

Training Citizens

Civic Education and Youth Apathy

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Executive Summary

Youth apathy is a long-term problem in the UK that shows no indication of improvement.¹

- Turnout has remained consistently under 50% amongst this group for decades.
- Young people, especially socially deprived ones, show the lowest levels of political knowledge or engagement of any age group in the UK.
- Young people consistently show a lack of investment in UK politics, seeing it as overly complex and impenetrable.
- Young people show persistently decreasing faith in and commitment to democracy as a political system.

Civic education can counteract this problem. It has proven success in improving young people's political knowledge and engagement, manifested in higher turnout rates. This also reduces social inequality by ensuring all young people, not only those from well-educated backgrounds, become politically engaged. That success does, however, require strong government support through mandatory, standardised courses and testing. Civic education can also be made more effective by including experiential learning (learning by doing). Civic service, the main alternative, is not comparatively practical or cost-efficient and lacks civic education's clear evidence of success.

The Government should:

- 1) **Make the GCSE in Citizenship Studies mandatory for all students:** Citizenship Studies GCSE has already been successful at improving youth political engagement, but is not provided in most schools. Examples from both the USA and the UK clearly show mandatory subject requirements to be the only way to guarantee provision.
- 2) **Alter the Citizenship Studies GCSE curriculum to integrate more experiential learning:** Experiential learning gives students direct experience of the democratic process, giving them confidence in their own ability to participate. Experiential learning initiatives have been highly successful at improving youth participation.
- 3) **Launch a new teacher-training programme for civic education specialisation:** The above changes will require many specialist teachers to implement them. A teacher-training programme consisting of new bursaries and an initiative in which existing specialists train non-specialist teachers to deliver the subject would rectify this.
- 4) **Increase Digital Services Tax to 2.5%:** The Digital Services Tax is a tax on the revenue of large multinational companies providing specific digital services to UK users, like search engines. This increase will generate sufficient revenue to support the

¹ When this report refers to 'young people', it should be taken to refer to 18 to 24 year-olds unless explicitly stated otherwise.

above recommendations, and is appropriate given the role of social media in weakening public trust in politics in recent years.

Introduction

Youth apathy is a truism of British politics. With youth participation rates consistently low, the conventional wisdom holds that young people, by and large, simply do not vote. As such, while many commented on the low turnout rate at the 2024 General Election, few paid attention to the fact 18 to 24 year-olds turned out at a rate 17 percentage points lower than the national average.²

Research into the problem of youth participation is clear, however, that youth apathy cannot be ignored – a view officially accepted by all the major political parties. Future participation rates are at risk if these young people remain disengaged. Lower turnout weakens government mandates and legitimacy. Most importantly, youth disengagement has undermined young people’s commitment to the democratic process. This problem threatens the core of our political system.

There have generally been two main approaches advocated when approaching this issue: civic education and civic service. Civic education aims to teach young people about the political process through schooling, ensuring they know how participation works and understand their own place and stake in the democratic process. Civic service aims to use voluntary or mandatory service in either community or military work to encourage young people to recognise their stake in political life and therefore participate. These approaches are not exclusive, and the UK Government has experimented with both in the past two decades without making any serious imprint on youth participation rates at large.

This report will focus on civic education’s potential to address youth apathy. Civic education is more practical, effective, and cost-efficient than civic service. It is also far more applicable for the critical period between the ages 11 and 15 in which youth apathy becomes established. While civic service is worth considering as the primary alternative, it lacks the practicality and proven success of civic education in turning out young voters.

The report will proceed as follows. Chapter 1 explores youth apathy in the UK, explaining what the problem is and why it needs to be addressed. Chapter 2 considers civic education as a potential solution, explaining its role and examining the current state of civic education in the UK in comparison with examples from the United States. Chapter 3 looks at civic service as an alternative solution. Finally, chapter 4 sets out recommendations for resolving this problem.

² For turnout, see: Skinner, G. et al, *How Britain voted in the 2024 election*, Ipsos, 2024. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/uk-opinion-polls/how-britain-voted-in-the-2024-election> (accessed: 9/10/2025). For commentary, see: Dunstan, G, *Area with lowest voter turnout in Wales feels forgotten by general election*, BBC, 13 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv2gw12e314o> (accessed: 10/10/2025). Mason, R, *Lowest turnout in UK general election since universal suffrage, report shows*, The Guardian, 2 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/12/lowest-turnout-in-uk-general-election-since-universal-suffrage-report-shows> (accessed: 10/10/2025).

