Getting young people into politics through service learning

Summary report, December 2021

THE
**BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS
TEAM**

Contents

Executive summary

Young people participate in politics less than any other age group, and they arguably suffer materially as a result. Service learning, a type of civic education, is one policy that has received a substantial amount of public investment in an attempt to solve this problem. However, the evidence to date on its effect, how this effect is produced, and how we might maximise it, has been lacking.

This report offers a summary of a mixed methods PhD thesis that attempts to address these gaps in our knowledge. The research was carried out by Dr. Patrick Taylor from the Behavioural Insights Team, with support from the National Citizen Service Trust (NCS Trust). NCS Trust is the body responsible for delivering the National Citizen Service (NCS) programme. NCS is a voluntary programme of youth development and civic participation operating across England, funded by the UK government. The research consisted of three studies, the findings from which are summarised here:

Study 1 was a large quasi-experiment (N=5,486), testing the effects of service learning on NCS participants' political participation. Taking a combined measure of political engagement that included petition signing, petition organising, directly contacting politicians, protest and voting, we found that NCS increased political participation by 3.1 percentage points (pp), equivalent to 12% above the baseline rate. The effects on petition signing and protest were even bigger (5.4pp (13%) and 4.9pp (63%) respectively). If the estimated average effect of NCS on non-electoral political participation were realised in the wider English population of 16-25 year olds, they would be the second-highest participating age group, as opposed to the second lowest as they are currently.

Study 1 also estimated effects on a range of potential mediating mechanisms. Prior to this thesis, there seemed to be strong evidence in the literature that, if service learning did have a positive effect on political participation, a key part of the explanation would be down to intermediate effects on participants' self-efficacy. In particular, a spillover effect was hypothesised where gains in service-based self-efficacy would lead to gains in political self-efficacy[1] which, in turn, would lead to gains in political participation. These tests suggest that the observed increases in political participation do not come via a process of self-efficacy spillover as had previously been thought.

Study 2 uses interviews with 27 'graduates' of NCS to build a more detailed theory that helps to explain the effect of service learning on political participation. It found that: i. there is substantial heterogeneity in the effects of service learning on political participation; ii. there are twelve, sometimes interdependent mechanisms that mediate these effects; and iii. there

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[1] 'Self-efficacy' is a person's belief in two things: i. that they have the ability to engage in a particular activity; and ii. that when they do engage, they will have a positive effect on the desired outcome.

are up to sixteen moderating factors. Two substantive results within these general findings may be particularly surprising to some. First, an increase in social self-efficacy seems to be the most powerful mediating mechanism, acting directly on political participation. Second, gains in service-based self-efficacy can lead to losses in political self-efficacy and, therefore, a reduction in political participation for some individuals.

Study 3 investigates how best to encourage democratic participation post-service. It uses a large randomised controlled trial (N=227,372) to test the effects of three different email messages on NCS graduates' participation in a political letter writing competition. A 'plain' invitation is pitted against two alternative messages that draw on the theories of self-efficacy and identity. It finds that the theory-informed messages perform no better than a 'plain' invitation in encouraging participation.

This research offers the first robust estimates of the causal effects of service learning on youth political participation, settling a dispute in the literature between those who have found (or predicted) positive, negative, and null effects. It also provides the first detailed theory to explain how these effects are produced. With the findings from this research we can now be fairly confident that:

- service learning (and NCS as an example) can have a large positive effect on political participation;
- this effect is partly produced by an increased sense of social self-efficacy; and
- social mixing and practical mastery experiences are crucial components of the intervention to achieve these effects.

These are not only important contributions to the literature, but also have crucial significance to policy makers and practitioners. Young people are underrepresented in politics, and they may suffer materially because of this. A lot of resources have been invested in service learning to help address this issue but, until now, we did not know whether it could work. Now that we know that it can, there is a strong argument for more resources to be put in, so that more young people have the chance to benefit, and so that we can assess whether population-level effects can be achieved.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Overview

Young people participate in politics less than any other age group, and they arguably suffer materially as a result. Service learning, a type of civic education, is one policy that has received a substantial amount of public investment to attempt to solve this problem. However, the evidence to date on its effect, how this effect is produced, and how we might maximise it, is lacking.

This report summarises the key findings and conclusions from ['Service Learning and Youth Political Participation: A mixed-method thesis'](#), new research which attempts to address this evidence gap. The research looks at the relationship between young people's political participation and service learning. Its focus has been the [National Citizen Service](#) (NCS) programme. NCS is a voluntary programme of youth development and civic participation operating across England, funded by the UK government.

The full thesis can be found [here](#).

Background

Why should we worry about youth participation in politics?

Young people participate in formal political activities – voting, contacting politicians, petitioning and protest – less than any other age group.[2] While there is some evidence that electoral turnout among young people increased over the 2010, 2015 and 2017 general elections,[3] 18-24-year-olds remained the lowest participating age group throughout this period and youth turnout in the latest UK general election seems to have been at its lowest for over a decade.[4] Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate clearly the inequality in political participation by age group in the UK.

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[2] Ipsos MORI, 2019. How Britain voted in the 2019 election. Available online: https://bit.ly/2UMKWIZ. Last accessed: 20 November 2020.; Cabinet Office, 2016. Community Life Survey 2015 to 2016: data. Available online: https://bit.ly/38VXZQC. Last accessed: 27 February 2017.; Sturgis, P. and Jennings, W., 2020. Was there a 'Youthquake' in the 2017 general election?. Electoral Studies, 64, p.102065.

[3] Sturgis, P. and Jennings, W., 2020. Was there a 'Youthquake' in the 2017 general election?. Electoral Studies, 64, p.3.

[4] Ipsos MORI, 2019. How Britain voted in the 2019 election. Available online: https://bit.ly/2UMKWIZ. Last accessed: 20 November 2020.; Sturgis, P. and Jennings, W., 2020. Was there a 'Youthquake' in the 2017 general election?. Electoral Studies, 64, p.3.

Figure 1: Turnout at the 2019 UK general election by age
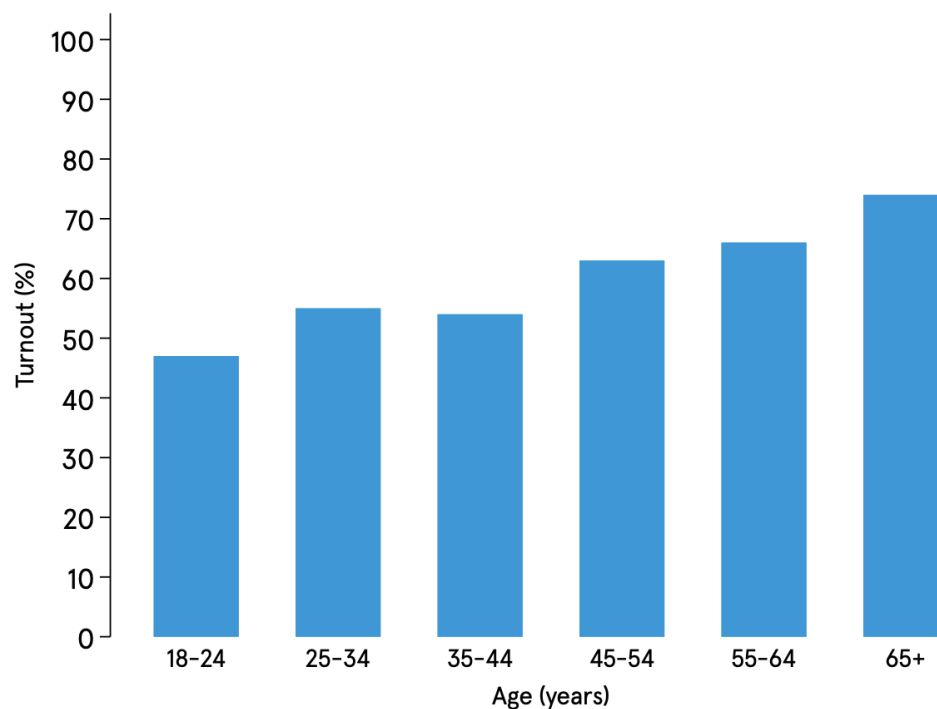
Source: Ipsos Mori (2019)

