A cross-national study of school students' perceptions of political messages in two national election campaigns

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Highlights

- School students are increasingly exposed to political messages during election campaigns.

- The trustworthiness of politicians, equality and immigration are key issues raised by students.

- Primary/elementary students adopt clear political positions about issues such as equality and immigration.

- Teachers need to address rhetoric that alienates or stigmatise minorities.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand, qualitatively, the ways in which school students from

England and the US engaged with campaign messages during two national elections. We

combined data from eight focus groups conducted in four schools in England (2

primary/elementary and 2 secondary/high; N = 60) and individual interviews conducted in

one school in the US (N=19). Three common themes were identified from our cross-national

data: the trustworthiness of candidates, equality, and the narrative surrounding immigration.

We argue that it is important for students to have spaces to understand, explore and debate

political messages and for teachers to feel confident and able to engage with those campaign

messages especially where they may be controversial, partisan or challenging.

Key words:

Elections; Schools; Students; Politics; Messages; Teachers; England; US.

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1. Introduction

Various cross-national studies of voter turnout have characterized young voters in terms of apathy and alienation, promoting a belief they are not interested in politics or have been 'turned off' by a lack of positive change (see Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Phelps, 2005; Russell, 2004; Russell, Fieldhouse, Purdam, & Kalra, 2002; Southwell, 2016). However, over the last five decades research has also shown that children assimilate political messages based on their relative levels of learning, their maturity and their exposure to political dialogue at home (Greenstein, 1965; Easton & Dennis, 1969; Hess & Torney-Purta, 2009; Jennings, 1990; Sears, 1983; van Deth, Abendschon & Vollmar, 2011). For example, Hess and Torney-Purta (2009) found that children, including very young children, understand concepts such as 'president', basic political structures (e.g. Democrats and Republicans), and basic concepts such as "good" and "bad"; and these value-laden constructs have been ascribed to a rudimentary understanding of political ideology and policy. Among 10 year olds, Hess and Torney-Purta pointed out that at time of national elections, children's understanding of the principles of political representation and of party policy are not only heightened but that basic allegiances can emerge (see also Allen, 1994).

While current evidence suggests that more robust party allegiances are not formed until late adolescence and early adulthood, in one report commissioned by the Department of Education of Northern Ireland it was noted that both racist and sectarian sentiments found among children in schools mirrored statements and opinions made by political parties which were also reaffirmed in the home (Watters, 2011). Elder and Greene (2016) have also demonstrated that the differences found between so called 'red' (Republican) and 'blue'

(Democrat) families in the US were assimilated by children long before they understood the nuances of a political system. Similar findings have been reported in other countries (see Alon-Tirosh & Hadar-Shoval, 2016; Deng, 2012). To partially explain this, Banducci, Elder, Greene and Stevens (2016) have suggested that having children can play a key role in the polarization of political attitudes, particularly where there is less state support for raising a family. They argue that a shift in social roles/identities, a change in social networks together with great calls upon financial resources and less free time has a significant effect upon political standpoints where parents rather than non-parents are likely to hold and expound more traditional views, particularly around the issue of social welfare.

1.2 Can school students be politically aware, particularly at younger ages?

Current literature assumes that children are introduced to political positions through a process of socialization and exposure to political discourse through the media (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). According to Berger and Luckmann (1967) socialization refers to the ways in which individuals assimilate the messages they have received through observations and interaction with others, making sense of their world through a process of *externalization* (seeing and learning about it), *objectification* (characterizing systems of living or social or cultural institutions as 'other' and, thus, not created by humans) and *internalization* (finding personal meaning, understanding the position of those within it and who operate it). This is very much a 'top-down' approach to the study of human social interaction and, in the context of political theory, places the individual (and moreso the child) at the bottom of the chain. Where the issues under consideration are highly partisan Kahne & Bowyer (2017) argue that perceptual biases can influence the judgements we make about the truth behind the claims being made. But, is this the case for school-aged children, particularly those in primary/elementary school?

According to Heiphetz and Young (2017), when it comes to controversial moral beliefs, pre-schoolers (4-6 year years of age) and adults are likely to report that only one person can be right. Pre-schoolers were also more likely to judge that only one person could be right in a moral disagreement. However, Lewis, Hacquard and Lidz (2017) have shown that children (between 3 and 6 years of age) are able to evaluate belief reports while struggling to understand intent. In other words, when someone says 'I believe' very young children are able to interpret and understand that person's position though they may not be able to gauge the ramifications (intent) resulting from that belief.

