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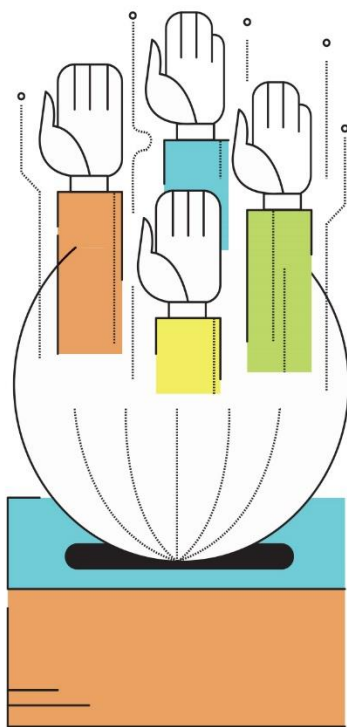
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# EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY



HELEN OSIEJA

# **Education for Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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# Preface

The idea to write this book arose after my personal experiences as a teacher, citizen, researcher, and a short time as a political analyst in the Swedish Parliament. I realized that what was taught in school under the name of "democracy" did not reflect what politicians actually said and did.

I observed with great interest what was going on during the political campaign for the Swedish parliamentary elections of 2018. I found that many teachers did not teach their students critical thinking, respect for pluralism and tolerance. On the contrary, I saw how some teachers incited and indoctrinated students against parties they did not like and how the police on several occasions had to intervene to stop confrontations in front of the party booths.

I had an assignment at the Swedish parliament as a political analyst which unfortunately did not last long. The work itself was fascinating, but when I pointed out to a Member of Parliament that she used many terms incorrectly, it was enough for her to fire me. I realized that the MP had no education whatsoever in either political science or international law, even though she was responsible for issues relating to international relations and migration. These experiences of having seen examples of incompetence and opportunism made me first begin to doubt the value of democracy as a form of government. But I soon realized that the solution is not to dismantle democracy because of incompetent politicians; on the contrary, if democracy does not work as it should, it means that democracy must be enhanced.

As the events that unfolded on January 6, 2021 in Washington, D.C. prove, democracy is today in danger in many countries of the world precisely because of ignorance regarding the pillars and tenets of democracy. It is also in danger because of politicians who forget that they have been elected as public servants and that therefore it is their duty to serve the people, not to be served by the people. As British historian and politician Lord Acton wrote: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

<https://democracyandeducation.org>

# Acknowledgements

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Helen Osieja

Stockholm, January 2021.

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## Introduction

The aim of this book is to prepare future citizens for living in a democratic country. To inform them about their rights and duties. To clarify that, while democracy implies freedom, it is not the same as anarchy, because rights go hand in hand with responsibilities. Unfortunately, the last decade has been characterized by an increasing polarization and political violence; dialogue has been substituted for by insults, labels, and other types of aggression.

While conflict in a society is healthy because it denotes the existence of pluralism, violence is not. Democracy, with all its flaws, is still much better than all other forms of government: No other form of government is characterized by a peaceful transfer of power; no other form of government allows its subjects the personal freedoms that we take for granted in democracies, and no other form of government makes rulers accountable for their actions.

It seems that many people have forgotten what the pillars of democracy are, and assume they have the right of attacking and harassing others only because they do not share their political views. Lamentably, bullying and harassment do not stay out of the workplace, and the author has experienced how not agreeing with the majority caused her to be bullied by colleagues and even excluded from a Christmas dinner. Other people fare much worse- they can even be beaten up for just not agreeing with what the majority thinks.

Demonstrations turn often into riots that produce multiple arrests. People get wounded at rallies that turn violent and, as some unfortunate cases prove, can even be killed.

This is a textbook for a basic course in democratic values. It is intended mainly for young people who will soon come of age and become citizens, as well as for immigrants from non-democratic countries that maybe do not know what rules apply in their new country of residence. The book covers content for 24 to 30 lesson hours. At the end of each lesson there



is a glossary and questions that can be discussed in a group and others that can be answered as an assignment.

The first chapter presents what politics is about and discusses the factors of political struggle. It also explains the differences between democratic and other forms of government, like authoritarian, totalitarian and theocratic. It discusses the role of the citizen in politics and presents the aims of the course.

The second chapter explains the tenets of democracy and what these mean for the citizen. Furthermore, it discusses the rights and responsibilities of the citizen in a democracy.

The subject of the third chapter is political parties and ideologies. The chapter presents the main ideologies that exist in democratic systems nowadays, and the importance of ideologies that distinguish political parties. Furthermore, it presents the main differences between democratic and undemocratic political parties.

