



DISCUSSION PAPER

The many facets of political literacy and participation



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I have a voice is a social enterprise that is proactively striving to increase political literacy and support diversity in public affairs and the political sphere.

FOREWORD



This started as a paper on the many facets of political literacy as I wanted to explore all of the potential benefits that can be derived from improving people's understanding of how our political system works. But the numerous discussions I've had to pull together the evidence-base for this report has made me realise what I am sure many others already know too well – that you cannot consider political literacy without talking about political participation. My aim is to extend discussions about political literacy beyond democratic participation and the increasingly acknowledged importance of media literacy. My background is in public policy and public affairs and so my experience of political literacy and participation is about how much people understand different societal issues such as social care and climate change – and crucially their part in preventing crises.

By working in public affairs, you also realise that everyone is exposed to political risk each and every day. Political decisions and discourse shape how we think, how we behave, our education, employment, financial security and health, and they shape how we engage with those very individuals and institutions that make the decisions that affect our lives. The Pandemic has brought to the fore just how much influence political decisions have over every single aspect of our lives. I hope one of the ways we 'build back better' is by harnessing this renewed political awareness to increase the UK's political literacy and demonstrate that doing so is a worthwhile endeavour.

'I have a voice' (IHAV) is one of a number of organisations dedicated to improving political literacy and participation. Our approach is to address two inter-linked challenges. The first is lower levels of engagement with democratic processes amongst specific segments of the population. This creates the second challenge – that these same people are also under-represented within the thousands of employment opportunities in policymaking. The fact that these voices are missing at a democratic, but also a professional level, means that their perspectives are missing from public policy and political decisions that directly impact their lives. It is important that we understand the implications of political decisions for different segments of the population.

There are measures in place to support policymakers to consider the impact of their decisions on different cohorts, such as impact assessments, but we've seen throughout the Pandemic that political decisions continue to have more adverse effects on some more than others. Increasing political literacy across the population will mean that policymakers are better able to consider the implications on their decisions on marginalised groups and will therefore be more robust. Our view is that overtime this could improve trust in politics and politicians across all parties. We're optimistic about this link between literacy and trust because one thing we see time and time again with the young people we work with is that as they learn more about what is happening in Parliament and across government departments on the issues that matter to them and their communities, the less they view politics as being something that they're not a part of or interested in. It combats the 'them versus us' rhetoric and instead encourages many of the young people we work with to consider their roles as citizens, and potential future workers and leaders within our political structures.

We're grateful to the contributors of this discussion paper. Their insights have set a clear direction for further purposeful discussions about political literacy and participation.



Rebecca, Founder of I have a voice

INTRODUCTION



In this paper political literacy is defined as the set of abilities necessary for citizens to participate in democratic processes. It includes:

- an understanding of how government works to the extent that you are able to participate in its processes as a citizen;
- knowledge of the important issues facing society and the role of politics in tackling those challenges;
- an understanding of your own exposure to political risks and how you can engage with policymaking to mitigate those risks;
- the critical thinking skills to evaluate different points of view and be able to discern fact from opinion and falsehoods; and
- have the tools and mid-set to participate in constructive political discourse.

The rest of this paper explores these different facets of political literacy and the impact that being, or not being, politically literate has on individuals, under-represented segments of the population and all of us as a collective society:

Chapter 1: Democratic participation

Chapter 2: Media literacy and political discourse

Chapter 3: Politics is about much more than elections, it is about public policy

Chapter 4: Understanding our exposure to political risk

Chapter 5: Political education for all

This paper raises a number of questions that would benefit from further discussion to enhance political education and increase political literacy:

1. How do we improve inclusion and increase diversity in the political sphere taking an intersectional approach?
2. How can we increase political literacy amongst those whose voices are currently marginalised?
3. Can we use political literacy as a tool to achieve the government's levelling-up agenda?
4. How can we better convey the value of political literacy for all business leaders to politicians and educational institutes to increase the profile of political education?
5. Is there value in linking political, media and financial literacy for individuals? Does this give political education more clout? If so, what are the next steps?
6. The national curriculum has 'educated citizens' at its heart, yet delivery is patchy. Can the political sphere help to give clout to this aspect of the curriculum and play a more active role in supporting teachers to provide young people with the practical tools they need to fully engage in democratic processes, extending beyond elections?
7. As part of the political ecosystem do organisations like 38 Degrees play an important role in political engagement? Can we build on the high-scale, low-effort engagement they foster to promote deeper and more meaningful engagement and education?
8. Political literacy needs to extend beyond formal education as informal education is required throughout a person's lifetime to enable them to follow policy and political developments. Who has a role in this and how could we approach this? Do other countries already do this well?
9. How beneficial would it be to introduce a nationwide measure of political literacy? The intention would be to use this to set a benchmark to identify those segments of the population with the lowest levels of political literacy and to assess improvements or deterioration overtime. This measure could also improve our understanding of the link between political literacy and participation. Who would we need to engage to make this possible and as useful as possible?

IHAV is keen to work with others to progress these discussions, so get in touch if you would like to join us in exploring and progressing any of the matters raised in this paper.

CHAPTER 1: DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION



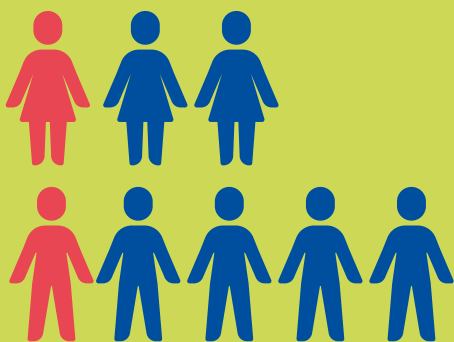
In the lead up to the 2021 local elections IHAV surveyed 192 young people, aged 16-18 from across England, to assess political literacy and engagement. The good news is 81% of the respondents said it is important that people vote. But 60% said the main barrier to voting is feeling that they do not know enough about the candidates. This is concerning given only 9% of the students knew what they would be voting for in the then forthcoming local elections, nevermind who was running – suggesting very low levels of knowledge. It is worth comparing this with the much lower proportion of respondents who declared a lack of interest (23%) as the reason for their lack of engagement in the local elections.

Responses to our survey differed based on gender and ethnicity:

- One in three females was registered to vote compared with one in five males.
- One in three males stated that they had a lack of interest in local elections compared with one in ten females.
- Seven out of ten females stated that the main barrier to them engaging in elections was feeling that they do not know enough about the candidates compared with four in ten males.
- One in three of the White British / White European participants were registered to vote compared with just 10% of the Black / Black British and 7% of the Asian / Asian British participants.
- The most significant differences in terms of barriers to engagement based on ethnicity was a lack of interest. This was identified by 63% of the Asian / Asian British participants, 27% of the Black / Black British respondents and 16% of the White / White British participants.

Our survey found that a lack of political knowledge is a significant barrier to political engagement for those respondents who identify as female and there is a greater lack of interest in politics amongst ethnic minority respondents.

Registered to vote / Not registered



Interested / Lack of interest



I know enough / I don't know enough



Numerous studies into both the actual political knowledge gap between males and females as well as females' perceptions of their level of knowledge compared with males support this finding [1]. This phenomenon is not only seen with political literacy, but also other forms of literacy such as financial literacy. [2] Research also supports our findings that people from minority ethnic groups are less likely to be politically literate and active.[1] A 'value add' from our research is that our survey was conducted amongst 16-18 year olds. This demonstrates that these trends, which can be seen across the adult population, start in younger ages. Therefore, early intervention is necessary if we want to tackle these disparities. IHAV believes political education for all would be a valuable intervention and this will be discussed further in Chapter five.

Elections are a useful time for assessing political literacy and participation, and for targeting education based interventions to increase voter engagement but this is not enough. The same segments of the population who are least likely to feel informed or interested are also least likely to stand for election.

Diversity amongst politicians

Progress is being made, the 2019 General Election (GE) resulted in the most diverse group of MPs we've ever had in the UK.[3] However, there is still a long way to go.

For the first time ever both the Lib Dems and Labour have more female MPs than male. For the Labour Party, this is partly attributable to it implementing all-women shortlists when selecting candidates and replacing retiring MPs in winnable seats (and not just marginal seats) with female candidates. However, overall, only 34% of MPs are female compared with 51% of the UK's population.[4] The University of Bath reviewed methods for increasing participation amongst females and it found the most effective method was gender quotas. But that to be most effective they should be run alongside proactive outreach to women to encourage them to stand, training and mentoring.[5]

10% of MPs are from non-white backgrounds, compared with 14% of the population. Despite appearances given the frontbench, only 6% of Conservative MPs are from an ethnic minority group compared with one in five Labour MPs. Ten years ago, only one in forty MPs were from a non-white ethnic group, showing significant progress has been made in a decade. In the 2019 GE alone, 13 more ethnic minority MPs were elected than the previous GE just two years earlier. It is noteworthy that they were all in English seats and there are no Black, Asian or other minority ethnic MPs in Wales or NI.[6] There were not any Black, Asian or other minority ethnic MPs in Scotland either until Anum Qaisar-Javed was elected as the new SNP MP for Airdrie and Shotts in a by-election in May 2021. Though there are ethnic minority MSPs and members of the Senedd.

