

Young people's opinions and reactions to Votes at 16

Introduction

We are a group of academics with long-standing interests in young people's politics in the UK. We are surveying a representative group of young people, starting this in October 2025, and now in the concluding stages of collecting data in England and Wales. This interim report, prepared for your Committee, presents a partial analysis of young people's (aged 14-15) views of the extension of the franchise, based on the views of 551 young people from 91 schools, 94% of our projected sample.

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Method

We have used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. Between October 2025 and March 2026 we have conducted small group deliberative discussions with over 550 Year 10 students (14-15 years old) across all the English Regions and Wales, each lasting around 75 minutes, where they were encouraged to explore their attitudes towards becoming voters within the next 18 months. (Sample details are given in the Appendix.) They discuss their expectations and apprehensions about this, and what kind of preparations they feel they need to make, and what sources they might turn to, particularly from schools. In the process of this, they complete a questionnaire that:

- explores their knowledge of voter registration and the voting process;
- their intentions to vote or not;
- their attitudes towards the major parties;
- the issues they consider important in deciding for whom to vote;
- their sources of information about politics; and
- with whom they discuss politics.

Responses of students

In the autumn of 2025, about half of the young people appeared to be unaware that the voting age might be changed to the age of 16: by February 2026, nearly all were aware of the proposal. The initial responses to the prospect of becoming voters within 9 to 21 months' time was, for about a half of them, a degree of apprehension. After further discussion, it was clear that the reluctance to vote stemmed from feeling unprepared for what they saw as the responsibility. Many said that they didn't know enough about the political parties, and what each of them believed and stood for.

Likelihood of voting

They were asked in the questionnaire, which was completed half way through the discussion, how likely they thought it was that they would vote in the next General Election, if the current proposed law was enacted and they had reached the age of 16.

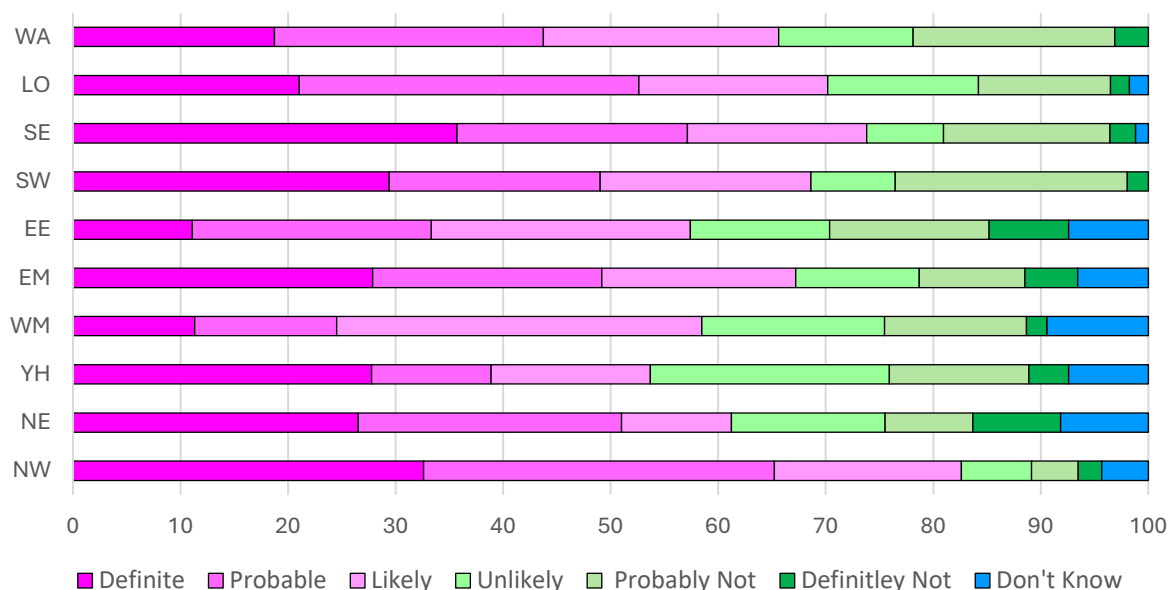
Table 1 shows the percentages of those indicating their likelihood on an eight point scale. Young women show a greater inclination to vote than young men: 71% of young women are in the first three categories, and only 60% of young men.

