

Votes at 16: the role of Citizenship education

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[Votes at 16](#), a manifesto commitment of the current Labour government, brings in an [increase in voter franchise in England](#). Campaigns to increase the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds have been [around for some time](#), and this policy brings England in line with [Scotland](#), which has had the right since 2015 and [Wales](#) since 2017 (in each case with voter registration starting at age 14). [Northern Ireland](#) looks set to follow in 2027.

As educators, we believe the best way to make this reform meaningful is to have high quality Citizenship education. Prime Minister [Sir Keir Starmer agrees](#), as does the recently announced [Curriculum and Assessment Review report](#) and the [government's response](#) to it. These reforms and the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#), requiring academies to follow the National Curriculum, will help improve Citizenship education. Research from a range of academics, including [Germ Janmaat](#) at the IOE, or colleagues at the [Association for Citizenship Teaching](#), [Middlesex University](#), [Nottingham Trent University](#) and the [Royal Holloway University](#) highlight the value of this provision.

Pivotal to making the most of this opportunity will be a sufficient supply of specialist Citizenship teachers.

Listening to young people

Comments against voter reform and franchise in the past have included the following:

'They don't have a desire to vote'

'Introducing the reform would weaken democracy'

'The voter franchise is already enough to represent the views of those that do not have it'

'They are emotional creatures, and incapable of making a sound political decision.'

Sound familiar? These were arguments used to [prevent women from having the vote](#).

The current government has taken a different view when it comes to young people. It now needs to support them to take up the vote in a meaningful way. As Ollie, a Year 10 student, commented to us:

"I believe the voting age in the UK should be lowered to 16 because citizens should have their say in elections when they get responsibilities. However, this should mean that Citizenship education should be compulsory."

As Demos note in their recent report [Inside the Mind of a 16 Year old](#), the real barriers to meaningful enfranchisement for young people are not their lack of maturity or desire, or their lack of knowledge of current affairs, on which they are generally well informed. The barriers relate to how informed

they are on the 'mechanics' – voting systems, the things they will need to navigate as adults such as participation in the community, etc – as well as how accustomed they are to feeling their views are valued and listened to. They need strong knowledge about voting systems and how to vote, and knowledge about the [different political party perspectives](#). Even more so in today's social media-saturated context, they need critical media literacy. They need to develop skills in understanding and debating controversial issues.

This is where Citizenship education – and teachers – come in.

Excellent Citizenship education for all

There are real systematic barriers to high quality Citizenship education at present. Although the aforementioned reforms are a significant step forward, as Carol Vincent has [recently pointed out](#), a significant number of schools do not have a specialist Citizenship teacher, and the IOE is currently the only provider of the subject [as a single PGCE](#). We need more places to train specialists, and to do that we need government to support university provision.

Learning to teach Citizenship education is not an easy task. Specialists must grasp complex themes around law, politics, economic and financial literacy as well as media literacy, and then use pedagogy around the teaching of controversial issues to deliver this sensitively in classrooms. This is an even taller task for a non-specialist who has their own subject to cover, [and no time](#).

Their task is only getting more difficult. Young people are very adept at consuming large amounts of data. The rise of digital platforms and their use by politicians looking for ways to connect, typically through 60-second sound bites presenting simplistic and often negative messaging around serious and complex issues, presents its own challenges to voters and to Citizenship teachers; such a landscape can be challenging to examine or counteract in the classroom. Algorithms narrow search fields and information can expose young people to single or polarising narratives, as research from [LSE](#), [UNESCO](#) and the [Council of Europe](#) show. Children may also be influenced by or rebel against voting preferences known to them at home. Citizenship education is crucial to help students explore and question what is seen and provide a forum for discourse analysis around platforms, issues and messaging.

In addition, 'Active Citizenship' can be especially powerful in preparing young people to take up the vote. In this regard, school councils and similar initiatives need to be more than tokenistic. There must be real commitment from school leaders to embed tangible and visible learning around democratic knowledge and action. Governors and senior leaders within school need to make time for platforms for 'pupil voice' to be the explicit change agents that all young people deserve. As [Sloam](#) notes, we need to amplify young people's voices through a real, inclusive and purposeful committed engagement.

As the UK moves towards a lower voting age, young people want and need early grounding in political understanding. To ensure that voter reform is meaningful we need more specialist teachers of Citizenship and a whole-school approach to preparing young people as voters.