1. The Problem of Youth Apathy

Turnout amongst 18 to 24 year-olds at general elections has remained consistently below 50% for over two decades.³ In 2024, just 37% bothered to vote. By comparison, over-65s have consistently maintained turnout rates over 70%.⁴ Young people are exceptionally disengaged from the political process.⁵ Future participation rates for the general population are at risk, while young people have become less committed to democracy. Youth apathy must be counteracted.

What is youth apathy?

Political apathy refers to a lack of engagement with or participation in politics.

*'People are politically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the democratic process.'*⁶

Young people collectively report the lowest levels of knowledge about politics and are the least likely of any age group to participate in political activities. They are the most politically disengaged group in the UK. This matters because they are the future of the British electorate.⁷

Lower levels of political knowledge are at the core of this problem. Young people are on average 10% less confident in their knowledge of politics than other age groups.⁸ Gordon Brown's Youth Citizenship Commission found that young people's most commonly cited reason for not voting was the complexity of politics.⁹ Less aware of the political process or confident of their ability to grasp it, politics becomes something not worth engaging with:

- 1) Young people are unlikely to become invested in a political system they do not feel able to understand.** Brown's Commission found that 51% of the young people surveyed agreed with the statement 'young people like me have no say in what the

³ While just over 50% of young people did vote in the 2017 General Election, this was a limited exception. Participation rates immediately returned to their earlier trend in 2019.

⁴ For turnout rates from 2005 to 2024, see: *How Britain Voted* series, IPSOS.

⁵ For turnout rates from 2005 to 2024, see: *How Britain Voted* series, IPSOS.

⁶ Dempsey, N and Johnston, N, *Political disengagement in the UK: who is disengaged?* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No. CBP-7501, 14 September 2018), House of Commons Library, 2018, p. 41. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/32186/1/CBP-7501..pdf> (accessed: 11/10/2025).

⁷ Beaunier, J and Veneti, A, 'Social media and political participation among British youth.' *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 8 (1), 2020, p. 42. Available at: https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/33889/3/03%20Beaunier%20Veneti_revised_edit%20proofs.pdf (accessed: 10/10/2025).

⁸ Dempsey and Johnston, *Political disengagement in the UK*, p. 11

⁹ Henn, M and Foard, N, 'Social differentiation in young people's political participation: the impact of social and educational factors on youth political engagement in Britain'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17 (3), 2013, pp. 367-368.

government does' (only 15% disagreed), while 57% believed that elections 'didn't really change anything'. This was the same group that had found politics 'boring' and 'confusing'.¹⁰ Lacking confidence in their own grasp of politics, young people feel less confident in their own ability to influence the political process and are left apathetic.

- 2) **Young people are unlikely to participate in a political system they neither understand nor feel invested in.** Feeling unaware and powerless, young people are alienated from the political process and become apathetic towards it. They manifest these feelings by failing to vote. Low knowledge and investment in politics correlates with low turnout rates at elections, as apathy encourages non-voting.¹¹

The end-result is the same: young people are politically disengaged and do not participate.

Why does youth apathy matter?

When electors do not vote, it becomes unlikely that their interests will be represented. British politicians cater to the 'grey vote' of pensioners who reliably vote in large numbers, but have much fewer incentives to cater to a 'youth vote' which is majority non-voting. Young people are even more unlikely to engage with a political system that seems to disregard their interests.¹²

Low youth turnout today in turn threatens future participation rates. Democratic government relies on popular mandates for legitimacy, but this requires continuously high turnout. The collapse in turnout in 2024 therefore makes it essential that young people be engaged now to ensure that they will vote in future, to avoid a progressive decline in turnout.

Youth apathy, however, poses a still more serious problem. Disengagement from the political process has left young people increasingly disengaged from democracy itself. In 2024, 49% of respondents between the ages of 16 and 21 were dissatisfied with how democracy worked in the UK.¹³ More concerningly, 61% of 18 to 34 year-olds now agree that strongman rule would be a 'good way of governing the country'. This follows a long-term trend amongst young people away from democracy since the 1990s – threatening the very basis of our political system.¹⁴

To counter this growing problem, the Government has claimed that its introducing votes at 16 will increase youth participation. Yet suffrage alone clearly does not secure turnout. Earlier this year, the John Smith Centre polled students set to be enfranchised by the change. Two-thirds

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 371.

¹¹ For data, see: footnote 3.

¹² Stockemer, D and Sundström, A 'Age Inequalities in Political Representation: A Review Article'. *Government and Opposition*, 60 (1), 2025, pp. 275-278.

¹³ *Survey finds that nearly half of young people are unhappy with UK democracy*, Royal Holloway, 2024. Available at: <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/about-us/news/survey-finds-that-nearly-half-of-young-people-are-unhappy-with-uk-democracy/> (accessed: 10/10/2025).

