

Active citizenship: learning resources for topical issues

2. Voting and elections





Introduction for staff

Turnout at elections is getting worse. There were five million fewer voters in the General Election of 2001 than turned out in 1997. A slight improvement for the 2005 election (61.4%) is no cause for complacency, since just over 17 million of those registered to vote decided not to do so. Voting turnout is particularly low for young people, and the Electoral Commission has suggested that there appears to be a ‘cohort effect – i.e. a generation apparently carrying forward their non-voting as they get older.’¹ Research has been carried out to find out why so many young people chose not to vote².

There are many indications that young people ARE interested in politics, and in some issues in particular, for example: environmental issues, facilities for young people, improving education. However, party politics, politicians and the media presentation of parliament do not impress young people. They say that the issues discussed are often not relevant to them, they have no interest in the point-scoring approach of politicians, and they fear that their voice makes no difference to decisions that are made. They also lack information on the parties and the candidates. Young people say they would be interested in becoming more involved in politics if they believed they would be taken seriously and could make a difference. On the following pages we have provided information and activities on the possible lowering of the voting age, the reasons people don't vote and whether or not voting should be compulsory.

Citizenship learning opportunities

The development of young people's knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to voting and elections is a vital part of political literacy, and therefore of citizenship education more broadly in a democratic society. In the post-16 phase, as young people approach and reach the minimum voting age, it is particularly important that they have positive, practical experience of involvement with democratic processes. This can come through elections for representatives on student councils, NUS executives, and so on, as well as mock elections which simulate general, local and European elections. Wherever possible, however, such events should be linked with active ‘classroom sessions’ which build young peoples’ underpinning knowledge of the significance of voting and the role of elections and representatives.

The materials can be used to stimulate debate about voting, elections and the reasons for the low turn-out at elections among young people. They are suitable for learners working at levels 2 and 3 but can be adapted to suit young people studying at different levels. The materials help to meet learning objectives identified in *Play your part: post-16 citizenship* QCA guidance (QCA, 2004). Study of voting and elections can be used to illustrate the key concepts of democracy, rights and responsibilities in the programme of study for key stage 4 citizenship (from September 2008). Voting and elections also feature in the range and content as ‘actions citizens can take in democratic and electoral processes to influence decisions, locally, nationally and beyond.’

¹ *Election 2005: turnout. How many, who and why?*, The Electoral Commission, October 2005

² *Young people and politics, A report on the YVote?/YNot Project by the Children and Young People's Unit 2002*

Suggestions for using the materials

1. As an icebreaker, ask young people to work in pairs and give each pair one of the following discussion questions:

- a. *Should voting be compulsory in this country? Why or why not?*
- b. *Why do many people choose not to vote?*
- c. *Why is the voting turnout very low for young people?*
- d. *Should the voting age be lowered to 16? Why or why not?*

Ask them to talk about the question for 10 minutes and then to join up with another pair that has been discussing a different question. The groups of four should share their discussions and summarise their opinions on a piece of flip-chart paper.

2. Hold a debate on one of the following motions:

We believe that voting in elections should be compulsory in this country.

or

We believe that the voting age should be reduced to 16.

To prepare for the debates, the students, in pairs or groups, could be asked to make a case for and against either motion using their views from the icebreaker activity and/or information and arguments from the pages on compulsory voting and those on lowering the voting age to 16.

3. Give each group of four some copies of the sheet, 'Some reasons why people don't vote'.

Allow 20 minutes for groups to decide on their solutions to the problems presented in one of the bubbles. They should write their solutions in blank bubbles and display them on the wall.

4. The Young Person's Agenda for Democracy summarises the opinions of 60 young people who were consulted by the government about how young people could become more interested in politics. Use it as a stimulus in a committee simulation. Put young people into three groups – politicians, government and the media – and give out copies of the Agenda for Democracy and the Briefing Sheet .

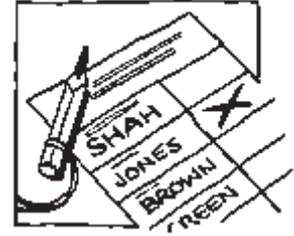
Each group should discuss their section of the Agenda for Democracy and decide (a) whether they agree with the proposals and (b) how they could respond. For example, how could the media make politics interesting and exciting, how could politicians listen and respond to concerns? Each committee should make a short presentation after 30 minutes.

