Electoral Reform Society – written evidence (CCE0136)

The Electoral Reform Society is an independent campaigning organisation working to champion the rights of voters and build a better democracy in Britain. Securing a fairer franchise and deepening public involvement in politics are two of the Society’s key aims which are particularly relevant to this inquiry and which have informed this submission.

- Political engagement is central to citizenship but growing generational gaps in turnout create a problem for sustaining a healthy democratic and civic life.

- The Society strongly supports extending the franchise to 16-and 17-year olds. This long overdue reform has benefits for registration as well as engagement.

- Improving electoral registration by lowering the barriers and making registration part of everyday life is a simple but effective way of improving political engagement.

- ERS has a longstanding commitment to youth engagement. We report on the findings of our roundtable on the state of citizenship education and our democratic schools initiative.

What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

1. For a number of years declining turnout and declining rates of party membership and other forms of political activity have been a cause to doubt the health of democratic life in the UK. Though membership of charitable and special interest groups has increased and engagement in other aspects of civic and associational life have remained buoyant, political engagement has waned. We believe that political engagement is central to citizenship and civic engagement and the latter cannot be achieved without the former.

2. Being an active citizen is not just about voting – but it is important. Poor political engagement is particularly evidenced in the persistently low levels of turnout amongst younger age groups. Whilst the last general election saw a turn up in voting amongst younger cohorts, the turnout gap between the youngest and oldest voters has been growing. The difference in turnout (of the eligible electorate) between 21- to 35-years-olds and 66- to 80-year-olds, grew to 28 percentage points at the 2015 general election. In 1992 it was less than 10. Differences in turnout between generations are becoming more marked and there were clear turnout generational gaps in both the Scottish and EU referendums despite high overall turnout. A generational gap in turnout has the potential to imbed generational inequality in the future.

3. The relationship between the state and the citizen is evolving. Power is shifting, and citizens will increasingly take responsibility for shaping more of the decisions that affect their lives. Technological developments have resulted in an increasingly informed but much less trusting public and enabled the spread of ‘fake news’. In these circumstances the need for a more engaged citizenry increases. Ensuring people (especially younger people) are informed, engaged and able to navigate the increasingly complex political world is therefore essential to creating a healthy democracy.
4. Political disengagement is not a terminal problem. Dissatisfaction with politics does not reflect a lack of faith in democracy or representative politics. There is great opportunity to create a democracy that engages and supports citizens. Ensuring that all citizens’ votes count at the ballot box is a principal means of improving democracy. Engaging younger citizens in and embedding participatory practice early is another way of helping reverse the growing turnout gap and improving electoral registration and the mechanics of voting can also help engagement.

**Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?**

**Votes at 16**

5. The Electoral Reform Society strongly supports enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds for all elections and referendums. We see lowering the franchise as vital to nurturing more active citizens for the future health of our democracy.

6. The next generation of voters are the first to have received citizenship education, yet are being denied their full rights as citizens. This is the first generation to have ever needed to study our democracy, our electoral system and the importance of voting. Lowering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice. Research shows that voting habits entrench - those that vote when first able to do so go on to vote regularly, whilst non-voting can also become habitual. If young people are registered early and get into the habit of voting, we will see lasting improvements in turnout.

7. There is a constitutional precedent for lowering the franchise to 16- and 17-year olds. In June 2015, Holyrood voted unanimously to give 16- and 17-year olds the vote in Scottish Parliamentary and local elections. Similar measures are being considered in Wales.

**Better registration and engagement**

8. Younger citizens (18- to 24-year-olds) are much less likely to be registered than older voters. Owner occupiers are more likely to be registered than renters, and social renters are more likely to be registered than private renters. Young people are more likely than the general population to be resident in either temporary or short-term lets, making up a greater proportion of the private rental market than the general population. Reaching young people when they receive their National Insurance number and whilst they are likely to be still living with their parents could massively improve registration rates for this age group.

9. Over 89% of 16- and 17-year-olds registered for the Scottish independence referendum. Lowering the voting age to 16 will improve registration rates and engage younger voters, developing better political relationships that will be carried through to later life.
10. It is a myth that 16- and 17-year-olds are insufficiently interested in politics to deserve the vote. Evidence from the Scottish independence referendum substantiated by research from Austria and Norway, showed — aided by the encouragement of families and schools — 16- and 17-year-olds have higher rates of turnout than 18- to 34-year-olds.

11. Research from the Scottish independence referendum shows 16-and 17-year-olds accessed more information from a wider variety of sources than any other age-group during the referendum campaign; discussing political issues in schools greatly increased their confidence in their political understanding and, in addition, far more 16- and 17-year-olds polled after than before the independence referendum campaign felt closer to a political party: these young people are the party activists of the future.

12. We do not support the notion that improving turnout among young people who already have the vote is a prerequisite for considering votes for 16- and 17-year-olds. Increased turnout in younger age groups in the 2017 general election is a positive development but extending the franchise and improving turnout are goals that should be pursued together.

