

Supportive but suspicious: Ideology, institutional trust, electoral participation and gender shape public opinion on citizenship education in the UK

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Abstract

Citizenship Education (CE) has been found to be an effective tool in preparing young people to participate actively in a democracy. However, recent years have seen a decline in both the quality and provision of CE, coupled with a notable absence of public input on the subject. This paper provides an initial exploration of the British public's views on citizenship education through an exploratory survey conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1003 individuals. The survey examined public perceptions of the current quality of CE, general support for the subject, and specific educational aims. Our findings indicate that while CE is generally regarded as important, its quality is perceived as lacking. Respondents highlighted critical thinking skills, as well as financial and digital literacy as the most crucial components of CE, whereas communitarian aspects of citizenship were deemed less significant. Additionally, the study found that ideology, demographic factors, and political attitudes significantly influence public views on CE. The paper concludes with a discussion of policy and research implications, emphasising the need to incorporate public perceptions in the design of citizenship education and suggesting ways that CE can be developed to support democratic engagement.

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KEYWORDS

citizenship education, democratic engagement, political literacy, public opinion

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper addresses the British public's perceptions of Citizenship Education, highlighting concerns about its declining quality and the lack of public input into its development and provision.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper reveals that, although Citizenship Education is broadly supported, the public perceives its quality as insufficient. Critical thinking, financial and digital literacy are seen as key priorities, while communitarian aspects are considered less important. Public views on Citizenship Education are significantly shaped by ideology, political attitudes and demographics.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are less likely to engage with elections than older individuals, with youth turnout in the UK particularly low compared with other comparable European countries (Mashford, 2020). In the 2024 general election it is estimated that voter turnout among 18–24-year olds was between 37 and 45%, compared with 80% among those over 65 years (Ispos, 2024; More in Common, 2024). Scholars and policy-makers alike debate the causes of this youth disengagement from formal politics (Sloam, 2013). While popular belief tends to blame a general apathy and indifference towards politics (Henn et al., 2005), research generally finds dissatisfaction with democratic processes (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Foa et al., 2020), frustration with the political system (Harrison, 2020; Henn & Foard, 2012) as well as mistrust of and feelings of marginalisation by political institutions (Berthin, 2023) to be the cause of diminished interest in formal politics among young people.

Frequently, concerns around how to tackle low youth political engagement become directed at the educational system, and the potential role that citizenship education (CE) can play to address these democratic deficits (Pontes et al., 2019). *Citizenship education*—also interchangeably referred to as *political*, *civic* or *democratic education*—‘develops knowledge, skills and understanding that pupils need to play a full part in democratic society, as active and informed citizens’ (Association for Citizenship Teaching, n.d.). It was introduced in 2002 as a statutory subject on the English National Curriculum, and it has been variably implemented across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (see Jerome et al., 2022 for a review across UK nations).

Education has been found to have mixed effects in terms of equalising political engagement. While Janmaat et al. (2022) have found a variety of educational aspects to enhance the social gap in political engagement, there have been plenty of studies focussing on CE more specifically which find that, when adequately supported, CE can reduce social

disparities in political engagement (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Jerome et al., 2024; Neundorf et al., 2016; Sloam et al., 2021; Weinberg, 2021).

According to Tam (2023), the delivery of CE across the UK is inadequate, often relegated to the margins of the secondary education curriculum, with substantial disparities in accessibility and quality persisting. Reforms to the curriculum often depend on both political and public support. Understanding public opinion is important, as public opinion can significantly influence public policy (Burstein, 2003), but this to some extent depends on how salient the issue itself is (i.e. Busemeyer et al., 2020). Yet within the field of educational studies, there is little research that examines the general public's attitudes towards citizenship education in the UK, nor how salient it is. This paper aims to address the former gap by drawing on a representative sample of British nationals ($N=1003$) to explore their support for citizenship education, what they think about its current provision and their views on how it should be approached.

In the next section, we provide a brief overview of CE in the UK and highlight the importance of including public perspectives, before describing our methods and discussing our findings and their implications in the sections that follow.

Citizenship education across the four nations: Approaches and aims

Citizenship education across the UK features distinct curricula tailored to each nation's educational needs and political, cultural and historical context (Muff & Donnelly, 2022). In England, CE became a statutory subject in 2002, following the influential 'Crick Report', which emphasised a communitarian–republican approach to foster political literacy, community involvement and moral responsibility (Burton et al., 2015; Kisby, 2009; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). Reforms in 2008 and 2014 reinforced its compulsory nature, and integrated so-called 'Fundamental British Values' into CE provision, in order to promote a broad civic identity among young citizens. However, these reforms also repositioned CE as a means to counter radicalisation and terrorism, and a 2010 reform enabled schools to convert into academies, granting them more autonomy in customising their curricula. These controversial reforms have significantly altered the scope and standing of CE within the English educational framework (Department for Education, 2010; Starkey, 2018). Unlike in England, Scotland does not enforce a statutory curriculum but uses an advisory framework, 'A Curriculum for Excellence' (2004, updated 2019). Scottish CE focuses on informed decision-making and responsible actions within communities, valuing local input and autonomy (Jerome et al., 2022). In Northern Ireland, Local and Global Citizenship was introduced as a statutory part of the Learning for Life and Work post-primary curriculum in 2007. It addresses themes of inclusion and social responsibility, aiming to bridge communal divides and promote a shared sense of citizenship, reflecting the region's post-conflict context (Mc Auley, 2022). A new Curriculum for Wales was introduced in 2022, integrating citizenship within Personal and Social Education rather than as a separate subject. It focuses on community understanding and a distinct Welsh identity, stressing diversity and social justice to foster a sense of belonging and community involvement.

