



# Young people and citizenship education: The impact of studying GCSE Citizenship Studies on young people's democratic engagement and participation

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Aims and rationale

Over the past few decades, democratic systems have been challenged by declining participation in elections, by political volatility, by an increase in populism and by the deliberate spreading of disinformation. Although youth participation in politics has fallen, young people remain interested in politics and are relatively active in non-electoral forms of civic and political engagement. The danger is that young people have become disconnected from formal politics, which is particularly the case for those from lower socio-economic groups.

The strong connection between education and democracy is well established in the academic literature – the more years a person spends in education and the greater knowledge they have of democracy and politics, the more likely we are to have sophisticated and active citizenry. But how can we reach out to all young people? One answer is effective Citizenship education, which should be delivered hand in hand with political reforms, such as Votes at 16. Together, enhancement of Citizenship education and better participatory opportunities for young people have the potential to rejuvenate British democracy.

In light of the ongoing (at the time of writing, in spring 2025) Curriculum Review, our aim in this report is to investigate the impact of Citizenship education on the democratic engagement of young people in England, and to independently evaluate its effect and how it might be refined and enhanced going forward. We surveyed 889 young people, aged 16 to 19, with a broad mix of men and women, those identifying as coming from a minoritised ethnic group or working-class background, and a boosted sample of those taking the GCSE in Citizenship Studies.

### Findings

The findings highlight the clear link between GCSE Citizenship Studies (GCSE CS) and an increasing sense of ‘internal efficacy’: pupils’ interest in politics and democracy; their understanding of the way in which politics and democracy work; and their willingness to participate to make a difference. In this respect, we found the following:

- Young people who had taken GCSE CS were considerably more interested in politics (63.1%) and in the news (64.3%) than were those who had not studied for the qualification (politics 47.3% and news 53.6%).
- Those who studied for this GCSE had a much higher level of understanding of political issues (70.7%) than those who had not taken the course (63.5%).

Contrary to negative characterisations of youth views of democracy in the media, our data points to a generation that is overwhelmingly diversity-friendly, with an open and inclusive outlook and a commitment to equity in social life. It is also an age cohort that is broadly supportive of democratic politics – the findings on democratic satisfaction revealed that:

- Although young people in general are highly distrustful of key democratic institutions, those who have studied for GCSE CS are less so than those who have not, including less distrust of the media (by 72.4% to 80%), local government (51% to 60.8%), the UK Government (62.6% to 72.6%) and politicians in general (76.8% to 89.1%).



- Those taking GCSE CS were also significantly more likely than their peers to feel that voting at either a general election (by 90.1% to 81.8%) or a local election (79.7% to 67.2%) could influence Government.
- We identified a particularly large improvement in political understanding and interest for the GCSE cohort in certain groups – especially young women and racialised minorities.

To address what young people saw as a democratic deficit, political reform was seen as a necessary step:

- Support for Votes at 16 from all young participants was 47.6%, but increased to 62.4% for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies.

The findings also emphasised the importance of issue-based learning – the young people in our survey wanted to know more about key Citizenship education topics, to better understand and engage in democracy:

- An average of 90% stated that the following core GCSE CS topics were either ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ important: Human rights, How government works, How citizens act to bring about change, Elections and voting, The media and social media, The economy and financial education, The environment and climate change, Crime and the justice system and Inequality and equality issues.
- Those who had studied for the GCSE were even more likely than their peers to view as important the following topics: How citizens act to bring about change (by 90.4% to 81.7%), Elections and voting (97.5% to 91.2%), The media and social media (86.5% to 79.3%) and Crime and the justice system (93.5% to 86.3%).

The existing literature suggests that knowledge about how politics works, political literacy and how to make a difference are key predictors of democratic participation. However, the appetite for learning about the Citizenship-related issues mentioned above was often unfulfilled. Most of our sample felt that over the previous year they had not had the opportunity to gain sufficient exposure to most of these topics.

- Well over half of the young people felt that they needed to learn more about Crime and the justice system (67.2%), How citizens can act to bring about change (60.3%), The economy and financial education (60.1%), How government works (56.8%), Elections and voting (56.1%) and Human rights (53.1%).
- Those studying for GCSE CS were much more likely to claim exposure to these topics than their peers, including: How government works (by 73.2% to 36.6%), How citizens act to bring about change (63.1% to 34.7%) and Elections and voting (70.1% to 38.3%).

Our findings suggest that, regardless of background, virtually all young people who have taken GCSE Citizenship Studies express extremely high confidence in their understanding of politics as a consequence of doing so.

- Those who had taken GCSE CS overwhelmingly (82%) confirmed that the additional study of Citizenship topics had increased their democratic literacy and confidence about political issues.

## Recommendations

- The Department for Education (DFE) should prioritise GCSE Citizenship Studies and include it in school performance measures so that the value of the subject as a qualification is better understood by parents/carers, schools and colleges.
- In the context of the DFE's Curriculum and Assessment Review, the subject of Citizenship and the quality of Citizenship teaching must be strengthened. Therefore:
  - The Citizenship studies curriculum in general and the GCSE Citizenship Studies in particular to be made available in all schools and educational settings so that all students have access to high quality and extensive Citizenship education.
  - Increased investment in the specialist training of new citizenship teachers and also in CPD for existing citizenship teachers to allow for more comprehensive provision of the GCSE Citizenship Studies as well as basic citizenship education within the curriculum.
  - The Citizenship curriculum – including the GCSE Citizenship Studies – to be kept under regular review so that it gives attention to key issues that have meaning for young people's everyday lives; the data from this study indicate young people would like deeper study of, and more discussion about, topics such as the environment and climate change, crime, as well as inequality and equality issues in their citizenship classes.
  - Deeper engagement between schools and students with policy-makers (which is most realistic and realisable at the local level), to make experiences of citizenship education more efficacious.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Younger people are facing uncertain times. The economic, social and environmental problems caused by successive 'waves of crisis' – the 2008 financial crash and austerity in public spending, the COVID-19 pandemic, the recent cost-of-living crisis, the looming threat of climate change – have negatively affected their everyday lives.<sup>1</sup> Many young people face multiple day-to-day challenges through issues such as affordability in terms of the cost of groceries, energy, housing or poor mental health. There is evidence to show that this polycrisis has increased disillusionment with mainstream electoral politics, which is exacerbated by the spread of populism and misinformation in democratic societies. In the 2024 UK General Election, it was estimated that youth turnout fell to a historic low of under 40%.<sup>2</sup>

Despite political commentary proclaiming the spread of anti-democratic sentiment among younger generations,<sup>3</sup> young people are interested in politics (issues rather than parties) and are engaged in a wide variety of non-electoral forms of civic and political engagement, including volunteering for social causes. According to the Hansard Society's 'Audit of political engagement', around half of young people would like to get more involved in political decision-making at both a national and a local level.<sup>4</sup> And

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<sup>1</sup> Intergenerational Foundation (2024) 'Blowing the budget: Why the young have to spend more than the old on essentials'. Available at: [www.if.org.uk/research-posts/blowing-the-budget-why-the-young-have-to-spend-more-than-the-old-on-essentials](http://www.if.org.uk/research-posts/blowing-the-budget-why-the-young-have-to-spend-more-than-the-old-on-essentials) (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos (2024) 'How Britain voted in the 2024 election'. Available at: [www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election](http://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election) (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Channel 4 (2025) 'Gen Z: Trends, truth and trust'. Available at: [https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/\\_flysystem/s3/2025-01/Channel%20-%20Gen%20Z%20Truth%20Trust%20and%20Trends%20-%20SUMMARY%20AND%20CALL%20TO%20ACTION%20-%20FINAL%201.pdf](https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/_flysystem/s3/2025-01/Channel%20-%20Gen%20Z%20Truth%20Trust%20and%20Trends%20-%20SUMMARY%20AND%20CALL%20TO%20ACTION%20-%20FINAL%201.pdf) (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Hansard Society (2019) 'Audit of political engagement 2004–2019: Audit 16'. Available at: [www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement#download-the-reports-tables-and-datasets](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement#download-the-reports-tables-and-datasets) (accessed 25 April 2025).

young people also want to learn more about politics: a 2025 British Academy report found that the number of students taking undergraduate degrees in politics had increased by more than 40% in the decade after 2012.<sup>5</sup>

So, the problem – properly conceived – is not one of disinterest, but one of disillusionment with public policy and of disconnection from the political system.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, education has a key role to play in connecting the issues about which young people care to social and political action. If not, there is a danger that the space will be filled by populist appeals that may have no basis in fact and offer simple solutions to what are complex and interconnecting problems. This danger is greatest among those groups for whom hope is in short supply – particularly young people from economically or socially disadvantaged groups.

### Education and democratic participation

The strong link between education and good and active citizenship is well established in the literature.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review undertaken by the Department for Education Expert Panel, and the planned introduction and implementation of votes at 16, offer an opportunity to reconsider how to generate virtuous circles through effective Citizenship education – increasing political sophistication and trust and developing a greater faith in one's ability to make a difference and, consequently, to increase the likelihood of youth participation.

In the UK, young people are much less likely than older people to vote at general elections, and the rate of youth turnout compared to the turnout of older adults is much lower than in other established European democracies. In the UK, Ipsos estimated that 37% of 18- to 24-year-olds voted in 2024, compared to 54% of all adults and 47% of 18- to 24-year-olds in 2019.<sup>8</sup> This is among the lowest youth turnout rates on record.

The decline in youth participation also masks a large intragenerational gap between those young people in higher education or from upper or middle socio-economic groups and those from lower socio-economic groups. In 2024, youth turnout of 18- to 34-year-olds in the lowest (DE) social group was only 22%, compared to around half of young people in the two higher (AB/ C1) social groups (57% and 49%, respectively). Turnout among young people from the DE group had almost halved, from 43% in 2019 (according to Ipsos polling). So, the fall in youth participation is very much centred around young people from less well-off backgrounds.

The lack of engagement of younger generations with electoral politics is a result of both long-term trends and short-term factors. Identification with political parties and party membership have reduced

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<sup>5</sup> British Academy (2025) 'New report uncovers popularity of Politics and International Relations degrees, with graduates outearning national averages'. Available at:

[www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/new-report-uncovers-popularity-of-politics-and-international-relations-degrees-with-graduates-outearning-national-averages](http://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/new-report-uncovers-popularity-of-politics-and-international-relations-degrees-with-graduates-outearning-national-averages) (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Sloam, J. and Henn, M. (2024) 'Youthquake for the progressive left: Making sense of the collapse of youth support for the Conservatives'. UK Election Analysis. Available at:

[www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-2-voters-polls-and-results/youthquake-for-the-progressive-left-making-sense-of-the-collapse-of-youth-support-for-the-conservatives](http://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-2-voters-polls-and-results/youthquake-for-the-progressive-left-making-sense-of-the-collapse-of-youth-support-for-the-conservatives) (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Brady, H. E., Verba, S. and Schlozman, K. L. (1995) 'Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation'. *American Political Science Review*, 89(2): 271–294; Neundorff, A., Niemi, R. G. and Smets, K. (2016) 'The compensation effect of civic education on political engagement: How civics classes make up for missing parental socialization'. *Political Behavior*, 38: 921–949.

<sup>8</sup> Ipsos (2024) 'How Britain voted in the 2024 election'. Available at:  
[www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election](http://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election) (accessed 25 April 2025).

dramatically over several decades,<sup>9</sup> which has increased voter volatility (switching between parties) and placed greater emphasis upon issues rather than broad policy platforms.<sup>10</sup> The failure of public policy in addressing the issues about which young people care – from mental health provision, to the cost of housing, to tackling climate change – has further undermined support for mainstream electoral politics.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, younger generations have turned towards non-electoral forms of participation relating to issues that have meaning for their everyday lives – signing petitions, joining boycotts, taking part in demonstrations and rallies, and participating in social movements or social action projects. Mass youth participation in the #Fridaysforfuture climate strikes and Black Lives Matter protests are just two of the most well-known examples.<sup>12</sup> Yet the distancing of young people from mainstream electoral politics remains a problem, which may lead to non-participation (in all forms of politics), as well as to vulnerability to disinformation and extremism and to being more seriously ignored by policymakers than is already the case. And so the vicious circle continues.

Beyond socio-economic status, education is a central component in defining who participates. Young people with high levels of educational attainment and university students are much more likely than their peers to engage in politics and are as likely to participate as older adults. The teaching of political knowledge and democratic skills – particularly in schools – is also known to increase trust and participation (especially among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds).<sup>13</sup> How we teach such knowledge and skills, such as through Citizenship education, is an evolving challenge. For example, new patterns in media consumption require a greater focus on the development of political and digital literacy skills, and the gathering crisis of environmental change requires a greater focus on sustainability.

The existing research on Citizenship education in England, the UK and other countries shows that when strong curricula and comprehensive teacher training are in place, when discussion of controversial issues is encouraged within a safe space, and when students are engaged in experiential learning in their communities and in politics, we witness large increases in trust and participation.<sup>14</sup> Citizenship education has proved to be particularly effective with young people from lower socio-economic groups – the very groups among whom participation is the lowest.

In England, Citizenship was introduced to all secondary schools in 2002 as a national curriculum subject, and alongside this a GCSE in Citizenship Studies, initially as a short course and then later as a full course qualification<sup>15</sup>. Despite the qualification's growing popularity in recent years, the GCSE is not offered in all schools, and less than a quarter of those teaching the qualification have specific

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<sup>9</sup> Burton, M. and Tunnicliffe, R. (2022) 'Membership of political parties in Great Britain'. House of Commons. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05125> (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Norris, P. (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Sloam, J. and Henn, M. (2025) 'How young people can shape environmental policy in urban spaces'. *Policy & Politics*, 53(1): 65–86.

<sup>12</sup> Sloam, J., Pickard, S. and Henn, M. (2022) 'Young people and environmental activism: The transformation of democratic politics'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(6): 683–691.

<sup>13</sup> Torney-Purta, J., Richardson, W. and Barber, C. (2004) 'Trust in government-related institutions and civic engagement among adolescents: Analysis of five countries from the IEA Civic Education Study'. CIRCLE Working Paper 17. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED484045.pdf> (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Willeck, C. and Mendelberg, T. (2022) 'Education and political participation'. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 25(1): 89–110; Deimel, D., Hoskins, B. and Abs, H. J. (2021) 'How do schools affect inequalities in political participation: Compensation of social disadvantage or provision of differential access?'. In: Kuang, X., Zhu, J. and Kennedy, K. J. (eds) *Civic Learning for Alienated, Disaffected and Disadvantaged Students*. Routledge, pp. 6–26.

<sup>15</sup> Joint Council for Qualifications - Examination Results Archive. available <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results-archive/> (accessed 14 May 2025)

Citizenship training.<sup>16</sup> Yet the GCSE in Citizenship Studies provides a coherent and academically rigorous framework for the implementation of quality Citizenship education when and where it is properly supported.<sup>17</sup>

To address future democratic challenges, it is vital that we increase both 'internal efficacy' (a belief in one's ability to engage) and 'external efficacy' (a belief in one's ability to make a difference through engagement) among younger generations. To generate internal efficacy, we need to reflect on the role of education in giving young people the knowledge and practical skills to engage effectively with civil society and democratic institutions. To generate external efficacy, this needs to be complemented with effective political change, such as votes at 16, and more effective interactions between parties and young people.