¹⁴ Stanley, L et al, *The Kids Aren't Alright*. ONWARD, 2022, p. 19. Available at: <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/kids-arent-alright-democracy.pdf> (accessed: 10/10/2025).

of respondents said that school had not readied them to partake in elections, while three-quarters of those who said that they were unlikely to vote cited the reason as their not knowing enough about politics.¹⁵

Millions are about to be enfranchised while still lacking confidence in their own ability to participate. Millions more between the ages of 18 and 24 do not vote despite holding the suffrage. Youth apathy urgently needs to be addressed in an effective way – which votes at 16 is not.

¹⁵ *New youth voters feel 'overwhelmingly unprepared' for voting*, University of Glasgow, 2025. Available at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2025/september/headline_1210149_en.html (accessed: 10/10/2025).

2. Civic Education

Civic education offers a solution to the problem of youth apathy. This is the practice of ‘training citizens’: teaching students about the political process and their place in it.¹⁶ As we have seen, youth apathy ultimately comes down to a lack of knowledge about politics. This makes education crucial in countering the problem at its roots and ensuring that young people feel confident in their political understanding – the prerequisite for their becoming invested in politics and participating.

Why civic education?

Youth disengagement in Britain stems in large part from a lack of understanding about the political process. This suggests that were this lack to be redressed, youth participation could be expected to increase.

Janmaat et al’s (2022) study of the relationship between youth apathy and education is essential here because of its use of the uniquely large and long-term BHPS/US database, created from annual interviews with members of over 40,000 households in the UK from 1991 onwards.¹⁷ Whereas at age 11 there was no difference between children of well-educated and less-educated parents in political interest and voting intention, by age 15 the former showed ‘significantly higher levels of engagement’. Adolescence is ‘the crucial period’ in which apathy becomes entrenched.¹⁸

In this period, well-educated parents, likely to have a good knowledge of politics, socialise their children into the political process and encourage their future participation. Less-educated parents, much less likely to have similar levels of political knowledge, are accordingly less likely to socialise their children into the political process. This makes civic education in schools vital to ensure their children nonetheless become politically engaged.¹⁹

Yet the children of less-educated parents are far less likely than their counterparts to attend the private or wealthier schools that provide civic education opportunities. Schools therefore

¹⁶ House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, *The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*, HC 118 (2017-19), 6th Report of Session 2017-19, 2018, chapter 3. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldcitizen/118/11806.htm#_idTextAnchor029 (accessed: 10/10/2025).

¹⁷ Janmaat, J et al, *The Development of Social and Gender Disparities in Political Engagement during Adolescence and Early Adulthood: What Role Does Education Play?* Nuffield Foundation, 2022, p. 16. Available at: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Final-report-The-development-of-social-and-gender-disparities-in-political-engagement-during-adolescence-and-early-adulthood-what-role-does-education-play.pdf> (accessed: 12/10/2025).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

‘amplify social inequality in political engagement’. The children of less-educated parents – by far the larger group of the two – remain apathetic and disengaged.²⁰

By contrast, the minority of young people who do vote are much more likely to be well-educated.²¹ Whereas 77% of 18 to 34 year-olds educated to degree level were estimated to be on the electoral rolls in December 2015, only 57% of the same age group that lacked degree qualifications were in the same position.²² Those reaching higher education are, however, inherently likely to come from a more educated background, so the problem remains rooted in earlier development.²³

Education is the essential determinant of whether students do or do not become apathetic. Better political education, whether through parents or schools, is what prevents youth apathy from becoming entrenched. Civic education, particularly in the adolescence period in which youth apathy is consolidated, therefore brings the promise of engaging young people and securing higher participation from this group.

Civic education in the United Kingdom

Attempts to implement civic education in this country have been largely unsuccessful. Included in the National Curriculum since 2002, most teaching of the subject remains optional, and the Curriculum is vague about what that teaching should actually entail.²⁴

This makes it unsurprising that less than a third of secondary schools in the UK offer any form of weekly civic education provision, while a fifth offer no provision at all.²⁵ Many of those that do regularly provide it do so as part of the wider subject of PSHE – hardly providing serious treatment. With unclear instruction and little active government pressure to teach the subject, ‘very few schools take citizenship education seriously.’²⁶

There are exceptions. Private schools and those with a wealthier intake tend to provide more civic education opportunities. Yet these schools are dominated by young people already likely to become politically engaged due to the high probability they come from a well-educated background. Most young people remain outside the process, and apathetic.²⁷

Two major avenues have been used to further encourage civic education:

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

²¹ Henn and Foard, ‘Social differentiation in young people’s political participation’, p. 369.

