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CAPTURING POLITICAL LITERACY?

Towards a nationwide measure in the UK

INDEX

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study assesses whether it is possible to develop a robust nationwide measure of political literacy in the UK. To do so, it surveys different approaches to understanding, governing, and measuring political literacy in the UK and internationally.

This report is divided into four chapters which discuss these aspects in turn, alongside the feasibility of a nationwide measure:

- **Understanding -** the many ways political literacy can be defined;

- **Governing -** the agents that govern and act as vehicles of political literacy;

- **Measuring -** the methods being used to measure elements of political literacy;

- **Feasibility** - whether a nationwide measure of political literacy is achievable.

Our analysis took place between January-June 2023. It includes evidence from desk research, roundtables with academics and civil society, and one-to-one discussions with stakeholder organisations who would potentially use a measure of political literacy. The aim of this feasibility study is to assess whether:

- it is possible to establish an integrated approach to political literacy to act as the basis for a measure;

- such a measure could be credibly produced, in a format that could be repeated on a regular basis;

- earlier attempts to measure political literacy validate our approach.

Understanding

Political literacy concerns not only the knowledge of political systems and institutions. It also relates to the acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, as well as people's attitudes and values. Additionally, it includes individuals' critical awareness of the social, cultural, political, and economic context, and ultimately, their ability to effectively engage in democratic life as informed and active citizens. Therefore, a method for measuring political literacy should account for the multidimensional nature of political literacy and include measures of political knowledge, political participation, and civic competence, while incorporating components of media literacy. Political literacy should be understood as a continuous and context-dependent process, rather than as an output of the education system.

Governing

The government and the Department for Education have the lead responsibility in providing a national framework for political literacy and in ensuring an enabling environment through funding and resources. They work in collaboration with schools and civil society organisations to develop political literacy at all stages, from strategic planning to implementation and evaluation. Ultimately, the success of a nationwide measure of political literacy will depend on the buy-in and support of these groups, from the early stages of designing the measure through to its eventual rollout.

Measuring

The measurement of political literacy should be modular, integrating several parallel approaches in the domains of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Several international measurements for different elements of political literacy exist, which provide important precedents that could be drawn upon in the development of a nationwide measure of political literacy in the UK.

Feasibility

By establishing an integrated approach to political literacy connecting knowledge, participation, and attitudes, the study provides a useful starting point for measuring political literacy. While a measure of political literacy would inevitably be multi-dimensional, including various sub-measures, there is ample best-practice that can be stitched together. The IEA's ICCS and the Community Life Survey offer precedents for creating a rigorous and modular measuring tool.

This report recommends that a nationwide measure of political literacy is feasible, while its long-term acceptance will rely on the support of several key stakeholders in the UK.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone is exposed to politics each day. While political literacy rarely makes headlines, it is the foundation which decision-makers rely upon to ensure the legitimacy of their actions. Political decisions and discourse shape how we think, how we behave, our education, employment, financial security, and health. Ensuring people are politically literate means equipping them with the skills and knowledge to participate in the democratic processes that shape political decisions and discourse. **Political engagement means being able to understand, value, and participate in the democratic process** (House of Commons, 2022).

Since 1997, young people have become increasingly disengaged with traditional methods of political engagement (Henn and Heart, 2017; UK Parliament, 2018). However, the 2017 UK General Election, alongside the Brexit Referendum and the Scottish Independence Referendum saw a significant reversal of this trajectory. In these elections, the turnout reached 64% for those aged 18-24, a 21-point increase compared to the 2015 General Election (Henn and Heart 2017). Though this is still much lower than amongst older age groups. In 2021, the House of Commons Library published a briefing outlining different measures of political disengagement, the reasons why people disengage, and variations in disengagement amongst different segments of the population. It detailed evidence that shows that segments of the population with the lowest levels of political engagement were more likely to be marginalised (i.e. female, from an ethnic minority, unskilled workers and the long-term unemployed, and younger). This same report identified that levels of voter turnout in UK General Elections has fallen over time. Among the recommendations, the report considered the importance of education on the basics of politics, voting and democracy.

Although education is often suggested as the solution to tackling political disengagement and improving democratic trust, there is a lack of evidence and empirical research on what people know about the political system and whether they would be able to apply that knowledge to engage with the system (see also Chapter 1). As part of IHAV's 2021 local election project, which was funded by JRRT, it surveyed 192 young people, aged 16-18 from across England, to assess their political literacy and engagement. A positive sign was that 81% of the respondents said it is important that

people vote. However, 60% said the main barrier to voting is feeling that they do not know enough about the candidates; while concerningly only 9% of the respondents knew what they would be voting for in the then upcoming local elections. It is worth paralleling this with the proportion of respondents who declared a lack of interest (23%) as the reason for their lack of engagement in the local elections.

Political literacy is a new area of policy and academic research and as such it lacks a standardised methodology and encounters several challenges in its measurement (Hart and Youniss, 2016). The subject is often referred to in conjunction with other skills and competences, ranging from citizenship education, to people's likelihood to vote, active citizenship, political trust, and trust in democratic institutions. In other words, political literacy is a multidimensional concept, requiring indicators that reflect several parallel dimensions (Nunnally 1978).

Within these measurements and conceptual challenges, this report asks the following question:

Is it possible to develop a robust nationwide measure for political literacy? This can be broken down into three sub-questions:

1. *Is it feasible to develop an integrated approach to political literacy from among the various disparate definitions and approaches that characterise the field?*

2. *Is it feasible to measure political literacy on the basis of this approach?*

3. *Do earlier attempts to measure political literacy validate our approach?*

In addressing these overarching questions, this report explores three main dimensions of political literacy which are elaborated in their corresponding chapters. These dimensions are: understanding; governing; and measuring policy literacy.

