



**Marta Żerkowska-Balas, PhD, DSc**

is a sociologist and political scientist, employed as an Assistant Professor at the Center for Democracy Studies at SWPS University. A member of the Polish National Election Study (PNES) team. Her research interests include the study of democracy (including its decline and its quality) as well as the relationship between political parties and voters (party identification and political branding).  
mzerkowska-balas@swps.edu.pl



**Michał Wenzel, PhD, DSc**

is an Associate Professor at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, focusing on social research methods and sociological aspects of the media. His academic work examines how media shape political attitudes and civil society, as well as the social aspects of culture. Previously, he worked at the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) and the University of Oxford. He has held research internships at the University of Michigan and the Max Planck Institute in Cologne.  
mwenzel@swps.edu.pl

# HOW TO ENGAGE YOUNG CITIZENS?

The “Youth Vote+” program aimed to empower young people with skills and knowledge, equipping them to actively participate in civic life.

**Marta Żerkowska-Balas  
Michał Wenzel**

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
Warsaw, Poland

Young citizens are often alienated from the political system. They vote less frequently, and when they do, they often support anti-establishment protest parties. As a result, they are underrepresented in mainstream politics, and political parties sometimes neglect young people as a target group, rarely proposing policies aimed at these voters.

Various explanations have been offered for the low political engagement seen among young voters. Some researchers point out that this is a dynamic time in the cycle of life: the priorities of finishing school, starting one’s first job, getting married, and starting a family all make political participation less significant at this stage. Others focus on the impact of such factors as a low degree of political knowledge among young people and their lack of political resources, which hinder new voters’ participation in elections. Democratic participation requires citizens to have certain competencies. They need to understand how formal procedures and concepts translate into the practice of democracy and require skills in conflict resolution and communication in deliberative settings.

One source of such competencies is school education, which plays a unique role in the process of civic socialization. Civic education programs aimed at school-aged children are becoming an increasingly popular tool for political socialization. Their effectiveness in addressing civic deficits at a young age for long-term improvement in the quality of democratic participation has been well-documented in the literature.

Having a chance to become engaged with civic activity in practice has enormous potential to foster democratic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices among participating school students. This potential is even greater when these experiences can be combined with curricula and extracurricular activities that address democratic theories and practices. This conclusion was the starting point for activities carried out as part of our project entitled “Social and Civic Activation of Young People in Developing Key Competencies,” aimed at developing personal, cognitive, interpersonal, and general competencies, thereby increasing civic engagement and job market opportunities among primary and secondary school students aged 14–19. The project involved 1,243 students from nearly 350 schools across Poland.

## Key competencies

The project, carried out from 2018 to 2021 by SWPS University in tandem with the Center for Citizenship Education (CCE) in Warsaw, led to the creation of the “Youth Vote+” program. This initiative built upon the long-standing “Youth Vote” project run by the CCE since 1995. By combining the theoretical expertise of SWPS University and the practical experience of the CCE, spanning across the fields of political science, sociology, psychology, and management, the program offered a robust educational experience for youth civic engagement. It focused on three key areas: conscious electoral participation (pillar 1), involvement in civic activities at the school and local community level (pillar 2), and the ability to discuss and express opinions (pillar 3). Each of these pillars featured a mix of traditional and innovative educational activities.

The program used the *service learning* method – an experiential approach that involves students in real-world activities, pursuing social, emotional, professional, and academic goals while also benefiting



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communities (Jerome 2012). Research has confirmed that this method effectively fosters civic attitudes and behaviors. The program combined scientific knowledge with practical experience, beginning with workshops and e-learning courses to prepare students for implementing their own projects in their schools and communities. Since it was organized around Polish elections (European, parliamentary, and presidential), participants were tasked with organizing voter turnout campaigns, debates, and school-internal “primaries” (simulating real election procedures). The program

also included information exchange and feedback through the e-learning platform and a conference that brought the project to a close.

Project participants were expected to develop three types of competencies related to core curricula:

1. civic competencies – defined as increased civic engagement and participation in social and political life (key competencies in this area include political knowledge of facts and procedures, a sense of political agency, support for democracy, and trust in democratic institutions),

2. cognitive competencies – defined as the use of knowledge and information to make real decisions (key competencies in this area include analytical skills, logical thinking and analysis of facts, critical thinking, information retrieval and analysis, and readiness to learn new things).
3. interpersonal competencies – defined as the ability to communicate and build relationships (key competencies in this area include teamwork skills, networking skills, and communication skills).

The competencies honed within the project are significant not only for the quality of political and social life but also for increasing participants' competitiveness in the job market.

## Project outcomes

Afterwards, we evaluated the project's effectiveness both quantitatively and qualitatively among the participants. The quantitative research measured civic and key competencies such as knowledge expansion, activ-

in cognitive competencies, on the other hand, were less pronounced. The program had a limited impact on developing skills in distinguishing critical information and producing effective argumentation.

Participants noted that the program had significantly increased their knowledge of the state and political system, improved their ability to express their views, and enhanced their cooperation skills. They also saw improvements in their event organization skills and capacity to analyze information, which could be beneficial for their future education and careers. While teachers and students appreciated the program for fostering cooperation and event organization skills, they expressed some concerns about its effectiveness as a platform for rational discussion. Better abilities at gathering information and conducting discussions proved to be the lowest-rated by participants, suggesting a need for further development of these skills in future editions of the program.

## The benefits of civic education

Active participation in civic activities brings undeniable benefits: it opens participants' eyes, socializes them, boosts their confidence. In Poland, as in many other new democratic states, democratic deficits find reflection in a lack of civically engaged behavioral patterns: participation is low, many citizens do not vote and rarely engage in campaigns and other political activities. Developing these habits at a young age is crucial, and students appreciate the transformative power of the program.

However, the project proved to be an insufficient tool for teaching about the political system. One reason for this is the relatively limited duration of the program. Students need to absorb knowledge about democracy over a longer period, and a short program cannot replace regular learning. Another reason is the format. Students appreciated the project for its action, activity, and elements of knowledge acquisition, which were much less interesting to them.

The "Youth Vote+" program had a significant impact on developing leadership skills among student elites. It was these school "opinion leaders" who took on the burden of responsibility in organizing activities, motivating passive or apathetic peers, dealing with teachers and school authorities, and managing logistics. Many admitted afterward that they had not anticipated how great the workload would be. Nevertheless, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with both quantitative and qualitative data showing that these students experienced profound personal growth. They emerged from the program as more engaged and capable citizens, and we believe many of them will become future leaders. ■

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ity encouragement, and skills in debating and information processing before and after the project. The qualitative research, which included focused group interviews (FGI), provided deeper insights into participants' behaviors, attitudes, and preferences, as well as group dynamics and affective (emotional) aspects. The quantitative research, in turn, focused on three dimensions of competencies: civic (knowledge and skills related to democracy), interpersonal (collaboration and organizational skills), and cognitive (information selection, understanding, and argumentation skills).

The results of the "Youth Vote+" project showed a significant improvement in participants' self-assessed competencies. They gained greater self-awareness in the Socratic spirit – realizing how much they had learned as well as how much more there was to know. The most significant gains in knowledge and skills were related to the practical activities included in the program, such as organizing voter turnout campaigns and election simulations. Improvements

### Further reading:

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