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The lasting influence of an open climate of classroom discussion on political trust: Results from a seven-year panel study among English youth

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of various educational conditions, including educational tracking, aspirations and aspects of citizenship education, on the development of political trust among English youth, and assesses whether these effects last into early adulthood. Data from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study show a tendency of distrust towards political institutions among English youth, with a fluctuating but overall downward trend in political trust as they grow older. Drawing on this dataset, we built hierarchical linear regression models to examine the effects of educational conditions on political trust during two major transitions experienced by English youth: from lower to upper secondary (or into work) and from upper secondary to university. As a participatory form of practicing citizenship education, open classroom climate in mid-adolescence has a positive and enduring effect on young people's political trust. The citizenship education curriculum – such as its volume and content—shows little impact, suggesting that free expression and democratic engagement in the classroom are more effective in shaping young people's political trust than simply acquiring political knowledge. Political trust is volatile during adolescence and into early adulthood, as later real-life experiences possibly lead to a more comprehensive and realistic sense of political trust.

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KEYWORDS
citizenship education, educational influences, open classroom climate, political trust

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper assesses the impact of various educational conditions, including educational tracking, aspirations and aspects of citizenship education, on the development of political trust among English youth, and assesses whether these effects last into early adulthood

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

An open classroom climate, as a participatory form of practising citizenship education, is an effective educational condition that has an enduring positive effect on young people's political trust

INTRODUCTION

Political trust is believed to be one of the most important resources that stabilise a democratic system (Citrin & Muste, 1999; Claes et al., 2012; Hooghe, 2011). It shapes how individuals interact with their government, including their willingness to accept and comply with laws and policies and their intentions to vote, pay taxes and engage in other civic activities (Hetherington, 2005; Hooghe, 2011; Norris, 2011). Almond and Verba's (1963) work, *The Civic Culture*, initiated the investigation of political trust, civic engagement and democratic culture, closely tying these concepts together. Later, Putnam's (1993) social capital theory provided a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between trusting attitudes and social capital, highlighting the role of active citizens in a democratic regime and emphasising the development of political support. Although citizens are expected to be critical of the authorities, their confidence in political institutions can still be seen as a barometer of the democratic health of the political system and a driver of political engagement (Dalton, 2004).

Conversely, dissatisfaction with the political system can lead to political alienation, cynicism and protest voting (Brezicha & Leroux, 2023; Citrin, 1974; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). As observed in many democracies, there has been a declining trend in political trust over the years, especially among younger generations (Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Marien, 2011; Putnam, 2000; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). Compared with its European neighbours, the UK appears to have one of the lowest levels of trust in political parties, institutions and the press (Chevalier, 2019; Norris, 2011). As a recent report indicates, politicians, government ministers and journalists are among the five least trusted professions, while trust in the police and television newsreaders declined by 7% and 16% respectively in a year (Ipsos, 2023). This rate has fallen considerably over the last three decades (Haerpfer et al., 2022), prompting a deeper examination of the roots of this trend by both scholars and policy-makers. In times of a global pandemic, regional conflicts and rapid transformations across the world, political trust is highly important in building cooperative efforts to deal with crises (Badman

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et al., 2022). Thus, it is necessary to not only observe the downward trend over time, but also explore the factors influencing these changes and respond accordingly.

Previous studies have provided substantial evidence of the essential role that education plays in the development of political trust, through both theoretical reasoning and empirical methods (Bovens & Wille, 2011). Not surprisingly, most studies reach a similar result: highly educated citizens tend to show higher levels of trust in politics since they are more equipped with civic skills and knowledge (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2011). Yet, some authors argue that education serves merely as a 'proxy' for social background and the existing social stratification and thus that it does not exert an independent effect itself (e.g. Kam & Palmer, 2008; Persson, 2012). This claim has been challenged by many, however. For instance, Schoon et al. (2010) and Hooghe et al. (2015) argue that political trust tends to stabilise only in late adolescence and that it is influenced by educational aspirations and tracking (Hooghe et al., 2015; Schoon et al., 2010). A 5 year panel study of Claes and Hooghe (2017), moreover, shows that an open classroom climate of discussion has a positive and lasting influence on young peoples' political trust. Claes and Hooghe tested the impact of various forms of citizenship education in the Belgian context, such as classroom instruction, school council participation and open classroom climate. By conducting a longitudinal study, they observed long-term positive effects of these predictors on Belgian youths' political trust level. Their study provides insightful evidence on the importance of citizenship education and made a great contribution to the exploration of how political trust is shaped by education.

