

SUBFLY-SD 19-COP-0042

From Lyceum to lecture hall

On democracy and student democracy

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Abstract

This text is based on several lectures held in Norway and Romania for undergraduate students of social sciences. The context is a student exchange, and the topic of the project is 'student democracy'. My lectures aimed to introduce the concept of democracy in general and Nordic democracy in particular. First there is an attempt to define democracy. After considering the phenomenon's historical roots, relevant theories and concepts are presented, such as democratic deliberation and participation. The practice of democracy is examined through Norwegian models for cooperation in economy. The text further elaborates on trust and social capital, pointing out their importance for the workings of society. This line of reasoning leads to a normative argument for student democracy. Aims, benefits and challenges of democratic practice by students are considered, and the case for furthering democracy in institutions of higher education is made. I advance that building student democracy leads to a widening of participation, creates greater resilience both for the organization and individuals, and active learning by students. Higher education should create citizens able to debate and cooperate. Obviously there are challenges but on balance I find education for democracy will benefit both individual students, the organization and all of society.

Keywords: Student democracy; social capital; trust; deliberate democracy; tripartite collaboration.

I. Introduction

This text is the extended version of a series of lectures conducted under the canopy of project SUBFLY, facilitated by Erasmus+. SUBFLY focused on student democracy and aimed to increase understanding and skills relating to democratic processes among students. The project was intended to be part of a formative process as democratic citizens. In a sense we educate the next generation of public servants, professionals and business leaders for democratic values and attitudes.

Lectures were held in Norway and Romania and attendants came from several European countries. The target group to be addressed consisted of undergraduate students, mainly studying economy. My brief was to talk about democracy in its various forms and permutations with the main object to introduce concepts and perspectives on democracy and to develop general understanding of those. The title refers to the continuity between the Hellenistic tradition and our contemporary lecture hall, as one may argue exists both in terms of democratic thought and of being an educational institution.

In our seminars and lectures we did attempt to practice what we teach. Students were exposed to information and ideas, then encouraged and guided to use this knowledge in the workshop following. The assignment urged students to theorize and reflect about democracy and apply relevant concepts to a real-life situation. By working in mixed groups participants improved their multicultural skills and learned from each other. Practical teamwork was rounded off by a presentation given by each group, reflecting on the process, students' experiences, and the lessons they had learned.

Lectures were held in a dialogical form, and in the following text I attempt a flat and open structure. The information supplied is rather straightforward and I do not delve deeply into academic debates nor distinctions or details. Some relevant names are mentioned and there is a list of references which might be seen as recommended reading for those who want to learn more about the matter.

Part II of this text contains a descriptive presentation of central features of democracy. The text opens with a wide scope; it then proceeds to treat subjects supportive of extending participatory democracy to educational organizations. Selected points are the concepts of voter- and discursive democracy, a categorization of democratic systems into majoritarian and consensual, the role of collaboration as illustrated by Norway, and background on trust and social capital. Those subjects gradually lead up to a normative consideration of our main issue, student democracy.

As such, part II serves as a background; the informed reader may choose to proceed directly to part III, where arguments for student democracy are considered and its benefits presented. Here the threads connect, highlighting the possible role of educational institutions in shaping the future of democracy. Arguments are about advantages for students, educators and universities, and all of society.

The text is rounded off in the Aristotelian tradition by a summery and conclusion given in Part IV.

II. On democracy, its theory and practice

Attempts at definition

The term democracy is widely known, used, and abused. So, what is democracy? Let me remind you of a fact we all know, that there are numerous states that call themselves democracy. We may try to narrow down the field by elimination, somewhat arbitrarily sort out the likes of the former GDR¹, the DPRK², or DR Congo³, and the various authoritarian regimes who let people vote from time to time. Examples are abundant. And what about one-party-states that allow inhabitants to vote?

There are many ways to measure democracy and plentiful websites dedicated to lists on which country is most democratic by which parameters. Examples are the ratings and rankings published yearly by Economist Intelligence Unit⁴ or Freedom House⁵. There is a plethora of books, pamphlets, speeches, films and so on, that explain and enlarge on the idea of democracy.

But what is true democracy? Is that equal to liberal democracy? In other words: does democracy necessarily imply secular liberalism? Do we count in illiberal democracies, self-declared or not?

In the liberal view cornerstones of democracy include freedom of assembly and speech, voting rights, minority rights, inclusiveness, and equality. Among those, general suffrage, the right to vote, is often highlighted. The principle is 'one person one vote'. Can suffrage be the litmus-test of democracy? "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."⁶

Karl Popper⁷ among others defined democracy in contrast to dictatorship or tyranny, focusing on the opportunity for the people to control their leaders and oust them without need for violent upheaval or revolution. Often this is expressed in more colorful language, as in the verdict stating that in a functioning democracy we may "kick out the rascals from time to time", which often is ascribed to Joseph Schumpeter. Mark Twain, probably falsely, is attributed the adage that we must change our politicians from time to time for the same reason as we change a child's diapers, because they stink. Many further efforts at definition exist, most centered on the right to vote. Connected is the problem if, and to what extent, choices between real alternatives exist to provide an opportunity to discipline bad politicians and appoint better ones. Let us turn to history for clarification.