Figure 2: Non-electoral participation in the UK by age
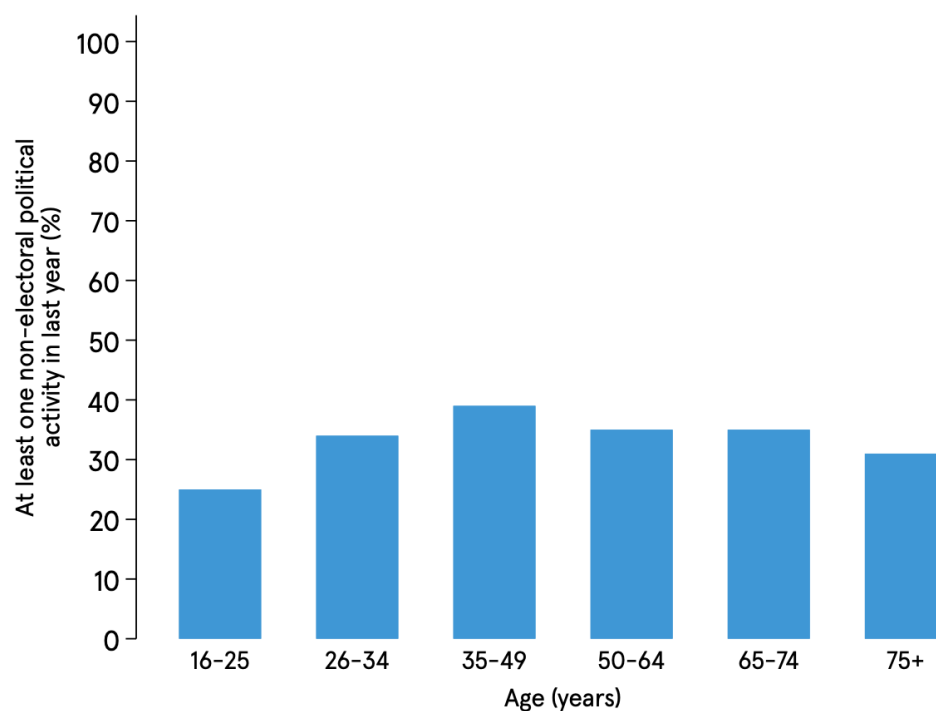
Source: Cabinet Office (2016).[5]

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[5] The activities included here are: i. contacting a local official such as a local councillor, MP, government official, mayor, or public official working for the local council of Greater London Assembly; ii. attending a public meeting or

This pattern of behaviour might represent a generational shift in preferences away from formal political participation and towards other modes of participation such as non-political community service.[6] This idea is supported by estimates in the UK that suggest that, when it comes to non-political civic participation, 16- to 25-year-olds are in fact the most active age group.[7]

This shift in mode, and inequality in political participation by age, matters for at least three reasons. First, who gets elected to government, and the policies that they put in place, seems to be strongly determined by who votes.[8] For example, when substantial public spending cuts were introduced by the UK government in 2010, the average 16- to 24-year-old is estimated to have lost services and benefits valued at 28% of their household

rally, taking part in a public demonstration or protest; and iii. signing a paper or e-petition. 2016 is the most recent year for which there are robust estimates of this behaviour in UK government statistics (Hamlyn et al. 2015).

[6] Kahne, J., Crow, D. and Lee, N.J., 2013. Different pedagogy, different politics: High school learning opportunities and youth political engagement. Political Psychology, 34(3), pp.420.; Dalton, R.J., 2016. The good citizen: How a younger generation is reshaping American Politics. Sage. pp.5-6.

[7] Cabinet Office, 2016. Community Life Survey 2015 to 2016: data. Available online: https://bit.ly/38VXZQC. Last accessed: 27 February 2017.

[8] Anzia, S.F., 2013. Timing and turnout: How off-cycle elections favor organized groups. University of Chicago Press.; Berry, C., R., and Gersen, J.E., 2011. Election timing and public policy. Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 6(2), pp.103-135.; Bertocchi, G., Dimico, A., Lancia, F. and Russo, A., 2020. Youth enfranchisement, political responsiveness, and education expenditure: Evidence from the US. American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 12(3), pp.76-106.; Birch, S., Glenn, G. and Lodge, G., 2013. Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters. IPPR. Available online: http://bit.ly/3sf9euE. Last accessed 11 January 2021.; Fowler, A., 2013. Electoral and policy consequences of voter turnout: Evidence from compulsory voting in Australia. Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 8(2), pp.159-182.; Lee, D.S., Moretti, E. and Butler, M.J., 2004. Do voters affect or elect policies? Evidence from the US House. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 119(3), pp.807-859.; Madestam, A., Shoag, D., Veuger, S. and Yanagizawa-Drott, D., 2013. Do political protests matter? Evidence from the Tea Party movement. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 128(4), pp.1633-1685.

income. For all other age groups, the equivalent figure ranged between 10 and 16%.[9]

Second, political participation is a habit. People who participate early on in their lives are more likely to participate when they are older.[10] If we can find ways to encourage participation in childhood and youth, we might therefore be able to increase general levels of participation across the population.

Third, there are other important inequalities in participation – like those based on ethnicity and wealth, for example – that begin in youth. Understanding and addressing low participation in childhood might therefore be the best way of addressing these other inequalities.[11] If we can encourage a habit in youth, then maybe we can encourage a habit in these other groups. Habits are more malleable in youth, and marginalised groups are perhaps easier to engage at this age (through the state education system, for example).

What is service learning?

Service learning is a particular kind of citizenship education that supports young people to carry out voluntary service that assists 'individuals, families, and communities in need'.[12] When delivered as part of formal education – schools, colleges, universities – this experiential core is supplemented by relevant classroom-based learning that covers topics such as how democracy works, and contemporary policy issues.

Recent years, however, have seen a growing body of interventions (and an associated body of research) that fit some of this description, but take place outside of formal education. These informal models of service learning are: usually funded by national governments; delivered outside of formal education, often by non-governmental organisations (NGOs); focussed on experiential learning (with limited or no knowledge-based curriculum); and are supported by non-civic personal development activities and guided reflection.[13]

The specific programme of service learning studied in this research is the National Citizen Service or 'NCS'; an example of an informal model of service learning. NCS is a voluntary programme of youth development and civic participation operating across England. Young

[9] Birch, S., Glenn, G. and Lodge, G., 2013. Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters. IPPR. Available online: http://bit.ly/3sf9euE. Last accessed 11 January 2021. p.14.