However, their study was limited in that it did not include controls for social background, i.e. the very condition that education is said to proxy, and other educational conditions. Building on their paper, we examine, in this article, the impact of a whole range of educational conditions, including educational tracking and aspirations in addition to aspects of citizenship education, on the development of political trust among English youth and assess whether the effects of these conditions last into early adulthood. Unlike Claes and Hooghe (2017), we also control for social background, gender and ethnicity (i.e. the usual suspects) and current main activity. We further note that English youth experience two major transitions between ages 13/14 and 22/23, the period we examine the development of political trust for: the first involves the change from lower to upper secondary (or into work) and the second from upper secondary to university (or into work). These transitions and the new experiences they engender are likely to leave their mark on young people's civic attitudes. In sum, our study represents a particularly stringent test of the durability of citizenship education effects.

Considering that longitudinal studies have long been identified as the most convincing approach to monitor the development of trust (Obradović & Masten, 2007; Schoon & Cheng, 2011), we draw on the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Survey (CELS), which was conducted every 2 or 3 years among English youth from 2003 to 2014 to examine these effects. Given adolescents' lack of first-hand knowledge about the political system, schooling should be their main source of information and experience. Hence, we would expect that these school-related predictors can have a significant positive effect on the outcome.

POLITICAL TRUST: DEFINITION AND DETERMINANTS

Defining the concept

Political trust, as a 'fuzzy' concept whose precise definition and measurement have yet to reach a consensus (Bovens & Wille, 2011), is the manifestation of citizens' attitudes of reciprocity that derive from civic engagement (Keele, 2007). Miller and Listhaug (1990, p. 358) described political trust as 'a summary judgement that the system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny', while Hetherington

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and Husser (2012, p. 313) defined it as 'the ratio of people's evaluation of government performance relative to their normative expectations of how government ought to perform'. According to Norris (2017, p. 23), political trust consists of the approval of core principles and values, evaluation of regime performance, confidence in political institutions and approval of incumbent office-holders. In short, it reflects citizens' attitudes towards the entire political system. Usually, a high degree of political trust means that citizens are more likely to acknowledge the legitimacy of the regime and accept the policies made by its agencies (Badman et al., 2022; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011).

Many believe that the relation is weak between political trust and social trust, while others argue that this bond is quite profound in modernised societies (Putnam, 2000; Rose & Mishler, 2011; Seligman, 1997; Uslaner, 2018). From a general perspective, Seligman (1997, p.18) classified trust into three dimensions: trust in persons, trust in institutionalised personal ties and trust in abstract systems. Social trust, or inter-personal trust, refers to 'the trustworthiness of the generalised other' (Putnam, 2000, p.137) and is strongly related to social and economic variables such as income, education, gender and age (Newton, 2001). Political trust, however, is usually more associated with variables such as patriotism and interest in politics (Newton, 2001). Instead of specific confidence in a particular political party or politician, political trust is usually believed to be a diffuse and general assessment that reflects the overall impression of the political system and the civic culture in a society (Bovens & Wille, 2011; Easton, 1965; Marien, 2011). Fisher et al. (2010) made meaningful contributions to the definition and explanation of political trust by clarifying three dimensions of the term. They argued that political trust should be measured not simply as a unitary concept, but as a comprehensive evaluation by people of the entire political system. Taking this into consideration, in this article, we interpret political trust as a composite concept covering various institutions. More precisely, we measure political trust with a six-item scale that integrates respondents' trust in politicians, political institutions and the press (see below in the section 'Dependent variable').

Educational influences on political trust

As previous authors have revealed, political trust is a relatively stable attitude within a country (Claes et al., 2012), although it is strongly correlated with government performance and can fluctuate under different contexts (Citrin, 1974; Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011). The formation of political trust occurs in the early stages of life, especially during childhood and adolescence (Easton, 1975; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Kokkonen et al., 2010). Once trust is established, it tends to be maintained owing to citizens' pre-existing expectations (Claes et al., 2012; Easton, 1975). Although adolescents rarely have hands-on experience with genuine politics, they learn from the operations of their school and the curriculum they follow (Claes et al., 2012). Being a source of second-hand information, schooling functions as a mediator in shaping young people's attitudes and confidence towards political institutions (Claes et al., 2012). In view of this, we chose to focus primarily on various micro aspects of schooling, instead of analysing the effects of changes in the economy and government performance from a macro perspective.

