

EDUCATION AS THE CRITICAL PILLAR FOR THE SUCCESS OF DEMOCRACY

Education

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ABSTRACT

Education stands as one of the most fundamental pillars supporting democratic governance worldwide. The relationship between education and democracy is not merely correlational but deeply causal, with educated populations serving as the bedrock upon which stable, functioning democracies are built. It is imperative that we prioritize educational initiatives to ensure active participation in democratic processes globally (Figure1).



Figure1: Graphical abstract

KEYWORDS

Education, Democracy, International, Human rights, Integrity, Society

The Inseparable Connection between Education and Democracy

As Nigerian author Chinua Achebe powerfully observed, “a functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy educated, participatory followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership.” This sentiment captures the essence of why education is not merely beneficial but essential to democratic success (1, 2).

Research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between educational attainment and democratic stability. Across 91 countries studied, the correlation coefficient between years of schooling and democracy scores reaches an impressive 74 percent. More significantly, this relationship appears to be causal—education leads to democracy, but democracy does not necessarily lead to increased education (3).

How Education Strengthens Democratic Societies**1. Fostering Informed Decision-Making and Critical Thinking**

Education equips citizens with critical thinking skills essential for navigating the complex information landscape of modern democracies. In an era where misinformation can spread rapidly through digital channels, the ability to analyze information, discern facts from fiction, and make reasoned decisions has become indispensable for maintaining democratic integrity(4).

Democracy thrives when citizens can make informed choices. Education enables individuals to:

- Evaluate political candidates and policies critically
- Understand complex policy issues
- Distinguish between credible information and propaganda
- Engage in reasoned public discourse (5)

Research shows that aspects of media literacy and critical thinking have long been embedded in educational curricula in advanced democracies, particularly in subjects emphasizing analytical reading, essay writing, civics, and rhetoric (6).

2. Enhancing Civic Participation and Engagement

A well-educated populace forms the foundation of active citizenship. Studies demonstrate that individuals with higher educational attainment are significantly more likely to participate in civic activities(7)(Figure2):

- **Voting:** College graduates are 27% more likely than high school dropouts to vote in local elections

- **Community Involvement:** They are 29% more likely to help solve local problems
- **Organizational Membership:** Education positively predicts participation in 15 out of 16 forms of group membership
- **Political Activism:** Educated citizens are more likely to contact public officials and engage in political discourse (8,9)

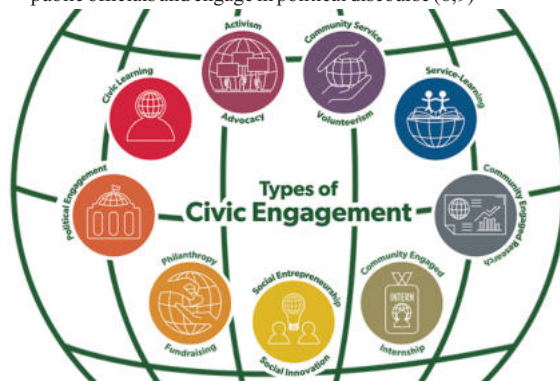


Figure 2: An overview of Civic Engagement in modern times

According to research from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and voter turnout, particularly among young Americans (10,11).

3. Building Social Cohesion and Democratic Values

Education serves as more than academic instruction—it functions as socialization that teaches people how to interact successfully with others. This includes:

- Understanding and appreciating diverse perspectives
- Communicating effectively through writing and speech
- Developing cooperative relationships
- Strengthening empathy and tolerance (12)

The socialization function of education helps create citizens who can work together across differences, a fundamental requirement for democratic societies to function peacefully and productively (13).

4. Promoting Human Rights and Freedoms

Education is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(Article 26) as both a fundamental right and a powerful means of promoting other human rights. Educational systems that integrate human rights education help:

- Empower citizens to advocate for themselves and others
- Foster respect for fundamental freedoms
- Create more equitable and just communities
- Promote international understanding and cooperation (14)

By educating individuals about their rights and the mechanisms to protect them, societies can cultivate active citizenship and strengthen democratic institutions(11).