[10] Aldrich, J.H., Montgomery, J.M. and Wood, W., 2011. Turnout as a habit. Political Behavior, 33(4), pp.535-563.; Collins, N.A., Kumar, S. and Bendor, J., 2009. The adaptive dynamics of turnout. The Journal of Politics, 71(2), pp.457-472.; Denny, K. and Doyle, O., 2009. Does voting history matter? Analysing persistence in turnout. American Journal of Political Science, 53(1), pp.17-35.; Gerber, A.S., Green, D.P. and Shachar, R., 2003. Voting may be habit-forming: evidence from a randomized field experiment. American Journal of Political Science, 47(3), pp.540-550.; Green, D.P. and Shachar, R., 2000. Habit formation and political behaviour: Evidence of consuetude in voter turnout. British Journal of Political Science, pp.561-573.; Plutzer, E., 2002. Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources, and growth in young adulthood. American Political Science Review, 96(1), pp.41-56.

[11] Holbein, J. B and Hillygus, S., 2020. Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action. New York: Cambridge University Press. pp.6-7.

[12] Hunter, S. and Brisbin, R. A., 2000. The Impact of Service-Learning on Democratic and Civic Values. PS - Political Science and Politics, 33(3), p.623.

[13] Reinders, H. and Youniss, J., 2006. School-based required community service and civic development in adolescents. Applied Developmental Science, 10(1), p.4.; Pye, J. and Michelmore, O., 2017. National Youth Social Action Survey 2016. London: Ipsos MORI. Available online: http://bit.ly/3oAPEa2. Last accessed: 11 January 2021. p.24.

people take part in the programme in the summer or autumn following their final year of secondary school, so the majority are 16 years old. Participants are placed into cohorts of approximately 60 peers, broken down into teams of roughly 12 young people, each supported by a non-professional youth worker. The programme has three phases. Phase 1 is a one-week residential curriculum at an outdoor centre, aiming to build participants' confidence, skills, and sense of team. In Phase 2, participants are based in a residential location near their home for a week, where they live 'independently' with their team (managing a food budget and cooking together), take part in skills-building workshops and visit local community organisations, such as day centres for senior citizens. During this week, they are encouraged to think about issues in their local area that they could address through their own civic participation. In Phase 3, which is either one or two weeks long, participants develop and execute a civic participation or 'social action' project to build their understanding of issues in their local community and work together to find ways to have a positive social impact. Typical projects include campaigning or awareness-raising, fundraising for a local charity, or improving a physical area or environment (for example, gardening at a care home or cleaning up a local park).

Why is service learning important in the context of youth participation in politics?

Service learning matters in this context for two reasons. First, a substantial amount of public resources are invested in it as a solution to the problem of low youth participation in politics. This is the case in England where, in 2015, up to £1bn was made available to NCS by the UK government, dependent on demand from young people.[14] Approximately 600,000 young people have completed the programme to date.[15] NCS graduates therefore represent a substantial proportion of the English population in their age group.

The second reason is theoretical. While there is literature on service learning and youth political participation, there is room for development in both the theory and the identification of causal effects. Combining the specific research on service learning with the wider evidence on voluntary associations, a literature review suggests that three types of mechanism may link service learning to political participation:

1. the development of key skills;
2. an increased motivation to participate via an increased sense of self-efficacy and/or social responsibility; and/or
3. an access to new networks.

But this theory is largely untested, and the details on the activities that might trigger these mechanisms and the factors that moderate them are very limited.[16]

Beyond this theorising, researchers have also attempted to identify the causal effect of service learning on political participation, but they have so far come up short. There is no strong evidence to say whether service learning has a positive, negative, or null effect on young people's political participation. Studies that have tried to identify causal effects have suffered from weak identification strategies and small samples.[17] There are, therefore, large gaps in our knowledge on this topic that have important practical implications.

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[14] National Audit Office, 2017. Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General: National Citizen Service. Available online: http://bit.ly/2iqnk9l. Last accessed: 31 October 2017. p.4. These are the most recent publicly available figures so may not represent the total amount invested to date.

[15] Figure calculated by adding published participation figures up to the beginning of 2019 (NCS Trust 2019, p.6) to NCS Trust's internal participation number for summer 2019 (98,331, unpublished at the time of writing).

[16] Ayala, L.J., 2000. Trained for Democracy: The Differing Effects of Voluntary and Involuntary Organizations on Political Participation. Political Research Quarterly, 53(1), pp.99–115.; Dartington Service Design Lab, 2019. Youth Social Action and Outcomes for Young People. Available online: https://bit.ly/2kh2H4m. Last accessed: 17 September 2019.

[17] Burth, H. P., 2016. The contribution of Service-Learning programs to the promotion of civic engagement and political participation: A critical evaluation. Citizenship, Social and Economics Education, 15, pp.58–66.

Research questions and design

This research aimed to improve our understanding of the relationship between service learning and political participation by answering three questions:

- RQ1: What is the effect of service learning on young people's political participation?
- RQ2: If there is an effect, how is it produced?
- RQ3: What is the most effective way to encourage political participation post-service?

These questions were addressed through three studies. Study 1 used a quasi-experimental (matched difference-in-differences) design, with a large sample (N=5,486), to compare the political behaviour of young people who took part in NCS with a group of young people who did not. The data available for this study comes from a survey that was issued to all participants of NCS in summer 2019 (the 'intervention group') and to a sample of young people who expressed an interest in NCS but did not participate (the 'comparison group'). Its primary aim was to provide an unbiased estimate of the average effect of service learning on participants' political participation (RQ1). The secondary aim was to generate unbiased estimates of the average effects on service-based civic participation, general civic self-efficacy, and political self-efficacy; providing the beginnings of an answer to the question of how the effect on political participation is produced (RQ2).

Study 2 aimed to build on Study 1 by improving our understanding of how the observed effect on political participation is produced (RQ2). It broke this question down into three parts:

1. What are the mechanisms in a service learning experience that lead to a change in participants' future political participation?
2. Which activities trigger these mechanisms?
3. What are the factors that moderate the effect of service learning on participants' future political participation?

To answer these questions, the study employed 'ideational process tracing',[18] using in-depth interviews with 27 'graduates' of NCS. These interviews covered the graduates' participation in democratic activities, their motivations for such participation and the role, if any, that NCS has played in this regard. Together, Study 1 and Study 2 aimed to develop a more complete picture of the relationship between service learning and political participation; with the former identifying the causal effect (RQ1) and the latter helping us to understand how this effect is produced (RQ2).

Study 3 attempted to go one step further to provide insights into how to maximise the positive effects observed in Study 1 (RQ3). Before this study, there was a large amount of evidence to suggest that 'Get Out the Vote' (GOTV) campaigns can increase voter turnout, and to tell us what form and content a message should take to be most effective in this context.[19] There

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[18] Jacobs, A.M. 2015. 'Process tracing the effects of ideas'. In Bennett, A. and Checkel, J.T. (Eds.), 2015. Process tracing. Cambridge University Press. p.43.

