EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

Varieties of Populism and Democratic Efficacy: How to Develop Democratic Efficacy?

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INTRODUCTION

The roots of populism are manifold. Although populist attitudes such as anti-elitism, people-centredness, and Manichean thinking are present in any society, specific context and factors are needed to activate them. This refers to the 'supply-side' of populism in terms of the number of politicians and political entrepreneurs who exploit existing societal problems and frame them along the populist discourse, usually dividing society between the 'good' people and the 'evil' others, such as minority groups. Populist attitudes, on the other hand, might manifest themselves as a consequence of poor democratic representation or perceptions of elite malfeasance, such as corruption.

Apart from external factors and contexts, individual-level characteristics may also activate populist sentiments, as people may react to populist ideas differently. Democracy does not work by itself. For it to function, citizens are required to exercise certain skills, attitudes and make investments: political engagement, reflective attitude, scrutiny of the power holders, and balancing trust-based cooperation with critical reactions to political authorities. The growing complexity of today's society in general and governance in particular presents increasingly stronger challenges to citizens to commit to democratic action. Facing the complexity of globalisation, the plurality of interests and values in politics, the flooding of information to cope with, and the sometimes painfully slow institutional responses to social problems one may easily feel frustrated and inefficacious – and, as a consequence, become either cynical or be tempted by populist views.

Passivity and cynicism, if pervasive, ultimately endanger the functioning of democracy. Populist manifestation illustrates that activism and participation may also be destructive: discontent and criticism without reflective engagement may lead to demagoguery, belief in conspiracy theories, and support for oversimplified solutions.

Based on DEMOS research, this policy brief looks into the question: which individual characteristics protect citizens against populist ideas and how to develop them?

Starting from the early 1950s and first systematic studies of voting behaviour, interest in political efficacy feelings grew stronger because scholarship found it is one of the most important predictors of political participation. Political science defines two dimensions of political efficacy: a person's image of the self and that of the government. Consequently, internal and external dimensions of political efficacy have been conceptualised and used in political studies. Broadly speaking, *internal political efficacy* (IPE) refers to citizens' beliefs that they have competences to understand and effectively participate in politics (subjective competence), and *external political efficacy* (EPE) is related to public perceptions of the responsiveness of governmental institutions (perceived system responsiveness). Importantly, low political efficacy means that citizens distrust governmental institutions and do not believe that their actions will influence governance. Therefore, low political efficacy is related to political alienation, which is detrimental to the health of the democratic political system.

Since political participation has always been considered an important feature of a democratic government, high political efficacy of citizens was consequently deemed as an important characteristic of good democratic governance. However, as increasing numbers of people participating in politics started supporting populist and extremist political actors, it has become clear that the crude level of political participation by itself is an insufficient (or even misleading) indicator of quality in democratic governance. To tackle this issue, the *democratic quality of political participation* should be considered.

DEMOCRATIC CAPACITIES

DEMOS research developed the idea of *democratic capacities*. This notion is rooted in normative democratic theory and defines the skills and capacities that citizens should possess to be able to participate in a meaningful way in democratic politics.

For instance, some degree of information is needed and desired to substantively participate in politics. In democratic settings, citizens must make decisions on the most important political questions. Besides, decision-making based on relevant information is more likely to reflect voters' true preferences. Consequently, citizens need to have some general political knowledge, but also keep up with the day-to-day political processes.

Yet, having political knowledge and being up to date are not enough to make informed political decisions. Citizens have to be reflective about their political decisions. To make matters even more complex, strong emotional attachments may undermine this reflexivity and introduce serious biases in reasoning and evaluation of political information.

Besides information consumption, skills, reflexivity, and emotions, democracy encompasses core values that citizens are required to embrace and exercise in order to make it work properly. First, citizens' political and legal equality is a prerequisite of democracy. Second, the normative justification of democracy rests upon the premise that citizens can make free and autonomous decisions. Third, democracy is a social activity where individuals must consider that others also have legitimate interests, opinions, and values. Citizens have to listen to and take account of opinions that are different from their own, because democracy is based on the idea of exchanging and confronting competing views and interests.

