

Written evidence from Shout Out UK¹ (TEC 34)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Work of the Electoral Commission inquiry

Introduction

The recent political and global events, including the December 2019 General Election, followed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrated widespread depleting trust in democratic institutions across the UK. Already in January 2020, the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) revealed that Brits perceive institutions as “less competent and more unethical compared to the global average”². Moreover, research by the [Reuters Institute from May 2020](#) determined that 48% of the British population rated the government relatively trustworthy in late May, down from 67% six weeks earlier³. What is more, the past year has also seen an unprecedented rise in misinformation, disinformation and mal-information around democracy, political leaders, and the Covid-19 pandemic⁴, making the public incredibly susceptible to harmful rhetoric, further deteriorating their levels of trust in democracy.

These staggering results bring into question the role of elections and effective democratic representation, especially of young people, which underpin the functioning of any healthy democracy. The 2019 General Election saw a reduction in youth turnout compared with the 2017 Election. The reasons for this sudden drop are not clear cut, but are indicative of young people’s continuous disengagement from democratic life, relative to older cohorts⁵.

¹ Shout Out UK is a youth-led social enterprise, which specialises in the delivery of political and media literacy education. Since 2015, we have delivered our bespoke programmes to over 1,000 secondary schools, colleges and youth clubs across the UK, engaging more than 30,000 learners. Our mission is to ensure that all young people receive Political and Media Literacy education, which are vital for fostering a generation of critically engaged and emotionally resilient citizens who can tackle misinformation narratives and safeguard our democracy. We strongly believe that Political Literacy in schools would provide learners with a clear understanding of what politics is and how our society works. It will also enable young people to engage their representatives more effectively and will ensure that youth voices are well-represented in democracy.

² The Edelman Trust (2020) ‘2020 Trust Barometer UK Results’ (available at <https://www.edelman.co.uk/research/2020-trust-barometer-uk-results>)

³ Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2020) ‘Trust in UK government and news media COVID-19 information down, concerns over misinformation from government and politicians up’ (available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-uk-government-and-news-media-covid-19-information-down-concerns-over-misinformation>)

⁴ Jon Roozenbeek, Claudia R. Schneider, Sarah Dryhurst, John Kerr, Alexandra L. J. Freeman, Gabriel Recchia, Anne Marthe van der Bles and Sander van der Linden (2020) ‘Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world’ (available at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.201199>)

⁵ Electoral Commission (2017) ‘Voting in 2017: Understanding public attitudes towards elections and voting’ (available at https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/234893/Voting-in-2017-Final.pdf)

Demographic analysis indicates that turnout among 18-24 year olds was significantly lower (47%) than among 25-34 year olds (55%) and 35-44 year olds (54%).⁶ We have also seen a wave of young people, aged 18-24, reporting some of the lowest levels of knowledge about politics, compared to older citizens⁷.

The Electoral Commission can play a vital role in closing the democratic under-representation gap between young people and older cohorts and in restoring trust in the democratic process. Leveraging on our expertise around youth democratic engagement and political literacy education, Shout Out UK puts forward the following recommendations for how the Electoral Commission can meet these objectives:

1. *Widespread political literacy education across secondary schools and colleges, as well as alternative educational settings*

When talking about political literacy we refer to one's basic understanding of our fundamental political institutions, such as Parliament, government, local councils, etc.⁸ Understanding how these institutions operate is an important prerequisite for effectively engaging with them and for reinvigorating youth democratic engagement⁹ (Keating et al., 2010). Moreover, political education can help build trust, cooperation and networking skills, which in turn can help bridge divides in British society and can build social capital (Flinders, 2016).

At the moment, political literacy education is not a widespread subject, despite the evermore worrying democratic participation trends and trust levels (mentioned in the Introduction). The absence of a compulsory Politics GCSE subject in British secondary schools has been stressed both by political and civic actors; yet so far action in this direction has been limited to policy recommendations. The burden to produce a politically literate and active youth population has, hence, fallen on Citizenship, which is not a compulsory subject, meaning many schools omit teaching it. Moreover, even if schools opt for Citizenship classes, they lack specialist teachers in this field¹⁰ — a problem, which is predicted to worsen in the foreseeable future. All of this is taking place in a context, in which 18-year olds are expected

⁶ Ipsos MORI (2019), 'How Britain Voted in the 2019 General Election' (available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election>)

⁷ Elise Uberoi & Neil Johnston (2019) 'Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?', p. 12 (available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7501/>)

⁸ Matthew Flinders (2015) 'The Problem with Democracy', p. 196 (available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276084161_The_Problem_with_Democracy)

⁹ Avril Keating & Jan Germen Janmaat (2015) 'Education Through Citizenship at School: Do School Activities Have a Lasting Impact on Youth Political Engagement?' (available at <https://academic.oup.com/pa/article/69/2/409/1936782>)

¹⁰ House of Lords. Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018) 'The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century', p.35

to suddenly recognise the importance of political participation, and be aware of their political preferences, without prior exposure to democratic life.

