

Written evidence from James Weinberg (TEC 35)

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

During the 2019 General Election a group of 24 non-partisan democratic education organisations collaborated to provide learning resources to young people to support them to engage in the election. This programme - EducateGE - was centred around a website and teacher support activities (www.educatege.com) that brought together 151 education resources and workshops from trusted organisations to support teachers and schools to encourage their students to learn about and participate in the election.

This submission draws on lessons from the EducateGE programme, and the experiences of some organisations in the EducateGE network. It addresses question 2a) from the inquiry's terms of reference on the roles and functions of the Commission, and argues that the Commission should maintain and strengthen its work to support young people to engage in elections.

This submission was prepared by the EducateGE convener - The Politics Project - with input from Dr. James Weinberg (University of Sheffield & Trustee of the UK Political Studies Association), the Association for Citizenship Teaching, Shout OutUK, Migrants Organise and Young Citizens. It does not necessarily represent a collective position of all organisations in the EducateGE network.

What roles and functions within the UK electoral system should the Commission perform?

Supporting young people to engage in elections

In the UK young people continue to be underrepresented in elections. In the 2019 UK General Election 47% of 18-25 year olds voted in contrast to 74% of people aged over 65 (Ipos Mori, 2020). The Electoral Commission can play a vital role in closing that gap, including by directly supporting young people to engage in elections, supporting non-partisan organisations that encourage young people to engage and helping teachers to understand the role they can play.

1. Directly supporting young people

Young people need access to clear information and the knowledge of politics and elections to enable them to make informed choices and vote. Supporting young people to learn about voting and elections as part of the curriculum at school is one of the most effective ways of increasing the rate of youth engagement in politics (Weinberg 2020).

This year the Electoral Commission is creating learning resources for the Welsh and Scottish Elections in 2021. This expansion into education is welcomed by the sector. Through the EducateGE programme The Politics Project conducted a review of the existing learning resources. The Commission's new resources address some of the gaps in provision that we identified, including an overview of voting systems and information about devolved elections.

2. Supporting organisations that encourage young people to engage

The Electoral Commission plays a vital role in helping organisations that encourage young people to engage in elections and to understand which activities are and are not allowed during elections, such as rules around purdah. We would welcome training and written guidance from the Commission to promote understanding, before and during elections, among organisations working directly with young people of what activities are appropriate.

3. Supporting teachers to understand their role in elections

Schools offer an opportunity to engage young people at scale. They can reach the vast majority of young people and encourage them to engage with elections. Working with teachers we can deliver solutions that are both scalable and cost-effective. A single teacher can have an impact on a huge number of students, making it a very efficient way to reach young people. Research demonstrates that democratic education can significantly increase young people's political engagement (Keating et al., 2010; Keating and Janmaat, 2016; Whiteley, 2014) and can, at the same time, mitigate long standing inequalities in political participation between socio-economic groups (Neundorf et al., 2016; Hoskins et al., 2017; Weinberg, forthcoming). Crucially, research also demonstrates that most teachers feel a responsibility to teach politics and improve young people's engagement, but feel underprepared and under-resourced to do so (Weinberg and Flinders, 2018; Weinberg, 2019).

However, during the 2019 General Election many of the teachers we worked with felt unsure about what role they could play in supporting young people to engage in the election. This included teachers who were subject specialists in Citizenship or Politics. In our post-election interviews following the programme, the number one request from teachers was access to clear, non-partisan advice on what role they could and should play in an election.

The Electoral Commission could provide guidance and training either directly to teachers or to organisations that support teachers in this area. Such guidance would be most effective if provided by the Electoral Commission as a trusted non-partisan source.

Case studies:

Migrants Organise

Supporting migrants, refugees and BAME citizens to register to vote

[Migrants Organise Ltd](#) provides an organising platform for grassroots migrant and refugee community groups and other civil society allies to work together for dignity and justice. [Promote the Migrant Vote](#) is a collaborative initiative launched in 2014 as a part of civic education to encourage participation of migrants, refugees and BAME citizens in democratic processes. The work consists of production of resources in community languages and outreach training and events to build the capacity of communities to encourage voter registration and participation in non-partisan ways.