While certain political or civic skills have long been considered to represent crucial democratic capacities, one can assume that coping with populism requires specific skills. For example, the quality of being able to deal with plurality and conflicts in politics and policy; practising empathy towards others' legitimate needs and goals; scrutinising leaders and their decisions; consuming

media content in a reflective manner (media literacy); and being able to express one's own legitimate needs, aspirations, and preferences.

DEMOS research proposes *five clusters of democratic capacities and values that have to be paired with political efficacy in order to derive a measure of democratic efficacy*:

- *Factual political knowledge* (citizens need to have some general political knowledge, but also keep up with the day-to-day political processes).
- *Political news consumption* (citizens need to develop habits of using the media for political information in a reflective manner).
- *Political reflexivity* (citizens have to be reflective on the political information, however, strong emotional attachments (political identities) may undermine this reflexivity and introduce serious biases in reasoning and evaluation of political information).
- *Core values of democracy* (citizens are required to embrace certain values as prerequisites of democracy in order to make it work properly: respect for political and legal equality (equality of interests), capability of making free and autonomous decisions (political autonomy), tolerance of and listening to opinions different from their own (reciprocity).
- *Political or civic skills* (citizens have to be at ease with practising certain behaviours and attitudes: coping with plurality and conflicts in politics and policy; scrutinising leaders and their decisions; being able to express one's own legitimate needs, aspirations and preferences).

Based on this conceptualisation people with complete democratic capacities are those citizens who have (1) a certain level of factual political knowledge; (2) regular and reflective news consumption; (3) non-intensive partisanship feelings (as a proxy of reflexivity); (4) strong identification with the core values of democracy, i.e. political and legal equality, tolerance towards dissenting opinion, and individual autonomy, and (5) some involvement in political activities.

DEMOCRATIC EFFICACY AND POPULISM

After conceptualising democratic capacities, the concept of political efficacy can be supplemented with a democratic component in order to add a quality aspect to the original term. While political efficacy is about subjective attitudes towards politics that is crucial as a motivational background of political behaviour, democratic behaviour requires some objective capacities as well. The idea of democratic capacities supplements the subjective construct of political efficacy with these objective requirements. As a result, the idea of democratic efficacy – as a more nuanced approach to political efficacy – is a better framework for understanding democratic political behaviour, one of the most important themes of the DEMOS project.

Democratic efficacious citizens (1) are interested in politics and participate in politics (high political efficacy) and (2) have basic democratic skills and capacities that make their political participation valuable from a normative point of view.

The main hypothesis of the research was that democratically efficacious people are less likely to be attracted to populist politics. DEMOS researchers tested the hypothesis, using a dataset of representative samples from an online survey in 15 European countries.

The research demonstrated that, indeed, *high democratic efficacy predicts a lower level of populist attitudes* in people. After disentangling the elements of democratic efficacy, DEMOS found that high external political efficacy predicts weaker populist attitudes, while high internal efficacy increases the populist appeal. This is plausible: if one believes that the political system is responsive to their needs and queries, then, populism loses ground; conversely, if someone is convinced about their own competences, this may instil anti-elitism and populist attitudes. A

crucial finding is that high democratic capacities significantly reduce the component of populism that stems from high internal political efficacy.

In other words, *increasing external political efficacy feelings* as well as *developing democratic capacities* is vital and needed to address challenges associated with populism in general and populist mobilisation in particular.

INCREASING EXTERNAL POLITICAL EFFICACY

DEMOS research found that external political efficacy feelings are – to a large extent – rooted in individual characteristics: more educated and wealthier people feel more efficacious. This is not very relevant from a policy perspective. It is more interesting that people who feel integrated in their communities and feel happier also express higher levels of external political efficacy attitudes. In the next section it will be become evident that, if schools provide a sense of belonging and are able to develop community feelings, students will strengthen their democratic attitudes. That is, communities and social integration are both important from the perspective of democratic attitudes and external political efficacy feelings towards weakening the populist appeal.