In terms of their education, 29% of MPs went to fee-paying schools compared with 7% of the population. Four out of five of the MPs who went to a fee-paying school are in the Conservative Party. MPs are well-educated as 21% of MPs went to Oxbridge, compared with 1% of the population and a further third went to one of the Russell Group universities compared with 6% of the population.[7]

There is no monitoring of disability amongst MPs, however six MPs have self-disclosed disabilities which is 0.009% compared with approximately 20% of the population.[8]

There are 56 openly LGBTQ+ MPs; and according to Pink News this makes UK's Parliament the most gay in the world.[9]



It is even more stark at the local level. 2018 census data from the Local Government Association found:

- 63% of councillors were male and 36% female
- 96% described their ethnic background as white, compared with 86% of the population;
- 88% described their sexual orientation as heterosexual or straight, compared with 93.2% of the population;[10]
- 16% had a long-term health problem or disability which limited their daily activities - 19% of the working age population and 46% of pension age adults have a disability.[11][12]

The working age and pension age percentages are relevant as at the time of the Census:

- 45% of councillors were already retired and the average age of councillors was 59;
- only 15% were aged under-45; and
- 43% were aged 65 or over compared with 18% of the population.[13]



This was troubling for the young people we worked with in the lead up to the 2021 elections as they were concerned about their voices being heard by older people who will have different priorities to them, particularly around housing and youth centres.

In large part, the lack of diversity at a local-level is because councillors are not paid a salary. The average councillor spends around 22 hours a week on associated duties, yet on average they receive a basic allowance of £6,099 per year - equivalent to £5.38 an hour, well below the minimum wage. This is not enough for people without financial security, or with significant financial or caring responsibilities, as it reduces the time they have available for work and family.[14]

Another significant reason for the lack of diversity amongst local councillors, is the high rate of incumbency at elections (80%). Not only does incumbency reduce the likelihood of newcomers being elected, but the majority of incumbents are male. In addition, female councillors are more likely to drop out after serving one term, so they do not benefit from the high prevalence of incumbency in the same way as their male counterparts.[15]

We spoke with Jeremy Lefroy, former Conservative MP, about his political career and his experiences bring to life a number of these observations, plus a number of other observations about the forms of diversity that are missing in politics:

“We’re in a time when some people spend their whole life in politics, but I think if a council or parliament consists entirely of people with that career it will be rendered pointless. You need people who’ve done a lot of other things who can bring their experiences. One of the things we’re missing desperately now is people with a working-class background. They used to rise up through the trade unions and then join the Labour Party, but we’re now seeing as many people with working-class backgrounds on both the Conservative and Labour side. Despite this the number of working-class MPs is limited and politics has become an increasing middle-class and ‘professional’ arena. I don’t think that serves us well.

One of the major issues is the cost of becoming a candidate. Certainly, in the Conservative Party it was expensive as you had to attend a lot of training sessions and events, as well as campaign across the country, all at your own expense. On top of the money that you spent it also meant that you had less time for other paid work. Even though I was lucky in that I was self-employed and so I could juggle my work to a degree, it was still very difficult. But for many other people, with less flexibility in their employment - perhaps those just starting out in their career and so on lower incomes, or those with a family to support so with less disposable income - it means that running for election is just not a financially viable option for them and their families.

Being elected as an MP is not an overnight event for most people. Often MPs will have been campaigning for years, first for others, then for selection as the preferred candidate for their party and then finally against other political parties for election by their hopefully soon to be constituents. And if you lose a general election, you usually have to remain active and campaigning until the next election. So, you have to be extremely committed to political life and willing to sacrifice other aspects of your life for a long time in order to do what it takes to be successfully elected – unless you have significant private resources behind you.

It doesn't stop when you're elected either. Being a politician wreaks havoc on your family life as it is all consuming, the hours are long and unpredictable, and it involves regular travel away from home. On top of that we hold politicians to a higher standard than we hold others because of their public persona, which means politicians and their families have to deal with personal attacks and even extremes such as death threats. We see this increasingly on social media and it is worse for female MPs. I experienced it when I raised questions about whether the government should debate possible options around leaving the EU after the Brexit referendum. I was called a traitor and sent death threats. You need a thick skin to be a politician."

Despite his relatively privileged position, our conversation with Jeremy highlighted many barriers for entrants into politics. It also highlighted the abuse many politicians have to live through and in the 2019 GE several women MPs stood down citing the continued abuse they received online as one of their key reasons.[15]

We had a conversation with Hannah Stevens, Direct of Elect Her, about many of these issues. Hannah's contribution highlights what we're missing out on by not knocking down barriers to participation. It also sends a strong message to anyone with a shy ambition for politics that there is a whole community of people ready to support you in taking your first steps and continuing to support you wherever that may lead.

An interview with Hannah Stevens, Director of Elect Her

"Men wake up one day and decide to become a politician. Women need to be asked to stand for election three times before they consider it."

ELECT HER



How do you support women to stand for election?

Elect Her is a tiny but mighty organisation working to motivate, support and equip women to stand for elected office in all spheres of Government across Britain. In the past 4 years of our operation we have had conversations with thousands of women, encouraging them to consider their role in our democracy and supporting them to take steps towards leadership. Today we have a programme of workshops, resources and community for women wherever they are on their own political journey, supporting women from getting started, through to standing for selection and election.

"Our experience is that there is a connection between political literacy and gender equality in politics."

One thing that comes up time and time again in the thousands of conversations we've had with women is that most of them want more information about how politics works and what their role would entail if they were elected. They don't know what a councillor does or the difference between local councils and Parliament, or the powers of the devolved Governments, never mind the difference between unitary authorities, county councils, district councils and parish councils (who does!?) – and how to identify which of these structures is in place where they live and therefore what political path to pursue. There is an increasing amount of academic research identifying the reasons why there are fundamentally less women than men in elected office; but we haven't seen the academic research reflect that a lack of political literacy is the first barrier for large proportions of our society.

How can people consider standing for office when they don't understand what that office does?

Our workshops have evolved to tell women how the system works, the connection between power and responsibility through the system, and what their role could involve if they decide to try and become a politician. Overwhelmingly the initial response is one of relief that it isn't just them who doesn't know all this information. Providing them with that political literacy is an important first step on their journey to standing for election. What's really great is when we see women become increasingly confident and empowered as they gain political knowledge over time and then begin to see themselves as future politicians. Now we're developing a new programme of self-led political literacy resources created with a gendered lens, acknowledging the lived experiences of many different women in a way that appeals and makes sense to our audience.

Other than how the system is structured, what other gaps in political knowledge do you see most often?

Until people join a political party there is a large dearth of knowledge around how political parties work, why you would consider joining and how to get involved in them. Local parties are largely run by volunteers, so information about meetings, campaigning and opportunities to get involved is often hard to access. We receive lots of quite practical questions from women relating to the payment, responsibilities, working hours and administrative support of all political roles. Which roles are voluntary? Which are you supposed to do whilst earning money elsewhere, which roles mean you have to give up your own employment? Women want to understand what life is like as a politician in a very practical sense and that information isn't readily available. It is complicated further when there often isn't one simple answer.

What will happen if we don't make more progress in getting more women into positions of power in politics?

The pandemic has been a real step backwards for gender equality and it has highlighted that there are not enough women involved in decision-making particularly in Westminster. We still have so much embedded misogyny in society, and it is deeply frustrating that the end of that is not in sight. If we don't make progress in getting more women into positions of power in politics, we will continue to see laws and policies designed by men for men. The progress on issues around violence against women and girls, the gender pay gap, parental and caring leave is simply too slow and no-one benefits from that. When women are in equal power to men, all of society benefits.



In your experience what messaging works, why do women come to you to find out more about getting involved in politics?

I don't have an answer to what messaging works, we are trying to figure that out ourselves! It would be really helpful to develop a better understanding of what would compel women who may be active feminists or concerned about a specific issue in their community to go from that to standing for election. The lack of trust and faith in politicians is really problematic in holding people back. We recently posted on our socials 'If not you then who' and a number of women emailed me on the back of that to find out more. Usually women come to us to find out more about getting involved in politics when there is a sense of frustration at the system or something specific in their community and they want to create change. Eventually something happens that compels them to take action. It is rarely a burning desire to be involved in 'Government'. Often women don't realise that they want to learn the fundamentals of our democracy, but actually that is what they are coming to us for. We've realised this is an important part of what we need to do, to remove the mystery that surrounds how everything works, for women who come to us for information and support.