[19] Gerber, A.S., Green, D.P. and Shachar, R., 2003. Voting may be habit-forming: evidence from a randomized field experiment. American Journal of Political Science, 47(3), pp.540-550.; Gerber, A.S., Green, D.P. and Larimer, C.W., 2008. Social pressure and voter turnout: Evidence from a large-scale field experiment. American

was less evidence, however, on the effects of such campaigns on non-electoral political participation, and none at all when the target population was young people who had participated in service learning. Programmes such as NCS are uniquely placed to encourage democratic participation post-service, but there was no direct evidence to suggest how this could be done most effectively. This study addressed this final gap, using a large (N=227,372) three-arm randomised controlled trial to test the effects of three different email messages on young people's participation in a political letter writing competition. The first of these messages relied on the idea of a self-efficacy spillover from the domain of service to politics, the second aimed to draw on participants' sense of identity, and the third was a plain encouragement message that acted as a control.

Political Science Review, pp.33-48.; Middleton, J.A. and Green, D.P., 2008. Do community-based voter mobilization campaigns work even in battleground states? Evaluating the effectiveness of MoveOn's 2004 outreach campaign. Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 3, pp.63-82.; Nickerson, D.W., 2006. Volunteer phone calls can increase turnout: Evidence from eight field experiences. American Politics Research, 34(3), pp.271-292.; Nickerson, D.W., 2007. Does email boost turnout? Quarterly Journal of Political Science, 2(4), pp.369-379.

Key findings

Study 1: The effects of NCS on civic participation

Figure 3 shows the effects of NCS on both service-based and political participation. Taking a combined measure of political engagement that includes petition signing, petition organising, directly contacting politicians, protest, and voting, we found that NCS increased political participation by 3.1 percentage points (pp) (p = 0.000; 95% CI [2.0, 4.1]); a 12% increase on the baseline average in the intervention group.

Figure 3: Effects of NCS on civic participation
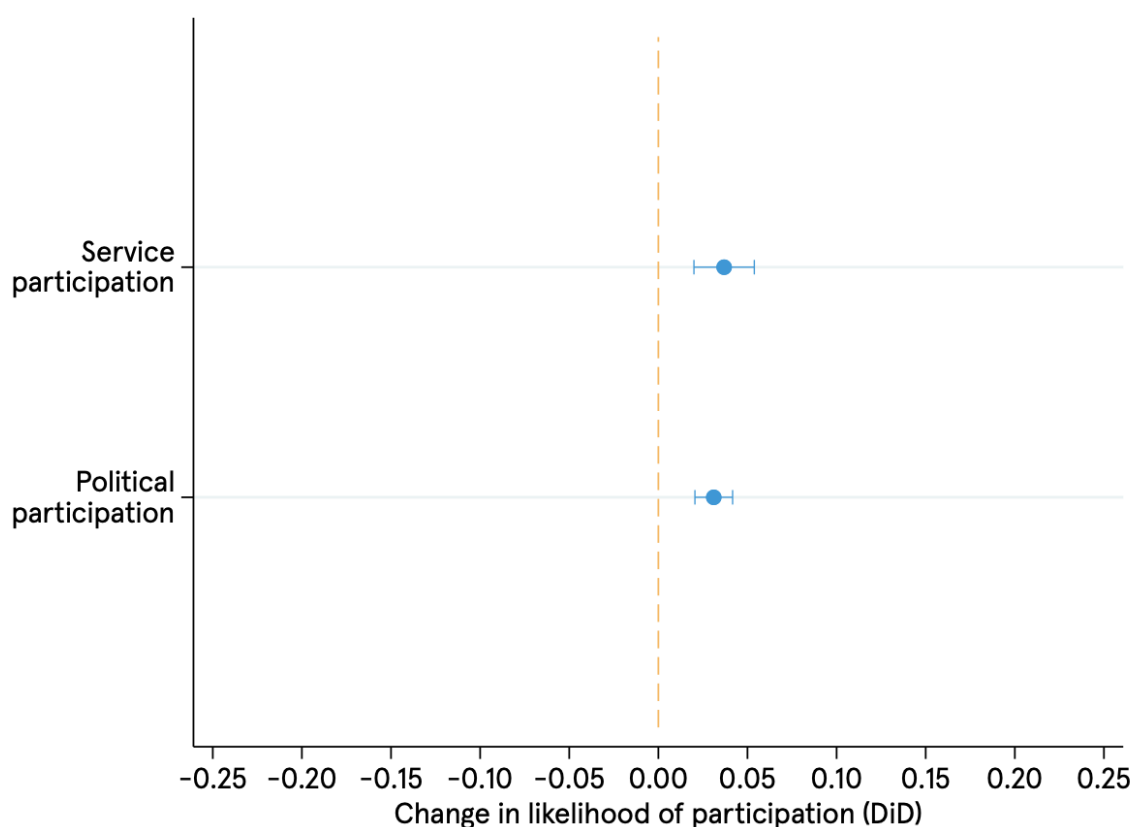
Breaking down this combined indicator of participation into its constituent parts suggests that NCS has even larger effects on some forms of non-electoral participation (Figure 4). This analysis shows that NCS had a 5.4pp effect on petition-signing (a 13% increase on the baseline average in the intervention group) and a 4.9pp effect on protest attendance (a 63% increase on the baseline average in the intervention group). These effects are substantial when we consider that only 25% of 16- to 25-year-olds in England are estimated to take part

in at least one of these activities in a year.[20] If the estimated average effect of NCS on non-electoral political participation were realised in the wider English population of 16-25-year-olds, they would be the second-highest participating age group, as opposed to the second lowest as they are currently.

Figure 4: Effects of NCS on political participation by type
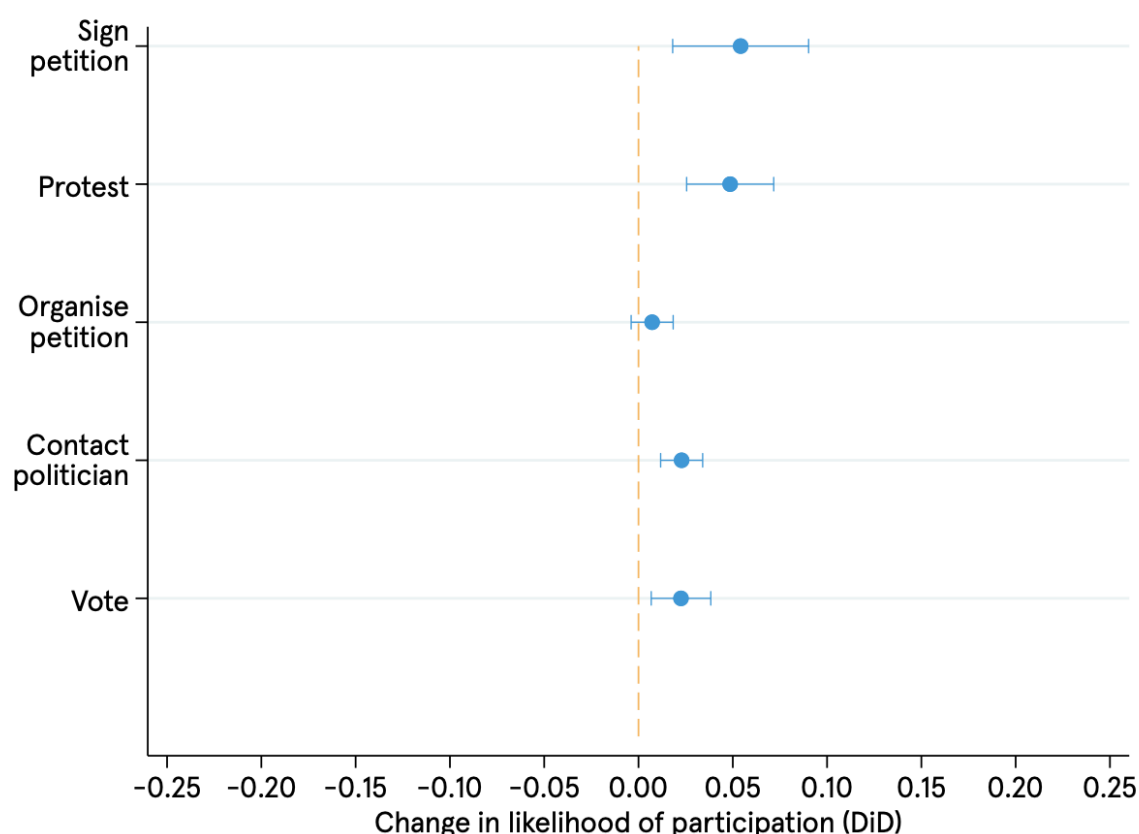
The literature prior to this study suggested that, if a positive effect is realised by programmes like this, then self-efficacy[21] may have played a key mediating role. The idea being that an experience of service-based civic participation can lead to an increased sense of service-based or general civic self-efficacy, which can lead to gains in political self-efficacy, which in turn can lead to more political participation (a self-efficacy 'spillover effect'). To test this theory, we also estimated the effects of NCS on service-based participation, general civic self-efficacy, and political self-efficacy.