In Chapter 1, we discuss the key academic and policy literature attempting to define political literacy. After discussing how political literacy is conceptualised within and beyond educational contexts, acting as a democracy-building and socialisation tool, we outline a conceptual framework to understand political literacy. The chapter concludes by outlining the components of political literacy that should be captured in a nationwide measure. **In Chapter 2, we**

briefly discuss the governance of political literacy, by outlining the role of governments, civil society organisations, and schools. The chapter concludes by considering how these actors must be engaged in the development and governance of a nationwide measure. **Chapter 3 looks at the issue of 'measuring' political literacy** and towards similar attempts to produce measures for political literacy or associated concepts, such as 'civic education', in a variety of contexts across the UK, Europe, and US. **Chapter 4 addresses the feasibility of a nationwide measure of political literacy**.

To develop the three themes of the report - understanding, governing, and measuring - the research methodology involved three steps.

First, we conducted a systematic desk research exercise, laying the knowledge foundation for the three principal themes of this report. This desk research drew on grey literature, academic sources, government reports, and the media. This exercise led to the formulation of an integrated approach to political literacy that should underpin in any measure. **Second, to capture the insights and perceptions of stakeholders, academics, and practitioners, we organised two roundtables to discuss our results and to gather stakeholders' points of view on the feasibility of a political literacy measure and how it can be used. Finally, we validated our findings during discussions with experts in political literacy and citizenship education who provided us with valuable feedback and suggestions.**

Taken together, the four chapters show the challenges of measuring political literacy and, above all, the lack of a commonly agreed definition for determining what needs to be measured and how. Our analysis presented here is the outcome of six months' work during which we have discussed the feasibility of a measure designed to be of relevance to governments, educators, and civil society organisations. Through this study, we hope to start a dialogue on how to develop and use a nationwide measure of political literacy in the UK.

C H A P T E R *1*

Understanding political literacy

There are several definitions of political literacy. Each of them emphasises a range of elements, from the knowledge of how political institutions work to the ability of individuals to express themselves in everyday life. Drawing upon the education and political science literature, this chapter starts by discussing the different ways we can understand political literacy. At one level, political literacy has been widely codified as a crucial component of citizenship education (Weinberg and Flinders, 2019); at another level, there is an emphasis on skills such as civic engagement and political engagement. After discussing the literature, the chapter outlines an integrated approach to political literacy that should form the basis for a nationwide measure.

1. Political literacy and citizenship education: knowledge, skills and values

Political literacy is at the heart of citizenship education (Peterson, 2014). In its best-known form, it refers to knowledge of government and political structures. Denver and Hands (1990, p. 263) define political literacy as "the knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues which enables people to perform their roles as citizens effectively." Wormald (1988) refer to the goals of training for self-government, political understanding, and education in the procedures and purpose of voting. Put differently, the aim of political literacy is to teach political information, thus making individuals more politically aware (Zaller, 1992).

In the UK, we can observe its origins in the introduction of citizenship education as part of the national curriculum in England in 2002. This was a result of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools report (often referred to as The Crick Report). It was chaired by Bernard Crick who considered enhancing political literacy among young people as a means of countering rising levels of democratic apathy (Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). The Crick Report (1998) recommended that schools educate pupils in citizenship and democracy as a separate statutory curriculum requirement (Andrews and Mycock, 2007, Frazer, 2000) defining "effective education for citizenship" as comprising three separate but interrelated strands: social and moral responsibility; community involvement; and political literacy (Burton et al., 2015). In this context, political literacy refers to the factual knowledge of institutions, citizens being able to make sense of their political world, and making citizens "effective actors in public life through knowledge, skills and values" (QCA 1998: 13; Milner, 2002). These demonstrate a common understanding: that being politically literate is not only about possessing political information but also specific skills and values.

A more recent strand of scholarship, a result of work by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Political Literacy, provides a more holistic definition. Weinberg (2021) defines political literacy as "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)". Thus, being politically literate means using such knowledge, skills, and values to participate both actively and responsibly within the community,

the political system, and society (Polizzi and Cino Pagliarello, 2021).

Whilst this study is focused on measuring political literacy it is worth noting that evidence suggests the level of political literacy delivered through education is very limited and skewed towards fee-paying schools and those in more affluent areas. A study conducted by the APPG and Shout Out UK surveyed around 3,000 teachers in more than 2,000 English secondary schools, showing the worrying state of the teaching in political literacy. It found that one-fifth of schools taught no political literacy material at all, and demonstrated the need for intervention to ensure everyone leaves school with a good level of political literacy (Weinberg, 2021).

1.2 Political literacy as a civic competence: political participation and civic engagement

Defining political literacy as a civic competence means also emphasising the role of civic education in fostering future political participation and civic engagement. As also noted in the introduction to this study, this is particularly relevant in the current crisis of institutions and values which affects representative democracy (Economou, 2009, p. 11), with citizens having fallen into a state of 'lethargy', 'political apathy' or 'political indifference' (Spanou, 2008, p. 215; 89 Initiative, 2020). According to Eurydice (2016), the competence strand of citizenship education includes four different areas:

1. Interacting effectively and constructively with others;

2. Thinking critically (media literacy, knowledge, and discovery and use of sources);

3. Acting in a socially responsible manner (cultural knowledge, justice and human rights);

4. Acting democratically (knowledge and understanding of political process, institutions and organisations).

A definition of political literacy should incorporate these four areas as they provide a bridge between education and political participation.