5. Carry out a mock election using the guidelines provided. Wherever possible it would be desirable for young people themselves to be strongly involved in the organisation and running of the mock elections.



Voting and elections

The right to vote (called the ‘franchise’) is an important part of our democracy. But many people choose not to use their vote and the ‘turnout’ of voters at national elections is declining year by year. The turnout among young people is even lower than among older voters. What are the reasons for this? And what could be done?



Nobody has to vote in this country – it is not compulsory. You have the right to vote and the right not to vote. This is not true everywhere – in Australia, Switzerland and Singapore, for example, anyone not voting without a good reason will be fined about \$100.



Every citizen of this country has the right to vote in national elections (except convicted prisoners). This is called ‘universal suffrage’. It has not always been the case. Working men had to struggle throughout the 19th Century for the vote and women did not get the right to vote in Britain until 1918. Even then, they had to own property and be over 30 years old. It was not until 1928 that women, like men, could vote at age 21.

The voting age was reduced to 18 from 21 in 1969, but you still have to be 21 before you can become a Member of Parliament.

Although our ancestors fought long and hard for the right of everyone to vote, many people still choose not to. Sometimes this is because they really cannot choose between the candidates, or they want to show their disapproval of the whole system. This is called ‘abstaining’. But there is no space on the polling card in this country for people to abstain, so they simply don’t go to the polling station, or they ‘spoil their voting paper’ by writing on it. Some countries have a ‘no-vote’ box on the ballot paper, which can be used by those wishing to abstain.

In order to be able to vote, you must be on the electoral register.

You get on the register by filling in the form that is sent to every household by the local council. Some people are not on the list because:

- they move around the country a lot
- they have recently moved to a new area
- they do not want to vote
- they think that they can avoid paying council tax if they do not fill in the form. (In fact, councils have separate registers for council tax.)



Young people's views on lowering the voting age

Below two young people give their views on lowering the voting age – one for and the other against.

What do you think?

Should the voting age be lowered to 16?

Why or why not?

If it was, would you bother to vote?



The case for votes at 16

The voting age should be lowered to 16 as a promising cure for political apathy especially dominant amongst young people. In order to further encourage young people to be proactive in their approach to any politics, they need to feel they are significant. Their support or opposition towards issues which affect their future is important or even necessary in the decision making of the central government.

The law permits 16 year-olds to get married, join the armed forces and to pay income taxes to the government. Although such rights cannot be directly compared to voting at 16, I believe if you can make a vital contribution to your country by joining the armed forces or in paying taxes to the government then young people should also be able to decide who governs them.

Young people have too long been pushed aside in important decision making and then expected, once it is their turn to vote, to take an interest in the world of politics which appears to exclude them. The paramount issue in the debate of lowering the voting age is the provision of knowledge through citizenship which will enable young people to make an informed choice when the time comes around to vote. If *Big Brother* is appealing to young people for their votes and can achieve it, I am sure the government can manage the task.

Peace Poroku

The case against lowering the voting age

The voting age should not be lowered to 16. People of that age are not sufficiently interested in politics to be able to make a committed choice. They are likely to either not turn up or see the whole experience as a joke. And most important of all, they have not had enough experience of the world to have the first idea whom to vote for. Although 16 year-olds can work full-time, they will not have had many months at work by their sixteenth birthday, and yet they would be able to vote. They are still legally children, and although they can marry and join the armed forces, they have to have parental permission, and anyway are never sent to a fighting zone.

Citizenship lessons in school may make a big difference to the knowledge of 16 year-olds, but all surveys show that currently many do not even know the name of the leader of the opposition party. And a recent Ofsted survey found that 45% of 14–16 year-olds said they didn't think it was important to know more about what the main political parties stand for. If lowering the voting age is supposed to increase turn-out, I have my doubts!

Roberta Miller

Some reasons why young people don't vote

A

'I just don't think politics is relevant to my life.'

'I'm not at all interested in what politicians do.'

'What's the point? My vote makes no difference.'

B

'I'm not on the electoral register because I've only recently moved to this area.'

