



Young Adults and Politics Today: disengaged and disaffected or engaged and enraged? The latest findings from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS)

Key findings

- 80% of young adults report very low levels of trust in politicians, but this does not mean that they are not interested in politics nor that they think that voting is unimportant.
- Voting remains the most frequently reported political activity, and there is potential to increase turnout in the 2015 general election: 50% of young adults reported that they are ‘very likely’ to vote in May and a further 25% said that they are ‘fairly likely’ to do so.
- Many young adults are using social media for political discussions, but only a small proportion are involved in non-institutional forms of political engagement such as boycotts or starting campaigns.
- Some young adults are more likely to vote and to be politically engaged than others: *intra*-generational differences in political engagement can be just as important as *inter*-generational differences.
- The engagement gap in political interest and engagement is already apparent at a young age and tends to increase as young people progress through the education system.
- Young people get more interested in politics and in voting as they progress through adolescence and into early adulthood, particularly between ages 16 and 20. This suggests a crucial role for strengthening citizenship education in post-16 education and training settings.
- Can citizenship education help boost youth political engagement? Yes, education for citizenship in schools (inside and outside the classroom) can increase positive attitudes towards voting and other political activities. However, the challenges must not be underestimated and other social groups (families, NGOs, political parties) also have a role to play.

Policy recommendations

- Strengthen citizenship education in schools, and ensure that it is continued in post-16 education and training settings.
- Continue to support opportunities for learning about citizenship through ‘real life’ practice and ‘active citizenship’, including through school councils.

Young adults and politics in Britain today

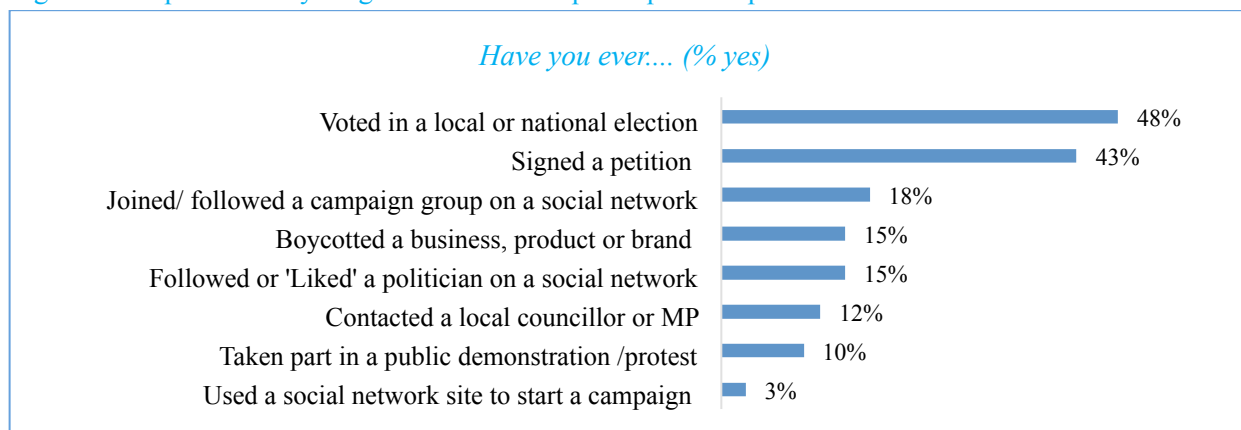
In the run up to the 2015 general election the issue of youth voting has once again been the subject of much media and political debate. This debate has been fuelled by recent concerns about the impact of electoral registration changes, but also by the apparent long-term decline in electoral turnout among younger voters. Just 44% of young adults voted in the 2010 general election, whereas among the over 65s, turnout was 76%.

Our new surveys with young adults indicate that the low turnout among young adults is not inevitable. Instead, we found that there is great potential to increase youth political engagement. For example, 50% of young Britons told us that they are ‘very likely’ to vote in the 2015 general election, and a further 25% said that they are ‘fairly likely’ to do so.

The ballot box still matters to young adults

While voting intentions do not always translate into turnout on election day, voting still remains the most common way that young adults engage with the political system. More young adults report having voted than having participated in any other type of political action (see Figure 1). Other ways of taking part are emerging, but other than signing petitions, only a small minority of young adults are engaging with politicians, taking part in protests, or starting campaigns.