In terms of political awareness, Bronstein (1992) argued that while children may appreciate that an election is taking place, they often possess less concrete information and factual content about those issues being discussed beyond the "exciting" negative information recounted by the media. More specifically, in one study by Allen, Kirasic and Spilich (1997), US elementary school children who were exposed to political news stories were found to make more story-generated inferences rather than to recall specific information. Thus, in an election filled with negative campaigning, and a society often referred to as having, "no uniform youth orientation to politics" (Henn & Foard, 2013), it is logical that children may be more likely to recall negative rather than positive candidate policies, and go on to infer negative character traits about those politicians (Mailtes, 2009; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

Kallio and Hakli (2011) suggest that children are in fact "competent political agents" who have "their own positions and roles" (p. 21). From within the field of children's geographies, they suggest that we should acknowledge their degree of political literacy and consider 'how' children's lives are political. Whereas adults use their understanding of politics to make sense of events, children do not. They become aware of aspects of political discourse through socialization but they do not see their own lives or experiences in political terms (Habashi & Worley, 2008). Thus, unlike adults, their reasoning is not limited by party

ideologies, policies or manifestos but by the justice and injustices they see and understand, and the informal social structures they co-create with peers (see also Maitles & Deuchar, 2004). This is a view shared by O'Toole, Marsh and Jones (2003) who have argued that our understandings of what it is for children and young people to be political are narrow in scope. For example, Habashi (2011) has also shown that children and young people can and do challenge predominant perceptions of other faiths and minority ethnic groups. Findings from this study of Taiwanese children's understandings of Islam suggest that children can be their own agents of meaning and can construct their own knowledge about the socio-political context in which they live independent of the adults around them.

1.3 The school: A space to discuss politics?

The discourses used by political leaders during election campaigns and when addressing pressing social issues have been found to translate into school-centred behaviours. In the UK for example, data gathered from over 1,440 children collected by the charity *Childline* found that discourses relating to the 'War on Terror' and immigration that appeared in news media *and* were discussed by political leaders translated into racist bullying and "Islamophobia" in schools (*The Independent*, 8 January, 2014). In the US, in a survey of 2,000 K-12 teachers during the 2016 Presidential elections, the Southern Poverty Law Centre reported that over half of the teachers they questioned said they had witnessed an increase in "uncivil political discourse," and one-third had witnessed an increase in anti-Muslim or anti-immigration sentiments (Costello, 2016). Over two-thirds of the teachers indicated that the students who were Muslim or the children of immigrants had expressed concerns about their families' futures and approximately 40% indicated that they were hesitant to talk about the election in their classes.

Data have clearly shown that when educators engage with political discourses in a balanced way, classrooms can become very effective environments for helping students understand the processes and personal machinations of democratic elections (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Maguire & Waldman, 2008; Misco & De Groof, 2014). Unfortunately, as Costello (2016) and Gonchar and Schulten (2016) have shown recently in US schools, teachers felt they had to shy away from talking about politics in the classroom given the often challenging details that emerged from the 2016 presidential primaries. Yet the question should be asked, did this deny students an opportunity to discuss and debrief whatever news stories they may have read or overheard? This is not a problem to be found only in US political campaigning. In Scotland, during the 2014 referendum on independence, while 16-17 year olds were given the right to vote, 26 of the 32 local authorities restricted the two key Yes/No campaign organisations from debates in school (BBC News, 2014). Furthermore, where debates did happen, two local authorities allowed hustings and voting while others only allowed discussions that were short and occurred outside classroom time despite the fact that one secondary curriculum area - Modern Studies - specifically requires students to study issues of democracy, social inequality, and international political or socio-economic concerns (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2014).

1.4 Aim of our investigation

The primary aim of this investigation was to understand, qualitatively, the ways in which students from four English schools and one American school engaged with the campaign messages leading to two national elections - the 2015 UK general election and the 2016 US presidential election. Using an innovative triangulation method, bringing together data from two qualitative studies, we report on the common themes that emerged from

primary/elementary and secondary/high schools in England and the US. The English study was funded in part by the Times Educational Supplement.