Despite the variations in national curricula, the aim of CE is generally to produce informed, responsible citizens. It is broadly understood as a way to connect young people to the political system, fostering their understanding of democracy, government, rights and responsibilities (Kisby & Sloam, 2012). However, CE's specific purposes and implementation approaches have been subjects of extensive debate. Originally, the Crick Report advocated for teaching an understanding of democratic institutions, community involvement, global issues and economic understanding (Burton et al., 2015). Recently, however, CE has shifted its focus from fostering 'active' citizens to producing 'good' citizens, prioritising

personal and social responsibility, such as volunteering and charitable giving, over political literacy. In England, this trend culminated in the introduction of the controversial Prevent strategy, which tasks educators with delivering a counter-extremism agenda and promoting Fundamental British Values (Department for Education, 2014), reflecting the broader move towards a depoliticised 'character education' (Kisby, 2017; Power et al., 2021; Weinberg & Flinders, 2018). This is also illustrated in extra-curricular initiatives like the National Citizen Service (NCS), introduced by the then Prime Minister David Cameron in 2009, which runs local community programmes and away-from-home camps for young people, with the aim to 'inspire generations of citizens through shared experiences that develop character and bridge social divides' (National Citizen Service, 2024).

However, there is ongoing debate about whether increased community participation translates into greater political engagement (Pontes et al., 2019). Critics argue that community involvement may build social trust, but it does not necessarily enhance democratic engagement or trust in political institutions (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001). Moreover, ongoing disillusionment with the political system among the youth (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Foa et al., 2020) highlights a significant challenge for CE: many young people remain sceptical of political institutions (Berthin, 2023) and view formal politics as ineffective and unresponsive (Pontes et al., 2019). Thus, while traditional forms of political activity like voting and volunteering remain central to citizenship education, younger citizens increasingly turn to non-conventional participation, such as protests, social media engagement and digital activism (García-Albacete, 2014; Kim & Hoewe, 2023). There is therefore a growing call to revisit CE provision so that it speaks to young people's interests and experiences, including forms of digital political engagement (Mirra et al., 2022; Peart et al., 2023).

Citizenship education in practice: Implementation and impact

The research on citizenship education—overwhelmingly conducted in the UK and US—has shown that it enhances political understanding and engagement, linking it to increased and durable political and civic participation in adulthood, increased political interest and likelihood to vote at 18 (Campbell, 2019; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Keating et al., 2011; Keating & Janmaat, 2016; Whiteley, 2014). Young people who receive CE show a better understanding of local and national issues and are more likely to engage in civic activism (Tonge et al., 2012). This impact has been found to be long-lasting, with skills and values formed in school during adolescence shaping political habits and identities well into adulthood (Weinberg & Flinders, 2018). Citizenship education, particularly in mid to late adolescence, may help to reduce inequalities in political participation associated with socioeconomic status (Hoskins et al., 2017), gender and ethnicity. This positive outcome is, however, contingent upon the quality of educational provision, which needs to be focussed on encouraging equal participation (Janmaat et al., 2022; Weinberg, 2022). As Weinberg (2021) notes: 'Citizenship and democratic education in schools remains a Cinderella story: it achieves positive impacts on young people where it is taught, but provision is scant' (p. 14). Over two decades since the introduction of CE in the UK, concerns about young people's political literacy are as high as ever. Citizenship education remains a peripheral feature of secondary education, with reductions in both funding for training as well as research on its provision (Tam, 2023). The House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018) remarked that '[t]he Government has allowed citizenship education in England to degrade to a parlous state' (para. 162).

Recent studies highlight significant gaps in the accessibility and quality of citizenship education in England: a 2022 Department for Education report found that only 24% of secondary students received weekly citizenship lessons, and another quarter had never received any

at all. Furthermore, just 16% of schools employed a trained citizenship education teacher, highlighting a severe shortage of qualified instructors (Department for Education, 2022). This has ramifications for the teaching of citizenship education as teachers feel fundamentally unprepared (Sant et al., 2024). Consequently, this divergence in educational provision can in turn have the opposite effect to that intended, exacerbating socioeconomic, gender and racial inequalities in political engagement (i.e. Body et al., 2024; Janmaat et al., 2022). A comparative study across six European countries highlighted England's particular ineffectiveness in promoting political literacy among working-class students, who report receiving significantly less citizenship education than their middle-class counterparts (Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). England's educational system is also distinctly more fragmented and privatised compared with those of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Brighouse, 2017). Additionally, the availability of longitudinal and comparative research on citizenship education has been in decline since 2007, marked by the conclusion of the DfE commissioned Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study, a survey aimed at assessing and monitoring CE in the UK, as well as England's exit from the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study, leading to an increasing gap in the evidence base on democratic education (Weinberg, 2021).

Classrooms are dynamic social and political spaces where teachers' backgrounds and beliefs can influence how political content is presented, despite laws like the Education Act 1996 mandating impartiality and a balanced discussion of political views (Muff & Donnelly, 2022). While there is limited research on the attitudes of the general public towards citizenship education, a recent report found that 39% of parents think that teachers impose their political views onto their children—this perception being notably stronger among parents with strong political views themselves (Weinberg, 2021). Despite these concerns around political bias, parents in the same study were generally found to be quite supportive of CE. This raises an interesting question: is this support unique to parents or is it reflective of the general public at large? To answer this question, we draw on survey data to examine public levels and conditions of support, contributing additional comprehensive and representative data to this field and enhancing the overall understanding of CE perceptions. Notably, the inclusion of the general public in CE research has been particularly limited, so far as that, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no significant studies conducted in the UK to date.

The present research

Discussions over the aims of citizenship education tend to occur mostly among academics and politicians (Owen, 2013). However, to uphold the legitimacy of the democratic process, it is essential to consider the public's perspectives on civic education goals alongside those of the state and educational experts when developing curricula, as a robust participatory democracy characterised by equal political engagement is fundamental to achieving a genuinely inclusive society (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021). Furthermore, particularly in the context of England's heavily privatised educational system, there is a pressing need to shift focus from market-driven priorities to more public-centred concerns. Pushing to reclaim the 'public' in public education, Tam (2023) calls for 'an ethos that is grounded in learning from all our "others", not just the privileged few who think they know best' (p. 28). Additionally, any CE reforms on a political level must consider and earn public support to ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness.