Figure 1: Proportions of young adults that have participated in political activities



Source: CELS cross-sectional survey 2014, age 22-29 (n = 2025)

Many young adults seem to agree that voting is important: almost 50% told us that ‘it is every adult’s duty to vote in elections’ and the importance of voting came up again and again in our in-depth interviews. For example, this young British Pakistani woman told us:

I think a vote is very important. Lots of people think ‘oh it doesn’t really matter who you vote for, they’re all the same’, but in reality I think it’s better to have voted than not to vote. Even if they’re all the same, at least you’ve still put your input in in some way or another... I mean, I’m not saying one vote changes anything but that one vote does contribute to many others, so it does make a difference.

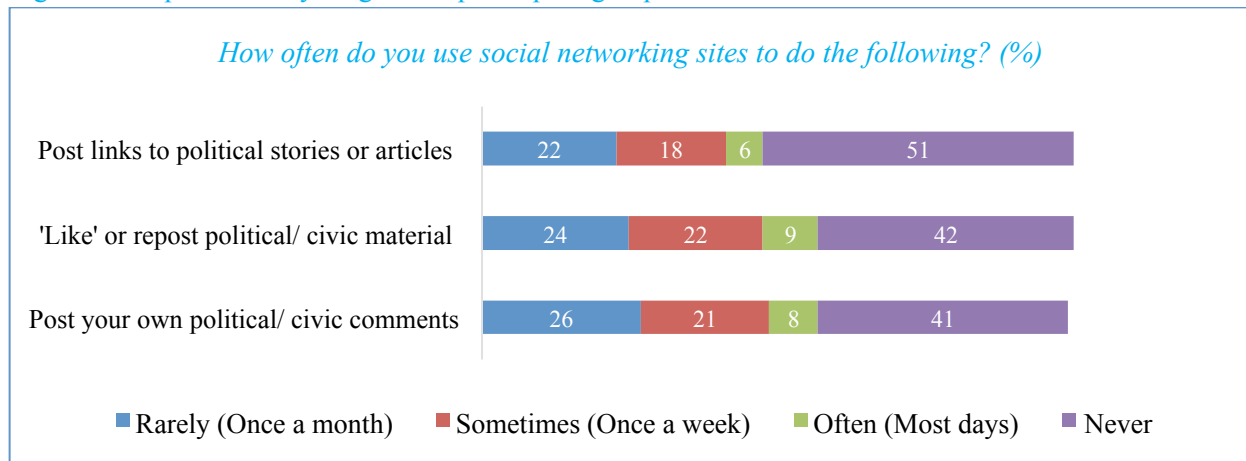
These views were apparent even with among young adults who had not yet voted, or who were disaffected by the current political system. As one young woman explained to us:

Just because I’m apathetic doesn’t mean that other people are... And, well, I still think [voting is] important. I think it’s important to have your input because otherwise I don’t think you should complain about the government if you haven’t had an input through your own vote.

Distrustful but not necessarily disinterested

The low levels of political trust among young adults are well documented and re-iterated in our surveys: over 80% of respondents told us that they have little or no trust in politicians. But almost as many young adults report being interested in politics as those who report being disengaged (33% versus 35%), and many are engaging in political discussions (online and offline). Almost 90% of this age-group are members of a social networking site, and over half of this group use social media to engage with political or civic material (either by liking, re-posting, or commenting on political/ civic material) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Proportions of young adults participating in political discussions online



Source: CELS cross-sectional survey 2014, age 22-29 (n = 2025)

What issues are young adults interested in?

When asked ‘*what is the single most important issue facing the country at the present time?*’ the most common responses from the young adults in CELS were: immigration (18.3%), unemployment (18.1%), and the state of the economy (11.8%). Housing also seems to be a widespread concern for young adults: almost 80% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘*the Government should make landlords do the repairs and charge fair rents.*’ Older adults are similarly concerned with immigration and economic issues, but only 3.5% cited unemployment as the most important issue (see BES 2014).

The young adults who are concerned about unemployment were more likely to have low qualifications. This was echoed in our in-depth interviews with disadvantaged youths, who wanted young people to be given more opportunities to acquire practical skills, better qualifications, and routes into work. This group also wanted safer communities, more activities for children and young people, and services and centres that could bring communities together.