¹ The German Democratic Republic existed from 1949 to 1990

² Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North-Korea)

³ The Democratic Republic of the Congo

⁴ <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2021-less-than-half-the-world-lives-in-a-democracy/>

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

⁶ Schumpeter, 1950. p. 250

⁷ Popper, 2020. vol1:120ff, vol.2:127ff 160ff

A bit of history

Western political theorists when challenged about democracy, habitually refer to Antiquity. So, let us go *ad fontes*. Etymologically the term democracy derives from ancient Greek; *dēmos* is the 'people' and *kratos* means 'rule'. Systems with degrees of empowerment of free male citizens were discussed and practiced in Hellenic city-states from the age of Cleisthenes (508 BCE) onward, and in the Roman Republic until Caesar made himself dictator for life in 44 BCE. Alas, similarity in name may be deceptive. As political systems go, there is not much likeness between the ancients' perception of democracy and modern Western concepts of it. Keep in mind that the ancient thinkers considered democracy for one possible form of rule, not necessarily the best. They saw democracy as a procedure for decision-making, there being nothing inherently moral about the majority getting its will.

The Hellenistic polis was a small unit. Athens consisted of 300 000 inhabitants at most, out of these 40 000 were 'free men'. Decisions were made in huge mass meetings. Important positions rotated among the male population and were filled by drawing lots. This was a genuine peoples governance in the sense that there were no professionals, only amateurs. Officeholders were chosen in turn, not according to expertise and skills but by chance.

Probably this is one of the reasons Plato scorned democracy. The reader might be familiar with his famous metaphor of the ship of state in book 6 of his *Republic*⁸. Let me paraphrase shortly: if you were on board a ship whom would you prefer to steer – a rabble of drunken sailors or a true captain, experienced in the art of navigation? In modern terms: if you get sick, will you see a doctor or will you ask your friends on Facebook to recommend a treatment? Well, probably both. Plato thought governing should be done by highly educated experts. No voting or majority decisions. Modern thought is rather that experts should guide us but we, the people, determine the objectives of politics.

Talking about votes: if the cradle of democracy stood in Athens, the phenomenon of voting has its roots in many places and elections of some kind are nothing unusual. The Roman republic had an extensive and complicated system of translating the will of the plebeians into political action. And Cicero in his works⁹ complains how difficult it is to ensure rational, democratic processes.

The period of migration in Europe, loosely set from as early as 300 CE to as late as 800 CE, saw the breakdown of sophisticated systems of governance. Democratic mechanisms still existed in various corners of the world – e.g. the Icelandic Alþingi founded in 930. And during medieval times a number of 'free cities' ruled themselves to a large degree. But most of Europe and Asia was part of empires, dominated by the idea of the absolute ruler, with the people as mere subjects bowing in submission.

⁸ Plato 1901 p. 181f

⁹ Cicero 2013

The interesting thing when referring to Antiquity is that each later period picks parts that are useful, fills them with new meanings and uses them in new ways when the time is ripe. Antiquities' ideas on equality and participation were revived by the Renaissance humanists and elaborated on in the Age of Enlightenment. John Locke wrote on the right to pursuit life, liberty, and happiness; that found entry into the US Declaration of Independence of 1776. At the heart of Kant's moral theory¹⁰ are his thoughts on the autonomy of man. Rousseau¹¹ advanced the concept of the general will of the people, where consensus, peace and harmony are achieved through the exchange of opinions and by shared norms. These ideas initiated a development towards the political emancipation of the common people; meanwhile the creation of nation-states offered new possibilities to its citizens for participation and social mobility. With the French revolution democracy acquired a political momentum. Now the sovereign people wanted to govern themselves. And elect their own rulers.

Voters' democracy

From that point on we see waves of political emancipation and mobilization during the last centuries. In due course the right to participate and vote expands, from a select few to all adult men at first, then including women after the turn of the last century. The unrestricted right to vote, universal suffrage, is often seen as the hallmark of a true democracy. Voting is a common way of reaching a decision peacefully. It is unambiguous and it is cheap, results come quick and are legitimate because voting behavior and results match. Perfectly. Usually, the right to vote is restricted to certain persons, such as members of a certain society or shareholders in a venture.

At this time, let me mention the distinction between direct and indirect democracy: Direct democracy is a system where the people themselves deliberate and decide on legislation, while in a representative democracy the people choose officials to govern as their representatives. By now the vast majority of democratic systems have settled for representative representation. This kind of democracy is commonly understood as voter democracy and is highly competitive. The public partakes in politics by electing representatives who compete for votes. Influence from below moves through political parties that strive for power. Politics is perceived as what happens in the parliament, on state visits, at G20-summits and the like. Politics is what the politicians are doing, not normal citizens. And equality is understood as equal voting rights.