Diversity in the wider political sphere

There is evidence that there is also a lack of diversity, albeit to a lesser degree, in the civil service. Latest figures show that 53.8% of civil servants are women, 13.2% are ethnic minorities and 12.8% are disabled. This means the representation of ethnic minority staff is in line with the wider working population and disabled staff are only slightly underrepresented (14.2% of the UK's working population were disabled as at July 2020). However, civil servants who are disabled, from an ethnic minority background or are female are more likely to be in more junior roles rather than senior roles.[16]

The figures are more concerning when we look at the lobbying industry, which informs and influences political decisions. Whilst data is not comprehensive, the PRCA's 2018 Census suggests that 91% of the PR industry (data is not available on the public affairs sector alone) is white, 64% are women, but 64% of senior roles are held by men, 20% went to a fee-paying school and only 2% have disclosed a disability. This suggests the industry needs to understand why it is not seen as an accessible or perhaps attractive career to people with a disability. There is also an unnecessary level of academic snobbery in the lobbying sector - 80% of practitioners have an undergraduate degree, compared with 49% of the working age population and 22% have a Masters degree compared with 6.2% of the UK population.[17]

All of this evidence shows that under-representation needs to be tackled from a holistic, intersectional perspective as many groups are under-represented including women, those who identify as being from an ethnic minority, those who did not attend a fee-paying school or go onto Higher Education and those with a disability. It is difficult to find data on those who identify as LGBTQ+ across all of these groups, but this should not be ignored. It is also important to acknowledge that many people are not defined by a single characteristic and may fall within multiple under-represented demographics.

A review of the different initiatives looking to address diversity in the political sphere suggests many approach diversity through just one or two lenses such as gender or ethnicity. These initiatives have been successful and so we should celebrate them and learn from them, but they often overlook that we are all diverse. Each of us has different things that make us unique, some of which are obvious on sight and others that are not, and so it is crucial that we look at diversity and inclusion in a holistic way and through an intersectional lens.

IHAV's mission is to take public affairs to the classroom to show young people from all under-represented groups that they have a voice in politics and that they should feel confident and equipped to use it. Our vision is a future where politicians and others working political spheres are representative of the population. As a small organisation we're aware of our limitations, but we have a growing network across the public affairs sector and therefore our ambition is to work across the industry to develop a diverse pipeline of talent.

Discussion point: How do we improve inclusion and increase diversity not just amongst politicians, but also those sectors that inform and influence government decisions such as the public affairs sector, taking an intersectional approach?



Initial ideas for the public affairs sector:

- **Census data to be gathered for public affairs specifically. This would underpin a benchmark and help public affairs teams to measure their progress towards becoming more diverse.**
- **Alongside this, we would like to investigate the merits of a Charter that teams could sign up to in order to demonstrate their commitment to inclusion and diversity. This could be tailored for each team depending on their size, their current team members and their ambitions for the team.**
- **We've already had success with an industry-supported mentoring scheme. This could be expanded.**
- **Proactive outreach to under-represented groups to invite them to apply for internships and work experience placements (again, we've already had some success here) and are keen to work with others to build on our progress so far.**

What happens if we don't diversify?

IHAV interviewed a number of former politicians through the Parliamentary Outreach Trust in compiling this discussion paper and Sir Vince Cable, former Liberal Democrat MP, raised that "if the Government wants legitimacy, then it poses a threat if people abstain from voting." The issue of legitimacy is epitomised by evidence from the Hansard Society's 2019 audit of political engagement. It found that feelings of powerlessness and political disengagement are intensifying, with almost one in five respondents saying that they strongly disagree political involvement can change the way the UK is run. This is the highest level since the survey began fifteen years ago. How can a democratic system be considered legitimate if people don't believe they have a role in it?

Perhaps even more concerning, 50% said that the main parties and politicians 'don't care about people like them' and 63% said they think Britain's system is rigged towards the rich and powerful. The survey also found:

- young people (47% of those aged 18-24) are significantly less likely to vote than older people (71% of those aged 65+),
- as are those from black and other minority ethnic groups (48%) compared with those who identify as white (63%); and
- social class plays a significant role in a person's perception of their political knowledge - 79% of class AB think they have a great deal or fair amount of political knowledge vs 29% of those categorised as DE.[18]

The impact of mistrust and lack of engagement has far reaching consequences. Low levels of democratic participation and a lack of diversity also affect political discourse and people's understanding of specific policy developments that will have a tangible impact on their lives. The following chapters will look at these in turn.

CHAPTER 2: MEDIA LITERACY & POLITICAL DISCOURSE



An increasing amount of academic attention is being paid to media literacy and the UK government has recently published an Online Media Literacy Strategy.[19] In this it commits to producing an annual Media Literacy Plan to coordinate media literacy education and empower users to make safe choices online and it has published a draft Online Safety Bill.[20]

But what is media literacy?

The Draft Online Safety Bill sets out the following definition of media literacy as an awareness and understanding of the:

- nature and characteristics of material published;
- impact that such material may have (for example, the impact on the behaviour of those who receive it);
- processes by which such material is selected or made available for publication;
- the reliability and accuracy of such material and how to check these; and
- means of protecting personal information.



Why is media literacy fundamental to constructive political discourse?

Individuals with higher levels of media literacy are better positioned to navigate and critically analyse content whether they receive it online or through more traditional channels such as the TV, radio and in print. This is crucial in an era where we can access a whole range of content on any given topic at any moment in time, providing we have an internet connection. Online platforms use algorithms to decide what news we see. These algorithms are based on a whole range of things, including an individual's previously consumed content, filtering the news people receive.[21]

Echo chambers are dangerous because they lead to confirmation bias i.e. we only access content that confirms what we already believe rather than content that challenges our views. This is especially concerning as most social networking sites lack reliable mechanisms for verifying information and may act as a conduit for the spread of distorted or downright false information.[22] In addition, according to group polarisation theory, this reinforcement of an existing opinion within a group can move the entire group toward more extreme positions.[23] Thereby contributing to a divisive and combative political discourse. Constructive political debate is important for consensus building and well-rounded political decision making. The whole point of increasing diversity is to increase the breadth of perspectives and experiences at the table. One-sided content may be easier to digest and avoid the reader feeling challenged or experiencing a level of discomfort, but it is highly unlikely to lead to the truth, which in politics is often messy and complicated.

As Adrian Sanders, former Liberal Democrat MP put it when we spoke with him

"I also think people prefer to read things that make sense to them and support their existing views of the world rather than reading news which forces them to challenge their existing views as it makes people feel uncomfortable and like they're being provoked. So, it is in built in us to read news sources that frame the news in a way that we want to hear and potentially perpetuates ignorance."



Without nuanced debate, which acknowledges different views, political discourse can quickly deteriorate into each 'side' suggesting the other lacks competence or compassion. We saw this with the Brexit Referendum, Trump's election and the rise and fall of Jeremy Corbyn. The most complex of these from a policy perspective was the Brexit Referendum. The implications of the UK's exit from the EU are hugely complex and even now we don't fully understand the long-term impact on our legislation and trade. But the rhetoric meant that for many the way they voted was determined by whether they were pro- or anti-immigration and how comfortable they were with the European Parliament having sway over UK legislation as opposed to being against (or even aware of) any specific EU policies. What made this even more concerning from a media literacy perspective was the exploitation of this complexity by some campaigns that knowingly peddled lies, such as the big red bus with figures about the NHS on its side, which did not take account of the UK's rebate nor how much of this comes back to the UK in the form of funding.

There are countless examples that demonstrate the value of balanced and pluralist reporting in the mainstream media. "If people feel their voice is not recognisable in mainstream balanced media, then they're more likely to seek out sources that only reflect their views." (Jeremy Lefroy)

To grapple with this, we caught up with Matteo Bergamini, Founder and CEO of ShoutOut UK, and Media Trust showed us how they increase media literacy amongst young people.

Matteo Bergamini, Founder and CEO of ShoutOut UK



What is the link between media literacy and political literacy?

The link in my view is that both are required to create active citizens.

Political literacy is about understanding the basics of how our democracy functions. For example, how a bill becomes a law. This is a basic thing that should be taught in schools, but quite often, for one reason or another, it isn't. But even that is only one half of the puzzle. If you understand how the system works, great, but if you don't know how to critically analyse the information that you're getting from those institutions then how can you be expected to make an educated decision on what's happening?

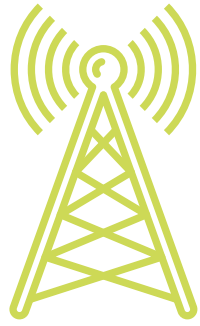
That's where media literacy comes in, as it is the ability to critically analyse information. The information we receive plays a huge role in shaping our opinions and how we vote. Media literacy helps us to become critical when dealing with political information from a range of sources, and therefore better able to determine what is misinformation, which in turn helps us to check our own biases.

And so, to me, political and media literacy are two halves of the same coin.



Media literacy has come to the fore recently for two reasons. One is Brexit, because it was the first time that we saw politicians and big personalities lie to the public with impunity. It is such an emotionally charged topic and I think people believed what they wanted to hear. No matter how many times the information on that big red bus was disproved, people either chose to ignore the facts or just didn't care that they were being lied to. And therefore, no matter what else was said, or no matter how arguments that countered it were phrased, or even how much evidence was put in front of some people, they would have always voted the leave EU and they therefore wanted information that supported their position.