Table 1: %age of all, young men and young women and propensity to vote. N=551

	all	young men	young women
Definitely	25	23	27
Probably	22	20	23
Likely	19	17	21
Not Likely	12	11	14
Probably Not	13	17	9
Definitely not	4	6	2
Don't know	5	6	4

There were also regional variations (Figure 1), although these are based on relatively small numbers (Wales 36; South East 85; others between 47 and 67). The North West, Wales, London, the South East and the South West appear more positive about voting; the Midlands, East of England, the North East and Yorks and Humber more negative, apart from the North East, which lies between the others.

Figure 1: Regional variations in likelihood of voting



Reasons for making this decision

The sample was asked to briefly describe their reasons for giving this indication of likelihood of voting. These were then categorised, several responses falling into two or even three categories (average 1.5 reasons). Table 2 shows these reasons: the first three categories are general dispositions (to make their voice heard, a sense of obligation or civic duty, more regarding the vote as a privilege or a right. The fourth category can also be regarded as a positive – the aim to be achieved was usually to ensure the success of a particular policy or party, but also sometimes specifically to contribute to the defeat of a particular party or politician (invariably not specified). Overall, it must be noted that the great

majority of young people are enthusiastic about having their voice heard, and contributing, through voting, to the work of Parliament. Of particular interest is the sixth category (highlighted): the belief that they lacked the knowledge about the various parties and their policies to be able to make a decision. In subsequent discussion, this emerged as an even more widespread concern than these figures suggest, and lay behind the widespread apprehension about voting referred to earlier.

Table 2: Reasons for offering how likely they were to vote, %

Reason	Total	Young men	Young women
1 to make my voice heard	31	27	33
2 It's a duty/I can vote	12	13	11
3 It's a privilege /a right	7	5	8
4 To achieve a particular goal	7	7	7
5 I'm politically well informed	4	4	3
6 I don't know enough about parties/politics	27	27	27
7 I'm not interested in politics	4	5	4
8 I'm not mature enough	4	5	3
9 The change to votes at 16 won't happen	3	2	3
10 I don't know/no answer	4	4	3
11 I am not sure why I selected this	2	3	1
12 voting won't make a difference	1	2	1
13 I have no intention to vote	2	2	1

'Not knowing enough about politics and parties was almost invariable given in a positive way: they would vote with confidence, if they had more information about parties and politics. The same gender distribution can be seen as in Table 1: young women generally giving more positive reasons to vote than young men.