Macro-level factors also play a role in increasing or decreasing external political efficacy. Since the concept itself expresses a belief in the openness of the political system, it is no surprise that participatory opportunities and proportional electoral systems strengthen external political efficacy. At the same time, higher levels of corruption predict lower ratings of political efficacy feelings.

HOW TO DEVELOP DEMOCRATIC CAPACITIES?

DEMOS research has paid particular attention to the role of schools and citizen education in developing democratic capacities. Using data from different sources and applying a variety of methods, DEMOS researchers have ascertained a number of empirical findings on the ideal role of schools in developing democratic capacities.

First, we studied the relationship between civic education (CE) curricula at schools and democratic political efficacy of youth in 14 European countries. The question was whether national level policies related to civic education change internal and external political efficacy, political interest, political participation and support for democratic values (equality, tolerance and autonomy) of youth. As explanatory variables at the country level, we included five variables identified in the Eurydice Report 'Citizenship at School in Europe Education 2017': compulsory guidelines on classroom assessment in citizenship education, recommended minimum number of hours of compulsory citizenship education as a separate subject, inclusion of competences related to 'knowledge of political processes', 'knowledge of fundamental political and social concepts' and 'knowledge of/participation in civil society' in national citizenship education curricula. Control variables were also added to the model. As the data source for investigating the relationship at the individual and country levels, we used data from the European Social Survey, Round 9.

We found that the recommended minimum number of hours of compulsory citizenship education as a separate subject has a statistically significant effect on youth's democratic political efficacy. This is an important finding because it suggests that civic education has a role to play in reinforcing democratic culture and helping the political socialisation of youth. At the same time, civic education should develop innovative methods to engage youth. With this goal, the DEMOS project designed tools for high school students and tested their efficacy. One of the tools is a role play and interactive game in which players have to stand up for their rights and justifiable

interests against an autocratic and populist leader. To move forward in the game, they also need to organise themselves and mobilise their political competences. Another tool helps students to strengthen their critical thinking and identify fake news. The tool does not merely aim at teaching news literacy to young people, on the contrary: it asks them to help develop training material on how to spot fake news for the elderly who might not have the necessary skills on social media. In this way, participants are nudged to train and educate themselves.

Second, we went beyond formal education and studied the role of school climate in developing democratic attitudes among students. Using PISA survey data from 70 countries, we found that the sense of belonging to school, the perception of competitiveness at school, the perception of cooperation at school and the perception of teacher commitment by students all predict stronger democratic attitudes. At the same time, a school climate associated with bullying and discrimination will hinder students' consolidation of democratic habits. To a lesser extent, poor discipline in the classroom also negatively shapes student's critical, democratic thinking.

Third, using a novel text-mining methodology, DEMOS researchers in Germany investigated the role of schools' "we-mentality" in shaping students' civic outcome. We-mentality was measured with an automated content-analysis approach applied to the schools' so-called general principle (mission statement) focusing on communications concerning the importance of community and belonging. Conducting a survey in 13 German schools with 488 students, we found that a stronger we-mentality is associated with more students being engaged in local civic activities. Moreover, students who exhibit stronger trust in others and are willing to engage with new and unknown tasks show more positive attitudes towards civic issues. These results, together with the findings previously discussed, bear relevance for the educational design of schools in fostering adolescents' civic education and participation.

Finally, instead of focusing on the variables of democratic efficacy, DEMOS researchers also studied how the challenge of populism manifests itself in schools and how it can be addressed. In one of the research studies, we made interviews with secondary schoolteachers in the UK and in Hungary about their experiences with populist discourse and topics (e.g. on immigrants, LMBTQ people, Brexit etc.) in the classroom and what the interviewees do in order to respond to this challenge. It seems that populist discourse is indeed present among students. Some topics became highly politicised, and students' opinions are increasingly polarised on these issues. Teachers find it more difficult to discuss these topics, although the degree of that difficulty is perceived very differently in the UK and in Hungary. UK teachers are more willing and more prepared to engage with debates on highly politicised topics than their Hungarian counterparts. But many interviewees in both countries agreed that addressing this challenge requires better mediating skills on their side, and possibly new educational materials.