Let's fast forward to Covid. The Pandemic has led to huge amounts of misinformation in a way that we've not seen before. This is in part because when the virus first started gaining global attention there was a massive gap in our knowledge about what it was and what was going to happen. Not because it was being hidden from us, but because that information just wasn't available. Because people were scared, we wanted any information that was readily available, and we were more easily swayed by that information. We saw with the 5G conspiracies which hit the UK hard. We burnt down 77 phone masts! And even less extreme, we all received some false news about what to do. I remember receiving a message from my auntie in Italy telling me that if I could hold my breath for 10 seconds then I didn't have the virus.



On top of that people are hungry to get information first, so they can be the first to share it to show how well-connected they are and that's what they're bothered about, rather than the risk that a week later it could be shown to have been complete garbage, because by that point everyone will be concerned about something new.



Having said that, people are most susceptible to unwittingly spreading misinformation if they're not able to critically analyse online information. And I'd say it isn't young people most at risk of this as they've grown up with the internet, it is older people aged 40-60 who are technologically illiterate.

Misinformation and disinformation have always existed, and propaganda in some form has existed for many years, the difference is that now it's a lot easier and cheaper to get involved. You can make a swish looking website for \$50 and you can share a social media post for free.

Does this mean people don't care about the truth?

In a lot of ways, the truth just doesn't matter anymore and it's a sad reality. There is a number of reasons for that.

1. Campaigns, like we saw with Brexit, intentionally skew facts to such an extent that nobody really knows what the truth is anymore. This leads people to voting based on their emotions, and when you vote because of an emotion, you can be very, very, very easily manipulated.
2. We live in an age where people are incredibly media and politically illiterate so they're very easy to manipulate. If you don't have the faintest idea how your system works and you haven't the faintest idea how to critically analyse information you can more easily be swayed.
3. The 'mainstream' or the 'legacy' media's obsession with balance. Which I think is major problem. It is not that I don't think balance is a good thing, but we need to better define balance. For example, is it balanced if you give the same amount of coverage or airtime to a scientist talking about the Earth being round versus someone talking about a belief that the Earth is flat? By making these two sides debate, one based on decades of scientific research and one lacking in factual evidence you are devaluing the expert and you're giving credibility to information that we know to be false. That's not balance. It frustrates me that in this instance the 'flat-earthers' are able to say to scientists that their years of research is just their opinion when it is not opinion, it is fact based on years and years of research. You often see this play out in politics when news shows and radio stations interview controversial commentators who tend to be on more extreme ends of the political spectrum to get their views on a given issue in a format that makes it seem like it is fact. Because it is often controversial or confrontational it is entertaining and I fear that these outlets are blurring the lines between entertaining their audiences and providing fact-based journalism.



Given that you've identified it isn't necessarily just young people who are susceptible to mis or disinformation how do we educate older people so that they can become more media literate?

FAKE NEWS

Regulating the internet would be impossible. The only country in the world that could even regulate parts of it is the US because most of the companies that are the biggest part of the problem are American. Ironically, if we were still in the European Union then we could have had more of a say because it has a big enough market share. Australia attempted it to an extent through its News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code Bill 2021, but unsurprisingly the platforms have pushed back.

The UK government is the putting through the Online Safety Bill, which is revolutionary. But will it be effective? Probably not. Because the companies it is aimed towards are global and they have huge amounts of power and we've just taken ourselves out of the only international body that could potentially do something about it.

We need to change the way people perceive information. If people stopped finding sensationalist commentators entertaining only then would the media stop putting them on air. If we changed our relationship with information, and we didn't just want speed journalism, which pumps out any old garbage within seconds of something happening, and instead, actually placed a value on the fact that it takes time to review some things. We've got social media for people who want inaccurate, random information about what's happening in the world.

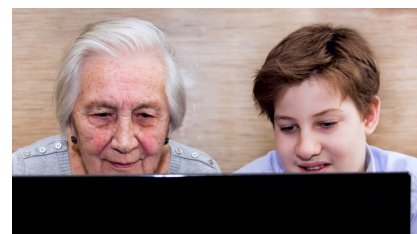


How do we reach people and get them media literate given that the age groups that you suggest are least media literate are not in any formal education?

I can't think off the top of my head of a way of systematically reaching them. Maybe through their employers, I don't know. To be honest. I'm a little bit sceptical. I think that we're just going to have to deal with that generation being media illiterate. And just combat that by making sure that their kids and grandkids don't make the same mistakes.

Do conversations with young people about media literacy have an effect back home as well?

Yeah, they do. You do have young people going home and educating their parents and grandparents; saying to them 'you can't share that', or 'that's incorrect' and 'that's factually inaccurate'.



Whilst an onus on individual media literacy is important and the regulation of media and social media would be difficult, not least because we need to protect freedom of expression and speech, is there a need for regulatory intervention related to media content from politicians and people with an official role in public life?

The problem is that in the UK there is no law that holds politicians to account if they lie to the public. Their suggestion is that it isn't necessary because they'll be held accountable at the ballot box. But if at the ballot box, we are voting on lies and half-truths, then no one can really hold anyone to account. I personally think that if a politician lies in public office, and it's been proven that they purposely lied to the public, they should face jail time. It is a public service role and they're spending money that is not theirs. You can get jail time for fraud, which is essentially lying to the tax man, but if you run the entire country that's somehow okay? I just don't understand how those two things are compatible, so 100% there should be more regulation, but there won't be until the people demand it. And people won't demand it unless they are media and politically literate. Once people understand the system, then you can start to change it. But unless you understand that, then you can't possibly start the change.



Matteo questioned whether the truth matters anymore. Uncovering the truth is problematic when it can be difficult to discern fact, from evidence-based predictions and opinions based on ideology. All of these have value, but their value and purpose are different. Beyond this Matteo's interview highlights that there is an imbalance in the amount of focus given to specific issues, campaigns or individuals, which introduces bias and can lead to falsehoods because it may give some issues and individuals too much importance.

Adrian Sanders felt strongly about this and when we spoke, he went as far as saying that "The issue of not telling the truth is worse than the amount of lies." He provided the example of the coverage of the pulling down on statues in response to anti-colonial protests, yet there was very little coverage of Chelsea fans defacing a statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square after the team won the Champions League. We have to face the reality that most people do not have the time or the inclination to access a range of news sources and to an extent they should not have to in order to get a balanced view, but understanding that different outlets have these biases is an important component of media literacy. This is even more important given the rise of social media placing increased pressure on traditional news outlets to generate 'click-bait'. This means the business model of media is increasingly skewed towards sensationalist reporting.

Jeremy Lefroy reflected on the role of his schooling in encouraging him to read a range of news sources, a habit he has maintained throughout his lifetime. "I make a point of reading different newspapers. This all started at school as I was given the choice of either reading the New Statesman, The Spectator or The Economist each week, essentially a serious periodical. I think something like this would benefit all Year 12 and 13 students, and offering these publications to schools for discounted rates could be beneficial for those publications in the longer-term as people tend to form lifelong habits around these things."

Matteo's interview also raised the need for different forms of intervention; some which empower, but also place an onus on individuals, alongside those which place an obligation on media outlets and people with official roles in public life, such as politicians.

Here is former Labour MP Helen Jones' take on how these are inextricably linked:

"I think there is a reluctance amongst politicians to lead public opinion and a tendency to play to whatever public opinion is now, rather than trying to inform the public about what policy developments they want to champion to try and bring the public with them. This is partly as a result of populism and partly as a result of social media. Things can very quickly spiral into anger on social media platforms. This makes it harder to have a sensible discussion on an issue. Instead, social media seems to me to be focused on finding mistakes, or leaping on someone if they've mis-spoken, or something they've said could be easily and intentionally be mis-construed or interpreted, as this forms clickbait.

I don't want to place too much blame with the media, as politicians blaming the media is like sailors blaming the weather, but a recent example of when the news can miss the point was coverage of the England football team taking the knee to show their commitment to tackling racism. There was not enough coverage about why they did this and the prevalence of racism in football, instead the coverage was overly focused on who agreed with it and who was outraged by it. This could have been a time for education, but instead a binary and divisive rhetoric was promoted.

This is reflected in the political discourse, and you have politicians speaking in slogans like 'get Brexit done' and 'build back better' and sticking to pre-agreed messaging rather than engaging in an open discussion and debate on a given topic. We need something meaningful behind those slogans."

Helen's perspective helps to unpick the relationship between media literacy and political discourse in a way that raises questions about the best way to address the concerns both she and Matteo raise that clearly, there are issues on the 'structural' side of social and traditional media, with click-bait and sensationalism, and inherent biases in the way news is reported. On the flipside, there is an individual responsibility to be informed and not spread misinformation, which is where media literacy comes in. Without media literacy, we as individuals cannot play our role or counter the structural issues.

It is not all doom and gloom when it comes to media literacy, some of these concerns are already being addressed; there are already initiatives underway in relation to the individual (Media Literacy Strategy), digital media outlets (draft Online Safety Bill), broader media outlets (Ofcom) and the role of politicians (The Ministerial Code, the APPG for Compassion in Politics and the Nolan Principles for Public Life). It remains to be seen what affect the new Strategy and pending changes in legislation will have and we are increasingly learning from initiatives elsewhere in the world such as the Digital Services Act in the EU and Australia's New Media Bill. Whilst legislation and regulation often fail to keep pace with advances in technology, in many ways understandably, progress is being made.