This report explores the state of 16- to 19-year-olds' interest, knowledge and engagement in politics and society through a bespoke survey of young people (n=889) across the country. It provides new evidence on the impact of Citizenship education on youth engagement, as well as identifying some of the gaps in the existing provision.

## RESEARCH AIMS

1. To examine the relationship between Citizenship education and levels of democratic engagement and participation of diverse groups of young people aged 16 to 19.
2. To identify whether studying for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)<sup>18</sup> in Citizenship Studies has an impact on the direction and levels of young people's democratic engagement and participation.
3. To identify whether studying GCSE Citizenship Studies has an impact on the reduction of inequalities in democratic engagement and participation by gender, ethnicity and social class.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study was commissioned by the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), with data collection conducted via an online questionnaire from September 2024 to January 2025. A convenience sampling strategy was used, targeting young people aged 16 to 19, which also included a sizable group (n=157) who had completed or were currently studying GCSE Citizenship Studies. Participant recruitment was coordinated by ACT.

The initial dataset comprised 1,032 responses; however, 143 individuals did not provide consent to participate or had not studied at a UK school or college since the age of 14. Consequently, the final sample included 889 participants. Data analysis incorporated both descriptive and bivariate statistical methods to examine potential associations between studying GCSE Citizenship Studies and key variables of interest.

<sup>16</sup> Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) (2024) 'Who is teaching Citizenship and what are they doing?'. Available at: [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/who-is-teaching-citizenship-and-what-are-they-doing](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/who-is-teaching-citizenship-and-what-are-they-doing) (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>17</sup> Department for Education (DfE) (2022) 'Citizenship studies: GCSE subject content'. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6287a835d3bf7f1f433ae19a/GCSE\\_subject\\_content\\_citizenship\\_studies\\_May\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6287a835d3bf7f1f433ae19a/GCSE_subject_content_citizenship_studies_May_2022.pdf) (accessed 25 April 2025).

<sup>18</sup> The GCSE is a qualification studied at schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by young people aged 14 to 16. In Scotland, some students may also be eligible to study for various GCSEs, although usually they undertake study for the Scottish Qualifications Certificate.



This study adhered to ethical guidelines and complied with relevant data protection regulations. Ethical approval was granted by the Nottingham Trent University Ethics Committee on 8 March 2024.<sup>19</sup>

## Descriptive statistics and intragenerational differences

It is important to note that our discussion of the research findings offers an assessment of the general and overall views of our sample of young people, but it also recognises that our survey respondents should not be treated as a homogenous group. Instead, we also adopt a nuanced approach by looking for evidence of within-age differences – or what we might refer to as ‘intragenerational inequalities’ – based on four key independent variables: gender, ethnicity, social class and the impact of enhanced learning in Citizenship Studies. The latter is based on whether or not our young respondents have studied for GCSE Citizenship Studies:

- GCSE Citizenship Studies: To assess the impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies variable on the democratic engagement of our young sample, we compared those who said that they had taken this particular GCSE (17.7%) with those who responded that they had not studied for this qualification or were unsure about whether they had done so (82.3%).
- Gender: To examine whether there are any gender-based differences, we compared the views and behaviours of those who identified either as female (48.7%) or as male (47.7%), as well as a third group that included both those who identified in other ways (1.9%) and those who responded that they preferred not to say (1.7%).
- Ethnicity: In order to assess the impact of ethnicity, we combined those respondents from the four predominantly White groups into a single ‘White’ category (63.2%), and then we created a second category that combined those included in the remaining 15 groups, which we labelled as ‘racially minoritised groups’ (36.8%).
- Social class: We decided to use a ‘subjective’ measure of social class, based on respondents’ own views of whether or not they thought of themselves as belonging to any particular class. We felt that this was a more valid measure of social class for our young people than other indicators – such as the UK’s National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC)<sup>20</sup> – that are often used in social research studies, but which rely on each young person’s knowledge of the detailed employment patterns, conditions and responsibilities of their parent or carer. Our view is that measures such as NS-SEC are therefore not appropriate for young people. Instead, our alternative and subjective measure of social class included those who considered themselves as ‘middle class’ (50.2%), ‘working class’ (19.0%) or not ‘belonging to any particular social class’ (28.2%).
- Please note that our intragenerational/within-group analyses only include findings (as measured by the use of the Chi-squared [ $\chi^2$ ] statistic) where there are statistically significant differences between each category of these four variables – for example, between those young people who have taken GCSE Citizenship Studies and those who have not.

Table 1 can be found in Appendix 3 of this report and provides an overview of the profile of our sample, including these four independent variables, as well as the following socio-demographic variables:

- their plans after they had left education or training

<sup>19</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for a detailed account of research design, sampling strategy and other methodological decisions made in this research.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of different measures of social class, see Lambert, P. (2024) ‘Sociological measures of inequality’. *Oxford Open Economics*, 3(1): i167–i175.

- their actual ages
- the region of the country in which they lived
- the sexual orientation of each respondent
- whether or not the sex with which they identified was the same sex with which they were registered at birth
- whether or not respondents noted any disabilities

## FINDINGS

### Interest in politics and in citizenship issues

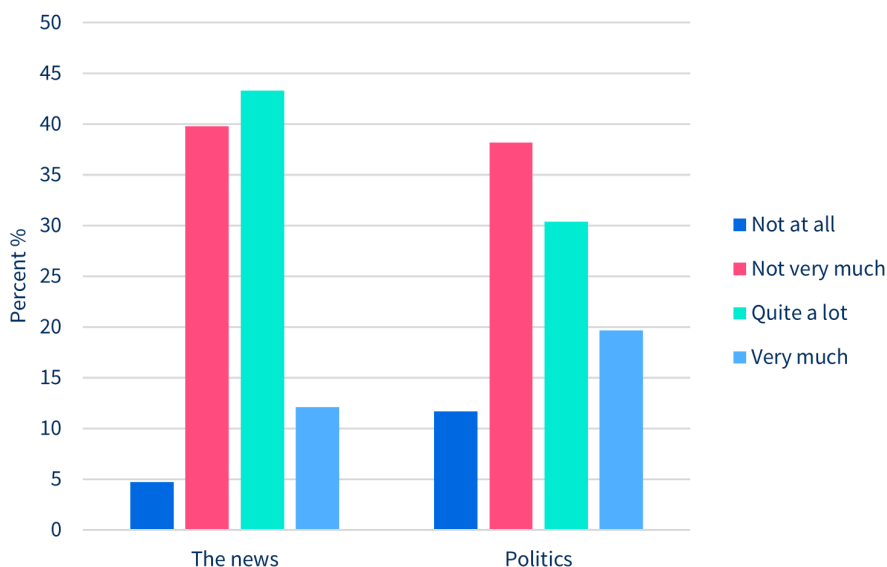
- As we have referred to in the Research context section of this report, there is a view commonly expressed in different circles that young people in Britain have little appetite for politics and citizenship issues, and that they are becoming increasingly disconnected from our democratic processes and institutions. However, there is a considerable body of countering empirical evidence indicating that many young people are in fact interested in political issues and are active in a wide variety of forms of civic and political engagement.<sup>21</sup>
- The results from our survey<sup>22</sup> of young 16-19-year-olds support such counter evidence. As Figure 1 indicates, more than half of our research participants (55.4%) claimed to have an interest in the news (Quite a lot/ Very much). In addition, they were slightly more likely to report an interest in politics (50.1%) than they were to declare not very much or no interest (49.9%); indeed, nearly a fifth responded that they were 'very much' interested in politics (19.7%). This compares quite favourably to the 36% of all UK adults who have a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics in the 2024 British Social Attitudes Survey.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hansard Society (2019 'Audit of political engagement 2004–2019: Audit 16'. Available at: [www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement#download-the-reports-tables-and-datasets](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement#download-the-reports-tables-and-datasets) (accessed 25 April 2025);

<sup>22</sup> Sloam, J. and Henn, M. (2019) Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain. Springer.

<sup>23</sup> Curtice, J., Montagu, I. and Sivathanan, C. (2024) 'Damaged politics? The impact of the 2019–24 Parliament on political trust and confidence.' National Centre for Social Research. Available at: <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Damaged%20Politics.pdf> (accessed 25 April 2025).

● **Figure 1.<sup>24</sup> Interest in news and politics**



**Intragenerational differences**

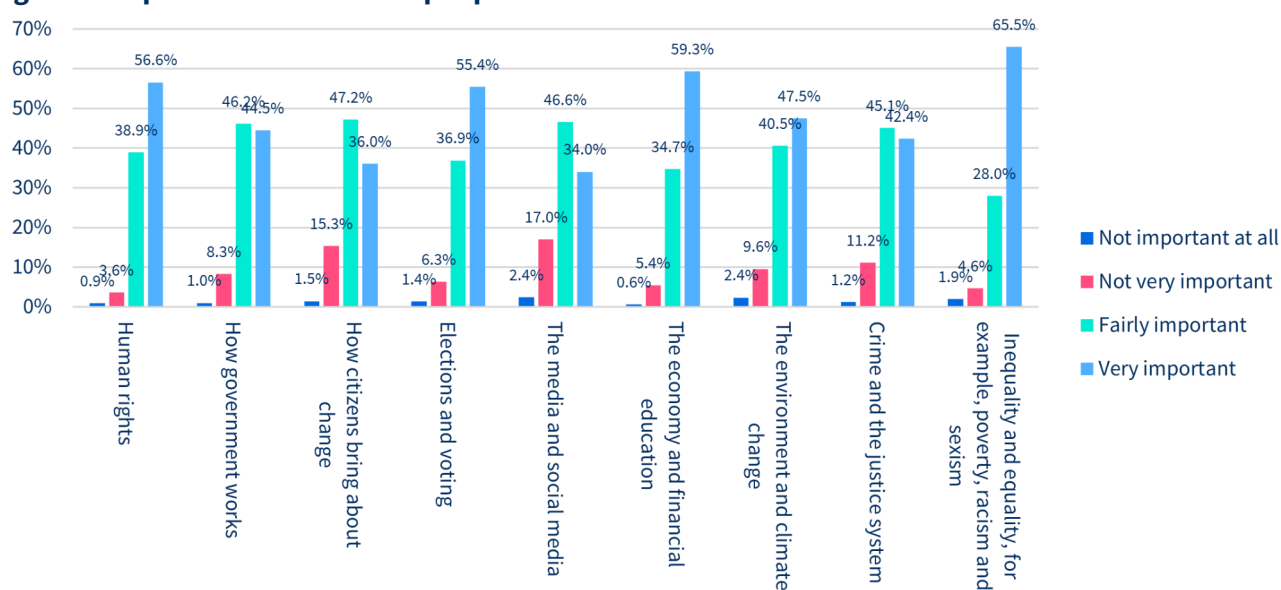
- It is important to note that not all young people shared the same levels of interest in the news and in politics, and the data does point towards some important (and statistically significant) intragenerational differences. For the following analyses, we have combined the 'Very much' interested and the interested 'Quite a lot' categories into a single 'Interested' response, and we have blended the interested 'Not very much' and the interested 'Not at all' categories into a single 'Not interested' response.
  - The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies: Those young people who had taken GCSE Citizenship Studies were considerably more interested in the news (64.3%) and in politics (63.1%) than were those who had not studied for the qualification (politics 47.3% and news 53.6%).
  - The impact of gender: There were no appreciable gender differences in interest for these two variables.
  - The impact of ethnicity: Ethnicity did exert an impact, with White survey participants more interested in politics (but not the news) (53.7%) than those young people from racialised minority backgrounds (43.7%).
  - The impact of social class: Social class also influenced levels of interest in the news and in politics. Middle-class young people were significantly more interested in the news (61.9%) than were those from working-class backgrounds (51.5%) or those who did not feel a social class connection (47.8%). Moreover, although middle-class (55.6%) and working-class (53.8%) respondents were more or less equally interested in politics, those considering themselves not to come from any particular class were much less interested in political matters (37.8%).
- Our sample of young participants also expressed an interest in a range of different Citizenship issues. We presented them with a list of nine Citizenship topics taught as a required part of the national

<sup>24</sup> For all tables and figures, our sample size of young people is 889 unless otherwise stated.

curriculum in all maintained schools in England at Key Stages 3 (age 11–14) and 4 (age 11–16),<sup>25</sup> and asked them to state how much value they placed in each by rating their level of importance as an issue about which to learn. These topics were:

- Human rights
  - How government works
  - How citizens act to bring about change
  - Elections and voting
  - The media and social media
  - The economy and financial education
  - The environment and climate change
  - Crime and the justice system
  - Inequality and equality issues
- As Figure 2 confirms, in all cases, very large majorities of more than 80% stated that learning about such topics was either 'fairly' or 'very' important. Indeed, the average 'importance' percentage score for learning about these Citizenship topics was extremely high, at 89.5%.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 2. Importance of Citizenship topics**



### Intragenerational differences

- However, there were some notable statistically significant differences in the levels of importance placed on the study of these topics by different groups of young people – according to whether or not they had studied GCSE Citizenship Studies, their gender, their ethnicity and their social class. For the following analyses, we have combined the 'Very important' and 'Fairly important' categories into a

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education (DfE) (2013) 'Citizenship programmes of study: Key Stages 3 and 4'. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f324f7ad3bf7f1b1ea28dca/SECONDARY\\_national\\_curriculum\\_-\\_Citizenship.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f324f7ad3bf7f1b1ea28dca/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_Citizenship.pdf) (accessed 30 April 2025).

<sup>26</sup> To create this score, we added the percentages of those who replied 'Quite often' and 'Very often' for each item (805.3) and then divided that figure by the number of items (9).



single 'Important' response, and the 'Not very important' and 'Not important at all' categories into a single 'Not important' response.

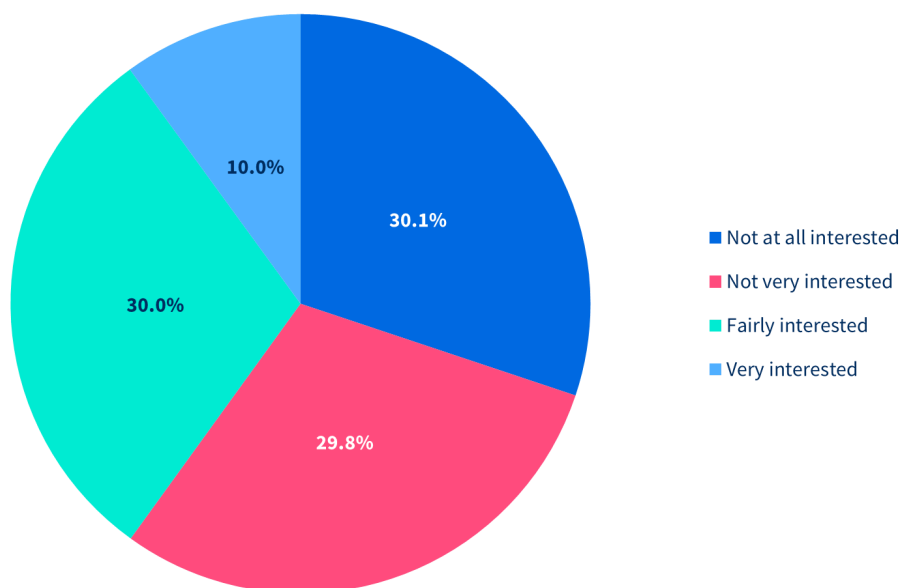
- **The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies:** This variable exerted a statistically significant impact on four of the nine Citizenship studies topics considered; in each case, those who had studied for this particular GCSE were considerably more likely than their contemporaries to view the topic as important. These topics were How citizens act to bring about change (GCSE 90.4% : non-GCSE 81.7%), Elections and voting (GCSE 97.5% : non-GCSE 91.2%), The media and social media (GCSE 86.5% : non-GCSE 79.3%) and Crime and the justice system (GCSE 93.5% : non-GCSE 86.3%).
- **The impact of gender:** There was a very notable gender gap observed for seven of the nine topics, with young females rating the importance of studying these more highly than did our young males. These topics were Human rights (females 97.5% : males 93.2% : other identifiers and no preference 100%<sup>27</sup>), How citizens act to bring about change (females 85.5% : males 79.9% : other identifiers and no preference 90.6%), Elections and voting (females 95.4% : males 88.6% : other identifiers and no preference 100%), The media and social media (females 86.3% : males 74.5% : other identifiers and no preference 84.4%), The environment and climate change (females 91.9% : males 83.5% : other identifiers and no preference 87.7%), Crime and the justice system (females 90.7% : males 83.9% : other identifiers and no preference 93.8%) and Inequality and equality issues (females 97.9% : males 88.4% : other identifiers and no preference 100%).

