Nottingham Civic Exchange and Professor Matt Henn – written evidence (CCE0188)

Executive summary

- Our submission answers questions 4, 5 and 6 set out by the commission. Our expertise in researching younger people’s political and civic activity leads us to make a set of clear recommendations at the end of this document which we hope the commission will take forward.
- This submission sets out key issues affecting younger people and formal political engagement and makes a strong case for lowering the age to vote to 16.
- We also make the case that the inquiry should avoid supporting compulsory voting aimed at younger people due to a set of potentially damaging consequences.
- We also ask the inquiry to recommend introducing stronger local and project based KS2 citizenship and political education and to fundamentally re-develop citizenship provision.
- Finally, whilst we can see the value of programmes such as NCS, we make a plea for the inquiry to recommend strengthening long term, embedded and community based approaches to support younger people to develop stronger ties within communities and civic and political systems.

About the authors

1. **Nottingham Civic Exchange** is Nottingham Trent University’s pioneering civic think tank. With a primary focus on issues relating to the city and the region, Nottingham Civic Exchange will enable discovery by creating a space where co-produced approaches are developed to tackle entrenched social issues. Nottingham Civic Exchange supports the role of NTU as an anchor institution in the city and the region. Nottingham Trent University holds engagement with communities, public institutions, civic life, business and residents at the core of its mission. You can find out more about our work at [www.ntu.ac.uk/nce](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/nce).

2. **Professor Matt Henn** has nearly 20 years’ experience of researching youth and democratic engagement, earning an international reputation for his work in the field. He has led successful projects funded by the ESRC. His work has resulted in numerous high profile publications, together with significant interest from the political parties and citizenship agencies, as well as from the national, local and international media.

3. Professor Henn would be delighted to submit further evidence and give oral evidence if so called.

Submission

Voting and participation of younger people (Q. 4.)

4. Through a range of largescale research projects measuring and codifying young people’s views, we believe there are a number of crucial changes required to encourage voting levels and engagement. Research led by Professor Henn has sought to better understand the characteristics and issues for younger voters and non-voters in the UK.

5. Our submission focuses on encouraging political activity with younger people. Our argument is that young people in Britain are neither anti-democratic nor innately anti-election. This is evidenced by the 75 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds who voted at the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, while it is estimated that 64 per cent of registered voters aged 18 to 24 cast a ballot at the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership. Furthermore, at the 2017
General Election there was a large upsurge in the youth voter turnout rate to 64 per cent; this has been attributed by some to the unusual nature of the contest, not least because of the attention given to youth issues by several of the main political parties, but also to the high profile direct form of electoral campaigning from the Labour Party. These particular cases suggest that young citizens will take part in formal election-oriented (institutionalised) politics where such contests have critical meaning and value-potential for them.

6. It remains to be seen whether or not young people’s willingness to vote in these recent identity-oriented Referenda and at the 2017 General Election reflect the beginnings of a genuinely new and positive trajectory in youth political engagement, or a temporary reversal in an otherwise ongoing trend of disengagement.

7. Certainly, UK national politicians have observed this relative youth electoral abstention with ongoing concern. Given that young people are significantly less likely to vote than their older contemporaries, it is therefore crucial that young people do not develop a natural pre-disposition towards electoral abstention, otherwise the threat to democracy is that in time the more voting-oriented older generations will be replaced by younger election-abstainer generations.

Changes to voting processes be considered based on research

8. Using quantitative data from a large representative national survey of 1,025 young people aged 18, recent research conducted at NTU has considered young people’s responses to a range of electoral administrative reforms, including whether they would be more likely or less likely to vote in the future if they were able to vote:

- in a public place such as a supermarket;
- over more than one day (including weekends);
- by phone (including by text message or smart phone App);
- via the Internet or digital television;
- or if polling stations were open for 24 hours.