Research on public views towards CE is notably sparse. In the US, Lautzenheiser et al. (2011) highlighted a significant pessimism about the quality of CE. They noted that the public places little emphasis on civic behaviours in favour of non-political skills such as good work habits, which are valued for professional and personal development, and may also be preferred owing to concerns about potential political bias in education. Owen (2013) found

that while the American public generally supports civic education, traditional objectives like training responsible citizens and voters are favoured over integrating twenty-first-century technology and media into political engagement. Ideology emerged as a stronger predictor of civic education goals than demographic indicators, with liberals and conservatives diverging primarily on goals perceived to be susceptible to political bias.

In contemporary UK, scholarly assessments by Mirra et al. (2022) and Peart et al. (2023) reveal that the CE curriculum continues to prioritise traditional forms of political participation, with digital citizenship notably underrepresented. This echoes the reluctance observed in the US regarding digital skills in civic education. Our study extends this dialogue by exploring current British public opinion on citizenship education, particularly in terms of digital citizenship and how various ideological positions may influence these views.

Our study aims to extend this dialogue by exploring current British public opinion on CE, focusing on who supports CE and the specific types of CE they endorse, including digital citizenship. Additionally, we will investigate how various ideological positions may influence support for CE, particularly examining areas where political bias may be perceived to impact specific CE goals.

METHODS

Drawing on a nationally representative sample ($N=1003$) of the British general public, we aimed to understand (i) how the British public perceive current CE provision, (ii) how they think it should *ideally* be taught and (iii) how those views are connected to different sociodemographic factors and ideological attitudes.

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited via Prolific.co, a crowd-sourcing platform, with eligibility restricted to UK residents over 18 years. A nationally representative sample of 1030 participants was obtained in February 2024. They were invited to complete a 10-min survey on citizenship education, receiving £1.50 as compensation, equivalent to £9 per hour.

After the exclusion of 27 participants from analysis owing to various technical reasons, the final sample for the main analysis consisted of 1003 adults (51% female) between 18 and 80 years old (mean, $M=46$, standard deviation, $SD=15.32$). A total of 584 (58%) were parents. Subjective socioeconomic status was approximately normally distributed ($M=5.52$, $SD=1.67$ [1–10]). Education levels varied—118 people (11.76%) reported having gone to secondary school up to the age of 16, 277 (27.62%) said that they had completed further education, such as A-levels, 423 (42.17%) held a bachelor's degree and 185 (18.45%) had pursued postgraduate studies. In terms of voting behaviour, most participants ($N=820$, 81.75%) indicated that they had voted in the last election, 117 (11.67%) said that they had chosen not to and 66 (6.58%) said that they had been unable to. A total of 840 (83.74%) were from England, with representationally smaller numbers from Scotland ($N=94$, 8.97%), Wales ($N=48$, 4.79%) and Northern Ireland ($N=21$, 2.09%).

Participants who accepted the invitation on Prolific were redirected to Qualtrics for the survey. They were informed about the study's goals, data privacy and processing before providing consent. The survey was divided into five sections: Perceived quality of current citizenship education; Ideal citizenship education; Perceptions of political engagement of young people; Sociopsychological measures; and Demographic measures. For details and an overview of the survey, see Hecht, Obradović and Andreouli (2024).

The study was approved by The Open University's ethical committee in January 2024, reference number 2024-0060-2.

Measures

The survey included 63 closed questions and one open-ended question. Responses to all closed questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), unless noted otherwise.

Parent

Participants were asked whether they are a parent, and if so, how old their oldest child is.

Perceived citizenship education

This measure (Adapted from Weinberg, 2021) assessed how participants perceive the current state of citizenship education in schools using four statements, namely, 'The state places importance on young people's citizenship education', 'Children receive a rich citizenship education at school', 'Citizenship education is currently a national priority for education' and 'The national curriculum sufficiently prepares young people to be active citizens'. Statements were randomised to avoid order bias. The index was constructed by first conducting a factor analysis to confirm a single underlying factor among the four statements. This involved tests for suitability, including a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test, both supporting factorability. The index is based on the average of these four items, following confirmation of their internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Perceived teachers' ideology measured agreement to the statement 'Teachers political views do not impact how they teach citizenship education'. We also included a measure from Weinberg (2021) asking participants whether they believe too many teachers are right-wing/left-wing, respectively ('Disagree', 'Not sure', 'Agree').

Ideal citizenship education

This measure was designed to capture participants' views on what citizenship education should ideally be like. Items were compiled from the four nations' citizenship education curricula.

General support for citizenship education

Firstly, respondents were asked: 'Do you think that all students should be required to undertake citizenship education in school?' ('Yes', 'No', 'Not sure').

Support of particular goals

Participants were asked to rate the importance of different goals of citizenship education on a five-point scale ranging from *Not at all important* (1) to *Extremely important* (5). These goals were organised into three categories: knowledge, skills and values. Items within each block were randomised:

- Thirteen statements pertaining to *knowledge*, such as 'Learning about how the parliament and other state institutions work', 'Learning about laws and the justice system' and 'Learning about social rights (e.g. right to welfare)'.
- Seven statements pertaining to *skills*, such as 'Learning how to participate as a citizen through voting in elections', 'Learning critical thinking skills (e.g. being able to evaluate

- different forms of information about public affairs)' and 'Learning how to participate as citizens in non-conventional ways (e.g. road closures, striking or protests)'.
 • Five statements pertaining to *values*, such as 'Encouraging respect for free speech', 'Encouraging commitment to the sustainability of the planet' and 'Encouraging respect for diversity in all its forms (e.g. cultural, religious, gender, ability)'.

Perceived party bias

This was measured using the item 'Citizenship education is biased by the political parties in power'.

Political ideology

This was measured through a self-placement item on the left–right scale: 'Many people think of political attitudes being on the 'left' or 'right'. When you think of your own political attitudes in general terms, where would you describe your political attitudes and beliefs?' Alternatives range from 1 (*Left*) to 9 (*Right*), with an intermediate label at 5 (*Neither left nor right*).