There were only two exceptions where there were no appreciable differences expressed by gender (The economy and financial education and How government works), with all our young people rating these topics extremely highly.

- **The impact of ethnicity:** There was only one Citizenship Studies topic that was impacted by ethnicity at a statistically significant level, and this was the study of Human rights. Here, more young people from racialised minority groups rated the topic as important (97.9%) than was the case for our White respondents (94.1%). For both groups, the percentages are extremely high and statistically significant.
- **The impact of social class:** Social class exerted a statistically significant effect on the level of importance attached to two of the topics, although the pattern varied and there was no clear social class direction. Middle-class students (93.3%) rated the importance of studying How government works more highly than those self-identifying as either working class (91.7%) or as not belonging to any social class (84.8%). Meanwhile, young people identifying as working class were more likely than their contemporaries to highly rate the value of studying How citizens act to bring about change (working class 88.8% : middle class 80% : no social class background 84%).
- In addition to our survey findings revealing a strong and clear interest in Citizenship issues, a noticeable minority (40%) of the full sample also stated that they might hypothetically be attracted to higher-level study in the form of a new A level in Citizenship Studies if such a qualification were to be made available at some point in the future (see Figure 3).

<sup>27</sup> Caution should be exercised for this group, given the small sample size (n = 32/3.6%) within our overall sample of 889 young people.

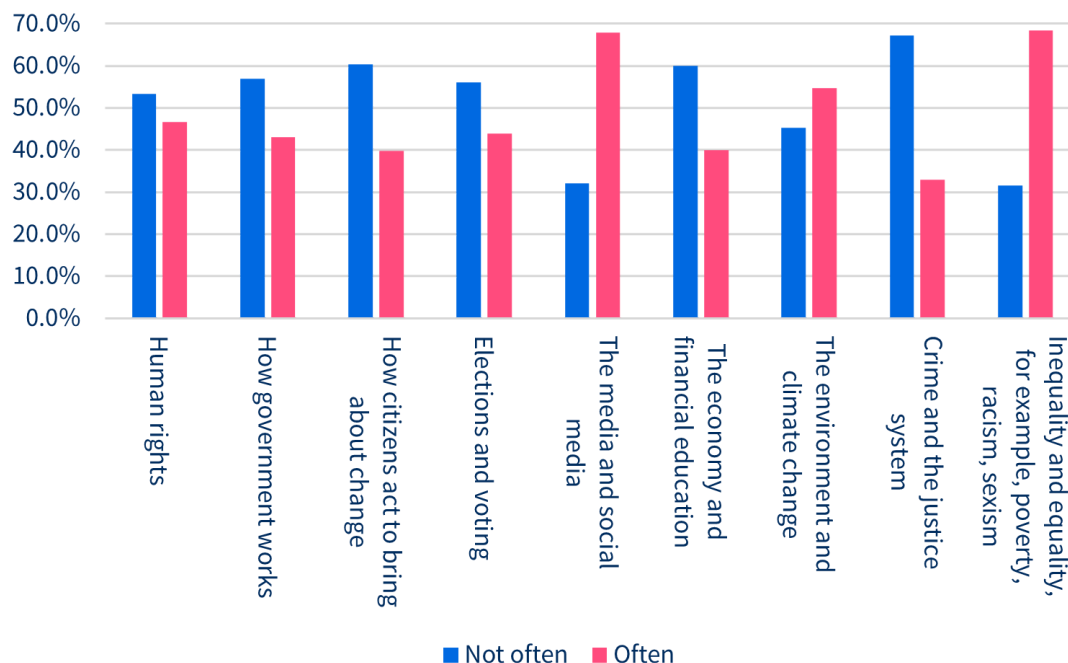
**Figure 3. Interest in hypothetical A level in Citizenship Studies**



### Perceived opportunities to learn about Citizenship Studies

- It should be noted that, despite the very apparent appetite for learning about Citizenship-related issues, most of our sample of young people felt that over the previous year they had not had the opportunity in their various learning environments to gain sufficient exposure to most of these topics. Figure 4 summarises these under-explored subject areas to which they referred, including *Crime and the justice system* (67.2%), *How citizens can act to bring about change* (60.3%), *The economy and financial education* (60.0%), *How government works* (56.9%), *Elections and voting* (56.1%) and *Human rights* (53.4%).
- However, these same students reported that there were adequate opportunities at their place of learning to engage with a small number of these listed Citizenship topics, including *Inequality and equality* (68.4%), *The media and social media* (67.9%) and *The environment and climate change* (54.7%).

**Figure 4. Under-explored Citizenship-related issues**



### Intragenerational differences

- The data reveals some important within-group differences with respect to our young respondents' (perceptions of their) exposure to these nine Citizenship topics. For the analyses, we have combined the 'Very often' and 'Quite often' answer categories into a single 'Often' response, and the 'Not very often' and 'Not at all' categories into a single 'Not often' response. These differences are outlined below.

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies.** This variable exerted a greater impact than any of our other four independent variables (of Gender, Ethnicity and Social Class). GCSE Citizenship Studies were very much more likely than their contemporaries to claim exposure to seven of the nine subjects - Human rights (GCSE 64.3% : non-GCSE 42.8%), How the government works (GCSE 73.2% : non-GCSE 36.6%), How citizens act to bring about change (GCSE 63.1% : non-GCSE 34.7%), Elections and voting (GCSE 70.1% : non-GCSE 38.3%), The media and social media (GCSE 80.3% : non-GCSE 65.3%), The economy and financial education (GCSE 53.5% : non-GCSE 37.2%), and Crime and the justice system (GCSE 54.8% : non-GCSE 28.1%). This was a mostly consistent picture – and by a statistically significant margin in each of these cases.

There were only two exceptions, where there were no appreciable differences expressed by those who had or had not taken GCSE Citizenship Studies (The environment and climate change and Inequality and equality).

- **The impact of gender:** The picture for gender was considerably more mixed. Young females were statistically more likely than young males or those who identified in a different way, to state that they had engaged with two of the Citizenship Studies subjects – The media and social media (females 72.3% : males 63.7% : other identifiers & no preference 65.6%), and Inequality and equality issues (females 74.4% : males 62% : other identifiers & no preference 71.9%).

Males were most likely to report having studied The economy and financial education (females 37.6% : males 43.9% : other identifiers and no preference 21.9%).

Those who identified in some way other than female or male or who preferred not to state their gender were (statistically significantly) more likely than their contemporaries to claim that they had previously had opportunities to learn about The environment and climate change (females 49.4% : males 59.2% : other identifiers and no preference 65.6%).

Gender had no appreciable impact on the remaining five subjects.

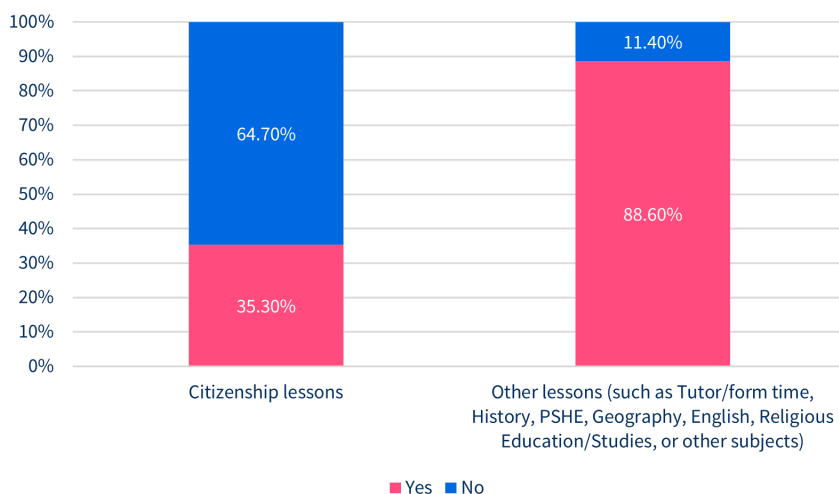
- **The impact of ethnicity:** In most cases, ethnicity had little impact on our survey respondents' claimed level of exposure to Citizenship topics at their place of learning. There was only one exception, in that our young White survey participants were much more likely than those from racialised minority backgrounds to report frequent opportunities to study The environment and climate change (White 57.5% : racialised minorities 49.8%). There were no other statistically significant ethnicity-based differences in terms of engagement with Citizenship Studies topics at their places of learning.
- **The impact of social class:** Social class exerted a statistically significant impact on only two of these nine 'subject exposure' variables. The data indicates that those who defined themselves as not having a social class identity were more likely than either working-class or middle-class students to recall engaging with Crime and the justice system (no social class background 42.2% : working class 37.3% : middle class 25.8%). Working-class respondents were significantly less likely than either of the two other groups to report having learned about The environment and climate change (working class 45% : middle class 57.8% : no social class background 56.6%).

There were no statistically significant social class differences for any of the other seven topics.

- In terms of the context and delivery of Citizenship teaching, only a minority of our sample reported that they learned about such topics in formal Citizenship Studies lessons (35.3%) – see Figure 5. Instead, they claimed that in those cases where they did engage with such topics, this was most likely to be in other learning settings (such as tutor/form time) or embedded within other subject classes, such as History, Geography, English, Religious Education/Studies or elsewhere (88.6%).



**Figure 5. Lessons where participants learned about Citizenship-related issues**



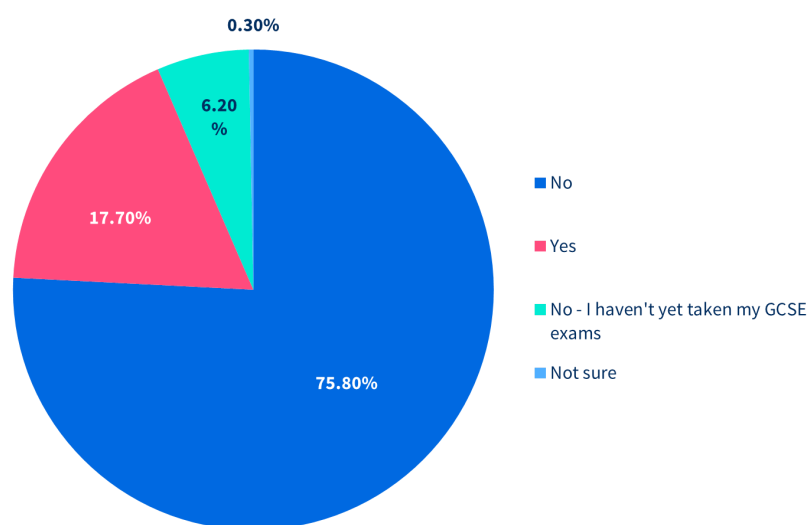
### Intragenerational differences

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** Those who had studied for this particular GCSE were (statistically) significantly more likely than other students to state that they had learnt about such topics in dedicated citizenship studies classes (81.9% : 25.3%, respectively). Those not taking the GCSE (90.5%) were more likely than the group of GCSE Citizenship Studies students (79.7%) to report engaging with such topics as part of their studies of other subjects.
- **The impact of gender:** Females (43%) were much more likely than males (28.4%) to report that they had encountered citizenship studies topics in formal citizenship studies lessons. There was no significant gender difference in terms of engaging with such topics in other learning situations.
- **The impact of ethnicity:** There is evidence of a statistically significant ethnicity gap in that young people from racialised minority backgrounds were more likely than their white counterparts to recall primarily studying citizenship studies in dedicated citizenship studies classes (racialised minorities 44.6% : white 29.8%). The opposite was the case for study in other subjects and settings (racialised minorities 82.2% : white 92.3%).
- **The impact of social class:** There was very little difference in terms of working-class young people and those reporting no social class background in recalling studying Citizenship Studies in dedicated Citizenship Studies classes (40.4% : 42.7%, respectively). However, less than a third of middle-class students (29%) claimed to have been exposed to this subject in formal Citizenship Studies classes.

## GCSE Citizenship Studies and understanding of politics

- Nearly one-fifth (18%) of our sample confirmed that they had taken their interest in Citizenship issues a step further, beyond statutory classes in the subject, by studying for the non-mandatory GCSE in Citizenship Studies (equivalent to 19% if we exclude those who stated that they had not yet taken their GCSE exams or were 'Not sure' whether they had done so). This compares with 3.1% of those who took GCSEs across the country.<sup>28</sup> See Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Studying GCSE Citizenship Studies**

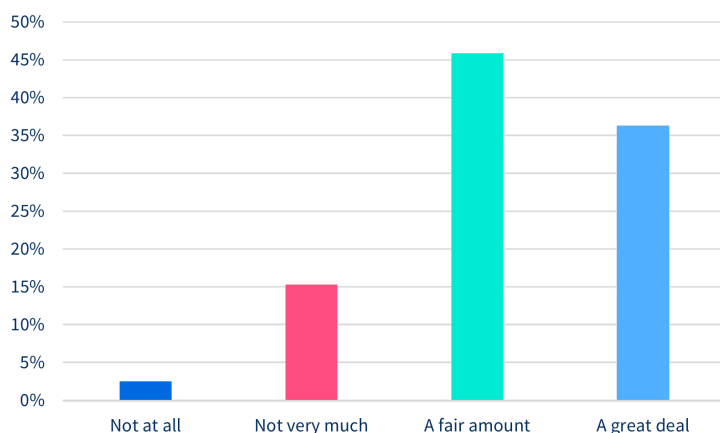


- Importantly, of those who had taken this GCSE, the overwhelmingly majority (82.2%) confirmed that this additional study of citizenship matters had increased their understanding of politics (See Figure 7). This serves to underline the value and importance of this subject as an area of learning that helps to improve young people's democratic literacy, their levels of confidence about political issues (or what we refer to as their 'internal political efficacy' <sup>29</sup>), and potentially their engagement with democratic processes and institutions.