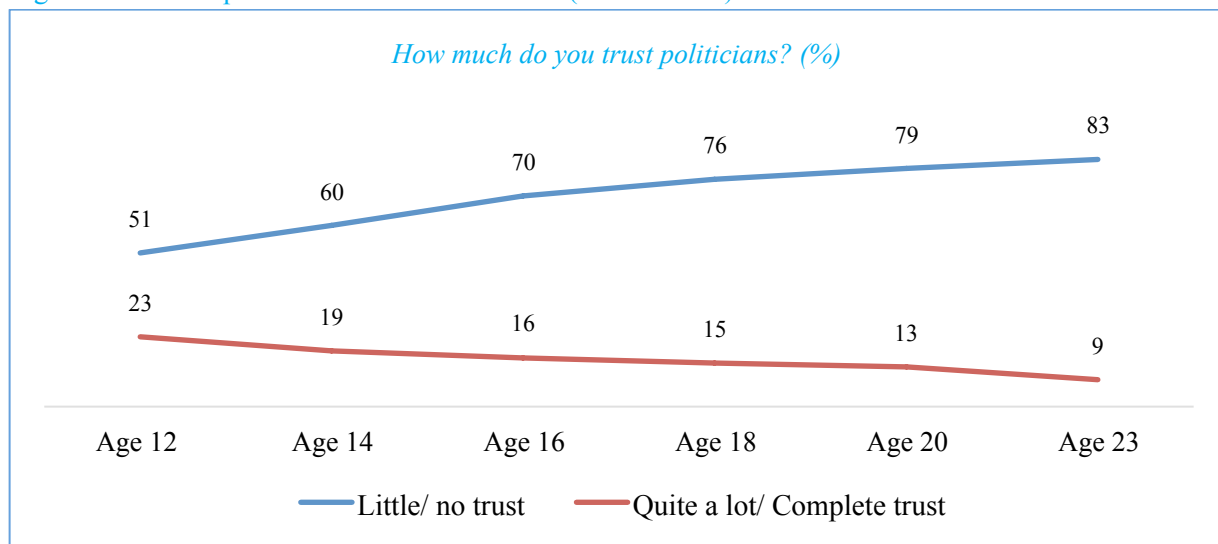
As this group often had low levels of interest or faith in the political system, improvements at the local level could help to rebuild trust. As one young man put it:

And if I do see even the slightest of change, then I would consider voting, because then I know there's somebody actually legitimately trying to help people around my area, like my people that I grew up with. I don't want to see nobody suffer, I want to see everybody working, I don't want to see no-one going to prison.

Growing up political today

It is not only disadvantaged young adults who have lost trust in the political system. Trust in politicians has declined markedly over the course of the CELS surveys (see Figure 3).

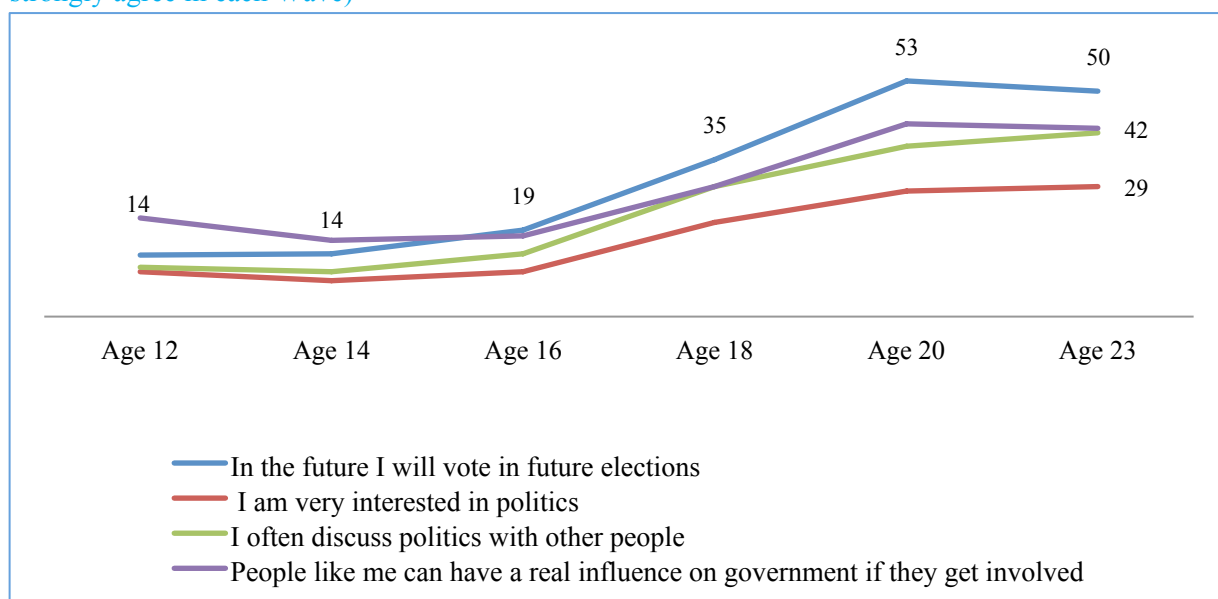
Figure 3: Trust in politicians - trends over time (2003 – 2014)