Fig 2: Regional variation in reasons for deciding whether to vote

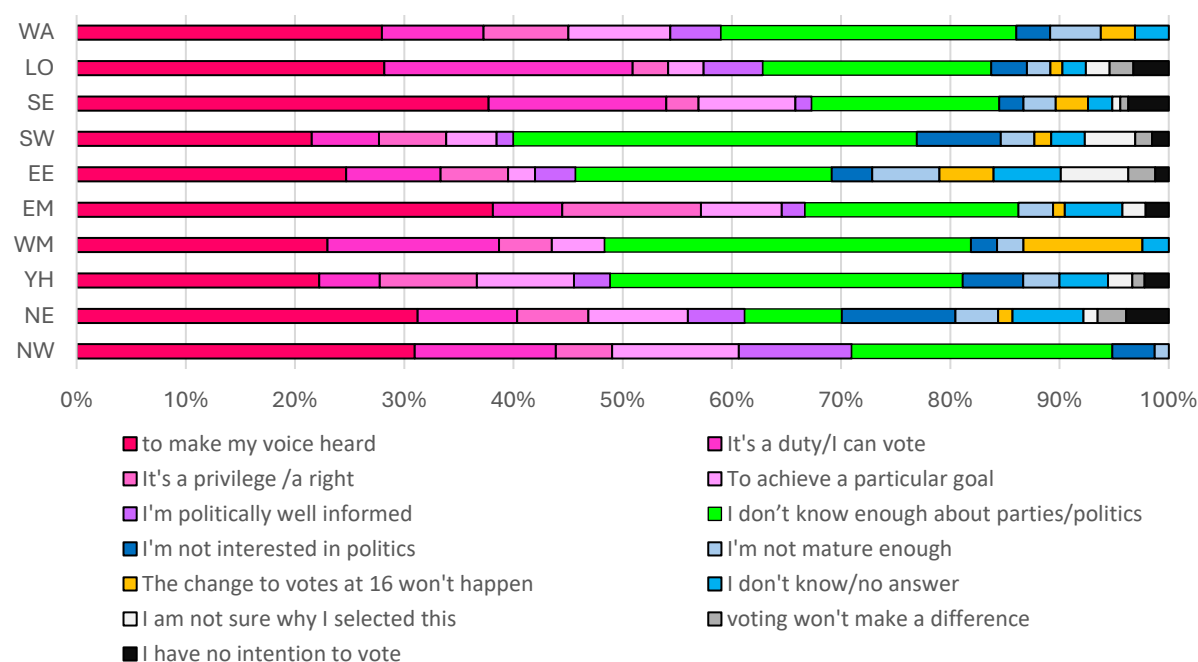


Figure 2 shows regional variations: the North East students appear to be most confident about their knowledge about politics.

Attitude to parties and intentions towards voting for specific parties

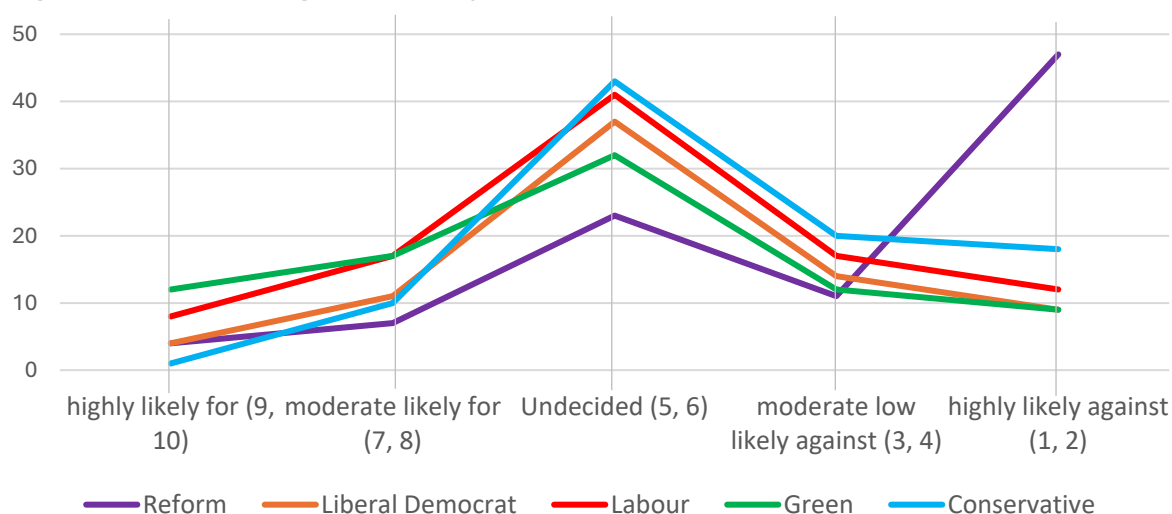
The sample were asked about their attitude to each of the major parties that stood in the 2024 General Election, indicating if they would definitely vote for or against each of them, and their degree of support or otherwise for each, on a ten-point scale. Table 3 gathers this ten point scale into five groups, and shows where individuals indicated that they had not heard of the party.