Another research studied the role of school bullying in predicting exclusionary populist views. The hypothesis of the research was that bullying and populism may have something in common; that those who accept or practice bullying are more prone to agreeing with exclusionary populist policy statements, such as 'A night club has the right to refuse to accept Roma clients', 'The government should not spend money on the healthcare of detainees', or 'A country has the right to decide about immigration based on the religion of the potential immigrants'. Conversely, those who reject bullying and show more empathy with victims of bullying are less supportive of those statements. The assumption is based on the hypothesised structural similarity between the exclusionary nature of (at least: certain types of) populism and bullying. The research also assumed that anti-bullying empathy treatment would decrease the appeal of exclusionary populist statements.

The research consisted of an online survey experiment with 500 respondents aged 16-25. The design included an empathy treatment (a vignette about a victim of bullying) and for the control groups either no treatment or an anger treatment (a vignette about injustice and power abuse). Based on previous results by DEMOS researchers on the role of anger in spurring populist

sentiments, we assumed that while the empathy treatment would decrease, the anger treatment would increase support for exclusionary populist statements.

Our basic assumption proved to be correct: those who are more lenient with bullying tactics expressed a stronger support for the exclusionary policy positions. Our hypothesis on the role of anti-bullying empathy treatment in decreasing this support seems to be well founded as well. Interestingly, our anger treatment did not work the way we expected: this did not induce more support for exclusion, on the contrary. It seems that provoking the feeling of injustice may also have a positive effect in terms of solidarity with the excluded and a rejection of exclusionary populism. These results have potentially important practical implications: they suggest that anti-bullying programmes in schools building on either empathy or injustice may foster the political attitudes of youth while decreasing the populist appeal.

Our results highlight the role of schools in developing democratic attitudes and preventing the sympathy for populist attitudes. Schools can – and probably should – aim at this objective through using multiple means: providing civic education; developing a culture of belonging and a sense of community; providing good quality education with committed educators; implement anti-bullying programmes. The above-presented results also imply that the democratic quality of the schools is also important: democratic attitudes of youth will obviously be strengthened if they can practice democracy and are not just taught about it. Although DEMOS research did not focus on the role of other democratic participative forms in developing democratic skills and attitudes, evidence shows that this role exists. For instance, Oross compared the political efficacy feelings, political interests, and democratic attitudes of young people living in different Hungarian settlements.[1] The settlements were very similar to each other with a crucial difference: they offered different forms and degrees of participation to youth in local decision making. The research revealed that there was a clear difference between settlements in terms of the political attitudes of youth; and the difference was linked to the effectiveness of participatory opportunities. If the young people could effectively participate in the local decision making, their political efficacy and democratic attitudes became stronger over time.

DEMOS has also worked on topics concerning the media and professional journalism, since political information and knowledge are part of the concept of democratic efficacy and the media obviously have a crucial role to play to provide political information to citizens. We also studied how civil society initiatives can help address the challenge of populism, since civil society provides opportunities for democratic actions and therefore can help develop political skills. We summarised our findings and recommendations concerning both the media and civil society in separate policy briefs. In the following, we will provide recommendations in relation to boosting democratic efficacy and enhancing school environment, making only references to the topics covered in separate policy briefs.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRATIC EFFICACY

DEMOS research proves that at the individual level democratic efficacy provides protection against the populist appeal. Therefore, policymakers should pay attention to the variables that constitute the idea: **1) political efficacy feelings** and **2) democratic capacities** (information, knowledge, reflexivity, democratic values and political skills). Policymakers should

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[1] Oross, D. (2017). How do participatory models influence youth participation? Local participatory initiatives and political participation of young people in Hungary. *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, *16*(2), 159–182.

make sure that the factors influencing these variables are given adequate attention and support: independent and quality media outlets, a flourishing civil society, participatory opportunities at various political levels and topics, civic education, and democratic atmosphere at schools.

