



Can Democracy Be Taught? The Impact of Civic Education Programs in Developing Democracies

Summary of a public presentation at the National Endowment for Democracy by

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On May 7, 2003, Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow Steven E. Finkel gave a public presentation at the National Endowment for Democracy on the impact of civic education programs in developing democracies. The following is a summary of his remarks, written by Adam R. Brown, research intern at the International Forum.

In an effort to teach democratic values and civic engagement to individuals in emerging democracies, donors in the United States and Europe have devoted considerable resources over the past several decades to civic education programs abroad. Until recently, however, little effort has been made to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs in promoting democratic orientations. In his presentation at the International Forum for Democratic Studies on May 7, 2003, Dr. Steven E. Finkel reported on the results of his fieldwork in South Africa, Poland, and the Dominican Republic, where he evaluated the impact of adult civic education programs over a period of five years. Funded by USAID, his study seeks to: a) assess whether and to what extent civic education affects democratic attitudes and behaviors; b) contribute to a better understanding of democratization, civil society, and political culture; and c) enable policy makers to streamline the implementation of future civic education programs.

To test the effectiveness of civic education programs implemented by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in South Africa, Poland, and the Dominican Republic, surveys were conducted with adults who had participated in such programs, as well as with a control group of similar individuals who had not. In the questionnaires, participants were asked about the frequency of civic training, the pedagogical methodologies employed, and their perceptions of instructor quality. In addition, Dr. Finkel gathered information about participants' gender, education, age, memberships in social groups, political awareness, and levels of motivation, in order to determine what types of individuals were most receptive to civic training.

According to Dr. Finkel, civic education can influence democratic political orientations in several ways. First, civic education can increase civic competence, including both political knowledge, such as an understanding of how one's government works, and political efficacy, or a sense that one can influence political outcomes through concerted effort. Second, civic education can strengthen democratic values by increasing political tolerance, defined as citizens' willingness to extend freedoms of association, participation, and speech to unpopular groups; institutional trust; and support for democracy over all rival systems. Finally, civic education can build on increased competence and strengthened values to foster greater participation in local politics. All of these potential effects were examined in Dr. Finkel's study.

In Dr. Finkel's study, civic education had the strongest effects on citizens' participation in local politics. Those receiving civic training in each country participated significantly more in town councils, election campaigns, and grassroots efforts than those from similar backgrounds who did not receive such training. In South Africa, for example, 50 percent of those with civic training participated in two or more local political activities, while only 30 percent of those without civic training did the same. Effects on participants' attitudes, however, were weaker than effects on political involvement: Civic education raised political tolerance and feelings of political efficacy, but had no uniform effect on institutional trust.

Dr. Finkel's most interesting finding was the "threshold effect" of civic education. Civic education was most effective, he found, when individuals attended three or more workshops, when workshops were conducted with participatory methods, and when instructors were perceived as knowledgeable, inspiring, and interesting. When these factors were missing, civic training had little effect on participants' involvement in local politics and virtually no effect on their attitudes and values. Shifting his focus to the characteristics of those trained, Dr. Finkel found that civic education had greater effects among individuals with higher levels of political resources, such as education, and among those who belong to more civil society groups, such as churches, trade unions, and clubs.

In conclusion, Dr. Finkel discussed several theoretical and policy implications of his findings. His data support three primary theoretical assertions. First, short-term changes in democratic attitudes and values are possible, despite earlier research suggesting that values are established during childhood and can only be changed later in life by long-term processes. Second, civil society groups play a crucial role in the civic education process: the NGOs that conduct civic education serve as powerful mobilizing agents for participation, and other civil society groups serve as information conduits to reinforce and amplify messages about civic education. Third, civic education may reinforce existing inequalities in political resources, producing undesired political disparities.

These issues lead to four possible policy concerns. First, civic education programs can work, but recognition of threshold effects is crucial; if civic education is not conducted properly, it may not be worth conducting at all. Active participatory methods and teacher training are essential, as is a plan to induce participants to come to several workshops. Second, programs that stress collective problem-solving and direct experience have the greatest potential for mobilizing participation in local politics. Third, NGOs should be encouraged to work through other civil society groups so that their training will have the maximum impact. Finally, targeting strategies are critical for addressing political inequalities: civic educators may either target those with more political resources because they are more receptive to civic training, or they may target those with less education and fewer resources to try to reduce political inequalities.