Positive effects were identified for the first two of these outcomes. NCS did increase participants' service-based participation and general civic self-efficacy (by 3.7pp and 8pp respectively). In fact, the effect on general civic self-efficacy (representing a 12% increase on the baseline average in the intervention group) seems quite large when compared with

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[20] Cabinet Office, 2016. Community Life Survey 2015 to 2016: data. Available online: https://bit.ly/38VXZQC. Last accessed: 27 February 2017.

[21] 'Self-efficacy' is a person's belief in two things: i. that they have the ability to engage in a particular activity; and ii. that when they do engage, they will have a positive effect on the desired outcome.

similar interventions targeting similar cohorts. For example, an RCT of a youth social action programme for 16- to 19-year-olds found an effect of 5pp (or a 7% increase on the control group average) on a similar outcome.[22]

However, the findings from our study suggest that NCS had almost no effect on political self-efficacy. This is probably because NCS (as with most service learning) is focused on non-political forms of participation, whose outcomes are also non-political. Participants did, however, experience an increase in their sense of internal political self-efficacy. This finding provides support for the idea in the literature that some of the capabilities developed through non-political civic participation are transferable.[23] It could be that a spillover is occurring only on this internal dimension. However, the effect on internal political self-efficacy is still small so seems unlikely to account for the relatively large increase that we see in political participation. This suggests that the self-efficacy spillover story is not quite right. As a study of mechanisms, however, this first study is limited by the small number of outcomes measured, the reductive quantitative indicators used to measure these outcomes, and an inability to say whether coinciding outcomes have a causal connection.

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[22] Kirkman, E., Sanders, M., Emanuel, N., Larkin, C., 2016. Evaluating Youth Social Action: does participating in social action boost the skills young people need to succeed in adult life? London: Behavioural Insights Team. Available online at: http://bit.ly/1SPmz6k. Last accessed: 2 November 2017. p.23. The nearest outcome in this study was labelled 'problem solving'. This outcome was composed of some of the same survey items used to construct the general civic self-efficacy measure in the current study, but also included some items relating to skills for solving problems.

[23] Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E., 1995. Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics. Harvard University Press.; Holbein, J. B and Hillygus, S., 2020. Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Study 2: How is this effect created?

The results from Study 1 suggest that, on average, service learning can have a positive effect on young people's future political participation. Study 2 aimed to add to our understanding of this relationship by explaining the mechanisms by which this effect is produced, the activities that trigger these mechanisms and the factors that moderate the effect. These questions are interrelated. We can't properly understand the role that one component plays in the causal chain – be it a mechanism, activity, or moderator – without understanding how it relates to the other parts. For example, describing a certain type of skill-development as a mechanism is only fully informative as part of the theory if you say which particular activities contribute to that skill-development, and which specific factors moderate its effects on political participation. For this reason, the detailed findings in the thesis are not separated into findings about mechanisms, findings about activities, and findings about moderating factors. In this overview, however, they are summarised separately below, before being presented together in the form of a logic model.

Four categories of mechanism were identified in Study 2: i. capabilities; ii. attitudes and beliefs; iii. knowledge; and iv. networks of recruitment. In total, seventeen individual potential mechanisms were identified across these four categories. Table 1 shows the evidence that each of these constructs is a true mediator of the relationship between service learning and political participation, presented in two parts; first, whether there was evidence of the construct as a proximal outcome (a change during or shortly after the experience, but prior to any change in political behaviour), and second, whether there was evidence to suggest that this proximal outcome contributed to the outcome of interest (an increase in political participation).

The findings suggest a high level of heterogeneity in effects. For some of the outcomes, positive, null, and negative effects were identified among the young people who were interviewed. There was evidence that twelve of the proximal outcomes identified were true mediators. Some of the outcomes identified as mechanisms seemed to directly affect political participation. Others had an indirect effect; i.e. there was at least one additional step in the causal chain prior to an increase in political participation.[24] Table 1 summarises these findings.

Table 1. Summary of findings on mediating mechanisms

Potential mechanism	Evidence as proximal outcome	Evidence as mechanism	Evidence of no effect	Evidence of negative effect	In literature?
Capabilities					
Social interaction and communication skills	Strong	Moderate	No	No	Partly
Teamworking skills	Moderate	None	No	No	Partly
Planning and organisation skills	Weak	None	No	No	Partly
Attitudes and beliefs					
General self-efficacy	Weak	Weak	No	No	No
Social self-efficacy	Strong	Moderate	No	No	No
Perceived success of social interactions	Strong	Moderate	No	No	No
Service self-efficacy	Moderate	Moderate	No	Yes	Yes

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[24] This extra layer of complexity is not displayed in Table 1 but is captured in the detailed findings and the logic model.

Perceived success of service	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes
Perceived importance of issue addressed through service	Moderate	Moderate	No	No	No
Perceived similarity between service and political participation	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	No	Yes
Political self-efficacy	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	Yes	Yes
Prosocial responsibility	Moderate	Weak	Yes	No	Yes
Self-esteem	Strong	None	No	No	No
Networks of recruitment					
Peer-to-peer	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	No	Yes
Through service	None	None	Yes	No	Yes
Knowledge					
Basic awareness of issues	Moderate	Weak	Yes	No	Partly
How politics works	Moderate	None	Yes	No	Partly

The terms 'weak', 'moderate' and 'strong' used in Table 1 are relative, qualitative descriptions of the strength of the evidence collected in this study. The purpose of this presentation is to provide an overview of the results to help orient the reader.