Table 3 Party Voting Preferences, %

	Conser- vative	Green	Labour	Liberal Dem	Reform	Plaid Cymru
high likelihood voting for (9, 10)	1	12	8	4	4	14
moderate likelihood voting for (7, 8)	10	17	17	11	7	0
Undecided (5, 6)	43	32	41	37	23	11
moderate low likelihood voting for(3, 4)	20	12	17	14	11	20
very low likelihood of voting for(1, 2)	18	9	12	9	47	17
haven't heard of the party	9	18	5	24	8	39
N=535 (17 did not complete this question) N = 16 (Wales, for Plaid Cymry)						

This in some measure confirms that these young people are confused about the political parties: only 6% say that have a high likelihood of voting for a major party, and only 12% are committing themselves to not vote for the four parties of the Conservative, the Green Party, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. 35% are very undecided. However, in one respect, they do display a particular preference: 47% declare themselves as very unlikely to vote for the Reform Party – breaking down that figure 40% gave a rating of 1 (would definitely not vote Reform, and 7% a rating of 2 (very unlikely). This in some sense belies their assertion that they cannot distinguish between the various parties and their policies.

Fig 3: Likelihood of voting for each Party, %



There is slight variation in this pattern between young men and young women, as can be seen in Figures 4a and b, below.

Fig 4a: Young men: likelihood of voting

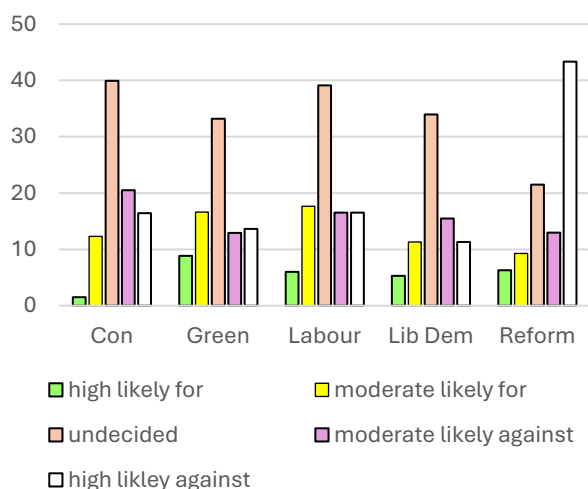
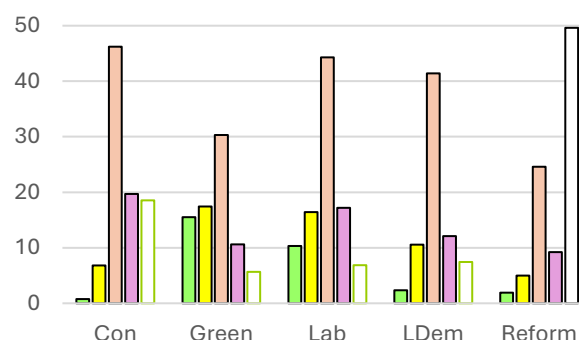


Fig 4b: Young women: likelihood of voting



The Plaid Cymru voting intentions have not been shown, as they form a small proportion of the Welsh votes.

Significant issues in deciding how to vote

Students were asked in questionnaire to indicate which issues they might consider important in deciding how to select a Party. They were not asked to select from a list, or given prompts. Up to three could be indicated: a small number gave a fourth. They were not ranked in terms of importance or significance. We also asked what actions they wanted to be taken with each issue mentioned. The responses suggest that current issues are followed as they are reported and discussed by the general population and media: for example, in March 2026 there were a few references to defence spending (the USA/Israeli action against Iran); there were some references to Palestine and Gaza in October 2025. 56% suggested three or more issues, 28% two issues, and 9% a single issue. 7% were unable to suggest a single issue. This suggests that a large proportion of the young people surveyed were able to identify matters of topical political concern.

Table 4: numbers of young people raising issues of concern, by gender and %

Issue	total number	young women	young men	combined % of total
Poverty-related: housing, benefits,	216	102	114	39%
Cost of Living	162	73	89	29
Environment, Global warming	158	74	84	29
Crime	155	82	73	28
Immigration (refugees)	144	75	69	27
Equalities (ethnicity, sexuality, etc)	138	64	74	25
Education & youth related	106	58	48	19
International affairs, war	83	43	40	15
NHS	70	39	31	13

There were differences between genders, not only in numbers, but in attitudes towards issues. For example, slightly more young men raised Immigration than young women, and almost always referred to refugee numbers, most vastly over-estimating the proportion of immigrants who were migrants.