<sup>28</sup> Figures calculated from: Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) (2024) 'GCSE Citizenship Studies results 2024 – empowering Citizenship education for every student'. Available at: [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/gcse-citizenship-studies-results-2024-empowering-citizenship-education](https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/gcse-citizenship-studies-results-2024-empowering-citizenship-education) (accessed 30 April 2025); Ofqual (2024) . GCSE candidate numbers are available via JCQ <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results-archive/>

<sup>29</sup> Broadly speaking, internal political efficacy can be defined as feelings of relative confidence in one's own understanding of political issues so that they feel able to participate in politics effectively. It can be compared with external political efficacy which refers to the extent to which one feels that their pathway to meaningful and effective participation and influence in democratic life is helped or hindered by (external) factors such as the nature of the electoral system, or the accessibility/remoteness of politicians. See Henn, M., & Foard, N. (2014) Young people and politics in Britain. *Sociology Review*, 23(4), 18-22.

**Figure 7. Studying GCSE Citizenship Studies and understanding of politics**



### Intragenerational differences

- There is evidence of some within-group/intragenerational differences amongst our sample of these particular young people who have opted to take the GCSE Citizenship Studies. In terms of gender differences, young female students are slightly more positive than men about the impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies in increasing their understanding of politics, but only by a margin of 83% to 82.1%. Similarly, those from racialised minority backgrounds are slightly more positive about the impact of their GCSE Citizenship Studies classes than are white students (82.9% : 81.6%, respectively), while there is also a relatively uniform pattern with respect to the positive impact of this particular GCSE on political understanding across the social classes (middle class 80%, working class 79.1%, and 86% of those not identifying with any social class). However, tests confirm that none of these within-group differences are statistically significant. Our findings suggest that regardless of background, young people who have taken the GCSE Citizenship Studies virtually all express extremely high confidence in their understanding of politics as a consequence of doing so.

### Young people and UK democratic politics

- We then put several questions to our sample of young people concerning their experiences of, views about and engagement with UK democratic politics. This issue is of particular importance given the current 'climate' and the challenges to democratic politics. In particular, these include the recent negative media coverage of many young people as active participants in the far-right racist riots that took place across the country in August 2024,<sup>30</sup> as well as a sizeable minority of this generation who have been characterised as preferring authoritarian politics led by non-elected strong leaders<sup>31</sup> rather than democratic politics.<sup>32</sup>

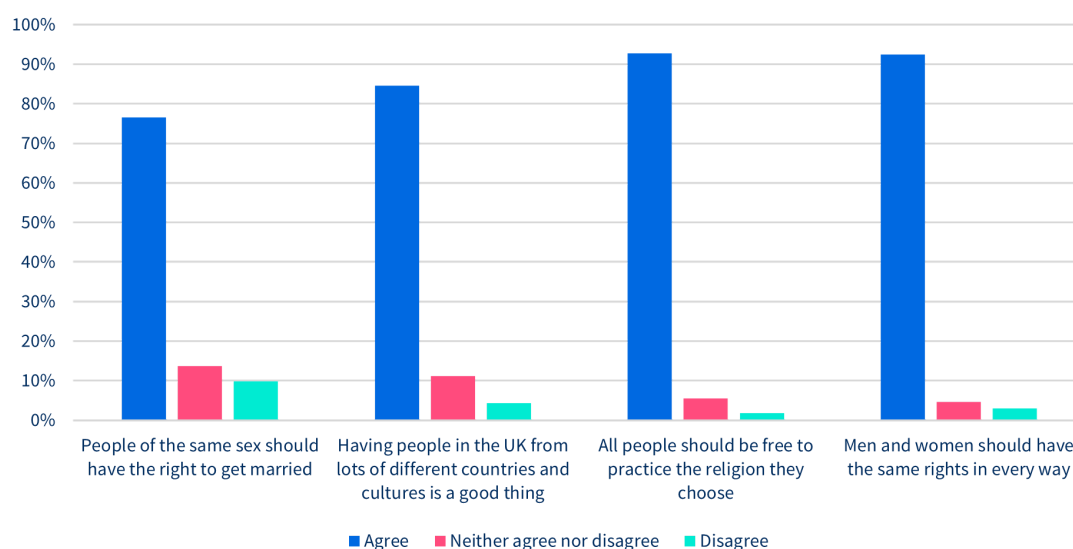
<sup>30</sup> Clarke, H. (2024) 'Children joined riots for the "thrill", report says'. BBC News, 28 January 2025. Available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cge72gxryqpo](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cge72gxryqpo) (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>31</sup> Mason, R. (2025) 'One in five Britons aged 18–45 prefer unelected leaders to democracy, poll finds'. The Guardian, 13 January 2025. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/12/one-in-five-britons-aged-18-45-prefer-unelected-leaders-to-democracy-poll-finds](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/12/one-in-five-britons-aged-18-45-prefer-unelected-leaders-to-democracy-poll-finds) (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Toynbee, P. (2025) 'Young people say they'd elect a "strong leader". I say give more of them the vote'. The Guardian, 30 January 2025. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/30/young-people-strong-leader-vote-democracy](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/30/young-people-strong-leader-vote-democracy) (accessed 10 March 2025).

- Contrary to these negative characterisations, our data points to a generation that is overwhelmingly diversity-friendly, with an open and inclusive outlook and a commitment to equity in social life; it is an age cohort that is also broadly supportive of democratic politics.
- We asked a series of four questions concerning young people's general beliefs about living in the UK that offer a collective insight into their views regarding DEI (Diversity, Equality and Inclusion) issues. The results are unequivocal (see Figure 8). By a huge majority, our young survey participants agreed that people of the same sex should have the right to get married (76.6%), with only a small number dissenting from this view (9.8%). They were also strongly of the opinion that living in a diverse and multicultural UK that comprised people from different countries and cultures was a positive thing (84.6%, with only 4.3% against). Even more evident was the near unanimous support for both of the principles of gender equality and of freedom of worship; 92.5% stated that men and women should have the same rights in every way (with only 2.9% in dissent), and 92.7% people agreed should be free to practice the religion they choose (with 1.8% in disagreement).

**Figure 8. General beliefs about living in the UK**



### Intragenerational differences

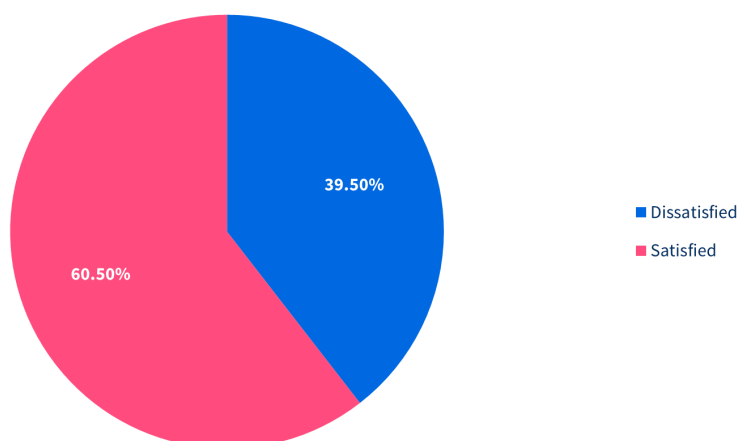
- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** The overall impact of this variable on these four items was not a uniform one. For instance, there was a statistically significant effect with respect to marriage rights for people of the same sex – those not taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies expressed higher levels of agreement (77.9%) than did those who had taken this particular GCSE (70.7%). All groups were also very positive about the remaining three items, but none of the relationships observed were statistically significant.
- **The impact of gender:** There was a clear and statistically significant gender gap for three of the four items. Young females expressed higher levels of agreement than young males or those who



identify in a different way with respect to people of the same sex having marriage rights (82% : 70.5% : 84.4%), that having people from different cultures and countries living in the UK is a good thing (91.7% : 77.1% : 87.5%), and that men and women should have the same general rights (94.7% : 90.1% : 93.8%).

- **The impact of ethnicity:** The influence of Ethnicity was somewhat mixed - and statistically significant differences were in evidence for only two of the four items. Those from racialised minority backgrounds were particularly supportive of the idea that the country benefitted from having people from different cultures and countries (88.1%), while 82.6% of young white people agreed with this statement. However, the ethnicity gap was reversed with respect to levels of agreement on the question of same sex marriage rights (white 87.9% and 57.2% for those from racialised minority backgrounds).
- **The impact of social class:** Social class had a statistically significant effect only in terms of same sex marriage rights, with middle class youth (80.3%) and working class youth (77.5%) both considerably more positive than those who indicated that they had no social class identity (69.7%). Although all were extremely positive about each of the other three items, there were no discernible and statistically significant differences in levels of agreement and disagreement expressed between the different social class groups.
- To gauge their level of commitment to democratic life, we also asked whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country. A large majority (60.5%) reported they were broadly satisfied, although there was a noticeable and sizeable minority (39.5%) who were left discontented with how UK democracy operates (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Satisfaction with democracy**



### Intragenerational differences

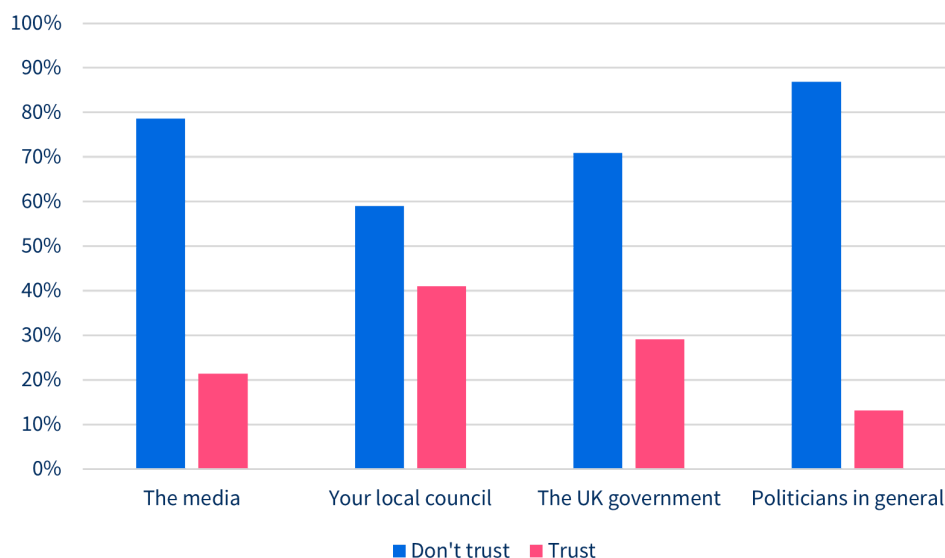
- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** Those who had studied for this particular GCSE were more positive about the state of democracy across the country (63.1%) than those who had not taken this qualification (60%), although the margin of difference was not at the level required for statistical significance.

- **The impact of gender:** There were no appreciable differences between young females and males with respect to their levels of satisfaction with the state of UK democracy (61% and 62.3% respectively). However, those who identify in ways other than male or female or who responded as 'Other' were extremely dubious on the question of UK democracy, with only a third (31.3%) expressing satisfaction (with 68.8% feeling dissatisfied). This difference was statistically significant.
- **The impact of ethnicity:** There was no appreciable ethnicity gap, with those from white (60%) and those from racialised minority backgrounds (61.5%) conveying almost identical levels of satisfaction with democracy at home.
- **The impact of social class:** There was an important and statistically significant social class difference, in that those young people self-identifying as working class were considerably less sanguine about how the nation's democracy works (50.3%) than were those from middle class backgrounds (61%) or who did not feel they belong to any such social class (67.3%).
- We noted earlier that there is a sizable minority group of young people doubting the workings of UK democracy (39.5%). This parallels somewhat a related concern across our sample regarding a lack of confidence in four of the key pillars of UK democratic politics – the media, politicians, the national Government and local government. The figures signal a strong disconnect between very large majorities of young people and these democratic institutions (see Figure 10). Over seven in ten respondents expressed their lack of trust in the national UK Government (70.8%) and the media (78.7%), with nearly nine in ten sharing the same view about politicians (86.9%). This absence of trust was somewhat less apparent with respect to local government (59%). This is as might be expected given what we know from other large surveys - that this level of government is often perceived as more accessible to, and less remote from, its citizens.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the overall 'trust-deficit' sits at a worryingly high level and underlines young people's apparent aversion to these democratic institutions.

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<sup>33</sup> ONS (2023). [Trust in government, UK - Office for National Statistics](#); LGIU (2024). [Only 25% of voters trust the Government to act in the best interests of local people, finds new LGIU poll - LGIU](#); New Economics Foundation (2024). [Voters twice as likely to trust local politicians to improve their area, polling shows](#).

**Figure 10. Trust in democratic institutions and actors**



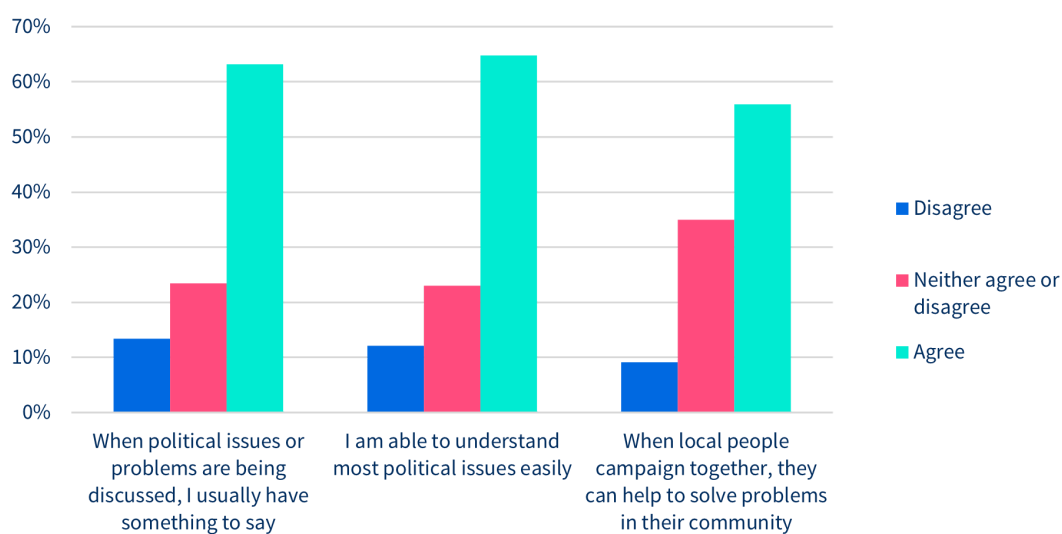
### Intragenerational differences

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** Although young people in general are highly distrusting of these four cornerstones of UK democracy, those who have studied for the GCSE Citizenship Studies (GCSE CS) are much less sceptical of each when compared to those who have not taken this particular course. The levels of distrust expressed by the GCSE CS / non-GCSE CS groups are: media 72.4% / 80%; local government 51% / 60.8%; UK Government 62.6% / 72.6%; politicians in general 76.8% / 89.1%. These differences are each statistically significant.
- **The impact of gender:** There is evidence of only one statistically significant gender difference, and that is that males are less distrusting of the UK Government (66.8%) than are wither females (74.7%) or those who don't identify as either male or female (71.9%). For the other three democratic institutions, the young respondents are broadly equally distrusting.
- **The impact of ethnicity:** As with gender, there is only one example where there is a statistically significant ethnicity gap – and this is that young people from racialised minority backgrounds are more distrusting of local government (63.8%) than are their white counterparts (56.3%). There are no appreciable differences in terms of their very high degree of scepticism of the media, of UK Government and of politicians in general.
- **The impact of social class:** Young people across the three categories of social class hold similarly strong misgivings about the media, local government and especially politicians. However, there are noticeable and statistically significant differences when it comes to national Government, with young people from working class backgrounds appreciably more critical (82%) than their middle class contemporaries (69.1%) or those who don't identify with any particular social class (67.3%).

