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Civic education and learning democracy: their importance for political participation of young people

Dr. Özlem Becerik Yoldaş*

*Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Biga Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences,
Department of Public Administration, Biga / Çanakkale, 17200, Turkey*

Abstract

We experience politics in our daily life and in all social spheres. People, particularly young people, always see politics as a complex process. Often, politically interested and motivated citizens are confronted with the concepts 'democracy', 'politics' and 'democratic elections' in various newspapers or on TV news. Moreover, there are intense debates about democratic deficits, and an increase in extremism is feared if the civic education young people receive is not enhanced. For these reasons, I intend to address the questions of how knowledge about politics is effectively provided through civic education and to show the impact political commitment has on young people by discussing the concepts of civic education, learning democracy and political participation.

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1. Introduction

We experience politics every day and in all social areas. Politics is experienced by the individual and, above all, by young people as a complex process. Often, politically interested citizens are confronted with the notions of 'democracy', 'politics' or 'democratic elections' in newspapers and television news. In addition, democratic deficits are often discussed, and a rise of extremism is feared if the civic education of the youth is not upgraded. Despite criticism that democratic decision-making processes are slow and that the involvement in politics reveal weak

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 (286) 3358738 - 1150; fax: +90 (286) 3358736
E-mail address: ozlemyoldas@comu.edu.tr

points, public political participation is a basic principle of democracy and is considered to be the heart of political considerations (Frevel, 2009: 7). New and intensive discussions on civic education run on for years, such as the adult education in the public in conjunction with professional development. The assumption is that people should be taught about "politics", and they should be able to implement what they have learned in civic education (Beer, Cremer, Massing 1999:11-12). Every citizen is entitled to judge social and political issues differently and, at the same time, to influence the judgments of others with his own judgment and behavior. Beside voter turnout, participation in protests, membership in political parties, associations and clubs a large number of possibilities for political participation in modern societies is affected by the means of the mass media (Rhomberg 2009: 145). The political image and judgment of citizens depend on information from the media (Plasser 2006: 525). The media plays a significant role in imparting knowledge about politics. The reason for this is that civic education and the understanding of democracy allow citizens to participate in and focus on politics (Rhomberg 2009: 161).

But at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, an accelerated decline of confidence in political institutions and in the political system has been registered. The number of non-voters is increasing, and the phenomenon of those discontent and disenchantment with politics is on the rise. For these reasons, I intend to address the question of how political knowledge is effectively provided through civic education. I intend to show the impact which discussions about civic education, learning democracy and political participation can have on the political commitment of young people. The starting point for this topic is the policy distance of youth because different European Values Studies revealed that young people are showing little interest in politics in their daily lives. It is remarkable that young people indicate that they have no interest in politics and feel that many politicians and, in particular, political parties have failed in addressing the needs of young people. Indeed, such serious situations should literally challenge civic education to spark political interest among young people in the classroom and outside of school.

2. Civic Education and Learning Democracy

What does civic education mean? What is the main focus of civic education? Wolfgang Sander stresses that the notion of "civic education" as a generic term for intentional political learning in educational institutions which is used and is not limited to those forms of political learning (Sander 2002: 12). Although there is no substantial and generally accepted definition about civic education in political science, this notion must be delineated from the concept of political socialization, civic and social education (Massing 1999: 27; Detjen 2007: 3).

a) Political socialization: The concept of political socialization is a general term for civic education and training. According to Buhl, educating young people to become members of society, who actively participate in the shaping of the political environment is a crucial step in the context of political socialization (Buhl 2003:16). In this context, the effort to bring the growing generation in contact with politics is the main task of civic education and training, which is defined as 'intended political socialization'. The functional political socialization shapes the political world view of an individual. The people who raise awareness in young people about political processes include family, neighbors, peer groups, the media, the military, the workplace and school as an institution that imparts knowledge, skills and values. Through the active collaboration in political decision-making processes in schools, such as student newspapers or elections of student council representatives, teenagers gain insight into the basic principles of liberal democracies, which can lead to more motivation and willingness on their part to become engaged in politics in and outside of schools (Detjen 2007: 3; Hellmuth/Klepp 2010: 91).

b) Civic education: Education means the civilization of a human being and aims to impact the behavior of individuals (Detjen 2007: 3). But in the course of industrialization, urbanization and political mobilization, a differentiation and institutionalization of civic education and training has happened. Social changes and political decisions, demands for stability in social and political structures, and the legitimacy by citizens led to the emergence and institutionalization of independent civic education and training. This means that in a system change or social change the concept of civic education becomes more important. Thus, civic education is both primarily system-oriented and stability-oriented (Massing 1999: 29).

c) Social education: As a subfield of pedagogy, social education also includes civic education. This is a targeted effort made by a person who is entrusted with education. One main aspect of social education is to promote the basic social attitudes. This includes the capability for empathy, cooperativeness, loyalty, solidarity and tolerance. The basic social attitude is used in the rational assessment of social conditions and issues. Recently, this concept was eclipsed by the concept of social learning. The concept of social learning refers to self-learning in social interaction and the socialization of the interaction (Detjen 2007: 4).