²² Dempsey and Johnston, *Political disengagement in the UK*, p. 12.

²³ Janmaat et al, *Disparities in Political Engagement*, p. 56.

²⁴ Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, *The Ties that Bind*, chapter 3.

²⁵ Quilter-Pinner, H et al, *Out of kilter: How to rebalance our school system to work for people, economy, and society*, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2023, p. 43. Available at: <https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/out-of-kilter-sept23.pdf?dm=1702046325> (accessed: 13/10/2025).

²⁶ Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. *The Ties that Bind*. Chapter 3.

²⁷ See: footnote 23.

1) Citizenship Studies GCSE

Introduced alongside the 2002 reforms, the Citizenship Studies GCSE has a much greater scope. It is governed by a clear national curriculum which specifies content – ranging from government structure to civic activism – in depth.²⁸ The GCSE outfits students with a good understanding of the political process.

A 2025 survey found that 63.1% of those who had completed or were enrolled in the GCSE were interested in politics, while an outstanding 70.7% of that same group were confident of their understanding of politics. The strong positive relationship between Citizenship Studies GCSE and political engagement testifies to its ability counter youth apathy.²⁹ Despite this, the vast majority of schools do not offer the subject.³⁰ In 2025, just 2% of students who took their GCSE exams sat the test in Citizenship Studies.³¹ These limits have minimised its impact, although its successes indicate that it would be effective against youth disengagement if provided at a wider scale.

2) ‘Fundamental British Values’ Reforms

Introduced in 2014, these reforms required that all schools ‘actively promote [...] Fundamental British Values’.³² These values included democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance. They were to be taught during ‘appropriate’ parts of the curriculum.³³

No real guidance was provided about how to teach the values, what they meant, and what content should be covered – making any stringent enforcement of the reforms

²⁸ Mitchell, M, *AQA GCSE (9-1): Citizenship Studies*, Hodder Education, 2023.

²⁹ Henn, M et al, ‘Is Citizenship Education the key to unlocking young people’s political engagement?’ *Political Studies Association New*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.psa.ac.uk/psa/news/citizenship-education-key-unlocking-young-people%E2%80%99s-political-engagement> (accessed: 13/10/2025).

³⁰ Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. *The Ties that Bind*. Chapter 3.

³¹ *GCSE Citizenship Studies 2025: Inspiring action, impact and participation*, Association for Citizenship Teaching, 2025. Available at: <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/gcse-citizenship-studies-results-2025-inspiring-action-impact-and-participation/> (accessed: 15/10/2025). *Qualification Results in England: Summer 2025*, Government Regulation and Qualifications Authority, 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualification-results-in-england-summer-2025?utm_source=Blogpost_Results25_OfqualResults25&utm_medium=Blogpost_Results25_Ofqual_Results25&utm_campaign=Results2025 (accessed: 15/10/2025).

³² For the Trojan Horse Affair, see: House of Commons Education Select Committee, *Extremism in Schools: The Trojan Horse Affair*. 7th Report of Session 2014-15, HC 473, 2015. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/473/47308.htm#n87> (accessed: 15/10/2025).

³³ For the National Curriculum changes, see: *Promoting Fundamental British Values as Part of SMSC in Maintained Schools*, Department for Education, 2014. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a758c9540f0b6397f35f469/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf (accessed: 15/10/2025).

effectively impossible. Admittedly, fears that teachers would be reluctant to teach the values proved unfounded.³⁴ Yet being unsure of how to meet the vague requirements, many teachers simply included superficial references to the values during their teaching to tick this box.³⁵ Beyond this, the reforms had no discernible impact.³⁶

Both avenues clearly failed to counteract the wider problem of youth apathy, but they offer important lessons. The failure of the 2014 reforms shows the importance of articulating a clear curriculum and expected content: Citizenship Studies GCSE provided both with proven success. Equally, the GCSE's failure to make a wider impact due to inadequate provision demonstrates the need for stronger government support to encourage uptake amongst schools. Realising civic education's potential in the UK will require government backing and a clear curriculum.

Civic education in the United States

Elsewhere in the world, civic education has been more successful. It has consistently positive effects on turnout rates, and on people's sense of civic duty.³⁷ The U.S. has played a guiding role here as a global reference point for civic education. American pedagogues like John Dewey have determined the purposes and nature of civic education as understood all over the world.³⁸ Nearer to home, the 1998 Crick Report that guided the 2002 UK introduction of civic education to the National Curriculum paid close attention to American models of civic education.³⁹ The United States's example(s) is clearly vital in understanding civic education's potential.