A recent report (Weinberg, 2021; see also Chapter 2) examining the impact of political literacy in English schools finds that political education can improve students' attitudes towards political engagement, with students undertaking lessons in politics more likely to become engaged in voting and in elections. Similarly, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA's) Civic Education study (1999) demonstrated a correlation between independent school attendance and young people's civic engagement. As Torney-Purta (2010) highlights, it became apparent in the IEA's study of 90,000 teenagers from 28 countries, that if schools want to foster civic engagement, they need to rigorously teach civic content and skills, ensure an 'open classroom' environment for discussing issues, emphasise the importance of the electoral process, and encourage a participative school culture. Campbell (2019) argues that although the existing data are limited, there is growing evidence that both formal and informal civic education have meaningful and long-lasting effects on young people's

civic engagement. More concretely, according to this author, there are four elements of civic education in schools that have a direct impact on civic learning and engagement, and which can compensate for a lack of civic resources in students' families and communities. These are: classroom instruction; extracurricular activities; service learning; and a school's ethos. Unsurprisingly, education has a positive effect on the vitality of democracy, and seems to be directly related to political participation. Indeed, the higher the level of education, the higher levels of political participation and civic engagement. For example, scholars have also underlined the importance of political literacy for being able to engage in current affairs – especially those that affect the lives of students (Estellés and Castellví, 2019; Westheimer, 2019 Kaufman, 2020). This includes controversial and explicitly political issues that require thoughtful engagement, such as abortion rights (Estellés and Castellví, 2019; Westheimer, 2019). Furthermore, it is argued that civic education courses should teach students how to grapple with challenging questions teaching them how to advocate and show constructive dissent (Giroux, 2017; Westheimer, 2019).

Lastly, civic education courses can present issues for discussion from multiple perspectives with the goal of enabling students to engage in democratic dialogue and work jointly toward agreed policies (Lin, Lawrence, and Snow, 2015; Westheimer, 2019). Civic education, in particular, matters for knowledge about politics and participatory attitudes (Niemi and Hepburn, 1995; Broman 2009). However, there is mixed evidence (Manning and Edwards, 2014) on whether civic education has a direct effect on voting, although it seems it increases activities of political expression, thus challenging the assumption that civic education produces 'politically participative' individuals. These complexities should be captured in any measure of political literacy as this research shows political participation can take many forms, beyond modes of engagement that have been measured traditionally (e.g. voting).

1.3   Political literacy and media literacy

Social media and the 24-hour news cycle mean that media and information literacy need to be considered as an important component of political literacy. The UK's independent communications regulator, Ofcom, defines media literacy as the 'ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts (Ofcom 2021[1]). The Online Safety Bill[2] includes a more detailed definition of media literacy. The elements it identifies that relate to political literacy are:

• an understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media (i.e. being able to identify if the source of information has an agenda / bias)

• an awareness of the impact that such material may have (i.e. the impact on the behaviour of those who receive it both online and offline)

• an awareness and understanding of the processes by which such material is selected or made available for publication (i.e. understanding that we do not all

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receive the same information and algorythims can lead to echo chambers)

• an awareness of how the reliability and accuracy of such material may be established (UK Parliament, 2023)

However, there are few studies that consider how to refine students' ability to identify fake news (Musgrove et al., 2018). Musgrove et al. (2018) provide useful pointers for how to design media literacy curricula by underlining some of the psychological processes that intervene in the formation of perceptions on fake news and its 'believability'. These authors remind us that individuals tend to confer credibility to information based on familiarity ("I've heard it before"), availability (whether events can be easily remembered or not), as well as their own confirmation biases (interpreting information in a way that reinforces an individual's beliefs and expectations). In an ambitious and pioneering study in Europe, Ranieri et al. (2016) looked at how media literacy education, including media content analysis and civic self-expression through media, can help address the rise of authoritarian populism and its popularity among young people. They find that, while broadly allowing students to identify stereotypes and deconstruct hate speech, the effectiveness of media literacy courses varies greatly according to the national context. Biesta and Lawy (2006) identify this context-dependency as a potential obstacle to the effective implementation of civic education. Consistent with previous research, open classroom discussions and students' active participation are found to be effective ways to teach democratic skills and habits (Rios Millett McCartney (2020). Specifically, Cook et al. (2015) found that engaging in classroom discussions to provide alternative explanations and directly address misperceptions improves media literacy.

2.   Political literacy as a democracy-building tool

Political literacy has also been studied with reference to democracy-promoting skills, namely 'self-efficacy' (Dudley and Gitelson, 2019). This concept has long been deemed a fundamental political attitude that underpins political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963). It is understood as "the feeling that one is capable of influencing the decision-making process" (Goel, 1980, p. 127). Efficacy is in turn sub-divided into two categories: internal efficacy, which relates to the belief in one's ability to understand and take part in political life, and external efficacy, related to the belief about the political system's responsiveness to one's political actions. Of these two categories, promoting internal efficacy has traditionally been one of the main goals of civic education, with a view to enhancing citizens' participation and engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Within this field of research, Pasek et al. (2008) examined the long-term effects of a civic education program in public high schools in Philadelphia and found that "a supplementary civic education program (...) can increase subsequent participation in politics by building long-term gains in political self-efficacy and skills in using the news media to follow government and political affairs" (p. 26). Amna and Zetterberg (2010) also include efficacy in their three core dimensions of political citizenship: internal political efficacy, namely an individual's belief about his or her own competence to understand and to make a difference in political matters; political literacy, intended as political knowledge; and political participation, the latter often discussed in relation to external efficacy. In this respect, external efficacy is closely associated with satisfaction with democracy and trust in insti-

tutions (Gonzalez, 2020).

However, while this literature has often stressed that civic education improves knowledge and political participation, thus having a positive effect on the overall functioning of democracy, it has not been possible to demonstrate a clear causal effect between the level of education and the level of political participation and civic engagement (Niemi and Junn 1998; Bowman, 2011). Thus, the results of the literature are mixed. Although some teaching practices, including deliberative discussion and an open classroom climate, seem to positively impact on students' knowledge about democracy and societal affairs (Amadeo et al. 2002), there is also the possibility that these positive outcomes are in turn influenced by students' family backgrounds (Ekman, 2007). Whereas some scholars consider political literacy as a harbinger of future political participation (Sondheimer and Greene, 2010), others argue that political literacy is not a cause but a proxy for political participation (Perrson, 2014). Therefore, understanding the correlation between political literacy and political participation is a challenge when conceptualising political literacy.