Most expressed attitudes towards migrants, and these were markedly different, as they were towards crime: the young women were significantly more supportive of migrants, and also attitudes towards crime: these are shown in Figure 5a and b, showing the percentages of attituded for those identifying these as issues.

Fig 5a: attitudes towards refugees

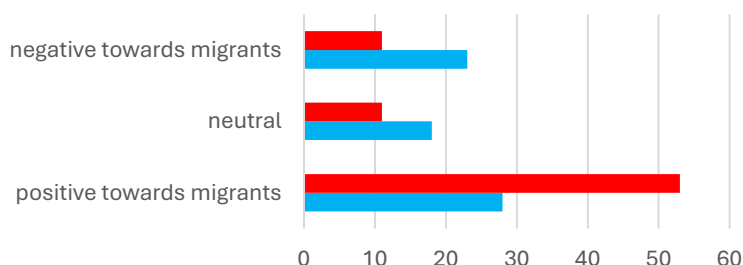
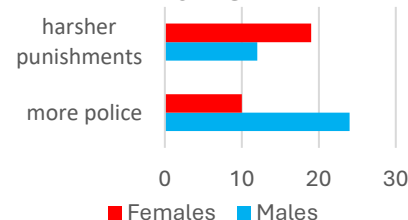


Fig 5b: attitudes towards crime

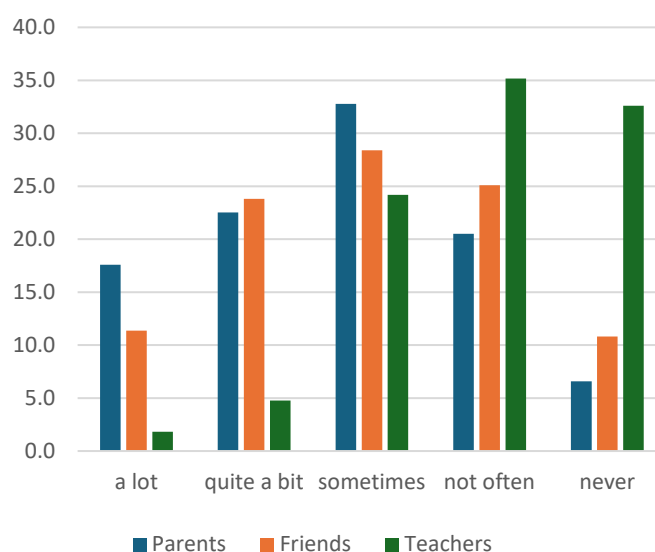


Talking about politics

We asked the students to estimate how much they talked about politics, with their parents, their friends and their teachers, to try and get an indication of the relative importance of each of these groups. Figure 6 shows this, as a percentage, for all young people.

This shows that very few young people feel that they engage in political conversations with teachers. From our conversations with some teachers, it appears that many of them either feel that this is forbidden in some way, or perceived as inappropriate. The Department of Education have produced *Guidance on Political impartiality in schools* (updated March 2025) that indicate that this is not the case, giving detailed examples of how to engage with KS 3 and 4 students, and encouraging such discussion with students in ways that do not take partisan approaches or seek to inappropriately persuade students into partisan views.

Fig 6: 'how much do you talk about politics with?'



Parents are shown as a particularly likely group with whom conversations are held: over a third of these Year 10 students say they talk quite a bit or a lot with their parents, although more than 10% say they never do this. The 'never' group include many of those that they say that they are not interested in politics, or that do not intend to vote. This is also seen when one examines the gendered responses to this question (Figures 6a and 6b). Young men are less inclined to talk with any group about political issues than are young women: but two thirds of all young people report that they never, or do not often, talk about politics with their teachers.

Fig 6a: young women talking politics with ...