3. The Main Goals and Tasks of Civic Education

Civic education is an independent cross-section part of education which differs from conceptual and institutional tasks (Sander 2002: 11). The ultimate goal of civic education is to encourage the ability and willingness of political participation by providing information and the basis to make conscientious judgments, which is characterized as a "political rationality" according to Bernhard Sutor (Kuhn/Massing 1990: 285). Civic education as a prerequisite of rational and humane action must contribute to the democratization of society and the emancipation of an individual (Ibid: 282). Knowledge of politics, political consciousness and political participation can be viewed as the main objectives of civic education in modern democracies.

Civic education has to meet the goal of political maturity and independence of the citizen in a democratic system. When it comes to education in schools, four groups of citizens need to be considered. First, the apathetic group is made up of people who rarely deal with politics or very rarely cast their ballots in elections. They may be seen as a challenge for civic education and training. Second, the well-informed and judicious people who are very interested in politics. They are well-informed about political life and are not easily manipulated. Outside of elections and voting, they show no active involvement in politics. Third, enabled citizens have knowledge of opportunities for political participation and are capable of rational political judgment. The last group consists of citizens who are actively involved in politics. They hold party memberships, participate in political parties, interest groups or action groups. At this point, it is believed that civic education plays an important role in willingness (Massing 2002: 36).

3.1. Dimensions of civic education

Peter Filzmaier (2007) distinguishes three dimensions of civic education: ⁽¹⁾

- (1) Civic education as the imparting of knowledge: It deals not only with the transfer of factual knowledge, but also with the understanding of pragmatic coherences
- (2) Civic education as a freedom of expression and promotion for participation: Should "support the development of political attitudes, opinions, and values." Political culture is a basic consensus for the existence and quality of democracy, which includes "interest in social and political issues".
- (3) Civic education as social competence: Is only effective with the interaction of theoretical knowledge; it includes the readiness to accept responsibility, to develop a judgment and to select predefined or developed policy options.

To summarize, civic education works on aligning the individual to find a way into the political, economic and social turmoils of political life. Civic education is a tool for the defense and development of democracy. Especially in times of advanced globalization, civic education gains in importance. The participation of a democratic political culture, as well as the mediation between individuals, institutions and social organizations are necessary assignments of civic education (Beer/Cremer/Massing 1999: 13-14).

3.2. Discussions about learning democracy

There are various debates and questions about learning democracy which may be answered in terms of philosophy. Learning democracy focuses on the support and participation of active and responsible people in a democratic society. A learning democracy approach is the close relationship between democracy and civic education. Civic education is a future requirement of democracy and can be only effective in a democratic system (Massing 2002:161). Gerhard Himmelman extends the approach and defines learning politics as learning democracy. The word 'politics' is considered by young people as 'dirty business' so the notion of democracy might gain in sympathy. Thus, he combines the notion of democracy with lifestyle, social system and form of rule. And from this three-way split, he goes further and defines the specific tasks and objectives of civic education (Ibid: 167-169). In short, the concept of learning democracy means understanding the function, value and content of democracy. Students are, therefore, able to experience democracy and politics through their own experiences and actions and understanding and, as a result, develop some abilities when it comes to understanding the notion of democracy (Henkenborg: 284–288).

4. Political Participation

In a representative democracy, the form of government gets its power from the participation of citizens in the political decision-making process (Meyer 2009: 133). If citizens avoid politics, the social system will lose its legitimating function. The forms of political participation are manifold and place different demands on the citizens. We are talking about participation, value consideration and interest enforcement. Examples of political participation are elections, party activities, referendum, strikes or citizens' initiatives (Schultze 2007: 398 ff.). In particular, young people are asked to contribute to politics and to reconcile interests. Thus, it is clear that young people who are active in politics must have basic communicative skills to perceive rules and values easier (Burdewick 2003: 37).

In the context of political debates about the political apathy of young people, questions arise about the political participation of young people and their understanding of policy questions. Discussions about participation are reviewed in the media, especially, if, on election day, young people avoid the ballot box or show no interest in politics, which is considered to be symptomatic of the crisis of democracy and the lack of civic education. At this point, it is necessary to motivate children and teenagers to become politically active. The school, the family and friends are important factors when it comes to explaining political behavior. These peer groups can encourage young people to show a great deal of interest in politics, thereby increasing their willingness to participate politically both in and out of schools (Schwarzer/Zeglovits 2009: 327). It is also reasonable to assume that the political participation of young people depends on social-economic status (Schultze 2007: 399).

In the framework of political participation research, Verba et al. (1995) summarized their findings in a model that explains voluntary participation of citizens in the political system. The model contains three explanatory factors that positively influence political participation. Individually available resources such as time and money can help how citizens participate in politics. The political involvement, such as political interest and political awareness can be classified as a second explanatory factor. The integration into social networks is the third explanatory factor. This determines whether citizens are confronted with details of participation opportunities (Perlot/Zandonella 2009: 427).