A constitutional precedent

13. The enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland was such a success that the Scottish Parliament has introduced Votes at 16 for Scottish Parliament and Scottish local elections. This legislation was supported by many people who had opposed Votes at 16 before the independence referendum, including Leader of the Scottish Conservatives Ruth Davidson.

14. Now 16- and 17-year-olds in Scotland can vote, it is unacceptable that their peers elsewhere in the United Kingdom cannot. Something as basic as the franchise itself should not be another wedge driven between the nations of the Union.

Voter registration

15. Electoral administration should work first and foremost for the voter. With rapidly declining citizen participation in elections we need to look afresh at how elections are run. There are a number of improvements to registering and voting that could help make the process easier and more engaging for citizens.

16. The introduction of individual electoral registration makes it now possible to integrate registration into other day-to-day transactions with the government. To increase registration in the UK, the government should consider providing registration forms at government offices and Post Offices, and electors should be reminded to register to vote in official transactions such as when applying for a passport, driver’s licence, social security and registering for council tax. Other groups such as landlords can play a role with at-risk groups such as private renters.

17. We also recommend introducing Election Day Registration which would allow voters to turn up at the polling station, register and vote all in one go. Groups with lower registration rates see the largest gains through Election Day Registration, especially among those who have recently moved address. In addition, we recommend allowing voters to
cast their vote at any polling station in their constituency.

18. We need to make registration easier and more in line with everyday practices instead of introducing new barriers such as steeper identity requirements.

**Missing Voices**

19. This summer, ERS Cymru launched a project called ‘Missing Voices’ consulting Welsh citizens on voting and how they feel about politics. It is examining the recent increase in political engagement and asking how it can be sustained. While the project aims to consult as many people as possible in Wales, it has a particular focus on seeking views from people who do not vote (or vote sporadically) and hearing their stories. ERS Cymru is collaborating with partners who provide services to groups who tend to be overrepresented among non-voters.

20. The project has over 20 partners at present including the Welsh Government, National Assembly for Wales, the Muslim Council for Wales and national charities such as Llamau and Chwarae Teg. The project is using a variety of methods, such as online surveys, online group chats and focus groups. The findings of the project will be reported in the autumn and we are happy to provide the Committee with further details of these findings.

What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

21. The Society is firmly of the view that high-quality citizenship education is important – both as a means of deepening public involvement in our democracy and as a way of equipping tomorrow’s voters with the knowledge and skills needed to play a full role in civic life. In January of this year the Electoral Reform Society hosted a roundtable with organisations involved in citizenship education from across Great Britain, including the Association for Citizenship Teaching, ClearView Research, Bite the Ballot, the Political Studies Association, DemSoc, the British Youth Council, the Modern Studies Association, the Scottish Government, University College London, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the Citizenship Foundation, National Citizen Service and Beijing Normal University. In our responses below we outline some of the issues raised at that roundtable.

**State of play in England, Scotland and Wales**

22. There are national differences in citizenship curriculum frameworks. Citizenship education in Wales is not a stand-alone subject. It is delivered through Personal and Social Education, Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship and the Welsh Baccalaureate. School councils are compulsory in Wales – a measure supported by the Society.

23. Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence has an aim to develop ‘responsible citizenship’ with a focus on educating for citizenship, not citizenship education. Space is given in Scottish classrooms to discuss political issues – and this has been key to future participation. The
independence referendum was a tipping point for political literacy. Votes at 16 has made a big impact on interest in having vibrant, informed discussions in Scotland’s schools.

24. It is at present difficult to assess citizenship education in England. Ofsted reporting on citizenship (and other subjects) has stopped. QCA used to survey schools but it closed in 2010. The Department for Education longitudinal study on citizenship has ended.

25. Roundtable attendees viewed the Government’s focus on National Citizen Service as positive.

Citizenship education in practice

26. Practical issues raised in our roundtable regarding the teaching of citizenship education included the time and status given to citizenship education in schools and the spread of qualified citizenship teachers and quality of teaching.

27. Roundtable participants felt that citizenship education should be issue-led; that young people need to see reasons why active citizenship works. Getting people practised at doing democracy is important and needs to start as young as possible. It was also felt that there is an opportunity to connect young people to citizenship through devolution and new institutions. Brexit and the introduction of new laws present another opportunity to engage young people with current affairs they find interesting. Skilling young people to look at news sources more critically is particularly important in the ‘post-truth’ context.

Democratic Schools Initiative

28. A further recent undertaking of the Society’s is the ‘Democratic Schools Initiative’ led by ERS Scotland. Students can get the best experience of democratic participation by seeing it affect one of the most important parts of their lives: their school day. Across the world there are hundreds of examples of democratically run schools, where students make collective decisions about the way that their classes, their curriculum and their school buildings are run. The ‘democratic school’ is about empowering students to take an active stake in their schools, fostering a culture of participation and trust in the life of the school, and student leadership. It is informal learning, so it does not need to be branded as ‘doing politics’. ERS Scotland will be developing this stream of work over the next year and would be happy to provide further details to the Committee.

Citizenship education – inside and out with the classroom


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