2. Method

2.1 Context

Data were collected in April-May 2015 immediately preceding the UK General Election and from February-March 2016 during the primaries for the US Presidential Election. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for the English study and was later adapted for the US study. We did not interview students from schools in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The English study consisted of eight focus groups (four conducted in primary/elementary schools and four conducted in secondary/high schools). The US study consisted of a case study involving a series of individual interviews with students attending one K-12 school.

2.2 Participants and schools

For the UK study, participants (N = 60) were drawn from two primary/elementary schools (n = 35; 20 males and 15 females) and two secondary/high schools (n = 25; 13 males and 12 females) in the South of England. All the schools were state-funded and selected to ensure an appropriate mix of students from urban and rural areas as well as pupils from different socio-economic groups and ethnicities. Primary/elementary schools ranged in size from 297-390 students (aged 7-11 years) and both had students on free school meals (15% in one and 10% the other - this is often used as a proxy for socio-economic status). Secondary schools ranged in size from 807-1265 students (aged 11-18 years) with one (an inner-city school) reporting 24.7% of students on free school meals. At least one primary/elementary school and one secondary school supported students with special educational needs.

In the US, participants (N = 19) were drawn from one selective, independent Pre-K-12 day school in a large metropolitan area in the North-East. At the time of data collection, the school population numbered 917 students attending a lower, middle or upper school with 30 students attending Pre-K provision (under 5 years). The population was ethnically-diverse (more so than others in the county) with the majority of students identifying as belonging to two or more races/ethnicities, Asian, Black or African American and Hispanic. Participants' ages ranged from 8 to 11 years. There were 10 males and 9 females.

2.3. Interview schedule

The interview schedule for both studies consisted of five core open questions with a number of subsidiary questions (see below). Additional prompts were used in both studies to seek further clarification or to explore issues raised by participants.

1.   Do you know what an election is?

2.   Can you tell me what are the main political parties that are part of this election (England)?

What does it mean to be a Republican, Democrat and Independent (US)?

 - Do you know who the main candidates are in this election (US)?

 - Who are the main party leaders (England)?

3.   What sorts of issues have those parties raised (England)?

What do you think are the most important things that politicians are talking about today (US)?

- What do you think the parties mean when they talk about those issues (England)?

- What do you think about that (US)?

4.   Why do you think people want to become politicians (England/US)?

5.   If there was one thing you would like politicians to change about the UK/US today

what would that be?

In line with recommendations, focus groups in England comprised of between 6-10 participants with the hope that groups of between 6-8 would achieve optimum saturation in terms of gathering a range of views and also ensuring a mix of students in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity and gender across the study (Kreuger, 2002). For individual interviews in the US, we were cognisant of Guest, Bunce and Johnson's (2006) observation that a sample of ≥ 12 participants is likely to achieve 92% saturation in data. Focus groups generally lasted between 30-40 minutes while one-to-one interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes.

3. Approach to Analysis

3.1 Analysis Triangulation

Borrowing approaches used by researchers in the fields of psychology, education and nursing (Carragher & Rivers, 2002; Lackey & Gates, 1997; Lewis & Holloway, 2018), we brought together the two data sets and our initial analyses in a meeting held in the UK in 2017. Prior to undertaking our own analysis for this article, we considered the nature of the convergences and divergences identified in both data collection and analysis (see Waltz, Strickland, & Lenz, 1991). Apart from the fact that the data were collected from focus groups in England and individual interviews in the US, we were assured that the interview schedules and initial analyses were sufficiently similar to allow us to form a shared understanding of students' perceptions of the political messages contained within the two national elections of interest.

3.2 Thematic Analysis

For our combined study we adhered to the principles of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007) to identify common themes arising from the focus groups and interviews in

both countries. In line with Braun and Clarke's recommendations, we followed the six phase approach to transcription and analysis. Phases 1 and 2 were initially conducted independently by the research teams in their respective countries. Subsequently, phases 3-6 were conducted at a joint meeting held in the UK.

Phase 1: Familiarization with data. This involved members of both research teams transcribing the data, reading and rereading the transcripts and noting down initial ideas.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Both research teams began a process of coding their own data separately, noting interesting ideas and potential codes, collating data under those potential codes.