This chapter concludes by showcasing the work of Media Trust as it shows the effectiveness of efforts to increase media literacy. You can also click [here](#) to watch their fantastic vlog!

Media Trust: How important is it for young people to have a voice?

By Tomi Ojo

Media Trust shares I have a voice's commitment to amplifying the voices of young people and underrepresented communities. We believe that political education and literacy can be confusing as many young people can easily feel overwhelmed by the amount of information out there. In today's crowded media landscape, it can be difficult for young people to have their voice heard. What they have to say matters and providing them a platform to do so not only enhances what they have to say but also supports their personal opinions when doing so.



Media Trust's Vlogstar Challenge

Our Vlogstar Challenge provides a space for young people to gather their thoughts and speak about matters that are important to them. We encourage our young people to speak about topics such as politics, education and current affairs - subject matters that most young people tend to stray away from mainly because the fear of being 'cancelled' or not believing that their opinion matters. Through vlogging we provide young people with a platform to get their voices heard and help them get cut through to champion the causes that are important to them in a way that is responsible, effective, and empowering.

Five Top Tips for being engaging and getting your voice heard:

1. Have confidence in what you have to say. Speak with the intention to be heard.
2. Keep your audience interested. Give them a reason to listen.
3. Be prepared. Do research on your chosen topic and ensure to check your facts.
4. Make it a conversation. Ask questions and get your audience involved.
5. Remember that you're speaking up for others. Be a champion voice for others.



Our priority is to continue supporting young voices and help them engage with the media positively. One thing we always prompt our young people to do is to be clear when they're providing factual evidence versus when they're putting forward an opinion. Even though your opinions are important, if you have factual evidence to support your views – use it! We hope that all young people know that their voice matters, and that they can be a champion for many if they learn the relevant skills to put themselves out there.

[CLICK HERE TO SEE THE VLOG ON GETTING YOUR VOICE HEARD](#)

CHAPTER 3: POLITICS IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN ELECTIONS, IT IS ABOUT PUBLIC POLICY



“Whether it is a pothole, the streets lights, or bins; class sizes or healthcare; foreign or defence policy; welfare benefits or green jobs – people say ‘they’ will come and sort it. What they’re saying is a someone other than me has a responsibility to do something about this. And it should be ‘we’ have a responsibility to do something about this. I don’t think people understand that they are the lynchpins of our democracy and they have responsibilities. When political decisions are made about allocating resources, introducing regulation or increasing ambition, people don’t always appreciate how their lived experience sits within these political decisions. Without that appreciation how will they be able to hold different politicians accountable for what does or does not happen as a result of the decisions they make about how to address an issue.”

(Joan Walley)

Politicians make policy decisions about a whole range of issues day-in, day-out, that have a tangible impact on our daily lives. Whether or not the public is informed about these issues and the potential courses of action has an impact on how much priority these issues are given and which courses of action are considered politically possible. For example, reforms to social care have been postponed time and time again, with promises of white papers and decisive action being pushed further and further back. The social care system is in crisis, leaving 1.6 million older people without the care they need to have dignity in later life and the UK's ageing population means this number is set to grow.[24] Despite the dire consequences for individuals if they cannot access the care they need in later life there is a lack of understanding amongst the public about how social care costs are split between individuals and the State meaning often suboptimal decisions are being made at the point of crisis. This lack of understanding about social care funding has led to misleading headlines in mainstream media. This was evident in the last GE campaign with Theresa May’s proposal for social care reforms being labelled a ‘dementia tax’. Whilst the proposals were not perfect, they would have been MUCH more generous than the current system. Labour have also faced similar issues in the past when their proposed reforms were labelled as a 'death tax'. Is it therefore surprising that social care reform keeps getting kicked into the long grass by successive governments?



Backlash against Labour



Backlash against Conservatives

Social care is far from the only issue where a lack of political literacy and the media coverage means that those impacted by political decisions cannot easily assess the facts and therefore have an informed say in those decisions. We hear about examples of this all of the time in politics with many in-house policy and public affairs teams calling for awareness raising and information sharing efforts on the issues they're trying to tackle, so that individuals understand the current policy and what this means for them. One thing that came up time-and-time again in conversations with councillors and former MPs in compiling this report is that people do not understand the relationship between political decisions and the 'welfare state', whether that be in relation to social care, housing or even what to do in the face of an extreme event like a fire, flood or domestic abuse. Political literacy extends beyond what happens in Parliament to how those decisions have a tangible impact on our lives.

Thinking about the issues that directly impact our lives, many of them will be linked to an individual's financial security - can you afford quality care to meet your needs, can you afford a decent home, can you rebuild your life if you experience an unforeseen event?

An indicator of whether people have financial stability and security is if they are living in or close to poverty. According to a research briefing by the House of Commons in 2019/20 on poverty rates in the UK (after housing costs):

- people in households where the head of the household is from a Bangladeshi (55%) or Pakistani (47%) ethnic group experience the highest levels of poverty, it lowest for those from White ethnic groups (19%);
- 35% of lone parent families (of which 90% are headed up by a female) experience persistent low income;
- 27% of families where someone is disabled are living in poverty, compared to 19% of people living in families where no one is disabled; and
- the proportion of people living in poverty in the North-East and the Yorkshire and Humber is 21% compared with 14% in the South-East and South-West.[25]

These figures show that there is an overlap between the groups that experience the highest level of poverty and those least represented in the political sphere. More than one in six people in the UK live in low income households before housing costs are taken into consideration. This rises to more than one in five people once we account for housing costs. These figures demonstrate that poverty in the UK is not a periphery issue, or at least it shouldn't be. Despite this there are constant headlines that suggest those with low levels of income are a burden to society and it is 'their own doing'.

Image from [NUJ reporting_poverty_guidelines](#)



To explore this, we caught up with Crisis about the framing of homelessness and the impact this has on people's views of the underlying causes of homelessness and therefore the solutions that should be pursued by government.



It is much harder to unlearn: Framing homeless based on the work of Crisis

Crisis has that we have a number of incorrect assumptions about homelessness:

- Self-making: homelessness happens because individuals make bad choices. Drugs and alcohol use still come to fore in both unprompted and prompted responses to questions about the causes of homelessness.
- Othering: homelessness affects other people, not people like me. Middle-aged men, young runaways, and abused women
- Homelessness = rough sleeping: the most visible form of homelessness is the only form. In their 01 public attitudes tracker 38% of respondents agreed that 'people are only really homeless if they are rough sleeping' and amongst those who recall media coverage of homelessness suggest it is helping to embed this view.

- Prevention is missing: homelessness can't be prevented, people can only be helped at crisis point, through hostels and hot meals. 29% of respondents think 'homelessness will always exist in our society no matter what we do'. However, 41% of people agree 'there is a growing chance that homelessness can be ended for good,' and 60% agree 'if the government takes the right steps, we can end homelessness'.

Together, these lead people to blame individuals for their circumstances. To see only individual-level solutions. And to deny the possibility of wider, systemic change to end homelessness.[26]

A study by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions found that there are different factors at play for different types of homelessness.

Family homelessness more likely to be a result of structural factors such as:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Decline of social sector housing as a proportion of all housing
- Tighter mortgage regulation and higher costs for first time buyers
- Unfavourable labour market conditions / rising poverty levels
- Growing fragmentation of families
- Reduced welfare provision



Personal factors play a more significant role in single person homelessness, though these factors are largely subject to the same assumptions about homelessness and themselves need reframing within the context of our system.

- Relationship breakdown (including domestic abuse and violence)
- Mental illness
- Addiction
- Discharge from prison
- Leaving the care system

As part of this study Crisis interviewed a number of people and talked to them about the structural causes of, and solutions for, homelessness. But the interviewees found it hard to overcome these existing assumptions even though they appeared to take on board the evidence presented. Their study demonstrates the importance of political education from a young age on the most significant policy challenges we face and the need for the media and politicians to ensure that their portrayal of these challenges does not negatively impact perceptions on their importance or the viability of effective policy solutions such as building more social housing, tackling rising rents and better support for victims of domestic abuse.



[Click here](#) to hear our interview with a group of local councillors to understand how they help people in their wards each and every day. Emily gives a great example related to housing and domestic abuse at 10mins 30seconds into the discussion.

Representation of different lived experiences will mean that political decisions are made fully cognisant of the effects they could have on all segments of the population and not just those most represented within political domains currently. Politics impacts every single aspect of our lives, the Pandemic has given us a stark reminder of this, but in the current system not everyone has an equal voice. Increasing representation is a powerful tool in addressing this imbalance and it would lead to more robust policy decisions. It would have the additional benefit of opening up thousands of employment opportunities for under-represented communities in the political sphere.

The IPPR is a progressive think tank that has teams and offices outside of the 'London-bubble' and has produced reports on both democratic participation amongst different cohorts, and on poverty alleviation amongst different cohorts. As experts in these fields, we asked them to share their thoughts with us to support the ongoing discussions we hope will result from this paper.