'I don't want to be on the electoral register because I am trying to avoid paying council tax.'

C

'I can't be bothered and haven't got time to go to the polling station.'

'I would prefer to vote at the places I regularly go to – the supermarket, the post office, the cinema...'

'Why can't I vote by text, phone or e-mail?'

D

'I just don't know enough about the candidates or the parties.'

'I can't understand what politicians say.'

'I need more information.'

Discuss the statements in each bubble.

Do you agree or disagree with the statements?

In pairs, choose one bubble and suggest a solution to the problem presented by the statements.

Compulsory voting

Arguments FOR

People who choose not to vote are often the very people that the government should be helping. If they were forced to vote, the government would be forced to listen to them and respond to their needs.

Voting is a civic duty in a democracy in just the same way that jury service is. We don't complain about jury service being compulsory because we know that the courts must have a cross-section of people on the juries. Voting is the same.

The right to vote has been fought for in this country and others. We should respect the sacrifices of our ancestors by voting.

People who know they will have to vote will take politics more seriously and start to take a more active role.

Compulsory voting works. In Australia the turnout is as high as 99%

There will be no excuse not to vote when Internet voting comes in. Already people can vote by post.

Arguments AGAINST

If everyone was forced to vote, the political parties would be likely to try to attract votes by using even more 'spin' and trivialising issues to appeal to people who were not very knowledgeable about them.

Every person in a democracy should have the right to vote or NOT to vote. It is not the same as jury service because jury service takes up a lot of people's time, and it is not surprising that many would choose not to do it if they could.

Those who fought for universal suffrage fought for the right to vote not the compulsion to vote. If turnout is low, the government is made more aware that many people did not choose it, and that it is not universally popular.

People who are forced to vote will not make a proper considered decision. They might just vote randomly or for extremist parties.

It would be nearly impossible for the government to collect the fines in this country. If 10% of the UK voters did not vote, the government would have to chase up four million fines, and if they refused to pay, it would clog up the courts system.

People who are busy or who work long hours cannot be forced to vote if they are actually unable to get to the polling station.



Briefing sheet on a Young Person's Agenda for Democracy

The agenda was drawn up by young people who took part in two residential workshops organised by the Children and Young People's Unit (at the Department for Education and Skills) in 2002. 60 young people aged 14–19 took part and presented their proposals to the organisers at the end of the workshops. The proposals are addressed to three different groups of people: politicians, government and the media.

In the following activity, you will work in three groups, each group taking on a different role.

- **Group A** takes on the role of politicians of all political parties, representing people at local, national and European levels.
- **Group B** takes on the role of the Government, who can make decisions about changes to policy and funding for new initiatives.
- **Group C** takes on the role of people working for the media – newspapers, television, radio, magazines, etc.

Scenario for all groups

You are a committee of people given the task, in your particular area of work, of replying to the proposals put together in the Young Person's Agenda for Democracy. Your meeting can only last 45 minutes, and in that time you need to make suggestions about what people in your position can do to respond to the Agenda. The chairperson keeps people to the point and to time. The note-taker records decisions made by the group.

1. Introduce yourselves in your group and elect a chairperson and a note-taker.
2. Discuss each of the proposals directed at your group and decide whether or not you agree with each. If you do not agree with any proposal, say why.
3. Choose two of the proposals and discuss ways in which people in your role could respond. For example, how can politicians talk directly to young people? How can government give young people the information they need? And how can the media make politics interesting and exciting? Try to come up with some concrete suggestions.
4. After 45 minutes, join the rest of the group. The chairperson in each group should briefly summarise what you have decided could be done to respond to the proposals.

A Young Person's Agenda for Democracy

To Politicians

Talk to us in a language we can understand – simple, clear, basic, understandable to keep us informed.

Talk to us directly, regularly, and in our environments – not just at election times, not just when we're old enough to vote, and face to face, not through a leaflet.

Listen and respond to our concerns – don't lecture us and don't assume we have no opinions or you know what we think.

Respect our diversity – and recognise that you need to find new ways of reaching out to different groups of young people.

To Government and the Electoral Commission

Give us the information and understanding we need – whether we are at school, college, work or unemployed.

Make citizenship education a priority within the curriculum – and give schools and colleges the support and resources they need to deliver it well.