Myriad studies have shown that education has a positive and strong impact on political trust (Schoon et al., 2010). Education, especially in civic and citizenship, helps students better understand current political, social and economic systems, which in turn will increase the likelihood of their support for these systems (Hooghe et al., 2015). As an important approach of preparing students into active citizens, citizenship education shoulders the responsibility of both conveying basic values and facilitating actual participation (Heater, 2004). On the one hand, higher levels of political knowledge and cognitive

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skills are positively related to one's attitudes towards the political system and one's willingness to participate in it (Claes & Hooghe, 2017). On the other, democratic skill practice in the classroom setting and the wider school context is positively associated with students' level of political trust (Kiess, 2022). Based on a comparative analysis among nine countries, Kiess illustrated that being exposed to democratic activities at a young age is essential to fostering political trust and a willingness for civic engagement. Some evidence, however, suggests that democratic participation might hinder the development of political trust by fostering 'critical and contestation-like democratic self-esteem,' which in turn may decrease political engagement (Kiess, 2022).

An open classroom climate has been found to be a significant factor having a positive influence on students' political trust (Claes & Hooghe, 2017). It refers to the extent to which students are encouraged and valued for expressing their opinions in classrooms, particularly during the discussion of political and social issues (Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Campbell, 2008). An open classroom environment is one that encourages dialogue on controversial topics, allows students to share diverse opinions and stresses the need for mutual respect among teachers and students (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). As previous studies indicate, an open climate in the classroom can not only promote students' acceptance of democratic norms (Hahn, 1998) but also foster a variety of positive political outcomes, such as political knowledge, political efficacy and voting intentions (Campbell, 2008; Manganelli, 2013). Claes and Hooghe (2017), from the 5 year panel study among Belgian youth, observed a positive long-term effect of open classroom climate on students' political trust, indicating that the more freely students are allowed to express themselves in the classroom, the greater their trust is in the political system. This impact will persist over time, but it is unlikely to significantly boost the level of political trust with the passing of time since experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood will also leave their mark on political trust (Claes & Hooghe, 2017).

Good candidates for such experiences are educational tracking and current main activity. Educational tracking refers to the practice of allocating young people to different educational tracks varying in the level and kind of education on the basis, usually, of prior achievement. In England the education system branches out in an academic track (A levels), preparing students for university, and a variety of vocational tracks at age 16. The relevance of tracking for political trust is that the academic track has been said to prepare young people for democratic citizenship much better than vocational education. Existing studies have pointed out that the former offers a more relevant curriculum (Ten Dam & Volman, 2003), a more stimulating pedagogy with participatory learning approaches (Hurn, 1978) and a more encouraging peer environment (Jacobsen et al., 2012) in terms of educational experiences relevant for political engagement. Moreover, tracking may be particularly important in England because of large cross-track differences in the curriculum, with next to no general courses, such as citizenship education, being provided in the vocational tracks (Janmaat, 2018).

Young people's main activity (i.e. being in education or training, in work, or doing something else) is also likely to have an impact on the development of political trust. Early school leaving has, for instance, been associated not only with higher levels of unemployment, poverty and illness but also with reduced social and political participation (Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014).

Including variables tapping tracking and main activity in our analysis will also allow us to assess whether the impact of citizenship variables is indirect. An indirect effect is plausible if, for instance, experiencing an open climate of discussion sparks a curiosity in political affairs that in turn fuels students' educational aspirations and a desire to pursue their studies at university. Indeed, Lauglo (2016: 430) found that engagement with politics at a young age through family socialisation acts as an 'incubator for young people's expectation of higher education'.

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The English context

This article will focus on the effects of citizenship education in lower secondary, specifically its content and volume, as well as on open classroom climate and school democratic practices, while taking possible effects of the abovementioned later experiences into account. It will examine these effects among a cohort of young people in England who completed lower secondary education in 2007. We believe this is a highly appropriate context to examine the effects of citizenship education. Earlier in that decade the Labour-run government had made citizenship education a statutory component of the curriculum in England. It was given a 'light touch' status, however, with schools left free to teach it in ways they considered best (Kerr, 2005). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this policy combination resulted in notable differences between schools in the delivery of citizenship education (Keating et al., 2009), a variation that suits us well in assessing the various aspects of citizenship education mentioned above. During the last 2 years of lower secondary (the so-called Key Stage 4), this variation between schools was, moreover, complemented with variation between pupils *within* schools in the experience of citizenship education, as pupils could choose distinct profiles and subjects during this phase. Our measures of citizenship education pertain to that phase (see further below). Hence, the context of England during the first decade of the new millennium offers ideal circumstances, in terms of variation in our predictors of interest, for our study on the educational drivers of political trust.