Political Literacy and Levelling Up by Erica Roscoe, Senior Research Fellow and Rosie Lockwood, Media and Campaigns Manager, IPPR North and Scotland

Public policy is not something that should be done to people. It should be done with and for them for good, effective public policy. However here in the UK, and especially in England, we have a long way to go to “level up” our democracy - to build a system that is inclusive, truly empowers people, and ultimately results in policies that work in everyone’s best interests.



The UK is the most regionally divided country of its size and level of development in the world. Our uniquely centralised system of governance is a root cause of these divides within and between regions – which have worsened during the pandemic, and which make the opportunity to live a good life in regions like the north of England increasingly unattainable.[27] [28]

It is therefore unsurprising that the democratic deal between people and politicians is deteriorating. We are observing a form of democratic apathy in consistently lower voter turnout in the north of England. In fact, between 2001 and 2019, every northern region recorded general election turnouts below the England average.[29] And across the country, turnout is consistently lower among lower age groups (British Election Study 2021).

Regional and other disparities in electoral participation could create a vicious cycle as politicians may be less inclined to act in the interests of less engaged groups of voters, and when those groups do not see policymakers acting in their interests, disengagement could be further exacerbated. This could see trust in politicians and our political institutions set on a downwards spiral. Indeed, trust in democratic systems and institutions is already low by historic and international standards.[30]

Voter apathy should not be misinterpreted as people not caring about their communities. The pandemic has highlighted peoples’ willingness to play an active part in supporting those around them, evidenced by the explosion of mutual aid and community groups during the pandemic.[31] The more likely explanation for these marked differences in voter turnout is that northerners have felt disconnected from the electoral process or that their participation would not change anything for the better.

It is time to acknowledge that there are barriers to democratic engagement that effective policy can and should dismantle.

In just nine years' time, the millennial and z generations will make up the majority of the electorate of the north of England.[32] They will inherit significant challenges including the legacy of the pandemic and the climate crisis.[33] These are issues that young people across the country care about. For example, we know that young people have been key actors in raising awareness of the urgent need for action to tackle the climate crisis. [34]



But not all young people know of the suite of avenues that they could use to affect change. To realise their own agency to make a difference, they will need to be shown how to do this and given the confidence to stand up and be counted. Connecting these issues that matter to young people (and to our future prosperity) to politics and their role within it is important. Everyone deserves to know where to go for help when you need it, and how you can change your community for the better - yet without political education many are denied the tools to make the difference that they could.

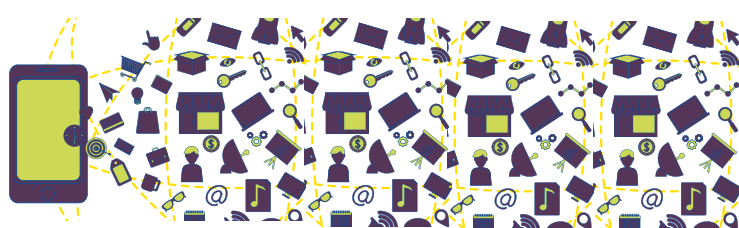
Part of the problem is that young people are often overlooked by policymakers. 16 and 17 year olds cannot vote in England (which is no longer the case in Scotland and Wales), they do not have access to political education, and after a decade of austerity, the infrastructure that once supported youth voice activities has been eroded. Investing in young people is the greatest investment we can make for our future prosperity. As such, a package of reform, including reversing austerity, introducing political education, and lowering the voting age to 16 are all required.

Moreover, if 'levelling up' is to mean anything, then it must be about creating the opportunity to experience a good life for those people – including young people - who have been locked out of policymaking for too long.[35] To achieve this, there is a need to pay better attention to intersecting inequalities. For example, northern women have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Inequalities do not exist in isolation – gender, regional, economic, racial and other injustices compound.[36] Young people are not a homogenous group. There are disabled young people, LGBT young people, young people living in poverty to name just a few of the many groups that make up 'young people'. Levelling up cannot be achieved without taking an intersectional approach to empowering people and developing policy. To do this, we need to bring more citizens from all of these underrepresented groups into the policymaking process, and to do this the process needs to be accessible and understood.

Research by the UK Democracy Fund has found that political education can improve students' attitudes to political engagement (Weinberg 2020).[37] If everyone has had the opportunity to learn how democratic systems work, that politicians should work with and for them, and if they understand how to engage with them to effect change, then barriers to participation could begin to fall. And when introduced alongside a wider package of reforms that embed participative and deliberative democracy into decision making across the UK, then we may just see better policy that doesn't widen, but reduces our divides.

In order to really equip young people with the ability to do this, we need to give them all of the tools they're likely to need. This should include an understanding of the policymaking landscape, i.e. the difference between local, regional and national politicians and who has responsibility for what. It should also include an understanding of how to engage with this landscape - from voting right the way through to standing for public office.

While understanding the policymaking landscape might seem complex and therefore difficult, equipping people with the right tools will not only help them to make sense of politics but will also be of use in society more widely. In teaching young people how to critically evaluate the validity of someone's arguments, for example, this not only enables them to make sense of political campaign materials, but it also helps them to better assess the credibility of information they receive through the news, social media and other sources.[38] In addition, soft skills such as compassion, empathy and communication will facilitate more effective dialogue with others, especially when encountering differences of opinion, both in and outside of the political landscape.



Finally, policymaking rarely covers only one issue; one public policy impacts on another and so on. The ability to take a holistic view of the world and how individual policies affect different people as well as other policies in different ways is essential. Equipping people with the ability to see things from different perspectives and assess the wide-ranging impacts of a decision would be invaluable for the UK.

At present, a select group of students are offered this kind of education already. Numerous independent and 'elite' schools offer pupils the opportunity to join debating societies. These extra-curricular groups, not often offered in state schools, no doubt perfectly prepare students for the likes of the Cambridge or Oxford Union Society; elite debating societies whose membership has included more than a few national politicians including prime ministers. Class divides across England are illustrated by divisions in opportunity such as these, whereby a select few develop skills and networks to equip them to reach the highest office. While distinct from the Oxford Union Society, that almost half (47%) of undergraduate admissions to the University of Oxford are students from London and the South-East, compared to just 15 per cent from the north of England offers further illustration of the inequality of opportunity across the country. And since this path, from elite school to elite university and on to political office is so well trodden, it becomes difficult to identify alternative routes into this environment. A national political education policy could make these alternative routes more visible and easily navigated, a real levelling up of opportunity.

The introduction of political education across the country, in addition to lowering the voting age and introducing mechanisms for increased participation in national, regional and local policymaking is an idea whose time has come. Combined with this, further devolution of power and resource to regional and local leaders has the potential to truly empower people, in the places where they live, to finally level up for themselves. For those for whom the distance between their life in regions like the North and the corridors of Westminster had previously been incomprehensible, empowering young people through education, participation and devolution could not only offer a shorter path into the policymaking arena, but also create the conditions for a better democracy here in the UK.

Discussion points:

- **How can we increase political literacy amongst those whose voices are currently marginalised?**
- **Can we use political literacy as a tool to achieve the government's levelling-up agenda?**



CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING OUR EXPOSURE TO POLITICAL RISK



The examples discussed in the previous chapter were all examples of how an improved understanding of the political system could lead to more robust decision-making. This chapter builds on that to discuss the impact of political risk on a larger scale, which ultimately impacts individuals, but other third parties such as banks, insurers and employers play an intermediary role between the state and the public. The political economy is an important part of political literacy and one which is not discussed as frequently as the main issues covered in this report so far. It is also an area of the political sphere that has thousands of job opportunities, and as we saw in chapter one this sector lacks diversity.



Political literacy makes business sense by Robin Grainger, Co-Founder & CEO, GK Strategy



You will be hard pressed to find a business or organisation that is not impacted by the decisions of politicians and regulators. They determine tax rates; employee protections; regulation in relation to capital, competition and consumers; trade tariffs and manage global supply chains; which sectors receive subsidies; and the level of investment in supporting infrastructure or R&D. I could go on. The point is - politics is central to how organisations function and to the role they play in the economy and society.

But while COVID and Brexit have made these linkages clearer, we see a big gap between 'political knowledge' and 'political literacy'. Most businesses and investors know what current policies are (political knowledge) but often don't understand why and how policy might change, the role they can play in informing those changes, and the potential impact of those changes (political literacy).

Public affairs professionals help organisations improve their political knowledge, but mostly, we help them understand political risk, and navigate Parliament and its processes, to minimise risk and create a supportive policy landscape. We are able to do this most effectively, and to the benefit of businesses and the government, when there is an existing understanding of these interlinkages.

Improving understanding of how politics works will enable business leaders to better identify and analyse relevant political risks. In doing so, they will be able to factor the potential to maximise upsides, as well as the need to minimise and mitigate negative risks, into their business strategy and plans.

This also benefits the government

Business leaders who understand political risk often share their expertise and experience with policymakers to ensure that policy developments have the desired effect and that unintended consequences are minimised. This is a good thing. In the same way that charities such as Crisis understand how to prevent and reduce homelessness, businesses have the data and insight to know what their consumers (the public) want and what protections are needed to ensure markets work effectively. Therefore, business and government often work together to come up with solutions to policy dilemmas.