Overview

In the United States, education is a state responsibility. Not all states include any requirement for civic education, while those that do differ widely as to the importance and support they attach to it. There is no 'national' model, but different local practices and models for each

³⁴ Barker, I, *How are schools promoting Fundamental British Values?* TES. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/sponsored/manchester-metropolitan-university/how-are-schools-promoting-fundamental-british> (accessed: 15/10/2025).

³⁵ Mansfield, A, 'Confusion, contradiction and exclusion: the promotion of British values in the teaching of history in schools', *Curriculum Journal*, 30 (1), 2019, p. 45.

³⁶ See: chapter 1.

³⁷ Feitosa, F, 'Does Civic Education Foster Civic Duty? A Systematic Cross-Country Analysis of the Effect of Three Forms of Civic Education on the Sense of Civic Duty to Vote', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 53 (4), 2020, pp. 889-890.

³⁸ Marquette, H and Mineshima, D, 'Civic Education in the United States: Lessons for the UK', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55 (3), 2002, p. 544.

³⁹ Advisory Group on Citizenship, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools: Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship*, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4385/1/crickreport1998.pdf> (accessed: 16/10/2025).

state.⁴⁰ The UK Government can and should learn from the successes and failures of these models.

Successes

- **Civic education in American schools has been particularly effective amongst disenfranchised groups.** In the 1960s, civics classes were found to greatly increase political knowledge and engagement amongst African-Americans. This group had only just become fully enfranchised, meaning that students surveyed were much less likely to have been politically socialised at home.⁴¹ Similar effects were found in more recent studies on the impact of civic education initiatives amongst Latinos and Hispanic immigrants.⁴² Civic education has therefore been disproportionately effective amongst traditionally disengaged groups unlikely to become politically socialised at home or elsewhere in their lives. *Civic education would be similarly effective at engaging the young people from less-educated backgrounds who are at the core of youth apathy in Britain.*
- **American civic education has been effective when it takes the form of prescribed civics courses with strong government support.** States in which civics courses are required to be eligible for a high school diploma perform better in civic knowledge aptitude and in youth turnout. Maryland requires one year of civics and passing a civics test for students to graduate high school. This strong incentive for students to improve their political knowledge has been reflected in an AP USGP (the nationwide civics test) score in the first quintile of states. Maryland has had consistently higher youth turnout than over ¾ of

Experiential learning

American experiments with experiential learning also offer useful insights into how civic education can be effective. Dewey argued that students needed to 'learn democracy' by having experience of the democratic process in the classroom.ⁱ Experiential learning may seem an obvious way to engage students, but traditional methods remain dominant. No state has any requirement for experiential learning as part of civics.ⁱⁱ

The Clinton administration, however, launched various experiential initiatives as part of their efforts to improve civic education. For example, their 'We the People – The Citizen and the Constitution' programme involved critical thinking exercises and problem-solving activities to improve students' participatory skills as they learned about the Constitution. The Department for Education's Program Effectiveness Panel strongly endorsed this initiative, with one study showing that 80% of students who participated in Clark County, Nevada registered to vote on turning 18 (against a contemporary national average of 37%). These initiatives were wound up after the Clinton Presidency, but their success indicates the potential benefits experiential learning could bring to civic education outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Evidence received before the UK House of Lords Citizenship Select Committee has also stated that experiential learning activities such as debates and school elections can improve participants' probability of voting by 14.9%.^{iv} *Experiential learning has an important potential to give students meaningful experience, rather than just abstract knowledge, of democratic processes and how they can impact them.*

⁴⁰ Jeffrey, A and Sargrad, S, *Strengthening democracy with a modern American Progress*, 2019. Available at: <https://www.americanprogressdemocracy-modern-civics-education/> (accessed: 16/10/2025).

⁴¹ Campbell, D and Niemi, R, 'Testing Civics: State-Level Civic Education Knowledge', *The American Political Science Review*, 110 (3), 2016

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 508.

the other states. Strong government support – through mandatory standardised testing – stimulates improved political knowledge amongst young people and greater political engagement.⁴³ *A similar mandatory testing system would be effective in incentivising British students to develop the greater political knowledge that encourages their participation.*

Failures

- **American civic education has been severely undermined by a lack of funding.** The Federal Government provides just \$4 million in annual funding for the subject.⁴⁴ Without proper federal funding, states have few incentives to improve costly civic education provision. The result is a lack of any serious positive improvements in provision across the states. *Civic education provision will remain low in the UK without good government funding.*
- **Many states require no civics education at all.** With no federal requirement that civics education be provided, thirteen states do not have any requirement that students undergo any form thereof.⁴⁵ *The only way to guarantee civic education provision is to mandate it at a national level.*
- **Lack of results.** This is the ultimate impact of the other failures. Without due funding and support, provision is lacking or inadequate, leading to bad outcomes. In 2023, just 22% of eighth graders were proficient in civics.⁴⁶ Young Americans at large continue to lack political understanding, and so youth turnout remains low.⁴⁷ *Without proper support, youth engagement outcomes will not improve.*

