

Engaging Citizens to Ensure our Democracy: The Role and Potential of Educational Institutions

Neil Jameson & Sebastien Chapleau

For Students, Teachers, Governors, Parents and Carers, and Organisers

CITIZENS UK
reweaving the fabric of society

“Teaching the art of politics in action” – a phrase coined by the late Bernard Crick – illustrates one of the principal challenges for Citizens UK. Can Citizens UK play a role in revitalising the political culture of our country? This is no small task. In 1950, 84% of the electorate turned out to vote but only 65% did so in 2010. A survey of first-time voters carried out for Radio 1, just before the last election, reported that 30% did not believe their vote would count and 20% felt they did not know enough about politics to make a decision. Despite these comments, however, more than half claimed they would vote if they could do so online or using text messaging. And, from the 15.5 million votes cast during the last series of the X Factor, we know young people like voting.

So can politics be revitalised simply by installing better voting technology? My answer is ‘yes’ if politics is defined as – and limited to – voting for a government every five or so years but ‘no’ if it lives up to its true mission. Politics is about ‘people power’ and must surely encompass groups of citizens taking collective decisions on behalf of their society based on justice, equality, fairness, safety, sustainability and the need for cohesion.

These are many of the goals on which [schools involved with Citizens UK] have set their sights. Pupils, teachers, school leaders and community organisers have campaigned for community cohesion and for streets safe from muggers, traffic or rodents; housing with enough space for families to live with dignity; and for workers to be paid a living wage. Their successes are living proof that the Citizens UK philosophy of learning by action actually works.”

Prof Peter Mortimore, Director of the Institute of Education (1994-2000)

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