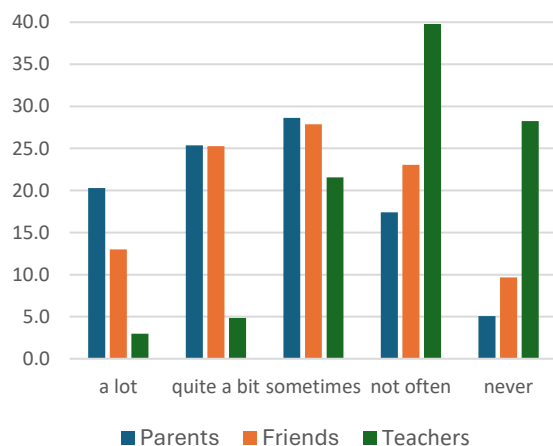
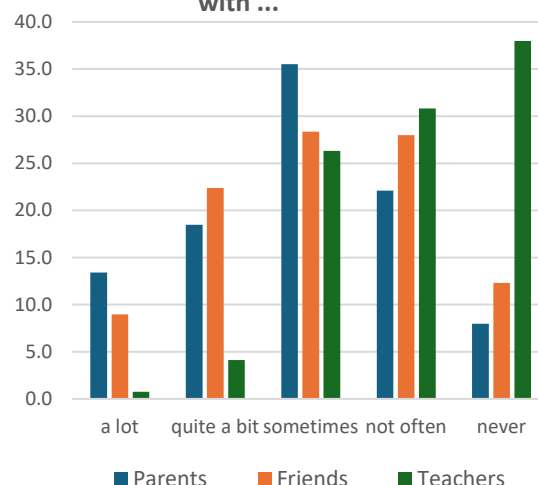


Fig 6b: young men talking politics with ...



The role of the school

While there is some enthusiasm about the prospect of voting at 16, over a quarter of these young people – all of whom will reach this age within 17 months - reported in the questionnaire that they felt that they lacked sufficient knowledge about parties and politics in general to make a decision about for whom they should vote. In subsequent discussion, this figure appeared much higher than this: we have yet to analyse the transcripts of these discussions, but would estimate that at least 50 to 60% felt that they needed more information about the differences between the political parties beliefs and programmes. Most of them also suggested that schools and teachers were best placed to provide such information. A substantial majority professed suspicion about the accuracy of the information they saw in social media. Many made little use of more traditional media, and those that did were frequently suspicious of print media such as newspapers, which were largely seen as partisan; broadcast media was seen as more likely to present a more balanced set of views.

The deliberative discussions that we held were deliberately presented as unstructured: questions were made in a very open-ended way, described to them as not having 'right' answers, and inviting them to present their own thoughts, but to also voice disagreements with others. They were not required to come to conclusions, and there was often dialogue on the differences between debate and discussion: they recognised that they did not need to come to a group conclusion, but exchange views – and perhaps modify views as the discussion progressed. Towards the end of one session, a young man in the South East accurately summarised our methodology:

I liked the way that you didn't have a list of questions, or anything else, on the table. You did *have* your questions, but they were all *up here* [tapping his head]. But you only asked them when we said something that *allowed* you to ask it. It's really good to be listened to ...

They liked being listened to, and they liked listening to each other: this was often described as a novel experience. There was general agreement that most of their teachers would be able to discuss political parties and issues with them in a neutral way, and not try to persuade them, or guide them towards particular conclusions. Many groups discussed the teachers of subjects who could do this well: English

teachers, history teachers ('if they could get away from the past'). Sometimes citizenship teachers were mentioned, and religious education teachers were suggested on several occasions, as being particularly able to present a wide range of beliefs, philosophies and practices, without bias. They said that they wanted 'the facts', but also wanted to discuss these in relation of current issues, and in the context of more fundamental approaches to society, not simply to current policies and manifestos.

The general preference was for small group discussions – suggestions varied from six to maybe half a class – to be held regularly – between fortnightly and monthly, with a mixture of presentations and discussion. (There are ways in which this can be managed within the context of whole class teaching.)

Other suggestions were for mock elections, held maybe every year, for the whole school. A substantial minority of schools already did this (perhaps a quarter), but in many cases this was only in election years. Classes or year groups could form constituencies, it was suggested, which would support understanding of the first past the post system.

