

# THE MISSING LINK

AN UPDATED EVALUATION OF THE PROVISION,  
PRACTICE AND POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION  
IN ENGLISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

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# FOREWORD

MATTEO BERGAMINI, CEO AND FOUNDER OF SHOUT OUT UK



It is our collective responsibility and right to engage in our democracy, a democracy that is fragile and currently under attack. The remedy is non-partisan political literacy education. If you care for our democracy, then the answer is simple: this subject must be taught in schools. This report reiterates the points that are continually raised by us at Shout Out UK and the civil society sector as a whole. Political literacy education is desired by students, acknowledged by teachers as an essential part of young people's education and recognised by parents as an important feature of English secondary schools. Yet, what has become clear through this report, is that the current provisions are not strong enough. Less than half of teachers **"self-report regularly using an open classroom climate in their teaching and less than a fifth feel 'very' confident when teaching sensitive or controversial issues."** The report clearly indicates that teachers recognise the important role political literacy education plays in young people's development, however **"only 1% feel fully prepared"** to teach such a lesson. While civil society organisations are tirelessly working to ensure young people receive some level of political education, it is important to recognise that in order to inspire a generation of active and knowledgeable voters, political literacy education needs to be a regular and clearly defined staple of the English curriculum. A crucial step in achieving this is ensuring that existing teachers, and those who are newly entering the profession, are given comprehensive and regular funded training. The report clearly states, **"When it comes to teaching democratic education effectively, there is clear evidence of a training effect."** Teachers need to feel confident approaching the subject and talking to students about controversial issues in a non-partisan way. This is not possible without funded teacher-training in politics and citizenship. Building an engaged electorate starts with comprehensive political literacy education. To achieve this, we need to recognise that trained confident teachers are a key part of this process.

To safeguard and amplify our democracy, we must recognize the gap in our education system now. This is not only about equipping young people with the tools to be active citizens, this is about safeguarding the very fabric of our democracy.



# FOREWORD

SIMON FELL, CO-CHAIR OF THE APPG ON POLITICAL LITERACY & MP FOR BARROW AND FURNESS



As I write this, the news is sitting very heavily that a friend and colleague, Sir David Amess, was murdered whilst holding a constituency surgery. David was a kind and generous man, and a great help to MPs like me who are new to the world of Westminster and the arcania of the House of Commons. We do not yet know the reasons for the attack that led to his death. But it is a reminder of just how fragile democracy is. I have no doubt that in the weeks and months that follow there will be calls for MPs to be followed by minders and to not hold public events. But the fact remains that we are public figures and necessarily so. Politics matters because it affects every part of the world. Accessibility and visibility is therefore important. The decisions which we as parliamentarians make have far-reaching consequences, and to wall ourselves off risks laws being imposed, rather than designed through consultation, consent and democratic mandate.

And this is why political literacy matters. If we don't equip young people with the tools to understand the world around them - and how to change it - then we're not just disenfranchising them, we are delegitimizing every decision that parliament makes. It is incumbent on us to rise to that challenge and make sure that young people are equipped to go out into the world and make informed choices, to advocate for their viewpoint, and to make change. Not providing those tools weakens our democracy.

This report illuminates some of the barriers to embedding political literacy education in schools. The research is clear: **"Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of democratic education as a feature of English secondary schooling. They attribute equal importance to it alongside subjects like Chemistry, History and Geography as preparation for adult life in modern Britain."** Yet, despite parents' support for democratic education, **"half of parents retain concerns about ideological bias in the classroom."**

So, we have a job to do. To enable and embed Political Literacy education into the curriculum, and to reassure parents and students about bias and refute those concerns in delivery. We fail if we do not properly equip young people with the tools to effectively navigate the political system and we will all be poorer for it if we don't achieve our goal.



# FOREWORD

CAT SMITH, CO-VICE CHAIR FOR THE APPG ON POLITICAL LITERACY AND MP FOR LANCASTER AND FLEETWOOD



This report comes at a time when many Western democracies are seeing declining voting rates amongst younger voters. We've got a real problem in England engaging young people in voting and the democratic process. I know that quite often young people tell me one of the barriers they feel is their limited knowledge about politics. As it stands, democratic education is a peripheral feature of secondary education in English schools and provisions vary widely from school to school. According to the report, **"competing demands on time, expertise, and curriculum content are identified by teachers as the three biggest obstacles to effective democratic education in English secondary Schools"**. Political Literacy should be the cornerstone of young people's journey through education, it is an essential piece to increasing democratic participation yet what has become clear is that teachers are not being given the training nor the space in the curriculum to effectively teach Political Literacy education. According to the report, **"The vast majority of teachers feel responsible for developing young people's political literacy, but only 1% feel fully prepared to do so."** What is becoming clear is that we are failing teachers by not giving them the skills they need to effectively tackle political literacy education despite the research being clear; **"When it comes to teaching democratic education effectively, there is clear evidence of a training effect. Teachers trained in cognate disciplines in the Humanities are more likely to utilise an open classroom climate, more confident teaching sensitive or controversial issues, and more likely to have personal experience of political participation in civic life."** We need to make it a priority that all teachers feel confident tackling political literacy education. Alongside the pressure placed on teachers, this report aptly highlights the socio-economic factors which affect Political Literacy education provisions. Students in fee-paying schools or maintained secondary schools are far more likely to receive a well-rounded political education. Considering the direct link between socio-economic position and political literacy provision, it is essential that we as parliamentarians work together to ensure the statutory inclusion of political literacy education for all young people, regardless of background.



# INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

DR JAMES WEINBERG, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD AND LEAD OF THE ACADEMIC ADVISORY GROUP



By the time this country next goes to the polls, our newest generation of voters will have grown up and come of age in a post-millennial period of transformative uncertainty. The global financial crash of 2007/08, increasing concerns about the sustainability of human development and climate change, mass migration across continents, the spread of instant worldwide communication technologies, as well as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, are just a few of the recent critical junctures that have stretched the social, cultural and political fabric of countries around the world. To tackle these issues and their legacy effects head on will, increasingly, require a global community of active citizens. Yet at the same time, new thinking is needed at all levels of policy-making and civil society to address worrying trends in political disaffection and distrust, volatile turnout, and the intergenerational transmission of political inequalities. Democracies are not defined, however, by the problems that afflict them, but rather the ways in which they respond. It is this solutions-focused mindset that informs and shapes this report on democratic education in English secondary schools.

A longstanding research base on democratic education, within and without the UK, has demonstrated that when properly resourced, the teaching of politics and citizenship has the potential to facilitate people's interest, active engagement, and investment in a political system that gives them agency. As our politics faces somewhat of a crossroads, democratic education is, then, one piece of a policy puzzle that is worthy of more concerted attention by academics, practitioners, politicians and citizens

alike. It is in this context that the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Political Literacy provides a cross-party forum to discuss the current provision of democratic education (in schools, further and higher education) and to explore how best to strengthen it so that young people, regardless of background, can play an informed and active role as citizens in our democracy.

One of the APPG's core objectives is to enhance and conduct research on the link between young people's political literacy and democratic participation, and in doing so to offer evidence-based recommendations to deliver on the goal of ensuring all young people receive a minimum offer of democratic education. This report speaks to that objective by sharing the findings of large-scale surveys administered to secondary school teachers and parents around England in the summer of 2021. **Specifically, the views of more than 3000 in-service teachers, working in almost 2000 secondary schools, as well as upwards of 1500 parents from around the country, are analysed to provide the most far-reaching assessment of democratic education across this sector in over a decade.** In this report, the data are assessed in line with four overarching goals:

- to measure the quantity and quality of existing levels of democratic education in English schools;
- to assess teachers' subjective responsibility for delivering democratic education and their preparedness to do so;



- to evaluate parental fears about ideological bias in the classroom and the 'politics of' teaching politics in schools; and
- to canvas stakeholder opinion on possible policy responses.

In pursuing these goals, this report is responsive to current debates within the parliamentary and policy community about 'when', 'why' and 'how' to empower all young people equitably and thus facilitate a fair and sustainable democratic system. Substantively and methodologically, this research also speaks to a significant gap in the academic research base by engaging parents on the topic of democratic education. Whilst students and teachers have been the focus of several extant projects in the UK and beyond, parents are more regularly neglected as a target population. This is despite their importance as an electoral group.

Throughout this report, readers will notice that I use three key terms: **democratic education**, **citizenship education**, and **political literacy**. It is worth clarifying what I mean by each of these for the sake of transparency and comprehension. Democratic education is used here to refer to all those curricular and non-curricular modes of education or political learning activities that are geared towards improving young people's political literacy. Citizenship education refers to a statutory subject that has featured on the English National Curriculum since 2002. Alongside the Politics A-Level, citizenship education is the most formalised setting in which political literacy may be taught in English secondary schools. Finally, political literacy is used holistically to denote the intended learning outcomes of democratic and citizenship education - extending to and including **democratic knowledge** (e.g. understanding of key institutions like parliaments, voting systems and the role of politicians), **democratic skills** (e.g. active participation; debating and oracy; critical thinking), and **democratic values** (e.g. support

for free and fair elections, free speech, and social justice).

Geographically, this report focuses on democratic education, citizenship education and political literacy in England. However, readers who are new to this topic should be aware that programmes of democratic education also exist in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and these are covered by different models of citizenship education as well as modern and social studies. Whilst many of the findings in this report are pertinent to similar debates happening in the other nations of the UK, more funding and research is needed to draw comparative conclusions.

The report itself is structured around three themes: **provision** ('what' is happening in schools), **practice** ('how' is it happening), and **politics** ('why' might it be contested). Each section speaks to one or more of the goals listed above and presents new data on democratic education in a robust yet accessible way. Tables and graphs are accompanied by in-text explanations, contextual discussions of related academic work, and links to practical problems and solutions. Still, there is a lot more that can be said about the data than it is possible to include in this report. I encourage readers to use the data and associated interpretations as a launching pad from which to take highlighted conversations further. I also encourage readers to contact myself or the APPG if they would like to discuss any aspect of this report in more detail.

The findings of this report (summarised below) fill a substantial gap in the existing evidence base on democratic education in England that has been largely vacant since the end of the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study in 2010. It is important that these findings are now acted upon if we (the policy community and democratically-minded citizens alike) are serious about the sustainability, longevity, and equitability of our democracy. On the other hand, many of these findings raise additional questions that are deserving, indeed demanding,



of further research funding and investigation. As such, I hope that this report will act as a lightning rod for renewed research activity in this space as well as practical action.

To support the latter, I use the findings from this research to call for strategic investment in teacher training and continued professional development.

In order to tackle a fractured and fractious policy problem, it is clear that we need a critical mass of trained professionals who are knowledgeable about politics and citizenship, and equipped with appropriate pedagogical expertise to deliver democratic education effectively.

**TRAINING BURSARIES:** Rapidly scale up ITT (Initial Teacher Training) provisions for democratic education by providing a teacher training bursary in Citizenship Education and/or Politics;

**UNIVERSAL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT:** Support ITT providers to embed modules on democratic education within all ITT schemes by, in the first instance, working aspects of democratic education into the ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework (ECF) established by the recent ITT market review (2021); and

**THIRD-PARTY PARTNERSHIPS:** Work more closely with external partners – such as Shout Out UK, the Association for Citizenship Teaching and the Political Studies Association - to create and disseminate resources or CPD (Continuing Professional Development) packs for teachers that (a) can be used within formal curriculum provision of key stage 3/4 Citizenship Education or key stage 5 Politics, (b) speak to different curriculum specialisms and not just these discrete subjects, and (c) help teachers to utilise declarative (fact-based) and procedural (skills-based) pedagogies.

These are actionable recommendations that receive support from our teaching body as well as parents in the wider electorate. They also speak directly to the current Government's Levelling Up agenda. If the policy community is serious about driving up and levelling up education standards and lifelong opportunities for children and young people around the country, then there is a clear and compelling case for targeted investment in democratic education. In the final section of this report

(see pages 39-41), I reflect further on the rationale for these recommendations in the current political moment. The means and wherewithal, as well as skilled external partners, are in place to drastically improve the state of democratic education in this country. All that is required now is the right level of will and collaboration.

**Dr James Weinberg**  
(University of Sheffield)



# KEY FINDINGS



Democratic education is a peripheral feature of secondary education in English schools. There are also inequalities in provision that favour students in fee-paying schools or maintained secondary schools serving affluent communities.



Competing demands on time, expertise, and curriculum content are identified by teachers as the three biggest obstacles to effective democratic education in English secondary schools.



The vast majority of teachers feel responsible for developing young people's political literacy, but only 1% feel fully prepared to do so.



Teachers across all curriculum areas are being asked to deliver democratic education in some format or frequency.



Teachers score higher than the wider English population in a basic test of political knowledge, but less than half self-report regularly using an open classroom climate in their teaching and less than a fifth feel 'very' confident when teaching sensitive or controversial issues.



Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of democratic education as a feature of English secondary schooling. They attribute equal importance to it alongside subjects like Chemistry, History and Geography as preparation for adult life in modern Britain.



Although supportive of democratic education, half of parents retain concerns about ideological bias in the classroom. These concerns are noticeably stronger among right-wing parents.



Teachers are more left-leaning than similarly educated members of the English public, but there is no evidence of a link between ideology and teachers' use of an open classroom climate (i.e. encouraging a balanced consideration of multiple political viewpoints).



# METHODOLOGY

## (a) Data collection

This project engaged with in-service teachers (working in English secondary schools) and parents (with children in English secondary schools) through online surveys.

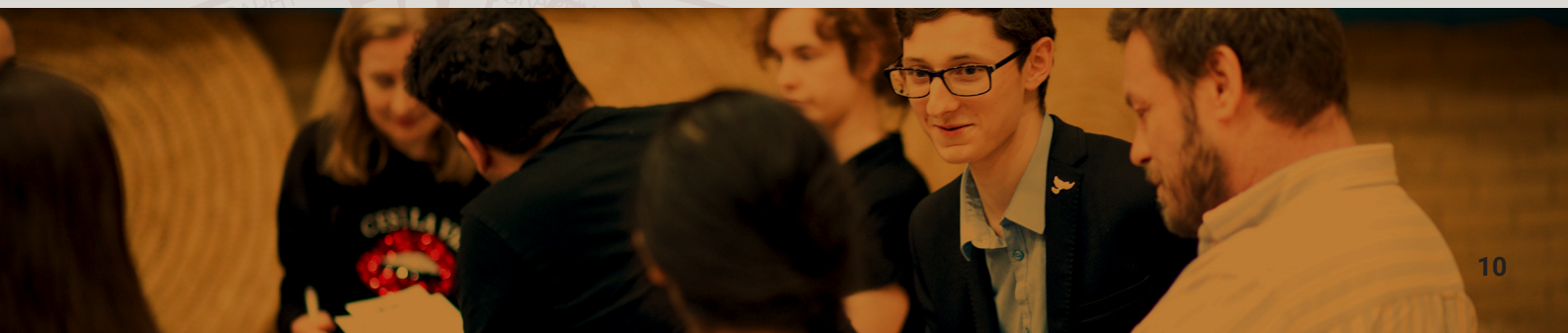
### Survey 1: Teachers

In early July 2021, surveys were fielded to in-service secondary school teachers in England through the polling platform Teacher Tapp. Teacher Tapp maintains an extensive panel comprising thousands of qualified teachers. Working with a unique survey application, Teacher Tapp provides access to high-quality observations for multiple or single response questions along with appropriate sampling weights that can be used to ensure that metrics derived from each dataset are representative of the teaching population. Alongside information on teacher demographics (e.g. sex, age, training subject, seniority, experience) and school-level characteristics (e.g. phase, governance, performance, Free School Meals (FSM), Ofsted ratings), this survey assessed participants' attitudes towards democratic education per se and provision in their current school; their own experiences of delivering democratic education (primarily through statutory citizenship education or via related pedagogic practices in another host subject); and their attitudes

towards a number of possible training needs and solutions. Participants also completed standard questions about their political knowledge, values and participation (taken from the 2019 British Election Study for comparative purposes).