The evidence from the U.S. reinforces our conclusions about civic education from the UK. It is effective at engaging politically alienated groups. Where provided with strong government support – funding, a clearly prescribed curriculum (with standardised testing), and mandated provision – it can be highly successful in outfitting students with the political knowledge that drives investment and participation in the democratic process. Meanwhile, American experiments with experiential learning indicate its potential in ‘training citizens’ through direct

⁴³ Jeffrey and Sargrad, *Strengthening democracy*.

⁴⁴ Davenport, D, *The Civic Education Crisis: What should we do and how?* Hoover Institution, 2019. Available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/civic-education-crisis> (accessed: 16/10/2025). Dubé, L and Vinnakota, R, *Preparing the next generation of citizens requires bringing back civics*, Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2023. Available at: <https://citizensandscholars.org/preparing-the-next-generation-of-citizens-requires-bringing-back-civics/> (accessed: 16/10/2025).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Altschuler, G and Wippman, D, *We have a civics education crisis – and deep divisions on how to solve it*, The Washington Post, 31 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/made-by-history/2023/05/31/civics-education-history/> (accessed: 16/10/2025).

⁴⁷ Brown, C and Shapiro, S, *A Look at Civics Education in the United States*. American Educator, Summer, 2018. Available at: https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2018/shapiro_brown (accessed: 16/10/2025).

experience of political procedures. The U.S. examples demonstrate that civic education can counteract youth apathy in the UK, but only with greater provision and support.

3. Civic Service

Civic service is considered the main alternative to civic education in achieving youth political engagement, and has been a repeated subject of government interest in recent decades. It refers to forms of community work or military service, targeted at the national good. The idea is that by undertaking such service, young people will realise the stake they have in their country. They will therefore become invested in the politics that determine the country's future, and they will be more likely to participate. While it ultimately cannot compete with civic education, we must consider the two variants of civic service.

Civic volunteering service

This refers to voluntary forms of civic service, generally oriented towards community work and volunteering. David Cameron's National Citizenship Service (NCS) followed this model: aiming to use volunteer work to build youth political engagement. While the scheme had 600,000 alumni by 2021, most participants' only experience of the scheme was completing brief volunteering opportunities.⁴⁸ The NCS provided no further infrastructure to encourage youth participation, and predictably had no long-term impact on youth participation.⁴⁹

The NCS's failure would appear to suggest that better infrastructure might have improved outcomes. For example, the U.S. AmeriCorps provides long-term community work programmes with a living allowance for volunteers. 91% of its alumni are registered to vote, while 94% of that group voted in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (against 58% nationally).⁵⁰ This success is deceptive, however. AmeriCorps, like all civic volunteering, is self-selecting. Participants apply, and someone bothered to apply for any such scheme is someone very likely to already have a civic predisposition inclining them to vote. Additionally, running an equivalent national scheme to AmeriCorps in the UK with over £300 million in annual funding would – at most – be able to offer schemes for around 45,000 young people each year: 1.5% of 18 to 21 year-olds.⁵¹

The self-selecting nature of a civic volunteering service makes its actual impact on youth engagement doubtful. Even then, a civic volunteering service with developed infrastructure able to provide schemes for most young people would be impossibly expensive. Civic volunteering does not offer a viable solution for youth apathy.

⁴⁸ Cohen, D, *Youth leaders criticise 'totally disproportionate' funding handed to David Cameron's failing legacy project*, The Independent, 4 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/david-cameron-national-citizen-service-b1826574.html> (accessed: 18/10/2025).

⁴⁹ GOV.UK. *National Citizen Service Trust Annual Business Plan 2025 to 2026*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-citizen-service-trust-annual-business-plan-2025-to-2026> (accessed: 18/10/2025).