2.1 Political literacy and political socialisation in a global context

At the same time, political literacy has been linked to political socialisation. Political socialisation, through political literacy, can help develop the attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours that enable citizens to make sense of their own life as individuals and active members of society (Greenstein, 1969). The definition of 'political socialisation' is broad, as it includes "all formal, informal, deliberate, unplanned learning at every stage of life. Political socialisation helps in learning of political attitudes and social preferences which is crucial for stable government and democracy" (Baruah, 2012). Previous studies confirm that socialisation directly contributes to changes in several cases, among others: change in interpretations of politics, political literacy, media and online material, and one's willingness to share attitudes and political opinions on social media (Dudley and Gitelson, 2002). In turn, political socialisation is significantly shaped by the parameters of the society in which it is embedded, from urban to rural communities, education background, and exogenous events. For instance, a study has found that exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic during an individual's 'impressionable years' (ages 16 to 25) has a persistent negative effect on confidence in political institutions and leaders (Eichengreen et al. 2021), thus suggesting that political socialisation is hugely shaped by the specific context in which it is experienced.

3.   Discussion

3.1   Defining political literacy: how many dimensions?

A first point emerging from the literature is that the definition of political literacy is multi-dimensional, depending on whether it is perceived as an extension of citizenship education, in its role as 'political information provider', or as a democracy-building tool. This view was reinforced in the roundtables organised with academics and civil society. As noted by our stakeholders, political literacy is not only about being able to read, evaluate, and possess knowledge and information about democratic systems and processes. It also means being able to engage as citizens and voters in a complex environment both offline and online. One stakeholder noted that "it is not only about having the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be politically informed, but it also refers to engaging, collaborating with, and conversing with politicians, while applying these ways of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to actively participate in democratic life". Therefore, conceptualising political literacy is an ongoing challenge, although the APPG on Political Literacy has undertaken work to develop a 'shared terminology'.

3.2   Political literacy and the many ways of engaging in political participation

Secondly, the literature has widely discussed the interaction of political literacy with political participation. In this sense, political literacy is also understood as a competence whose goal is to prepare citizens to carry out their role in democratic life through political socialisation. Thus, it is also linked to participation, ranging from political participation (such as engaging in minimally expected forms of participation, such as voting at elections) to social, cultural, and economic participation. Indeed, in support of this point, one of our participants stressed that one signal of political literacy is greater involvement in social action, including engaging in debates around social issues. For instance, issues around the economy have been considered by some participants as important catalysts to trigger interest in political literacy. As one participant put it: "I started engaging in politics more because I was exposed to systemic issues in the economy". This suggests an interplay of political literacy with our economic and social life. Furthermore, as noted by an academic at the roundtables, participation needs to be "unpacked" and considered "according to its variations, ranging from high participation to low". This means that political participation should be based on a neutral understanding (in terms of gender, socio-economic status, cultural orientation) reflecting the global context, and including factors such as participation on social media, values, and subjective interests. In other words, understanding political literacy as political socialisation means also connecting it to less traditional definitions of political participation.

3.3   Understanding political literacy as a process, rather than as an output, providing democratic values

At the roundtables, there was consensus that an integrated approach to political literacy should understand this as a process, rather than as an

output of the education system. It should be based on peoples' responsibility and ability to autonomously and critically understand the social, political, and economic determinants of the society in which they live. As noted by one stake-holder, it is not only about whether people are informed about the mechanisms of their political system, but rather what kind of image they have of the world around them. In this respect, our discussions show the importance that values hold in understanding political literacy. Broadly encompassing the values of the public sphere (e.g. human rights, social justice, collectiveness, and individual achievement), these are an important enabler for citizens to participate in public life and a vital component of political literacy in fostering and maintaining social justice-oriented communities.

4.   An integrated approach to political literacy

Following the discussion of the literature and the insights gained during the roundtables, we propose that these elements constitute an integrated approach to political literacy:

- **Political literacy concerns the knowledge of political systems and institutions AND the acquisition and use of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to engage in democratic life as active citizens.**

- **Political literacy should capture active and informed political participation and account for its multidimensional nature - including internal and external efficacy, political participation and its variations, civic competence, and media literacy.**

- **Political literacy should be understood as a continuous and context-dependent process rather than as an output of the education system. A measure of political literacy should also consider the ability of individuals to be critically aware of their social, cultural, political, economic, and global context.**

CHAPTER 2

Who should be involved in measuring political literacy?

Defining who should 'govern' political literacy is not an easy task. As seen in the previous chapter, political literacy is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Thus, its governance involves a similarly broad set of actors, from governments and ministries of education, to educators, the media and social media, and parents. Most of these actors would need to be on board with the development of a nationwide measure of political literacy for it to be successful. This chapter discusses some of those different actors – governments and policy makers, schools and educators, and civil society organisations – surveying their role in governing political literacy to date, and considering their future contribution.

1.   Governments

In comparison to other countries, England has been slow to provide a systematic form of citizenship education as a matter of national policy. This is due to the decentralisation of the school curriculum (Mclaughlin, 2000) and the absence of a codified constitutional framework (Andrews and Mycock, 2007). Since 2002, political literacy has been a part of the national curriculum in England for Key Stages 3 and 4 with an optional GCSE available in the subject (UK Parliament, 2018; see also Chapter 1). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the introduction of citizenship education (with political literacy as one of three interrelated strands) was part of the recommendations produced by the Crick Committee (Kerr, 2003). This was also linked to the Labour government's plan to encourage citizenship education as part of its emphasis on social justice with individual responsibility (Kisby 2009, p. 44).