### Young people's capacity for and interest in getting involved in democratic politics

- Despite their concerns over how UK democracy operates and their extremely high levels of distrust in democratic institutions and players, young people are not anti-democratic. Our findings indicate that most young people do recognise the value and importance of democratic politics. Furthermore, many are potentially interested in getting involved in the democratic process themselves – especially at the local level and within their communities.
- It was mentioned previously that most of our young survey participants reported a strong interest in political and citizenship issues. In addition, our research also reveals that a large group within this youth sample expressed high levels of ‘internal political efficacy’ – or feelings of relative confidence in their own understanding of political issues. Around two-thirds (64.8%) reported a relative ease in dealing with such matters, while only a small minority (12.1%) shared that they lacked confidence in terms of their grasp of political affairs (see Figure 11). This finding compares with the results from other studies, where young people express confidence.<sup>34</sup> This relatively high level of internal efficacy is reflected in the results from one of our other questions, where over six in ten (63.2%) responded that they usually had something to contribute when political issues or problems were being discussed.

**Figure 11. Political understanding and engagement**



### Intragenerational differences

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** There is a considerable and statistically significant difference for this variable, with those having studied for this particular GCSE having a much higher level of understanding with respect to political issues (70.7%) than is the case for those who have not taken this course (63.5%).

<sup>34</sup> Walkden, O. (2024) ‘Young people who feel informed about politics are more likely to vote, new research reveals’. Young Citizens. Available at: [www.youngcitizens.org/news/young-people-who-feel-informed-about-politics-are-more-likely-to-vote-new-research-reveals](https://www.youngcitizens.org/news/young-people-who-feel-informed-about-politics-are-more-likely-to-vote-new-research-reveals) (accessed 1 May 2025).



- **The impact of gender:** Our survey results reveal an important (statistically significant) gender gap in that young females are considerably less likely (59.1%) to claim a confidence in their understanding of politics, when compared to males (70%) and to those not identifying as neither male nor female (71.9%).
- **The impact of ethnicity:** White youth express greater levels of confidence in their understanding of politics (68.3%) than do those young people from racialised minority backgrounds (58.7%), and this finding is statistically significant.
- **The impact of social class:** Our findings indicate statistically significant social class differences, with a larger share of those self-identifying as middle class declaring an ease with their understanding of political issues (70.2%) than do either their working class contemporaries (66.3%) or those young people who state that they don't belong to any social class (54.6%).
- In addition to their having the capacity for getting involved in democratic politics, our young research participants also expressed an appetite for doing so, whether through formal methods of electoral politics, such as voting, or by getting involved in different and informal methods of civic and political engagement.

### Young people and formal methods of electoral politics

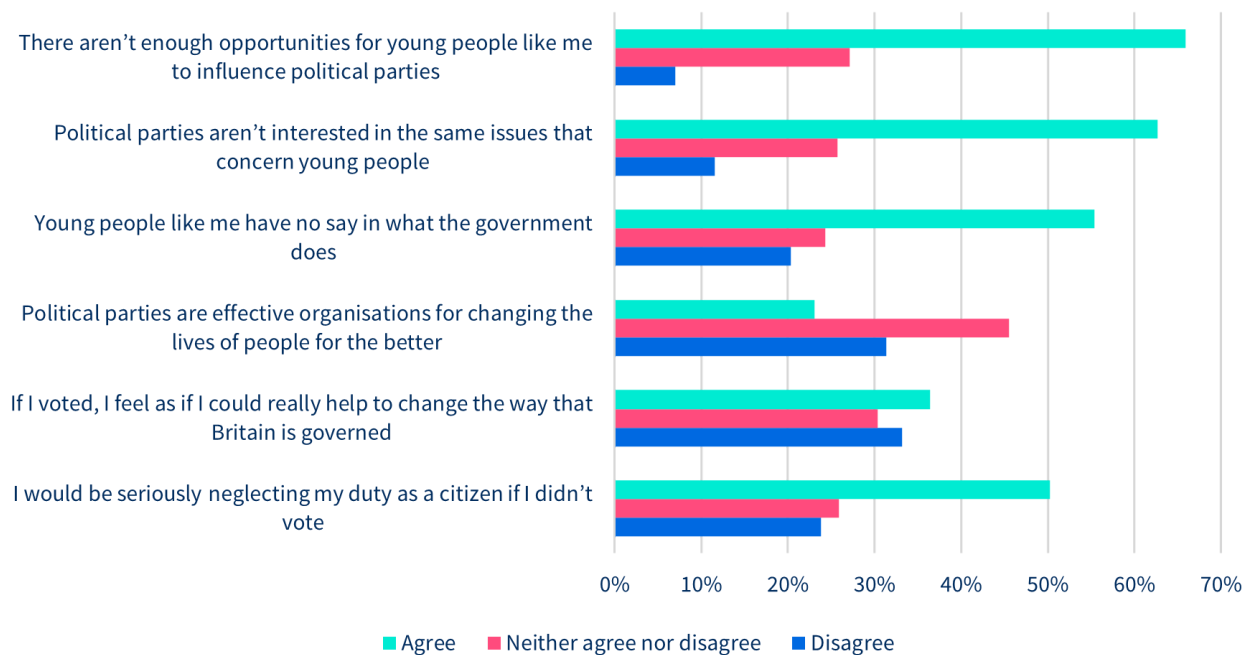
- Specifically with respect to electoral politics, young people reported an eagerness to play a full role – despite some unease in terms of their thoughts concerning the effectiveness and the impact of such elections.
- The survey findings indicate that the largest group of our young respondents considered voting to be a civic duty and something in which they should take part (50.3%, with only 23.8% in disagreement) – see Figure 12. However, many considered that the outcomes from elections were somewhat lacking, and a majority were more likely than not to feel a sense of disconnect from the political class. For instance, they were only marginally more likely to agree (36.4%) than they were to disagree (33.1%) that voting presented opportunities for them to influence how the country might be governed.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, our young people were noticeably fatalistic about their own sense of 'external political efficacy',<sup>36</sup> with over half (55.4%) claiming that young people like themselves have little say in what the Government does – nearly three times as many as those who disagreed with this position (20.4%).

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<sup>35</sup> The remaining third of our young people (30.4%) responded 'Neither agree nor disagree'.

<sup>36</sup> The extent to which a citizen feels that there are opportunities open to them to participate meaningfully in political affairs – see Footnote 27 for further details.

**Figure 12. Opinions on civic and political issues**

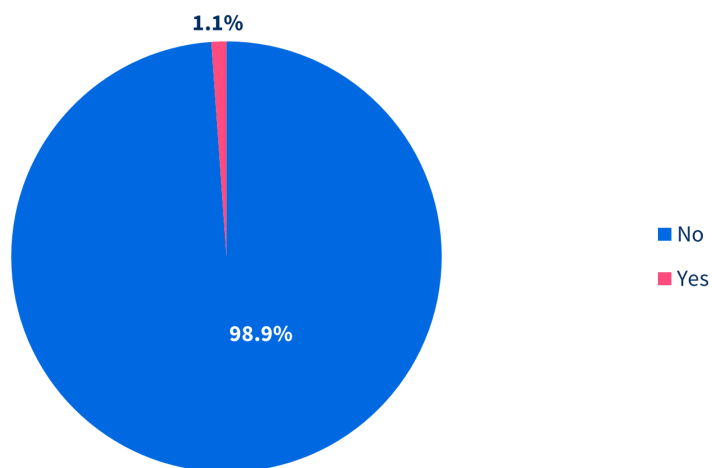


- Importantly, a large majority of our sample considered that political parties are failing young people. Only 23.1% viewed political parties as effective organisations for positively impacting people's lives, while a third did not (31.4%), and nearly half 45.6% were left relatively unsure. Furthermore - by a considerable margin - the young respondents felt that these same political parties were somewhat 'distanced' from young people in terms of issue priorities (62.7%; with only 11.6% disagreeing with this sceptical statement), and were also relatively insulated and immune from the demands and preferences of young people (agreed 65.9%, with only 7.0% in disagreement).
- Despite these findings, our sample of young people felt that on balance, there was value in elections as offering some opportunity to influence national government, whether that involved voting in General Elections (83.3%) or via local elections (69.4%).
- Regardless of their thoughts concerning the external political efficacy of competitive elections, young people are typically committed to voting.
- Nearly all of our young sample (96.3%) reported that they were ineligible to vote at the UK General Election that had taken place on 4 July 2024, two months prior to the launch of our online questionnaire (see Figure 13). Together with the very small number of those who did not want to vote, or did not vote for another reason, or did not recall whether or not they had voted, this resulted in 98.9% of our sample not voting. Only a tiny fraction of the remaining participants claimed that they had voted (1.1%).
- Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of participants (91.1%) reported their *intention* to vote at the next UK general election (see Figure 14)<sup>37</sup>. It should be noted that, as is often the case, people of

<sup>37</sup> However, this may be artificially high because of the noticeable group who did not respond at all to this question – 10.1% of the sample. If we were to *exclude* those people, then the proportion expressing an interest in voting falls to 81.9%.

all ages tend to over-estimate past or future election turnout. Our finding is broadly in line with a YouGov post-election finding of 68% self-reported turnout for under 30s,<sup>38</sup> while Ipsos data<sup>39</sup> suggests that voting turnout among young people aged 18 to 24 was much lower than this – indeed, falling from 47% at the 2019 UK General Election to only 37% at the 2024 contest, and back to levels last seen in 2015.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 13. Vote at the UK General Election on 4 July 2024**

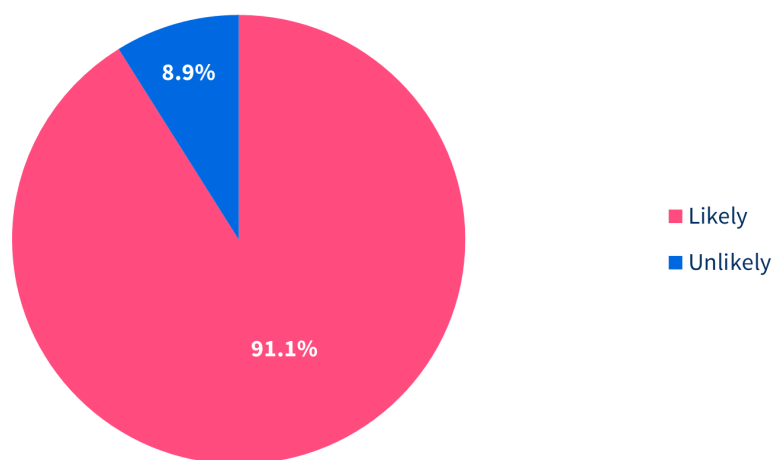


<sup>38</sup> Fox, S (2024) 'Young people led surge for smaller parties but no Reform "youthquake", says UK election survey'. The Conversation, 12 July 2024. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/young-people-led-surge-for-smaller-parties-but-no-reform-youthquake-says-uk-election-survey-234394> (accessed 1 May 2025).

<sup>39</sup> Ipsos (2024) 'How Britain voted in the 2024 election'. Available at: [www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election](https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election) (accessed 1 May 2025).

<sup>40</sup> Sloam, J. and Henn, M. (2024) 'Youthquake for the progressive left: Making sense of the collapse of youth support for the Conservatives'. UK Election Analysis. Available at: [www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-2-voters-polls-and-results/youthquake-for-the-progressive-left-making-sense-of-the-collapse-of-youth-support-for-the-conservatives](https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-2-voters-polls-and-results/youthquake-for-the-progressive-left-making-sense-of-the-collapse-of-youth-support-for-the-conservatives) (accessed 1 May 2025).

**Figure 14. Intention to vote at the next UK general election**

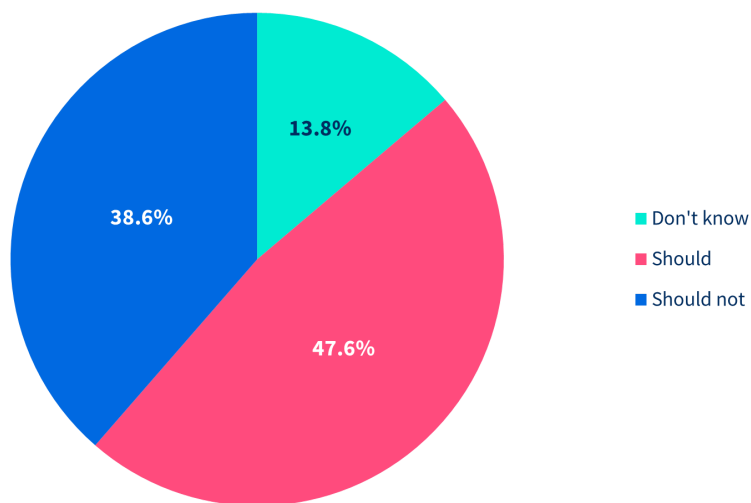


- In addition to their support for *national* elections, a sizeable majority of our sample of young people (77.9%) reported that they are likely to vote in the next local government election in their area.<sup>41</sup> Taken together, these findings confirm young people's appetite for electoral politics, despite their misgivings with respect to how they themselves perceive both the outcomes from such elections and the performance, remoteness, motives and behaviours of those politicians who compete for and get elected to the UK House of Commons.
- As a final marker of their general commitment to electoral politics, the survey results point towards a considerable level of support for the new Labour Government's recently confirmed intention to introduce legislation to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections, including future UK general elections.<sup>42</sup> As Figure 15 indicates, nearly half of our young research participants expressed a desire for this reform (47.6%), while others were either of the opinion that the voting age should not be lowered (38.6%) or unsure on this question (13.8%). Thus, even though they feel that elections don't really change anything – and that politicians are rather distanced from them – the largest group of young people within our sample expressed support for the Government's intention to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds.

<sup>41</sup> As with the question on voting at the next General Election, this expected vote for the next local election may be high because of the large number of our sample who did not answer this question – 17.1%. Again, excluding this group would leave 64.6% expressing a positive view about voting in a future local election contest.

<sup>42</sup> Norris, A. (2024) 'Correspondence: Letter from Minister Norris to the electoral sector'. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/democratic-participation-open-letter-to-the-electoral-sector/letter-from-minister-norris-to-the-electoral-sector](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/democratic-participation-open-letter-to-the-electoral-sector/letter-from-minister-norris-to-the-electoral-sector) (accessed 10 March 2025).

**Figure 15. Views on whether to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds**



### Intragenerational differences

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** GCSE Citizenship Studies (GCSE CS) students were typically more engaged with electoral politics than were other young people – although the differences between these two groups were not always statistically significant. This GCSE CS group were more positive about the effectiveness of political parties than were other young people not taking that particular GCSE (29.9% : 21.6%), almost as fatalistic as their contemporaries with respect to feeling that people like themselves have no say in what the national government does (54.1% : 55.6%), almost as likely to feel that there are very few opportunities for young people to influence political parties (64.3% : 66.3%), and to express that these parties are not interested in young people's issue priorities (61.8% : 62.8%).

