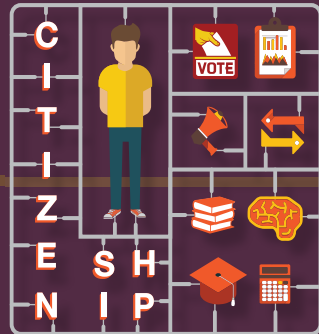




DEMOCRATIC  
FUTURES

Electoral  
 Reform  
 Society  
Scotland



# SCOTLAND'S FUTURE CITIZENS

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The importance of developing the practice of citizenship is hard to overstate. A key goal of society is to have an active democratic citizenry and this must come from integrated education and participation from a young age.

Today's youth is the most connected in history, but still there are rising levels of political disengagement; with people either cut off from, not valuing or not participating in the political process. To combat this it is important that young people's voices are heard and

their interests understood. But this won't happen just by acknowledging it—we need a bigger focus on this in our schools in order to develop citizens who are engaged from the beginning of their adult life.

With the lowering of the voting age in Scotland to 16, first for the referendum on independence and subsequently for elections to Holyrood, now is the perfect opportunity to foster a generation of informed and active citizens.

We should constantly be asking what we can do to improve the way that we undertake citizenship development in Scotland. This document sets out three policy suggestions for the next Scottish Parliament to best prepare our future citizens.



## 1

## A NATIONAL SCHOOL VOTER REGISTRATION PROGRAMME

We need a registration revolution in this country - the last modern democracy to introduce individual voter registration - and a national school registration programme can play a key part in this.

The changes to registration rules mean that young people can no longer be automatically registered to vote by their parents, universities or colleges. The danger of this cannot be overstated; the less young people that vote, the easier it is for politicians to ignore them. This then feeds a climate of disengagement and apathy. It is more vital than ever that schools play a key role in increasing registration and turnout.

This work is already being done effectively elsewhere in the UK. In Northern Ireland Electoral Registration Officers now work directly with schools, with the result that there has been a dramatic increase in registered voters.

That's why we're calling for voter registration to be included in the Curriculum for Excellence. This would ensure that no pupil leaves school without being registered to vote, or at the very least knowing how to.

## 2

## MODERN STUDIES TAUGHT IN ALL SCHOOLS

Getting young people to take part in the democratic process isn't just a matter of registering them to vote – it is also about convincing them of the power that comes with voting.

Many children leave school without understanding the practicalities of our democratic system. There is a clear demand from young people for political education that not only imparts and builds knowledge about our country's political systems, but that also equips them with the necessary skills and competencies to take a stake in our political and democratic processes ([Bite The Ballot](#), 2015). This will require teachers who are skilled and knowledgeable.

Every school should offer Modern Studies through all years of secondary education. We believe this is a big step towards young people gaining a full understanding of democracy, democratic values and the democratic process in Scotland. With recent changes to our National Curriculum, it is particularly necessary to reaffirm a commitment to Modern Studies, in order that we hold the highest standard in the political literacy of our electorate.

Recent research shows that civic education has a long-term impact on political engagement, which persists long after people have left school ([Neundorf et al](#), 2015). Modern Studies can help young people become informed citizens of Scotland and the world.

## HANDS-ON CITIZENSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Learning about the role an informed citizen plays is only part of the story of citizenship development. People learn to be active citizens not just by thinking but by doing. A fuller civic education must include experiential learning; citizenship should be taken beyond the classroom to include active campaigns within and outside the school ([Modern Studies Excellence Group, 2011](#)).

Internal participation can include preparatory exercises for the democratic process like mock elections. These allow people who have never voted to explore the practical workings of electoral procedures. But students can get the best experience of democratic participation by seeing it affect one of the most important parts of their lives: their school day.

Across the world there are hundreds of examples of democratically run schools, where students make collective decisions about the way that their classes, their curriculum, and their school buildings and services are run. This is about empowering students to take an active stake in their schools, fostering a culture of participation and trust in the life of the school, and student leadership.

External action means civic participation and community based learning. To take an example which is gaining traction in many schools across the United States, this could be to train students in community organising - working with their communities to address local issues. People need to feel that what they do matters, and empowering young people within society will increase their self-efficacy. This is informal learning, it doesn't need to be branded as 'doing politics'.

Such incredible kinds of participation and action are already happening in schools across the country, but more young people need to be able to access this enriched learning experience ([Audsley et al, 2013](#)). This is why we recommend that the Government investigates ways to include this 'democratic and social action' in The Curriculum for Excellence.

To renew and revitalize our democratic culture, we need to close the gap between schools, communities and civil society. This needs continued, structured interaction and the best way to ensure this happens is to include it in the curriculum. A key purpose of education must be to prepare our youngest citizens to participate in, and help strengthen and shape, democratic life in Scotland.

Addressing the issues raised above will help to ensure that every young person should leave school empowered and equipped with skills, knowledge and confidence to:

- *register to vote, and vote*
- *understand, challenge and help evolve our political processes*
- *take action, improve and strengthen our schools and communities*

We want young citizens to take responsibility for themselves and their communities and contribute to the political process. This way we ensure the next generation of Scots are informed citizens, shaping the world for everyone's collective wellbeing.

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