RESEARCH DESIGN: DATA SOURCE, VARIABLES AND METHOD

Data source

To answer the research questions, we drew on the CELS dataset to track young people's political trust over time and analyse the predictors that might have long-term impacts on the outcome. The CELS is a six-wave panel survey conducted among a cohort of secondary school students in England to examine the effects of citizenship education curriculum on young people's knowledge, skills and attitudes (Coleman, 2015). The survey first took place in 2002–2003, when the respondents were aged 11–12 (Year 7, the first year of secondary school). This data was collected from a nationally representative sample of 75 state-maintained schools in England – representative in terms of region, GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) attainment and percentage of students on free school meals[i] (Benton et al., 2008). Within the sampled schools all the students of the year of interest were selected (i.e. all the students in a certain grade; a grade can include one or several classes). After the first wave, data was collected every 2 years until 2011. The last wave of the study took place in 2014, when the participants were aged 23–24 and had generally left education. The participants were recruited through their schools in the first three waves. Since Wave 4, participants have been contacted individually. The sample of the current study consists of participants who took part in Waves 2, 3 and 6 ($N=429$).

As a longitudinal study, CELS unsurprisingly shows considerable attrition. While 18,583 students participated at the beginning of the study (Wave 1), 58% of the original sample participated in Wave 2, and only 2.3% in Wave 6 (Janmaat, 2018). Like in most cases, participants who dropped out of the survey are, on average, from more deprived backgrounds (Janmaat, 2018). To mitigate the impact of this selective attrition as much as possible, we created a weight using variables indicating participants' socio-economic status (SES) and conducted the analysis both with and without weights. However, the results showed minimal differences in terms of effects and significance levels. Given that applying weights would

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reduce the valid sample size, we chose to present the results without weights to ensure validity. Since there is sufficient variation in both the outcome and predictors among the respondents across waves (see Tables 2 and 3 further below), the data is still usable for the current analysis.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable we used for analysis concerns trust in political institutions, politicians and the media. Since overstating the influence of each agent (political leaders, parliament, etc.) may lead to biased results (Badman et al., 2022), we intend to introduce a more comprehensive measurement to better represent and explain political trust. In the latest survey (Wave 6), the CELS dataset provides us with six relevant items regarding ‘How much do you trust the following?’, including ‘The police’, ‘Politicians’, ‘the European Union’, ‘Newspapers’, ‘Radio’ and ‘Television’ (with a response scale ranging between 1 ‘not at all’ and 4 ‘completely’). Given that these six items form a reliable scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.78$ in Wave 6, 0.73 in Wave 5, 0.74 in Wave 3, 0.65 in Wave 2 and 0.68 in wave 1), we consider them to comprise an internally coherent syndrome of political trust. In light of this, we merged these items into one dependent variable by taking the average of the six items in each wave. The resulting political trust scale ranges theoretically between 1 and 4, with 2.5 being the midpoint denoting neither trust nor distrust (see Table 1 for the descriptive statistics).

Independent variables

We used Wave 3 data to measure citizenship education factors, covering open classroom climate, citizenship education (CE) volume, CE content and school political activities (SPA). The degree of open classroom climate is measured based on the item ‘what generally happens in your lessons?’ From the six activities listed in this item, we selected the four most relevant ones: ‘Are students encouraged to make up their own minds about issues?’, ‘Do students feel free to express opinions even when they are different from most of the class?’, ‘Do teachers respect students’ opinions and encourage them to express them?’ and ‘Do students feel free to disagree with teachers during discussions about topical issues?’ We averaged the responses to these activities to create the scale ‘Open Classroom Climate’ (ranging from 1 to 5, Cronbach's $\alpha=0.84$). The CE volume is tapped with the item ‘Are you taught about “Citizenship” in school?’ (1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = a lot). The CE content variable represents the sum of six items asking respondents about the topics they have learned in school over the last 12 months, covering rights and responsibilities, crime and punishment, parliament and government, voting and elections, resolving conflict and the European Union. This summed variable ranges from a minimum of 0 (learned none of these) to a maximum of 6 (learned all six of these). Similarly, SPA is measured with three items asking respondents about their participation at school in debating clubs, student councils, elections for council members and/or mock elections. It ranges from 0 (participated in none of these activities) to 3 (in all of them).

Apart from these educational variables which concern us most, we also added controls for gender, ethnicity (White British), SES (which is a Wave 3 construct combining the number of books at home and the education level of the mother and the farther). Previous research has shown that people from more deprived backgrounds, especially males, tend to have lower levels of political trust (Schoon et al., 2010). To make the result more convincing, we also included educational aspirations (‘when do you think you may leave Full-time education?’), which was found to be a determinant of political engagement (Khattab, 2015). As

