

# The Government needs to implement Youth Citizenship Commission proposals to turn schools into 'sites of democracy'

By Democratic Audit

As part of our [series on youth participation](#), **Andy Mycock** and **Jonathan Tonge** consider the progress made in the five years since the Youth Citizenship Commission made a series of recommendations to government. They find that many of its proposals have been adopted, although without much fanfare. One area where there has been little change is in the use of schools to engage young people in democracy: the authors argue that electoral registration should take place via schools, there should be enhanced democracy within schools, and they should remain open when used as polling stations.



Schools can become sites of democracy, engaging young voters from an early age. Credit: [Parliament Week](#), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Established in 2008 by Gordon Brown, the [Youth Citizenship Commission](#) (YCC) was invited to examine how young people define citizenship and to explore how that citizenship might better be connected to political activity. It reported to government in June 2009, making sixteen policy recommendations. The Brown government responded positively to the YCC final report, endorsing virtually all of its findings. In places, however, its [formal response](#) read a little too much like a trumpeting of existing examples of good practice, confined to a select number of government departments, whereas the thrust of the YCC's arguments was for a much more comprehensive development and extension of the useful schemes of political engagement already evident. The Labour government was however voted out of office before it could implement any of the policy recommendations.

## The impact of the Youth Citizenship Commission

What has happened since then? Let us start with the good news. A cross-party consensus would appear to have emerged in acknowledging the need for the state to take action in bolstering youth citizenship. This has ensured a modest degree of policy continuity from the previous to current governments, although, regrettably, neither has sought to acknowledge this. The Coalition government that came into power in May 2010 has clearly drawn

heavily on the recommendations of the YCC in designing youth citizenship policies. For example, the *Positive for Youth* initiative, a 'cross-Government policy' launched in 2011, stated its intention to promote youth voice by involving young people in decision-making and auditing of youth services. The Coalition government also implemented the YCC's recommendation to establish national scrutiny groups to 'youth proof' policies affecting young people through equality impact assessments. These proposals strongly mirrored the YCC's own recommendations on the importance of youth-led policy formation and scrutiny at all levels of government. It also followed the YCC's proposal to provide sustainable funding for the UK Youth Parliament.

Commendably, the current government has, against the original instincts amongst Conservatives, backed the YCC support for citizenship education to be maintained as statutory subject within the secondary school curriculum in England. In Opposition, the then shadow Education Secretary, Michael Gove, promised to strip down the '*politically motivated*' curriculum and questioned the efficacy of Citizenship, asking: 'When it comes to citizenship, community cohesion and a sense of national solidarity, why is it that we imagine a particular subject put on the National Curriculum can address these deep and long standing challenges?' We concur that it is asking too much of a single subject to transform youth democratic participation, but to remove that subject would have weakened it considerably. The *efficacy of citizenship education* in promoting democratic participation and civil engagement has surely now been proven, having been subject to more than a decade of rigorous statistical testing. As such, government support for the subject is a welcome confirmation of evidence-based policy.

We continue to argue the need for the centrality of citizenship education as part of a programme of civic regeneration across the UK. Recent reforms of the curriculum appear however to prioritise social and economic citizenship. We support the idea that the civic and the civil can be linked by emphasising connections between rights, duties and obligations in encouraging socially acceptable behaviour, volunteering and active citizenship via political participation. But in the absence of a Politics GCSE, much rests upon the efficient delivery of citizenship classes infused with a mission to deliver civic education. The original aims and outcomes of citizenship education insisted one of its key roles must be to challenge the '*inexcusably and damagingly bad*' levels of political literacy and participation (QCA 1998, 16) and to make young people '*feel that they have a stake in our society and the community in which they live by teaching them the nature of democracy*'. We call for a restatement of the need for political literacy by placing knowledge of our political system at the heart of the citizenship curriculum. This will complement, not usurp, the civil engagement aspect of citizenship classes.