In this kind of awareness raising drive in the run up to the last election in 2019, we did not have the capacity to record the number of all people registered at events as there are challenges with asking people for personal data. Often people wanted to register during events, but did not have their national insurance number with them, and so would then go and

do it at home. Many registered after events or after social media posts, translated in eight languages. What we know for certain that on the 22nd November for example, when we organised events and [social media push](#) with [Muslim Council of Britain](#), the spike in voter registration was recorded (292,541) out of total 3.1 million registrations in the run up to the 26th November. The government website that tracks applications does not have ethnicity information.

Awareness raising and messaging

The work of Migrants Organise was mainly focussed on awareness-raising around the eligibility of migrants and BAME citizens to vote, and the importance of BAME and migrant communities voting in the election. The information provided by the Electoral Commission is useful, and we are aware that new citizens are encouraged to register to vote at their citizenship ceremonies, however, more proactive campaigns, with explainers in different languages, target use of social media would make people feel more included and engaged. Feedback from one of our events in London in November 2019 is anecdotal but illustrative: "It was really interesting to see that NONE of our participants (incl. British-born British citizens) were confident that they knew the full eligibility criteria for voting in a General Election. Everyone had so many questions, which we answered all together. People left feeling empowered and inspired, with lots of actions for those who can and can't vote alike."

A recurring theme was that many people did not know Commonwealth citizens in the UK could vote.

Comment from a participant in Sheffield at a Promote the Migrant Vote Awareness Raising Presentation Event in Hull: "You have inspired me and I am going to do more about voting and elections. This was very short notice, if we had a few weeks and brought more people." Participant in Coventry: "We definitely need this. We didn't know Commonwealth citizens could vote."

Working with community organisations

Having better demographic data as well as ethnicity tracking might be helpful in targeting campaigns that are encouraging people to register and exercise their voting rights. Promote the Migrant Vote was poorly resourced (one small grant of £7,500) so we ended up working with our existing members engaging more than 50 volunteer organisers around England. If we had better data and more resources, more focused and targeted voter registration campaigns would produce better results. The Electoral Commission could work in collaboration with community initiatives to help target awareness raising, in an accessible and trustworthy manner.

Migrants Organise, like many organisations working with migrants and BAME citizens, is a registered charity. Our work is not party political and voter registration is done in a strictly non-partisan way. If and when people ask us who to vote for, we direct them towards publicly available, usually mainstream media election websites. But many charitable organisations we reached out to were very reluctant to get involved and even provide a desk space for leaflets and volunteers to raise awareness. These organisations are mistakenly afraid that they will be penalised by the Charity Commission for organising voter registration as it appears to them to be a prohibited political activity.

The Electoral Commission is perceived as trusted, impartial and reliable and it would be helpful if it produced and published accessible information and training on voter registration for charities, this would make it easier for community groups, especially BAME communities and faith communities to be more open to voter registration education and outreach. Voter education needs to be encouraged as an ongoing activity for charitable organisations with some targeted outreach to BAME and migrant and refugee community groups, that would have a training element and possibly small grant element in the run up to election would be useful.

The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

Parallel Elections

One key area of support required for schools is teaching about democratic processes, accountability, elections and voting. Elections provide a key moment for teaching about the political system, voting and democracy. However, the national curriculum for citizenship requires that teaching about elections and voting are included as part of regular teaching about the UK political system. It is important that pupils learn and experience the process of elections and voting as part of a high quality citizenship education. With this in mind the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) developed a resource on Parallel elections to help teachers plan and undertake a parallel election with their pupils. The key idea is to model all the processes and activities that happen as part of a real election and involve the pupils in an active learning experience. This is different to a 'mock election' which often involves pupils making up their own political party and creating pretend policies.

The resource developed by ACT highlights the key electoral processes and suggests ways to organise lessons and other time such as breaks and lunchtimes to hold vote registration activities, campaigning and an election day in their school. The activities can be scaled and adjusted according to the curriculum time and resources available and offered as a class activity, whole year or whole school parallel election. The activities can be extended to include a school hustings with the local prospective party candidates which will be particularly relevant for those students eligible to vote for the first time in the next election.

The processes pupils follow align with real elections giving them an authentic experience of the electoral process from vote registration, analysis of party manifestos, candidate campaigns and policy positions through to the vote, election count and results analysis. Pupils work in teams on some of all of the activities and should engage with and analyse real election campaign materials, manifestos and political information about the policy positions of the main political parties.

See <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/parallel-election-teaching-resource>

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