Conclusions

The great majority of these young people feel that they should be contributing to the democratic processes of the country through participating in the election. Many display some apprehensions about this, fully aware of the responsibilities that come with this. Their principal concern lies in their lack of knowledge about the political parties and their policies towards a range of issues. They want the opportunity to learn about these, and many say that, given the current lack of school activity in this area, they will have to 'do research' on this, but are also aware of the lack of reliable resources for them to be able to do this.

Schools, they feel, should provide places where they can receive the reliable and dispassionate information that they need, and provide the location and leadership to have regular small group discussions about political parties and issues.

There is some urgency about providing such structures through schools. The revisions to the National Curriculum need to address these issues: but their suggestions will not come into effect till the start of the 2028-9 school year. Given that the next General Election will be held, at the latest, part way through that year, interim measures need to be in place before this to support schools and teachers in addressing political education for all students. This should probably be provided for all classes from Year 9 (13-14 year-olds) to Year 13, including 6th form Colleges and Further Education provision, and should start, at the very latest, by the Autumn of 2027.

The final word ...

... from a group of students in a school in the Yorkshire and Humberside Region, in late March 2026

[1, male] it's only a bad idea if it's executed poorly. So if they don't change the curriculum into teaching young kids about politics and letting them come to their own thing, if we had a class once a week where they just laid out the history of all the parties and what they want to do and then you let the people come to their own conclusions, then I think it's fine. But because that's not the thing, then we shouldn't do it If it's going to happen, then it's going to need to - You *have* to be able to teach about it, because I don't know anything about it, if I'm being very honest. I've got like a very loose understanding, so...

[2, female] I completely agree with [1]. I feel like kids are just - too poorly educated to know and make decisions on who should run our country and make such important decisions like this .. but also kids should be heard and involved in the government.

[3, male] I do agree with [1] and [2] - I think some kind of education system about politics [is needed] because currently you can definitely see - especially online - there's a lot of these bubbles forming, of really radicalized groups, and I think when they reach voting age that's going to really impact. Because if you're really deep into something like that then you're just going to like vote like - I don't know. Someone could be awful, but obviously, if you've been radicalised to think that's the right option, then that's what they're going to choose. So I just think if there was a sort of gateway - just like "oh, here's what they do, here's this" - and then just let people decide on their own what they believe instead of - because if you don't, it just leads to people forming rumours and bad opinions that just get echoed.

April 6, 2026

Appendix: Methodology

Between 8 and 12 schools were selected in each Region in England and Wales. Schools were selected in a range of different constituencies, such that the sum of the votes cast in the 2024 General Election for each of the major parties $\pm 1\%$ in England, and no more than $\pm 2.5\%$ in each Region. Schools selected from the constituencies in each region were selected to include an appropriate range of students in terms of ethnic identities and poverty (FSM) using data from the DoE and Welsh Government annual census on Schools.

Schools were asked to select 6 students from Year 10, preferably from a single class/registration group (this was easier for schools to manage, and from the research perspective led to groups that already knew each other, making conversation easier from the outset). Schools were also asked to select students who could represent, as far as possible within the size set for the group, an appropriate balance for gender (in mixed-sex schools), academic ability, ethnicity and FSM provision. We also asked that we did not get members of the School Council; and that we had a proportionate number of any students taking the GCSE Citizenship examination. (This is not widely taken, and in all schools save one we had no such students: one school in the North West had a policy of all students taking this examination, and this group thus were all taking the course).

Written consent was obtained from all students and all parents. All quoted students will be given pseudonyms, and referred to only by gender and Region. Schools were asked not to prepare students for the discussion, which was referred to as being concerned with Young People and their Democratic Futures (not 'Votes at 16'). It was emphasised that we were not assessing schools or individuals.

We are grateful to all schools and young people involved for their cooperation, and to the Electoral Commission that provided letters asking schools to assist us in the investigation.

Our study has to date included 91 schools in England and Wales: we envisage 4 or 5 more schools being added in the early summer. We also hope to add similar studies in Scotland and Northern Ireland in the summer of 2026.