Source: CELS Waves 1-6 (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2014)

Yet this increased distrust has not necessarily undermined youth political interest or voting intentions. CELS data also shows that as young people move towards adulthood, they get more interested in politics, more likely to say that they will vote in general elections, and more confident in their ability to influence political institutions (see Figure 4). In other words, low levels of political trust do not necessarily mean young adults are disinterested or disaffected.

Figure 4: Youth attitudes towards voting and politics from adolescence to early adulthood (% agree/ strongly agree in each Wave)



Source: CELS Waves 1-6 (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2014)

Intra-generational as well as inter-generational differences

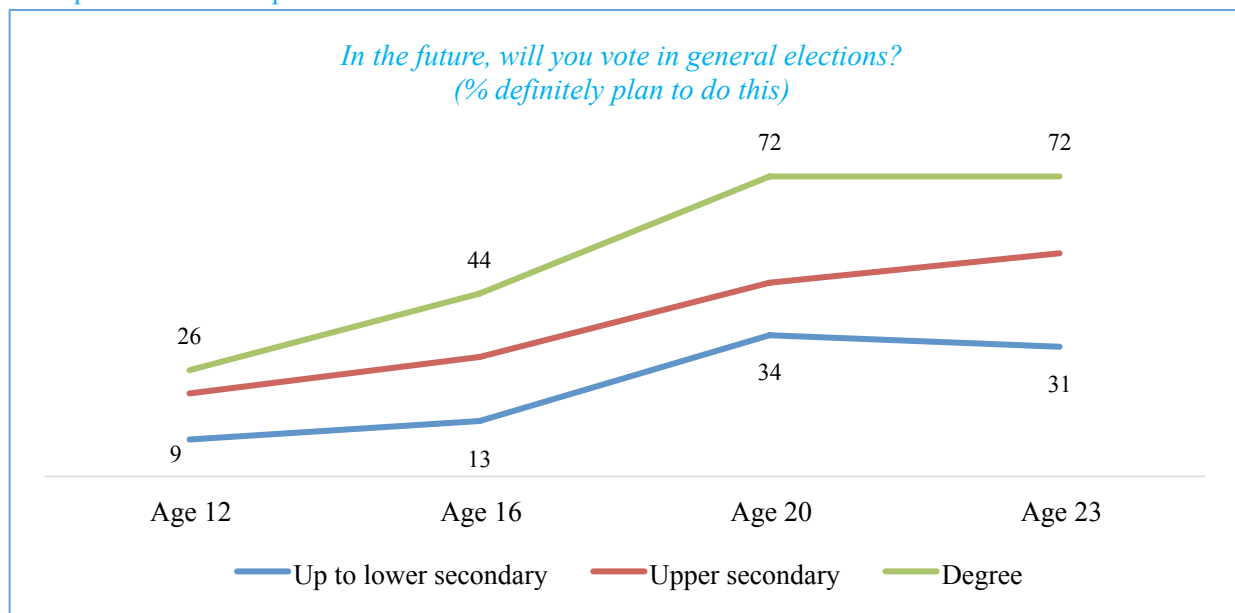
We often focus on the differences between older and younger voters, but this should not be the only concern: there are also important differences *between* young adults. For example, almost 60% of young men told us they were very likely to vote in the next general election, whereas only 46% of young women reported likewise.

Similar patterns are apparent when we look at the responses of university graduates and young adults with higher levels of cultural capital. For example, young adults are more likely to vote if they have degrees than if they leave at school at 16, or even if they obtain qualifications at upper secondary level (or equivalents).

The engagement gap starts early and gets bigger during adolescence

CELS allows us to look at the emerging political attitudes of these groups, and to see that the differential engagement patterns they exhibit as adults are already apparent at a much younger age. Furthermore, the engagement gap tends to increase rather than decrease as these groups make their way through adolescence and their educational careers (see Figure 5).