The qualitative evidence relating to these outcomes is presented in the thesis, accompanied by descriptions of the specific activities and characteristics of the programme that seem to lead to the results. These activities fell into four categories: i. non-civic personal development activities; ii. service-based civic participation; iii. guided reflection and positive feedback; and iv. political and issue-based discussions. Perhaps surprisingly, it was the non-civic personal development activities – i.e. the activities that have nothing, on the face of it, to do with service or politics – that seemed to be among the most powerful triggers of the most important mechanisms.

The findings on the factors that moderate the effects identified, are also integrated into the findings on mechanisms in the thesis, to make it clear which specific effect is under moderation in each case. Two categories of moderator were identified: i. characteristics of the participants prior to the service learning experience; and ii. characteristics of the service learning experience itself. In total, sixteen moderating factors were identified across these

two categories. These are summarised in Table 2 alongside the outcomes that they seem to influence.

Table 2. Summary of findings on mediating moderators

Moderator	Outcomes influenced by moderator
Participant characteristics prior to service learning	
Social interaction and communication skills	Social interaction and communication skills
Critical thinking	Prosocial responsibility
Prosocial responsibility	Service self-efficacy; Prosocial responsibility
Issue interest	Teamworking skills; Service self-efficacy
Political interest	Social interaction and communication skills; Social self-efficacy; Service self-efficacy; Political knowledge
Political motivation	Social interaction and communication skills; Social self-efficacy; Service self-efficacy
Social self-efficacy	Social interaction and communication skills; Social self-efficacy
Political self-efficacy	Service self-efficacy
Openness to others' views	Social interaction and communication skills; Teamworking skills
Political knowledge	Social self-efficacy; Political knowledge
Other commitments / priorities	All
Characteristics of the service learning experience	
A safe and supportive environment	Social self-efficacy
Legal and safety restrictions on service	Service self-efficacy
Sociodemographic diversity of cohort	Social interaction and communication skills
Diversity of cohort in terms of political engagement	Networks of recruitment
Depth and focus of political knowledge components	Political knowledge

As with the summary of mechanisms, this table is only intended to provide a snapshot of the findings on moderators to help orient the reader. The detailed findings on moderating factors are complex. Whether or not a particular factor was at play, the combination of factors at play, and the influence that these factors had often varied by individual.

The presentation of the results in the thesis accounts for this complexity in two ways. First, wherever outcomes or moderators were observed to have different effects in different circumstances, the full range and diversity of effects is described, categorising these experiences where possible, along with the relevant circumstances.[25] Second, brief case studies are presented throughout the findings to try to capture some of the residual complexity that is lost in the (necessary) processes of summary and categorisation carried out in the main analysis.


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[25] Ritchie, J. Lewis, J. Nicholls, CM. and Ormston, R. eds. 2014. Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers. Sage. p.386.

The moderating factors identified are also unlikely to comprise an exhaustive list. A factor is only included in the list if there is specific qualitative evidence of it affecting a specific outcome. It is plausible that some of these moderators influenced other outcomes, but inferences in the absence of specific reports from participants, or clear implicit evidence, have been avoided. It should also be noted that several other factors are identified as influencing interviewees' political participation in general, but with no evidence that they were moderating the effects of service learning.[26] These factors were also omitted from the findings.

Prior to carrying out the interviews for this study, an initial logic model was created based on the pre-study literature. The purpose of this was to mitigate the risk that the existing literature would influence data collection and analysis in an implicit and unsystematic way. A revised version of the logic model was then created based on the combined results of Studies 1 and 2, which can be found in Figure 5. This diagram shows the activities, mechanisms, causal pathways, and moderators that were identified as present for some participants in the study. If an item appeared in the pre-study model – because it was identified in the literature as potentially important – but found no support in the findings, then it is not included in the revised model. If a construct is identified in the results as a proximal outcome, but there is no evidence to show it acting as a true mediator, then it is also excluded from the model. Mechanisms that are supported by at least 'moderate' evidence in Study 2, are coloured in darker blue. Those supported by weaker evidence are coloured in lighter blue.


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[26] These factors are: baseline networks of recruitment, baseline political attitudes (political trust, feelings of representation by current political parties, the perceived effort required for participation), baseline level of political socialisation, sense of identity, previous experience of political participation, and having 'more important' commitments.

Figure 5: Logic model of service learning and political participation
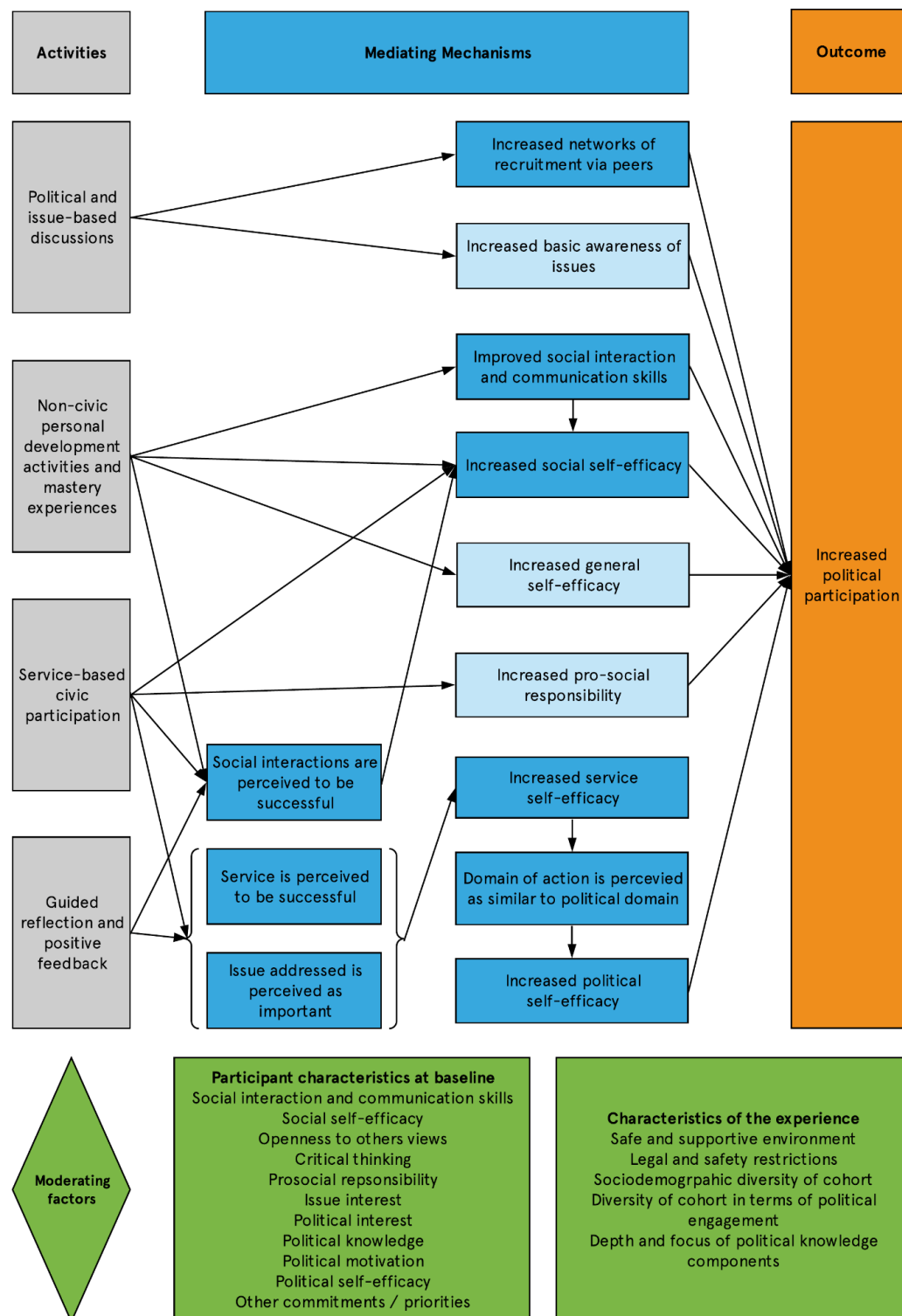
Two substantive results within these general findings may be particularly surprising to some. First, not everyone gets a positive effect. The average stats from Study 1 mask a lot of variation, with some young people even participating *less* in political activities after voluntary