### Survey 2: Parents

Surveys were simultaneously fielded to parents in England with school-aged children (11-18) through Qualtrics, which is a bespoke polling platform with a global panel base that is regularly used for both academic and market research. Quota sampling was used to ensure that the sample represented the target population in terms of age, gender, and geographical spread. Participants answered questions about their a priori support for democratic education in schools; their understanding of existing delivery models in English secondary schools; the extent of any fears about ideological or partisan bias in the classroom; and their support for various teacher training models and continuing professional development opportunities in the field of democratic education. Participants also completed standard questions about their political knowledge, values and participation (taken from the 2019 British Election Study for comparative purposes).



## (b) Participants

### Sample 1: Teachers

**Table i. Individual-level characteristics.**

Note: percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

	n	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	2407	72%
Male	945	28%
<b>Age</b>		
Age in 20s	552	17%
Age in 30s	1219	36%
Age in 40s	1089	32%
Age in 50s+	497	15%
<b>Subject</b>		
Arts incl. D&T	182	5.0%
English	723	22%
Humanities	756	23%
Languages	196	6%
Maths	637	19%
Other incl. PE	189	6%
Science	637	19%
Special/AP	7	<1%

	n	Percentage
<b>Experience Level</b>		
Less than 5 years	754	22%
5-10 years	764	23%
10-20 years	1118	33%
Over 20 years	719	22%
<b>Seniority Group</b>		
Classroom Teacher	1175	35%
Middle leader	1501	45%
SLT excluding head	534	16%
Headteacher	69	2%
Other	84	2%

**Table ii. School-level characteristics.**

Note: percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

\*(quartiles for maintained schools calculated using the proportion of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM))

	n	Percentage
<b>School Type</b>		
Independent	264	8%
Maintained	3099	92%
<b>Deprivation index*</b>		
Fee-paying	231	7%
Q1 (affluent)	816	24%
Q2	716	21%
Q3	634	19%
Q4 (deprived)	568	17%
Unknown	398	12%



## Sample 2: Parents

**Table iii. Individual-level characteristics**

Note: percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

	n	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	831	52%
Male	765	48%
<b>Ethnicity (top five by size)</b>		
White British	1269	80%
Any other white background	59	4%
Indian	54	3%
Black African	30	2%
Any other mixed background	26	2%
<b>Education (highest qualification)</b>		
University or CNAAB first degree (eg BA BSc BEd)	285	18%
University or CNAAB higher degree (eg MSc PhD)	183	12%
University diploma	120	8%
GCE A level or Higher Certificate	277	17%
CSE grade 1; GCE O level; GCSE; School Certificate	277	17%
Other technical; professional or higher qualification	91	6%
Recognised trade apprenticeship completed	31	2%
Other	332	20%
<b>Household income per annum</b>		
£70001+	220	13.8%
£60001 - £70000	126	7.9%
£50001 - £60000	149	9.3%
£40001 - £50000	234	14.7%
£30001 - £40000	277	17.4%
£20001 - £30000	262	16.4%
£10000 - £20000	249	15.6%
Below £10000	79	4.9%
<b>Region</b>		
South East	270	16%
Greater London	264	17%
North West	214	13%
West Midlands	173	11%
South West	155	10%
East Anglia	153	10%
Yorkshire and the Humber	149	9%
East Midlands	140	9%
North East	78	5%

### (c) Funding

This research was supported by £20,000 of Knowledge Exchange funding from the University of Sussex (Higher Education Innovation Fund). This support was acquired thanks to Dr Tom Wright and Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 'Speaking Citizens' project. Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson is a member of the APPG on Political Literacy Academic Advisory Group.

Funding for this report was made possible by support from the Speaking Citizens project,

based at the University of Sussex. Speaking Citizens is a group of historians and social scientists who work with educators and policymakers to promote citizenship education through talk. You can find out more about the project by visiting [www.speakingcitizens.org](http://www.speakingcitizens.org) and you can contact the team at [speakingcitizens@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:speakingcitizens@sussex.ac.uk).

### (d) Ethics

This research project was ethically approved ahead of data collection by the University of Sheffield's Department of Politics and International Relations (Reference Number 041175).





# SECTION 1: PROVISION

## (a) What's happening in English secondary schools?

Democratic education programmes in schools have been debated by teachers and policy-makers alike in the UK since the early 1970s. However, democratic education only acquired formal recognition following the publication of the 'Crick Report' (QCA, 1998), which presented a communitarian-inspired approach to teaching young people in school about society through 'social and moral responsibility', 'community involvement', and 'political literacy'. Following the report's recommendations, and spearheaded by the political will of then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, 'citizenship education' was introduced as a statutory subject on the English National Curriculum from 2002.

Citizenship education in England was initially monitored by the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (henceforth CELS), which was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to investigate the delivery and impact of compulsory citizenship education between 2002 and 2010. Over the course of nine years, the CELS research team collected data from 43,410 young people, 3,212 teachers, and 690 schools. Despite finding impressive quantitative and qualitative evidence on the positive link between curricular citizenship education and young people's political and citizenship outcomes, the CELS team also discovered that citizenship education was only delivered in a discrete timetable slot by just under a third of schools (Kerr et al. 2007, pp.8-9). In contrast, a much higher percentage opted to deliver subject content through adjunct activities like assemblies or intertwined in other host subjects like PSHE ('personal, social and health ed-

ucation'). As early as 2006, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) concluded that 'only a few schools... have created a coherent programme [of citizenship education] which pupils can recognise as an entity' (2006, para. 69). The last detailed subject-specific report by Ofsted, published in 2013, gathered evidence from 94 maintained secondary schools. It concluded that '[v]ery few of the schools visited delivered discrete citizenship across the secondary age range'; in 40 schools the citizenship curriculum was below satisfactory or inadequate; and in these cases, 'schools were attempting to cover the citizenship programme in a curriculum period that was labelled both PSHE and citizenship' (pp.23-24).

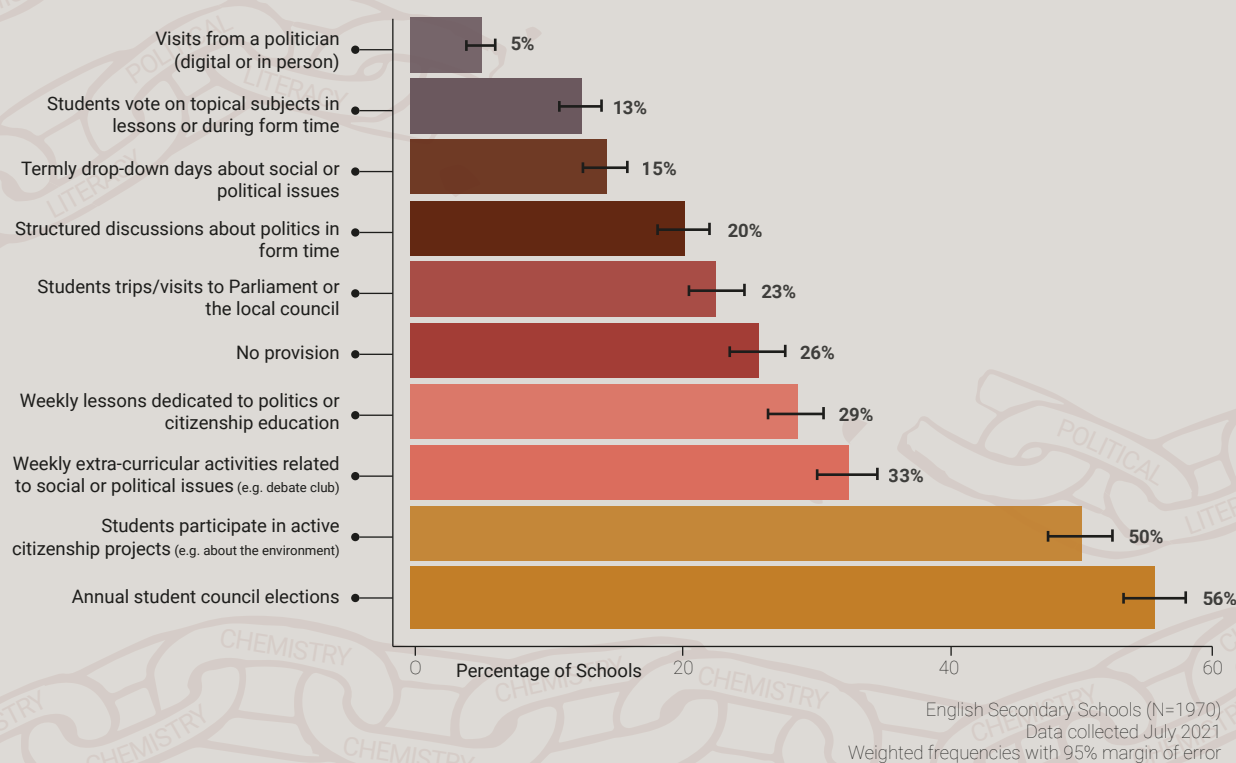
The end of the CELS, England's withdrawal from the International Civic and Citizenship Study (henceforth ICCS), and a hiatus in subject specific Ofsted reports on curriculum citizenship education largely decimated the evidence base to build on early evaluations. At the same time, citizenship education remains a statutory foundation subject on the national curriculum in England, it is recognised by accountability measures of student achievement like Progress 8, and there is a GCSE qualification in Citizenship Studies. In 2020, the Politics in Schools project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, attempted to take stock of contemporary provision vis-à-vis citizenship education lessons as well as informal provision around or beyond the curriculum. It surveyed teachers working in 69 secondary schools and concluded that citizenship and democratic education in schools remains a Cinderella story: it achieves positive impacts on young people where it is taught, but provision is scant. It surmised that formal lessons on citizenship education and politics were still taught in fewer than a third of schools (Weinberg, 2020). However,

er, the sample size of teachers and schools recruited for the study makes it hard to be confident of the accuracy of these claims.

To provide a comprehensive picture of contemporary provision, this report draws on data collected from over 3000 teachers working in 1970 English secondary schools. Representing 47% of all state-funded secondary schools in the country and 14% of all independent schools, this sample exceeds that of the CELS. As such, Figure 1 presents the most accurate assessment of democratic education across this sector in over a decade. Reinforcing the findings of the *Politics in Schools*

project, and showing continuation rather than change in the trends picked up by Ofsted in 2013, the data point to a rather worrying status quo. **Less than a third of secondary schools are offering weekly lessons in politics or curricular citizenship education, and a fifth of schools are offering no provision at all.** Not a lot has changed, it seems, since the end of the CELS in 2010. As argued elsewhere, the roll out of statutory citizenship education in England may have been fast-paced and relatively well-resourced, but ultimately it has not embedded within school curricula or broader education governance (Kisby, 2017; Weinberg and Flinders, 2018).

**Figure 1. Provision of democratic education (formal and informal) in English secondary schools.**



**Schools remain more likely to offer extra-curricular activities like debating societies than discrete lessons, and at least half have instituted annual student council elections. At the same time, half of secondary schools are getting their students involved with active citizenship projects in, across, or around curricular lessons.** This is a highly encouraging finding that may reflect the saliency of a recent and continued surge in youth activism around issues such as climate action and inequal-

ity (see Pickard, 2019) as well as the growth of extended project qualifications at Key Stage 5 (for a discussion, see Gill, 2016). The 'least likely' modes of provision are political contact and student vote exercises. **As few as 5% of schools are visited by a politician (digitally or otherwise) in the course of each school year.** This is a gap that demands attention. Academic research on this relatively under-developed topic in the UK suggests that positive political contact with poli-



ticians can overcome anti-political sentiments and stimulate future engagement among adults (Soo et al., 2020). Similarly, research with young people in schools points to a profound impact on youth expressive participation and political ambition to stand for office, although these effects appear to be contingent on a descriptive link between the politician and the young people they visit (see Weinberg, 2021). In recent years, a civil society organisation called *The Politics Project* has launched a digital surgeries programme that facilitates political contact in the classroom. This is an important initiative with evident room to grow further. Equally, a responsibility lies with politicians and their offices to be more proactive in setting up such visits with schools in their constituencies.

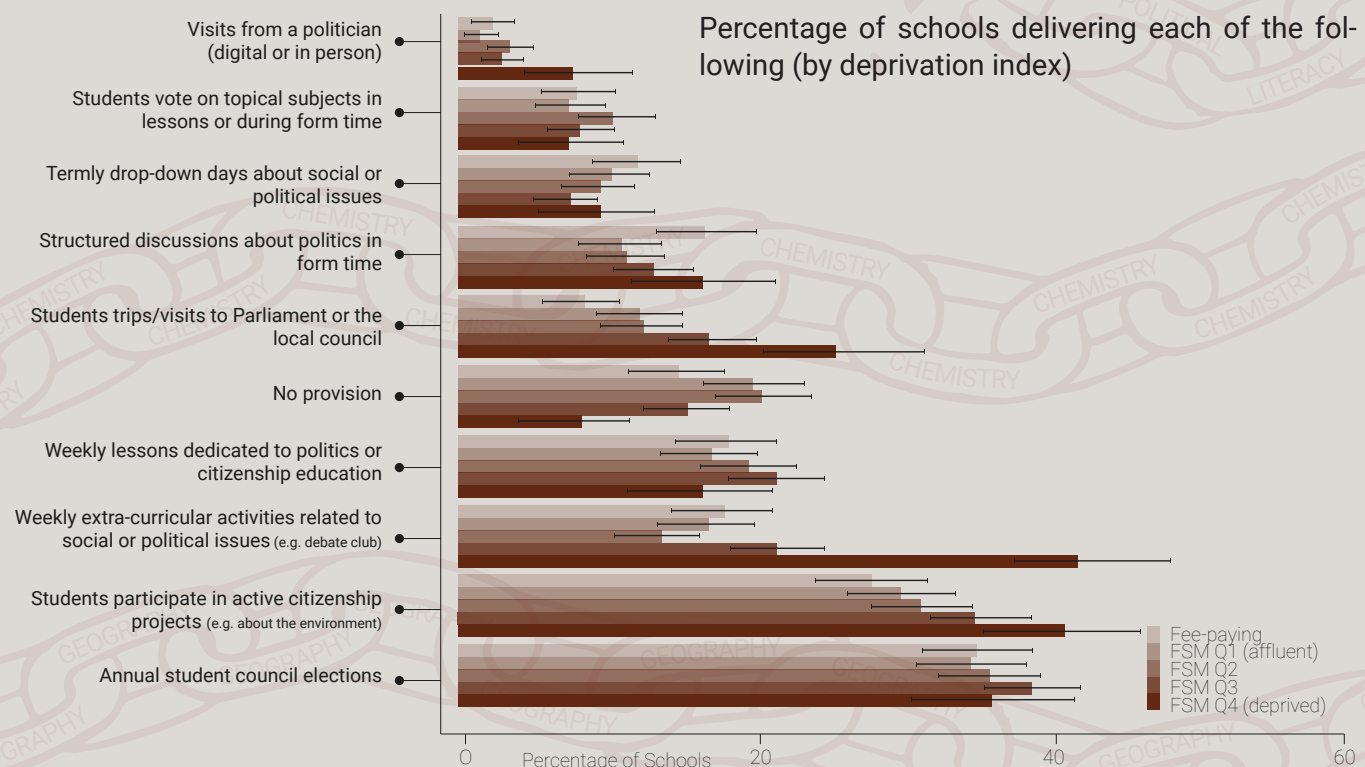
## (b) Inequalities in provision.