9. From this study and based on nearly two decades of researching in this area, Henn’s views are that the introduction of these methods would have a positive impact in terms of stimulating increased electoral participation. In particular, voting via the Internet or digital TV would be especially effective in terms of encouraging them to vote in future general elections, followed by voting over more than one day (including weekends) and then voting by phone (including by text message or by a smart phone app)

10. Whilst it is recognised that such changes would not bring uniform increases, there exists a sizeable minority of a key sub-group of intending abstainers that might be persuaded into voting in the future if initiatives were enacted. 45% said they may vote in the next election if they could use the Internet or by digital TV and 32% by phone. These findings suggest that introducing increased flexibility into the electoral provisions might encourage some to reconsider their stated intention to abstain from participating. Consequently, these electoral administration options should be further investigated in terms of their potential impact on political engagement in general and voting in particular, and the issues and practicalities associated with implementation.
Compulsory voting - a risk not worth taking?

11. One method by which government might intervene to reduce young people’s disengagement from electoral politics is to introduce a system of compulsory voting for young people. Whilst the case has been made by numerous policy actors and academics we do not believe this intervention would be beneficial to the longer term aim of supporting increased engagement in political and civil activity. Our main concern with compulsory voting is the risk of increasing societal divisions and the masking affect created by compulsion to deal with the deeper issue of disconnection between younger people and the political system.

12. We recognise the potentially positive outcomes to follow from the introduction of compulsory voting for young people. For instance, drawing on the idea that voting (and indeed non-voting) may be habit-forming, a recent IPPR study has concluded that such a one-off compulsory system would “kick-start a life-long habit of voting” (Birch, Lodge and Gottfried 2013, 21). Secondly, evidence suggests that compulsory voting may reduce generational disparities in electoral participation rates; in particular, it helps to ensure that socio-economically disadvantaged groups are neither under-represented at the ballot booth nor under-estimated in the minds of politicians and policy-makers. In essence, by helping to eliminate the generational electoral divide, it is argued that this would have the effect of reducing generational social and economic policy inequalities. This might contribute to the creation of a virtuous circle, in that young people begin to recognise the latent power of their vote and of their influence over the political class – and this might help to shape an enhanced positive predisposition to electoral participation. However, this is a contested position, and Lever (2008) has recently concluded that in Australia – where compulsory voting is extremely popular and long established – there exists little evidence that high levels of electoral turnout are correlated with enhanced responsiveness of political parties to socio-economically marginalised groups.

13. A major drawback of such a compulsory voting scheme for young people is that it singles them out as ‘different’ from the rest of the adult population, helping to reinforce the stereotype of this current youth generation as distinctly apathetic. The implication being that it is the behaviour of young people that needs changing, rather than a reform of the political process and of democratic institutions which should become more accessible and meaningful. We are also concerned by the negative implications for the health of our democratic system; by forcing them to vote, this may entrench attitudes of disdain for the parties. However, offering the option to vote for ‘None of the above’ on the ballot paper may help mitigate against this latter point.

14. A key question to address is whether or not compulsory voting would resolve the disconnect between young citizens and democratic institutions and processes and result in high quality political engagement? Our response is largely shaped by evidence from Henn’s ESRC research project mentioned above. Firstly, the data suggest that more young people would vote if compelled to do so in electoral law. However, these data also reveal that those already demonstrating low levels of political engagement - previous non-voters as well as likely future abstainers - would be particularly resistant to compulsory voting. Indeed, such compulsion may actually serve to reinforce a deepening resentment, rather than to engage these particular young people in a positive manner. Compulsory voting for first-contact elections might result in a quantitative increase in the numbers of young voters, but the evidence presented here suggests that it would not necessarily improve the quality of broader political
engagement. Consequently, we don’t believe that the case for compulsory voting for young people has been made.

**Lowering the voting age to 16**

15. Evidence suggests that young people are open-minded about electoral politics and do not have a hardened disaffection; they are more likely than not to express faith in voting and the democratic process although not with politicians or political parties. Research indicates that there is therefore a perception problem. It may be that more young people might opt to engage in elections if they can be convinced that as an age cohort they themselves and their issue priorities are treated seriously by politicians. Reducing the voting age to 16 might assist this process by persuading young people that they are valued by the political class. In doing so, it would contribute to the conversion of their already-existing democratic commitment into actual democratic participation.