To say the young people are uninterested in politics and lack information about politics is a generalization. Based on the results of different studies, it appears that despite different political cultures, going to the polls is perceived as a civic duty. It is also considered to be something which does not warrant a big fuss and requires little information (DeNève 2009: 155). Nevertheless, media consumption has a special influence on the political willingness of participation. The information supply in the media may disorient young people. They are confronted with critical world events and are unable to classify or handle them in everyday life. Hence, they feel overwhelmed and can easily remove themselves from politics (Böhmer 2002: 37–38). Processing information into knowledge is the basis for social action and political participation. At this point, civic education is introduced that should convey the media's portrayal of politics. But what kind of knowledge and which abilities do citizens need to be included in the political system?

The word "knowledge" as opposed to ignorance or being against information indicates a socially validated relation of the psychological system and its environment. In science, knowledge is tested on a probable falsehood. In the education system, knowledge is estimated as an individual knowledge, which means that it represents a form of curriculum vitae. In this context, the mass media serves as a transfer of knowledge for the understanding of information (Luhmann 2002: 98). On the basis of knowledge, other opportunities can be accomplished which provide a goal-oriented direction in the future (Ibid: 97).

To carry out different roles as citizens, you need abilities. The main purpose of civic education is to equip students with political know-how. If you are confronted with political issues or problems, you have to fall back on relevant knowledge. Here, civic education is defined as the "working knowledge"; it is cause-related and has an 'instrumental character'. Abilities expect a working knowledge that is required for the analysis of specific learning subjects. Parts of the working knowledge flow into the expertise and contribute to the development of concepts and the understanding of political categories (Krammer 2009: 19). Thus the concept of competence refers to 'what', based upon which social or policy-didactic expectations are set (Moegling 2008: 29).

5. New Concepts and Opportunities in Civic Education

For a comprehensive, long-term and natural culture of a political participation by young people, different projects are organized to spark the interest of young people for politics and to strengthen their willingness to participate. Those projects and initiatives in the field of civic education and participation which have been initiated will be shown with the EU examples. In the field of civic education, the Council of Europe declared the year 2005 as the "European year for civic education", with the objective of promoting democratic political education through educational activities within EU member states and to encourage those individuals responsible to improve education policy (Kordik 2008: 806). The reason for the launch of the 2005 campaign year was to improve low turnout and lack of participation in young people in public and political life. An important step in the promotion of young people's participation was taken at the EU level with the adoption of the new EU youth strategy of the EU Council. The framework for youth policy cooperation in Europe was governed by 2010 to 2018. Topics of the EU youth strategy are: ⁽²⁾ Education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, volunteer commitment, health and well-being, youth in the world, creativity and culture, non-formal education, participation by young people and social integration. With the EU project "Youth in action" makes a high contribution to the youth participation because it encourages young people to be politically engaged in society and support Europe.

The EU youth strategy also reached its peak in Germany. In 2011, the first results were presented in the framework of a workshop with the title: 'Participation of Young People in a Democratic Europe', where representatives of political institutions, youth associations, different departments of the education ministry and some adults joined forces. The main focus of this workshop was to analyze the measures taken by the EU member countries to support the participation of young people ⁽³⁾.

6. Conclusion

As already noted, the main objective of civic education is to educate students to become mature and capable citizens. Ultimately, democratic societies depend on civic education and political commitment. It is clear that civic education plays a crucial role in the political culture of a modern democracy. At this point, the institution 'school' enters into the picture which is responsible for teaching politics to children and young people and empowering them to become critical and conscious citizens with their own judgment on political participation. However, given an interest in political participation, the mass media is an important link between participation and politics because young people learn politics via the media. Political discussions and conversations with family, friends or at school can affect the knowledge and political engagement in a positive way.

Civic education is and will remain the subject of empirical investigations in the future because it is repeatedly confronted with new challenges to manage key risks of the democratic legal system. Low voter turnouts or growing

disinterest in politics by young people are forcing policy makers to consider the central role of civic education in democracy and to make suggestions for improving civic education. There is no doubt that the subject of ‘civic education’ is not enough to convey pure information about rights and duties in a democracy and to motivate young people politically. Gaining experience in the social environment and active experience with democracy can significantly increase the political commitment of young people. The political participation of young people and reasonable policy making in all areas that affect young people are shaping the future. Given this situation, politicians are invited to perceive the interests, needs and desires of young people to fight their disenchantment with politics or mere disinterest.

Notes

1 <http://sciencev1.orf.at/science/filzmaier/73825>

2 <http://www.jugendpolitikineuropa.de/>

3 http://www.jugendpolitikineuropa.de/downloads/4-20-2942/transfer_prot_Werkstatt_Part_280611.pdf

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