The Evidence: Education Predicts Democratic Stability Highly Educated Democracies Show Remarkable Stability

Research analyzing democratic transitions from 1960-2000 reveals striking patterns:

Well-Educated Countries (>5 years of schooling):

- 95% of democracies remained democratic after 20 years
- 87% of dictatorships transitioned to democracy within 20 years

Moderately Educated Countries (2.7-5 years):

- 74% of democracies remained democratic after 20 years
- 54% of dictatorships democratized within 20 years

Poorly Educated Countries (<2.7 years):

- Only 54% of democracies survived 20 years
- Only 26% of dictatorships transitioned to democracy within 20 years

This data demonstrates that education is not just correlated with democracy—it fundamentally strengthens democratic resilience while increasing the likelihood of democratic transitions in authoritarian regimes (15).

Education Prevents Democratic Backsliding

Countries with higher educational attainment show greater resistance to authoritarian coups and anti-democratic movements. The evidence suggests that education creates a broad base of citizens who understand democratic values and are willing to defend them, even when facing only weak individual incentives to do so (16).

Beyond Political Participation: Education's Broader Democratic Benefits

Reducing Crime and Promoting Social Stability

Education contributes to democratic stability through multiple pathways, including crime reduction:

- US students attending better-funded schools were less likely to be arrested through age 30
- Swedish data shows federally sentenced individuals with higher education had less extensive criminal histories
- Latin American research demonstrates that increased school attendance reduces crime rates and the probability of incarceration (17)

These findings underscore that investing in education creates safer communities and reduces societal costs, both of which strengthen democratic governance (2).

Economic Development and Democratic Stability

Education yields dividends beyond individual advancement. It strengthens democratic institutions, promotes economic development, and fosters social cohesion. Educated populations are better equipped to participate in modern economies, reducing the economic grievances that can destabilize democratic systems(18).

The Quality of Civic Education Matters

Not all education equally supports democracy. Research indicates that the **content and quality** of civic education significantly impact democratic outcomes:

Effective Civic Education Includes:

1. **Civic Knowledge and Skills:** Understanding governmental processes, political ideologies, constitutional rights, and democratic history
2. **Civic Values and Dispositions:** Appreciation for civil discourse, free speech, and engaging with diverse perspectives
3. **Civic Behaviors:** Developing the confidence to vote, volunteer,

attend public meetings, and engage with communities(16)
Importantly, rote memorization of civics facts does not effectively increase youth voter turnout. Instead, integrating practical information about democratic processes and encouraging active engagement proves far more effective (19).

The American Civic Education Challenge

Despite education's foundational importance to democracy, civic learning has been marginalized in many American schools:

- Only 17% of Americans trust the government to do the right thing (as of March 2019)
- 1 in 4 Americans cannot name the three branches of government
- 70% of 12th graders have never written a letter to give an opinion or solve a problem
- 30% have never participated in a debate(20)

The 2018 Brown Center Report found that while reading and math scores have improved, there has not been a commensurate increase in eighth-grade civics knowledge. High school social studies teachers report being among the least supported teachers, often teaching larger classes and taking on more non-teaching responsibilities (21).

Historical Context: Education and Democracy in America

The link between education and democracy is embedded in American history. Horace Mann, often called "the father of American education," argued in 1848 that "It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion."(22)

The Common Schools Movement Mann helped establish was built on the belief that free, standardized, and universal schooling was essential to American self-governance. This foundational principle—that democracy requires educated citizens—remains as relevant today as it was in the 19th century(23).