An underlying assumption is that common people are not informed or clever enough to participate in complex decisions. The citizen does not possess competence nor capacity; we vote every fourth year or so, then we have to wait and see. And in most democratic systems there now are populist currents

¹⁰ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

¹¹ Rousseau, J-J. & Cole, G. D. H. (2013)

claiming that even if we may appoint an elite, 'they' will do as 'they' like. Politics has apparently become a matter for the initiate and the illuminati. Whatever became of the will of the people?

The people, it seems, have lost interest in voting, and do not trust the practice very much anymore. Norwegian parliamentary elections in 2021 saw a voter turnout of 76,6 %, which is considered good. Here all citizens above 18 now have the right to vote, and non-citizens too, under certain conditions. Gender differences in political participation are almost gone; minorities and migrants are represented. Freedom of speech is asserted, as well as freedom of assembly and similar rights. However, this has not led to a growth in political activity. Participation in elections is declining in most democracies, as is membership in political parties. Competitive democracy is losing ground.

Participatory democracy

When people who differ in opinion need to make a decision, voting is a useful method, yes. But before voting, ought not the people deliberate on the matter at hand and exchange views? Politics should not be competition but deliberation about goals and values. And, if the interests of the citizen are at center of the political decision-making process, should not the common citizen partake in those activities?

The idea of participatory democracy is not opposed to but rather complementary to voter democracy. Its proponents hold that the people's participation in political decisions defines the extent to which a society may be called democratic. Practices that empower all citizens to take part in decisions and to initiate change can be implemented at different degrees, as transparency, consultation, dialogue, and partnership; and there are many ways to organize communication with and participation by citizens¹². In this sense politics is what happens in public institutions and in the arenas that affect them, e.g. in large companies and organizations and in the mass media. Equality then means the ability to take part in the public political dialogue. Participation, at all levels, means people talking to each other.

The related idea of deliberative democracy emphasizes the need for political debate by an interested and informed public. Democracy depends on a knowledgeable dialogue between politicians, public servants, and citizens. And vice versa, informed communication sustains and enhances democracy.

Deliberative democracy is a constant dialogue; decisions are made on basis of a broad, public debate that aims at political consensus. The citizens air their views, reflect, and exchange opinions, until they agree on the situation and on ways to act. In an ideal setting it is the good argument that counts, not the person or institution uttering it¹³. The practical problem is to find time and space for a domination-free dialogue, and channels to bring the dialogue forward to the decision-makers.

¹² Council of Europe (2020) <https://rm.coe.int/civil-participation-in-decision-making-toolkit-/168075c1a5>

¹³ Vide the works of philosophers as Jürgen Habermas or Arne Næss

By partaking in debates and organizations citizens increase their ability to understand and handle political issues; they become skilled in democracy. This is observed already by Tocqueville¹⁴ and is repeated by political scientists such as Putnam. We must learn and practice democracy in our daily life, not by voting, the argument goes, rather by taking on tasks and positions in the local community. Voluntary action and community responsibility, networks and cooperation will create a good society.

Despite all ideals and clever ideas, in fact the level of political participation by ordinary people is low. There is generally weak political interest and a sense of distance from the political processes. Support for competitive democracy is strongest among the elderly, especially those connected to organizations of various kinds. Members of younger generations seem disinterested in or disillusioned about voting. As for participation and dialogue – honestly, who can find the time and resources?

However, there are great differences between social groups in participation and attitudes. Political engagement grows with increasing social status, which can be due to growth in political resources. Ability and means to assert oneself require articulation skills, organizational power and a network. We know that education promotes an active role in democracy, and so does membership in organizations. These factors strengthen a person's belief that it is possible to influence political decisions.

A tale of two systems

Allow me to expand on perspectives and ways of analyzing political systems. As a starting point I use two ideal types, established by Arend Lijphart in his seminal work *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), wherein he talks about the differences between 'majoritarian' and 'consensual' rule. These are two different ways how liberal democracies translate popular opinion into executive power.

Consensual democracy wants to make government inclusive, wants to ensure that as many people as possible agree with decisions. Opposition parties have the possibility to influence policy, to make their voice heard. So do organizations and interest-groups. A consensual state typically has a multiparty system; this finds expression in parliamentarism, proportional electoral systems and corporatist structures. These institutions ensure that policy can be controlled by large majority only and that the ability by those in power to infringe on minority rights is limited.

Majoritarian democracy is a conventional form of democracy, used in many countries. Examples are Great Britain and its former colonies. Accordingly, Arend Lijphart calls this the 'Westminster model'. Here representatives are chosen by simple plurality voting, and 'the winner takes it all'. Usually this is a two-party system. Majoritarian rule wants to ensure that the will of the majority is fully expressed by the executive. The aim of politics is to enforce one's own policy, as much and as lasting as possible.

