

2. DEMOCRACY

It is vital to promote a culture of democracy and human rights among children and young people, as attitudes and behaviour are shaped at an early stage and can be decisive in determining their future involvement in public affairs.

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What is democracy?

Never in the history of Europe has democracy been so widespread and strong in the continent as at the turn of the twenty-first century. Almost all European societies are considered to be democratic if they are founded on the principles of a sovereign citizenship, transparent decision making and accountable government. It is difficult to fully achieve these principles in reality, but nevertheless we can say that in general these are the guidelines for the development of democracy in contemporary Europe.

The word *democracy* comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning ‘people’, and *kratos*, meaning ‘power’. Accordingly, democracy is often defined as ‘the rule of the people’: a system of making rules determined by the people who are to obey those rules. In today’s world most people and most countries consider democracy to be the only valid and viable system of government.

Democracy rests on two fundamental principles:

- the principle of ‘individual autonomy’: that no-one should be subject to rules that have been imposed by others;
- the principle of ‘equality’: that everyone should have the same opportunity to influence the decisions that affect people in society.

Other forms of government violate both these principles, for power is held by a certain person or social class who then take decisions on behalf of the rest of the population. For example, an oligarchy is ruled by a small, privileged group distinguished by some quality such as wealth, family or military powers. In a plutocracy, government is controlled by the wealthy, and in a dictatorship by a single all-powerful individual. In these other forms of government neither individual autonomy nor equality is respected.

Democracy takes many forms. For example, in direct democracy citizens personally participate in decision making. The most widespread form of democracy, however, is liberal or representative democracy, in which citizens elect representatives who create laws and policies and appoint the government officials. In theory, representative democracy involves the free and fair election of a government by a majority vote of the people being represented. A liberal democracy is characterised by the rule of law, separation of powers, protec-



tion of human rights and protection of minorities. The rule of law is the principle that the government and judiciary function only in accordance with written rules. It is closely linked with the principle of separation of power, according to which the legislative (parliament), executive (government) and judiciary (courts) act independently of each other. In a democratic government human rights provide a common value system. Accordingly, underrepresented social group of any kind, such as children, women, migrants, religious or ethnic minorities, are protected from discrimination and their identity and participation are promoted.

The term *democracy* signifies a particular type of society as well as a particular form of government. A democratic society provides the fairest method of governance for most people and the most equality, with the majority of the people playing an active rather than a passive role. It is characterised by a moral imperative to protect and promote the human rights of every individual, every group and every community of society. Because a democratic society is constantly seeking to solve social questions for the benefit of the greatest number of people, these decisions are most likely to be respected by the people. Democracy exist at the local as well the national level.

Democracy in practise

Democracies are different from each other and none can be considered a model for others. Democratic governments can take several forms, including presidential (as in France, Romania or Russia) or parliamentary (as in the United Kingdom, Slovakia or Spain). Others, such as Germany, have federal governmental structures. Some voting systems are proportional while others are majoritarian. The common principles, however, are the equality of all citizens and the right of every individual to some degree of personal autonomy. However, personal autonomy does not mean that everyone can do whatever she or he likes. It implies that the governmental system allocates an equal vote to each citizen and recognises that each individual is capable of independent choice and entitled to have that choice taken into account. After that, a great deal depends on the initiative and participation of individual citizens.

Democracies differ greatly in the degree to which they respect equality and allow their citizens to influence decisions. People who live in poverty may have a weaker voice. Women, who are less present in the public arena, may have fewer opportunities to influence decisions, even those concerning women specifically. Some social groups, such as children and foreign workers, may not be allowed to vote. At the same time most people believe that rules have been imposed on them by elected officials who do not represent their interests. So where are the basic democratic principles? To what extent can we feel any 'ownership' of the laws and government decisions?

Democracy is never perfect and never complete. Karl Popper has even said, "Democracy is the word for something that does not exist". This may be an exaggeration, but it is true that genuine democracy is an ideal model. It is up to the people to determine how close their society can get to this ideal state.

Democracy works only if citizens are active

Democracy is much more than an electoral code. It is a code of behaviour, an attitude and a state of mind.

Terry Davis, Introductory speech at the Summer University for Democracy, organised by the Council of Europe, 2006

A democratic society is more than a democratically elected government and a system of national institutions. Strong and independent local authorities, a developed and active civil society at national and local levels, and a democratic ethos in workplaces and schools are also key manifestations of the democratic society. Democracy is a practical process that should be nurtured every day and everywhere.