Global Imperatives and Challenges

Educational Disparities Threaten Democratic Development

Despite clear evidence of education's importance, significant global disparities persist:

- 42% of countries in Latin America have laws requiring children with disabilities to be educated in separate settings
- Only five countries worldwide have inclusive education laws covering all learners
- In 39 countries, people receive an average of just six years of schooling—three years fewer than in other low- and middle-income countries

These educational gaps represent serious obstacles to democratic development and stability worldwide (24).

The Risk of Education as a Tool of Oppression

It's crucial to recognize that education's impact depends on its content and approach. History provides cautionary examples:

- **Apartheid South Africa:** The Bantu Education Act enforced inferior, segregated schooling to limit Black South Africans' empowerment
- **Nazi Germany:** Education became a propaganda tool to indoctrinate youth with racist ideology
- **Authoritarian regimes:** Educational systems have been deliberately manipulated to undermine democratic norms

The lesson is clear: education strengthens democracy only when civic learning is inclusive, rights-based, and grounded in core democratic values such as equality, freedom, and respect for diversity (25).

Uniting 21st-Century Skills with Civic Learning

Modern education reform movements emphasize "21st-century skills"—collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. While valuable, these skills alone are insufficient for democratic citizenship without explicit focus on democratic values and civic engagement (26).

As one analysis notes, leaders of extremist organizations can display excellence in collaboration, creativity, and digital navigation—yet use these skills for anti-democratic purposes. What distinguishes democratic education is its explicit cultivation of values supporting civic participation and respect for democratic norms(27,28) (Figure3).

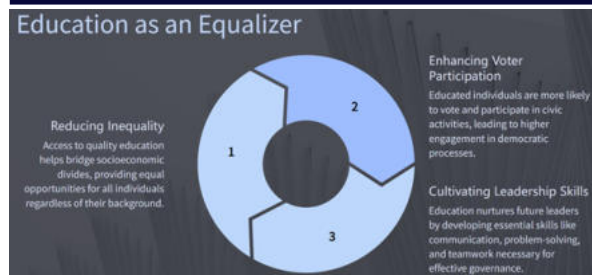


Figure3: Education following democratic standards

Moving Forward: Policy Recommendations

To strengthen democracy through education, policymakers should:

1. **Prioritize civic education** from elementary through secondary school
2. **Invest in teacher training** specifically for civic education
3. **Implement experiential learning** including service learning, simulations, and direct engagement in school governance
4. **Promote inclusive education** ensuring all citizens, regardless of background, receive quality civic education
5. **Integrate media literacy** and critical thinking across curricula
6. **Expand educational access** globally, particularly in regions with low educational attainment
7. **Monitor and assess** civic learning outcomes alongside academic achievement(29)

Conclusion: Education as Democracy's Foundation

Education is far more than a pathway to individual economic success-it is the silent infrastructure upon which democratic societies are built. From equipping citizens to discern truth in an information-saturated world to empowering marginalized communities to claim their rights and participate fully in civic life, education shapes not only individual minds but entire societies.

The evidence is overwhelming: democracies with educated populations are more stable, more resistant to authoritarian threats, and better able to adapt to changing circumstances. Conversely, poorly educated populations struggle to maintain democratic institutions and are more vulnerable to manipulation and authoritarian rule.

As Chief Justice John Roberts observed, "Civic education, like all education, is a continuing enterprise and conversation. Each generation has an obligation to pass on to the next, not only a fully functioning government responsive to the needs of the people, but the tools to understand and improve it." (2,30, 31)

To build democratic societies that are just, resilient, and inclusive, global policymakers must urgently commit-politically, economically, and morally-to investing in inclusive, quality education. This investment must equip all citizens with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, and civic empowerment necessary to uphold and advance democracy. Anything less risks undermining the very foundations of democratic governance and the freedoms we hold dear.

The choice is clear: invest in education, or watch democracy falter. The future of democratic governance depends on the decisions we make today about how we educate tomorrow's citizens.

Sources for further reading

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- Brookings Institution - The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools
- NBER Working Paper - Why Does Democracy Need Education?

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Conflicts of interest

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