⁵⁰ Stanley et al, *The Kids Aren't Alright*. P. 71-73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

National service

This refers to standardised, mandatory civic service, often taken to entail military service but which can also encompass community work. In 2024, the Conservatives proposed a version of national service that mixed military and community work, and which would have been mandatory for all 18 year-olds – with the aim of engaging young people nationwide.⁵² Yet what little evidence exists for the impact of national service on youth participation in democracies suggests that it has no significant effect. South Korea, for example, features mandatory and universal military service, but youth participation rates remain the lowest amongst all age groups.⁵³ National service is generally taken as having no proven effect either way on youth participation.⁵⁴

National service is also deeply impractical. Proposals that integrate community work would need to find, create, and finance millions of slots for the young people participating – itself an immense and costly administrative effort. While the Conservatives projected a £2.5 billion annual cost, this is unrealistic. Considering that paying the training staff alone for the (smaller) military intake could cost £311 million a year, the bill for supporting all those undergoing national service would likely reach into the tens of billions of pounds.⁵⁵

Universal national service has no proven record of even impacting civic engagement levels. The costs involved would be exorbitant and totally impractical. National service does not offer a viable solution for youth apathy.

Civic service clearly cannot compete with civic education. It is neither economically practical nor obviously effective: its volunteering schemes relying on a self-selecting group already likely to be politically engaged; its mandatory ones lacking any proven effect whatever on civic engagement. Meanwhile, since youth apathy sets in between the ages of 11 and 15 – ages at which any form of civic service is largely impossible for such participants – it would be acting after the problem had become entrenched. Civic service may be regarded as the main alternative to civic education, but it cannot compare with the practicality and proven effectiveness of civic education.

⁵² The Conservative and Unionist Party, *The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2024*, 2024. Available at: <https://public.conservatives.com/publicweb/GE2024/Accessible-Manifesto/Accessible-PDF-Conservative-Manifesto-2024.pdf> (accessed: 18/10/2025).

⁵³ *Youth Participation: South Korea*, Asian Electoral Resource Center (ANFREL). Available at: <https://aerc.anfrel.org/country/south-korea/youth-participation/> (accessed: 18/10/2025).

⁵⁴ Almén, D, 'The Civic-Minded Citizen and the Role of Conscription: Evidence from Sweden.' *Political Behavior*, 2025. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-025-10072-0>.

⁵⁵ See: footnote 64.

4. Recommendations

Youth apathy is a problem that must be addressed to improve participation, reduce social inequalities, and secure our democracy. Civic education is the best way to address this issue, and as such we recommend:

1) Mandatory GCSE in Citizenship Studies

Details: The GCSE in Citizenship Studies should be made mandatory in all schools. Curriculum time should be redistributed to allow for this. The UK Government should pay exam administration fees for the subject in all state schools under its authority.

Rationale: Lower secondary is when youth apathy becomes entrenched, so GCSE-level education is the most important in counteracting this. Citizenship Studies GCSE has proven success in improving youth political engagement. It has a clear, detailed curriculum. Mandatory requirements through standardised testing ensures that all schools will provide for a decent civic education for all young people, regardless of their background, so that all can become politically engaged. Testing also incentivises students to attain the political knowledge that will make them confident in their own ability to participate.

Cost: The UK Government would have to pay exam administration fees for those in state schools in England sitting the GCSE, costing approximately £41.2 million each year.⁵⁶ It would also need to support textbook provision, costing up to £22.4 million as a one-off expense.⁵⁷

2) Alterations to the Citizenship Studies GCSE curriculum

Details: The Citizenship Studies GCSE curriculum should be altered to include experiential learning. Students complete a deliberative project as part of the course, in which they would be presented with a political issue, consider and draft outcome proposals, present this back to the class, and hold a whole-class discussion. This project

⁵⁶ This figure comes from multiplying the estimated number of state school entries for Maths GCSE in England in 2025 (approximately 800,000, determined by taking 93% (the proportion of state to private schools in England) of the total Maths GCSE entries) by the summer 2026 price of AQA UK entry fees for Citizenship Studies GCSE (£51.50). For entries, see: *Provisional entries for GCSE, AS and A level summer 2025 exam series*. Department for Education, 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2025-exam-series/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2025-exam-series> (accessed: 20/10/2025). For AQA exam fees, see: *Entry fees and other charges for the UK and International Centres: Summer 2026*, AQA, 2025. Available at: <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/p28bar15/green/db8efb2a8d2cf086f95a646a9fc00afb1cb21588.pdf> (accessed: 20/10/2025).

⁵⁷ This figure comes from multiplying the price of the AQA Citizenship Studies Textbook (£28.00) by the entries estimate in footnote 70.

will take place over a series of weeks. There will be a question about this project in the GCSE exam.

Rationale: Experiential learning has proven success in improving youth participation outcomes. Mandating this learning would ensure that students have direct experience of democratic decision-making, concretising the abstract knowledge they will also gain in the course and giving them confidence in their own ability to participate.

Cost: The UK Government would have to fund a review for these curriculum changes. Considering that the 2013 National Curriculum review cost £287,619 and covered a wider range of subjects, this review would very likely cost no more than that.⁵⁸

3) Teacher-training programme for Citizenship Studies

Details: The UK Government should fund teacher-training bursaries of up to £25,000 for 1,500 teachers. It should also establish a training programme in which existing specialists train non-specialist teachers to enhance their subject knowledge.