It is possible that these levels of provision are not equal across all types of secondary school. Research using CELS data (Hoskins et al., 2017), as well as recent small-n studies of students in

England (Weinberg, 2021), suggests that access to democratic education in school might be shaped by young people's social background. Such inequality in provision is confirmed here. Appendix A compares the provision of democratic education in maintained (state-funded) and independent (fee-paying) secondary schools in England, and Figure 2 provides an even more nuanced picture by breaking down maintained schools into four quartiles using a deprivation index based on the proportion of their student intake who are eligible for free school meals. Whilst access to weekly discrete lessons in politics or citizenship education does not appear to be affected by the socio-economic composition of a school's student population, **independent schools do offer an enhanced programme of provision outside the curriculum – specifically school trips to political institutions, political contact, extra-curricular activities and active citizenship projects. These differences are starkest when compared to maintained schools serving the most deprived communities. Independent schools are also significantly less likely to be offering no provision whatsoever.**

**Figure 2. Democratic education in English secondary schools compared by levels of student deprivation**

Percentage of schools delivering each of the following (by deprivation index)



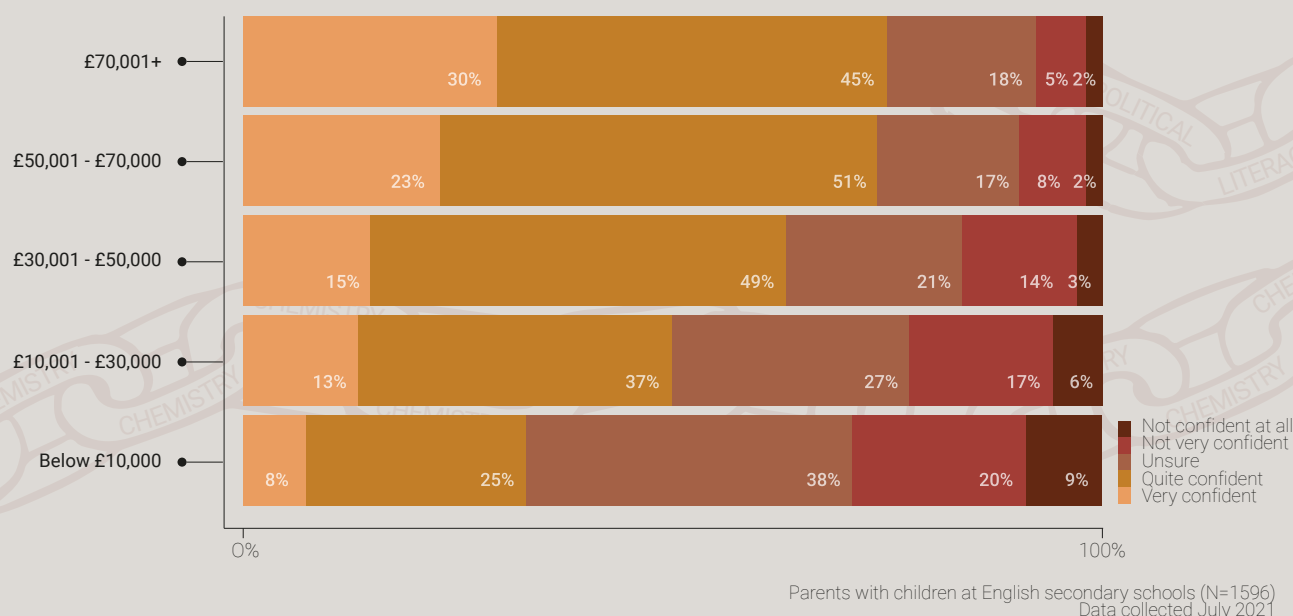
English Secondary Schools (N=1970)  
Data collected July 2021

On several activities, maintained schools serving affluent student populations are more likely to offer democratic education than those with higher levels of deprivation. These findings are concerning on a number of levels. For example, there is already a wealth of research pointing to inequalities in both political participation and political outcomes between communities with high and low socio-economic status, and these inequalities often intersect with race and gender as well (e.g. Heath et al., 2013; Dalton, 2017; Plutzer, 2018). Such discrepancies are noticeable in the political engagement and knowledge of parents from high- and low-income households as well as their self-reported confidence when it comes to discussing social and political issues with their children (Figure 3). For example, **parents earning over £70,000/year are more than twice as likely to feel ‘quite’ or ‘very’ confident talking to their children about politics**

**than parents earning less than £10,000.** If universal education is going to fulfil its base promise of writing out rather than perpetuating these inequalities, then all students should be able to access and benefit from a quality democratic education. As it stands, the evidence presented here suggests that children from low-income households are unlikely to access comparable levels of political socialisation at school or in the home. The result is that our education system appears to encourage rather than confront a version of the eponymously named Matthew Effect – a well-researched phenomenon in education that refers to the cumulative advantage accrued to children from wealthy, safe, secure, or high-status backgrounds (Merton, 1968). To paraphrase, “the [politically] educational rich get richer and the [politically] educational poor get poorer”.

**Figure 3. Parental confidence talking about social and political issues in the home.**

To what extent do you feel confident talking about social and political issues with your child[ren]?



Disparities in school-based provision are also mirrored in the subjective assessments of democratic education made by parents (Figure 4). For instance, **31% of parents believe that the secondary curriculum, where taught, fully develops political**

**literacy (i.e. democratic skills, knowledge and values)** in young people, but this figure is substantially higher where it is actually being taught with greater frequency and variety (53% among parents with children attending independent sec-

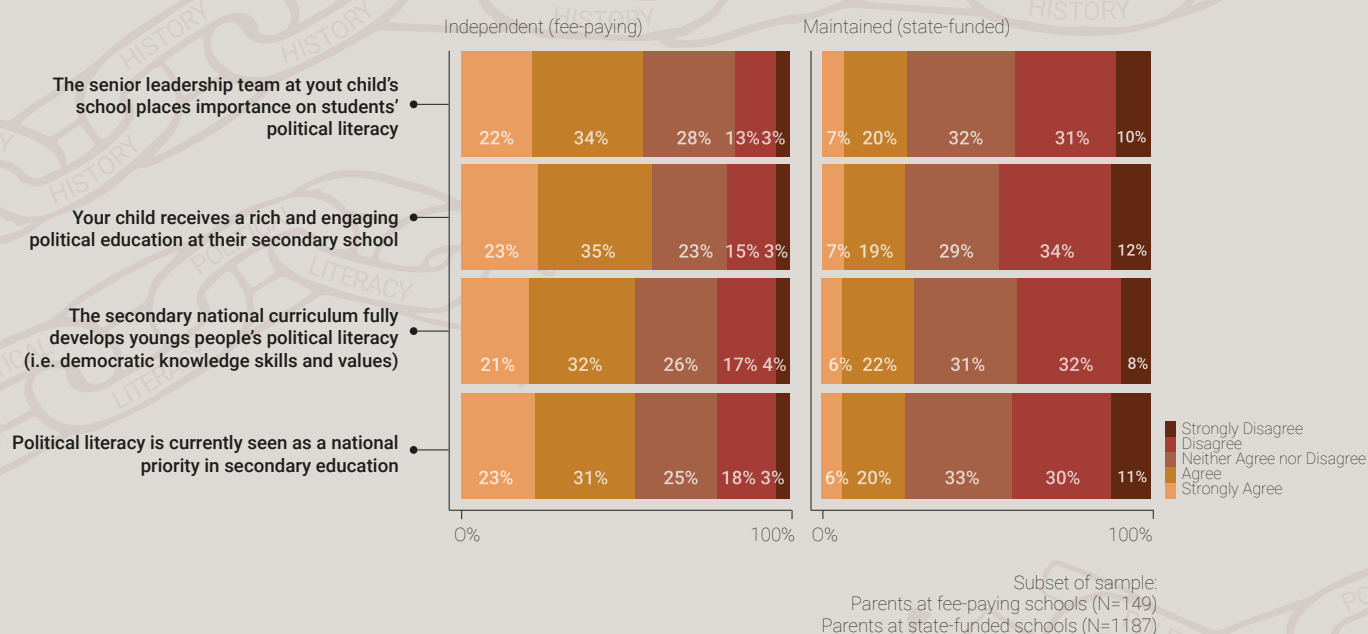


ondary schools). **Just 30% of parents agree that their child gets a rich and engaging democratic education in school, or that the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) at their child's school values political literacy**, but these figures jump to 58% and 56% respectively when we only consider parents with children at independent schools. Interestingly, parents are significantly more likely to believe that political

literacy is a national policy priority when their child attends an independent school (54%) as compared to a maintained school (26%). These figures might suggest an upward trickle of frontline practice impacting elector perceptions of policy performance that should be compelling for politicians and civil servants.

**Figure 4. Parental perceptions of democratic education in English secondary education.**

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? Subjective assessments of political education by parents with [secondary] school age children.



Despite negative perceptions of existing provision, parents are strongly supportive of democratic education. To be specific, **72% of parents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that it is important for children to be taught about politics in school**, and this figure does not vary significantly between parents with children at different types of schools. At the same time, a **majority of teachers (60%) feel 'quite' or 'very' responsible for developing young people's political literacy**. This figure is higher among teachers with training specialisms in English (72%) and Humanities subjects like History and Geography (82%), as well as Headteachers (76%) and Senior Leadership Teams (70%). If levels of democratic education in English schools are so fractured, yet there is both an appetite for it among electors and a subjective sense of responsibility among frontline educators,

then we might ask two further questions:

**Is there actually a case to be made for increasing the quantity of democratic education?**

**And if so, what are the barriers to that happening?**

The next section tackles each of these questions in turn.

### (c) The case for democratic education and the barriers against it.

On the first of these questions, there is an extensive evidence base within the UK and abroad that points to the positive impact of 'democratic', 'civic', 'citizenship' or 'political' education on young people. In England, the majority of academic research in this area draws on data collected by the CELS. The final report of that landmark longitudinal study concluded:

[T]he CELS cohort [i.e. a group of pupils who were tracked and regularly surveyed during their period of full time education] was more likely to have positive attitudes and intentions towards civic and political participation (both in the present and in the future) if they had high levels of 'received citizenship' (i.e. if they reported having received 'a lot' of citizenship education).

*(Keating et al., 2010, p. vi)*

Where students had received a regular high-quality learning experience in politics and citizenship, they developed greater belief in their ability to make a difference locally or nationally and to influence others, they were more likely to participate in politics expressively by, for example, raising money for charity or signing a petition, and they presented more positive participatory intentions vis-à-vis voting and community involvement in the future. Shortly after the end of the CELS, additional survey data was collected from more than 3,000 young people in England, Wales and Scotland that pointed to similar links between citizenship education and young people's political knowledge, participation, and efficacy (Whiteley, 2014). Tracking 746 19- and 20-year olds who had been part of the CELS cohort, Keating and Janmaat (2016) were able to show that young people with a positive track record of active citizenship and democratic education in school at age 15 and 16 (including school councils, mock elections and debating clubs) were more likely to go on to vote in subsequent elections and more likely to participate expressively as adults in a wide variety of other political activities.

These findings are echoed in a much larger international evidence base that identifies replicable relationships between civic education and dependent variables such as 'civic knowledge, expected participation and students' attitudes towards political institutions and towards rights for immigrants and political rights for women' (Knowles et al., 2018, p.12). Reflecting on data collected from young people in 24 countries, the 2016 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS; Schulz et al., 2016, p. 209) concluded:

[the] promotion of civic and citizenship education, in both formal and informal ways, should be considered as an essential means of helping young people become more conscious of their political roles and the importance of being participating citizens.

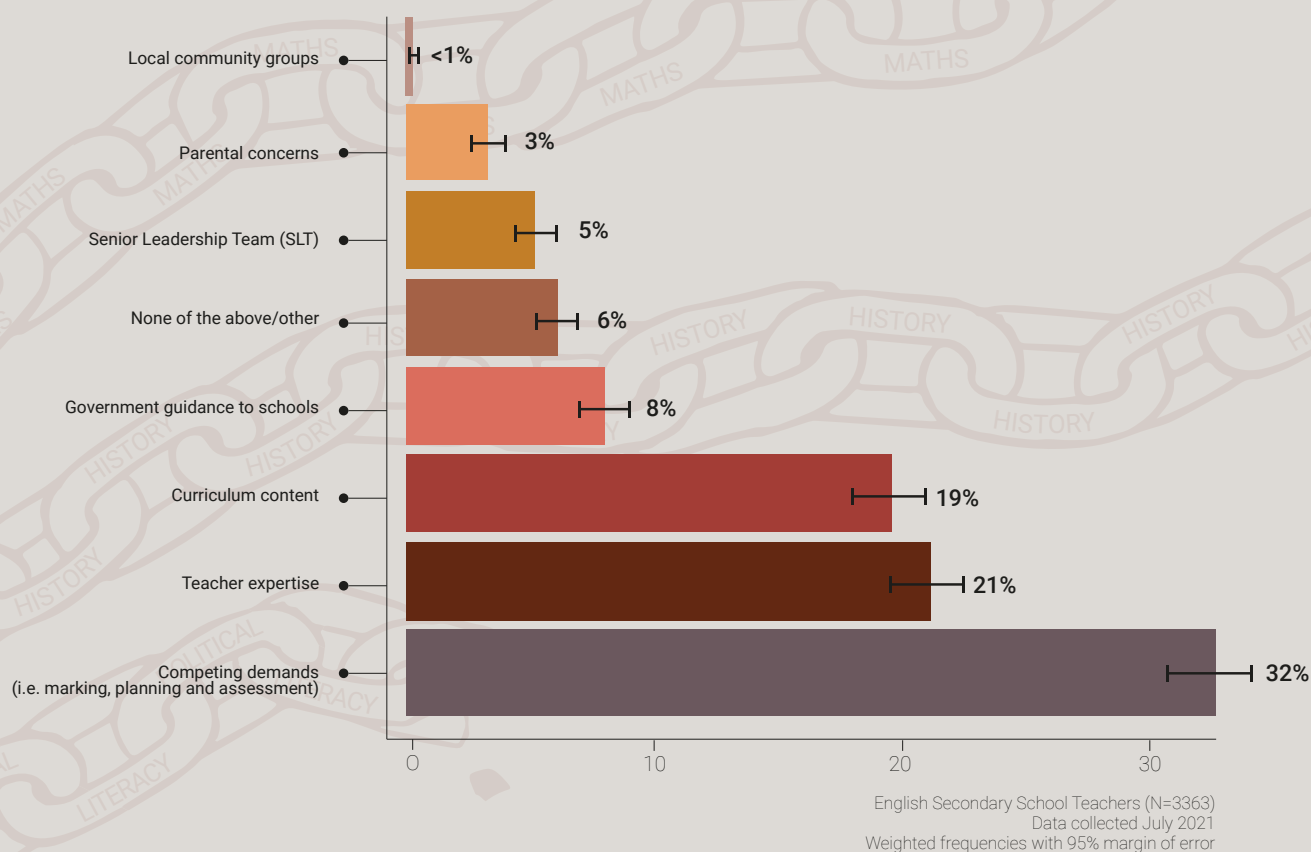
Evaluating 25 randomised controlled trials on the effects of democratic education, as opposed to studies using observational data, Donbavand and Hoskins (2021) also find confirmatory evidence of the aforementioned links between school-level approaches such as participatory learning and improvements to young people's political engagement. A smaller body of work has, in turn, shown that democratic education and related activities in school may mitigate known inequalities in informal and formal political participation that are seen by socio-economic status, gender, and ethnicity (Martens and Gainous, 2013; Neundorff et al., 2016; Hoskins et al., 2017). However, recent evidence from England suggests that these effects may be contingent on the descriptive quality of curricular materials or political contact (Weinberg, 2021).