Seriously consider the arguments for lowering the voting age – and making voting compulsory, and making it easier to vote.

To the Media

Make politics interesting and exciting for us – relate it to our lives but don't trivialise it with stories about politician's private lives or political infighting – we're not interested.

Find ways of mixing politics with entertainment – introduce political story lines into soaps, talk about political issues on chat shows, and make it cool to be interested in politics.

Use our interest in local issues by giving us relevant, accurate and up-to-date information about local decision making and finding ways of involving us, asking our opinions, etc.

From Young people and politics, A report on the YVote?/YNot? Project, by the Children and Young People's Unit 2002.

Running a mock election – guidance notes and materials

Mock elections can be fun and topical if they are carried out at the same time as local, national or European elections are taking place in the country. They also enable young people to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to take part effectively in the electoral process.

Mock elections can take a variety of formats:

1. Young people can invite local politicians from different political parties to visit them and address them on specific issues selected by the group. After questions and discussion, the young people vote for their chosen politician, using ballot slips and a ballot box.
2. During election times, especially during general elections, a mock election can be held across the whole organisation, with young people taking on the roles of parliamentary candidates for different political parties. Each candidate can run a campaign, mirroring the campaigns of the real candidates, making use of posters and lunchtime meetings. Everyone in the organisation has a vote on election day.
3. Young people can carry out a mock election in a smaller teaching/training group, using the procedure suggested on the next page. In this format, everyone has a role to carry out as well as voting.



Whichever format is used, it is very important that young people prepare in advance. There are several aspects of elections that young people should understand before taking part in mock elections. For example:

- how parliamentary seats relate to constituencies, and what wards are
- the relationship between a candidate and a political party, including what is meant by a manifesto
- the role of the election campaign, including party political broadcasts (PPBs)
- the role of the returning officer and independent observers who make sure that the election is fair
- the rules controlling elections: one person one vote, anonymity and confidentiality.

There is much material for staff and young people available from organisations which promote electoral involvement.

The *YVote Mock Elections* download pack from the Hansard Society, provides suggestions for ways in which young people can prepare for a mock election. Visit the site below to register and then download the pack: **www.mockelections.co.uk**

See also the list of resources at the end of this document for other materials on voting and elections.

Carrying out a mock election in a small group

- Discuss with the whole group which issues the candidates in the mock election should focus on. To make it easier for the candidates, select no more than three. If the mock election is mirroring a referendum, only one issue should be selected.
- Divide the group into two halves. One half will be candidates and helpers, the other half will be election officials and journalists. Everyone gets a vote.
- Photocopy and cut out the instructions for each group and give out copies.



Candidates and helpers

- Five or six members of your group will be the candidates. Each candidate should have one or two helpers.
- The candidates should need to meet to decide which parties they will each represent. Some candidates may decide to be Independent.
- Candidates and helpers should work out their manifesto.
- Each candidate will have to have to plan of campaign – for example posters and leaflets. One helper could be chosen as campaign manager. Helpers can also make rosettes.
- Candidates will need to visit others in the group and talk about what they will do if they win and to try to persuade voters to vote for them. Journalists will expect to be able to interview candidates.



Officials and journalists

Some jobs need to be done for the election. You need to get into two sub-groups.

- Group One is in charge of the election. One member of the group should be elected as Returning Officer to make sure everything is fair. The group should design and make enough ballot papers for everyone to use. A sample ballot paper is shown on the next page. The group can discuss whether or not to have a 'No vote' option on the ballot paper. This group should also make or find a ballot box to put votes in.
- Group Two should take on the role of journalists who are following the campaigns and reporting what is going on. They could do this by writing headlines to pin on the notice board (e.g. 'Conservative candidate promises tax cuts'). Journalists should interview candidates and will be interested in any scandal.

- Voting will take place at a pre-agreed time. Everyone has a vote, including the candidates. The vote is secret. Each voter should have a ballot paper. Mark a cross against the chosen candidate, fold the paper and post it in the ballot box.