16. There is no consensus on whether extending the vote to 16 year olds should be considered a basic right. Detractors question both the maturity of adolescents aged 16 and 17 who have not yet had the opportunity to develop advanced autonomous knowledge and understanding of politics (Chan and Clayton 2006), and also their lack of motivation which it is argued might reduce overall percentage rates of electoral participation (Electoral Commission 2004). Advocates argue that extending the vote to young people while they are “members of settled communities” - living at home and attending school - might increase their turnout in elections (Berry and Kippin 2014, 7). Furthermore, it follows that if socialised into voting within these contexts, they are more likely to continue to do so in the future as voting becomes habit-forming (Franklin 2004). Finally, supporters argue that enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds would ensure that their concerns are brought to the attention of the political class.

17. As mentioned above, when these younger groups were granted the right to vote at the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, three quarters of them cast a ballot. This suggests that young people are not innately averse to voting on matters that are of critical consequence for them. We believe that providing the vote from 16 would be beneficial for young people and society at large.

**Educations and citizenship (Q. 5.)**

18. Education is in our opinion a critical area to support engagement in civic and political activity. We set out below a series of suggestions to improve and develop this.

19. We don’t believe current provision is working and believe an increase in provision starting at KS2 should be implemented, which focusses on awareness of political processes and structures at a local and national scale. This should be complemented by more practical project based interventions for young people that highlight the value and ease of engaging in civil and political systems that exist around them, and position active citizenship education within the context of local communities.

20. The introduction of statutory citizenship classes in schools in England in 2002 was in large part prompted by successive governments’ anxieties related to these issues. It is claimed this ‘citizenship curriculum’ contributes to the development of democratic knowledge and skills, of building informed young citizens, and of preparing them for participation in democratic life. However, reaction to statutory citizenship education (CE) has been mixed (Citizenship Educational Longitudinal Study, various 2001- 2010). Ofsted, has concluded that the method
of delivery has been left wanting; and perceived as such by young people. Consequently, in 2012, CE was significantly scaled-back and reinvented with a changed curriculum that gave greater emphases to life skills “at the expense of the political” (Kerr 2014, p.46). These changes continue to raise questions about the efficacy of citizenship education in schools as a preparation for young people’s participation in democracy.

21. The active involvement of young people in schools and the wider community provided an opportunity for learning and experiencing active citizenship (Kerr et al 2004: 2-3). Such opportunities depend on student interest, the teaching staff’s involvement in the wider community and the school ethos (Ibid: 5). They also depend on a commitment to experiential learning. The original Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998) report emphasised the importance of active learning for active citizenship (see also Arthur and Davison 2002; Packham 2008; Woodward 2004), an approach that requires opportunities for community involvement and learning through citizenship (Selwyn 2002).

22. In the original AGC recommendations, citizenship education was seen as intimately tied to action in the wider community (AGC 1998). Despite this, later research by the NfER found that:

“Young people’s participation opportunities are currently confined largely to the school context, and comprise opportunities to ‘take part’ in clubs and societies, rather than to effect ‘real change’ by engaging with various decision-making processes in and out of school. Additionally, opportunities in the curriculum are often not connected with those in the whole school, or indeed, with wider contexts and communities beyond school.” (NfER 2006a: 1)

23. If current patterns of political disengagement and disaffection are to be reversed, then citizenship education has a critical role to play in helping to:

- promote enhanced universal political literacy,
- foster a strengthened civic culture, and
- alert young citizens to the potential value that is to be gained from strong, active and regular political participation, including (but not limited to) voting.