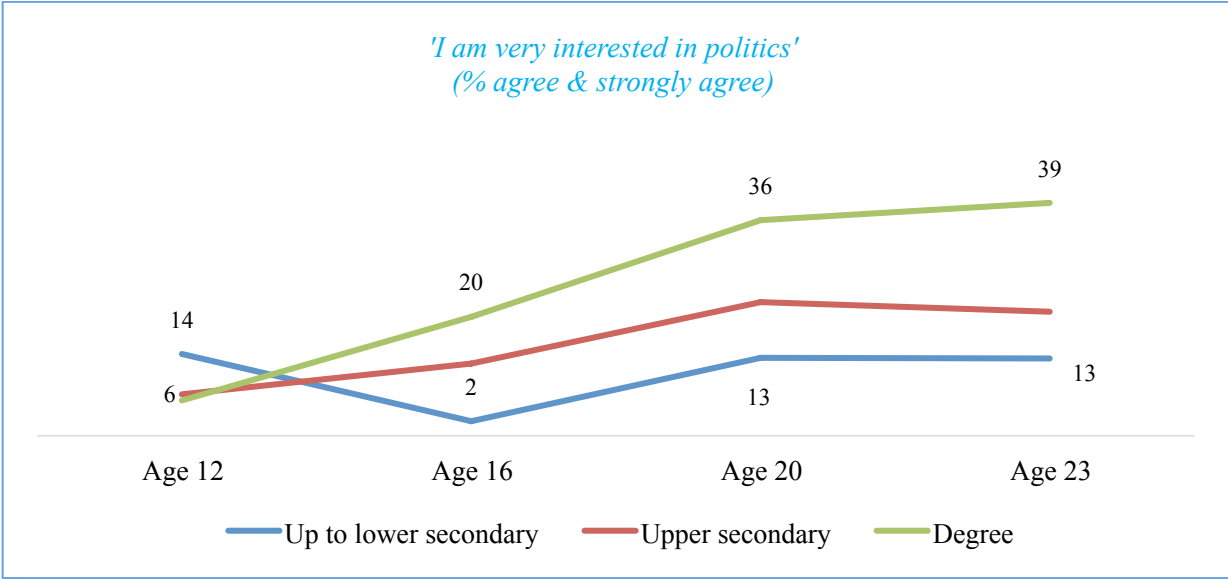
Figure 5: Voting in general elections - comparing the evolution of attitudes among young people who end up with different qualification levels



Source: CELS Waves 1, 3, 5, 6 (2003, 2007, 2011, 2014)

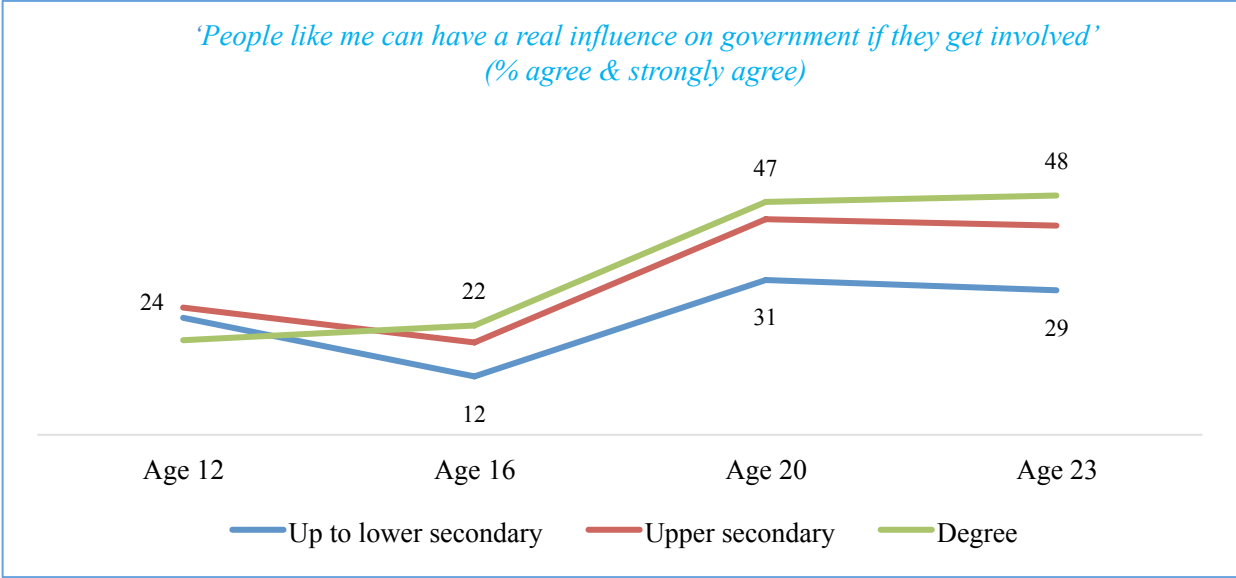
Similar gaps are apparent in the evolution of youth political interest and political efficacy (see Figures 6 and 7). In these cases, however, young adults who end up getting a degree tend to have lower levels of interest and efficacy at age 12, and the gap only begins to emerge as they progress through secondary school education. By contrast, students who end up leaving school at 16 show substantial falls in political interest and efficacy between the ages of 12 and 16. Their interest and efficacy rebound by the time they are 20, but their interest levels remain markedly lower than their peers who have continued with their formal education.