Voting behaviour

Participants were asked whether they voted in the last election. The three options included: 'Yes'; 'No, I did not want to vote'; and 'No, I was not able to vote'.

Sociodemographics

Other measures included gender, age, national location (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland), national identity and subjective socioeconomic status. Educational attainment was measured in four categories (High school until age 16, Further education, Undergraduate studies, Postgraduate studies) but then re-grouped into three categories (High school, Further education, University education) and weights were applied to adjust the sample to a nationally representative one (Department for Education, 2023).

Additional exploratory measures were included such as perceptions of young people's political engagement, understanding of citizenship and political interest and miscellaneous views on CE. See OSF for the full survey.

RESULTS

First, we examined the perceived quality of current CE in the UK. Descriptive analysis showed that the average rating for the quality of CE fell just below the mid-point of the scale ($M=2.63$, $SD=0.81$). A linear regression analysis revealed that, controlling for age, socioeconomic status, education level and parental status, the perceived quality of CE increased slightly among more right-leaning individuals ($b=0.06$, $p<0.001$) and among those who placed greater trust in teachers' neutrality ($b=0.25$, $p<0.001$).

There were no significant differences between parents and non-parents in any of our analyses, so below we report combined results from both groups.

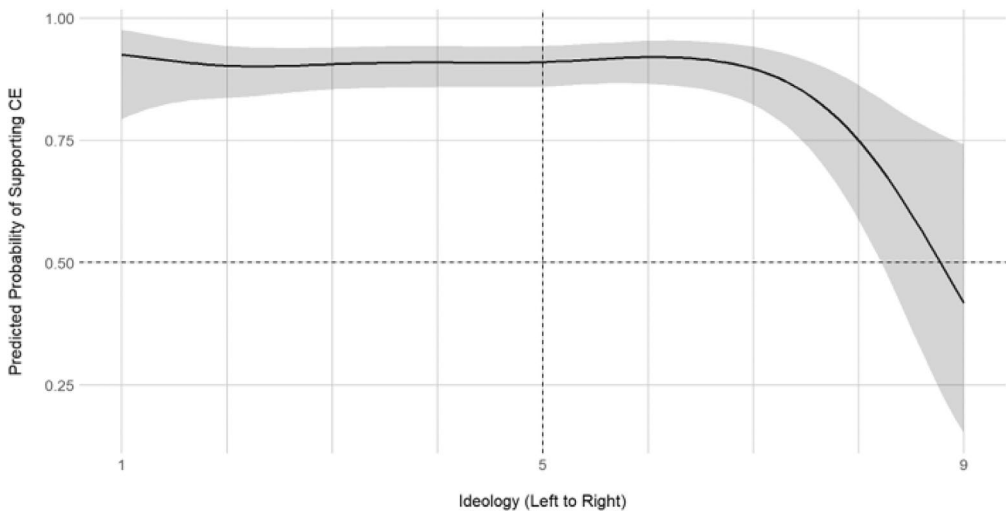
Who supports citizenship education?

Overall, there was widespread support among the British public for mandatory citizenship education, with 77.47% of participants responding 'Yes' to the question 'Do you think that all students should be required to undertake citizenship education in school?', while 14.46% were unsure, and only 8.08% were against it. For further analyses, the 'Not sure' responses were excluded, focusing on a binary dependent variable. A GAM¹ was employed to explore the influence of various sociopolitical and demographic factors on support for CE.

The analysis identified a significant, curvilinear relationship between political ideology and the likelihood of supporting CE (effective degrees of freedom (edf)=5.1, $p < 0.004$; see Figure 1). This relationship indicates that notably lower support for CE is primarily observed among individuals with more extreme right-wing ideologies, with only those at the farthest end of the spectrum being more likely to oppose CE than support it. Additionally, intentional non-voters were about three times less likely to support CE ($b = -1.19$, $e^b \approx 0.3$, $p = 0.001$), compared with those who did vote, and the more someone perceived the political parties to bias the curriculum, the less supportive they were of CE ($b = -0.41$, $e^b = 0.66$, $p < 0.002$).

How are teachers and their political ideology perceived?

Next, we examined what might influence support for CE. Concerns about an ideological imbalance in terms of teachers in school found expression on both sides of the ideological spectrum. More right-leaning participants were more likely to agree to a left-wing bias



Note. Effect of political ideology on the likelihood of supporting mandatory citizenship education. The solid line shows the fitted values, with the grey shading representing the 95% confidence interval. Predicted probabilities are derived from a GAM, with log odds converted to probabilities for eased interpretation. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates where the likelihood of opposing CE surpasses the likelihood of supporting it.

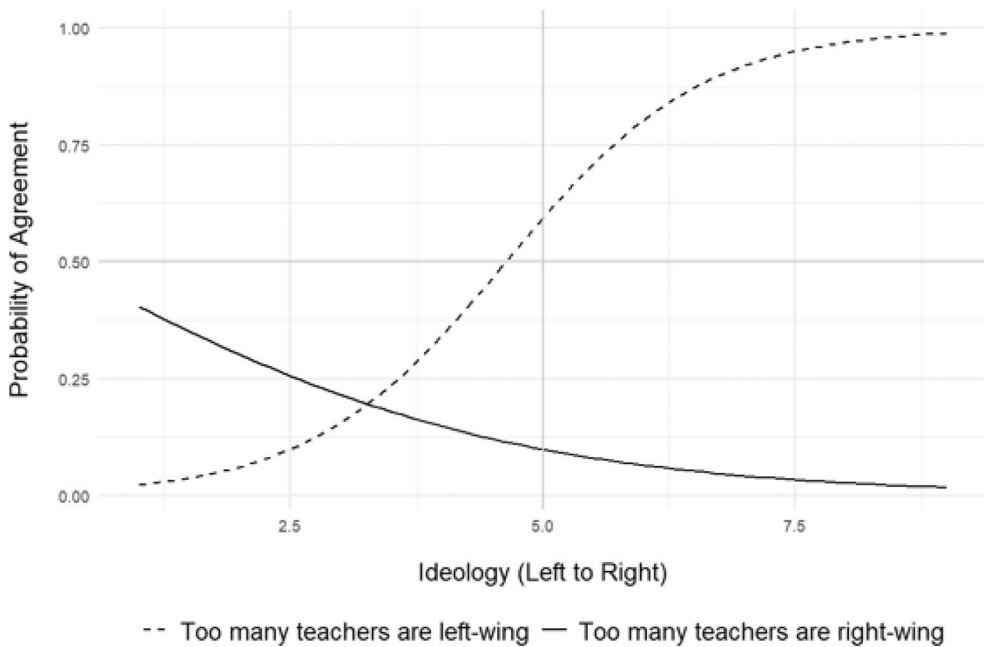
FIGURE 1 Effect of ideology on the predicted probability of supporting citizenship education (CE). Effect of political ideology on the likelihood of supporting mandatory citizenship education. The solid line shows the fitted values, with the grey shading representing the 95% confidence interval. Predicted probabilities are derived from a GAM, with log odds converted to probabilities for eased interpretation. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates where the likelihood of opposing CE surpasses the likelihood of supporting it.

among teachers ($b = 1.03$, $e^b \approx 2.8$, $\chi^2 [1] = 198.66$, $p < 0.001$), and left-leaning participants, albeit to a lesser extent, were more likely to perceive a right-wing bias ($b = -0.45$, $e^b \approx 0.64$, $\chi^2 [1] = 31.84$, $p < 0.001$). These observations corroborate previous research with parents (Weinberg, 2021), which notes a ‘scissors effect’, illustrated in Figure 2.

However, even if teachers might be seen to be more or less ideologically inclined, the public could still consider them as ideologically impartial in terms of how they teach. Here too we find that participant’s ideology influences their perceptions of teachers. The analysis revealed significant effects ($\text{edf} = 2.95$, $p < 0.001$), as illustrated in Figure 3, showing a transition across the zero-effect threshold at the centre of the ideological spectrum, where left-wing individuals perceive teachers as more impartial, whereas right-wing individuals tend to view them as more biased.

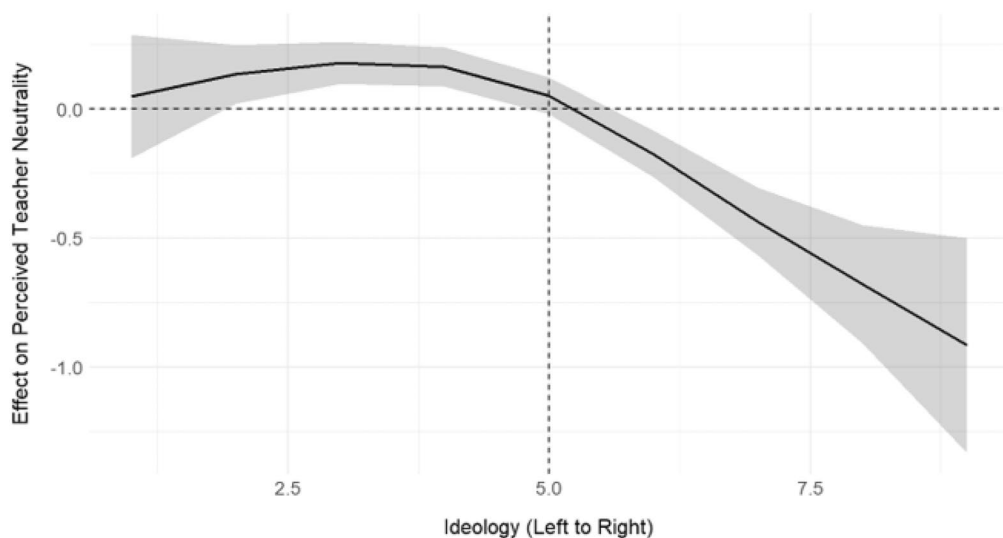
What kind of CE does the public endorse?

We conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis across the 25 CE goal statements to examine what kind of citizenship education the public thinks is needed. Table 1 shows the loadings of all items. We constructed factors based on the highest loadings of each variable, guiding the categorisation into these five distinct dimensions of CE:



Note. Predicted probability of agreeing to the statement ‘Too many teachers are left-wing/right-wing’, respectively, as a function of ideology. Probabilities are derived from a logistic regression model, illustrating how perceptions of teacher bias vary with ideology.

FIGURE 2 Perceived teacher ideology. Predicted probability of agreeing to the statement ‘Too many teachers are left-wing/right-wing’, respectively, as a function of ideology. Probabilities are derived from a logistic regression model, illustrating how perceptions of teacher bias vary with ideology.



Note. Non-linear relationship between political ideology and perceived teacher neutrality, modelled using a GAM. The solid line shows the fitted values with grey shading representing the 95% confidence interval.

FIGURE 3 Effect of ideology on perception of teachers as unbiased. Non-linear relationship between political ideology and perceived teacher neutrality, modelled using a generalised additive model. The solid line shows the fitted values with grey shading representing the 95% confidence interval.

1. Political Literacy ($\alpha=0.90$);
2. Civic Engagement ($\alpha=0.81$);
3. Environmental Citizenship ($\alpha=0.900$);
4. Rights-based Citizenship ($\alpha=0.88$); and
5. Critical Skills ($\alpha=0.55$).

The Critical Skills factor only contained two items, when ideally it should be three or more (Watkins, 2018). It was however retained owing to its conceptual importance.

An ANOVA followed by Tukey's multiple comparisons highlighted that support for Critical Skills was significantly higher (mean difference = 0.16 (Political Literacy), 0.21 (Rights-based Citizenship), 0.15 (Environmental Citizenship); $p < 0.001$ for all) and for Civic Engagement significantly lower (mean difference = -0.62 (Political Literacy), -0.57 (Rights-based Citizenship), -0.63 (Environmental Citizenship); $p < 0.001$ for all) than the other themes, with no significant differences observed for the remaining three themes (see Figure 4).

To explore demographic influences on support for the different dimensions of CE, GAMs were initially applied to each factor. These models included a spline function for ideology to assess potential non-linear effects, alongside control variables age, gender, voting behaviour, parenthood status, socioeconomic status and education (weighted). Finding that the effects of ideology were near-linear across all factors, we subsequently employed linear models for clearer interpretation, maintaining the same set of control variables.

Political literacy focused citizenship education was more supported by participants who were *older* ($b=0.007$, $p < 0.001$), more *left-leaning* ($b=-0.09$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived a higher *party bias* ($b=0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Individuals holding university degrees, or having received further *education* (i.e. A-levels), were more supportive than those with a secondary education (up to age 16) ($b=0.22$, $p < 0.001$ and $b=0.13$, $p=0.02$, for University or Further

TABLE 1 Results from the factor analysis of the individual citizenship education aims.

Item	Political literacy	Rights-based citizenship	Environmental citizenship	Civic engagement	Critical skills
Learning about how the parliament and other state institutions work	0.75	0.06	0.08	0.16	0.11
Learning about how voting and elections work	0.78	0.10	0.09	0.06	0.23
Learning about laws and the justice system	0.48	0.18	0.05	0.17	0.17
Learning about the role and function of politicians in public affairs	0.71	0.10	0.11	0.28	0.05
Learning about participating as global citizens by understanding one's nation's role in the world	0.44	0.27	0.30	0.32	0.11
Learning about civil rights (e.g. freedom of speech)	0.46	0.41	0.12	0.25	0.20
Learning about political rights (e.g. right to vote)	0.72	0.28	0.17	0.14	0.10
Learning how to participate as a citizen through voting in elections	0.63	0.08	0.16	0.21	0.41
Encouraging respect for free and fair elections	0.56	0.08	0.15	0.17	0.55
Learning about human rights and international law	0.36	0.54	0.29	0.31	0.08
Learning about identity-based rights (e.g. respecting diverse cultural traditions)	0.18	0.77	0.3	0.21	0.14
Learning about social rights (e.g. right to welfare).	0.34	0.56	0.22	0.32	0.08
Encouraging respect for diversity in all its forms (e.g. cultural, religious, gender, ability)	0.04	0.70	0.36	0.14	0.30
Encouraging respect for social justice	0.20	0.46	0.31	0.27	0.38
Learning about environmental issues (e.g. climate change, sustainability)	0.23	0.31	0.81	0.14	0.020
Encouraging commitment to the sustainability of the planet	0.13	0.27	0.82	0.16	0.19
Learning about the role of citizens in protecting and conserving the environment	0.14	0.23	0.70	0.33	0.20

TABLE 1 (Continued)

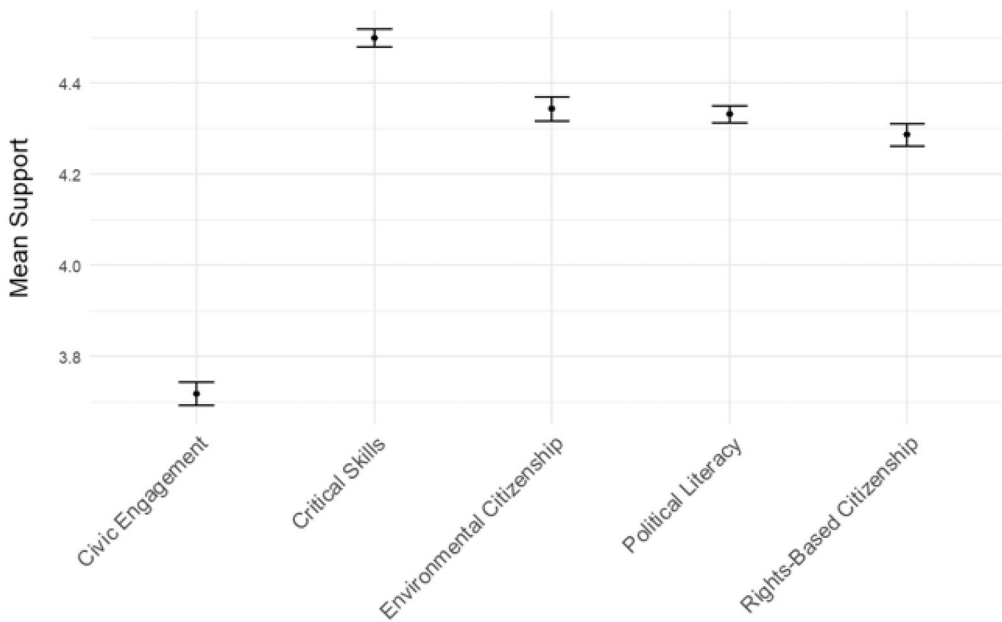
Item	Political literacy	Rights-based citizenship	Environmental citizenship	Civic engagement	Critical skills
Learning about other ways of citizen participation like contacting officials or signing petitions	0.31	0.12	0.18	0.70	0.24
Learning about the role of civil society organisations (e.g. NGO, community groups) in society	0.44	0.32	0.20	0.46	0.05
Learning how to participate as citizens in non-conventional ways (e.g. road closures, striking or protests)	0.18	0.29	0.15	0.60	0.06
Learning how to participate as citizens through community engagement (e.g. volunteering)	0.16	0.23	0.27	0.58	0.29
Learning critical thinking skills (e.g. being able to evaluate different forms of information about public affairs)	0.38	0.12	0.14	0.23	0.40
Encouraging respect for free speech	0.31	0.27	0.03	0.21	0.49
Learning about personal financial responsibility and public finance.	0.36	0.14	0.12	0.03	0.15
Learning skills about digital and media literacy (e.g. understanding and recognising misinformation)	0.25	0.20	0.25	0.07	0.39
Proportional variance	0.19	0.12	0.11	0.10	0.07
Cumulative variance	0.19	0.31	0.42	0.51	0.58

Note. The extraction method was maximum-likelihood factor analysis with orthogonal varimax (Kaiser ON). Factors were defined based on the highest loadings of variables. Notably, items 'Learning about personal financial responsibility and public finance' (mean, $M=4.7$, standard deviation, $SD=00.59$, range 1–5) and 'Learning skills about digital and media literacy' ($M=4.59$, $SD=00.66$, range 1–5) scored the highest support overall but did not reach a loading of 0.4 on any factor and were therefore removed from further analysis. The bold indicates which factor the item is loading on.

education, respectively). The higher individuals perceived their socioeconomic status to be, the less they supported CE ($b=0.03$, $p=0.02$).

A rights-based approach to citizenship education was more supported among more *left-leaning* individuals ($b=-0.20$, $p<0.001$) and *women* ($b=0.25$, $p<0.001$). A *university education* was associated with an increase in support ($b=0.12$, $p=0.04$) compared with secondary school until age 16, and those *unable to vote* in the last election displayed a higher likelihood of support ($b=0.21$, $p=0.03$) than those who had voted.

In the Environmental Citizenship dimension, support was significantly higher among *women* ($b=0.18$, $p<0.001$) and lower among those with more right-leaning *ideologies* ($b=-0.19$, $p<0.001$). Individuals higher in subjective socioeconomic status were slightly less supportive ($b=-0.05$, $p<0.002$), and those unable, as well as unwilling, to vote were



Note. Mean support for each citizenship education dimension, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

FIGURE 4 Support for citizenship education dimensions. Mean support for each citizenship education dimension, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

more supportive than those who had voted in the last election ($b=0.25$, $p=0.03$ and $b=0.18$, $p=0.03$, respectively).

Civic engagement focussed citizenship saw similar patterns to right-based citizenship, where *women* ($b=0.14$, $p=0.003$), more *left-leaning* individuals ($b=-0.15$, $p<0.001$), those perceiving more *party bias* ($b=0.14$, $p<0.001$), and those *unable to vote* ($b=0.35$, $p=0.001$) tended to be more supportive. Holding a university degree, compared with secondary school (until age 16) correlated with more support too ($b=0.25$, $p<0.001$).

Lastly, the Critical Skills dimension showed that *older* individuals ($b=0.005$, $p<0.001$) and those with higher *education* levels ($b=0.17$, $p=0.003$ and $b=0.27$, $p<0.001$ for Further education [i.e. A-levels] and University, compared with Secondary School until age 16, respectively) were more supportive. Higher *perceived party bias* was also linked to greater support ($b=0.09$, $p<0.001$), and a more conservative *ideology* correlated with less support ($b=-0.1$, $p<0.001$).

DISCUSSION

The present paper set out to examine how the British public perceive current CE provision across the UK, how they think it should *ideally* be taught, and how those views are connected to different sociodemographic factors and ideological attitudes. Our results show that while the general public is not very positive about the delivery of CE in the UK, their support for it in principle is quite high, indicating that the general public does perceive citizenship education to be potentially valuable and important. Some segments of the public were found to be more positive towards CE than others, with women showing more support for CE

than men and voters showing more support than non-voters. Education was found to be a very significant predictor, with more educated participants generally having more positive attitudes. Political ideology and ideological concerns more broadly seem to shape support for CE, with individuals towards the far right end of the political spectrum showing higher levels of resistance towards CE and higher levels of concern for perceived ideological bias among teachers. When we turn to consider what kind of citizenship education the public is likely to endorse, we find that there is interest in teaching 'real-world' skills, including critical thinking skills, media literacy and financial literacy, echoing previous research in the UK and beyond (e.g. Mirra et al., 2022; Peart et al., 2023). Contrary to its significant emphasis in recent educational policies (such as the NCS), there seems to be less support for the more communitarian aspects of CE. Overall, these findings reflect previous research from the US, which also identifies high degrees of pessimism towards the current implementation of CE, in part owing to concerns over political bias, a high demand for skills for employability and the influence of key educational, ideological, and sociodemographic factors on public opinions towards CE (i.e. Lautzenheiser et al., 2011; Owen, 2013). There are several implications from these findings, which we discuss below.

Firstly, given the importance placed on education as a policy area among the general public and the fact that any policy change requires public 'buy-in', it is crucial to understand who supports CE and what might be some barriers for support. One key driving force, and potential barrier, is perceived institutional trust. As our findings show, institutional trust at both the school level (through perceived teacher bias) and the government level (through perceived party bias on education policy) impacts support for CE, with less trust leading to less support. This aligns with concerns about potential political bias in schools and whether education can remain independent of partisan influences (Morgan, 2017; Weinberg, 2021). Interpreting perceived party bias and voting behaviour loosely as indicators of systemic trust suggests a broader scepticism towards the current political system and its actors. This connection, reinforced by findings that link educational level with social capital and political trust (Schyns & Koop, 2010), alongside the impact of ideology on systemic trust (Fischer, 2011; Morisi et al., 2019), underscores the need for further research into these dynamics. Such studies could explore how citizenship education in turn might influence public trust in government and other institutional structures.

Secondly, we note a potential feedback loop developing where politically engaged adults (i.e. active voters) see the value of citizenship education in schools for cultivating political engagement among youth. This loop highlights the challenge of engaging those who are currently disengaged and emphasises the importance of breaking this cycle to foster a more universally engaged citizenry and garner more support for CE for future generations. Given that parental education is the most important dimension of social background influencing political engagement in young people (more so than occupation and income; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2024; Janmaat et al., 2022), it becomes increasingly important to ensure that educational institutions serve an ameliorating, rather than exacerbating, function with regard to political engagement.

Thirdly, our finding that women show higher support for citizenship education compared with men on multiple dimensions is noteworthy. Research continuously finds that women tend to have lower levels of political interest and engagement than men, particularly in sociocultural contexts where gender roles form a significant barrier to electoral participation (Dassonneville & Kostelka, 2021). A potential explanation for our findings then is that women might view the educational system as a means to counteract sociocultural norms around gender and politics. Consequently, it might be women and girls who benefit most from CE, meaning that careful planning and implementation of CE could have broader positive social impacts against sociocultural disparities (Jerome et al., 2024).

Lastly, the public's interest in teaching 'real-world' skills, including critical thinking, media literacy and financial literacy, echoes existing research (e.g. Mirra et al., 2022; Peart et al., 2023) and contrasts with the UK government's emphasis on local community participation exemplified in initiatives like PREVENT and NCS. This divergence raises questions about CE's relevance and alignment with the ambitions and interests of citizens and young people themselves. A recent report in Wales highlights young citizens' desire for an education that is more relevant to their lived experiences and local context (Andreouli et al., 2024). The Association for Citizenship Teaching found that, despite three-quarters of secondary students agreeing that CE is important, only a third find their current lessons interesting (Hilal et al., 2024), prompting calls for greater student involvement in curriculum design (Bron et al., 2022). On the other hand, teachers view citizenship education as crucial for fostering critical engagement in students but are concerned about its marginalisation in the curriculum and it slipping into character education, with a depoliticised focus on civic behaviour and values over active citizenship (e.g. Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2021; Önal et al., 2018). They stress the importance of students developing practical skills and self-efficacy over merely understanding citizenship roles (Hamden-Thompson et al., 2015).

Considering these nuanced perspectives, with the public's call for practical skills, students' desire for more relevant 'real-life' teaching and teachers' emphasis on teaching applied, rather than normatively defined, skills, further research is needed to explore the views of all involved to get a fuller picture of what is wanted and needed. Such comprehensive research will help design a citizenship education programme that meets the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, ensuring it is both widely supported and highly effective.

From an applied standpoint, the insights from this study carry substantial implications for policymakers, educators and civil society organisations involved in the design and delivery of CE programmes.

Our findings highlight broad public support for CE, underscoring the importance of aligning legislative efforts with public sentiment. However, the study also identifies significant barriers, such as ideological resistance and distrust in the political system. At a time of widespread political distrust in the UK (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2021), with low levels of trust in politicians (Clemence & King, 2023), the government and political parties (National Centre for Social Research, 2024; Office for National Statistics, 2024), these trends may have implications for how people perceive educational institutions. On the basis of evidence that CE contribute to a more equitable society by fostering active citizenship, as discussed in the introduction (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021; Jerome et al., 2024; Weinberg, 2022), we suggest that creating a curriculum that not only educates but also actively involves students in democratic processes and critical societal issues, can help cultivate a more participatory and informed future electorate. This can potentially foster greater confidence in political institutions and encourage active engagement in communities and the broader political sphere, addressing concerns about young people's political disengagement.

There is a clear public appetite for revising CE in the UK in a way that resonates with the public's concerns and aspirations. This study provides up-to-date robust data to support advocacy efforts aimed at reforming the subject. Particularly the finding that non-parents are as supportive of CE as parents indicates strong public backing. Understanding ideological and political resistance offers a strategic advantage in designing programmes and interventions that specifically address these issues, reducing scepticism and fostering broader acceptance and participation in CE programmes. This might involve shifting back from character education to a more politically focused CE curriculum, incorporating vital practical skills like financial literacy and critical thinking to enhance relevance and engagement. Making CE more responsive to community needs and aspirations will enhance its effectiveness and ensure it plays a crucial role in developing an engaged citizenry.

Limitations and further research

This study employed an exploratory survey with certain limitations in the validity of measures, primarily because our focus was on capturing public opinion rather than measuring complex psychological constructs. Although we hold that this approach was generally appropriate for our objectives, it presents challenges. For instance, our use of broad terms such as ‘young people’ may have caused ambiguity about the specific age groups targeted, potentially influencing responses owing to varying views on age-appropriate educational content. Defining terms more clearly could enhance the reliability of potential future research. Similarly, the subjective framing of the question ‘too many teachers are right-/left-wing’ might have led to varied interpretations among respondents. While we retained this wording for comparison purposes with previous research (Weinberg, 2021), future studies might consider refining these aspects for better clarity and precision.

Furthermore, while our sample was nationally representative, it meant that sample sizes for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales were too small to allow for any meaningful cross-country comparisons, which is a significant limitation considering variations in educational policy and differences in sociopolitical contexts. England generally tends to see more analysis and evaluation of CE than the other three nations (Kisby & Sloam, 2012) and further research might look into obtaining equally sized samples from all nations to be able to make cross-national comparisons and adapt local curricula better.

Our survey did not ask participants to rank or prioritise CE comparatively to other policy areas or school subjects, which is another aspect future research could explore. Weinberg (2021) asked participants to rank subjects and found that English parents rated CE as no less important than History, Geography, Chemistry and Physics, and more important than Religion, Classics and Languages. This suggests that further investigation into how CE is valued relative to other subjects by the public could provide insightful context for its placement within the curriculum.

Investigating other factors that may affect public perceptions of Citizenship Education—like sociocultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and the distinction between urban and rural settings—could provide deeper insights as well. And lastly, given the significant influence of perceived political biases on CE views as discussed above, further research could delve deeper into these aspects, examining the specific concerns related to party bias and the political system. This could yield valuable information for designing curricula that better meet public expectations and foster trust.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/5qxuf/?view_only=7c6e4c81b95c4b929674a7b2f1099f25.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved ahead of data collection by the Open University's ethical committee in January 2024, reference number 2024-0060-2.

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ENDNOTE

¹ GAMs (generalised additive models) were used to explore the influence of ideology, to allow for non-linear associations. These offer a flexible approach to modelling non-linear relationships without needing to specify the form of the nonlinearity *a priori* and can capture linear components as well as curvilinear connections, and were therefore found to be suitable for this analysis, in which both types are present (James et al., 2013).

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