

2. Political culture

2.1 Democracy comes to life through its citizens

An example:

Parliamentary elections produce winners and losers. The majority forms the new government, the minority the opposition. The former government may lose office, and a new government with a different political outlook replaces it.

The rules are clear, but this is not enough. The election system will only work if we can rely on the losers, the minority, to accept the result. If they do not, an election can spark off violent conflict, tearing a society apart, instead of strengthening cohesion among its members.

An election campaign gives parties the opportunity to communicate their ideas to the citizens. But what happens if parties that take part promote a racist, fundamentalist or antidemocratic agenda?

For elections to function as one of the most important ways for citizens to participate in democratic decision making, a society apparently needs more than just a framework of laws that put the election system into place. There needs to be trust in the political process and ways of ensuring that these processes have been carried out properly.

The example shows that democracy depends equally on a set of rules and on the citizens' attitudes towards democracy. They must understand and appreciate the system, and they must feel responsible for its stability. Parties must treat each other as competitors, but not as enemies. Only then can democracy show its strength as the only system in which a change of government is possible without changing the political system.

Democracy consists of a system of institutions and processes that include general elections, parliamentary representation and control of power through checks and balances. Some constitutions include direct participation through referenda or a constitutional court. This is the stage, and the citizens are the actors. Literally, the citizens must therefore be willing and able to play their part, and they must identify with the political system of democracy.

Democracy is a system of institutions rooted in a political culture. The institutional system can set the framework for this culture, but cannot create it or ensure its stability. The same principle applies to autocratic government. An autocrat also depends on a suitable political culture, based on politically docile subjects rather than active and committed systems.

2.2 The cultural dimension of human rights

Human rights that are civil and political in nature spell out what democratic processes are in practice, including freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of the media (that is, the prohibition of censorship), the right to vote, and the principle of equality and non-discrimination that applies to the enjoyment of every human right. When countries ratify a human rights treaty, they promise to harmonise national laws and practices so that they are consistent with these international standards. They do so out of free will.

What happens if the state fails to uphold its human rights promises? There are different mechanisms of protection that have been established by the UN and by regional human rights institutions that have promulgated regional human rights laws that governments can sign up to. For example, in Europe there is the European Convention on Human Rights, which concentrates on civil and political rights. Governments can also sign up to the European Social Charter, which specifies economic, social and cultural rights. If a government has signed up to the Convention but acted in a contrary manner, citizens (and, indeed, any person within the state's jurisdiction) of the member states of the Council of Europe can ultimately refer a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

In most cases, the enjoyment of human rights takes place within governments organised as constitutional democracies through the usual mechanisms of democratic processes. These mechanisms involve evolving laws but also a culture of participation and engagement by citizens.

Democracy and human rights depend on an institutional framework that consists of two components: a set of rules and principles established in the constitution and legal system, and a political culture. Democracy and human rights are embedded in a set of principles, values and responsibilities. Democracy and human rights allow dissent on issues, but they can only do so if there is strong consent on the framework that allows and protects, but also limits liberties. You may disagree on almost anything, but this works only if all identify with the system that allows disagreement.

2.3 Teaching through democracy and human rights – democratic culture in school

There can be no democracy without committed democrats.

Each generation receives its democratic heritage, and will hopefully understand and appreciate it, and learn how to make active use of it. It is the task of EDC/HRE, and education as a whole, to support and encourage the young generation to become active and committed democrats.

The cultural traditions that are favourable for democracy develop slowly, as the historical experience in many countries has shown. Nation-building projects in post-civil war societies face their most serious obstacles in the absence of a democratic cultural tradition. A blueprint of a democratic institution can be imported, as it were, but the cultural roots of democracy cannot – they must literally stem from the society’s cultural heritage.

Political culture can therefore be conceived in constructivist categories. It is acquired through processes of learning and socialisation. Therefore it makes a difference whether schools are governed democratically or autocratically, as the students may be expected to learn how to live in, or under, the form of government they experience in early life.

School as a micro-society can support its students to acquire and appreciate key elements of a democratic and human rights culture, including the following:

- The students are able to know and express their interests and views with confidence and self-esteem.
- The students treat each other with mutual respect, including listening and empathy, that is, the willingness and ability to switch perspectives.
- The students are able to settle conflict through non-violent means, that is, negotiation and compromise.
- The students appreciate the function of institutional frameworks that protect and limit their individual rights of liberty. They add the “soft”, informal element of political culture to the “hard”, formal element of rules.
- The students appreciate politics as a practical effort aiming to solve problems that require attention and a decision.
- The students participate in the process of electing representatives and in formal decision-making processes.
- The students engage in non-prescribed ways to influence decision making, such as through awareness raising, activism, lobbying and by handling problems on their own.
- The students take responsibility for their decisions and choices, considering their impact both for themselves and for others.
- The students are aware that if they do not participate in decisions that affect them, others will make them, and the outcome may be unfavourable for them.

Political culture is strongly linked to the attitudes and values that young citizens acquire through processes of socialisation, including their school experience. There are other agents that also strongly influence the socialisation process of young people, particularly the family, peers and the media. On the other hand, the school community offers children and adolescents the earliest opportunities to experience interaction in society and in public; we may therefore assume that school has a decisive influence on how the democratic heritage is passed on to the young generation. Through their learning and experience in the school setting, young people can develop the habits and skills for lifelong engagement with democratic process and human rights values, both through formal decision-making processes as well as through everyday interactions.