¹⁴ Tocqueville, 1945 [1840]

There are clear positions and there is a clear opposition. This model may work fine when economic growth covers tensions in society. In times as ours, conflicts in majoritarian democracies may cause breakdown in community. And the elites' dependence on votes leads to a populist form of politics. The main objective then becomes to procure votes, by hook or crook.

Lijphart finds "that consensus democracy produces better results - but without the expectation that the differences will be very strong and significant"¹⁵. But when looking at "kinder, gentler" aspects of democracy, such as incarceration rates, women's rights and the like, consensus democracy performs substantially better.

A look to Norway

Norway does not fulfill all criteria for either kind of model but possesses many of the hallmarks of a consensual democracy. We are in a no-mans-land empirically, and living well with that, a prosperous and peaceful part of the globe. Blame it on history, geography, and sheer luck.

Scandinavia's development towards democracy took place without the use of conflict and violence. The last war between Nordic states was fought in 1814. This Swedish-Norwegian war lasted for less than three weeks and ended with a compromise. From then on inter-state relations in Scandinavia have been characterized by peace and cooperation.

Norway was a periphery of little interest to the big powers. Related and more important, it had a highly homogenous population with a small degree of inequality. There never were many noblemen; there was a relatively horizontal distribution of power and status. In all of Norway there is one single castle, situated in the middle of the capital, Oslo. There are no elite schools. Equality is important. One may also point to religion. Significant religious minorities were absent. And since Puritanism's basic rule is to act morally toward all, not just sib or family, the potential for cooperation was extended beyond the immediate group. Given time and peace, assets such as education, cooperation and networks led to the emergence of democratic institutions and a high degree of organization.

See how politics is linked to political, social and cultural conditions. Norwegians stick together, still. Anti-system-parties are small, polarization is negligible, willingness to political compromise is great. There is a consensual political culture with a well-developed corporate decision-making structure. Before political decisions are made broad hearings are conducted, where organizations and actors present and argue their views. Participants are seen as partners striving for a balance of interests.

These norms reflect on the way actors in economic life relate to each other; the image is of social partners working towards a common goal, to achieve prosperity and welfare for all. Trust characterizes

¹⁵ Lijphart 1999 p.261

interaction in Norwegian working life and is an important asset in meeting with other business models. Nine out of ten Norwegian companies say the cooperation between trade unions and the company's management is positive for the company¹⁶. They point out that collaboration leads to conflicts being resolved in a good way; profitability is better, and the company does create and preserve more jobs. A high level of trust, short power distances and participation ensure productivity and adaptability.

The main instrument in the labor market is called a tripartite collaboration, indicating the relationship between workers, employers, and the state. The three parts each represent their different interests. Organized employees are represented by the employee organizations; employers within the private and public sector are represented by their respective organizations. The government takes an active role supporting the common interest, on behalf of the people. This collaboration is institutionalized and regulated by law and agreements and built on a spirit of consensus. Shared responsibility for wages and working conditions creates good competitiveness and ensures high employment. It is easy to argue a correlation between democratization and economic prosperity.

Politics matter

Politics and economy then are not seen as separate but connected. The Norwegian state has become a negotiating, collaborative actor where the purpose of government is to find solutions that are acceptable to most people. Extensive consultation is part of this system. The corporate channel, hearings, organizations and lobbying, permits impact on political decisions at all levels of politics. There is dialogue and interaction directed by institutional guidelines. Yet, individual political participation requires personal resources, most important education, and a connection to the organizational structure. Stein Rokkan's famous quote "Votes count, resources decide"¹⁷, still stands.

So democratic states listen to their people, at least in theory, and try to make decisions accordingly. Dictatorial regimes in contrast, and authoritarian ones, rule by splitting people in fractions that will not cooperate. One systematic creates and uses mistrust. The regime will stop neighbors from talking freely to each other, workers or students from organizing. Every step and every word by everyone is monitored and has to be accounted for; as Lenin is supposed to have said: "Trust is good, but control is better". Political and economic power is centralized, media are controlled, education is restricted and supervised, neighboring states declared enemies. There is a lack of good information to the public; people tend to tell leaders what they think the leaders want to hear. The pervasive absence of trust results in high costs for control, both ethically and economically. Distrust grows in an evil spiral. This creates mostly misery.

¹⁶ NHO n.d.

¹⁷ Rokkan 1966, p.105

Trust

Let me now introduce two key concepts: Trust and social capital. These two terms address the basic questions about living together and cooperating in democratic organizations. In the following we deal with generalized trust, which is trust in other members of society not personally known to us. The standard question to assess the level of trust in a society, used in many surveys, is as follows: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”¹⁸. Respondents answer on a scale of 0 to 10. Generalized trust varies widely on a global scale, as shown by e.g. World Values Survey¹⁹ and the European Social Surveys²⁰. Note that there also is relational or particularized trust. The difference, put simply, is that relational trust is in others that are known and close to you, while generalized trust is towards unknown, distant others.