Democracy can function more effectively and serve the interests of its citizens better if people formulate demands, exert pressure and monitor government's actions continuously. In modern society, non-governmental organisations and the media serve as the key channels for citizens' control. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can advocate, educate and mobilise attention around



major public issues and monitor the conduct of government or other governing bodies. Through NGOs, citizens can be the driving force and the principal agents of change for a more democratic world.

The media have a very powerful function in democracies, communicating news and opinions of various social actors and serving as a watchdog on behalf of citizens. But this function exists only if the media are free from governmental or corporate interests and influences, they value public service and take their role seriously.

What is wrong with democracy?

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century there is a universal concern today about the status of democracy. In many European democracies political discontent and scepticism are widespread, and people often believe the political elite can afford to disregard the will of the people. Some contradictory developments of democracy such as acute social inequality and corruption cause frustration and anger that can lead to populism supported by the mass media. Citizens often feel powerless and are discouraged from taking a more active role in their society.

Such concerns about the state of democracy are often based on the levels of citizen participation at elections, which has significantly decreased everywhere in Europe in the last fifteen years. This decline, which appears to indicate a lack of interest and involvement on the part of citizens, undermines the democratic process.

The turnout of young people at elections is especially low, and there is a growing difference in the participation rate between young people and other age groups. While this discrepancy does not necessarily mean that young people will not vote more actively as they get older, their interests are already less represented at elections. All over the world, young people are becoming increasingly removed from democratic institutions and traditional structures of political life, such as political parties, trade unions or formal youth organisations.¹

Although these are undoubtedly serious problems, other studies² indicate that different forms of participation are actually on the increase within pressure groups, campaigns, ad hoc civic initiatives or consultative organs. Global civil society and Internet activism are flexible new forms of civic participation based on the possibilities provided by technological development. Young people can quickly mobilise around single issues, such as, in the United Kingdom, the war in Iraq or the Orange revolution in the Ukraine. Political opinion can also be expressed through arts and sport, voicing environmental concerns, women's rights or consumer boycotts. These forms of participation are just as essential to the effective functioning of democracy as voter turnout at elections. Elections, after all, are a very crude way of ensuring that people's interests are accurately represented. Four or five years between elections is a long time to wait to hold governments to account. Everyday participation is key in democracy, and that starts at the local level. Efforts should always be made to improve participation, especially of young people.

QUESTION: *Do you know any non-governmental organisations or citizen's initiative in your community that have successfully influenced a community or government decision in recent years?*

Another serious weakness in European democracies is the representation of minorities, especially those suffering from social exclusion. Thomas Hammarberg, the European Commissioner for Human Rights, said recently that powerlessness is the greatest problem of those millions...

"... who are displaced; those who do not have the means to seek legal advice; those who face language barriers when they want help; those who are repressed by their own cultural group or squeezed between two lifestyles; those who are underground and fear exposure; those who are isolated in their disability; those old who have lost everything and are too fragile to start again; those belonging to minorities targeted by xenophobes or homophobes".³



In a society where governments are elected by the majority, and electoral systems work by the ‘winner-takes-all’ rule, it is especially difficult for minorities to achieve a proper representation. Awareness-raising in favour of the equality and social inclusion of minorities is key to democratic governance.

In the twenty-first century, several economic and social developments have had an effect on the concept and practise of democracy. European integration and global interdependence, technological developments and the growing influence of the media can be positive factors in the development of democracy but can also harm traditional democratic structures. Rapidly changing demographic trends and intercultural migration can similarly upset balances in society. It is important to use and build on the opportunities provided by these phenomena in order to develop and make democracy stronger.

QUESTION: *Do you think Internet-based technology would provide new techniques for decision makers to consult directly with people on certain local or national issues?*

Why and how should democracy be taught to children?

For democracy to continue to thrive, children must be taught to value it as a way of life. The necessary skills for building democracy do not develop automatically in children. Teaching democracy means preparing children to become citizens who will preserve and shape democracy in the future. Therefore democracy should be a key aspect in every form of education at the earliest age possible.

As Lianne Singleton, Australian education consultant, argues, educators have to have a conviction that democracy is possible and that the democratic way of life can be lived in society and in children’s environments. They should help children understand that no democracy and no government is perfect and no ideology is unquestionably true. In a healthy democracy, citizens question the motives of their leaders and monitor their activities.