service. For example, one graduate of NCS that we interviewed had been highly politically engaged before NCS - campaigning regularly for a political party. On NCS, he had a very positive experience of helping out at a homeless shelter, seeing immediate benefits for the people who used the service. This made him feel like he could make a real difference through volunteering. His political participation suddenly seemed less effective in this light, so he had decided to focus more of his time on non-political voluntary work in the future. In psychological jargon, gains in *service* self-efficacy can lead to losses in *political* self-efficacy and, therefore, a reduction in political participation for some young people.

Second, when young people do experience a positive effect, it seems to be often explained by an increase in their confidence in interacting with new people (their 'social self-efficacy'). This idea was identified in interviews, but also given further support through some exploratory quantitative analysis of the Study 1 dataset. It is a fairly new idea, but makes sense when we consider that young people are particularly sensitive to the social world; their sense of self-worth is more closely tied to the opinions of others and they fear social exclusion more than adults do.[27] The young people that we interviewed often thought that political participation (even emailing a politician) would lead to uncomfortable new social interactions. Doing NCS made them feel less afraid of these possibilities, so more likely to give it a go.
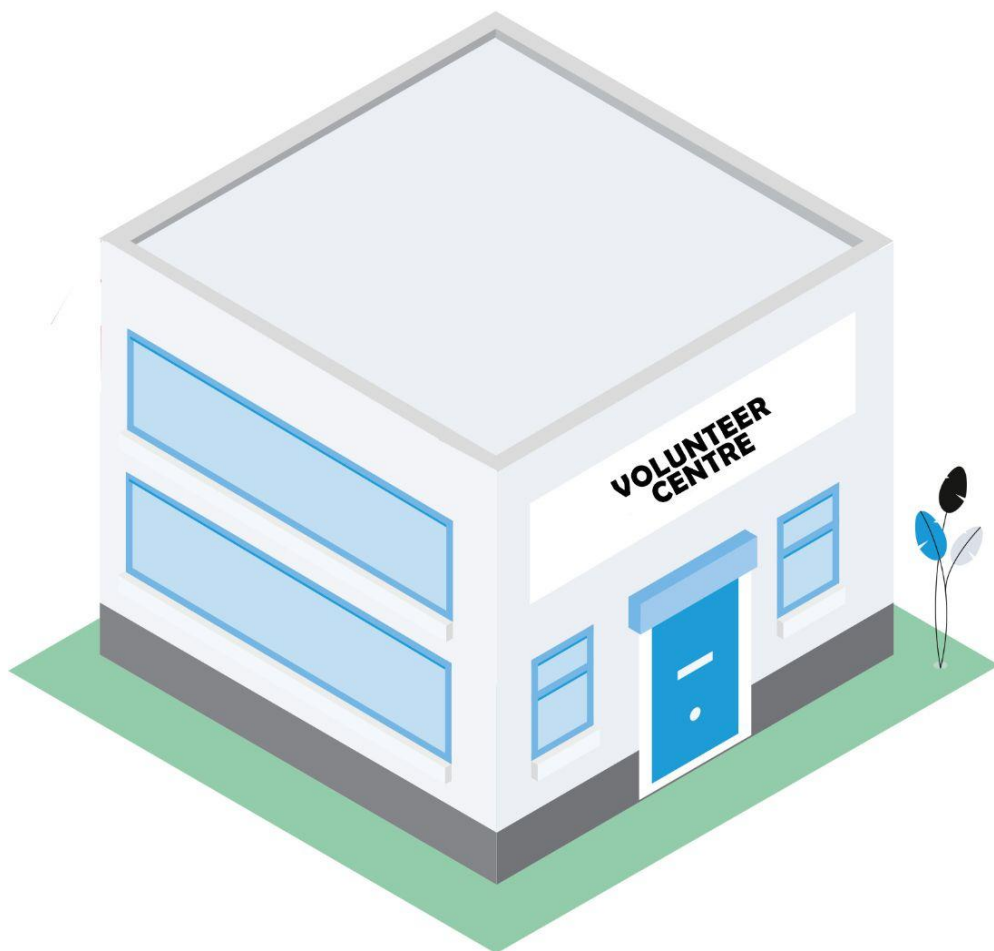
[27] Blakemore, S. J., 2019. *Inventing ourselves: The secret life of the teenage brain.* Black Swan.

Study 3: How can we maximise the effect post-service?

Study 3 aimed to further improve our understanding of service learning and political participation by looking at how best to increase political participation post-service. It did this by testing the relative effects of three messages that encourage graduates of NCS to participate politically via a 'write to the minister' letter writing competition. The literature suggests that, when it comes to civic participation, self-efficacy and identity are particularly important factors for young people who have taken part in service learning. We hypothesised that a message that primed recipients' sense of civic self-efficacy, and one that appealed to their sense of identity, would both be more effective than a plain invitation. We also predicted that the identity message would be more effective than the self-efficacy one.
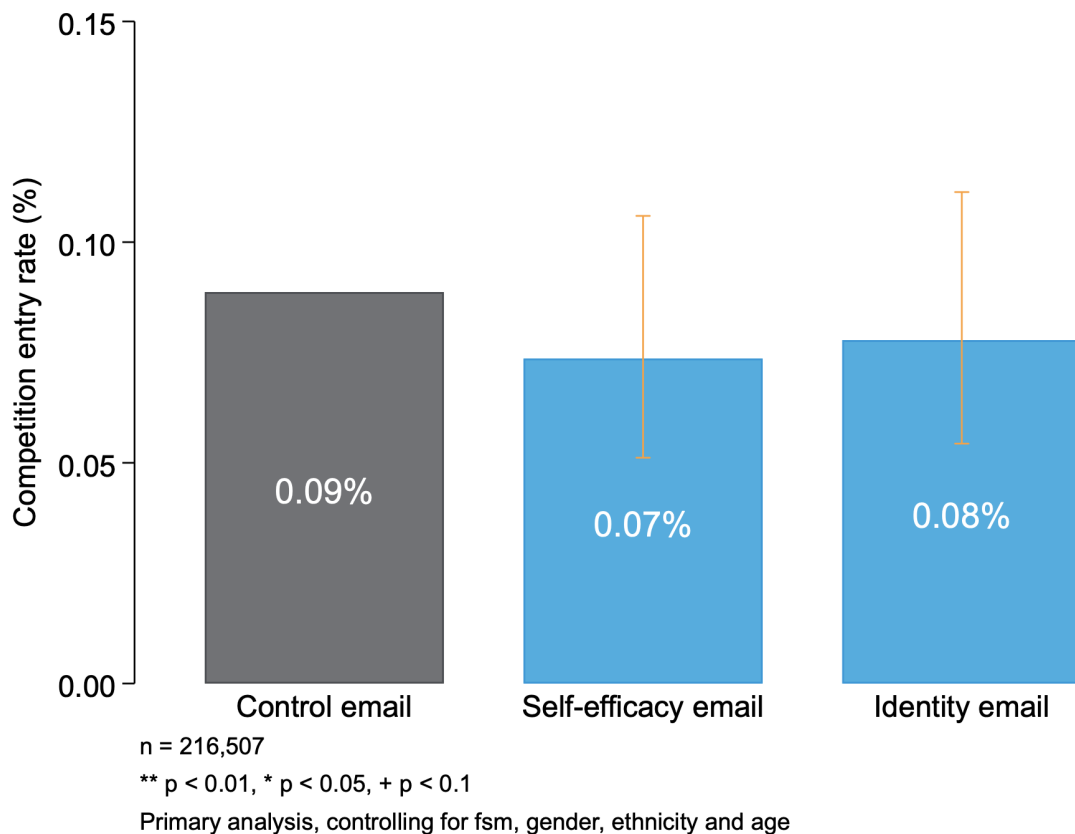
We expected that both theory-informed messages would be more effective for young people from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. This is because they are likely to have had fewer experiences of political socialisation, have less resources that support participation and have received fewer invitations to participate politically in general, as compared to their peers from higher SES backgrounds.