Following the 2010 general election, the Conservative-led Coalition Government enacted some major shifts in the governance of citizenship education, including the adoption of 'fundamental British values' by the Department for Education (2014). Moreover, the expansion of private schools and their freedom in terms of curricula (West and Wolfe, 2018) caused a gap in the provision of political literacy as a curricular subject. Most available data at national level refer to the 2010 Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study, which demonstrated that citizenship education was delivered in a discrete timetable slot by only a third of schools (DfE, 2010). Several efforts are being undertaken by civil society organisations to raise awareness and provide evidence on the state of political literacy in the UK (see also next section). A report by Shout Out UK (SOUK, 2021) confirmed that less than a third of schools are offering weekly lessons in the curriculum in 2021, with the provision of political literacy dependent on schools' resources, and a huge discrepancy in its provisioning between independent and state schools. Moreover, government cuts in the budget for teachers and an emphasis on developing subjects like maths and English have also been barriers in promoting the teaching of political literacy. In other words, at an institutional level, there is no central authority responsible for political literacy; rather what emerges is fragmentation and a general inclination to shift (already scarce) resources away from political literacy. Despite political literacy being often discussed as a key competence for citizens, there are still substantial gaps in its provision with a greater involvement required by the government and the Department of Education in addressing these gaps, while working on partnerships and coordination outside the education system.

2.   Schools and educators

There is a consensus among researchers and practitioners that teachers are un-evenly equipped in terms of learning objectives, instruction time, and assess-ment in relation to political literacy. By surveying schoolteachers, the SOUK re-port found that the majority of teachers (79%) did not feel adequately prepared for teaching politics, in particular for teachers in schools located in most dis-advantaged areas (Weinberg, 2021). Related to this aspect, it is not surprising that political disengagement, characterised by issues such as voter abstention or disengagement from political processes, is higher for students who have not been exposed to politics in their classes (House of Commons, 2022). Together with schools and teachers as governance actors, parents play a very important role in helping their children develop what one participant of the roundtable referred to as "the language" of political literacy. According to the SOUK report, parents are very supportive when it comes to the teaching of politics. Indeed, parents are also responsible for transmitting values and thus play an important role in reinforcing political literacy. **While respecting and maintaining the de-centralisation and flexibility given to educational institutions, it would be important to create a national strategic plan for the development of polit-ical literacy skills in England, including small scale and collective decision making initiatives.**

3.   Civil society organisations

Outside the education system, a more proactive role has emerged for civil soci-ety organisations over the last decade, especially since low youth turnout at the 2015 general elections highlighted the worrying state of political engagement among young people (Henn and Heart, 2017). The launch of the APPG on Politi-cal Literacy - which has its origins in the Political Literacy Oversight Group (PLOG) - is an example of evolving civil society dynamics. It involves youth organisations, volunteers, and academics cooperating with a coalition of MPs and Lords, with the shared aim of promoting political and media literacy education. The long list of stakeholders composing the APPG provides evidence of the important inter-action between different sets of actors. It also speaks to the many ways one can approach the subject of political literacy, whether as a curricular subject of the education system, or as a more multidimensional competence which, although difficult to quantify, can nevertheless be observed (see also Chapter 1). Besides the campaigns and initiatives led by I Have a Voice, there are several examples of how different organisations and youth-led movements in the UK have pursued creative forms of civic engagement including the Politics Project, specialising in delivering workshops for young people, events such as 'Bite the Ballot' that aims to empower young people and marginalised communities to lead change, and the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), which is also part of the Five Na-tions Network, a unique forum sharing best practices in citizenship education in all four nations of the UK. Civil society organisations are critical actors in political literacy: beyond their traditional function of providing resources and organis-ing outreach programmes, they act as important partners for schools and gov-ernments given their grounding in the local context, and their capacity to form bridges between academia and academic research, and to reach communities otherwise marginalised by conventional debates.

4.   Governing a nationwide measure

For a nationwide measure of political literacy to be widely accepted, all the above groups will need to be engaged at some level. The government and the Department of Education would be required to integrate the measure into existing political literacy and civic education frameworks. Meanwhile, schools, parents, and civil society would play an important validating role, contributing to the development of the measure itself, through feedback and consultation. There are challenges here which would have to be overcome. Resistance to a nationwide measure would likely occur during discussions around the components of the measure, and the types of knowledge, participation forms, and attitudes that it would seek to benchmark. Parents and teachers, depending on their political leaning, may have opposing ideas concerning this. The role of political parties and their ideologies is relevant here too. Depending on which party is in power, there may be different approaches to the topic of political literacy. Such challenges may be overcome by the formation – at an early stage – of a broad coalition of supportive actors on multiple levels and ideally from across the political spectrum. If successful, the measure would become the responsibility of the government to oversee long-term.

POLLING STATION

CHAPTER 3

Measuring
political literacy

This chapter provides an overview of existing attempts to measure the three main components of political literacy: knowledge, participation and skills, and attitudes. The chapter also assesses, from the standpoint of these existing measures, whether it is feasible to measure political literacy with a methodology that could be deployed at scale, ultimately nationwide, in the UK. Finally, it includes an overview of stakeholder views on whether such a measure would be useful and something they would use. This insight has been gained through two roundtables, an event organised as part of the Festival of Debate, and a series of one-to-one discussions.

3.1   Political knowledge

The IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), discussed earlier in this report, assesses lower secondary school students':

- **knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship;**
- **participation in civic activities;**
- **attitudes towards and perceptions of civic institutions, behaviours, and practices.**

The last study took place in 2016 and included c. 94,000 students, in 3,800 schools, across 24 countries in Europe and Latin America.