The fourth chapter discusses the characteristics of the ideal democratic society, like secularism, the strict division of political and civil society, - which is non-existent in other political systems-, the separation of the private and the public life realms, the significance of freedom of religion and the principle of the rule of law in a democracy.

The topic of the fifth chapter is democratic political culture: It defines political culture, discusses the role of the agents that form political culture in a society, the forging of national identity and the main components of a democratic political culture, which include, but are not limited to, the rule of law, the equality of all citizens before the law, and secularism.

The sixth chapter presents the enemies of democracy, that is, all attitudes, behaviors and organizations that directly or indirectly pose a threat to democracy.

The seventh chapter is the conclusion of the textbook, and it summarizes the rights and obligations of the citizen in a democracy.

Some concepts are mentioned in more than one chapter, because they are relevant in more than one way, like is the case of the rule of law. The rule of law is not only a basic tenet of all systems that call themselves democratic, but also a concept of political culture. The same is true of the equality of all citizens before the law.

This book is not, and does not intend to be, an advanced course on political science. Its aim, though, is to be a guide for course participants of what to expect from, and how to behave in a democracy.

## What is politics all about?

You might ask yourself why discuss politics at all if you are not interested in the subject. Yet, you live in a country with a political system and a social order. With laws, norms and regulations which you might agree or disagree with, but which you must obey.

Politics is about **public administration**, that is, the management of the resources of the country. Political leaders are the ones who decide how the limited resources of the country are to be used, and who is to benefit from those resources. As resources are limited and needs unlimited, there will be disagreement as to how to best use the economic resources of the state. But politics is also about **power**, or the capacity to influence others. Power can be economic, like is the case of enterprises which can influence politicians to pass laws favorable to their interests. Power can also be military, that is, the capacity of a country to use force to defend its interests. But power can also be based on knowledge, and that is why education is so important for the citizen. An educated citizen will be capable to defend her rights much better than an illiterate citizen, who is probably not even aware of what her leaders are doing.

In democracies, the struggle for power is carried out in elections, in which **political parties** compete for the votes of the citizens. Political parties are registered organizations with a minimum number of members which participate in elections. Political parties usually have an **ideology**, which is a system of opinions, of values and of beliefs. Political parties claim to represent the interests of particular groups of people. For example, in Sweden there is a feminist party which claims to represent the rights of women. Likewise, there are workers' parties in many countries which claim to represent the rights of the working classes. In any case, what must be kept in mind is that the main aim of political parties is to gain votes in an election so they can obtain political power.

### 1. The factors of the political struggle

No matter how wealthy a country is, economic resources will always be limited while the needs of the people are unlimited. Since governments obtain their economic resources from taxes paid by the citizens, a main factor of struggle is socioeconomic, that is, how the resources will be used, and who will benefit from them. While for some people the struggle for political power is limited to the socioeconomic realm, most will admit that there are other relevant factors, like ideological, religious, national, racial, and cultural factors.

Since social and economic inequality exists in all countries, there are different social classes with different interests. While a businessman and a worker employed by him might be compatriots, one can expect that their perspectives and their interests are going to be different, and that they will most likely vote for different political parties.

Furthermore, since most countries have a diverse population, cultural factors play a role as well. In ethnically diverse countries, political parties might have a cultural profile representing a group of people. An example of this are parties with an ethnic or religious profile, which claim to represent people who belong to a given ethnic or religious group.

## 2. The struggle for power in different political systems

As mentioned above, all countries or political entities have limited resources and unlimited needs. All countries or political entities have to face choices as to how the resources are used and who is going to benefit from those resources. In all political entities there will be individuals or groups that aim to attain power and influence others, but the ways the struggle for power looks like will vary greatly between democratic and non-democratic entities.

In democratic countries, the struggle is peaceful and takes place in the form of elections. The transfer of power from one political party or parties to other political parties takes place peacefully. In contrast, in non-democratic countries, the struggle is violent and is carried out as rebellions, riots or revolutions. Sometimes these rebellions or revolutions can last years and cost thousands of lives. The political struggle depends on which group can exert more violence on its opponents, and once in power the victors will forbid all competition for power. Since there is no legal opposition, the losers are forced to go underground, and their activities will be declared illegal by the group in power. In non-democracies there is no opposition, but rather dissidence. **Dissidents**, or people who disagree with the government, are often persecuted, arrested, put in jail and in some cases tortured or killed.

In democracies political parties promise positive changes and benefits to their electors. Electors choose the party they believe best represents them, and the contest is decided by the number of votes each party obtains in an election. If the **government** (the political party in power at a given moment in a **state**) does not deliver what it promised, it risks losing its electors to another party or parties. It is the people who decide which party or parties attain political power in a democracy, and parties respect their opponents in the political struggle.