Phase 3: Searching for themes. This process involved collating data from England and US, including potential codes and identifying common themes associated with those codes and the underpinning data. At this stage we were able to identify overlapping themes and collapse them down further.

Phase 4: Review of themes. We then reviewed the themes in light of the combined data sets ensuring that the themes were representative of the data extracts (Stage 1) and then the entire data set (Level 2), creating a thematic map (see Figure 1) showing associations between themes.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. This process is iterative and required the researchers to define and refine the name of each theme, and build the 'story' the analysis tells.

Phase 6: Producing the report/manuscript. In this final phase, illustrative examples of data are identified to illustrate the themes identified. Those extracts are then reviewed in light of the themes that have been identified, the overall research question and the existing literature on the topic in question.

Prior to submission the research team leads (IR and DJC) reviewed the analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2007) 15-point checklist of criteria for a good thematic analysis. A key concern of ours was to ensure that our themes had not been generated from a select number of vivid examples, but that the opposite had occurred and that examples we used that were illustrative of both data sets and the issues students themselves had raised.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate UK university ethics committee and by the US school administration. Participation in both studies was entirely voluntary. Active consent was sought from parents as well as from those students who were being interviewed. Interviews and focus groups took place during the school day and with a member of the school staff on hand to ensure participants' comfort and safety.

4. Results

Three common themes were identified from our analysis of students' discussions with researchers in England and the US: the trustworthiness of candidates, equal rights, and immigration.

INSERT FIGURE 1

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4.1. Theme 1 - Trustworthiness of candidates

In both countries students indicated that trustworthiness was an important consideration when discussing candidates for political office. In particular they commented on politicians' focus on money as a key issue in their campaigns. For some students there was a belief that politicians were self-serving and sought political office to accrue personal wealth and had little or no experience of poverty:

US: He's arrogant. He doesn't really care about like stuff, he just wants to

have all the money (3rd grade student).

England: We need someone who has experienced being on low money and

experienced being on benefits and knows what it is like not coming from a

rich family (Secondary/High School student).

A second focus of students' concerns related to campaign promises and whether or

not those promises would be kept. One 5th grade student in the US described President

Trump's campaign as follows:

US: In my opinion, I think he's a bit of an extremist… Trump kind of

exaggerates in a way that he's actually going to do [a] thing (5th grade

student).

By way of contrast, primary/elementary school students in England observed that

politicians make promises to get votes but cannot always see them through:

England: They make promises to get your vote then they don't always keep

them because they might not have the economic power.

Linked to candidates' backgrounds and focus on wealth, students in both countries

argued that some politicians are unable to connect with 'the people' because they do not

understand what it means to represent others:

US: He's more like a celebrity instead of a president because he, everyone

likes him because he's funny and stuff, but I don't think so because he's

actually just acting cool, but in a bad way (3rd grade student).

England: They have a different idea of what the struggle is.

(Secondary/High School student).

Ultimately, the narratives presented under this theme demonstrate that students in

both England and the US felt that politicians were distant figures and did not represent them

or their families. As the students said themselves, they come from different (often more affluent or privileged) backgrounds, they do not understand what it is like to be reliant upon state support (benefits or social security), and they have a different understanding of the "struggle" many families and individuals face.

4.2. Theme 2 - Equality

The second theme to arise from our analyses focused on equality. Students in both countries expressed very strong beliefs about fairness, including monetary fairness:

US: I want women to get paid as much as men, it's, it's just not fair at all. I want everything to be equal because it's just not fair (3rd grade student).

US: I think people have to be treated fairly (3rd grade student)

England: If they [Politicians] help people and make everything equal people wouldn't feel so downgraded and they wouldn't feel… especially teenagers and stuff… like most teenagers go out and make money in illegal ways because their parents might not have as much of it or something like that and that is the truth of it. (Secondary/High School student).

England: So if they help people more like especially when it comes to benefits and stuff they wouldn't have to do that and it would reduce crime. (Secondary/High School student).

Closely allied to issues of fairness were students concerns about access to welfare. There was a general feeling among students that the state or federal government should support those less fortunate. For example, homelessness was an issue that students in both countries raised:

US: they should change that people that don't have that much money, they would have this place they could keep a lot of people, like maybe a building

that they can, that's for free for people that don't really have homes who can go there for a few years and have a better life (3rd grade student).