In sum, the case for quality democratic education is compelling. If one agrees, as Jerome and Kisby (2020, p.48) argue, that 'democracy should act deliberately to build a culture and set of practices to sustain itself', then democratic education should be a sine qua non of the policy and practice devised to make good on that belief. This conclusion leads, then, to the second question posed above: what is hindering democratic education in England? To answer this question, more than 3000 teachers were asked to identify the biggest obstacle to effective democratic education from a list of possible options that were harvested from smaller qualitative studies (see, for example, Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). Three 'barriers' or 'blockages' stand out: competing demands on teachers' time; teacher expertise; and curriculum content (Figure 5). It is worth noting that there was no significant variation in the hierarchy of these obstacles according to teacher experience, seniority or school type.



**Figure 5. Obstacles to democratic education.**

Percentage of teachers who identified each of the following as the biggest obstacle



The first and third of these obstacles reflect long-standing arguments about the trade-off between educational theory and ‘the grammar of schooling’ (Tyack and Tobin 1994). Put simply, the expectations or subcultures of school subjects, schools, and regional or national education systems implicitly delimit the scope of what is necessary or possible in the classroom. In a test- and target-oriented education system like the one seen in England, the good intentions and preferred operation of subjects like citizenship education must fit or fail according to dominant logics of thought and assessment metrics. For this reason, Bernard Crick himself lamented that ‘[no] other curriculum subject was stated so briefly [as citizenship education]’ (2002, p.499), and in many ways the light-touch approach taken to introduce the subject between 1998 and 2002, when it was first taught, made the subject more vulnerable to the grammar of schooling than other established or mainstream school subjects.

The second biggest obstacle to effective democratic education, that of teacher expertise, echoes findings from a number of earlier studies in this field. The final report of the CELS recommended that policymakers and practitioners ‘[work] to ensure that schools and teachers have sufficient support and training to embed citizenship learning’ (Keating et al., 2010, p.viii). Similarly, the 2013 Ofsted report on statutory citizenship education noted: ‘[when] the subject was taught by enthusiastic expert teachers who demonstrated specialist knowledge gained through specialist training or experience with support when in post, lessons were more likely to be successful in securing good progress’ (p.19). It makes sense that teachers with bespoke training or continuing professional development in politics or citizenship education will be better equipped to deliver a high-quality learning experience. This is also a fact that teachers appear

to be reflexively aware of themselves. However, the number of trained citizenship teachers in English secondary schools falls well below the necessary, let alone desirable, number that would be required for politics or citizenship education to thrive as a universal entitlement for all students. In the Department for Education's 2019 school workforce survey, only 456 of 2876 schools reported having a trained citizenship education teacher. This is a shocking

statistic, but possibly not surprising when you consider the historic training figures for this subject area. Just 284 Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) practiced the subject in 2006 (against a target of 540); in 2010 only 220 citizenship education teacher training places were available; and by 2017 the number of trainee citizenship education teachers reportedly dropped to fewer than 50.<sup>1</sup>



This figure was cited by Liz Moore, CEO of the Association for Citizenship Teaching, in an evidence session conducted by the 2018 House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. A full transcript can be obtained here: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/citizenship-and-civic-engagement-committee/citizenship-and-civic-engagement/oral/72120.html>.



## SECTION 2: PRACTICE

Drawing on comprehensive survey data collected from secondary school teachers and parents in England, the first section of this report pointed to (a) a worrying deficit in the amount of democratic education delivered in schools (both in terms of formal citizenship education lessons as well as a range of alternative political learning activities), (b) inequalities in democratic education, and (c) a range of obstacles that may impede effective democratic education including school-based demands on teacher time, teacher expertise, and curriculum content. The following section of this report focuses on the second of these obstacles by exploring ‘who’ is delivering democratic education where it does occur and ‘how’ prepared they are to do it. Compared to curriculum reform and wholesale changes to the nature of the modern teaching profession, it is possible that additional data on teacher preparedness might facilitate relatively low-cost, high-impact solutions to the under-provision of democratic education in schools.

### (a) Who is teaching democratic education?

If there are currently so few trained politics and citizenship teachers in England, then it is crucial that we not only map where democratic education is taking place but by whom it is being delivered. The imperative here is even greater when the teaching body itself is able to identify teacher expertise as the second biggest barrier to effective provision (Figure 5). In 2010, the final report of the CELS concluded that citizenship education in England faced serious concerns relating to train-

ing and staffing: ‘[in] many cases citizenship education is delivered by staff with little experience of, expertise in, or enthusiasm for [it]’ (Keating et al., 2010, p. 47). The report went on to claim that ‘a considerable number of teachers are still not at all confident about teaching about the economy, government, or European and global issues’ (Keating et al., 2010, p. 36; italics in original). It argued for:

...[more] teacher training (both in initial and through CPD) to ensure that young people are given sufficient opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to be able to engage effectively with the political system and political issues.

(Keating et al., 2010, viii)

New data collected from more than 3000 teachers for this research project suggests that this call was not met. **At present, 39% of secondary school teachers report being asked to deliver formal lessons or learning activities in politics or citizenship education** (Table 1). Whilst this responsibility falls predominantly on staff trained in the Humanities (31% of whom are required to teach politics or curricular citizenship education more than once per month), the same demand is made of teachers trained in Art or Design Technology (18%), English (20%), Modern Foreign Languages (22%), Maths (15%), Science (17%), and Physical Education or vocational subjects (22%). At the same time, 60% of teachers feel a responsibility for young people’s political literacy. This subjective sense of responsibility may also translate into everyday decisions to teach political content (broadly defined) in host

subjects in a way that is additional to the formal teaching duties noted above. **As such, this remains an area of learning taught predominantly by non-specialists.**

There is also a stark contrast between teachers' sense of responsibility vis-à-vis young people's political literacy, the formal requirements made of them vis-à-vis teaching politics and citizenship education, and their self-reported (un-)preparedness to act on either (Table 1). **Worryingly, 79% of teachers feel that their initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) have 'not prepared them at all' for teaching political literacy. Only 1% feel fully prepared.** As expected, levels of preparedness are higher among those trained in cognate subjects in the Humanities (36% of whom feel prepared to varying degrees). Although there are too few trained citizenship education teachers in this cohort to draw isolated

conclusions, other research projects suggest that levels of preparedness are notably higher among these professionals (Weinberg, 2020). Levels of complete unpreparedness are also considerably higher among teachers in the Arts (82%) and STEM subjects like Maths (88%) and Science (85%). This body of evidence suggests that non-specialist ITT programmes and CPD sessions are not adequately preparing teachers for the task of delivering citizenship and democratic education in general, even though teachers across the curriculum are being required to do so. Not only does such a situation place an unfair burden on non-specialist teachers, but the lack of trained colleagues is highly symbolic in a school setting and may naturally undermine the status, legitimacy or momentum of democratic education. It may also impact the quality of provision that does occur. It is possible to take this line of inquiry further by examining teachers' political knowledge and pedagogic preferences.

**Table 1. A comparison of teachers' subjective responsibility for teaching political literacy, their subjective preparedness to do so, and the regularity of their teaching commitments in politics or citizenship education.**

**To what extent do you feel responsible for teaching young people political literacy (e.g. democratic knowledge, skills and values)?**

	All	English	Maths	Science	Humanities	Languages	Arts incl D&T	Other incl PE
Not responsible at all	7%	3%	16%	10%	2%	6%	4%	9%
Not very responsible	27%	19%	37%	44%	14%	24%	22%	30%
Quite responsible	44%	52%	35%	34%	48%	54%	56%	41%
Very responsible	16%	20%	7%	7%	33%	13%	13%	11%
Unsure	4%	4%	5%	5%	3%	2%	5%	7%
Not relevant / cannot answer	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%
Unique responses	3367	724	641	639	758	196	183	189
Respondents (weighted)	3387	663	689	676	744	188	188	183
Maximum margin of error	2%	4%	4%	4%	4%	7%	7%	7%



**To what extent did your initial teacher training or ongoing CPD prepare you to teach political literacy (e.g. democratic knowledge, skills and values)?**

Did not prepare me at all	79%	79%	88%	85%	64%	82%	81%	79%
Somewhat prepared me	13%	14%	9%	8%	20%	15%	11%	13%
Adequately prepared me	4%	4%	1%	3%	9%	0%	2%	3%
Fully prepared me	1%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	2%	1%
Unsure	2%	2%	1%	3%	2%	2%	1%	2%
Not relevant / cannot answer	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	3%
Unique responses	3387	724	641	639	758	196	183	189
Respondents (weighted)	3387	663	689	676	744	188	188	183
Maximum margin of error	2%	4%	4%	4%	4%	7%	7%	7%

**How often are you required to teach citizenship education or politics at your current school?**

Never	51%	53%	59%	57%	42%	51%	51%	39%
Once or twice per year	18%	17%	16%	18%	18%	19%	21%	26%
More than once per month	9%	9%	8%	9%	11%	9%	7%	10%
Weekly	11%	10%	8%	9%	14%	12%	11%	12%
Daily	1%	1%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%
Not relevant / cannot answer	10%	10%	9%	8%	9%	8%	10%	12%
Unique responses	3387	724	641	639	758	196	183	189
Respondents (weighted)	3387	663	689	676	744	188	188	183
Maximum margin of error	2%	4%	4%	4%	4%	7%	7%	7%

## **(b) Political knowledge.**

Political literacy, as defined in the context of this report and others (including the 1998 'Crick Report') includes a strong emphasis on knowledge alongside skills and values. Whereas the skills of argumentation, debate, consensus-building and independent research are all central to active participation in politics, knowledge of politics (its systems, institutions, rules, and actors) provides the basis upon which opinions can be formed and the skills listed above can be exercised. It is crucial, therefore, that teachers who are tasked with delivering political learning in schools are also appraised

of such knowledge. For the purpose of this report, over 3000 secondary school teachers in England were asked to complete a battery of TRUE/FALSE questions about British politics. These questions are taken directly from the British Election Study, which seeks to measure citizens' understanding of the basic 'rules of the game'. These survey items are a crude measure of political knowledge and, admittedly, they represent a very narrow slice of 'political facts' about British parliamentary politics. However, they provide a baseline test against which to measure teachers' political knowledge compared to other target populations (such as the wider public in England).

The individual items, and the proportion of correct responses given by teachers, are as follows:

Polling stations close at 10.00pm on election day. (92% answered correctly)

You can only stand for parliament if you pay a deposit. (59% answered correctly)

Only taxpayers are allowed to vote in a general election. (94% answered correctly)

The UK uses a proportional representation system for national elections. (84% answered correctly)

Members of Parliament from different parties are part of each parliamentary committee. (73% answered correctly)

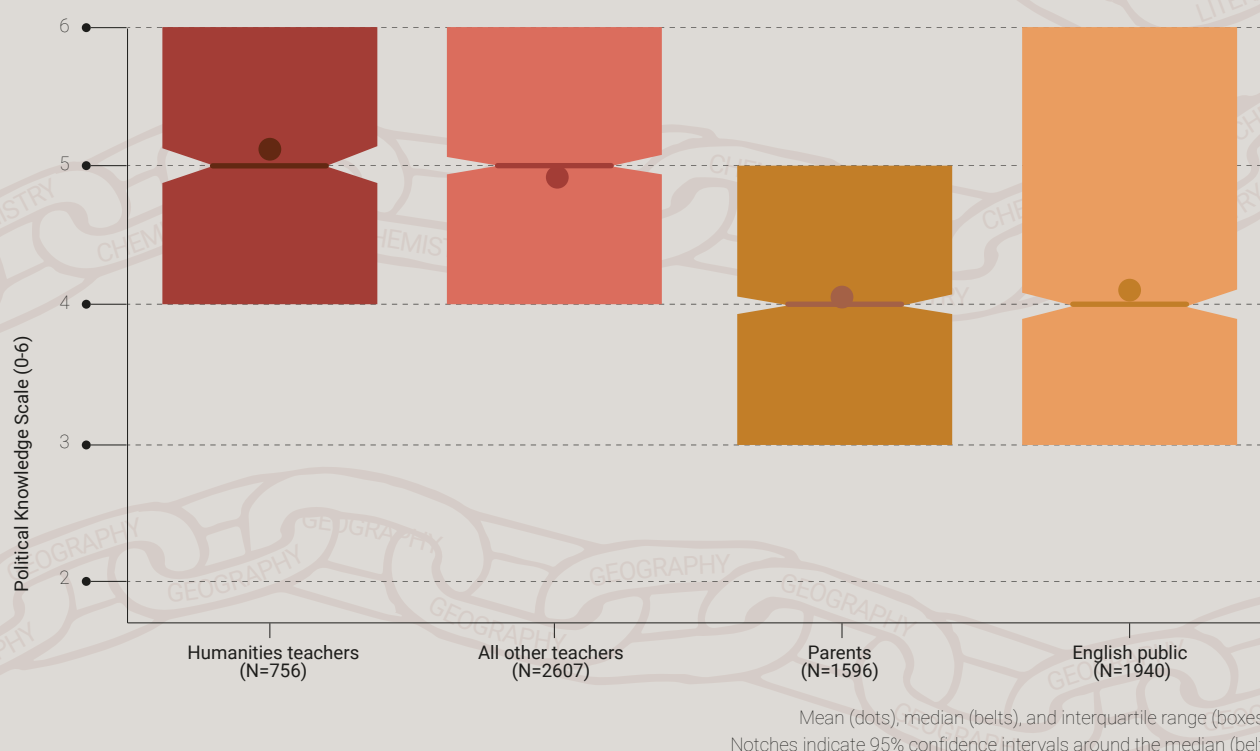
There are roughly 100 Members of Parliament. (94% answered correctly)

At an aggregate level, political knowledge among participants is robust; a majority of teachers cor-

rectly identified whether each statement was true or false. Yet treating these items as a cumulative scale where each correct answer elicits one point, only 43% of teachers scored six and 13% scored less than three. Whilst these items are, as stated, an imperfect measure of political knowledge, these results suggest that there is more work to be done to create an expert teaching base – arguably a prerequisite if teachers across the curriculum are going to continue to be tasked with delivering democratic education. We can also place these scores in context by comparing teachers to two other target groups: parents of children in English secondary education (surveyed for this study) and the wider English public (surveyed by the 2019 British Election Study; Fieldhouse et al., 2021) (Figure 6). Teachers are also split here between those in the Humanities and all other subjects on the basis that the former should have acquired a more acute understanding of politics through training in cognate disciplines with a substantial cross-over of curriculum content.