In response to the under-supply of effective political education across the UK, we have been delivering our Political and Media Literacy programmes to fill-in the gap left by formal education. Our work in the past academic year confirmed the benefits political literacy brings about to young people’s political knowledge and willingness to participate in democratic life, as well as character development skills:

Question/Statement	Pre-survey results	Post-survey results
‘I understand key British/local/international institutions’	38.5% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’	87.3% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’
‘I’ve learned enough about politics to make informed voting decisions’	28.3% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’	82.6% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’
‘I am confident to work with others to make positive changes to society’	34.3% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’	91.2% of participants ‘Strongly Agreed’ and ‘Agreed’

Having worked in the democratic engagement sphere since 2015, we have observed that democratic engagement initiatives; in particular, voter registration drives, intensify in the months leading up to a general or local election. Whereas these initiatives have been successful in ensuring that young people’s voices are better represented, the action of voter registration alone does not demonstrate an understanding of democratic process or a willingness to participate in elections. Such knowledge cannot be acquired indirectly from the rest of the education curriculum prior to high-salience elections. If the goal is to ensure that we have a thriving and vibrant democratic culture and appreciation of elections, political literacy deserves a separate, special space in young people’s studies, with impartiality being a key component of this process. This is also confirmed by the results we obtained from polling 1,573 Political Literacy programme participants in the past academic year - 79% of students shared with us that they wish political literacy had a greater presence in their education at school, while 71.8% answered ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Should there be a GCSE in Politics’? These results demonstrate that there is certainly a strong appetite on the side of young people for having more opportunities at school to acquire fundamental political knowledge. They also bring up the question of who should be responsible for providing such knowledge to young people. Given the Electoral Commission’s impeccable reputation as an impartial source and their expertise in educating individuals about elections, we recommend that the Electoral Commission extends its role to encompass overseeing the commissioning of political literacy resource creation for young people across the UK. The Commission should also oversee the resources’ implementation at schools with the help of organisations working

in the democratic engagement sector, who have built strong and trusting working relationships with teachers and Senior Leadership Teams across the country.

2. Extensive training support for teachers

The irregular nature of these democratic engagement initiatives also means that educational settings and professionals are unprepared for effective discussions around the meaning of voting, elections and politics in general. This was confirmed by our experience in the lead up to the December 2019 General Election when we ran a series of voter registration drives together with our signature Introduction to Political Literacy workshop in fifteen London-based sixth forms and colleges. We had an uptake of teachers contacting us last minute, asking for us to provide their students with fundamental understanding of democratic elections and the role of Parliament, while ensuring that they are registered to vote. Whereas we gathered positive feedback from teachers and young people (87% of students shared that they feel confident to make informed voting decisions after workshop participation), our experience showcases a more worrying trend - educators feel increasingly unprepared and lack the confidence to discuss complex topics, such as politics, at a time when individuals feel the direct consequences of policies.

Already in advance of the May 2021 Local and Mayoral Elections, we are seeing a growing anxiety in teachers to integrate the topic of elections in their classrooms. Educational resources on [political](#) and [media literacy](#), such as the ones we produced at the start of the pandemic, could be useful in helping educators feel more comfortable discussing democratic engagement with their students; however, they only scratch the surface of the conversations young people should be exposed to ensure that they truly understand how British democracy operates. For this reason, for the past academic year we have been providing our Political Literacy programme to secondary schools and colleges in seven areas with some of the lowest levels of voter turnout in local elections. Those areas are also expected to have Local and Mayoral Elections in 2021. Preliminary informal interviews with teachers has confirmed our suspicions that the irregularity of democratic engagement initiatives does not suffice in ensuring that pupils are effectively prepared for civic participation, and it further feeds into teachers' insecurity to tackle politics in an impartial and unbiased manner. At the same time, 97% of teachers, who have received political literacy training and have delivered our programme independently (with the use of our E-portal), report back that the experience has enabled them to improve their teaching practices and to feel more confident in preparing their students for active participation in democratic life. This demonstrates that regular training and all-year-round exposure to political literacy can be an effective solution to teachers' depleting confidence to teach politics at schools.

In light of this evidence, we recommend that the Electoral Commission work collaboratively with the civil society sector to identify the largest gaps in current political literacy training provision for teachers, and provide advice and teaching resources on how to tackle conversations around elections and democracy in an impartial and unbiased manner. Whereas the Commission has already made steps in this direction with the recent creation of Political

Literacy resources for Wales and Scotland, such a resource is increasingly needed and welcome in the rest of the UK as well.

- 3. Ensure that third-sector organisations working on democratic engagement are provided with a space to share knowledge and access funding.*

At the moment, the democratic engagement sector in the UK is heavily characterised by lack of coordination between civil society organisations. Cooperation is oftentimes replaced by competition, partly due to lack of sufficient funding opportunities and other incentives that would help third-sector organisations in coordinating their efforts. In the current turbulent and dynamic environment of British and global politics, it is vital to ensure that those who work to safeguard democracy do so collectively after identifying specific gaps in democratic engagement initiatives provision. The presence of a separate body, which observes and provides incentives for the civil society sector to collaborate, could be an appropriate role for the Electoral Commission, especially in the years between high-salience elections. The Electoral Commission could leverage on its reputation as an impartial body, and provide space for knowledge sharing and expertise exchange between democratic engagement organisations.

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