England: Well some people are homeless and they need houses because they get really bad diseases from the street because there is not that much hygiene on them and they really don't have that much money so they can't afford the medicine and they can't get a job because they are homeless. (Primary/Elementary School student).

Healthcare was also a concern:

US: [They] should be talking about health care, because they're saying that Obamacare isn't good, and they're trying to figure out a better way to give health care… I don't know if they're talking about it… because they're not really doing anything about it, they're just kind of watching. (5th grade student).

England: I would like them to talk about things like sometimes when people need to go to hospital instead of taking them to the district general hospital they take them to [name of distant hospital] even if they desperately need to get to hospital and one day say they were taking someone to [name of distant hospital] that has been hit by a car one day someone might die in the ambulance and not make it and I think possibly might need to if they don't have room to treat everyone then they might need to possibly extend places like the district general hospital. (Primary/Elementary School student).

In both England and the US, students also discussed their desire to have the vote while still at school and to have greater educational input about politics:

US: [Politicians] should listen more to everyone, to listen to like little people,

like not just the people that are older, important… I think they should at least

give chances to little people (3rd grade student).

England: I think we should be taught politics at definitely a younger age than

because we are now so behind. (Secondary/High School student)

While students' comments relating to gender equality, access to benefits, housing and

healthcare demonstrated a commitment to social justice, most significantly they also

advocated for their right to be heard not only at the ballot box but also at school with more

guidance and instruction on contemporary political issues.

4.3. Theme 3 - Immigration

The final theme we identified from students' discussions in both England and US

related to the issue of immigration. Data from the interviews demonstrated that students' had

not only understood the concerns expressed by politicians and also by their family members

about immigration but that they also understood the tensions that those concerns had brought

about.

We noted that a fear of terrorism was present in the interviews with students in both

countries. They understood the need for heightened security, especially at airports. They also

recognised that some people enter a country with the intention of harming others:

US: I also want, like, them to focus on ISIS, because it's kind of scary, and I

don't want anyone to like come here (5th grade, student).

England: I think they are not letting people in because there are some people

from Syria and there is a risk of them being terrorists (Primary/Elementary

School student).

Linked to this fear of terrorism was an understanding of what could happen if there was not heightened security. For example, one 3rd grade student in the US said:

US: There should be a little more like, a little bit more… security… there has been some cases like, there has been bad stuff like the Boston Marathon a couple years ago… and especially now that the terrorists are like, may come and may not, they should like be more aware of what's happening.

Similarly, the following exchange between two students in an English primary/elementary school demonstrates that they were not only able to identify Afghanistan as a country of concern, but also discuss the ways in which an attack could happen.

England: [1] In some areas they could even cause trouble.

[2] Yeah, like the terrorist what is it called the big terrorist group in

Afghans.

[1] Afghanistan.

[2] Yer they could come over we might not realise it and they

might start terrorising us.

[1] We would probably realise if they if they were

carrying huge weapons.

[2] Yer but not really. Yer but what happens if they had a great

backpack and its loaded and that and...

[1] They get out a machine gun.

Students in both countries also were able to demonstrate an understanding of the complexity of the political discussions underpinning immigration and how it could be described as racism. In the US, students expressed concerns about the ways in which people of Muslim faith and Mexican heritage were being discussed and framed within the policies suggested by presidential candidates:

US: He shouldn't send all of the Muslims back where they came from; he's

doing stuff like that. He's trying to build a wall and no people can cross it

between places (3rd grade student).

US: He's not such a nice guy… he's trying to make a border. He's very racist

(3rd grade student).

In England, it was clear that the discussion of immigration was closely tied to issues

that many described as 'racist'. As the comments from one student in primary/elementary

school demonstrated, discussions relating to immigration had caused a degree of confusion

about what constitutes racism:

England: They are saying that what I said is racist where foreigners shouldn't

be allowed in the country because the country is only small but it's not

actually racist they are foreigners.