**Figure 6. Distribution of scores from a standard test of knowledge about British politics.**

Political knowledge among teachers, parents and the wider English public.



On average, Humanities teachers do score marginally higher on this test, but these differences are not statistically significant. Rather, the main takeaway here is that teachers score higher than the public or the parents of their students when it comes to knowing basic facts about politics (specifically British parliamentary politics in this case). This is an encouraging finding. However, existing curriculum specifications (e.g. for programmes of study in citizenship at key stage 3 and 4) require students to learn not only the fundamental basics of the UK's political system, but also a sound knowledge of how it is governed, how and when citizens can participate, how laws are made, and the role of law and justice in UK democracy (DfE, 2013). Additional survey evidence is needed to assess teachers' political knowledge across these wider topics in order to further evaluate teacher expertise and preparedness to deliver democratic education.

### **(c) Open Classroom Climate (OCC) and controversial issues.**

The results of an extensive literature on citizenship and democratic education point to a pedagogic link between how teachers approach their role as civic educators and student outcomes (Torney-Purta 2002; Neundorff et al., 2016). Put simply, citizenship education has the most significant impact where pupils receive both declarative knowledge (i.e. facts, concepts and relationships between these) and procedural knowledge (i.e. how to carry out actions) within an Open Classroom Climate (OCC) (see Schraw, 2006). OCC refers to the learning culture in a classroom with a particular focus on the extent to which young people are encouraged to debate, form and express individual opinions, and introduce issues for class discussion. Across coun-

tries, contexts and timeframes, OCC shares the most consistent positive associations with young people's democratic attitudes and behaviours (e.g. in Latin America: see Trevino et al. 2016; in the UK: Weinberg, 2021; in western Europe: see Knowles and McCafferty-Wright 2015; in Thailand and Hong Kong: Kennedy, 2012; and in the United States: Campbell, 2008). Evidence collected in England and the US also indicates that OCC can compensate for the disadvantages faced by young people with low socio-economic status when it comes to levels of expressive and electoral participation in politics (Campbell, 2008; Weinberg, 2021). As Martens and Gainous (2013, p.18) argue in their US-based study, 'the unmistakable conclusion to be drawn from our research is that fostering an open classroom climate is the surest way to improve the democratic capacity of America's youth.'

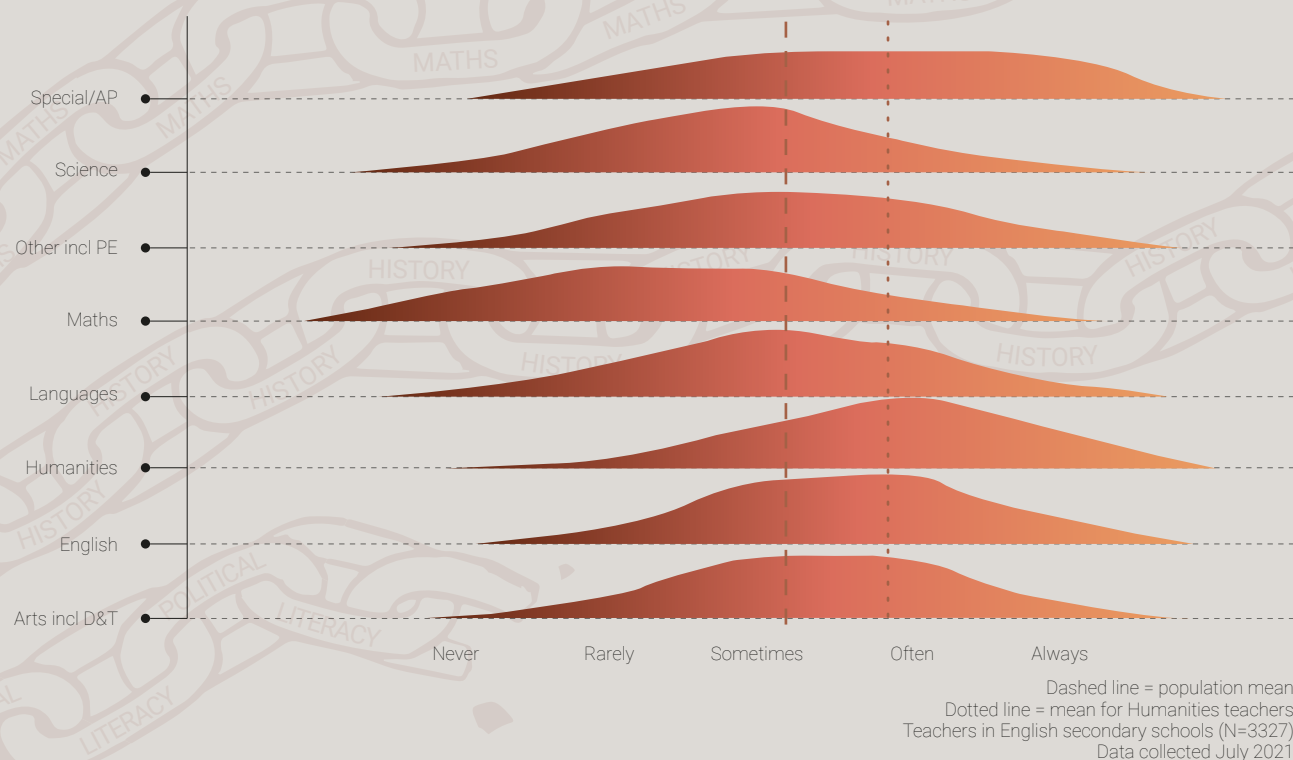
If educators agree that young people should be encouraged and equipped to participate equally in democratic politics – which is the express position of this report – then teachers should be invoking OCC in their practice wherever possible and especially when tasked with delivering democratic education. To test whether or not this expectation manifests in reality, teachers in England were asked to report their use of OCC with a specific focus on social and political issues. Figure 7 presents density ridge plots showing the distribution of scores across a five-point frequency scale (divided by teachers' subject specialisms). **On average, 42% of teachers self-report using OCC 'often' or 'always' in their lessons.** Indicative of a training effect, this figure is considerably higher among Humanities teachers (69%) and considerably lower among teachers in Modern Foreign Languages (35%) or STEM subjects such as Maths (17%) or Science (22%).





**Figure 7. Teachers' use of Open Classroom Climate in English secondary education.**

How often do you encourage students to consider, discuss and express opinions on multiple viewpoints about social and political issues in your classroom?



On one hand, these results suggest that teacher-training programmes can make a meaningful difference in preparing practitioners to deliver effective citizenship and democratic education (either discretely or in a cross-curricula setting). On the other hand, these results may reflect the restrictions imposed by host subject curricula on teachers from different training backgrounds. Put simply, practitioners who go on to teach subjects in the Humanities are necessarily delivering content on a daily basis that lends itself more easily to these pedagogic practices than those practitioners in the hard or physical sciences. This might be considered acceptable if those same teachers in, for example, STEM subjects were not also required to teach citizenship and democratic education in English secondary schools. **Considering only those teachers who are currently required to deliver democratic education (at any frequency), just 51% reported using OCC 'often' or 'always' in their classroom.**

As a pedagogic choice, OCC enables students to enter into civil deliberation about competing viewpoints and ask 'open questions' about sensitive subject matter. Indeed, as a social and scholarly field of study, citizenship and politics necessarily engage with controversial issues that rarely appear elsewhere on the formal or informal curriculum. Issues such as racism, gender identity, Brexit, religious freedom, and even radicalisation are all topics of study that come under the umbrella of democratic education. These are important issues that often dominate adult discourse in the media and it is crucial that young people are given a safe space in which to learn about them, discuss them, and make informed and tolerant opinions.

The need to introduce controversial subjects in the classroom was given a statutory fillip by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. Under this legislation, the Department for Education asserts that schools have a responsibility to build

pupils' resilience to radicalisation by promoting 'fundamental British values' and enabling them to challenge 'extremist views'. The purpose and wording of this legislation is challenging and, for many, controversial itself on several dimensions. Yet for the purpose of this report, it remains an important moment in the evolution of democratic education in schools. In June 2015, the Department for Education issued guidance to schools that identified citizenship education as a key locale for meeting the Prevent Duty. It reads:

"[Schools should provide] a safe environment for debating controversial issues and helping [students] to understand how they can influence

and participate in decision-making...Citizenship helps to provide pupils with the knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society. It should equip pupils to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, to debate, and to make reasoned arguments. In Citizenship, pupils learn about democracy, government and how laws are made and upheld. Pupils are also taught about the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding."

(DfE, 2015, p.8)





The Expert Advisory Group for Citizenship and the Association for Citizenship Teaching (2015) subsequently published their own guidance to schools that emphasised the importance of teacher-training. On a checklist of key preparatory questions for Head Teachers and Senior Leaders, it asked:

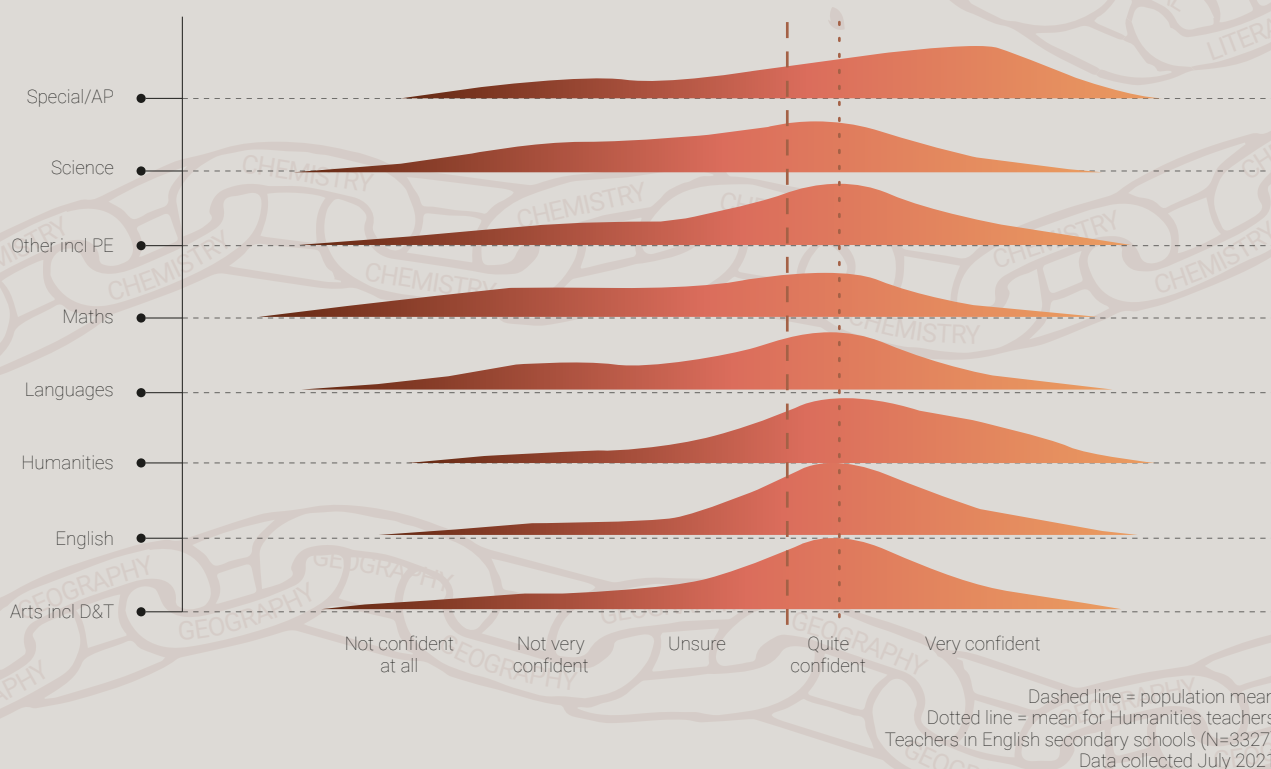
**Has your school appointed specialist trained citizenship teachers and/or provided existing staff with adequate training and CPD opportunities?**

Whether teaching staff are equipped to introduce controversial issues in the classroom is, then, understood to be a crucial factor in the effective delivery of democratic education (broadly conceived) as well as a school's capacity to meet its safeguarding duties under Prevent. To assess the state of play, English secondary school teachers were asked to report their confidence when it comes to teaching about controversial or sensitive social and political issues (Figure 8). **This study**

**finds that 48% of teachers feel 'quite' confident, but only 15% feel 'very' confident.** The latter statistic rises to 30% of Humanities teachers, but drops to 17% of English teachers, 7% of Maths and Science teachers, 10% of MFL teachers, and 14% of teachers in Art and Design Technology. These findings are once again indicative of a training effect insofar as ITT or CPD in cognate disciplines may improve teacher preparedness. **Yet of those teachers currently required to deliver citizenship or democratic education in schools (at any frequency), only 20% feel 'very' confident when teaching controversial issues.** This a concerning situation that undermines schools and teachers who should otherwise want to, and be able to, engage young people in important discussions about issues such as race, gender or even extremism. Only when staff are comfortable and prepared for teaching controversial issues, is it realistic to start planning for effective learning.

**Figure 8. Staff confidence about teaching controversial issues in the classroom.**

How confident are you teaching students about controversial or sensitive social and political issues (e.g. race relations, gender identity, referenda)?





# SECTION 3: POLITICS

So far this report has presented new data on democratic education in English secondary schools with a particular focus on provision and teaching practice. A comprehensive dataset, gathered from teachers around the country, crystallises the peripheral position of democratic education in most schools, inequalities in provision, and a stark disjuncture between teachers' subjective responsibility for young people's political literacy and their self-reported ability to teach it effectively. The final section of this report explores the 'politics of' teaching politics in schools. On one hand, effective democratic education carries a legal and moral imperative towards impartiality that should guide the delivery and inspection of learning activities geared towards developing young people's political literacy. On the other hand, ideology and partisanship are hard-wired social identities as well as psychological variables that shape public discourse around democratic education and, in turn, affect the conversation about when, how and why to teach politics in schools. Both are critical considerations for those committed to an impactful and equitable system of democratic education that fully prepares young people as ethical, informed, and active citizens.

## **(a) Legal mandates and parental opinion on ideological bias.**

Impartiality in the classroom is an essential condition laid down in law by the Education Act 1996, which prohibits practitioners from promoting partisan political views in an educational setting. It also lays out clear requirements for practitioners to offer a balanced presentation of different political views. For example:

### **(i) Prohibiting partisan teaching**

Section 406 (1) of the Education Act 1996 ("the 1996 Act") provides that the governing body and head teacher of a maintained school must not allow:

- (a) the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at a maintained school who are junior pupils, and
- (b) the promotion of partisan political views through the teaching of any subject in the school.

### **(ii) Promoting balanced teaching**

Section 407 of the 1996 Act provides that the governing body and head teacher shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils while they are:

- (a) in attendance at a maintained school, or
  - (b) taking part in extra-curricular activities which are provided or organised for registered pupils at the school by or on behalf of the school,
- they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

A legal ruling in the court case of *Dimmock v Secretary of State for Education and Skills* ([2007] EWHC 2288 (Admin)) clarified some of the key terms in the Education Act (see Summary of Judge's reasoning). To be specific, it was accepted that the term 'partisan' in section 406 was not only understood to mean 'party political', but rather to denote 'one sided' teaching of political content. Recent guidance provided to practitioners by the Welsh

Government and the Association for Citizenship Teaching (2021, pp.4-5) explains the outcome of this ruling with even greater clarity:

[Practitioners] may use partisan materials in their class, but they should do so in a balanced way and should provide a range of alternative views. However, the concept of balance does not require practitioners to provide 'equal air-time' to all opposing views, rather it simply requires practitioners to be fair and dispassionate in the way they present the range of views, the context in which the political debate happens, and the relationship between the various views and the evidence. The purpose of such teaching should be to stimulate informed discussion of political issues rather than to influence the views of children in any pre-determined way.'