In non-democratic countries, power is tantamount to physical violence and intimidation. People do not get to elect their representatives, and usually the only way to get rid of them is using violence as well.

## 3. The citizen in politics

In democracies, politicians are called public servants, because they are elected by the people to serve them. If public servants do not deliver what they promised, or if they misbehave while in office, the people can demand their dismissal.

In contrast, in non-democracies politicians are served by the people. They do not represent the people of the country and they use the country's resources to satisfy their own needs, as there is nobody who will demand **accountability**.

As stated above, knowledge empowers people. An educated population will not permit abuses of power by the government; it will demand accountability and will express its will in elections by voting. Furthermore, an educated population will not be fooled and manipulated as easily as an illiterate population. An educated people will defend their rights, organize and protest - albeit in a peaceful manner- whenever they perceive that their leaders are not doing what is expected of them.

It is a very unfortunate fact that the poor, the most marginalized members of society, do not usually vote and therefore have little or no chance of improving their situation. It is easy for the powerful to take advantage of a population who does not know how to defend their rights.

You might think, but what can I as a private citizen do to influence my political leaders? Well, a lot, together with a group of people who share your interests and concerns. You can join an interest group. You can start a petition for something you consider important. You can join a political party and run for office. You can file a lawsuit against the government if you believe that you have been wronged by it and obtain a redress. But you can do this only if you are involved.

#### 4. Aims of this course

You live in a democracy because you were either born in one or you and your family decided to immigrate to a country with a democratic system. You have probably become a citizen either by becoming an adult (in most countries at 18 years of age) or by **naturalization**, that is, by obtaining the citizenship of a country other than your country of birth. Or you will soon come of age and be able to vote.

The only path for a people or a country to flourish is peace. In democracies, conflict is inevitable (like in any other system), but violence is not. Respecting differences and solving conflicts peacefully is indispensable to avoid violence not only at the national level, but also to preserve peace at the international level. Violence threatens democracy, stability, and peace.

Your classmates, colleagues, friends, and relatives might have opinions different from yours, but that does not make them despicable. Not in a democracy, because pluralism is one of its pillars. You might find it impossible to agree with certain people, but you can always agree to disagree without becoming enemies.

Democracy is a form of government where citizens have the right to live their lives in the way they choose. Democracy allows us to have our own opinions without being afraid of punishment. However, democracy is a fragile form of government because there are many forces which see it just as an instrument to attain power and not as an end in itself.

This course has several aims:

1. To prepare you to be a responsible citizen of a democratic country, and to assume the rights and responsibilities that living in a democracy implies.
2. To clarify what the limits to our rights in a democracy are, namely, the rights of other people, common good, and social order.
3. To prepare you to defend your opinions and your rights without breaking the law.
4. To clarify why conflict and violence are not synonyms, and that while conflict is inevitable and healthy, violence is only destructive.

Nonetheless, this book does not aim to convince you of any political ideology or of voting for any party, because that is something that only you can decide. Hopefully, this book can aid you in deciding what your political preferences are, and of motivating you to assume your rights and responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic country.



*Naturalization ceremony in Florida, USA, 2012. These people have officially become US citizens.*

## Glossary

**Accountability** – The responsibility of a politician for the choices she makes on behalf of his or her people.

**Dissident** – A person who is critical of the government in non-democratic systems.

**Government** – The public administration of a state at a given period.

**Ideology** – A system of ideas, of opinions and beliefs not based on scientific evidence, and therefore not able to be proven true or false.

**Naturalization** – The process by which an alien can become a citizen of a country other than his or her country of birth.

**Pluralism** – The coexistence of different political ideologies, parties, and organizations in a country.

**Political parties** – The entities in a democracy which can directly participate in elections. An organization must usually have a minimum number of members to be considered a political party.

**Power** – The capacity to influence others without being influenced by them.

**Public administration** – the management of the state's affairs, for example the economy, the health system, and the educational system.

**State** – The institutions that rule over a territory and its people.

**Topics for discussion:**

1. Are you politically involved in any way? If the answer is NO, what issues could motivate you to become politically active?
2. Could you be a good friend of somebody who has totally different political opinions from your own? Why?

**Questions:**

1. What is public administration?

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2. Give examples of
  - a) economic power

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- b) military power

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## c) power of knowledge

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3. Name two political parties of your country of residence. What are their main differences?

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4. Name three factors of political struggle.

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5. What does the concept of **pluralism** mean?

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6. How are conflicts solved in a democracy as compared to other forms of government?

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