Rationale: Mandatory Citizenship Studies GCSE will force schools to provide specialist teaching in this subject, but there is a massive shortage of qualified citizenship teachers in England.⁵⁹ By providing bursaries higher than all other non-STEM subjects for teacher-training, prospective teachers will be incentivised to train for Citizenship Studies. Training 1,500 fresh specialists will provide a new generation of qualified teachers for the subject. This will not totally meet demand, but by combining it with a training programme by existing specialists (later joined by these incoming teachers) for non-specialist teachers each school will be able to have someone trained to deliver the subject.

Cost: The bursaries would cost £37.5 million. The Government would also have to fund the subject training programme. Considering that this programme exactly matches the format of an existing one for a different subject – the Subject Knowledge for Physics Teaching programme, which costs £2.55 million – we can expect a similar cost to this.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Costs relating to expert panel on national curriculum*. Department for Education, 2013. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/costs-relating-to-expert-panel-on-national-curriculum> (accessed: 20/10/2025).

⁵⁹ For the number of state secondary schools in England, see: *VFM Standard Metric Report: Metric 2199*, Local Government Association, 2025. Available at: https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-area=E92000001&mod-group=AllRegions_England&mod-metric=2199&mod-period=3&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup (accessed: 20/10/2025). The figure for qualified citizenship teachers comes from extracting the percentage of teachers teaching citizenship who are actually qualified to do so in 2023 (23.3%) from the total teachers for this subject (4,152) in 2022 (all in England).

⁶⁰ McKinnell, C, 'Physics: Teachers.' *UK Parliament: Written answer*, HC 56002, 30 May 2025. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-05-30/56002>. (accessed: 20/10/2025); *Response to Freedom of Information request 2025-0042787: Subject Knowledge for Physics Teaching programme*, Department for Education, 2025.

Supporting local authorities in paying the salaries of the newly-trained specialist teachers would cost £49.374 million annually, taking the typical teacher starting salary as a benchmark and assuming the UK Government pays all of this sum.⁶¹

4) Increase the Digital Services Tax to 2.5%

Details: The Government should raise Digital Services Tax from 2% to 2.5% to fund the above recommendations.

Rationale: A high estimate for the total cost of the three outlined recommendations would be £60,187,619 as a one-off sum, alongside £93,142,00 annually. Increasing the Digital Services Tax to 2.5% would provide an extra £250 million in annual revenue by 2030.⁶² This is more than sufficient to fund the recommended proposals. Digital Services Tax is an appropriate source of revenue due to the prominent role social media platforms (which the tax targets) have played in spreading misinformation that has undermined public trust in our political system in recent years. Other European countries have raised higher rates over social media companies' opposition without major difficulties arising.⁶³

⁶¹ GOV.UK. *Teacher Pay*, Get Into Teaching, 2025. Available at: <https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/life-as-a-teacher/pay-and-benefits/teacher-pay> (accessed: 20/10/2025).

⁶² Digital services tax currently stands at 2%. By 2027 it is projected to bring in £1 billion in revenue each year. Hence an increase to 3% would project a £1.5 billion total revenue. *Economic and Fiscal Outlook – March 2023*, Office for Budgetary Responsibility, 2025. Available at: https://obr.uk/docs/dlm_uploads/OBR_Economic_and_fiscal_outlook_March_2025.pdf (accessed: 21/10/2025)

⁶³ The UK has one of the lowest rates of digital services tax compared to other countries. See: Tax Adviser, *Digital services tax: navigating a new landscape*, 2024. Available at: <https://www.taxadvisermagazine.com/article/digital-services-tax-navigating-new-landscape#:~:text=The%20rate%20of%20tax%3A%20The,services%20tax%20rate%20is%207.5%25> (accessed: 21/10/2025). Turkey and France have both maintained 3% rates without any jeopardization of digital services provision. See: Asquith, R, *France government to strike down proposed DST rise to 6%*, VAT Calc, 2025. Available at: <https://www.vatcalc.com/france/france-dst-rise-to-6-proposal/> (accessed: 20/10/2025).

ⁱ Kiess, J, 'Learning by doing: The impact of experiencing democracy', *Politics*, 42 (1), 2022, p. 77.

ⁱⁱ Brown and Shapiro, *Civics Education in the United States*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marquette and Mineshima, 'Civic Education in the United States', p. 551.

^{iv} Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, *The Ties that Bind*, chapter 3.

YOUNG
FABIANS