The legal architecture that frames teaching practice vis-à-vis democratic education is, then, firm and resolute. It should also provide a baseline from which to build voter confidence in the teaching of politics in schools. However, recent debates about the existence, or not, of a so-called 'culture war' in the UK have centred on our educational establishments. In Higher Education, this argument escalated after former Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson MP, announced plans to appoint a "free speech champion" and place new conditions on universities related to ideological plurality that would be linked to public funding. At the same time, research into these culture wars by the Policy Institute at King's College London (Duffy et al., 2021) found that fears about ideological bias among university educators are largely overblown. Among people who did not go to university, 42% think academics most often have a range of different political views – compared with 18% who think they tend to be left-wing, 11% who think they are moderate and 6% who think they're right-wing. Among graduates, the most common view remains that academics have a mix of political opinions (36%).

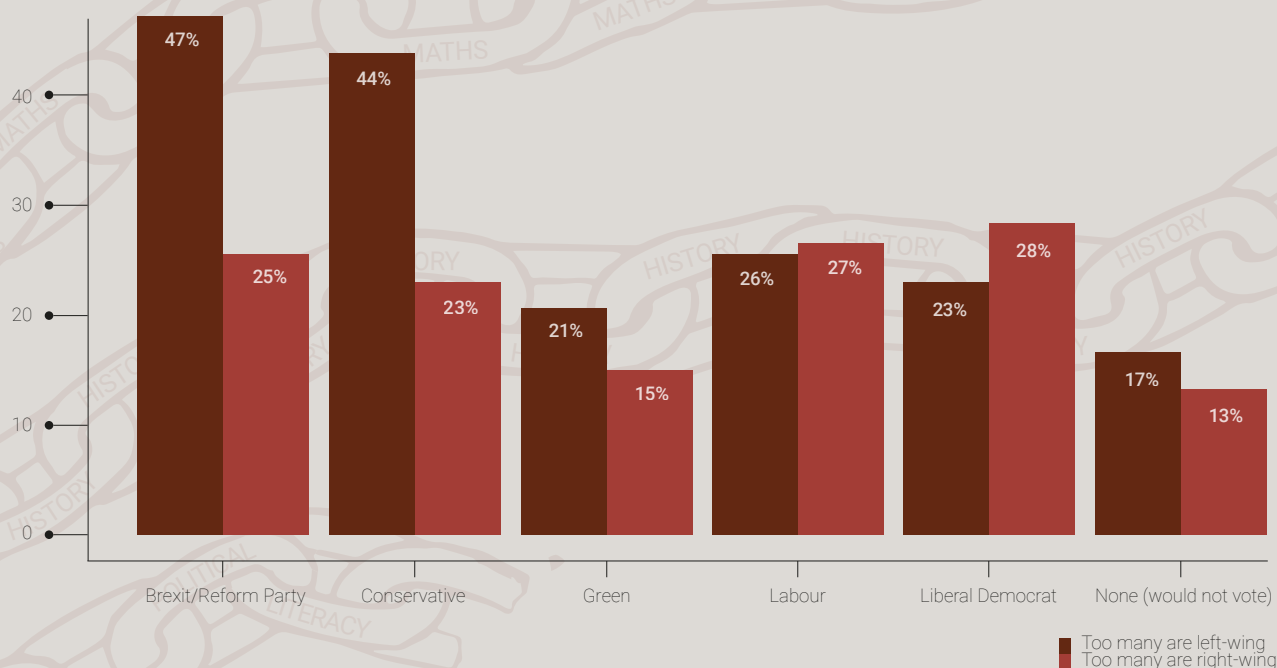
In secondary education, related arguments arose following the publication of new guidance on the teaching of relationships and sex education. Published by the Department for Education, this guidance extended to the teaching of issues related to 'cancel culture', transgender rights and 'extreme political opinions'. Shortly after its publication, representatives from more than 30 organisations promoting citizenship and democratic education expressed their concerns in an open letter to the Education Secretary. Yet to what extent might these high-profile debates either reflect or influence public opinion about teachers and, more specifically, the teaching of politics in schools? As a preliminary response, this report draws on survey data collected from a representative sample of parents with children in English secondary education.

**When asked about the ideology of secondary school teachers, 23% of parents thought that 'too many are right-wing' and 31% thought 'too many are left-wing'. 27% and 19% of parents actively disagreed with these statements respectively, and the largest proportion, 50%, were unsure in each case.** On average, these statistics reflect fears about teachers' impartiality that run in both directions on the Left-Right axis. We might also expect these figures to hide a certain amount of motivated reasoning. Very simply, humans are imperfect information processors and we often rely on our own social and political identities to process facts and form opinions in a way that confirms our own biases and disconfirms contrary information. This is partially reflected among parents' attitudes towards teachers (Figure 9). When broken down by partisan affiliation (based on self-reported voting intentions), we see that parental fear about 'too many left-wing teachers' rises to almost 50% among Conservative and Brexit/Reform Party supporters. This pattern appears to be asymmetric insofar as parent voters on the Left (Labour, Green or Liberal Democrat party supporters) are almost equally likely to believe too many teachers are left-wing or right-wing.

**Figure 9. Parental attitudes towards teachers broken down by voting intention.**

Parents' views of teacher ideology by partisanship.

Percentage of parents who think too many teachers are either left-wing or right-wing.



Parents with children in English secondary education (N=1520)  
 Participants who were unsure or disagreed with either statement are excluded for ease of interpretation  
 Data collected July 2021

To explore this further, we can compare parental attitudes to teachers according to parents' own self-reported ideology on an 11-point scale of Left-Right (Figure 10). On one hand, a weak scissors effect emerges from the data, which indicates that left-wing parents are more likely to believe that too many teachers are right-wing and vice-versa among right-wing parents. On the other hand, the data once again point to increased sensitivity to fears about teacher impartiality on the Right. Parents who self-reported being on the centre-Right were almost equally concerned about right-wing bias among teachers as those parents who self-reported being on the far Left. The reasons for these differential concerns are subject to further analysis and additional research.

For the purpose of this report, these statistics matter because of how such beliefs influence parental perceptions of teachers' professionalism

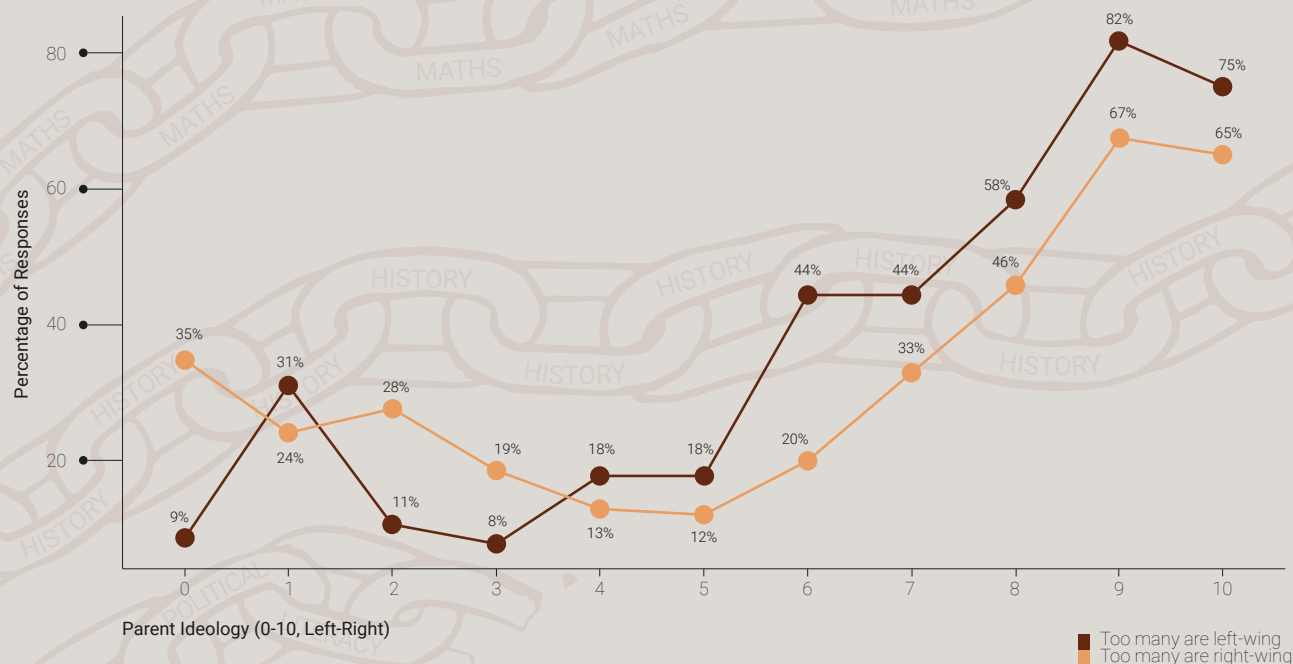
and, specifically, their ability to meet the requirements of the 1996 Education Act. When asked whether teachers impose their own political opinions on students, a significant minority of parents (39%) agreed. However, this figure rises dramatically to 74% among those parents who also believe that too many teachers are left-wing and 71% among parents who believe that too many are right-wing. There is, then, a latent fear about the purpose of democratic education in a school setting among a subset of voters with a stake in the content of secondary education. This appears to be linked to perceptions of teachers' ideology without a specific fear in one ideological direction or the other. At the same time, these fears appear to be more prevalent on the Right of British politics and it is among these voters that advocates of democratic education need to work hardest to allay concerns.



**Figure 10. Parental attitudes towards teachers broken down by Left-Right ideology.**

Parents' views of teacher ideology by left-Right position.

Percentage of parents who think too many teachers are either left-wing or right-wing.



Parents with children in English secondary education (N=1596)  
 Participants who were unsure or disagreed with either statement are excluded for ease of interpretation  
 Data collected July 2021

## (b) Teachers' political activity, ideology and practice.

Having established that some parents hold concerns about the ideological leaning and in-classroom practice of secondary school teachers, this section now looks at the political activity and actual ideology of teachers themselves. In the first instance, a small yet important body of comparative research has highlighted a link between teachers' own levels of political engagement and their aptitude and willingness to teach democratic education in school. In some settings, teachers' superficial conceptions of what democratic education is, and what it is for, have been attributed to a lack of civic participation experience (e.g., in Singapore: Sim et al. 2017). In other contexts, researchers have found positive correlations between teachers' level of political engagement and the frequency with which they choose to teach

about social problems in the classroom (e.g., in the United States: Rogers and Westheimer, 2017). Working with a group of North American civic education teachers, Schugurensky and Myers (2003) concluded that political experiences provide a valuable affective and cognitive resource for teaching politics and citizenship.

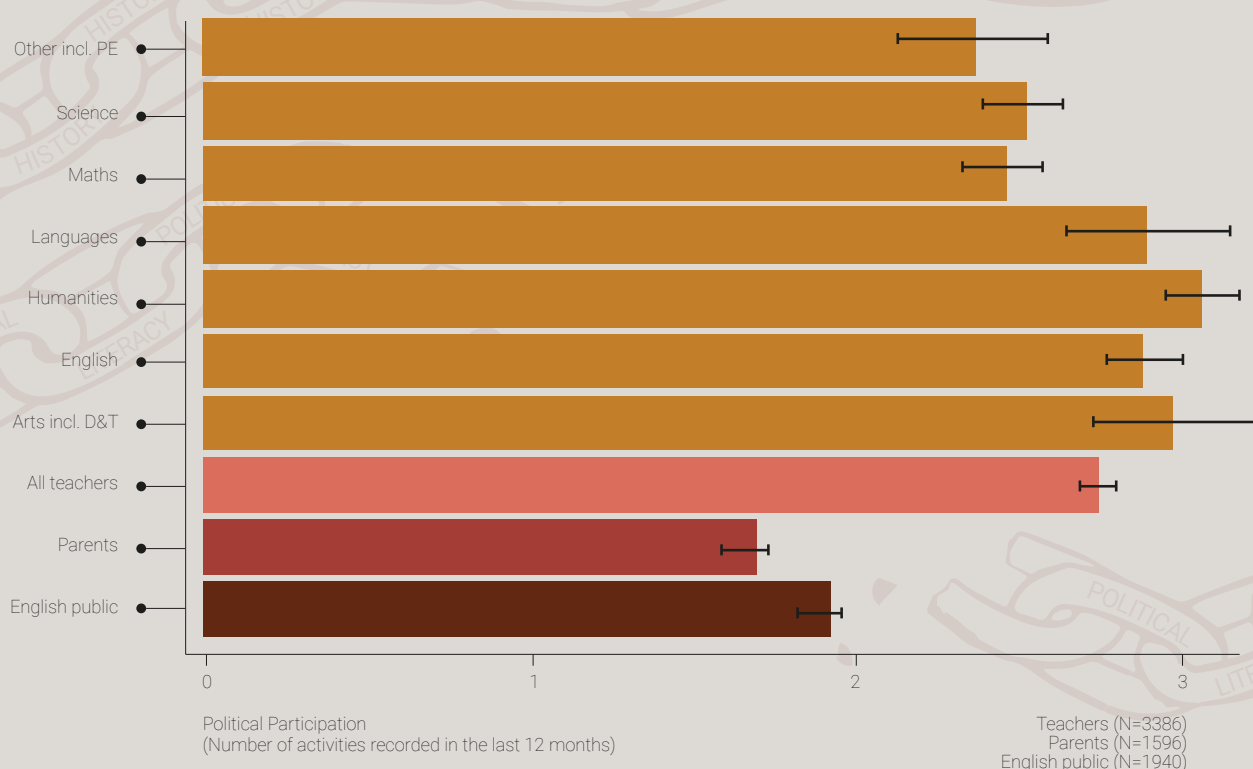
So how active are English secondary school teachers? In this study, more than 3000 were asked to self-report acts of political participation that they had undertaken in the previous 12 months. Participants selected options from a list of activities that varied from expressive behaviours (such as protesting) to electoral behaviours (such as voting). The same question was also fielded to parents and included in the 2019 British Election Study. Treating each act of participation as one unit on a cumulative scale, figure 11 compares average levels of political participation among

teachers (including by subject area), parents, and the wider English public. **When compared to these latter populations, it seems that teachers in England are substantially more engaged vis-à-vis active participation in politics.** Levels of participation are also higher among teachers trained in the Humanities, Arts, and English. Appendix B breaks these statistics down further into levels of participation across individual types of activity. It shows

that **teachers are significantly more likely to contact political authorities, sign online petitions, and engage in expressive behaviours like boycotts.** When it comes to partisan activities, teachers are no more or less likely than the wider population to work on behalf of a political party. They are, however, more likely to donate money to political organisations or causes.

**Figure 11. Levels of political participation among teachers.**

Political participation among teachers, parents and the wider English public. Mean scores and 95% confidence intervals.



