PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES
DEMOCRACY DEPENDS ON CITIZENS’ WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS.

There are many manifestations of democratic participation, but in parliamentary democracies, like the United Kingdom, political participation in elections is vital.
Young people are pioneers of many forms of political participation, but they are also the socio-demographic group with the lowest turnout in elections in England.

The introduction of the Voter ID requirement has further intensified these low turnout dynamics. Young people, particularly from deprived areas, were one of the groups more likely to fail to meet ID requirements in the 2023 local elections.

Schools and colleges have an opportunity and the responsibility to promote democratic values. This involves facilitating that young people can participate in democratic politics, including through voting. Research has repeatedly shown that young people’s political participation in elections depends on their status, motivation, knowledge, and skills. Whilst schools cannot change young people’s status, they can make a difference in terms of motivation, knowledge, and skills.

Promoting Democratic Participation in Schools and Colleges is directed to teachers and leaders in schools and colleges who wish to promote democratic political participation among their students. Developed in partnership between officers in Manchester City Council and researchers from The University of Manchester, the handbook provides some practical information on how teachers can promote democratic participation in both the Greater Manchester Mayoral Election and the Manchester City Council Local Elections taking place on the 2nd of May 2024, as well as a forthcoming UK Parliamentary election which will be held in 2024. Most of the resources in this handbook will also be useful to facilitate participation in future local, mayoral, and national elections.

This handbook aims to provide teachers with research-underpinned practical resources to enhance young people’s motivation, knowledge, and skills needed to participate in democratic elections. Promoting democratic participation requires a long-term commitment, but we are also realistic considering the number of competing priorities schools and teachers face. For that, we suggest four activities, lasting as little as 25 min. To complete the four activities, we recommend a minimum of 150 min. We also recommend further resources for longer-term curricular developments.
MOTIVATING YOUNG PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS.

Citizens’ motivation to participate in democratic politics depends on three main pillars: (1) Our interest in overall politics and/or the key political issues at debate; (2) Our perception that we can make a difference with our participation; (3) Our understanding that the political system is trusted, fair, and responsive to our needs. Drawing on a large of research, we recommend two activities to encourage students’ motivation.
This activity is based on agonistic approaches to democracy.

Democracy is agonistic when we understand that some disagreements cannot be resolved, yet adversaries still need to respect each other. Agonistic approaches in education do not necessarily seek to generate consensus or knowledge over political issues but to engage students in politics.

**Aims:**
1. To facilitate engagement and interest in politics.
2. To emphasise the existence of political alternatives.
3. To feel more comfortable when dealing with disagreement.

**Participants:**
A classroom group of students (from Y5 to Y13), divided into small groups of 5-6. In each group, a teacher or one of the students works as a facilitator.

**Resources:**
agree/disagree cards (right); list of statements.

**Time needed:**
25-45 min.

**Preparation:**
Consider political statements that might drive your students’ interest and might generate controversy. You can consult on the recurring issues identified by young people in the 2022 Youth Parliament making your mark vote.

Additional statements could include:
1. Young people should be able to vote from the age of 12;
2. There should be quotas in councils saved for women and ethnic minority councillors;
3. There should be more space in the school timetable dedicated to learning about politics.

**Method:**
1. Divide students into small groups of 5-6. Select a facilitator in each group;
2. Provide all students in each group with an agree/disagree card. In addition, provide facilitators with a list of statements.
3. At each table, facilitators are expected to read aloud the first statement. Students are expected to rapidly show their agreement/disagreement in relation to the statement using their cards.
4. At each table, students discuss their views with those who have the same opinion. There is no need to have/show academic knowledge about the issues. Then, they exchange perspectives with those with different opinions.
5. The facilitator reads aloud the second statement.
6. Tasks 3 and 4 are repeated as many times as needed.

**Templates:**

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[AGREE]  
[DISAGREE]
ACTIVITY 2.
RESPONDING TO YOUNG PEOPLE’S DEMANDS: UNICEF RIGHTS RESPECTING SCHOOLS.

Responsive institutions are more likely to encourage political participation.

This is the case of educational establishments like schools and colleges. In Manchester, more than 20 schools hold a UNICEF UK ‘Gold Rights Respecting Schools Award’ granted to schools that have fully embedded the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into their ethos and curriculum.

Aims: (1) To identify situations in which political participation has made a difference; (2) To appreciate ways in which parliamentary democracy is responsive to young citizens’ demands.

Participants: A classroom group of students (from Y5 to Y13).

Resources:
Gold inspection reports (examples):
• St. Mary’s CE
• Haveley Hey Community School

Advocacy toolkits:
• UNICEF
• Electoral Commission

Time needed: ≥ 50 min.

Preparation: Examine participation initiatives carried out by a Manchester-based UNICEF UK Gold Rights Respecting awarded school and identified in the Strand C of the Gold inspection reports. Ideally, school leaders should commit to supporting a participation initiative. Select one of the school reports. Examine and select activities from the recommended advocacy toolkits.