Businesses often develop some of these solutions as well, for example the role of the insurance industry alongside government safety nets this means they are often well-placed to inform and in some cases drive policy developments in the public interest. On the flip side, this means the sector is inextricably linked to political decisions and understanding how these decisions are made is beneficial to business leaders. There are many examples of this level of interaction and interdependence between business and government. Leaders in these businesses stand to benefit greatly from knowing how decisions are made in Parliament, both so they can feed into those processes and so they can keep on top of what those decisions mean for their operations. Being politically literate makes business sense.

Political literacy

Political literacy does not mean pushing one political party's agenda over another. In fact, as public affairs professionals it often is crucial that we remain party-neutral. Instead, we help clients to navigate the UK's democratic and parliamentary processes. For example, the role of Select Committee inquiries in developing policy recommendations and All-Party Parliamentary Groups' ability to build consensus and awareness. These are skills that would benefit all business leaders, and let's face it, all members of society as ultimately these decisions impact them, either as consumers or citizens. Our profession is uniquely placed to share its experience with anyone who wants to understand how politics works. We work across political parties and political issues. We understand the need to find workable policy solutions. We know that building cross-party support is often much more productive than being divisive. Spreading this foundational level of knowledge will serve our industry, our clients, our stakeholders and our society.

For too long, too many public affairs professionals have been happy to give the impression that the world of politics and regulation is a world that only people in the Westminster bubble of politics, media, think tanks, trade associations, and consultancies can really understand.

It's time for this to change.

Politics is complex but not unintelligible. It's the responsibility of our profession – and indeed educators – to communicate that and make politics a more navigable territory for everybody.

IHAV's Board Member Faye Alessandrello has provided a specific example of the need for individuals to understand the political economy and their exposure to political risk to help explain how it has a direct impact on their financial wellbeing. Faye's article also demonstrates that not only is political literacy linked to media literacy, but it is also inextricably linked to financial literacy.



Financial literacy by Faye Alessandrello, Policy Manager at the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries and IHAV Board Member

Policy decisions impact all areas of life. Having the skills to successfully engage with the policy-making process enables people to shape the issues and decisions that impact their life. Personal finances are a good example of this, as they are inextricably linked to policy intervention. Decisions the government makes about spending money, tax rates and rules, and financial products can all have an impact on an individual's financial wellbeing. An ability to understand government discussion and decision-making around these topics can impact a person's ability to ensure their financial security for the future.



Financial literacy refers to the knowledge and skills that enable individuals to manage money well, both day to day and through significant life events.[39] It is the ability to understand the pros and cons of a money decision, weigh the options and confidently decide what to do. A financially literate person also understands how common personal finance products work, like bank accounts, credit cards, investments, savings vehicles and pensions, mortgages and insurance.[40] But being financially literate doesn't mean you know everything about money; rather, it equips you to seek out the answers you need in order to make a good financial decision. A financially literate person is better able to make informed financial decisions to avoid negative financial behaviours such as getting into problem debt.

In recent years, there has been a trend toward transferring risks from institutions to individuals across a number of areas of public and financial policy.[41] Greater individual responsibility regarding financial decisions, accompanied with more choice in terms of financial products, has increased the importance of both financial and political literacy. For example, making decisions about saving for retirement through a pension scheme. It is no longer the case that your employer automatically provides you with a pension based on your salary during your working life, instead pension providers invest individuals and employers pension contributions. Individuals have to make a series of active decisions about when and how to take their pension. These decisions are complex and will determine whether someone's pension lasts their lifetime, or whether they run out of money during their retirement. These decisions have to be made as a result of political interventions in the pensions system. For example, George Osborne announced a range of pension 'freedoms' in 2014 and the pensions industry is still innovating and updating its regulatory framework to be able to protect and best serve consumers.

Despite pensions savings being an important vehicle for financial security in later life, research from the pension and investment company, Royal London, found that two in five people aged 18 to 34 stopped or reduced their pension contributions in response to coronavirus.[42] Even more worrying perhaps is 24% of under 25 year olds in the UK reported having no pension savings at all.[43] Rising unemployment, the continuing growth of the gig economy and any increases in tax to cover pandemic-related government spending are all likely to impact young people's ability to save for the future. Coupled with increases to state pension age, this raises questions about whether young people are heading towards a pension crisis.

One proposed solution to encourage greater pension saving amongst this age group, is to remove barriers to their savings being invested in a cause they care about. There is roughly £2.6 trillion invested in UK pensions.[44] This is a massive number. To put it into context 1 million seconds is about 11.5 days, 1 billion seconds is about 32 years and 1 trillion seconds is equal to roughly 32,000 years, meaning 2.6 trillion seconds is equivalent to 83,200 years – massive! Now imagine if this money was invested in funds and projects that supported the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals rather than say fossil fuels, tobacco or arms. Ultimately, pension funds want to make sure that your investment performs well financially and so it is often political decisions that affect whether funds are more likely to invest in say fossil fuels versus green energy. For example the government's commitment to net zero by 2050.

Pension providers are also driven by consumer behaviour meaning that we all have a personal responsibility to understand how our pension is invested. According to the Make My Money Matter campaign, investing retirement savings in sustainable funds is the most powerful thing an individual can do to protect the planet.[45] Consumers will not be empowered to do this if they do not know about, or understand, the link between financial products and political decisions.



Strong financial and political literacy would mean that people can meaningfully engage with the development of fiscal and monetary policy which can affect their personal finances both now and in the future and help them to understand how different financial products work.

This example is from the pensions industry, but the availability of a whole range of financial products such as mortgages, ISAs and loans are also dictated by political decisions. It is highly likely that the majority of people will have at least one if not more financial products throughout their lifetime and this article highlights the importance of having an understanding of both how these products work and the influence that political decisions have over your personal finances.

Discussion point:

- **How can we better convey the value of political literacy for all business leaders to politicians and educational institutes to increase the profile of political education?**
- **Is there value in linking political, media (think back to Chapter 2) and financial literacy for individuals? Does this give political literacy more clout? If so, what are the next steps?**



CHAPTER 5: POLITICAL EDUCATION



To improve political literacy we need political education for all. The national curriculum states that “Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based and which:

- Promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and
- Prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.”

It also clearly states its aim as “...provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens”.^[46] The curriculum has many facets that support students leaving education as educated citizens, from the core citizenship curriculum to PHSE. Analysis by Weinberg found that having this type of education in different formats is beneficial. Weinberg's 2020 analysis found that political education in different formats can improve attitudes to political engagement, increase expressive participation in politics and heighten future anticipated participation in democratic activities such as voting in an election. However, this same research found that formal and informal political education remains peripheral and therefore some students in England are unlikely to receive comprehensive or even piecemeal political education.^[47]

One of IHAV's youth ambassadors, Eve Ronson, recently presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Political Literacy. Eve did not have any form of political education until she reached university. She rightly raised that “if we rely on universities to provide political education there will be a huge disparity in political literacy amongst young people” and this will last into adulthood.

Given its benefits, it is concerning that access to political education is unequal. Even more concerning is the divide between those children that receive political education and those that do not, as many children from working-class families do not get to experience school-based political activities to the same degree as children from more well-off families.^[48] We asked a group of former MPs from across the political spectrum and across the country why they thought political education is so patchy in the UK and why there is a gap between provision for working-class and well-off children despite ‘citizenship’ being included in the National Curriculum.

Why is political education so patchy in the UK?

“I don't think there is any dearth of it in public schools. Those schools have a heavy focus too on debating. I see a big divide though as state-funded schools focus on what they're measured on and they're not meaningfully measured on what they do in relation to citizenship.” Joan Walley



“I don't know and I find it odd that we give religion higher prominence than religion in the curriculum. I don't know why we're afraid of in talking about different political ideologies when we're comfortable talking about different religious ideologies when it shows that teachers are well-equipped to teach subjects without putting across their personal views or persuasions.” Adrian Sanders



"It is treated as a low-profile element of the education system and doesn't have the same standing as other subjects. If it isn't taught by a teacher who is passionate about politics and instead as an 'add-on' it can be detrimental as it can be viewed as an imposition, rather than something they're enthused about taking on in addition top of their existing teaching commitments." Sir Vince Cable