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Missing (%)
Dependent variable					
Political trust (Wave 6)	1	3.50	2.22	0.47	0
Political trust (Wave 3)	1	3.67	2.30	0.49	0
Independent variables					
Continuous					
Open classroom climate (Wave 3)	1	5	3.36	0.91	2.8
Citizenship education volume (Wave 3)	1	3	2.35	0.55	10.7
Citizenship education content (Wave 3)	0	6	3.35	1.81	0
School political activities (Wave 3)	0	3	0.78	0.82	1.6
Educational aspirations (Wave 3)	1	4	3.25	1.09	12.8
Socio-economic status	−1.08	1.48	0.14	0.72	40.8
Previous political trust (Wave 2)	1	3.33	2.29	0.47	0
Categorical					
Variable	Category (%)	Wave	Valid *N* (missing %)		
Gender		6	429 (0)		
Male	50.3				
Female	49.7				
Ethnicity		6	426 (0.7)		
White British	82.3 (% yes)				
Highest qualification		6	423 (1.4)		
Level 1	4.5				
L2 NVQ 2	5.9				
L2 GCSE	10.2				
L3 NVQ	11.6				
L3 A-levels	11.3				
L4 and 5 NVQ	7.3				
L6 Degree	49.2				
Current activity		6	429 (0)		
Working	81.4				
In education	8.2				
Something else	10.5				

Claes et al.'s (2012) study indicates that previous political trust has a robust impact on the outcome in 2 years, we included the political trust index from Wave 2 to control for autocorrelation in the outcome of interest. Doing so enables us to better separate the effects of citizenship education out from earlier influences on political trust because Wave 2 political trust can be said to absorb such influences. In fact, controlling for these initial levels of trust allows us to see whether citizenship education factors have contributed to a *change* in political trust from the moment of their occurrence (Wave 3) (cf. Finkel, 1995; Kahne et al., 2013).

In the Wave 6 analysis, we further included highest qualification achieved, which we used as an indicator for educational tracking, and Current Activity (working, in education, or

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doing something else) to test the effect of post-school experiences. We considered-highest qualification achieved to be a good proxy for the track experienced as it captures both THE level and kind (academic or vocational) of education. Based on the National Qualifications Framework for England and Wales, it has the following categories: Level 1; L2 NVQ (Level 2 vocational); L2 GCSE (Level 2 academic); L3 NVQ (Level 3 upper secondary vocational); L3 A-Levels (Level 3 upper secondary academic); L4 and 5 NVQ (Levels 4 and 5 higher education vocational); and L6 Degree (Level 6 higher education academic).

Methods

By conducting hierarchical linear regression analyses, we aim to examine the extent to which political trust is determined by schooling, particularly citizenship education at an early stage. We added the predictors stepwise to see if the coefficients of the predictors of interest change when more control variables are added to the model. If the CE variables lose their significance after variables relating to socio-demographic background or prior trust are added to the model, we can conclude that the citizenship education experienced in lower secondary is not leaving a lasting impact on political trust. If such variables become insignificant after the tracking and current activity variables are added to the model, we can posit that the effect of citizenship education is mainly indirect. We first run a stepwise analysis on Wave 3 political trust (Table 2) and then on Wave 6 political trust (Table 3).

To mitigate the influence of missing values in the dataset (the percentage of missing values is, for instance, quite high on SES), we imputed 10 sets of data using multiple imputation in SPSS. This technique is considered the most appropriate for dealing with longitudinal data and helps to retain sampling variability (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013, p. 103). It takes random samples from the cases based on the distribution of variables with missing data and then creates new datasets accordingly (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). After multiple imputation, SPSS pools the results to provide summary estimates. The current study reports these summary estimates.

TABLE 2 Determinants of political trust (Wave 3).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	**(SE)**	***b***	**(SE)**	***b***	**(SE)**
School Political Activities	0.05	(0.03)	0.04	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)
Open Classroom Climate	0.15***	(0.03)	0.15***	(0.03)	0.11***	(0.03)
Citizenship education volume	−0.02	(0.06)	−0.01	(0.06)	0.00	(0.05)
Citizenship education content	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.04*	(0.02)
White British			0.13*	(0.07)	0.07	(0.06)
Gender			−0.09	(0.05)	−0.07	(0.05)
Socio-economic status			0.06	(0.05)	0.03	(0.04)
Educational Expectation			0.04	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Previous political trust (Wave 2)					0.44***	(0.06)
R^2 (%)	8.5		12.7		3	
N	429		429		429	

*$p<0.05$. **$p<0.01$. ***$p<0.001$.

