

Start the debate: global learning and the 2017 General Election

Introduction

At first glance, teachers may consider the General Election as a topic that will spark less interest for pupils. Are there ways that we can engage them by showing how aspects of it relate to global matters? It may well appear that the political parties pay scant attention to global learning themes, as they concentrate on domestic matters. However perhaps it's worth considering how those domestic matters are actually tied up with global matters as well. It is also important to remember that this General Election is being contested at a challenging time globally. The conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen continue to displace populations who often decide to seek refuge in Europe. Many thousands of refugees and those seeking safety are still trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The recent decision by the UK to leave the EU is a core issue for some in this election. European nations are struggling with populist and right-wing political groupings who promote an intolerance of migrants, fear economic downturn and blame globalisation for the ills of European nations. The world continues to face challenges in respect of environmental damage and climate change, seeming to delay taking cross-border decisions to address them. The global superpowers are spending more time challenging each other as opposed to working together, and the threat from an assertive regime in North Korea is growing.

This aide memoire points out some of the issues that you, as global educators, can draw on in this election season, with both a national and local political focus. Teachers can use this opportunity to underline how the decisions made by UK politicians have a global impact and how the General Election engages with global matters.

What are the issues?

The biggest issues that could form the basis of exploration with pupils are taken from the key aims of the Global Learning Programme (GLP), which centre on social justice, poverty, interdependence, sustainability and environmental change. These words are not necessarily visible in the election materials, but the issues are. For example, when looking at foreign policy, it is legitimate to try to understand what the political parties' ambitions are in relation to regional conflicts or environmental damage and degradation. There has been much discussion about how much the UK should spend on foreign aid, what form that aid should take and whether this is in fact investment in the well-being of other nations or merely continuing to apply 'sticking plasters' to insolvable problems. The matter of Brexit – the UK voting to leave the EU by 2019 – is taking a central place in most political party manifestos. How do these themes play out in our own communities in relation to aspects of cohesive communities, migration and sustainable food production?

Pupils can investigate these issues and research them to understand what their democratic representatives stand for and talk about in relation to such matters. They could try to raise them with their local MP or any other representative, and include them in school-based

debates, mock-elections or campaigning. This does not make the whole topic one just for citizenship teachers. In all subjects there is authentic learning to be had by pupils exploring the issues in a way that will help them make more coherent sense of our democratic system of governance, how it affects them and how they can affect it.

What are parties saying?

To date the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties have published their manifestos. Some are not publishing their manifestos until almost the last moment. However, bigger issues will still come to the fore, and one or two are there for all to see (there is more on this below). It is important to understand that what parties say they will do and what they actually can commit to may be very different. There will be compromises to be made by those who take power, and there will be budget and policy restrictions as well. However, regardless of the solidity of the policy and what may or may not happen in practice, the key thing – and also the most interesting – is debating the main issues that link these elections to global learning. These will include:

- foreign policy
- defence
- immigration
- Brexit
- climate, environment and sustainability
- human rights
- extremism
- trade
- aid.

What do NGOs want to hear from the parties?

Most NGOs that are concerned with global matters will want big commitments on issues such as poverty, overseas spending and aid, conflict resolution, world health, food and water programmes, and deeper commitments to environmental change. Some, like the United Nations Association of the UK (UNA), have made very bold statements linked to global learning:

'It is time to put foreign policy at the heart of the General Election. This is not just about our relationship with the European Union. This is about building cross-party consensus on issues like international peace, migration, human rights, the environment, the UN, Britain's role in the world – these things are bigger and more important than party politics.'

<https://www.una.org.uk/manifesto-2017>

Some including Amnesty International UK and The Refugee Council have chosen to highlight certain issues they champion and link them to the General Election – for example human rights and refugees.

(www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4926_speak_up_for_refugees_during_the_election_campaign)

Others will be issuing their own manifesto – look out for memos or briefings. These may be of use to you when researching, but need to be treated with care and balanced with the views of others. You could search for these online and encourage pupils to evaluate them for their breadth and depth as well as single-issue focus.

Use the big questions below to start the debate on global matters

The questions below could form starting points for you to use with pupils. They are not all easy to unlock or find within party manifestos, and you may need to approach or write to candidates in order to understand their position better. However, these questions are good starting points for a whole range of global matters during this election time.