Teachers also self-reported their ideology on an 11-point scale running from Left to Right. Not only is this information pertinent to discussions about impartiality in democratic education, but teachers' own views on citizenship and democracy – which are tightly anchored to ideology – often condition their educational practice (see Estelles et al., 2021). **The data collected here indicate that the vast majority of teachers self-identify on the left of centre, and sit, ideologically speaking, to the left of both parents and the wider English population (Figure 12).** This is, however, a slightly erroneous comparison given that highly educated adults

– particularly those who have attended university – are far more likely to assume predominantly liberal positions across a range of political values. In England, it is a requirement for all teachers to hold an undergraduate degree, or an equivalent qualification, as well as qualified teacher status, in order to practice in most maintained (state-funded) secondary schools. Teachers are, then, a uniquely educated sub-population. **Yet even compared with university graduates, teachers in England remain significantly more left leaning than the wider English population (Figure 13).**

Figure 12. Teacher ideology compared to parents and the wider English public.

In politics people sometimes talk about left and right.  
Where would you place yourself on the following scale? Left-Right (0=10)  
Density plot distributions of participant self-placement among teachers (N=3120), parents (N=1596) and the wider English public (N=1576)

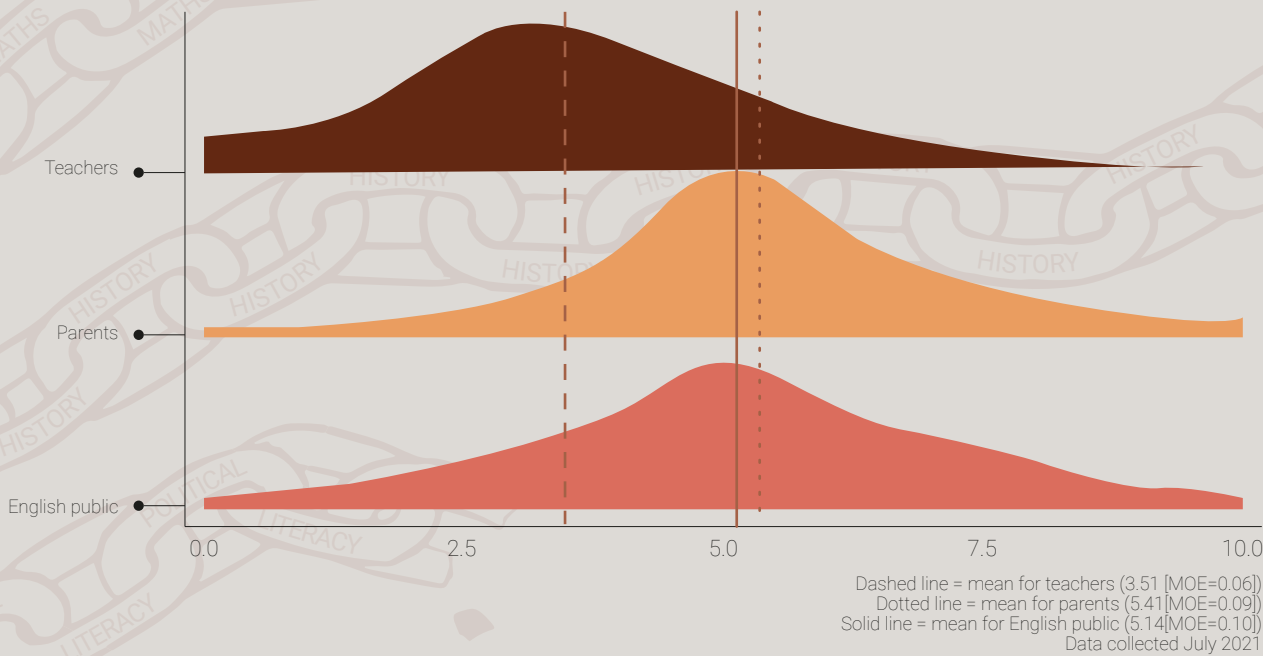
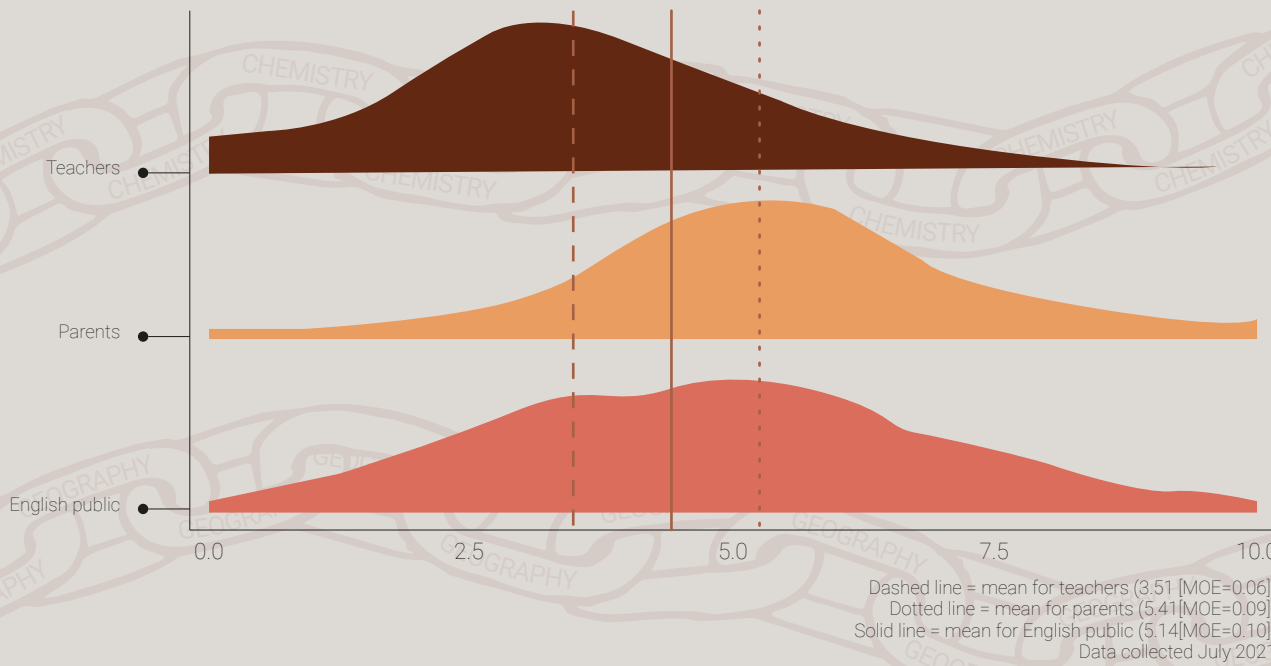


Figure 13. Teacher ideology compared to fellow university graduates in England.

In politics people sometimes talk about left and right.  
Where would you place yourself on the following scale? Left-Right (0=10)  
Density plot distributions of participant self-placement among teachers (N=3120), parents (N=1596) and the wider English public (N=1576). All participants hold a bachelor's degree or higher.



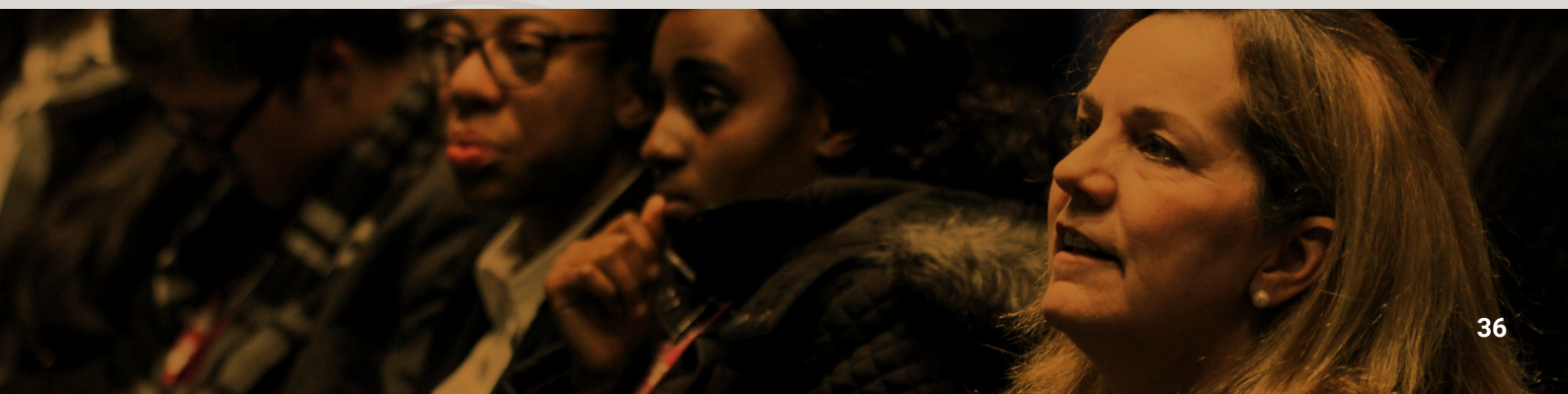


Whilst these findings may at first glance appear alarming to a concerned or cynical audience, it would be wrong – and ultimately lazy – to presuppose that a left-wing teaching body equates to left-wing bias in the classroom. There are two points to make here. Firstly, the self-reported ideology of teachers clashes with their professed conceptions of the objectives of subjects like citizenship education. In England and in comparative contexts, the majority of teachers engaged by researchers tend to either (a) define citizenship in terms of moral and character education, or (b) teach towards personally responsible views of citizenship that prioritise legal compliance and public spiritedness (Carr, 2006; Marri et al., 2014; Martin, 2010; Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). These ‘visions’ for democratic education are resoundingly conservative in their aims and ambition, and suggest that there is not a neat delineating link between teachers’ ideology and their approach to teaching politics in school.

To test this hypothesis further, we can model the associations between these variables and teachers’ use of an open classroom climate (OCC), which revolves around dialogic pedagogies and attention to a plurality of social and political viewpoints. Figures 14-16 report the predicted effects from weighted ordinal logistic regressions in which teachers’ self-reported use of OCC was the dependent variable and ideology, cumulative political participation, and training subject were entered as independent variables. **Reassuringly, these models detect no significant relationship between teachers’ ideology and OCC (Figure 14).** Echoing similar findings in North America (Rogers and Westheimer, 2017), and indicating high levels of professional-

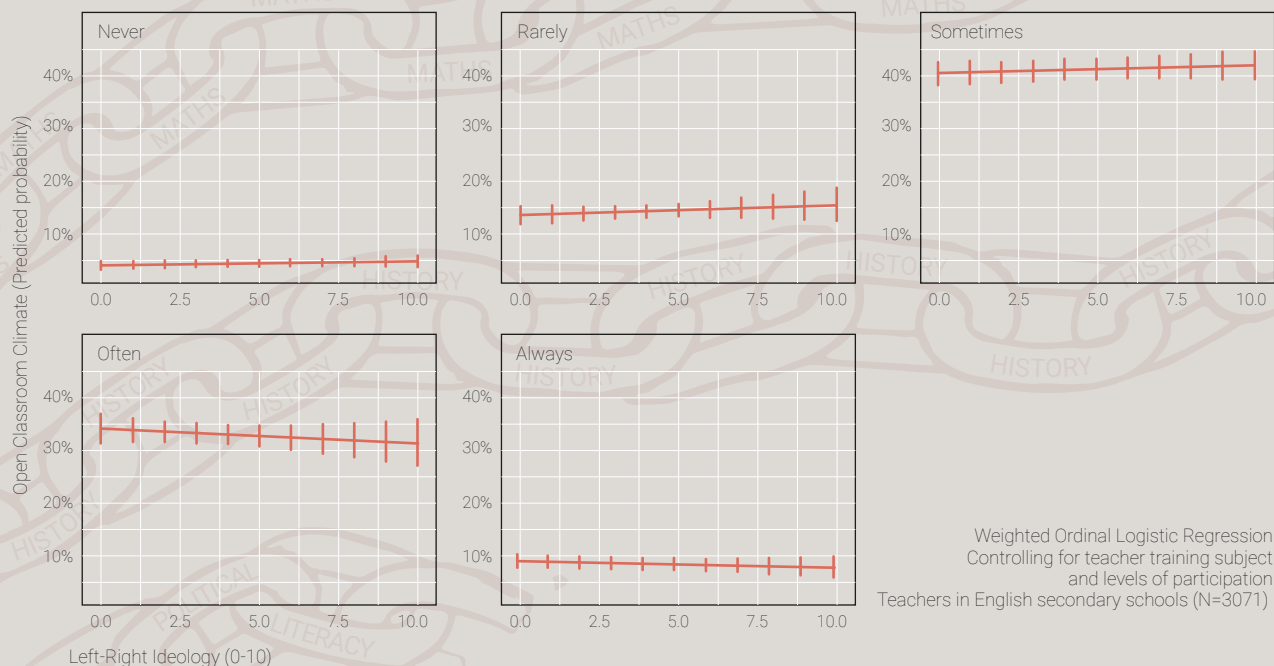
ism, **these results suggest that teachers’ personal political ideology does not impact or impede their willingness to teach a balanced curriculum.** There are, of course, methodological limitations to this test. The statistical models presented here rely, for example, on self-report measures of ideology and OCC that may be affected by simultaneity or omitted variable bias. Future research should now seek to replicate these findings using (a) exogenous variables for teaching practice (such as Ofsted inspections of lessons or peer ratings) and (b) composite measures of ideology.

The findings reported here do, however, reinforce the importance of effective teaching training when it comes to teaching politics and citizenship. Controlling for individual level preferences (i.e. ideology) and experiences (i.e. political participation), teachers’ training specialisms continue to exert a powerful impact on their preference for OCC. Specifically, teachers trained in the Humanities and English are much more likely to engage these pedagogic practices and encourage students to consider, debate or express opinions on multiple viewpoints (Figure 15). Political participation also shares a positive correlation with teachers’ use of OCC (Figure 16). Put simply, teachers are more likely to use OCC on a regular basis in their lessons if they are also accumulating political experiences in their personal lives. Far from being a cause for concern, **these results suggest that a politically active teaching body is a positive thing for the quality of democratic education in schools.** Again, these conclusions should be subject to replication studies that draw on a wider range of variables and measurement instruments.