Trust, by definition, is the positive expectation that the other will fulfill what has been agreed. Trust is built through contact and positive experiences with each other. These encounters lead to positive expectations of the others behavior. Hence, when you trust people, you take greater risks with them. You open up to new ideas, innovation, and cooperation.

In business terms trust is an investment in a future action with an uncertain outcome. Trust is related to traditional virtues like honesty, keeping commitments, reliable performance, reciprocity. These informal norms remain important in economy for coordination action and reducing costs and risks. A market works only well if actors have full information about the exchanged goods and terms of trade are known to all parties. Producing and exchanging goods and services involves large transaction costs. Trust significantly reduces the expenses associated with formal coordination mechanisms such as contracts, hierarchies, bureaucratic rules. Time and energy can be used on other concerns. In other words, good institutions and norms of cooperation generate economic success.

I will not delve on categorizations of trust but point out that trust here is treated not as an emotion, but rather as a way to act towards and relate to others. As such trust can be measured. And empirically, in Western democracies, we see trust is declining steadily during the past decades. This manifests itself in populist currents; people do not trust institutions anymore, do not trust politicians, do not trust the traditional media; many do not vote, do not participate. Meanwhile, Central and Eastern Europe are still recovering from communist rule. Mistrust in politicians and institutions is deeply seated and difficult to eradicate. Trust seems difficult to build and easy to break. What is needed?

¹⁸ Example taken from European Social Survey (2018). *ESS Round 9 Source Questionnaire*.

¹⁹ <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

²⁰ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

It can be argued that trust in your neighbors and trust in government correlate in a positive way. If the people can trust the bureaucrats, their neutrality and professionalism, they will trust each other. And public servants trust each other if they have confidence in the integrity of the educational institutions. Good institutions create favorable conditions for trust by reducing citizens' vulnerability and insecurity. If you feel that you will get help when you need it, you are more willing and able to help others in need. On the other hand, when institutions break down or are corrupted, this not only reduces trust in authorities and politicians, but in society in general and everybody within it.

Social capital

All of this is connected to the idea of social capital, which can be defined as networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. Social capital is what happens between people when they connect around a task or interest. It allows a society or organization to function well together as a whole. Find a country with vital organizations and interaction between citizens; you will find well-functioning institutions and a working economy.

Research consistently shows important benefits related to social capital²¹. Individuals with higher levels of social capital are said to be happier and find better jobs. People report better health and increased levels of trust because of positive relationships. A lack of such capital will result in political polarization, weakened family structures, lagging economic development and break-down of societal cohesion. Society, economy, institutions, a democratic system cannot do without.

To make democracy work we need strong "norms of reciprocity and networks of civil engagement"²². The idea is that when individuals do things together in local associations or other informal contexts, then positive synergy effects develop. This phenomenon is located somewhere between the couch at home and the big government institutions. Would it be a football club or your weekly quiz at the pub? Or maybe you borrow tools from neighbors for odd jobs, and they borrow items from you. This is called reciprocity, the informal exchange of goods and services, for mutual benefit. As a system it is older than monetary economics, and still, it works to everyone's benefit.

On an individual level, social capital provides access to resources and human capital, in the form of skills, expertise, or information. At group level the most visible result is to give members the strength to act together. For organizations, it means better problem solving, more creativity, more innovation. Social capital relates positively to motivation, this has consequences for productivity and efficiency. For a nation high social capital means higher BNP and standards of living. According to its proponents, social capital is the key to successful governance and a good society.

²¹ Vide <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/theory/benefits/> for treatment and sources.

²² Putnam 1993, p.171; cf. Coleman 1990, pp.302ff.

Scholarship on social capital

The concept of social capital has opened a wide field of research, with important names connected. Sociologist James Coleman (1926-1995) brought the term into wider use in recent years²³, arguing that it was a public good. Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) talks about cultural capital and the value of knowing many people and/or powerful and influential persons. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama (born 1952) points out the importance of social capital to efficient functioning of modern economies, calling it “the *sine qua non* of stable liberal democracy”²⁴. To him it is not an abstract idea but generated in actual human relationships; reciprocity is actualized in my dealings with my friends. Already Alexandre de Tocqueville (1805-59) in his seminal *Democracy in America* stated that the strength of a democratic society lies in the engagement of people in the place they live. Or else, he says, freedom will be lost. It is by coming together in civil associations that weak individuals become strong; the associations they formed could either participate directly in political life or will serve as ‘schools of citizenship’.

Robert D. Putnam (born 1941) is a major author in the field; his contribution is influential and debated. In his initial work on the issue, *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*²⁵ he compares regional governments in Italy. Putnam finds that to work well, democracy needs mutual trust among citizens, the strong horizontal bonds that make up social capital. In the controversial *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam shows that social capital in the United States has collapsed since the 1960s. The consequences are felt in the local community, at school, the workplace he observes. Local involvement and cohesion are missing. Fear and loneliness are growing. Putnam says people of all ethnicities, sex and age are “hunkering down”, hide in their shells like a turtle²⁶. Social mobility is reduced, there are diminishing prospects for coming generations. The American Dream seems no longer true²⁷.