- Which parties are committed to a 0.7% of GDP to development overseas? This commitment was recently enacted in a new law. Did your previous MP support or oppose this?
- Is a commitment to a 0.7% of GDP to development overseas truly sustainable for a new government given our economic circumstances?
- What are the parties' views on development assistance?
- What are the parties' views on continuing with support for all existing human rights legislation (including that in the UK and Europe)?
- What are the parties' views on promoting social justice in the context of development assistance?
- What are the parties' views on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- What are the parties' views on current conflicts and investment in rebuilding after warfare?
- What do the parties say about water and food security, and countering environmental and climate damage, nuclear power and sustainable energy?
- What do the parties say about how they see the connections between building more cohesive and just communities overseas with those at home?
- What do the parties say about linking global matters, such as radicalisation, to local and regional matters?
- What do the parties say about human rights matters such as female genital mutilation (FGM), rape in war, women's education and child soldiers?

- What are the parties' views on whether, or in what ways, Britain might become involved in a number of international conflicts?
- What are the parties' attitudes to nuclear weapons, and proliferation and the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to international security and boundary respect and selling weapons to regimes that have poor human rights records?
- What are the parties' views on freedom of movement to work across Europe for EU citizens?
- What are the parties' views on the main Brexit issues – the rights of citizens of the EU and the UK, the border in Ireland, and the nature of world trade post Brexit?
- What are the parties' views on overseas peace-keeping roles by the UK in respect of civil and military personnel?

It may also be interesting to try to find out how global learning is reflected in the education policies of the parties – what do they say about the place of global citizenship education in the school curriculum, training of teachers for global learning, opportunities for teachers to work and train globally? Do they say anything about universities and global education opportunities or the participation in the EU and other education programmes by scholar and students?

What have the parties said already?

Only three manifestos have been published to date. Below are some links to global matters:

Conservatives: take the UK out of the EU, consider a new UK human rights legal framework after Brexit, work to ensure the UK has the lowest energy costs in Europe and develop the shale industry

Labour: provide 60% of energy from renewables and work towards a world free of nuclear weapons, and guarantee the rights of EU nationals in the UK after Brexit

Liberal Democrats: maintain EU environmental standards, pass a Zero Carbon Act to reduce net greenhouse gas by 80% by 2050, pass a Zero Waste Act, oppose fracking, offer legal safe routes for refugees to the UK and take 50,000 Syrian refugees over five years

The manifesto pledges from the other main parties in the UK General Election have yet to be published, therefore teachers should consider following these on news outlets.

Teaching strategies

This General Election should spark a good deal of interest among young people on the back of a year of interesting politics: the Brexit vote and then elections in America, Italy, Austria, Belgium and France, the resurgence of a demand for an independence referendum in Scotland and the vigorous pursuit of young people by the political parties of late. There is also a national campaign to ensure young people register to vote in time. Of course many young people may also be disinterested in the elections and the campaigning, which will seem to go on for ever. The time is right therefore to fire the imagination of pupils about the election

matters from a specific angle – that of global learning. In doing so, you should be aware of the challenges and risks of teaching controversial, topical and sensitive issues, which many of these matters will be in our schools and communities. There may be issues of ‘fake news’ or alternative facts in the media coverage of the General Election, especially in social and new media sources. Teachers and students should be prepared to fact check the claims of parties, the manifestos they publish, and the reporting of issues in discussion and debate. You could consider using approaches that rely on critical thinking skills, community of enquiry approaches, P4C and the OSDE methodology. Key considerations include:

- being mindful that these are controversial and topical aspects of learning
- using appropriate teaching approaches and management strategies
- promoting respectful deliberation, debate, discussion, listening and reflection
- ensuring balance and avoid partisanship at all times.¹

More advice and guidance on this can be found at:

http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/lib_res_pdf/0118.pdf

Further links and resources

- ACT [teaching resources](#)
- Burnet News Club [General Election special issue](#) with lessons plans and resources
- Global Dimension [resources](#)
- Send My Friend to School [General Election 2017 resource](#)
- UK Parliament [election toolkit](#) and [assembly resource](#)

This resource was developed by Chris Waller, Professional Officer, Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) in association with the Global Learning Programme (GLP) for England.

¹ 1996 Education Act ‘Political indoctrination (1) the local education authority, governing body and head teacher shall forbid (a) the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at a maintained school who are junior pupils, and (b) the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school.’