The civic knowledge outcome measure was based on a survey with 87 questions – 78 multiple-choice and 9 constructed-response questions. The majority of the questions had a brief contextual stimulus (e.g. an image or some text) followed by a series of related questions. The questions cover:

(a) how citizens can vote in local or national elections;

(b) how laws are introduced and changed;

(c) how to protect the environment;

(d) how to contribute to solving problems in the local community;

(e) how citizens' rights are protected;

(f) political issues and events in other countries.

The IEA also assesses democratic participation by asking the students whether they have participated in civic activities such as voting in school elections, taken part in discussions about social and political issues, and whether they expect to vote in elections when they are old enough. Students' attitudes are assessed through their responses on the importance of citizenship, grassroots movements, and promoting equality.

Based on these responses, the students were put into one of four groups with 'A' demonstrating the strongest knowledge, most participation and most positive attitudes, and 'D' the least. This enables countries to assess the proportion of students in each category over time. From a practical perspective, these tests are administered through a mixture of online and paper booklets. Two challenges raised by Schultz (2021) are the balance between asking consistent questions that show change over time, and including new questions in each round that capture students' knowledge on pertinent issues. For example, the ICCS which took place after 9/11 asked about threats to democracy, whereas the 2022 ICCS (results yet to be published) focused on sustainability. The second challenge is in consistently assessing the constructed response questions, as they provide greater insight into students' cognitive reasoning and their ability to apply knowledge (Schultz, 2021)

The IEA has three central aims:

1. To monitor changes in students' civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement over time;

2. To address new and emerging civic-related challenges to improve countries' understanding of these issues, such as environmental challenges;

3. To generate a reliable and comparable dataset to enable countries to evaluate the strengths of their educational policies and to measure progress toward achieving national, regional, and international civic goals.

These aims are aligned with our ambitions for a UK nationwide measure of political literacy and there is evidence from countries in Europe and Latin America that policymakers have used the results of the ICCS to inform their civic education policies and practices.

A UK-based assessment of political knowledge is the 'Life in the UK Test'. This is an assessment of civic knowledge that certain immigrants must pass to obtain citizenship or Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK. It is a computer-based test that asks 24 multiple-choice questions that cover topics such as British Values, history, traditions and everyday needs such as employment matters, housing, health and education.

This test has faced significant criticism. In 2022, The Justice and Home Affairs Committee conducted an inquiry and identified several problems, including that the test is based on a series of obscure facts and subjective assertions (including offensive historical content), while questions are poorly phrased and trivialise the process. The Committee also stressed the need to reintroduce taught courses, known to promote social cohesion and gender equality.

There are many other examples of tests internationally that assess people's civic knowledge such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Student Questionnaire in the US. Common critiques that would need to be addressed while developing a nationwide measure in the UK include the following:

- The format of questions can mean that instead of assessing someone's literacy i.e. their ability to apply their knowledge to navigate the political system, tests assess what can people remember about the democratic system and its institutions. We live in a world where we have access to boundless knowledge; so, knowing how to access the information we need and act upon it when needed is more relevant than being able to remember a series of facts. This critique suggests that any nationwide UK measure must assess peoples' ability to find information and apply it to real-world situations.

- Whilst it is important that people understand traditional components of citizenship – such as writing to their MP, or how to research candidates standing in an election – for some groups these methods of engagement are less relevant and accessible than others, such as taking part in a grassroots movement or raising awareness of issues online. This concern has been flagged as some groups have been systemically marginalised by the system. Therefore, their engagement with, and knowledge of, the system is rooted in a different experience compared with those in power, and therefore they have a different perspective of the system. Any nationwide measure will need to be developed and tested with a representative sample of the UK population to avoid question and researcher bias.

3.2   Democratic participation

There are several methods used in the UK and internationally to assess people's current and anticipated future democratic participation. The most frequently used measures for democratic participation are voter turnout and voter registration. However, in the UK, when these figures are broken down into age brackets or other categories they often amount to mere estimates.

Another measure used in England is The Community Life Survey of adults aged 16+ (DCMS, 2021). This is a household-level survey and can be self-completed online and offline. It measures:

- Civic participation: engagement in democratic processes, both in person and online, including contacting a local official (such as a local councillor or MP), signing a petition, or attending a public rally (excludes voting);

- Civic consultation: taking part in a consultation about local services or problems in the local area through completing a questionnaire, attending a public meeting or being involved in a face-to-face or online group;

- Civic activism: involvement in activities in the local community such as being a local councillor, school governor, volunteer special constable or magistrate (for those aged 18 or over). Civic action also includes involvement (in person or online) in decision-making groups in the local area. This might involve, for example, a group making decisions about local health or education services, a tenants' decision-making group or a group set up to tackle local crime problems or to regenerate the local area.

An example question from this survey is: "If you wanted to influence decisions in your local area how would you go about it?" Here, respondents are presented with a list of options to select all that apply. The three most common responses

in 2021 were "sign an online petition", "contact the council/ a council official", and "contact my councillor", with the same result in 2019/20. Another example is "what would make it easier to influence decisions in your local area?"

This survey is aimed at those aged 16+. Surveys aimed at young people often ask about what democratic processes they have engaged with in their school, such as school council elections, or whether they have had an opportunity to vote in their classrooms, as well as their views on how likely they are to participate in elections, or engage with their community when they are older. A 2012 study by the European Commission found that around a third of countries have issued central guidelines at secondary level for assessing student participation in school life and in wider society. This assessment takes various forms including establishing personal profiles for students and validating participation outside school. In the UK, the Citizenship GCSE has an Active Citizenship component that requires students to investigate and research an issue, take responsible action and measure their impact against objectives (AQA, 2022). In school settings observation and feedback on participation can complement surveys and questionnaires – though self-reporting would need to be relied on for the adult population.

Increasingly, measures of democratic participation include aspects of digital and media literacy. I Have a Voice surveyed over 100 young people in 2021 with 68% responding that a primary source of information is social media. Given the increased volume of information, number of online sources of information, and the rise of fake news, misinformation, deep fakes, online extremism, and radicalisation, it is crucial that measures of political literacy account for the knowledge and skills needed to be a responsible citizen online. One interesting way of approaching this has been to ask people to critically assess a political meme (Elmore & Coleman, 2019). This approach could be applied to other forms of image and video content on social media and online more broadly given the prevalence of this form of content.

Finally, many of the skills that are needed to be an active citizen are skills that people need to succeed in all walks of life. Therefore, many other skills-based frameworks could be helpful for measuring political literacy. One example is the Skills Builder Partnership. This is a global movement of employers, educators, and impact organisations working together to ensure that one day, everyone builds the essential skills to succeed. In 2022, it was used to support c. 2.3 million individuals to build their essential skills. The core skills that the Partnership provides a framework for assessing and developing are: Listening; Speaking; Problem-solving; Creativity; Staying Positive; Aiming high; Leadership; and Teamwork. Other examples include the Life Skills Assessment Scale (2014) which was developed by two clinical psychologists in India and The Australian Council for Education Research's Assessment of Capabilities (Scoular *et al.* 2020).

When using these tools, it is important to be mindful that some people will be more inclined to participate in traditional democratic processes, while others may be more anarchic or prefer to engage in online spaces. Navigating what these mean for people's political literacy and how they're weighted will be a necessary step in developing a measure of political literacy.

3.3   Attitudes, values and beliefs

Pollsters are continuously assessing public attitudes on a range of political issues and towards politicians. We have access to hundreds of 'snapshots' of people's views on a particular topic and how they change over time. These are useful for assessing the impact of current events on people's attitudes, but more in-depth analysis is needed to understand whether someone's values and beliefs have fundamentally changed. Indeed, we cannot ascertain from these 'snapshots' the different factors that have led to this decision, or whether their views are deep-rooted. It will be important therefore to make sure that attempts to capture attitudes, values and beliefs capture items that could change daily depending on what is happening in politics.

The Hansard Society conducted and published 15 audits of political engagement. The content of these audits shares many similarities with this study's aims. Among other things, it polled people's interest in politics as well as their satisfaction with, and trust in, the political system. The annual audit was made possible by working with a polling organisation. The Hansard Society was able to garner support to run the poll year-on-year. Other annual examples of this third component include the Edelman Trust Barometer, which seeks to understand how personal attitudes interconnect to shape broader societal forces and My Life My Say's Youth Democracy Index, which in 2022 surveyed 1,000 people aged 18-24 to gather their opinions on three key sections: 1. Their preferred political system, 2. Their views on the state of British democracy, and 3. Their perspective on whose interests they think the government serves.

An online tool that is operating in Finland to assess values and attitudes is the Citizenship Booster, produced by the GO! Education network in Flanders. This online questionnaire comprises a series of simple statements to help schools elicit insight into the citizenship-based values, attitudes, and behaviours of their students, using this information to understand the effectiveness of school-level citizenship education approaches (for example, the policy towards bullying). Based on the results, schools can reflect on and change how they implement teaching and support learning for citizenship education. The project was launched in September 2016 and, by the end of April 2017, 11,000 students in 85 schools had used it. A second online tool in Finland is the Citizenship Compass from the Catholic education network, which was launched in September 2020. This tool also starts from a student survey, measuring students' socio-emotional abilities, their 'inner compass' (e.g., identity and values system), and their social responsibility and commitment to sustainable living. Although both tools are similar, the Citizenship Compass also provides an interactive feedback view, in which schools can be benchmarked against similar schools or the Flemish average (Claes & Stals).

CHAPTER 4

Analysis and feasibility

In this chapter, we turn to the feasibility of a nationwide measure of political literacy in the UK. It will build on the previous chapter, by analysing the international tools that have been used to measure political literacy in the past – in the areas of knowledge, participation, and attitudes – setting these against the components of political literacy discussed earlier. It will then cast its verdict on the question of feasibility, responding to the three sub-questions that were indicated at the outset.

1.   Analysis

1.1   Knowledge

There exist several international trackers of civic education attainment, such as the ICCS, that offer helpful templates to follow. The ICCS's breadth of coverage is relatable to a future measure of political literacy, which would be similarly broad. The volume of questions across the different categories of interest provides the ICCS with considerable depth, enabling it to tease out differences within the tested sample, and ultimately to assign scores.

Meanwhile, its sensitivity to context offers another useful parallel for a measure of political literacy. This has permitted the ICCS to conceive of civic education in broader terms than a simple understanding of institutions, voting, and the intricacies of government. It also appreciates that politics concerns issues – not merely process – and, above all, how people respond to and engage with such issues. As discussed previously, our approach to political literacy involves a similar breadth of understanding, something which renders the ICCS a useful and validating parallel for a nationwide measure of political literacy.

The ICCS study also highlights the interaction between knowledge and skills elements, through its focus on participation. This chimes with our own understanding of political literacy concerning the *acquisition and use of knowledge*, not merely the knowledge itself. Therefore, it provides a useful precedent for our purposes.

1.2   Participation

The Community Life Survey demonstrates that it is possible to measure democratic participation among young people in a variety of ways including their direct participation in the democratic process, consultation, and activism. A key factor that the measure does not consider is the role of media literacy. This, as demonstrated by the I Have a Voice study (2021), is a critical omission. For a political literacy measure to be robust, it must also reflect how literate citizens are with the media and particularly social media.

Measurement tools for media literacy are also in their infancy. However, the development of a political literacy measure should work in tandem with developments in media literacy. The Elmore and Coleman (2019) approach for evaluating how people respond to online information is a promising one. This raises methodological questions, suggesting that to measure political literacy, one must go beyond surveys and questionnaires used in the ISSC and Community

Life Survey initiatives, to include other more nuanced forms of examination, such as interviewing.

1.3 Attitudes

The Citizenship Booster and Citizenship Compass seek to teach certain values, and to track their development in schools across time. It is questionable whether there are specific attitudes, values, or beliefs that can be associated with political literacy, or that political literacy can furnish one with a set of values.

The Hansard Society Audit and the Edelman Trust Barometer are multiyear studies that test the change in attitudes and values over time. Viewing political literacy as a process, rather than an outcome, accords with our own understanding. In a measure of political literacy, there should be similar emphasis on development over time of certain values, rendering these valuable reference points for the study.

2.   Feasibility

To determine the feasibility for the development of a robust nationwide measure of political literacy, this study has sought to answer three critical sub-questions:

- Is it feasible to develop an integrated approach to political literacy from among the various disparate definitions and approaches that characterise the field?

- Is it feasible to measure political literacy on the basis of this approach?

- Do earlier attempts to measure political literacy validate our approach?

2.1   An integrated approach to political literacy

Chapter 1 discusses the various ways of viewing and defining political literacy. It seeks to consider distinct approaches to understanding political literacy, from the perspective of knowledge, skills, and values. In so doing, it teases out synergies between the three, forming these into an integrated set of understandings for political literacy. By demonstrating the synergies between these elements, we have been able to develop an integrated approach to conceptualising political literacy that would act as the starting point for measurement.

2.2   Measuring political literacy

As the analysis above demonstrates, the key principles developed in Chapter 1 correspond with several recent and longer-term measurements. The ICCS provides precedents for detailed surveying methodologies to be applied at scale. Its incorporation of context into the measurement of political literacy reflects the principle outlined in Chapter 1, that political literacy should be understood as a 'continuous' and 'context-dependent' process.

A critical principle reflects the role of skills alongside knowledge: the ability of a citizen to engage. Both the ICCS and the Community Life Survey includes a category which tests this ability to participate: the ICCS through its focus on student participation in civic activities; the Community Life Survey through its interest in civic activism.

The final principle concerns the continuous nature of political literacy. The studies surveyed above are all annual or multi-year studies which enabling the tracking of developments over time. To capture changes in political literacy, a nationwide measure of political literacy would require regular testing, as an annual survey or one conducted at multiyear intervals.

Given the role of social media in political engagement, a key challenge is the integration of media literacy into political literacy, a challenge measurements to-date have not addressed, and which a nationwide measure in the UK would be required to do, but for which there are interesting existing tools that could be drawn on.

2.3 Stakeholder buy-in

The extent to which such a measure would be widely accepted depends on the support of important stakeholder groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, civil society organisations play a vital role, as do parents and schools. The government and the Department of Education would inevitably be called upon to rubber stamp the measure, before it can be adopted nationwide. The same is true of the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. To achieve broad support, stakeholders must be engaged in the development of the precise components of the measure, and at the conclusion of the process, offering support and validation.

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CONCLUSION

Politics is part and parcel of our everyday life. From voting in elections, to signing a petition, or being engaged in volunteering activities for the local community, we all participate in different ways and to different degrees. In this, **political literacy an essential condition for effectively performing our role as citizens.** In the UK, factors such as youth disengagement in elections, distrust towards politicians, and the proliferation of fake news in a more hostile and complex digital society, have further increased the need for political literacy, broadly intended as a combination of attributes and behaviours enabling citizens to participate in democratic processes, shaping decisions and discourses. However, if there is unanimous agreement that political literacy is of paramount importance to the functioning of democratic institutions, with a growing body of scholarship providing more evidence and data based evaluations, a means of measuring political literacy nationwide does not yet exist.

Commissioned by the JRRST-CT, this study has contributed to ongoing research and debates on political literacy. Through desk research, roundtables with stakeholders and academics, and expert validation, this study addresses the following question: **Is it possible to develop a robust nationwide measure for political literacy in the UK?** In addressing this overarching question, this study has 'unpacked' political literacy by considering three main dimensions: (i) **Understanding**, providing a common conceptual framework able to capture the different dimensions and definitions of political literacy; (ii) **Governing,** discussing the role of key agents involved in political literacy; and (iii) **Measuring**, surveying similar attempts to produce measures for political literacy. Related to these dimensions, there are several conclusions that emerge from our research.

First, political literacy is a multidimensional concept, ranging from a core competence of citizenship education to a set of democracy-shaping skills. It is also a process rather than an output of the education system as it also promotes political engagement, political participation, and a set of behaviours enabling citizens to participate in public life. Second, governments, school institutions, and civil society organisations are key agents responsible for political literacy and so need to be bought into the merits of a nationwide measure. Third, measuring political literacy is complex and requires a modular approach to assess specific interventions. Nevertheless, there

are helpful precedents which can be used to inform a nationwide measure of political literacy.

The study concludes that a nationwide measure of political literacy in the UK is feasible. Focusing on the acquisition and use of knowledge, the context-dependent, and the multi-dimensional nature of political literacy, it has been possible to unify disparate conceptual strands. By establishing an integrated approach to political literacy connecting knowledge, participation, and attitudes, the study provides a useful starting point for measuring political literacy.

While a measure would be multi-dimensional, possibly involving various sub-measures, there is ample best-practice from which to draw. Surveys such as the IEA's ICCS and the Community Life Survey involve precedents for measuring interaction with political content, and integrating current affairs into surveying methods to capture changes in context. Given the importance of media in political engagement, a nationwide measure of political literacy must also integrate tools for capturing media literacy.

Future research must turn to the technical development of the components of a nationwide measure. It must also consider the question of stakeholder buy-in and the extent to which the UK government and civil society would support and help adopt a nationwide measure of political literacy.

Therefore, the next step in this process should involve the formulation of a wider stakeholder group to develop the measure in conjunction with academic experts. This measure should be stress-tested through rigorous consultation, leading to its eventual launch nationwide.

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