Students in England also understood that others had concerns about the numbers of

people coming to the UK from Europe. The following example illustrates the discussion that

two students in one elementary/primary school had about what has been described as 'benefit

tourism':

England: [1] I think it's about benefits, like say someone from a different country

comes over to England

[2] Immigrants

[1] Yeah, immigrants then say they went and got a house but because

they didn't have a job they would still get benefits and I think

that's wrong.

Overall, while students in both primary/elementary and secondary schools in England

and the US demonstrated a thorough understanding of the threat of terrorism, it is also clear

that the students we interviewed in primary/elementary schools had also adopted clear

political positions about who should remain in their countries and who should not, and also who should have access to benefits. These data were particularly striking as they mirrored the narratives that have been present in media and posited by political candidates. Taken holistically, the three themes we identify in this article indicate that there is a need for teachers to engage proactively with the messages contained within political campaigns and address the rhetoric that can alienate or otherwise stigmatises people of colour, those from other cultural/ethnic backgrounds, and those who experience poverty or a lack of access to material resources.

5. Discussion

Our analyses have shown that the students we interviewed in both primary/elementary and secondary/high schools in England and the US assimilated a great deal of information about the elections they witnessed. We identified three themes that were common to students in both countries. Firstly, comparable with the earlier research by Maitles (2009), students of all ages expressed concerns about the trustworthiness of candidates and understood that the promises politicians make are not always kept. Secondly, students in both countries said they wanted people to be treated fairly and wanted key issues such as poverty and homelessness tackled. Finally, students demonstrated a very nuanced understanding of the issues relating to immigration. Here we not only saw a very comprehensive understanding of the potential threats associated with terrorism, we also saw a questioning of the acceptability of comments relating to the deportation or repatriation of those without UK or US citizenship and whether such comments and the underpinning policies that informed them were racist (cf. Maitles & Deuchar, 2004).

Somewhat contrary to Bronstein's observations in the early 1990s (Bronstein, 1992), the students in our studies demonstrated very concrete understandings of the political

narratives at play during the UK and US elections of 2015 and 2016 and in both countries they were able to recall very specific and often negative information about issues they believed were important (Allen et al., 1997; Henn & Foard, 2013).

It was clear that students in both countries the capacity to challenge predominant views in environments where they felt able to do so (Habashi, 2011). Yet, other than talking to us, only one student from our US sample had spoken to a teacher about the 2016 presidential primaries whereas the majority had spoken to their parents - usually after having heard discussions on the radio, television, or when listening to their parents talk to each other or to friends. Interestingly all of the students interviewed in the US said that they had chatted with their own friends about the presidential primaries and the key candidates. In England, all of the schools in which focus groups were conducted ran their own elections with candidate hustings, policy statements and votes. While students were able to demonstrate a degree of independence from their parents' political views at school, one cautioned us during a focus group, "don't tell my dad", suggesting that there was less opportunity for conversation at home.

5.1 Schools and politics

While schools can offer young people an opportunity not only to learn about political systems but to understand and debate the issues that affect them, their families, and their futures, the reticence that has been reported among educators in US and UK schools to engage with modern politics is of concern - especially where such reticence leads to anti-social behaviour or violence in the schoolyard. Yet as Parker (2014) has pointed out in the US, the school curriculum is abound with opportunities to explore citizenship and civil rights issues in contemporary as well as historical contexts. Additionally, he argues that long-held concerns about teaching students to be critical thinkers and to tolerate others (especially

where such toleration is extended to groups that challenge parents' religious beliefs) are not in keeping with the principles underpinning public or state-funded education (see Macedo, 1995). In England, the national curriculum for citizenship in secondary/high school includes explicit high quality instruction that aims to provide students, "with knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society". Specifically, it claims to develop students' understandings of democratic processes and government. It also offers students the opportunity to critically interrogate relevant political and social issues and weigh the evidence for and against policy statements and actions (Department for Education, 2013). Yet as Eichhorn (2014) points out, taking a "civics" class does not increase political literacy and voting, rather it is the facilitation of opportunities or safe spaces to discuss politics that make a difference. In the absence of such spaces it seems there exists a disconnect between academic criticality (through the study of political systems) and its translation into discourses and behaviours that occur outside the classroom.