TABLE 3 Determinants of political trust (Wave 6).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	b	(SE)	*b*	(SE)	*b*	(SE)	*b*	(SE)
School political activities	0.02	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)
Open classroom climate	0.09**	(0.03)	0.09**	(0.03)	0.09**	(0.03)	0.09*	(0.03)
Citizenship education volume	0.02	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)
Citizenship education content	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
White British			0.21**	(0.07)	0.20**	(0.07)	0.20**	(0.07)
Gender			−0.00	(0.05)	−0.00	(0.05)	−0.00	(0.05)
Socio-economic status			0.11*	(0.05)	0.11*	(0.05)	0.10*	(0.04)
Educational expectation			−0.06*	(0.03)	−0.07*	(0.03)	−0.08**	(0.03)
Previous political trust (Wave 2)					0.07	(0.07)	0.06	(0.07)
Highest qualification								
Level 1 (ref.)								
NVQ 2							−0.12	(0.16)
GCSE 5A-Cs							0.03	(0.14)
NVQ 3							0.06	(0.14)
A-levels							0.02	(0.15)
NVQ 4 and 5							0.04	(0.15)
Degree							0.10	(0.13)
Current activity								
Something else (ref.)								
Working							0.14	(0.09)
In education							0.16	(0.13)
R^2 (%)	6.0		12.2		13.7		15.4	
N	429		429		429		429	

*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

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RESULTS

As a longitudinal study spanning from 2002 to 2014, CELS allows us to have a closer look at how political trust varies across waves. Figure 1 shows the means of the political trust scales across waves, showing the variation in political trust levels of all participants as well as the ones in our analytic sample (Waves 2, 3 and 6). Generally, trust levels are somewhat below the midpoint of the scale in all the waves and appear to decline with age (see Figure 1), corresponding to the overall trends observed in other national contexts (Chevalier, 2019; Claes & Hooghe, 2017). To illustrate this, while 39.5% of the respondents scored higher than the neutral point 2.5 in Wave 1, which means that they trust the political institutions and agencies 'quite a lot' or 'completely', only 21.5% of them did so in Wave 6. We can further see that the respondents in our analytic sample are slightly more trusting in all the waves than all the participants in CELS.

When it comes to the linear regression analyses, generally, we include our predictors of interest in the first model, and then consecutively add control variables based on when they appear as a possible influence over the life course. Table 2 presents three models drawing on Wave 3 variables (both dependent and independent). Model 1 includes the school-related predictors we care about most, allowing us to focus solely on the impact of these factors on the outcome. Model 2 includes control variables such as respondents' backgrounds and educational goals. Model 3 further includes a previous index of political trust, with an aim of investigating the stability of political trust throughout lower secondary education. Looking closely at the results, it is obvious that Open Classroom Climate is highly robust in all three models ($p < 0.001$), indicating a consistently significant and positive impact on the political trust in Wave 3 regardless of the control variables added. The more freedom of discussion there is in the classroom setting, the more likely students are to trust the political system. However, the other three citizenship education variables are not significant, not even in the model without any of the controls. Interestingly, CE content starts to show a significant positive effect once prior trust is added to the model, even though this correlation is not very strong. More specifically, the more topics students are acquainted with during citizenship education, the more likely they are to trust political institutions and agencies. However, the effect of open classroom climate is still much stronger than that of CE content, indicating that democratic interactions in the classroom are more effective than the citizenship education

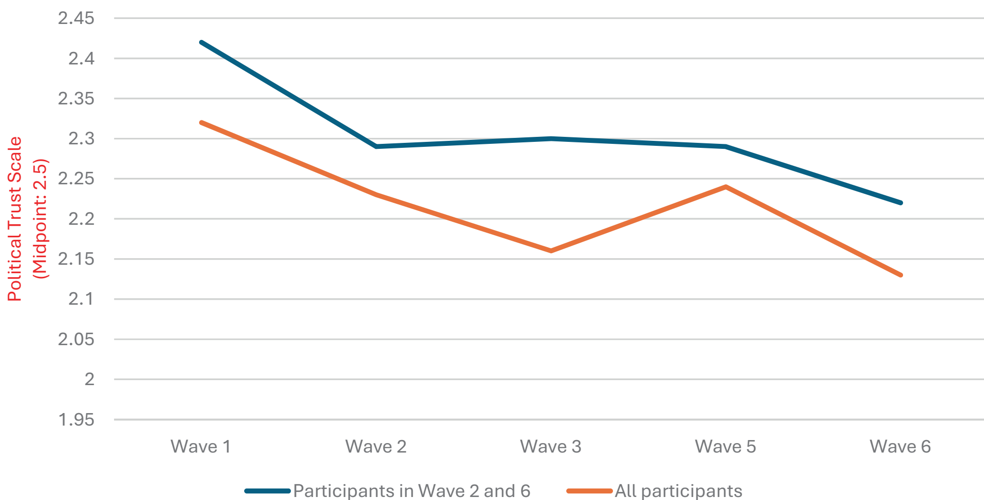

FIGURE 1 Mean levels of political trust across waves.

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curriculum per se. Meanwhile, in Model 3, it can be seen that previous political trust is significantly and positively related to the level of political trust ($p < 0.001$), which suggests that political trust is stabilising in mid adolescence.