24. To achieve these outcomes, citizenship education should be extended and deepened so that schools should become what Mycock and Tonge call “sites of democracy”. In particular:

- Citizenship education should remain a statutory element of the national curriculum;
- statutory Citizenship education should be extended to all primary schools to help younger students’ develop their knowledge and understanding of democratic institutions and processes and promote the value to be gained by participating in civic and political projects and activities;
- the GCSE Citizenship Studies should be available to all secondary schools across the UK;
- the balance of emphasis of the Citizenship curriculum should be revised so that political literacy is given increased prominence to pre-2014 levels;
- there should be an expansion of the number of trained specialist teachers who take the lead in the design, teaching and assessment of the citizenship curriculum;
- there should be the “formation of a standing all-party Commission on Education for Citizenship to monitor provision in schools and colleges in England (as recommended in
the Crick Report of 1998)” as has been suggested by contributors to the Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission” (Kerr, 2014).

- Schools should work with community partners to embed civic engagement and practical experience into the Citizenship curriculum, a defining feature of good practice identified in the longitudinal evaluations cited above.

25. We think these are fundamental issues that should be supported and taken forward to ensure future generations of young people grow up understanding how to engage with and influence the world around them.

Young People as citizens in their communities (Q. 6)

26. The increased emphasis on citizenship and social action over the past decade has been welcome, but it has been characterised by short-term programme based approaches at the expense of embedded community-based services for young people. The decline in youth services and youth work provision is well documented, despite previous Ofsted reviews acknowledging the important contribution of youth work to citizenship education.

27. Short term programmes have the benefit of securing high rates of participation but, as the National Audit Office found, ‘it remains whether ... effects are enduring’ (NAO 2017). There is an added difficulty that such time limited programmes may do little to position young people’s power and influence within their own communities. One aspiration for citizenship programmes must be to challenge the exclusion of young people from democratic and community power structures.

28. Longer-term and embedded provision for young people is more likely to be community-based, acting as a ‘permanent base’ for children and young people to experience active citizenship.

29. At the Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families (www.ntu.ac.uk/nccypf) we are working with former Children’s Commissioner and current Visiting Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green to develop a ‘whole-community’ approach to addressing attitudes towards children and young people. This programme will seek to embed aspects of active citizenship education (and the promotion of young people’s rights and responsibilities) within the many statutory and voluntary organisations that intersect with their lives. We would be very keen to keep the Committee abreast of developments in this work.

Recommendations

30. As stated in our submission we feel there are a number of crucial steps to take when considering younger peoples formal electoral actions and political and civic engagement. Below we set out a series of recommendations we wish the inquiry will consider and explore in more depth.

31. Flexibility to voting methods and systems are needed to help increase engagement of younger voters and potential voters. Making positive changes to voting administration would see an uptake on voting for younger people with increased attention placed on online or mobile voting options. Between a half and a third of young people identified as abstainers in the political voting system stated they could be persuaded to vote if it was available over the internet, TV or mobile services. This flexibility will also have a knock on affect across the voting population of the UK.
32. Compulsory voting and especially first opportunity compulsory voting should be avoided for future attempts to increase engagement in civil society and voting. Negative impacts and increased stigma associated with forced voting will only reinforce entrenched disdain for political parties who introduce it and reduce effectiveness of this policy intervention for young people.

33. The voting age should be lowered to 16 for all local and central government elections and referenda. We disagree with the assumption that younger people aren’t politically engaged in the UK. Evidence from recent UK experiments with votes for 16 year olds suggests that young people do hold strong views on matters viewed as of critical importance to them. This should point to further pressure on political parties to pivot their policies and engagement to a younger demographic to build on recent increases in younger peoples voting rates.

34. The 2017 election highlighted increased engagement with formal political processes from younger people when policies and parties targeted them which strengthens our previous assertions that younger people are disillusioned with political parties and not the role of politics and civil society to improve the world around them. All political parties should take note of this and ensure policies and engagement is designed to better reflect the views of all citizens.

35. Citizenship Education should be developed for Primary School students with a focus on developing knowledge of political institutions at a local and national level with a curriculum that also stresses participation in civic and political projects.

36. Department of Education should set out plans to expand the recruitment of specialist citizenship educators to design, teach and assess curriculum which is integral to rather than a bolt on to students educational experience.

37. Explore the value of ‘whole community’ approaches and assert the importance of long term community based civic opportunities for younger people to help strengthen their engagement and awareness of civil society and politics.

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