Despite some despondency with respect to the political parties and their motives, GCSE CS students were more likely than other young people to agree that voting itself should be considered as a civic duty (52.9% : 49.7%, respectively) and that there is some value in voting as a means for influencing what the government does in office. Indeed, they were statistically significantly more likely than their contemporaries to feel that voting at a General Election offered a route through to influencing government (90.1% : 81.8%), with local election voting also offering a high degree of external political efficacy (79.7% : 67.2%). Perhaps as a consequence of this, a very large proportion of those in the GCSE Citizenship Studies group as well as other young people claimed an intention to vote at the next UK General Election (91.9% : 91%) and at the next local government elections (83.2% : 76.8%). Finally, those who had studied for the GCSE Citizenship Studies are considerably more supportive of the idea of extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds (62.4% : 44.4%) – and this margin of difference is statistically significant.

- **The impact of gender:** There is very little evidence of gender exerting any consistent and significant impact on predisposition to formal electoral politics. The results indicate that young females were considerably more likely than either males or other young people identifying neither as male nor female to view voting as a civic duty (56.1% : 44.6% : 46.9%, respectively) and also that voting offers the opportunity to change the way that the country is governed (41.6% :



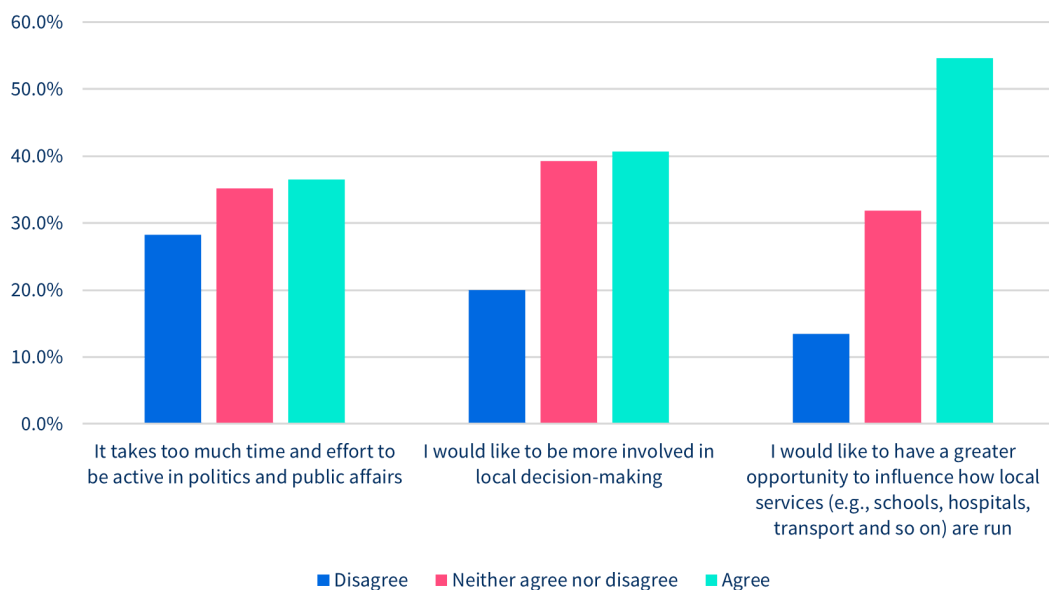
31.6% : 31.3%). However, gender did not have a statistically significant impact on any of the other electoral variables considered, with no appreciable differences in the views on these matters expressed by our groups of young females, males and those identifying in a different way. The gender impact on backing for Votes at 16 is statistically significant, with a majority of females (51%) and those expressing no gender identity (56.3%) supporting the idea and young males offering less support (43.4%).

- **The impact of ethnicity:** Similarly, there were relatively few cases of young people expressing (statistically significantly) different views about electoral politics based on their ethnicity – although where this was the case, young white people were more engaged than were those from racialised minority backgrounds. For instance, a small majority of young white people (55.3%) felt that voting was a civic duty, while significantly fewer of those from racialised minority backgrounds stated the same (41.6%). Only a minority of our sample of white youth (38.8%) believed that voting offered a route through to influencing the actions of national government, although this was a significantly higher proportion than those young people from racialised minority backgrounds (32.4%). Despite these relatively low levels of connection with electoral politics, both groups of white youth and those from racialised minority backgrounds stated a firm intention to vote at the next UK General Election (white 93.5% : racialised minorities 87.1%,) and local elections (white 81% : racialised minorities 72.2%) – although these rates of intended participation are statistically significantly different. However, there is no appreciable ethnicity gap with respect to the idea of extending voting rights to 16s.
- **The impact of social class:** As with gender and ethnicity, the data point to statistically significant differences for social class in terms of support for the idea that voting is a civic duty (middle class 58.1% : working class 47.3% : no social class identity 39%). Furthermore young people from working class backgrounds are significantly more sceptical in feeling that young people have little say in what the government does (60.9%, compared with middle class 54.9% and those without a class identity 53.8%), and political parties are not interested in young people's issue priorities (working class 68% : middle class 61.9% : no social class identity 60.2%). There are no statistically significant social class differences with respect to intention to vote at either General Elections or local elections. However, there are substantial (statistically significant) social class differences on the question of Votes for 16s (middle class 43.5% : working class 52.1% : no social class identity 51%).

## Young people and informal methods of political participation – social voluntarism and civic engagement

- In addition to their backing of electoral politics, our young survey respondents were also broadly supportive of other forms of civic and political engagement and actions - even if they were not sure of the degree to which such actions would lead to positive outcomes. For instance the largest (albeit minority) group within our sample felt somewhat resigned that it often takes too much time and effort to be active in politics (36.6%); by comparison, a similar-sized group (28.2%) disagreed with this pessimistic statement, while a further third (35.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed (see Figure 16).

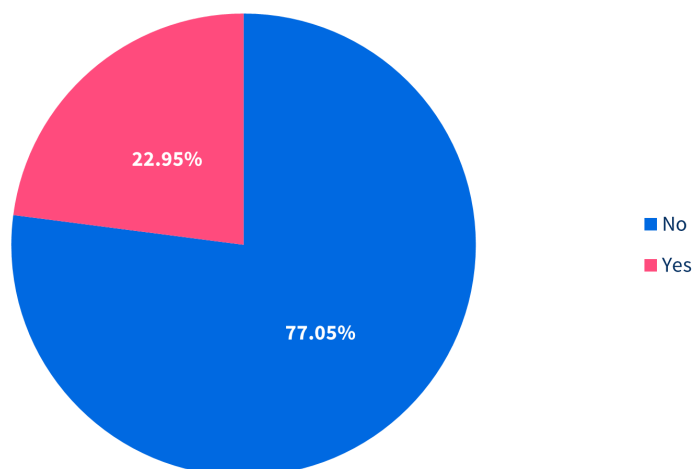
**Figure 16. Views about the value of political participation**



- Nonetheless, there was evidence that young people were open to engaging in such informal political and democratic actions – and many, in fact, had already previously done so.
- Mid-way through our survey data collection period, the newly elected UK Government announced in November 2024 that the National Citizen Service (NCS) programme would end in March 2025 as part of its planned youth strategy.<sup>43</sup> The NCS had originally been launched in 2010 to provide volunteering opportunities for 16 and 17-year-olds to gain civic skills, to develop their confidence, and to help them play a role in what the then Prime Minister David Cameron referred to as the “Big Society”. Nonetheless, we had asked questions designed to investigate young people’s awareness of, and participation in, the NCS. A minority declared that they had heard of this programme (22.9%) and of those, a sizeable share of our young survey respondents (20.1%) had taken the next step to actively participate in the scheme (see Figures 17 and 18).

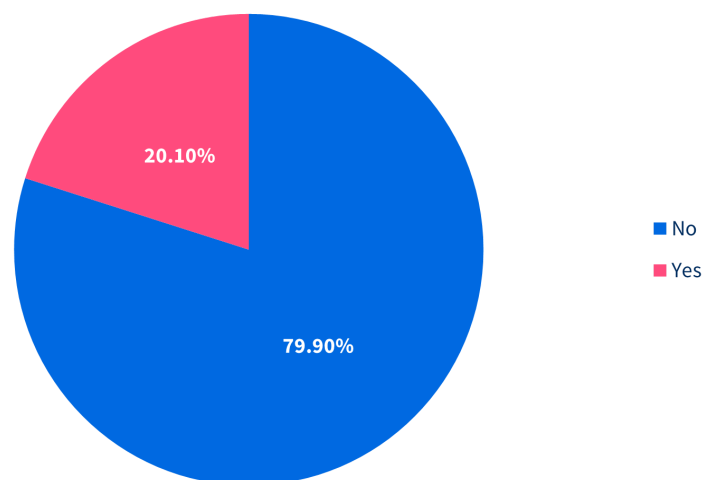
<sup>43</sup> Taylor, H. (2024) [Government announces end of National Citizen Service and launches youth strategy](#).

**Figure 17. Awareness of the National Citizen Service**



**Figure 18. Participation in the National Citizen Service (NCS)**

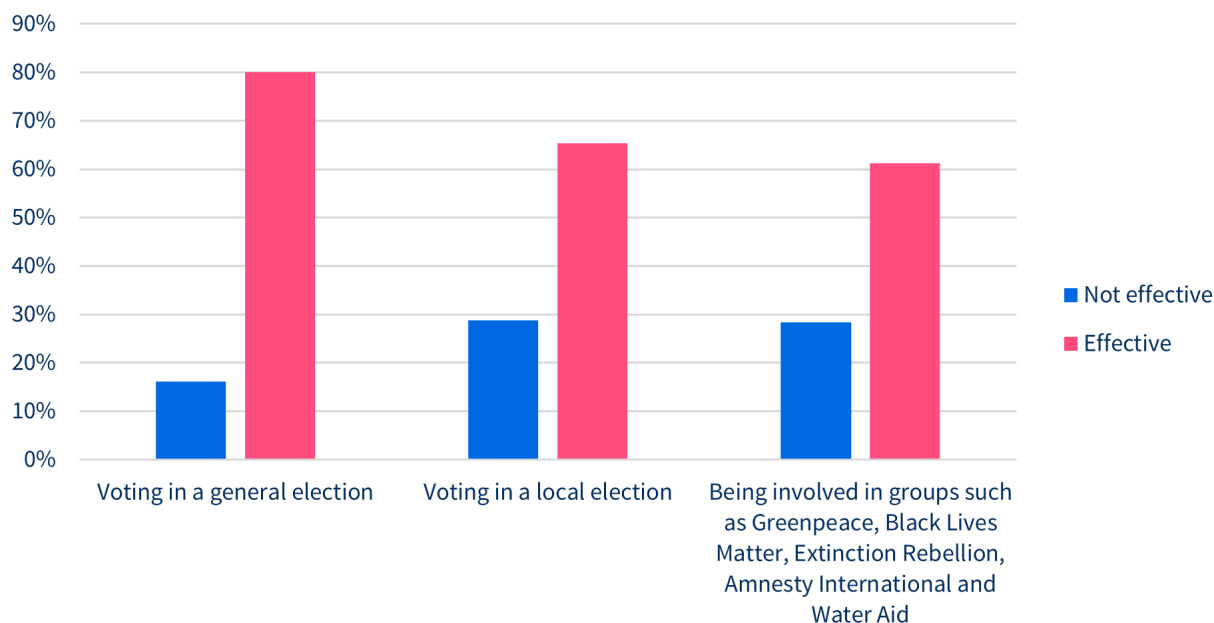
(All those claiming awareness of the NCS, n=204)



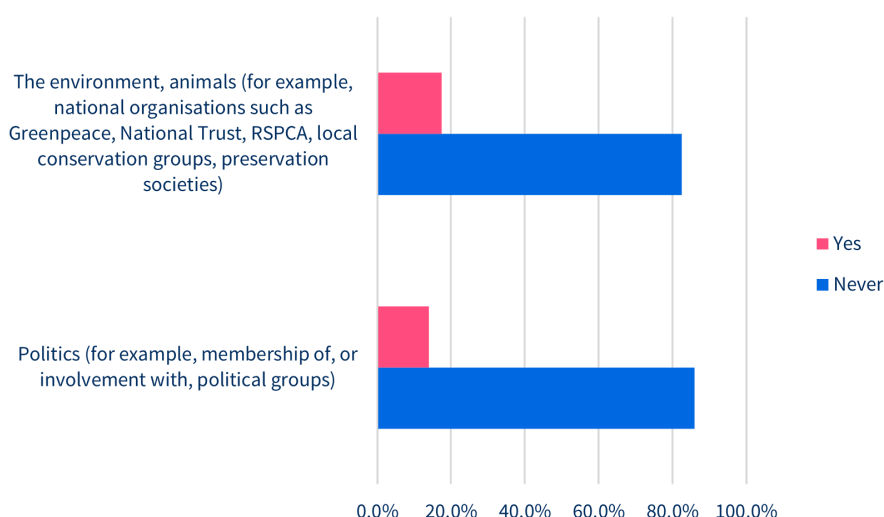
- Given the appetite for such a programme by a not-inconsiderable proportion of young people, these findings perhaps underline the importance of investing the resources necessary to promote a greater awareness of such social voluntarism and civic engagement initiatives.
- Reflecting the potential value in their minds of such informal social activism, a majority of our young survey participants (68.4%) also expressed the view that being involved in campaigning and direct-action groups such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Water Aid, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion was also of value (Figure 19). They claimed that such methods had the potential to offer a degree of external political efficacy in terms of providing a route through to, and some degree of influence over, the UK Government. Indeed, nearly one fifth (17.4%) claimed that they had had some direct involvement in, or membership of, national environmental and animal welfare organisations such as Greenpeace, National Trust, RSPCA, local conservation groups, preservation societies over the previous 12 months (Figure 20).

Interestingly, this was slightly more than the 13.9% who declared that they had participated in ostensibly 'political' groups over the same period – perhaps reflecting young people's somewhat more cautious view of the political class, as reported elsewhere in this report.