Figure 6: Political interest - comparing the evolution of attitudes among young people who end up with different qualification levels



Source: CELS Waves 1, 3, 5, 6 (2003, 2007, 2011, 2014)

Figure 7: Political efficacy - comparing the evolution of attitudes among young people who end up with different qualification levels



Source: CELS Waves 1, 3, 5, 6 (2003, 2007, 2011, 2014)

Although there is a clear ‘engagement gap’, it is also clear that all young adults get more interested in politics and in voting as they progress through adolescence (see Figures 4-7). This upward trend is particularly marked between the ages of 16 and 20. This suggests that it is worthwhile continuing and strengthening citizenship education in post-16 education and training settings. As it currently stands, there is no statutory entitlement to citizenship education in 16 to 19 education (i.e. upper secondary education).

What role can *Citizenship* education play?

One of the most common policy solutions to these challenges is provide young adults with more education about citizenship while at school, whether it be through a formal curriculum intervention and/or through community service, school councils, and other practice-based learning opportunities.

But does citizenship education work? The CELS data shows us that it does. Students who report receiving a lot of education about citizenship at school are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards civic and political participation, and to feel that they can effect change in their communities and in the political sphere (i.e. to have higher levels of political efficacy). These benefits can be seen even after they have left school and become young adults (see Keating et al, 2010; Whiteley, 2014).

Students are, in turn, more likely to report that they have received lots of citizenship education if their school provides discrete *Citizenship* classes of 45 minutes or more per week, if teachers have a hands-on role in planning their lessons, and if their learning is formally assessed (e.g. through a GCSE examination) and provided regularly throughout their school experiences.

And it is not just the *formal* curriculum that can make a difference. The CELS data also shows that when schools provide opportunities to put citizenship learning into practice, this can have a lasting impact on youth political engagement. In a recent LLAKES research paper, we looked at the role of extra-curricular activities that could facilitate political learning, namely school councils, mock elections, and debating teams. We found that these activities have a lasting and positive impact on young adults, and that students who participated in these activities while at school are more likely to vote and to engage in other types of political activities (such as signing a petition or contacting an MP or local councillor). These positive benefits were apparent even after the participants had left school and even after we controlled for the impact of other influences (such as latent political interest and family background influences). In other words, active learning opportunities such as school councils can help to engage even those who are not very interested in politics or participation (see Keating and Janmaat paper, 2015).

Curriculum and contextual challenges

But while education plays an important role in promoting civic engagement, the challenges of providing effective citizenship education should not be overlooked. CELS has also showed us that the efficacy of teaching and learning can be undermined by changing policy agendas, uneven policy implementation, and a lack of support for teachers who are delivering this subject (see Keating and Kerr, 2013).

Furthermore, the task of preparing younger generations for citizenship should not be left to schools alone. Families, communities, political parties, and civil society organisations also have a role to play, and we need to focus more on how they can do so rather than assuming that tinkering with the school curriculum will close the gap between political institutions and their citizens.

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Sources

This analysis draws on a range of data including: (a) the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS), a long-running cohort study that has surveyed young people in England from age 12 (in 2003) to age 23 (in 2014). This cohort has been surveyed six times, and the latest data was collected from July-Jan. 2014. (b) A cross-national and cross-sectional survey that was conducted in England, Scotland and Wales among 2025 young adults aged 22 – 29. This survey was conducted online in June-July 2014 by TNS-BMRB. (c) 100 in-depth interviews that were conducted with young adults aged 18-26 across England. CELS was originally commissioned by DfES (now DfE) and conducted by NFER between 2001 and 2012. Since 2013, CELS has been managed by LLAKES, and has overseen the collection of this data with the generous support of the ESRC.

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