It is also worth noticing that the explained variance jumps dramatically from 8.5% in Model 1 to 33.2% in Model 3. Considering that prior political trust is the only predictor added in Model 3, this dramatic rise of explained variance further confirms the high degree of autocorrelation in political trust level of political trust is a strong determinant to the outcome during the observed period of time. However, even though previous level of political trust is significantly and positively impacting the outcome, it does not weaken the influence of open classroom climate, suggesting that open climate exerts an independent effect on the development of political trust between ages 13/14 and 15/16.

Nevertheless, these results can only explain the situation in Wave 3 when the respondents were 15 or 16 years old. From the trend presented earlier (Figure 1), the level of political trust declined over the observed years, which suggests that later conditions might play a role in shaping political trust after the participants have left secondary education. The CELS longitudinal dataset allows us to further investigate the effects of these later predictors.

Table 3 shows the determinants and their effects on Wave 6 political trust. The variables in Models 1–3 remain the same as in the prior Wave 3 analysis. Model 4 further includes two predictors from the Wave 6 survey: Highest Qualification and Current Activity. These two variables are added to see what happens when students have left lower secondary education. In Model 1, only our predictors of interest were tested. Our main explanatory variable, Open Classroom Climate, is still significant but weakened to a certain degree ($p < 0.01$). However, CE content, which was slightly significance in the Wave 3 analysis, lost its significance over the span of 7 years. As in the Wave 3 analysis, neither SPA nor CE volume has a significant effect on trust. In Model 2, same as before, we added demographic control variables such as gender and social background. It can be seen from the results that after the participants leave lower secondary education, their ethnic and social backgrounds begin to matter for their level of political trust ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$ respectively). More precisely, White British respondents and those from privileged backgrounds have significantly higher levels of political trust. In contrast, educational aspirations have a negative impact on the outcome ($p < 0.01$). Importantly, adding these control variables to the model does not diminish the positive effect of open climate, which remains strong at the same level of significance. In terms its effect size, as open climate goes from minimum to maximum (i.e. from 1 to 5), so political trust rises on average by 0.36 units (4×0.09) on a scale from 1 to 3.5 (see Table 1), which amounts to a not negligible increase of 14.4%.

Model 3 includes prior political trust level as a control variable. Surprisingly, this variable, which was significantly and positively related to the outcome in the Wave 3 analysis, completely loses its significance here. Adding this variable does not influence the effect of other predictors either. In Model 4 we add the two variables relating to post-secondary school experiences to the analysis. Both turn out not to have a significant effect on political trust. Neither does adding them to the model change the effect of ethnicity and SES. The influence of open classroom climate is further weakened but it remains significant ($p < 0.05$), which suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be indirect for a small part. In contrast, the impact of educational expectation is further strengthened when these variables are added ($p < 0.01$). Meanwhile, the other three citizenship education variables still show no significant effect in this model. The proportion of explained variance, although not as large as in Wave 3 analysis, rises from 6% in Model 1 to 15.4% in Model 4.

It is noteworthy that in the Wave 6 analysis, previous political trust level lost its significance in all three Models. Since previous studies seldom perform separate analyses for both mid-adolescence and early adulthood, we will try to explain this change of effect in the next section.

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DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to examine the associations between political trust and various forms of citizenship education, such as open classroom climate, citizenship education volume, citizenship education content and school political activities. To explore whether these predictors have long-term effects on British youths' political trust level, we examined these effects for trust in mid adolescence and early adulthood, respectively.

The relevance of this aim was highlighted by the fact that we found British youths on balance to be more distrustful than trustful of political institutions, as was shown by levels of political trust never reaching the neutral mid-point of the political trust scale in any of the waves of CELS study. Moreover, we found a fluctuating but overall downward trend in political trust as young people grow older. Hooghe et al. (2015) found a similar trend in political trust among Belgian teenagers. Admittedly, the CELS data that we analysed and the longitudinal data of Hooghe's study are now more than 10 years old, but a recent study issued by the Institute for Public Policy Research and reported in the *Observer* (10 April 2022) suggests that the lack of trust in political institutions among British youth has certainly not diminished: it found that young British adults (18–24) are more negative about how democracy functions than any other age group, with just 19% saying it operates well against 55% who say badly. This underscores the continuing relevance of exploring whether citizenship education can help to promote young people's engagement with political institutions.