Teaching for democracy is teaching about an inclusive society. This society recognises all members, regardless... of their situation or status... and recognises diversity among its members, and makes them feel that they are part of the community. ...⁴

Democracy education is about promoting curiosity, discussion, critical thinking and capacity for constructive criticism. Children should learn about taking responsibility for their action. These educational outcomes are only possible through action. While key concepts of democracy should be understood by children, living and acting in a democratic environment is the only and the best exercise. Schools, institutions, children’s clubs and organisations and even families that respect democratic principles and have real democratic structures function as the best models to help children learn what democracy is about. Democratic principles must permeate school structures and the curriculum, and should be standard practise in school relations. Educators should demonstrate respect for children by establishing children’s decision making bodies and peer mediation, trusting children to organise their events and empowering children to explore issues, to discuss, to formulate opinion, to debate and to propose strategies to deal with conflict and achieve reasonable goals. Such experiences of participation are especially empowering for children, helping them to understand that participation is a worthwhile effort.

There are plenty of good examples worldwide on how to build successful democratic structures in children’s natural environment. The Council of Europe programme ‘Education for Democratic Citizenship’ has produced guidelines and collected good examples for school democracy building and democratic governance. ‘Governance’ here demonstrates the openness of educational institutions and organisations, where participants (teachers, children, parents, owners) discuss, negotiate issues and make decisions at the end of the process. ‘Democratic’ indicates that governance is based on human rights values, empowerment and involvement of all actors: children, adults, parents and staff of the institutions.



Democracy and Human Rights documents

Human rights and democracy are reciprocal concepts. Human rights form the basis of any democratic system, and states are there to defend and guarantee them. On the other hand, human rights are independent from the states: they are inalienable, belonging to everyone on the sole basis of being human. However, only democratic structures are able to protect people's human rights. Both human rights and democracy are constantly developing.

Useful resources

- Backman, Elisabeth and Trafford, Bernard, *Democratic Governance of Schools*, Council of Europe, 2007.
- Boman, Julia, *Challenges to Democracy in Today's Europe, Synthesis of plenary sessions and workshops*, Council of Europe, 2006.
- Forbrig, Joerg, *Revisiting youth political participation*, Council of Europe Publishing, 2005: www.youth-knowledge.net/system/galleries/download/research_reports/2005_revisiting_youth_political_participation_coepub.pdf
- *The Future of Democracy in Europe, Trends, analysis and reforms*, Green Paper for the Council of Europe, Council of Europe, 2004: http://edc.unige.ch/download/Schmitter_Trechsel_Green_Paper.pdf
- Gollob, Rolf and Kampf, Peter, *Exploring Children's Rights, Nine projects for primary level*, Council of Europe, 2007.
- Kovacheva, Siyka, 'Will Youth Rejuvenate the Patterns of Political Participation?' Forbrig, Joerg (ed.), in: *Revisiting Youth Political Participation, Challenges for research and democratic practise in Europe*, Council of Europe Publishing, 2005.
- *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*, Adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe 2003: www.coe.int/t/e/cultural_cooperation/youth/TXT_charter_participation.pdf
- Singleton, Lianne, *Discovering Democracy, Teaching democracy in the primary school*: www.abc.net.au/civics/democracy/pdf/td_primary.pdf

Useful Websites

- Discovering Democracy resources: www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/default.asp?id=9180
- Electoral Education for Children: <http://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/493883939>
- Elections in Europe: www.elections-in-europe.org
- Election Resources on the Internet: <http://electionresources.org/other.html>
- International Institute for Democracy: www.civilsoc.org/elctronic/ngo-devl/iid.htm
- Voices of Youth: www.unicef.org/voy

References

- 1 Forbrig, Joerg, *Revisiting Youth Political Participation, Challenges for research and democratic practise in Europe*, Council of Europe Publishing, 2005, p.134.
- 2 Kovacheva, Siyka, 'Will Youth Rejuvenate the Patterns of Political Participation?' in Forbrig, Joerg (ed.), in *Revisiting Youth Political Participation: Challenges for research and democratic practise in Europe*: Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2005.
- 3 Thomas Hammarberg's speech at the 1,000th session of the Committee of Ministers, Council of Europe, 2007.
- 4 Singleton, Lianne, *Discovering Democracy, Teaching democracy in the primary school*: www.abc.net.au/civics/democracy/pdf/td_primary.pdf