Another policy area where the current government clearly engages with the final report of the YCC is on the issue of civic service. Although the concept of the 'Big Society' has had some difficulties gaining traction, its outworking in terms of youth engagement in the form of National Citizen Service (NCS) is significant. Whilst not opposed in principle, the YCC final report and *subsequent research* has drawn attention to the limitations of civic service programmes, encouraging some recognition of international comparisons. Although the government targets for the expansion of NCS are admirably optimistic, recruitment has failed to meet targets set during each year the programme has run so far. NCS has expanded considerably but lacks universality in opportunities for young people to participate both in England and Northern Ireland, where the programme runs, and in Scotland and Wales, where it does not. Moreover, the claims regarding its long-term impacts on the attitudes and behaviours of young people are simply not sustainable on current evidence.

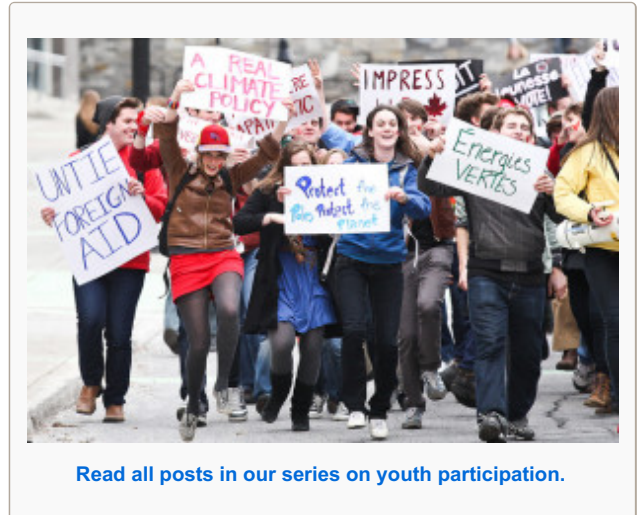
Our primary concern though is that the civil engagement involved in NCS, whilst welcome, is not extended to substantial forms of civic engagement. As such, it is an initiative which does not attempt to address key issues of democratic participation, beyond an unproven hope that social activism will crossover into political activism. Despite implicit claims to the contrary, there is no evidential link between young people participating in NCS and increased knowledge, skills, or preparedness to participate in formal or informal modes of political activism. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the independent assessments undertaken by NatCen have not sought to test if NCS participants are more predisposed to civic engagement and proponents of the programme rarely laud its potential to build political capital.

### **Schools as 'sites of democracy'**

One area where the Coalition government appears to have failed to engage with the YCC is the proposition to turn schools into 'sites of democracy'. The YCC encouraged the universal adoption of class and school councils and

also the election of student representatives on school and college governing bodies. We also encouraged schools to be kept open if they were to be used as polling stations. One of the most important recommendations of the YCC was that compulsory electoral registration of young people ought to be undertaken by schools or colleges. Those concerned with youth political participation ought to also be concerned at the mode of electoral registration, currently being switched from household to individual mode by the government. Under the old system of household registration, the percentage of unregistered young people was estimated as being as worryingly-high as 28 per cent. Analyses of youth non-voting needs to start at first base, by addressing the problem that many youngsters are not even eligible to vote, courtesy of their non-registration by parents. As such, the low turnouts reported amongst youngsters understate the problem, as they are expressed as a percentage of an electoral register from which many are missing.

The current government has responded with the 'Rock Enrol' initiative, which shifts electoral registration responsibilities to schools and colleges, and is welcome. Electoral registration will be promoted in schools via the provision of information packs for teachers, with the support for community volunteers, and can form part of active citizenship classes. However, the voluntarism of the scheme is hugely regrettable. Registration will be patchy, according to where volunteers enter schools and the degree to which schoolteachers respond to the initiative. Electoral registration in schools and colleges ought to be compulsory, in the same manner in which the registration of births, marriages or deaths, or the completion of a census form, is required. Recent suggestions to introduce online voter registration should be welcomed but voluntarism in the electoral process should be confined to the decision whether or not to vote, but should not underpin the composition of the electoral register.



[Read all posts in our series on youth participation.](#)

### ***Policy proposal***

*Electoral registration should be compulsory in all schools and colleges across the UK.*

This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics* volume can be downloaded [here](#).

*Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of the LSE or Democratic Audit. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: [buff.ly/1rYPIkf](http://buff.ly/1rYPIkf)*



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