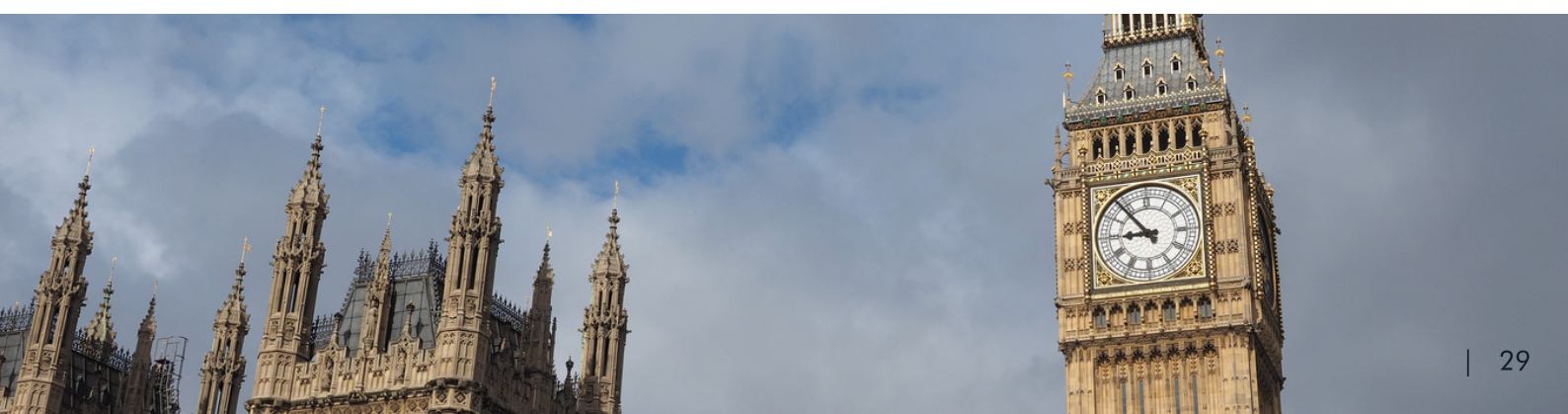


"I went to an independent school and general studies were considered very important and politics was often spoken about. Also being in London meant politicians, often substantial ones, regularly came to visit. There were several schools which were keen to invite the MP and local politicians for Q&A sessions. However some were more reluctant, which I could understand.

Some heads will feel that they've got enough on their plates, particularly, if they work in very challenging schools. This is the same with heads of departments, some are more interested than others about bringing in politicians to speak with students. Politics and current affairs is sometimes viewed as optional and of marginal interest. This is such a shame because young people are willing to ask penetrating questions, which led to some fascinating exchanges, but this touches on another barrier - teachers may be concerned about controversial topics being discussed.

My view is that we don't give young people an opportunity to have these debates we're doing them a disservice. But if you're on the school board or the senior manager of a university you may not want to expose yourselves to any risks associated with debating controversial topics, and to an extent I do not blame them. But in my view, with the right support, it is certainly not beyond teachers to have these really important conversations in a manner that is constructive.

When I was an MP I supported setting-up a school debating club in my constituency, where the students debated topics of public interest and we held the final in Parliament every year for three years. We found that as a result of the competition, schools set-up debating clubs and so this chance to engage with politics was really important." Jeremy Lefroy



"I was teacher when I was a councillor and my experience was that schools were scared that if a politician wanted to deliver education about how the system works that they'd try to indoctrinate the students with a specific political party's policies. I also found that a lot of the teachers who do provide political education do not really understand it that well themselves as they're not usually a specialist in that subject, for example when I was an MP, I had teachers write to me who did not understand what a constituency is and so if they're not getting it right, then how are they going to teach their students correctly.



Until we give political education a high enough status teachers will not train to teach it specifically. Without specialised training teachers can fear doing something that would upset parents or be construed as party political. Headteachers can often have those concerns too. I think fear is quite prominent.

I don't know how this higher status can be achieved as I think our current government thinks of active citizenship as being synonymous with volunteering rather than being able to grapple with political processes. It will take time and a lot of work to grapple with this and so you need a government that is supportive of the public having this knowledge and the skills to hold them to account. We need to change the attitude of government." Helen Jones

These conversations raised several barriers to political education for all from it being given sufficient standing in schools, teacher training and headteacher's capacity and appetite. None of these are insurmountable.

Discussion point:

The national curriculum has 'educated citizens' at its heart, yet delivery is patchy. Can the political sphere help to give clout to this aspect of the curriculum and play a more active role in supporting teachers to provide young people with the practical tools they need to fully engage in democratic processes, extending beyond election?



Informal political education for all ages

The onus for political literacy cannot be placed solely with schools, Further Education and Higher Education institutes. As we have seen there are many more influences on our political knowledge and beliefs beyond what happens in the classroom. In addition, acquiring political knowledge is a lifelong endeavour as each election brings with it new candidates, with new policy proposals, and we live in a rapidly changing world where the challenges we face and our means of addressing them are constantly evolving.

Given it is ultimately politicians that we're voting for, and they are our elected representatives, we also asked the former MPs for their views on what gaps in political knowledge are most prevalent and therefore need to be filled through lifelong informal education. We also asked for their views on the role of MPs in educating their constituents and the public on relevant policy issues and political developments.

Gaps in political knowledge

“During the election period I was often asked by people, when they could vote, where and how to vote. There is a lack of awareness particularly amongst young people and first-time voters about the mechanics of voting and there is a lack of understanding about the part that our electoral system plays in our democratic processes. It’s like we expect people to know these things by magic. One of the things that was really apparent to me as an MP in Stoke-On-Trent was that in this area lots of the young people weren’t given the opportunity to debate and articulate their views on political issues in school. So, they weren’t confident in expressing their views on how we could solve the problems they were experiencing and seeing, nor explaining what was causing them. Because these are skills that have to be learnt and therefore taught.” Joan Walley



“I vividly remember in a General Election campaign we were on a local council estate and I asked one of the women living on the estate, probably in her 40s, if she was going to vote. She replied ‘oh no, I don’t vote’. When I asked why she replied ‘I don’t know how to’. As we spoke it became apparent that she was worried about making herself look like an idiot by going and not knowing what to do. But it is not her fault that she does not know how to vote. That some people are never supported to vote for the first time and get into the habit of going to vote is a fundamental barrier.”



Adrian Sanders



“I think in working-class areas like mine people are not generally focused on big policy questions, they’re focused on getting by day-to-day. However, I did find, particularly amongst younger voters, that they asked questions like “How do I go and vote” “Can I do it online?” and often you’d get from younger women “I don’t understand it.” These is also widespread ignorance about what MPs actually do. Many of my constituents seemed surprised that we spent a lot of time in London. As an MP I spent more of my time on ‘non-Parliamentary’ issues such as housing and benefits, compared with Parliamentary business as often correspondence I received about Parliamentary issues were from people who were part of a campaign group like 38 Degrees. One of the issues that then arose was that we’d write back to our constituents with follow-up questions so we could take the best course of action and they wouldn’t know how, or just didn’t bother, to respond. So it weakened the impact of those letters as it gave the impression that they didn’t really know what sat behind those campaigns.” Helen Jones

Vince Cable also raised his scepticism about letters sent through campaign groups such as 38 Degrees raising questions about their usefulness from a campaigning perspective. However, it could be useful to explore the benefits of these campaign groups from an educational perspective.

Discussion point:

As part of the political ecosystem do organisations like 38 Degrees play an important role in political engagement? Can we build on the high-scale, low-effort engagement they foster to promote deeper and more meaningful engagement and education?

MPs' role in filling those gaps

This question elicited a number of potential opportunities to deliver political education in adulthood.

"MPs used to have a communications budget, which I'd use to put together a short newsletter, a bit like a magazine, that told people what I had been up to and what was happening in the area. It was not about promoting my party, but about informing constituents about my work as an MP on their behalf. It was delivered to every household to create awareness of what their MP is doing. But I think this budget got scrapped." Joan Walley



"When you're door-knocking you're often catching people unaware as they're not expecting you to pop round. So when you ask them what issues are bothering them they often struggle to bring them to mind, but I bet if you went back 5 minutes later they'd have thought of some." Adrian Sanders

"I put out reasonably regular leaflets, which tried to be fact-based, balanced and not party political. In response to the events that followed the Mid-Staffordshire health crisis in my constituency I even took out a full-page advertisement in the local newspaper that set out what services would continue, what services would partly continue and what services would be removed." Jeremy Lefroy



Adrian's point does raise the question that perhaps it would be beneficial if politicians forewarned constituents when they would be knocking on doors in their area. It could lead to more meaningful discussions for both parties if people have had an opportunity to think about any issues they'd like to raise in advance.

Discussion point:

Political literacy needs to extend beyond formal education as informal education is required throughout people's lifetime to enable them to follow policy and political developments. Who has a role in this and how could we approach this? Do other countries already do this well?

Efforts are being made to understand provision across schools and the Hansard Society measures political engagement across the population, but we do not measure people's political literacy i.e. what they know about the system and different issues, and how they can engage with it. IHAV thinks that creating a nationwide measure of political literacy would make it possible to evaluate different methods of delivering political education. It could also identify those with the least political literacy and allow for targeted interventions, as well as being used to set a benchmark and measure progress towards a politically literate population.

Discussion point:

How beneficial would it be to introduce a nationwide measure of political literacy? The intention would be to use this to set a benchmark that would help to identify those segments of the population with the lowest levels of political literacy, to assess overall improvements or deterioration overtime and to help understand the link between political literacy and participation. Who would we need to engage to make this possible and as useful as possible?

There are many avenues such a measure could take and IHAV is actively looking for partners to take this forward.

Next steps

This paper raises a number of discussion points that IHAV would like to consider further with input from other interested parties. Get in touch if you or your organisation has an interest in exploring and progressing the points raised.



get in touch

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