**Figure 19. Effectiveness of voting and of engagement in campaigning and direct action groups for influencing Government**



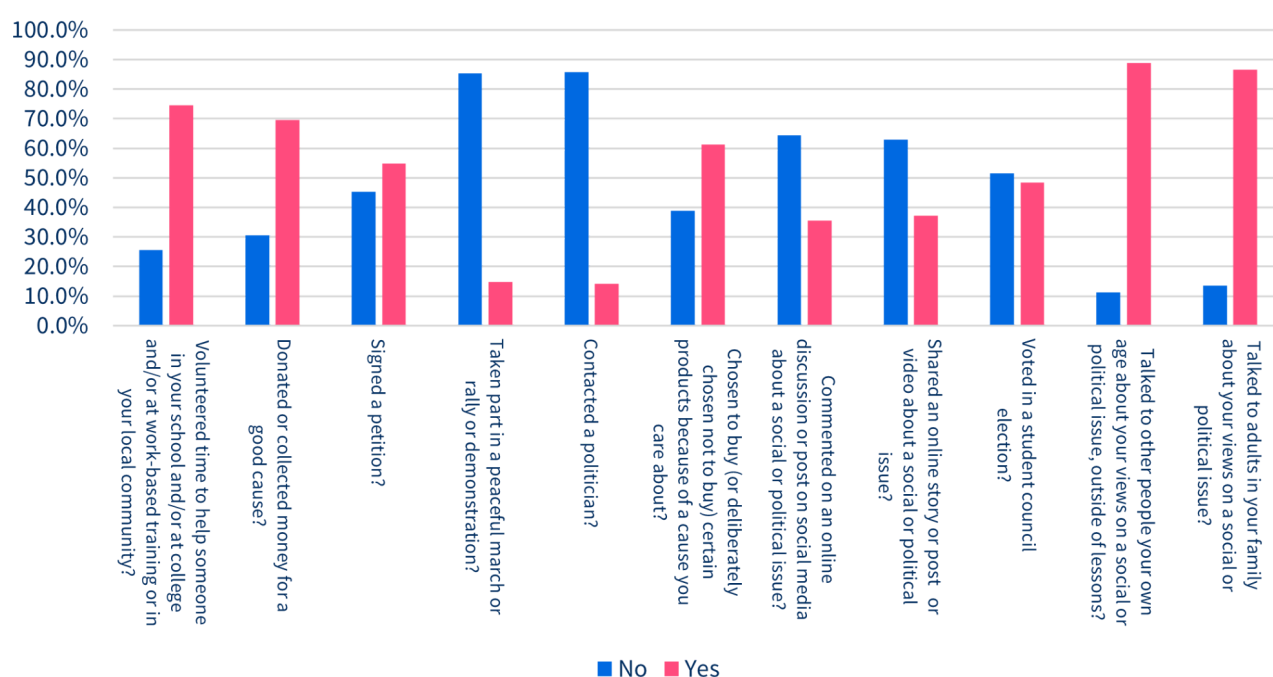
**Figure 20. Involvement with groups, clubs or organisations during the last 12 months**



- To investigate their views of, and open-ness to, other informal non-electoral methods of political engagement and political participation, we asked whether our young survey respondents had taken

part in and/or used such methods over the previous 12 months. We presented them with eleven such items. As Figure 21 reveals, a majority claimed to have had involvement with, or used, six of these items at least once during this period: including, discussing social and political matters with other young people (88.8%) or family members (86.5%), local volunteering (74.5%), donating or collecting money for a good cause (69.5%), boycotting or buycotting to support a cause (61.2%), and signing a petition (54.8%). The five items that had 'Never' been used by a majority of the respondents included contacting a politician (85.8%), taking part in a peaceful rally (85.3%), commenting on (64.5%) and/or sharing (62.9%) an online social or political story, and voting in a student council election (51.5%).

**Figure 21. Views of informal (non-electoral) methods of political engagement and political participation**



- Our findings from other questions further reflect young people's interest in informal methods of political engagement and political participation, and they displayed particular confidence in the value of social voluntarism and civic engagement - especially at the local level and within their own communities. For instance, as Figure 11 indicates, more than half of the participants (55.9%) agreed that when local people campaign together, they have the potential to influence the world around them by solving issues in their local community (only 9.1% disagreed). Reflecting this confidence in such local actions, a large group of young people (40.7%) declared an interest in becoming more involved in local decision-making, while a noticeable majority (54.7%) stated that they would like opportunities to become open to them to influence how local services such as schools, hospitals, transport are run (see Figure 16).

## Intragenerational differences

- **The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies:** Whether or not our young people had studied for the GCSE Citizenship Studies had a statistically significant impact on four of these 11 items, although the effect was mixed. During the previous 12 months, those who had studied for this qualification were more likely than were those who had not taken this particular GCSE to have participated in a peaceful rally or demonstration (GCSE CS 22.3% ; non-GCSE CS 13.1%), and also to have commented online about a social or political issue (GCSE CS 45.9% ; non-GCSE CS 33.3%). This group were also borderline statistically significantly more likely to have signed a petition (GCSE CS 61.8% ; non-GCSE CS 53.3%) and to have contacted a politician (GCSE CS 19.1% ; non-GCSE CS 13.1%).

However, these GCSE Citizenship Studies students were significantly less likely to have voted at a student council election (GCSE CS 35.7% ; non-GCSE CS 51.2%) or donated/collected money to a good cause (GCSE CS 62.4% ; non-GCSE CS 71%).

This GCSE Citizenship Studies variable had no appreciable impact on the remaining five items listed in Figure 21.

- **The impact of gender:** There were statistically significant gender differences with respect to young people's recent political engagement and political participation histories. Young females were much more likely than young men to have engaged with five of these 11 political items, including volunteering (female 81.5% ; male 67.5% ; identify differently 71.9%), donating and collecting money (female 74.4% ; male 64.6% ; identify differently 68.8%), signing petitions (Female 61.4% ; male 47.6% ; identify differently 59.4%), and buying or boycotting products to further a political cause (Female 73% ; male 48.6% ; identify differently 68.8 %).

Interestingly, the small group of young people who either identify in some way other than male or female or who preferred not to say, were (statistically significantly) more likely than young male or female identifiers to have either shared a political or social story online (Identify differently 50% ; female 43.9% ; male 29.2%), or to have commented on one (Identify differently 59.4% ; female 33% ; male 36.3%).

There were no items where young males were (statistically) significantly more likely to engage in these methods of political engagement and political participation than either females or those identifying differently.

- **The impact of ethnicity:** Even more than gender, ethnicity exerted a considerable bearing on young people's previous engagement with 'informal' political methods. Those from 'Racialised Minority' backgrounds were significantly more likely than their 'White' counterparts (and statistically so) to have done so for four of the 11 items. These included having previously donated money to a political cause (racialised minorities 73.4% ; white 67.3%), participated in a peaceful rally or demonstration (racialised minorities 21.4%; white 10.9%), boycotted or boycotted products for a political cause (racialised minorities 67.6%; white 57.5%), and shared a story online about a social or political issue (racialised minorities 42.2%; white 34.2%).

They were also borderline statistically significantly more likely to have commented on a political or social story online (racialised minorities 39.4% ; white 33.3%) or voted at a student council (racialised minorities 52.6% ; white 46.1%).

On only two items were those from the White group statistically significant more likely to engage with such political methods – to have talked about social and political issues with their peers



(white 90.7% ; racialised minorities 85.3%), or with adults (white 89.9% ; racialised minorities 80.7%).

- **The impact of social class:** Social class had a statistically significant impacts on four of the 11 items. Young people from middle class backgrounds were more much likely than working class young respondents or those who did not consider themselves as belonging to a particular social class to have contacted a politician (middle class 17.5% ; working class 14.2%; no class identity 7.2%), or discussed matters concerning the social and political world with other young people (middle class 91.5% ; working class 89.3%; no class identity 83.3%) or with adults (middle class 90.8%; working class 83.4%; no class identity 80.9%).

The only method that working class young people were (statistically) significantly more likely to use than their counterparts was in terms of their commenting on a political or social story online (working class 47.3%; middle class 33.6%; no class identity 30.3%).

## The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on gender-, ethnicity- and class-based inequalities of democratic engagement

- The data and analyses presented so far have engaged with the first two aims of this research project:
  1. To examine the relationship between Citizenship education and levels of democratic engagement and participation of diverse groups of young people aged 16 to 19.
  2. To identify whether studying for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in Citizenship Studies has an impact on the direction and levels of young people's democratic engagement and participation.

In the next section, we will present results from analyses to address the third and final aim:

3. To identify whether studying **GCSE Citizenship Studies** has an impact on the reduction of inequalities in democratic engagement and participation by **gender, ethnicity and social class** within the wider youth population across the country.<sup>44</sup>

For this purpose, we have selected key democratic engagement and political variables for detailed examination. These focus on interest in politics, confidence in understanding of political issues ('internal political efficacy'), levels of satisfaction with respect to democracy, trust in key democratic institutions, preparedness to get involved in local decision-making, commitment to voting at future general elections and local elections, and whether they feel that voting rights should be extended to 16-year-olds for all elections.

## Interest in political and Citizenship issues

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** There is a huge and statistically significant impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the political interest of young people from different ethnic backgrounds.

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<sup>44</sup> Please note that the category for those young people included in the 'Gender' variable who identify as neither male nor female (or who prefer not to say) are not included because the group is too small (n=32) for reliable analysis.

- The baseline level of interest in politics for all young White people is 53.7%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 70.1%; the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 50.7%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is almost as (statistically) significant (baseline political interest is 43.7%, increasing to GCSE 54.3% : non-GCSE 40.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the political interest of young females is statistically significant – it increases for males but not significantly so.

The baseline level of interest in politics for all young females is 49.2%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 68.1%; the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 44%.

The impact on young males is high but not statistically significant (baseline political interest is 50%, increasing to GCSE 57.1% : non-GCSE 48.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on political interest is statistically significant for middle-class young people and those not identifying with a social class, but not for working-class young people.

The baseline level of interest in politics for all young middle-class people is 55.6%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 68.3%; the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 53.6%.

The impact on young working-class people is very high but not statistically significant (baseline political interest is 53.8%, increasing to GCSE 65.1% : non-GCSE 50%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class is also statistically significant (baseline political interest is 37.8%, increasing to GCSE 56% : non-GCSE 33.3%).

## Confidence in understanding of political issues

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the level of understanding of politics for young people from racialised minority backgrounds is statistically significant; it increases slightly for young White people but not significantly so.

The baseline level of understanding of politics for all young White people is 68.3% and marginally increases for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 69%; the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 68.2%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is statistically significant (baseline level of understanding of politics is 58.7%, increasing to GCSE 72.9% : non-GCSE 54.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of understanding of politics of young females and males is statistically significant.

The baseline level of understanding of politics for all young females is 59.1%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 72.3%; the level of understanding of politics for those not taking the qualification is 55.5%.

The impact on young males is also statistically significant. Here, the level of confidence in their understanding does not increase appreciably (baseline level of understanding of politics is 70%, *decreasing* to GCSE 69.6% : non-GCSE 70.1%). However, there is a significant impact in terms of reducing their lack of understanding of politics. The baseline level of such uncertainty about politics for all males is 7.8%, but 0% of those taking the GCSE report a lack of understanding, whereas 9% of those not taking GCSE Citizenship Studies report a lack of understanding about political matters.

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the level of understanding of politics is not statistically significant for young people from any of the different social classes.

The baseline level of level of understanding of politics for all young middle-class people is 70.2% and increases markedly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 80%; the level of understanding of politics for those not taking the qualification is 68.7%. However, the impact is not statistically significant.

The impact on young working-class people is also not statistically significant (baseline level of understanding of politics is 66.3%, decreasing marginally to GCSE 65.1% : non-GCSE 66.7%).

The impact on those who do not identify with social class is also not statistically significant (baseline level of understanding of politics is 54.6%, increasing to GCSE 64% : non-GCSE 52.2%).

## Satisfaction with respect to democracy

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of satisfaction with democracy of those young people from different ethnic backgrounds is not statistically significant.

The baseline level of satisfaction with democracy for all young White people is 60%, but this decreases marginally for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 57.5%; the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 60.4%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds increases markedly but is not statistically significant (baseline satisfaction with democracy is 61.5%, increasing to GCSE 70% : non-GCSE 59.1%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of satisfaction with democracy of young females and males is not statistically significant.

The baseline levels of satisfaction with democracy for all young females is 61%, and this increases marginally for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 61.7%; satisfaction with democracy for those not taking the qualification is 60.8%.

The impact on young males is also positive but not statistically significant (baseline satisfaction with democracy is 62.3%, increasing to GCSE 67.9% : non-GCSE 61.4%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of satisfaction with democracy of those young people from different social classes is not statistically significant.

The baseline satisfaction with democracy for all young middle-class people is 61%, but this increases for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 63.3%; satisfaction with democracy for those not taking the qualification is 60.6%.

The impact on young working-class people also increases, but not statistically significantly (baseline satisfaction with democracy is 50.3%, increasing to GCSE 58.1% : non-GCSE 47.6%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class also increases, but not statistically significantly (baseline satisfaction with democracy is 67.3%, increasing to GCSE 68% : non-GCSE 67.2%).

## Trust in local councils

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on levels of trust in local councils is statistically significant for young White people. The baseline level of trust for all young White people is 43.7%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 55.3%; the baseline level of trust for those not taking the qualification is 41.6%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is also positive but not statistically significant (baseline trust for this group is 36.2%, increasing to GCSE 41.4% : non-GCSE 34.8%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in local councils held by young males is statistically significant.

The impact on young males is very strong and is statistically significant (baseline trust is 42%, increasing to GCSE 56.4% : non-GCSE 39.9%).

The baseline level of trust for all young females is 40.6%. It increases for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 45.2%, but this is not statistically significant, while the trust levels for those not taking the qualification is 39.3%.

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in local councils is statistically significant for young middle-class people.

The baseline level of trust for all young middle-class people is 43.7%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 62.7%; the baseline trust level for those not taking the qualification is 40.8%.

The impact on young working-class people is positive but not statistically significant (baseline trust is 33.9%, increasing to GCSE 37.2% : non-GCSE 32.8%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class is also positive but not statistically significant (baseline trust is 40.2%, increasing to GCSE 42.9% : non-GCSE 39.5%).

## Trust in national Government

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on levels of trust in national Government held by young White people is statistically significant. The baseline level of trust for this group is 30.1%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 38.8%; the baseline level of trust for those not taking the qualification is 28.5%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is positive but not at a statistically significant level (baseline trust is 27.6%, increasing to GCSE 35.7% : non-GCSE 25.4%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in national Government held by young females and males is statistically significant.

The baseline level of trust for all young females is 25.3%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 33.3%; the baseline trust level for those not taking the qualification is 23.1%.

The impact on young males is also statistically significant (baseline trust is 33.2%, increasing to GCSE 47.3% : non-GCSE 31.1%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in local councils held by young working-class people is statistically significant.

The baseline level of trust for all young working-class people is 18%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 31%; the baseline trust level for those not taking the qualification is 13.6%.

The impact on young middle-class people is also positive, although not statistically significantly (baseline trust is 30.9%, increasing to GCSE 40.7% : non-GCSE 29.4%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class is also positive, although not statistically significantly (baseline trust is 32.7%, increasing to GCSE 38% : non-GCSE 31.3%).

## Trust in politicians

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on levels of trust in politicians in general held by young people from different ethnic backgrounds is statistically significant.

The baseline level of trust in politicians for all young White people is only 12.9%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 23.5%; the baseline level of trust for those not taking the qualification is 10.9%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is also statistically significant (baseline trust is 13.5%, increasing to GCSE 22.9% : non-GCSE 10.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in politicians held by young females and males is statistically significant.

The baseline level of trust for all young females is 13.5%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 21.5%; the baseline trust level for those not taking the qualification is 11.2%.

The impact on young males is also statistically significant (baseline trust is 12.8%, increasing to GCSE 27.3% : non-GCSE 10.6%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the levels of trust in politicians held by young people from different social classes is statistically significant.

The baseline level of trust for all young middle-class people is 12.6%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 22%; the baseline trust level for those not taking the qualification is 11.1%.

The impact on young working-class people is also statistically significant (baseline trust is 12%, increasing to GCSE 23.8% : non-GCSE 8%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class is also statistically significant (baseline trust is 13.9%, increasing to GCSE 24% : non-GCSE 11.4%).

## Engagement with local decision-making

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on interest in engaging with local decision-making amongst young people from different ethnicity backgrounds is not statistically significant, but it is positive.