Putnam’s conclusion is that viable societies learn, adapt and change. For democracy to succeed, one needs to build up social capital. This may be done by building bridges between individuals and groups, across differences in identity, values, or class. We must learn to tolerate each other and to live together peacefully. To do so we need meaningful interaction; we need meeting places such as libraries, sports facilities, schools, or universities. Common dialogue, activities and experiences create togetherness and community. This builds up badly needed social capital and opens possibilities to interact and learn from each other. The government’s role would be to guarantee trustworthy institutions, create favorable conditions for voluntary associations and places to meet on equal footing.

²³ Coleman 1988

²⁴ Fukuyama 1999

²⁵ Putnam et al. 1993

²⁶ Putnam 2015

²⁷ Putnam 2016

III. On student democracy - an argument

So far I have given a sketchy introduction to democracy. In the following I aim to present normative arguments based on the information submitted. My central concern is the case for student democracy. It has been argued that social capital is essential to build democracy. How does this insight apply to democracy in educational organizations? More specifically, to a large organization as a university?

A university traditionally has two mainstays; these are teaching and research, the transfer and the expansion of knowledge. Now there is talk of a third mission: the university in dialogue with society. We should contribute to community, educate for citizenship, public service and responsible business. To advance democratic values in society by education surely is an aim worthwhile pursuing.

Since the work of John Dewey on *Democracy and Education* (1916) there has been a discourse about educating for democracy, which by now has grown into a broad area of research and publications. A perceptive exploration of the subject is found in Herheim and Werler (2021), *inter alia*. Consensus is, not surprisingly, that the education of democratic citizens is a vital task for all institutions of learning. Education itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place. One has to develop an “enlightened understanding” among students, as Dahl (1998, p. 37) puts it.

The imperative of educating for democracy is addressed by international organizations, e.g. the Council of Europe (COE) in its Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education²⁸. The Council regards higher education as a key factor in developing modern societies and published an extensive rapport on the question, *Learning to live together*, in 2017. There also is a resolution by the General Assembly of the UN (2016), stressing “the complementarity and mutual reinforcement of ... education for democracy”²⁹.

Meanwhile reality is far from that. Citizenship and active participation barely ever are promoted in our institutions of higher education. There are nominal systems and structures, but practical measures to involve students in the running of our institutions or to build their democratic consciousness seem few. The situation warrants a rethinking. What can we achieve by including student participation in decision processes? Here some arguments on student democracy.

Better democracy

Democracy is a no-brainer, as they say. Let me rephrase this in academic terms: the assumption that democracy is to be desired and enhanced is axiomatic to this text and to project SUBFLY.

²⁸ Council of Europe (2010).

²⁹ <https://daccess-ods.un.org/tmp/6483355.16452789.html>

If citizens are to influence decision making in society, they must be enabled to use their abilities, and this can be done best by education and participation. Universities then should produce professionals able to work in democratic contexts and ways. The argument is simple: If we want a democratic society, we should practice democratic forms of education. And since decisions by the university's organization affect the life of each student, all have the right to actively share in the process.

The use of participation and dialogue is a significant development from older ideas about democracy, which focused on structures, laws and procedures. It recognizes that democracy will not work unless citizens want it to work and are able to cooperate for the common good. If democratic institutions are to function, we must promote attitudes and behaviors necessary to act democratically. This concept manifests itself as practice rather than yet another theoretical subject to be taught and studied.

Widening Participation

An essential element of all education for democratic citizenship is the promotion of social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. A university is the kind of place proponents of social capital wish for, an arena for meeting of cultures and trends, of curious minds. For advocates of participatory democracy, the setting presents opportunities for developing social skills and practice democratic involvement.

Widening of participation is about increasing the opportunities of new population groups, and the inclusion of all levels of society and its diverse minorities. This demands an educational practice that relates to cultural and social diversity and questions the unequal distribution of power. Not to forget, it should empower people of all genders. In other words, should address the interests of all students. Participation of marginalized minorities will ensure a plurality of views and approaches. Interactions based on democratic virtues, as listening to others, respect for difference and respect for argument, will demonstrate that a pluralism of ideas and worldviews does not have to result in conflict, but rather do add welcome new perspectives on life, and lead to new solutions for shared problems.

Cohesion is essential for democracy to thrive. Still, we know that people find it easier to trust those to whom the social distance is small. So, one has to shorten social distances by connecting to 'the others'. When we interact with people from different backgrounds, we learn to cooperate and trust each other. To live and work together successfully we have to create new, inclusive identities that all can share. Citizenship is being and acting part of the larger community, beyond one's own individual interests. In organizations socialization takes place; participation develops a democratic repertoire of behavior. Such a democratic environment acts as social regulator. Fixed ideas are challenged by debate and by encountering the views of others. All of us, no matter what our background, desire to find friendship and to engender respect. This disposes us to act in socially acceptable ways, in harmony with our surroundings. A democratic university is the place to further the goals of inclusion and participation.