So, what role could educators play in unpicking the complex narratives that surround national elections and the policies/messages that are aired? As we have noted above, schools can provide a space in which political discourses can be scrutinized and understood (see Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Maguire & Waldman, 2008; Misco & De Groof, 2014) but this can only be done if teachers feel confident in navigating a path where controversial topics arising from political manifestos and candidates' speeches can be discussed. Both Costello (2016) and Gonchar and Schulten (2016) have demonstrated that, during the 2016 presidential primaries, US school teachers felt they had to shy away from talking about politics in the classroom. Yet, Costello (2016) also noted that a corollary of this was that over two-thirds of the teachers said that students from Muslim families or those who were the children of immigrants had expressed concerns about their futures, over half had witnessed an increase in what they described as "uncivil political discourse", and one-third said they had witnessed an

increase in anti-Muslim or anti-immigration sentiments. In the UK, reports of racist and 'Islamophobic' bullying were also directly attributed to political pronouncements relating to the 'War on Terror' and it was reported that this made schools very uncomfortable places to be for non-White children and young people.

Within the context of the present study, our data illustrate the difficulties students face (especially those within primary/elementary school) reconciling narratives of immigration with those of racism:

> They are saying that what I said is racist where foreigners shouldn't
>
> be allowed in the country because the country is only small but it's not
>
> actually racist they are foreigners.

In this instance the student remained unclear how the political arguments surrounding immigration and "foreigners" differ from those of racism. This is perhaps one demonstration of the power of socialization in the development of political discourses; here the student assimilates what he has heard and tries to understand that discourse within the context of those systems of everyday living he occupies. The extract from the focus group in which this statement was made supports, in part, the observations proffered by Kallio and Hakli (2011) in that the students in our studies demonstrated the potential to be their own "competent political agents", trying to make sense of the messages they overheard but also showing a degree of independence of thought through their discussions with peers. Yet, comparable with the findings from cognitive studies of children's thinking, the ramifications of these messages is lost (Lewis et al. 2017). It is clear that we must consider how the airing of such views (and the potential to act upon them) can impact not only upon the individual who utters them but also the lives of peers - especially where harm or discomfort is caused to another.

5.2 A changing pattern of engagement with politics?

In recent US and UK national elections data relating to the youth vote (18-34 years of age) indicates that the purported disinterest of young people in politics and voting is no longer a reality and that many young people have a desire to facilitate change through the democratic process. In the 2016 US presidential election it was noted that more young voters chose a third-party candidate, eschewing traditional bipartisan voting. However, at a fundamental level, in a pre-election millennial poll, it was clear that young voters preferred more inclusive policies with 49% indicating a preference for Hillary Rodham Clinton and only 28% for Donald Trump (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2016). In the UK, in the most recent 'snap' General Election of May, 2017 there was a significant surge in youth voting (64%) when compared to the General Election of 2015 (43%), with more students, young people and millennials registering to vote than in previous elections (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2017).

These polling data together with the results from our analysis indicate that we should not ignore or silence the voices of school students during national elections. The surge in voting among young people in the UK and the desire to see change among those in the US is illustrative of the need to ensure that we have a "uniform youth orientation towards politics" and that we must do more to include young people in the democratic process and create or enhance opportunities for them to learn about the world in which they are being apprenticed (Henn & Foard, 2013). Without such opportunities it is impossible to contextualize or challenge the hostile or intolerant narratives to which students are increasingly exposed via the media. If students in primary/elementary school are able to understand and form opinions on issues such as welfare, immigration and terrorism, should they not, then, be included in the conversation?

5.3 Limitations and strengths of this study

While we acknowledge that the qualitative data contained within this manuscript provides a brief insight into students' understandings of political systems and, especially, their views of two recent national elections, our analysis has a number of strengths that should be considered. Firstly, we have demonstrated that students, particularly in primary/elementary schools, do have an understanding of political messaging during periods of electioneering and do assimilate a great deal of information that does require unpacking. Secondly, we have demonstrated that in 2015 and 2016 students in both England and the US shared common concerns about their political leaders and the policies they supported. Thirdly, although the political contexts of England and the US are notably different, and in bringing data-sets together some of those differences become less clear, those points of commonality we have identified allow us to learn from one another. Finally, our analysis highlights the need for teachers to engage with political discourses and help students, at all ages unravel the often complex and challenging messages that are contained within election campaigns.

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Figure 1: Key themes arising from interviews and focus groups.