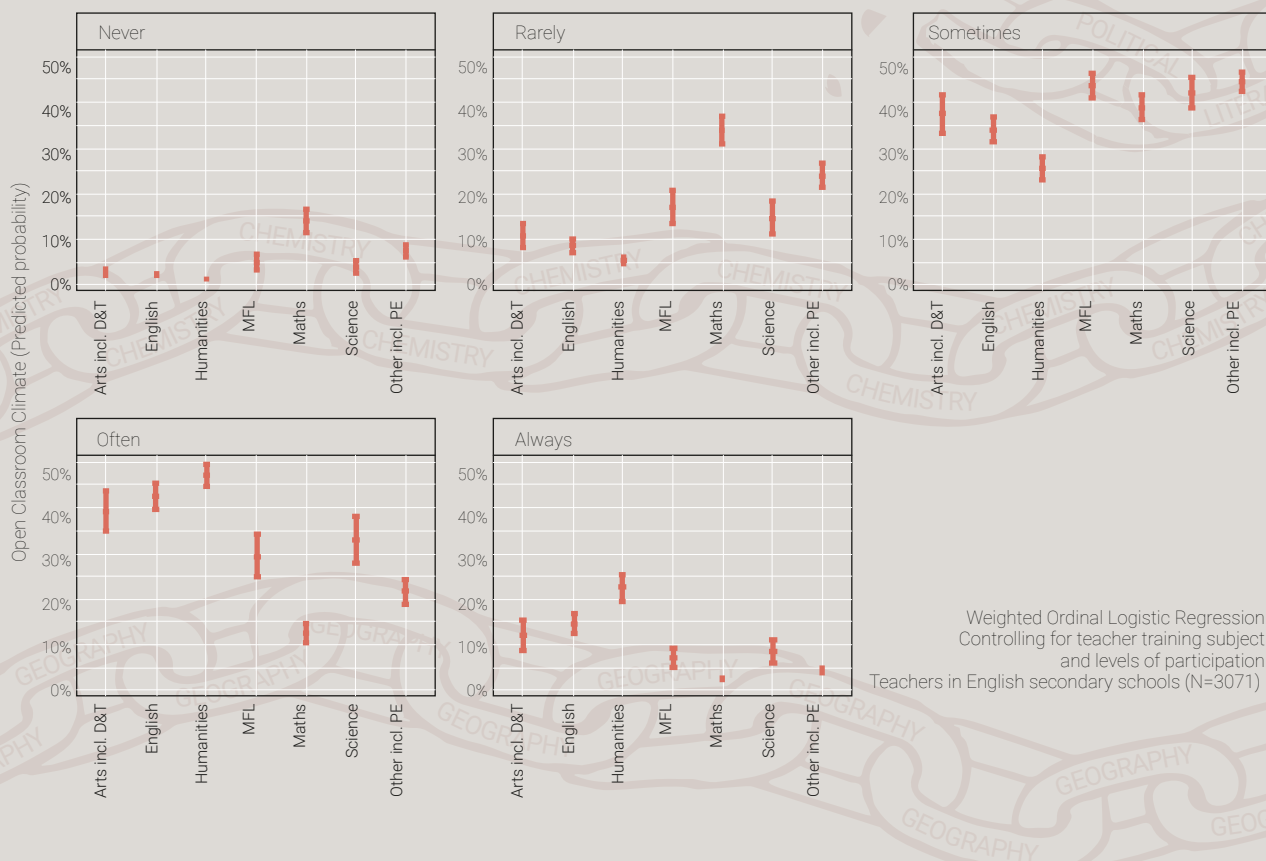
**Figure 14. Teachers' ideology and pedagogic practice.**

Associations between teacher ideology and use of open classroom climate.  
Predicted effects with 95% confidence intervals



**Figure 15. Teacher training and pedagogic practice.**

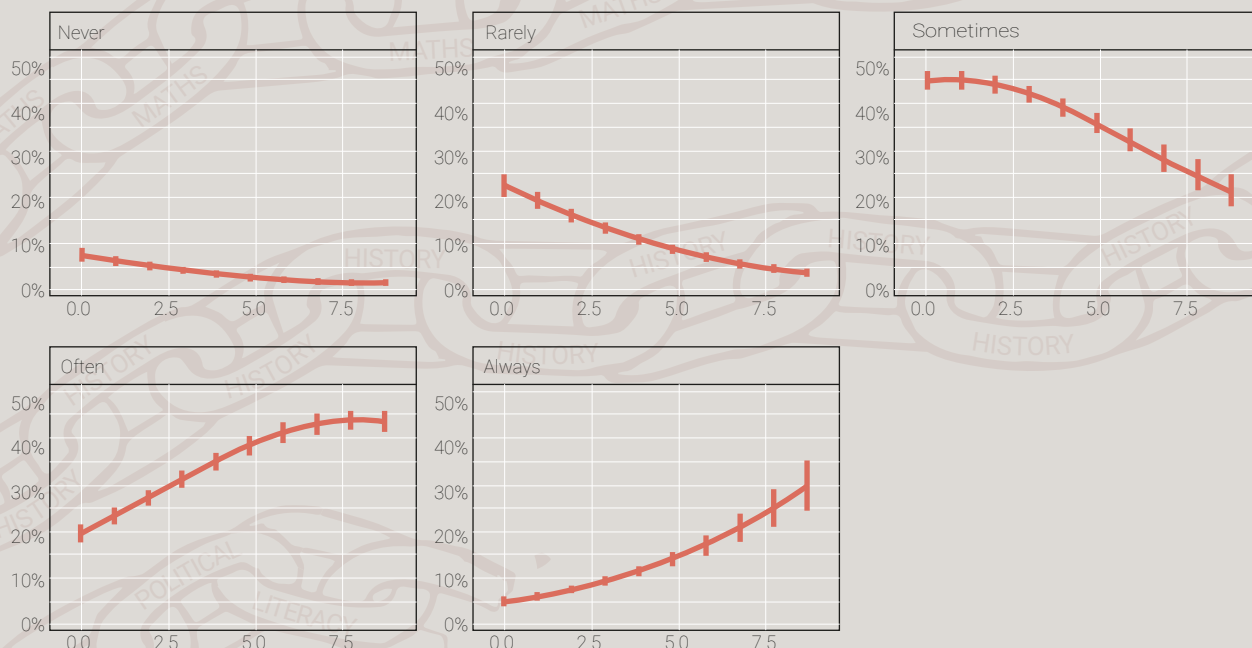
Associations between teacher training subject and use of open classroom climate.  
Predicted effects with 95% confidence intervals





**Figure 16. Teachers' political participation and pedagogic practice.**

Associations between teachers' political participation and use of open classroom climate.  
Predicted effects with 95% confidence intervals





# RECOMMENDATIONS

This report highlights a number of significant challenges that need to be overcome before we can be confident that all children in England are receiving a minimum offer of democratic education. In particular, new data utilised here indicate that:

(a) provision of democratic education remains the exception rather than the norm in English secondary schools. This gap in provision per se is exacerbated by inequalities across schools serving affluent and deprived communities.

(b) democratic education is being delivered in the main by non-specialists who neither feel prepared to teach it (including controversial issues) nor favour appropriate pedagogic practices (such as open classroom climate).

(c) parental concerns about ideological bias and indoctrination continue to conflict with their overall support for democratic education in schools.

To address these challenges, policy-makers need to think carefully about the costs and benefits of different evidence-based responses. To support solutions-focused thinking, this report recommends a concerted focus on teacher training. New evidence has already been presented in this report suggesting that teacher expertise is the second biggest obstacle to effective democratic

education (as identified by frontline workers). This report has also shown a training effect insofar as teachers trained in the Humanities (and thus subjects cognate to politics) are more likely to utilise an open classroom climate, more confident teaching sensitive or controversial issues, and more likely to have personal experience of political participation in civic life. By building a critical mass of specialist teachers in the profession, it may be possible to tackle all three of the challenges listed above. Specifically, increased numbers of trained teachers will (i) expand schools' capacity to plan for and deliver a minimum offer of curriculum and non-curriculum democratic education, (ii) equip teachers to facilitate meaningful and impactful political learning where they are required to deliver democratic education, and (iii) further guard against the possibility of bias in the classroom. To achieve this recommendation, the Government and relevant civil service departments could take a number of comparatively low-cost, high-impact decisions.

**Key recommendation:** take action to build a body of expertise within the teaching profession by substantially increasing the number of trained specialists in schools.



## Practical strategies:

1. Rapidly scale up ITT provisions for democratic education by providing a teacher training bursary in Citizenship Education and/or Politics;
2. Support ITT providers to embed modules on democratic education within all ITT schemes by, in the first instance, working aspects of democratic education into the ITT Core Content Framework and the Early Career Framework (ECF) established by the recent ITT market review (2021); and
3. Work more closely with external partners – such as Shout Out UK, the Association for Citizenship Teaching and the Political Studies Association – to create and disseminate resources or CPD packs for teachers that (a) can be used within formal curriculum provision of key stage 3/4 citizenship education or key stage 5 politics, (b) speak to different curriculum specialisms and not just these discrete subjects, and (c) help teachers to utilise declarative (fact-based) and procedural (skills-based) pedagogies.

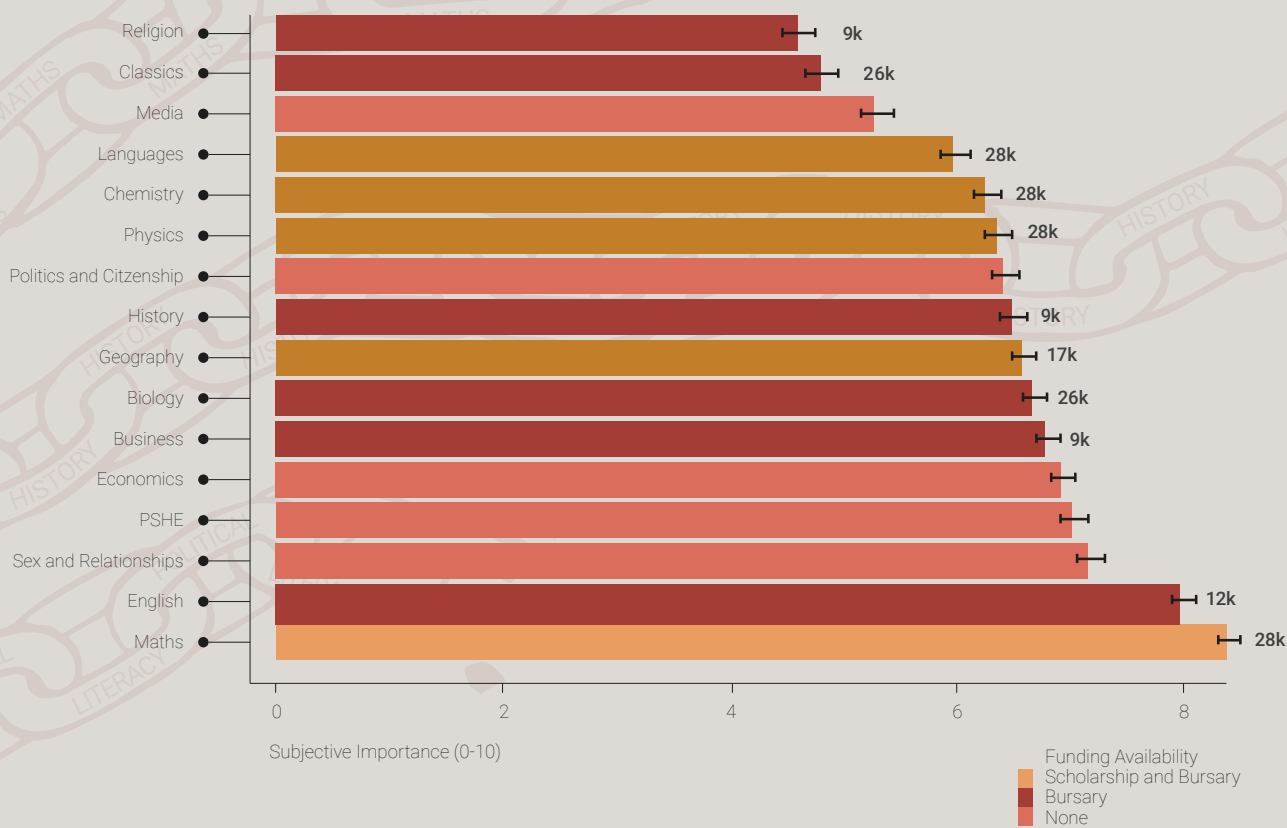
There is no better time to act on these recommendations than the present. Alongside the 2021 Budget, the current UK Government launched its prospectus for a £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund. This fund is supported by a forthcoming White Paper focused on bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunities in all parts of the UK. As the Government builds on the scale of this commitment in coming months and years, there is a case to be made for concerted attention to democratic education (both policy and delivery) in order for all young people, regardless of background, 'to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting' (QCA, 1998, p.7). This is a sentiment that the Government itself has iterated in its ITT market review, which commits to 'to driving up and levelling up education standards so that children and young people in every part of the country acquire the knowledge, skills and qualifications they need to progress.'

Importantly, these solutions are supported by frontline practitioners and key stakeholders in the voting population. When presented with a range of

policy options, **77% of parents and 82% of teachers expressed support for additional funding to expand continuing professional development and/or introduce ITT bursaries in citizenship education and politics. This support is consistent across partisan supporters on the Left and Right.** By introducing additional support for teaching training in citizenship and politics, the Government would also be filling a gap in its existing approach to ITT funding. Whilst politics and citizenship are not currently eligible for training scholarships or bursaries, **parents in England rate these subjects as no less important for adult life in modern Britain than History, Geography, Chemistry and Physics (all of which are eligible) and more important than Religion, Classics and Languages (all of which are eligible).** Whilst the Government must take decisions on behalf and in the best interests of the public, and not always in line with public opinion, these figures add further fuel to a clear and compelling case to improve the state of democratic education in England. By acting on these recommendations, the Government would be working in the interests of our young people, for the sustainability of UK democracy, and with the support of stakeholder opinion.

**Figure 17. Parent ratings of school subjects alongside their eligibility for ITT funding.**

How important are each of the following school subjects/subject areas for adult life in modern Britain?  
Average subjective importance in ascending order with 95% confidence intervals. Printed figures show the maximum amount of financial support available to trainee teachers.



Parents in England with children aged 11-18 (N=1596)  
Funding data available at:  
<http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-bursary-funding-manual/initial-teacher-training-bursaries-funding-manual-2020-to-2021-academic-year>  
Due to survey limitations, not all curriculum areas could be included  
Data collected July 2021







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## Appendix A. Provision of democratic education (formal and informal) in English secondary schools.

Provision	Funding Model	Percent	95% margin of error	N
Whole lessons	Private	23	6.77	330
	State-funded	30	2.28	1640
Political contact	Private	11	4.91	330
	State-funded	4	1.01	1640
Political trips	Private	38	7.77	330
	State-funded	20	1.99	1640
Student council elections	Private	55	7.96	330
	State-funded	56	2.47	1640
Student votes in lessons and form	Private	12	5.17	330
	State-funded	13	1.67	1640
Form time discussions	Private	23	6.69	330
	State-funded	20	1.99	1640
Drop-down days	Private	13	5.46	330
	State-funded	15	1.77	1640
Extra-curricular activities	Private	62	7.77	330
	State-funded	27	2.21	1640
Active citizenship projects	Private	60	7.83	330
	State-funded	48	2.48	1640
No provision	Private	16	5.79	330
	State-funded	28	2.24	1640

## Appendix B. Levels of political participation among teachers, parents and the public in England.

Thinking now about how active you are in politics and community affairs, have you done any of the following during the last 12 months?

	Teachers	Parents	English public*
Contacted a politician, government or local government official	31%	15%	16%
Signed a petition on the Internet	79%	45%	43%
Signed a petition not on the internet	9%	15%	11%
Done any work on behalf of a political party or action group	5%	6%	3%
Given any money to a political party, organisation or cause	16%	1%	8%
Voted in an election	81%	56%	79%
Taken part in a public demonstration	8%	9%	5%
Bought – or refused to buy – any products for political or ethical reasons	48%	20%	22%
Gone on strike or taken industrial action	3%	4%	1%
None of these (exc. voting)	6%	21%	44%
Respondents	3386	1596	1940

\* Please note that the BES survey took place in a different 12-month period to the other two surveys. E.g. there was a high profile General Election in the 12 months prior to the BES survey and not in the case of the other two

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## **Note on the author:**

Dr James Weinberg is Lecturer in Political Behaviour at the University of Sheffield where he currently holds a Leverhulme early career fellowship. His research has been published in a range of high-quality peer reviewed journals such as the British Journal of Political Science and in a recent monograph published with Bristol University Press. James is also an elected trustee of the UK Political Studies Association and a community governor at a local school in Sheffield. He started his career as a qualified secondary school teacher in West London.

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