Greater resilience

Broad participation leads to better decisions and to cooperation between various interests in society. Tolerance and solidarity across major divisions strengthens a democracy's ability to respond to crisis. Networks give the ability to adapt to and change with altering circumstances.

Resilience might become a key consideration for future educational policy in democratic societies. Corona, war, famine, climate change are challenges to all states. In addition, western democracies face threats from the inside, such as the rise of populism, polarization, a decline in general trust, negative effects of identity policies. In the words of US president Biden, we will "have to build back better".

Resilience is what enables individuals, institutions, a society or state to endure and to deal with change. It is the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or crisis by adaption, flexibility and innovation. Resilience manifests as the capacity to withstand stress but also to recoup from damage and disorder.

The future is more unpredictable than ever. This means more risk and diminished control, but this also allows for a new perception of higher education. Under conditions of uncertainty the main task may not be the transfer of established knowledge nor groundbreaking research or effective intervention. The task is to enable individuals, institutions and organizations to survive and adapt to new and difficult circumstances. Successful societies overcome crises by developing new networks, bonds, identities. A living, democratic society will always find new ways.

Resilience and sustainability are facilitated by dialogical learning and critical thinking. In a dynamic dialogue no one knows the answers beforehand, new ideas and solutions develop during the process. Accordingly, education for resilience cannot be static, it has to accept, even embrace, unpredictability. And it must connect students, hand them tools to make and sustain strong civic networks. In terms of sustainability, robustness, and adaptability, social capital is at the hub of resilience. As such, student democracy offers a platform to improve social cohesion and political competence.

Active learning

Education for post-crisis, post-covid, post-war – who knows what is next. A random guess would be a tendency toward conservation and adaption rather than rapid advance. What we know is the future will be different. Apart from a need for resilience to crisis, the enormous amount of information and the rapid development of technology makes it difficult to predict which competences will be central in future society and work. How to enable students to master challenges that we know little about?

Most academic curricula and courses still are oriented towards a traditional perspective on learning. We pass on information, and we train for skills associated with scholarship. As a lecturer, I want students to develop analytic faculties, to know the field of study and its terminology, to have a good

citation practice. Consequently, exam performance is measured by these parameters. This may work fine for the traditional role of universities in research and transmission of knowledge.

A reorientation is needed. Universities ought to educate for qualities desired in a democratic society, such as participation and contribution, diversity and equality. Educators should facilitate for students to develop democratic competence. To facilitate is to make an action or process easier; here it aims at encouraging students to participate, reflect and communicate in a democratic way. Key objectives are to develop critical thinking and objective inquiry, i.e., an active, determined and organized effort to make sense of the world by thinking, aimed at improving understanding and deepen reflection.

Lived democracy in education is to provide opportunities for young learners to influence a decision through enacting the values of freedom of speech and equality. All students should have opportunity to take part in their own learning and be encouraged to interact with their curriculum. They are due the power to affect a course of action, a debate or a decision by expressing arguments and critique. Involving students in decision-making processes is consistent with the principle that learning ought to be continuous with life outside school; this in turn makes them attractive to employers.

Let us stimulate the skills that promote cohesion and enable future citizens to handle disagreement and conflict. These includes abilities such as social competence and community building, ethics and integrity in leadership, even deliberative and rhetorical skills to further effective public speaking. Student democracy creates opportunity to practice dialogical forms, students learn to further interests by dialogue, negotiation and arbitration. Participation in decision-making conveys important lessons about what works and what to avoid in a debate; it develops competence to publicly present arguments and deal with the positions of others, how to handle criticism and demands. I argue that is the task of educational organizations such as universities to further and enhance such developments.

Educators want students to actively construct knowledge, to collaborate and create, share questions and ideas. In one phrase: Active learning, denoting any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. Preferably group-based, collaborative learning, or learning based on problems.

Empowerment to democracy then involves 'In-depth learning', a concept promoted by pedagogues. In the Norwegian context 'in-depth' has come to be a highly relevant term in education and is treated abundantly in pedagogical literature and research. Focus then has shifted from bare surface learning, to remember, define, reproduce facts, ideas or theories, towards learning in depth, training to think. Here the learner understands the relationships and context of a subject area and can apply what he or she has learned to new situations. Information is abundant; it is the ability to think in innovative ways we must convey. Active in-depth learning is claimed to create autonomous individuals better able to interact and cooperate in democratic society. Isn't that what we want and need?

Some challenges

Trust is about the connection between assumptions about others and one's own actions. Giving trust to students will challenge established principles and structures, but also the behavior of leaders and lecturers. Student democracy means that power will be delegated and redistributed, control and governance reduced. A flatter organization that provides room for autonomy also leads to changes on a personal level. Democratic education is emancipatory by its nature, position counts for nothing, the best argument wins. There is a challenge in this for educators, to let go of power and control. To what degree should the students' voices count equal to the educator's insight? Can we really trust students to manage their own learning process? Do they know what is best for them? We have to find out.