Carrying out a mock election in a small group

Sample ballot paper

<i>Mark one cross 'X' against the name of your chosen candidate</i>	
JONES, Frankie (Conservative Party)	
SMITH, Pat (Green Party)	
ROBERTS, Chris (Labour Party)	
BROWN, Sam (Monster Raving Looney Party)	
PATEL, Rehanna (Liberal Democrat Party)	
MACDONALD, Angus (Independent)	
DAVIES, Bryn (Plaid Cymru)	

The Returning Officer and his/her team should make sure that the count of the votes is fair. Journalists could also keep an eye on things. The count should be carried out in public so that everyone can see it.

The Returning Officer announces the result. The results should be read out as follows:

I (Alex Jones), being the Returning Officer for 'XX' group, do hereby declare that the votes cast by 'XX' in this election are as follows:

<i>Jones, Frankie</i>	<i>3 votes</i>
<i>Patel, Rehanna</i>	<i>6 votes</i>
<i>Smith, Pat</i>	<i>5 votes</i>
<i>Brown, Sam</i>	<i>10 votes</i>
<i>Roberts, Chris</i>	<i>2 votes</i>
<i>MacDonald, Angus</i>	<i>2 votes</i>
<i>Davies, Bryn</i>	<i>3 votes</i>

I therefore declare that Sam Brown is duly elected as Member of Parliament for 'XX'.

The winner should then make an acceptance speech.

At the end of the election, young people should work in groups of about four (which should be different from the groups they worked in during the election) to discuss the following questions:

- What happened during the election? Was it fair? Why did the winner win?
- What skills and knowledge did people gain during the activity? What knowledge is still needed? How can skills be used and improved?
- How do representative structures in the organisation elect officers? Does everyone vote? If not, why not? How can skills and knowledge for representation be improved?

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Resources

The Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

As the professional subject association of those involved in citizenship education, the main aim of the association is the furtherance of mutual support, knowledge and good practice, skills and resources for the teaching and learning of citizenship in schools and colleges.

Publishes *Teaching Citizenship* journal which provides practical advice and resources for citizenship teachers.

www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk

Centre for Citizenship Studies in Education

Promotes research and education for citizenship, human rights and the teaching of democracy in schools. Resources include teaching and learning materials, and a distance-learning programme for teachers.

www.le.ac.uk/se/schoolcentres/citizenship

citizED

Supported by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) for citizenship and teacher education, citizED supports tutors, mentors and trainee teachers.

www.citized.info

Citizenship Foundation

Promotes citizenship through education about the law, democracy and society, particularly topics relating to rights and responsibilities, law and the legal system, human rights, education for democracy, and moral and critical thinking. It aims to empower people, particularly the young and disadvantaged, with the knowledge and skills to engage positively with their communities. Resources include classroom materials, Youth Parliament and Mock Trial competitions, Speakers4Schools initiative, good practice case studies and guidelines on whole-school policy/planning.

www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk

The Institute for Citizenship

As an independent charitable trust, the institute aims to promote informed, active citizenship and greater participation in democracy and society through a combination of community projects, research, education and discussion and debate. Established in 1992 by the then Speaker of the House, the Rt. Hon. Bernard Weatherill MP, the Institute is supported by a wide range of organisations.

www.citizen.org.uk

National Union of Students

The NUS supports the development of students' unions and councils by training for union executives, representatives and council members through residential and in-house routes. It also produces support materials and guides on aspects of union involvement.

www.nusonline.co.uk

The National Youth Agency

Promotes young people's personal and social development, and their voice, influence and place in society. Range of published resources to support this work, including www.youthinformation.com that offers information on a variety of topics, including justice and quality, money, health, housing, employment and training.

www.nya.org.uk

The Politics Association – The Association for Lecturers, Teachers and Students of Politics

Promotes the study and teaching of the theory and practice of local, national and international politics and offers a professional service for all those engaged or interested in the teaching of political subjects. Publishes a range of AS/A2 textbooks, AS packs, issues papers and audios on politics. Also runs conferences and produces the journal *Talking Politics* (includes book reviews and news briefing).

www.politics-association.org.uk

School Councils UK

Provides training and resources to assist schools with the establishment and development of effective schools councils.

www.schoolcouncils.org

UK Youth Parliament (UKYP)

UKYP aims to give 11–18 year olds a voice that will be listened to by local and national government and other agencies with an interest in the views and needs of young people.

www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk