

DEMOCRACY EDUCATION

Tackling the challenges to a democratic culture

Support to democratic norms and culture is often a missing element of the assistance provided by donors, state bodies and academic institutions in support of democratic governance. Yet, a democratic culture is the foundation of stable institutions and an inclusive decision-making process, where citizens actively participate because of their ability and desire to do so in matters of public affairs affecting them.

It is vital that greater attention is paid to education in order to counter, inter alia, deepening polarisation, anti-pluralism and exclusionary rhetoric. These challenges to a democratic culture originate at two different levels: citizens and political leaders.

Citizens: Representative democracy is damaged when citizens fail to participate in the system. One way this lack of interest manifests itself is through failing to vote in elections. This can be caused by disillusion or frustration with the system – for example, by voters believing that either their vote doesn't count or a lack of interest in politics as a whole, as well as lack of information and education on their role as voters. This ultimately paves the way for leaders with a much weaker mandate from citizens.

Political leaders: On the other hand, the increase of populist discourse has exposed the dangers that arise when political leaders who disregard democratic principles and values take office. Leaders who do not respect democratic principles can not only break down the critical institutions of democracy, such as the separation of powers and an independent press, but they can also greatly harm the place of democratic values in society, including the respect for the rights of minority groups.

Strengthening a democratic culture through education

As these challenges emanate from the behaviour of individuals themselves, the key long-term means to tackle them comes through education. In the long-run any state needs a populace that understand the principles, rights and obligations of a democracy.

In practice, education on the principles of democracy varies according to the target audience and their knowledge of civil duties and rights as well as interest in the subject. There are thus two broad levels to this education:

At the most basic level, **civic education** aims to educate citizens (rather than aspiring political representatives) on the basic meaning of democracy. In this case, the goal is to provide them with the skills to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities, and strengthen their ability to hold their leaders accountable.

At a more 'advanced' level, **democracy education** offers those who are already engaged in politics - like active civil society leaders, media leaders, and political devotees - a more in depth curriculum to acquire the skills and knowledge to become a democratic leader. More concretely, democracy education can be split into two subcategories:

First, **Democracy Schools**, aim to further prepare political party members and members of civil society organisations with the tools to become agents of change in their societies.

Secondly, **Schools of Politics**, which target politicians already immersed in the public sphere, place an emphasis on enhancing their practical leadership skills, such as speechwriting, public speaking, debating and campaigning skills, as well as further developing theoretical knowledge.

Democracy education in practice

To guarantee the successful outcome of a democracy education programme, it is important to consider the approach, target group, recruitment process, curriculum and duration of the programme. This section looks at each element in turn and provides evidence based on lessons from the field.

Approach

Democracy education should be seen as neutral and independent. It should strive to create a safe space that is impartial and where all opinions are respected in a non-partisan manner. This is vital in building the necessary foundations for democratic discourse and civil debate.

Each democracy education programme should be tailored to meet the needs of a particular country context and the needs of the participants, including through a careful assessment of the political landscape. Participants need to commit to certain requirements, such as attending a minimum amount of classes.

Curriculum

The range of topics varies from culture, public speaking, and human rights, to dialogue with civil society and the role of the judicial system. The curriculum should depend on the needs of the participants and the context.

Participants

Target group: The primary target group for democracy education is aspiring societal leaders. Participants who attend the democracy education programmes may be representatives of political, public, civil society and media sectors, as well as students and active citizens interested in contemporary issues of democratic politics. The **inclusion** of underrepresented groups, such as women and youth, is vital in order to underline the importance of diversity and inclusivity in politics.

Recruitment process: Participants should be recruited in different ways depending on the exact target group of the school. In some cases, this can be through an open application process where candidates can apply by sending in their résumés, and in others, participation can be more exclusive, requiring candidates to be recommended by political party leaders.

Course Structure

Number of participants: should ideally be between 30-36. It has been shown that a discussion between a larger group than that, hinders the productivity of discussion between participants.

Extracurricular activities: that include the participation of political experts and leaders, should be organised to provide participants with an opportunity to engage with local politicians.

Duration: A long-term course should be privileged over one-off sessions or short-term training courses, with 6 months of engagement being the preferred option.

In general, it is recommended that the participants **meet on a regular basis** over a period ranging from 2 to 12 months with repeated sessions being held.

Alumni networks

Alumni networks can be supported through different types of activities, and serve as civic clubs that would allow graduates to take part in small grants competitions, joint conferences and events.

Further Reading

- Center for Civic Education: [A Forthcoming Education Policy Task Force Position Paper from the Communitarian Network, 1998.](#)
- Council of Europe: [Schools of Political Studies.](#)
- Fund for Democratic Culture: [Democratic Culture, 2015.](#)
- National Democratic Institute: [Democracy Education Civic Forum Style, 1997.](#)
- Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy: [Democracy Schools.](#)