Method: (1) Working in groups, ask students to read the participation activities carried out by the selected school and select one of the participative initiatives that they would like their school/college to implement. (2) Provide students with the relevant advocacy toolkits and ask them to select a campaigning tactic. (3) Help students to organise their campaign aiming to encourage school leaders/governors to implement a participative initiative.
To be able to participate in democratic politics, citizens need to have some knowledge and skills. Among other issues, knowledge and skills are important for two reasons: (1) they influence our motivation as they make us feel more confident in our ability to participate, and (2) they are necessary to be able to know how to politically participate. We recommend two activities to teach the necessary knowledge and skills.
ACTIVITY 3. 
REGISTERING TO VOTE AND GETTING A PHOTO ID.

British, Irish, qualifying Commonwealth citizens, and some EU citizens are entitled to vote in local and mayoral elections in England.

From 4 May 2023, citizens must be registered and present a photo ID when voting at polling station elections in England. Young people can register to vote when they are 16 or over, but they can only vote from the age of 18. To vote at polling stations, a photo ID, or a Voter Authentication Certificate (VAC) is also required. 16-year-olds can apply for a VAC after they have registered.

Aim: (1) To identify processes and documents required to be able to vote at polling stations in England. (2) To register to vote in England. (3) To obtain photo ID or VAC requirements to be able to vote at polling stations in England.

Participants: From a classroom group of students to full school/college participation (Y12, Y13).

Resources:
Electronic devices with internet access or paper copies of the:
• register-to-vote form
• Apply-for-a-VAC form
Manchester City Council Electoral Services Fact Sheets on Registering and Photo ID

Time needed: ≥25 min.

Preparation: It would be advisable to share necessary information/consent forms with students/families/careers before the session, also checking whether students are entitled to vote (i.e. citizenship, age). For students entitled and consenting, ask them to bring to the classroom the necessary documentation to register to vote: (1) name/former names; (2) address/former addresses; (3) National Insurance Number (if they have one); (4) nationality/nationalities; (5) DOB. If they do not have ID requirements (check the detailed list of accepted photo IDs), ask them to bring a digital photo to obtain a VAC.

Method: (1) Check with students that they have the necessary information to register. (2) Help students to register to vote online or with the register-to-vote form. (3) Check with students that they have a necessary photo ID or additional information needed to obtain VAC. (4) If they do not have the necessary photo ID, help students to apply to obtain the VAC online or with the Apply-for-a-VAC form.

More information about registering to vote and getting a photo-ID can be found here:
ACTIVITY 4.
PARTICIPATING IN (MOCK) ELECTIONS.

Schools can provide opportunities for young people to participate in elections.

Ideally, these elections should be real. A good example is elections in school councils or participation in Make Your Mark. But even through mock elections including scenarios representing polling stations, students can learn the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to politically participate.

**Aims:** (1) To enhance knowledge about electoral processes; (2) To practice social and political skills needed to participate in elections.

**Participants:** From a classroom group of students to full school/college participation (from Y7 to Y13).

**Resources:** material resources to vote/simulate vote, instructions to carry out elections, and ballot paper, manifesto and notice of poll templates (see a detailed list in Make Your Mark).

**Time needed:** ≥50 min for polling scenarios. ≥100 for mock elections + polling scenarios.

**Preparation:** For Y12/Y13 students, ideally, carry out this activity after activity 3 above.

**Method:** Mock elections: (1) Allocate the following roles to students: 1-2 returning officers; 2-4 polling/counting officers; ≥10 voters. (2) Divide the group of voters, in groups of 4/5 students. Ask each group to select a candidate that will stand for elections and to prepare a brief manifesto of their policies. Simultaneously, the officers will prepare the polling documentation, including the register of voters, a notice of poll, ballot papers, and a ballot box. (3) Candidates present their manifesto to the entire classroom group. Polling scenarios: (4) Ask students to represent election day in the polling stations. Officers will ensure that students are registered to vote and have the necessary photo ID; they will provide students with the necessary ballot papers. All citizens can vote for candidates, providing they meet requirements. Officers will then count votes and announce the election’s winners.
MANIFESTO

CANDIDATE: 
PARTY: 

NOTICE OF POLL

ELECTIONS FOR: 

DAY: 
TIME: 

LOCATIONS: 

CANDIDATES

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**VOTE FOR ONE CANDIDATE ONLY.**
Mark a cross (X) in the right hand box next to the name of the candidate you wish to vote for.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

ELECTIONS AND YOUNG PEOPLE
British Youth Council:
Make Your Mark

Electoral Commission:
Welcome to Your Vote

Manchester City Council:
Electoral Services Fact Sheets

PARTICIPATORY SCHOOLS
Child Friendly Manchester

Council of Europe (n.d.):
Three country audit of the lower secondary citizenship and human rights education curriculum

UNICEF:
Rights Respecting Schools

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES
Council of Europe (2016):
Living with Controversy. Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE)

Sant, E., Thiel, J. et al. (2021):
PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN SCHOOLS. Practical resources to support teachers’ initial and continuous professional development

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Dr. Edda Sant
The University of Manchester
edda.sant@manchester.ac.uk

Sean Morris
MCC Elections Team
sean.morris@manchester.gov.uk