The most important finding of our study, and perhaps an uplifting one for those who fret about young people's distrust in politics, is that an open climate of classroom discussion experienced in mid adolescence is positively associated not only with political trust at the same age but also with political trust in early adulthood (at ages 22 and 23), controlling not only for socio-demographic background but also for prior political trust. Our key conclusion, therefore, is that open climate, as a participatory form of practising citizenship education, has a lasting positive effect on young people's political trust. At the same time, the content and volume of citizenship education and participation in school political activities, as the three other citizenship education variables that we tested, did not show significant links with political trust at ages 22 and 23. The CE content had a small positive effect in one of the analyses on political trust in mid adolescence, but this effect disappeared in the subsequent analyses on political trust at ages 22 and 23.

This pattern of findings affirms those of Claes et al. (2012): democratic interaction in the classroom setting is more effective than cognitive knowledge gained from citizenship education courses, which provides support for Dewey's theory of 'learning democracy' as a theoretical basis (Dewey, 1916). The experience of free expression and democratic engagement in the classroom plays a more important role in shaping young people's political trust than simply acquiring political knowledge from the curriculum. As other citizenship education predictors (CE volume and SPA) are not significant in any model, it is possible that classroom environment has a stand-alone effect on political trust. This also aligns with Janmaat's (2018) finding that citizenship education in lower secondary school does not impact students' democratic values and attitudes 8 years down the line, suggesting that these factors might not be as influential as is often assumed. However, why only open climate has this lasting effect and not participation in school political activities, which is also understood as a more participatory/learning democracy form of citizenship education, is a question that we could not resolve and leave for future research to address.

We further saw that the effect of open climate on political trust among early adults becomes weaker, although staying significant, when highest qualification achieved and current activity, the two variables capturing post school experiences, were added to the model. This suggests that this effect was partly indirect and expressed through the educational

pathways that young people pursue after they leave school. Possibly, as surmised earlier, experiencing an open climate sparks a desire to continue in the education system in order to learn more about society and politics. This would suggest that an open climate has positive effects that go beyond fostering political trust.

Another noteworthy finding is the lack of a relation between prior political trust (at ages 13 and 14) and political trust at ages 22 and 23. This suggests that political trust is quite volatile during adolescence and into early adulthood, which aligns with the findings of other research. Analysing six panel studies covering five countries between 1965 and 2020, Devine and Valgardsson (2024), for instance, find that while political trust tends to be stable across the life course, aside from the fluctuations prompted by changes of government, the exception to this pattern being late adolescents, whose political trust levels change markedly as they move into adulthood. According to Schoon et al. (2010), this volatility can be explained by the new and different experiences that young people encounter when they turn into adults. These concern not only engagement with the political system prompted by the right to vote, but also experiences with other institutions, such as universities, local councils, employers, and landlords and housing associations, as young people leave the parental home and start to live by themselves. These manifold experiences possibly lead young people to develop a more comprehensive and realistic sense of political trust, and one that is more grounded in real life experiences.

In this respect, it is also worth noting that we found ethnic and social background to be significant predictors of adult but not adolescent political trust. Possibly, an awareness of one's own background surfaces through positive and negative experiences with a variety of institutions as young people move into adulthood (Schoon & Cheng, 2011). In a way, this volatile nature of political trust during adolescence and early adulthood only adds to the importance of our most important finding, as apparently the impact of open climate is so robust that it weathers the storms later in life affecting and reshaping political trust.

We close by noting that our key finding has a clear implication for pedagogy: teachers, not only citizenship education ones but also those who teach other subjects with a clear relevance for democratic values such as history, social studies and literature, would do well to reserve ample time for free discussions of social and political topics in their lessons. This is likely to be most effective when teachers are neutral arbiters, ensuring that a discussion with opposing viewpoints is conducted in a respectful and balanced way (Campbell, 2008). Our call is particularly directed at teachers who teach classrooms with a relatively high intake of disadvantaged students, for two reasons. First, such teachers have been found to be less inclined to enable free discussions for fear of a breakdown of classroom order (Ichilov, 1991). This is unfortunate as such students are often lagging in political knowledge and engagement (Lauglo, 2016; Verba et al., 1995) and could thus be said to be most in need of stimulating pedagogies. Second, disadvantaged students have actually been found to benefit more from an open climate of discussion than children of more privileged backgrounds in terms of fostering their political engagement (Campbell, 2008). Schools serving such students could thus play a vital role in bringing about greater equality of political outcomes by offering a free climate of discussion. Our call also holds distinct relevance for state-funded schools in England, which recruit relatively many disadvantaged students and whose emphasis on direct instruction in basic literacy and numeracy skills tends to crowd out other valuable pedagogies, such as an open classroom climate (cf. Bischoff, 2016).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data subject to third party restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval was not required.

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ENDNOTE

[i] Free school meals in the UK are a government initiative that provides free nutritious school meals to children from low-income families in primary and secondary state-maintained schools.

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