The baseline level of interest in engaging with local decision-making for all young white people is 43.2%, but this increases to 46% for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies - the corresponding figure for those not taking the qualification is 42.7%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is also positive but not statistically significant (baseline interest is 36.4%, increasing to GCSE 45.7% ; non-GCSE 33.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on interest in engaging with local decision-making amongst young females and young males is not statistically significant.

The baseline level of interest in engaging with local decision-making for all young females is 44.3%, but this increases to 47.9% for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies - the interest level for those not taking the qualification is 43.4%.

The impact on young males is also positive (baseline interest is 36.6%, increasing to GCSE 46.4% ; non-GCSE 35.1%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on interest in engaging with local decision-making amongst young people from different social classes is not statistically significant.

The baseline level of interest in engaging with local decision-making for all young middle class people is 43.5%, but this increases noticeably for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 55% - the interest level for those not taking the qualification is 41.7%.

The impact on young working class people is negligible (baseline interest is 46.7%, changing slightly to GCSE 46.5% ; non-GCSE 46.8%).

The impact on those who do not identify with social class is positive but not at the level of statistical significance (baseline interest is 30.7%, increasing to GCSE 34% ; non-GCSE 29.9%).

## Commitment to voting in general elections



- Given the extremely high level of intended voting at (nationwide) general elections, there is very little scope for significantly increasing the likelihood of voting via studying for the GCSE Citizenship Studies. Nonetheless, our data point to a positive impact when young people take this qualification.

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in general elections for young people from different ethnicity backgrounds is positive but not at the level of statistical significance.

The baseline level of commitment to voting in general elections for all young white people is 93.5%, but this decreases marginally for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 90.7% - the voting commitment for those not taking the qualification is 94%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is a positive one (baseline general election voting commitment is 87.1%, increasing to GCSE 93.3% ; non-GCSE 85.5%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in general elections for young females and young males is positive but not at the level of statistical significance.

The baseline level of commitment to voting in general elections for all young females is 91.6%, but this increases for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 92.6% - the voting commitment for those not taking the qualification is 91.4%.

The impact on young males is also marginally positive (baseline general election voting commitment is 91%, increasing to GCSE 91.7% ; non-GCSE 90.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in general elections for young people from different social classes is positive but not at the level of statistical significance.

The baseline level of commitment to voting for all young middle class people is 93.6%. It increases for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 94.5%; which compares with 93.5% for those not taking the qualification.

The impact on young working class people is also marginally positive (baseline commitment to voting is 88.3%, increasing to GCSE 89.2% ; non-GCSE 88%).

The impact on those who do not identify with social class is slightly more positive (baseline commitment to general election voting is 88.8%, increasing to GCSE 92.3% ; non-GCSE 88.1%).

## Commitment to voting in local elections

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in local elections is statistically significant for young people from racialised minority backgrounds.

The baseline level of commitment to local voting by those from racialised minority backgrounds is 72.2%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 85.5%; this is 68.8 % for those not taking the qualification.

The impact on young White people is positive but only marginally so (baseline commitment to local voting is 81%, increasing to GCSE 81.4% : non-GCSE 80.9%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in local elections for young females and young males is positive but not at the level of statistical significance.

The baseline level of commitment to local voting for all young females is 80.5%, but this increases markedly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 85.3%, which compares with 79.1% for those not taking the qualification.

The impact on young males is also noticeably positive (baseline commitment to local voting is 75.1%, increasing to GCSE 80% : non-GCSE 74.4%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of GCSE Citizenship Studies on the commitment to voting in local elections for young middle-class people is statistically significant.

The baseline level of commitment to local voting for all young middle-class people is 79.6%, but this increases significantly for those taking GCSE Citizenship Studies to 90%, which compares with 78.1% for those not taking the qualification.

The impact on young working-class people is negligible (baseline commitment to local voting is 75.9%, compared to GCSE 75.7% : non-GCSE 75.9%).

The impact on those who do not identify with a social class is very positive (but not at the level of statistical significance), with a baseline commitment to local voting of 76%, increasing sharply to GCSE 85.3% : non-GCSE 74.1%.

## Voting rights for 16-year-olds

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and ethnicity:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on support for extending voting rights to 16-year-olds expressed by young white people is statistically significant and very positive for those from racialised minority backgrounds.

The baseline level of support for Votes at 16 for all young white people is 47.9%, but this increases significantly to 66.7% for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies - the support from those not taking the qualification is only 44.4%.

The impact on those from racialised minority backgrounds is also very positive, although marginally short of the level needed to attain statistical significance (baseline support is 47.1%, increasing to GCSE 57.1% ; non-GCSE 44.4%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and gender:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on support for extending voting rights to 16-year-olds expressed by young females and young males is statistically significant.

The baseline level of support for votes at 16 for all young females is 51%, but this increases significantly for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 67% - the political interest level for those not taking the qualification is 46.6%.

The impact on young males is also statistically significant (baseline support is 43.4%, increasing to GCSE 57.1% ; non-GCSE 41.3%).

- **GCSE Citizenship Studies and social class:** The impact of the GCSE Citizenship Studies on support for extending voting rights to 16-year-olds expressed by young people from different social classes is statistically significant.

The baseline level of support for votes at 16 for all young middle class people is 43.5%, but this increases by a statistically significant margin for those taking the GCSE Citizenship Studies to 63.3% - support for this reform proposal for those not taking the qualification is 40.4%.

The impact on those who do not identify with social class is also statistically significant (baseline support is 51%, increasing to GCSE 72% ; non-GCSE 45.8%).

The impact on young working class people is negligible (baseline support is 52.1%, increasing to GCSE 51.2% ; non-GCSE 52.4%).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest that there is significant scope for the GCSE Citizenship Studies to help strengthen young people's connection with democracy in Britain, and also to reduce the inequalities of democratic engagement and participation by gender, ethnicity and social class which otherwise exist. We would therefore propose the following recommendations:

- The Department for Education (DFE) should prioritise GCSE Citizenship Studies and include it in school performance measures so that the value of the subject as a qualification is better understood by parents/carers, schools and colleges.
- In the context of the DFE's Curriculum and Assessment Review, the subject of Citizenship and the quality of Citizenship teaching must be strengthened. Therefore:
  - The Citizenship studies curriculum in general and the GCSE Citizenship Studies in particular to be made available in all schools and educational settings so that all students have access to high quality and extensive Citizenship education.
  - Increased investment in the specialist training of new citizenship teachers and also in CPD for existing citizenship teachers to allow for more comprehensive provision of the GCSE Citizenship Studies as well as basic citizenship education within the curriculum.
  - The Citizenship curriculum – including the GCSE Citizenship Studies - to be kept under regular review so that it gives attention to key issues that have meaning for young people's everyday lives; the data from this study indicate young people would like deeper study of, and more discussion about, topics such as the environment and climate change, crime, as well as inequality and equality issues in their citizenship classes.
  - Deeper engagement between schools and students with policy-makers (which is most realistic and realisable at the local level), to make experiences of citizenship education more efficacious.

## APPENDIX 1: Research design and methods

This project considered the impact that studying GCSE Citizenship Studies (GCSE/CS) may have on young people's democratic engagement and participation, with the following research aims:

1. To examine the relationship between Citizenship education and levels of democratic engagement and participation of diverse groups of young people aged 16 to 19.
2. To identify whether studying for the General Certificate of Secondary Education in Citizenship Studies has an impact on the direction and levels of young people's democratic engagement and participation.
3. To identify whether studying GCSE Citizenship Studies has an impact on the reduction of inequalities in democratic engagement and participation by gender, ethnicity and social class.

### Questionnaire design

We designed an online questionnaire that asked questions about students' experiences with Citizenship education, their engagement with democratic processes, potential barriers to their political and civic participation, and some sociodemographic characteristics. Some of the questions used were borrowed from already existing questionnaires, including:

- ACT's National Citizenship Education Study (NCES)<sup>45</sup>
- 'Young people and politics in Britain: How do young people participate in politics and what can be done to strengthen their political connection?'<sup>46</sup>
- Community Life Survey<sup>47</sup>
- British Election Study<sup>48</sup>

Questions that have been used in other surveys have often undergone rigorous testing for reliability and validity, which suggests that the questions accurately measure what they are supposed to (validity) and that respondents interpret it consistently (reliability). Consequently, using such questions reduces the risk of bias or misinterpretation from participants, and allows for consistency in measuring complex concepts (like political participation in this research project, for example). Additionally, using previously developed and established survey questions allows for comparisons with previous studies and for the findings from this research to be directly compared to national trends looking at the relationship between taking GCSE Citizenship Studies and youth political and civic participation.

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<sup>45</sup> Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) (2024) 'National Citizenship Education Study (NCES)'. Available at: [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/national-citizenship-education-study](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/national-citizenship-education-study) (accessed 2 May 2025).

<sup>46</sup> Henn, M. and Foard, N. (2011) 'Young people and politics in Britain: How do young people participate in politics and what can be done to strengthen their political connection?'. UK Research and Innovation. Available at: <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FI03157X%2F1> (accessed 2 May 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DDCMS) (2021) 'Community Life Survey 2020/21'. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021) (accessed 2 May 2025).

<sup>48</sup> British Election Study (2019) 'British Election Study 2019 data release – internet panel, results file, and expert survey'. Available at: [www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/british-election-study-2019-data-release-internet-panel-results-file-and-expert-survey](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/british-election-study-2019-data-release-internet-panel-results-file-and-expert-survey) (accessed 2 May 2025).

## Pilot project

A pilot questionnaire was conducted and data collected from 28 March to 31 July 2024. The preliminary data collected allowed for testing of the clarity, wording and structure of the questions, and helped to gain a better estimate as to how likely people were to respond and complete the survey. In total, 81 responses were collected, with 58 participants consenting to take part in this research. As a result of the pilot questionnaire, the participant recruitment strategy was reconsidered and adjusted, to ensure a larger sample size for the main questionnaire.

## Convenience sampling method

A convenience sampling strategy was used in this research project. This approach was chosen for this study due to its practicality in terms of accessing participants. Since ACT was responsible for the participant recruitment, they were able to reach out to direct contacts in their network, which allowed for efficient data collection without the complexities of random sampling. A convenience sample worked well for this research because the focus was on exploring general trends. However, it is important to acknowledge that this sampling method does not produce a fully representative sample, and this may limit the generalisability of the findings. Despite this limitation, convenience sampling provided valuable insights from an accessible population of young people aged 16 to 19 years old, making it an effective approach for meeting the study's objectives.

## Data-collection approach

The data collection period for the main questionnaire took place from 1 September 2024 to 31 January 2025. The initial dataset comprised 1,032 responses; however, 143 individuals did not provide consent to participate in this research or had not studied at a UK school or college since the age of 14. Consequently, the final sample comprised 889 participants.

ACT's participant recruitment strategy included disseminating and sharing the survey link<sup>49</sup> with strategic contacts, requesting students to complete the survey during their classes at schools and colleges whenever possible. Most student completions of the online questionnaire were triggered via these individual schools and colleges. In addition, other key contacts also shared the link with young people, and these included:

- National Citizen Service (NCS) Trust
- Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Association for School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- National Association for Managers of Student Services (NAMSS)
- I Have A Voice (IHAV)
- Young Citizens
- #BeeWell programme
- My Life My Say (MLMS)
- Chartered College of Teaching
- National Union of Students (NUS)
- Democracy Classrooms

<sup>49</sup> [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/young-people-and-citizenship-education](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/young-people-and-citizenship-education)

- Shout Out UK
- Fair Education Alliance (FEA) Young People's Advisory Group
- Citizens UK
- UK Youth Parliament

The academic research team also shared the survey link via their social media platforms. Additionally, ACT organised a dissemination event<sup>50</sup>, where the research team presented the preliminary results from the initial pilot survey, which was also publicised throughout social media platforms, the Political Studies Association<sup>51</sup> and ACT's website.

## Data-analysis methods

The dataset was cleaned before the analyses were carried out. First, all participants who did not give consent to participate were removed from the dataset. After that, incomplete or missing responses were reviewed and assigned specific codes (such as 999) when necessary. However, since most of the questions in the questionnaire required a mandatory answer, this reduced the frequency of missing values. Additionally, in cases where there were minimal responses, such as 'Don't know' or 'Prefer not to say', which were disrupting the analysis (by creating difficulties in identifying trends), these were also treated as missing values.

Descriptive statistics were obtained to summarise the key characteristics of the sample and to provide an overview of the distribution of sociodemographic variables, such as gender, ethnicity and social class, as well as whether or not survey participants had taken GCSE Citizenship Studies (GCSE/CS). A bivariate analysis was performed to explore potential relationships between our variables of interest. Our independent variables were ethnicity, gender, social class and whether the participant had taken GCSE/CS; our dependent variables were questions 3 to 23 of the questionnaire<sup>52</sup> (these included topics such as political participation, civic engagement and opinions regarding civic and political issues). Crosstabulations (crosstabs) allowed for a comparison between our independent and dependent variables. Additionally, to assess whether the observed relationships suggested in the crosstabs were statistically significant, Chi-squared tests for independence were performed. The Chi-squared test is particularly useful for determining whether there is a statistically significant association between two (or sometimes three) categorical variables. A significance level (p-value) of 0.05 was used as the threshold for statistical significance, meaning that any p-value below this indicates that the association is unlikely to have occurred by chance.

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<sup>50</sup> [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/event/panel-discussion-engaging-young-people-in-democracy](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/event/panel-discussion-engaging-young-people-in-democracy)

<sup>51</sup> [www.psa.ac.uk](http://www.psa.ac.uk)

<sup>52</sup> To access the various questions asked in the questionnaire, please see Appendix 2.



## APPENDIX 2: Online questionnaire with young people (average completion time 17 minutes)

To access the online questionnaire, please click [here](#).<sup>53</sup>

## APPENDIX 3: Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of our young people

ables (n, %)	
GCSE Citizenship Studies	(17.7) (82.3)
(years)	
15	7.1
18	(92.4) .6)
Gender	
Male	(47.7) (48.7)
Prefer not to say/other	3.6)
Sexual orientation	
Gay/bisexual/heterosexual	(78.1)
Gay/lesbian	4.5)
Gay/lesbian	9.8)
Prefer not to say	6.5)
Other	1.1)
Gender as registered at birth	
Male	(94.7)
Female	3.3)
Prefer not to say	2.0)
Social class	
Upper middle class	(50.2)
Lower middle class	(19.0)
Working class	(28.2)
I don't consider as belonging to any particular social class	2.6)
Ethnicity	
White British	(36.8)
Other	(63.2)
Where after education/training	
University	(72.6)
Apprenticeship	9.9)
Employment	3.1)
Unemployed	10.2)
Other	1.8)
Prefer not to say	2.4)
Education level	

<sup>53</sup>

[https://myntuac-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/ana\\_nunes\\_ntu\\_ac\\_uk/Ee1\\_wBaIKnxNIFbYyJPlvhoB2QSLUrbzSDRMjV8arb8ixA?e=wtYo5Z](https://myntuac-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/ana_nunes_ntu_ac_uk/Ee1_wBaIKnxNIFbYyJPlvhoB2QSLUrbzSDRMjV8arb8ixA?e=wtYo5Z)



thern Ireland	8.4)
lands and eastern England	(12.6)
thern England	(78.6)
es, Scotland and Northern Ireland	.3)
ability	(74.0)
	(19.8)
fer not to say	4.9)
er	1.2)