The results of the experiment show that the theory-informed messages performed no better than a plain invitation in encouraging participants to submit a letter (Figure 6). There is also some evidence to suggest that the plain invitation was slightly more effective in sparking initial interest in participation.

The effect of the self-efficacy email on the competition entry rate was estimated to be -19% (p = 0.316; 95% CI [-55%, 18%]). The effect of the identity email on the competition entry rate was estimated to be -13% (p = 0.474; 95% CI [-49%, 23%]). These effects correspond to differences of -0.015pp and -0.011pp respectively.

The effect of the self-efficacy email on the proportion of people who clicked to find out more was estimated to be -8.8% (p = 0.097; 95% CI [-19%, 1.6%]). The effect of the identity email on the proportion of people who clicked to find out more was estimated to be -9.1% (p = 0.087; 95% CI [-20%, 1.3%]). These effects correspond to differences of -0.086pp and -0.088pp respectively.

Figure 6: Effects of different messages on post-service political participation

n = 216,507

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05, + p < 0.1

Primary analysis, controlling for fsm, gender, ethnicity and age

The marginal effect of the self-efficacy email on the competition entry rate for participants from low SES backgrounds is estimated to be 12% (p = 0.804; 95% CI [-80%, 103%]. The same effect on the proportion of people who clicked to find out more is estimated to be -7.8% (p = 0.952; 95% CI [-26%, 24%]). The equivalent marginal effects for the identity email are estimated to be -6.1% (p = 0.897; 95% CI [-99%, 87%]) and 6.7% (p = 0.598; 95% CI [-18%, 32%]) respectively. These results suggest that there was no difference in effects for people from low-SES backgrounds.

The two theories tested in this study – relating to self-efficacy and identity – were chosen because they related to specific characteristics of the study population and context (as described in section 2.4 of the thesis), but they had not been tested in this way before. Two broad explanations for the null/negative results are discussed in the thesis: a failure in the theories and a failure in implementation. Both are plausible, and the lack of manipulation check – coupled with limited associated literature – make it difficult to be sure which combination of factors led to the results in this case.

However, the thesis speculates that at least four factors might be at play. First, encouraging a spillover from a sense of service-based or general civic self-efficacy to a sense of political self-efficacy is very hard to do (among this population at least), and did not occur here. Second, graduates of NCS appear not to have incorporated a strong sense of being an active citizen into their identities. Third, email appears not to be an effective tool for mobilising political participation in this group of young people. And fourth, the control condition – which also encouraged participation, by design – did have potentially favourable

characteristics; its simplicity and earlier mentioning of the competition. These plausible strengths of the control, when combined with the possible failures in theory, may have made it as (or slightly more) effective than the theory-informed interventions.

Conclusions

Prior to this research, it was not clear what effect service learning had on political participation, how any effect was produced, or how to maximise the chances that young people participate politically post-service.

We can now be fairly confident that:

- service learning (and NCS as an example) can have a large positive effect on political participation;
- this effect is partly produced by an increased sense of social self-efficacy; and
- social mixing and practical mastery experiences are crucial components of the intervention in achieving these effects.

Prior to this research, there seemed to be strong evidence in the literature that, if service learning did have a positive effect on political participation, a key part of the explanation would be down to intermediate effects on participants' self-efficacy. In particular, a spillover effect was hypothesised where gains in service-based self-efficacy would lead to gains in political self-efficacy which, in turn, would lead to gains in political participation.[28] The combined findings from the three studies in this research suggest that this spillover effect is very hard to create, and does not happen for the average participant.

The research has drawn two sets of results that are new to the academic literature, and useful for policy and practice. First, it has shown that service learning can have a substantial effect on young people's political participation. It can increase the chances that they will vote when they are old enough, and it can lead to greater participation in non-electoral influencing activities in the shorter term. These latter effects might be quite large. Effects of 5.4pp for petition-signing, 4.9pp for protest attendance are substantial when we consider that only 25% of 16- to 25-year-olds in England are estimated to take part in at least one of these activities in a year.[29] If the estimated average effects of NCS on non-electoral political participation were realised in the wider English population of 16-25-year-olds, it would make them the second-highest participating age group (as opposed to the second lowest as they are currently).

Second, we have developed a detailed explanation of how these effects are achieved. To create this new knowledge, we used a mixed-methods approach, and this mixing of methods has strengthened the inferences made. A large amount of new data has also been collected; some of which has now been placed in the public domain for other researchers to use. These

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[28] Condon, M. and Holleque, M., 2013. Entering Politics: General Self‑Efficacy and Voting Behavior Among Young People. Political Psychology, 34(2), pp.168.; Reinders, H. and Youniss, J., 2006. School-based required community service and civic development in adolescents. Applied Developmental Science, 10(1), pp.2-12.
[29] Cabinet Office, 2016. Community Life Survey 2015 to 2016: data. Available online: https://bit.ly/38VXZQC. Last accessed: 27 February 2017.

are not only important contributions to the literature, but also have crucial significance to policy makers and practitioners who want to increase youth political participation.

Knowing that these positive effects can be induced, and understanding how they are created, is important. Young people are underrepresented in politics, and they may suffer materially because of this. A lot of resources have been invested in service learning to help address this issue but, until now, we did not know whether it could work. Now that we know that it can, there is a strong argument for more resources to be put in, so that more young people have the chance to benefit, and so that we can assess whether population-level effects can be achieved.

After the PhD viva, the thesis findings were disseminated to policymakers and practitioners in two ways. First, a series of workshops were held to present the results and to support NCS Trust staff to interrogate them. These workshops were used to co-develop a set of recommendations for NCS Trust to take forward. Second, this summary report has now been written so that findings may be shared with a broader policy and practitioner audience.

The full thesis is available via the UCL website.

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The full bibliography for this research can be found in the main PhD thesis here.