It is already happening. New forms of teaching and interacting with learners are taking shape and win ground. We do our best to open up education for students' participation, to initiate debate, facilitate project-based learning, offer case studies and assignments to be solved in groups. Students are treated as active participants in their own knowledge construction, we scaffold, they climb.

Not all responses are favorable, though. Learners who are used to get spoon-feed with snippets of information find activity demanding; the passive compilation of established information seems easier. While many educators look for interest, commitment, creativity, and in-depth understanding, quite a few students see themselves as customers. They pay with their time, and we deliver the goods.

This is mirrored by administrators and leaders who relish control and the collection of numeric facts such as students' attendance, their progression, and the measurable achievement of academical goals. These parameters are more convenient to gauge than probable gains in insight and democratic culture. Granted, it is hard to quantify the effect of the approach suggested here. However, let us not mistake indicators of quality for quality itself. Education has to aim for emancipation and better understanding, not goal accomplishment.

Some benefits

Finally, the central question: what is in it for me? Why bother engage in discussions, argue decisions, facilitate activity and democracy? As an academic, is it not enough to write and research? As educator, what is wrong with transferring good information? As a student, is it not sufficient to read curriculum, pass exams? And speaking organization-wise, why complicate decision-processes further, by involving the students? On balance, challenges of student democracy are outweighed by benefits. All gain by it.

Individual benefits are numerous. On a metaphysical level you become yourself by being concerned with something outside of yourself, by interacting with someone who is different. Identity is defined in relationship to others. Democratic participation develops the capacity to manage one's own life and become autonomous, as well as the ability to cooperate with others. Individual social capital increases

by participation and engagement; by strengthening existing relationships, getting to know new people, by being helpful and supportive, by trusting and acting trustworthy we grow.

And, yes, active students will score some extra points on their CV. There is a reason; participation in student democracy promotes a set of skills that is useful in many professions. It offers the chance to gain practical experience in leadership and community building, in a safe and regulated environment. As academia supplies a growing proportion of professional leaders and administrators this will make students more attractive to potential employers. Core features of democratic participation align with the emerging consensus on business and management priorities such as increased collaboration, decentralized organization, and corporate social responsibility in general.

Student democracy offers benefits for the university as an organization, too. According to Kumlin and Rothstein (2005), if the institution trusts its humans, those in turn will trust and support the institution. Co-determination helps to create a stronger affiliation with the institution. This applies very much to an educational organization, one might assume. The more students feel part of it, the more it will make the working of the organization smoother and enhance resilience to internal and external crises.

Ideally there is reciprocity and a flow of information going both ways. This also ensures a greater variety of input; students can be an important resource in making decisions. Management and governing bodies concerned about the university's reputation will benefit from the students' input. We know that to be included in the process increases the legitimacy and quality of decisions emerging. Participation helps resolving conflict inside the organization, which can be costly in terms of resources such as time, money, image. When students are involved in the process, decisions will be more efficient and less costly. There is a clear link between democratic participation and productivity in organizations.

Benefits for society are, as has been argued, a main point of education for democracy. The strongest political rationale for student democracy is that it teaches the virtues of democratic deliberation for the sake of future citizenship. Participation not only prepares students for life in a democratic society but advances a democracy that involves participation in deliberation, group decisions, and social life. Getting a higher degree should develop the qualities of an active citizen. Involved students will make capable citizens, whether they come to be politicians, public servants, academics or work in business.

IV. Conclusion:

The purpose of this text is twofold: primarily it explores what democracy is or could be, and secondly to argue the gains of developing participation by students in our institutions of higher education.

Accordingly, part II has described different basic perspectives on democratic systems and institutions. After a short attempt to define democracy and a historical sketch of its development, relevant theories and concepts are presented, such as voting, democratic deliberation and participation, consensual and majoritarian systems. Practical cooperation is examined by way of the Norwegian tripartite model for balancing different economic interests. The text then elaborates on trust and social capital, pointing out its importance for the smooth workings of a democratic society. Throughout it emphasizes the importance of students acquiring competence and skills through democratic practice, and not barely by theoretical learning.

Part III argues the benefits of student democracy as participation and dialogue. A university willing and able to put democracy in action will create better citizens and a more democratic society. The lecture hall thus can become a democratic arena for dialogue and cooperation. Especially in pluralistic settings we urgently need meeting-places where all can interact with each other and the greater community. By creating a common identity, we establish a spirit of belonging that will sustain us in troubled times. Students are empowered to work not for their own interests only but become part of a drive for the greater good. One even might hope this will aid to transform the perceived decline of democracy into transformation and renewal of participation and civil spirit.

The obvious conclusion on this material is that we ought to promote democratic governance in all educational institutions, both as a desirable and beneficial method of governance and as a practical means of learning and experiencing democracy.

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