- *External political efficacy feelings* are stronger if people are socially integrated; therefore, helping communities and promoting social integration are of paramount importance in addressing populism. Participatory opportunities in decision making as well as proportional electoral systems also boost external efficacy. At the same time, combating corruption brings about an additional benefit to society: increasing the feeling of external political efficacy.

- *Information on public issues and political knowledge* are part of democratic capacities. While civic education can help impart and advance political knowledge, independent and professional media should be continuously strengthened and supported to provide reliable information to citizens.

- *Democratic values* as normative commitments are also part of democratic capacities. Civic education can help strengthen them, but practicing democracy is probably even more important to stabilise such capacities. In this sense, making democracy at schools and in public fora accessible to youth is vital. Civil society and its organisations play a complementing role in this respect.

- *Reflexivity* defined as a lack of extreme partisanship as well as other *political skills* (of organisation, communication, etc.) should be acquired through civic education and democratic practice.

DEMOCRATIC EFFICACY AT SCHOOLS

DEMOS conducted several studies concerning the role of schools in both developing democratic capacities and addressing the challenges of populism. Although schools should not be left alone with the responsibility of strengthening democratic commitments of youth and preparing them to face populism (because the larger social and political contexts obviously matter), schools can and should be supported to work more in these respects.

- Even the general quality of education seems to matter when it comes to the democratic attitudes of pupils. Youngsters who perceive the quality of their school as being high and view their teachers as committed express stronger democratic attitudes. Therefore, governments should provide good quality education to all segments of society. Not only because of well-known reasons (social justice, economic competitiveness, etc.), but also for strengthening democratic culture which is key to addressing populism.

- School atmosphere and culture also matter. Schools with a democratic culture, cooperative spirit, and strong community contribute more to the development of democratic efficacy of their students. Policies should be designed to ensure that schools have the motivation, skills, and resources to become more than just places of teaching.

- The culture of bullying at schools has detrimental effects on students' rating of democratic efficacy. On the one hand, bullying undermines democratic values. On the other, it increases the probability of students accepting exclusionary populist views. Therefore, schools should take bullying seriously by designing, implementing, and monitoring anti-bullying and norms programmes.

- Evidence shows that civic education does have a role in strengthening democratic efficacy. Policymakers should encourage member states to make it a mandatory part of the educational curricula, probably at different levels of educational systems.

- The spread of populist attitudes and discourses represents a new challenge to educators. This challenge is very contextual and should be dealt with differently in different countries. But professors and teachers should be trained to address highly politicised and divisive public issues topics that emerge in classroom discussions. New methodologies and educational tools should be constantly developed to scale up and make civic education effective. DEMOS developed several educational tools, but more should be done across member states.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

DEMOS – Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe is a three-year collaborative research project with 15 consortium members across Europe. DEMOS is funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 framework programme. It started in December 2018 with two general objectives:

DEMOS aims at better understanding of the populist phenomenon by identifying and filling existing lacunas in the literature. More specifically, the project will study the conditions and contexts of populism with an emphasis on its socio-psychological roots, while concurrently analysing the varieties of populism across Europe – building on the assumption that populism has both generalizable socio-psychological foundations and many context-bound manifestations rooted in history, culture and specific socio-economic conditions. The project will devote attention to 'populism in action', that is, exploring the impact and consequences of populist governance and policymaking across several levels – from the individual to the supranational – acknowledging that recently the influence of populism has increased dramatically and gained power in several countries. Last, but not least, the project will shed light on the responses and reactions of social actors to the challenge of populism, identifying coping strategies, good practices, successes and failures, as well as forecast probable scenarios.

DEMOS aims at addressing the challenge of populism through the operationalisation of the concept of 'democratic efficacy'. The project will study the potential of democratic efficacy to counter populism through experiments and action research, devoting special attention to the youth, studying schools and educational measures, and developing educational tools as well as policy recommendations on how to boost civic awareness and reflective engagement through increasing democratic efficacy.

THE DEMOS RESEARCH

The results and policy formulation presented in this policy brief stem from research on creating and measuring the idea of democratic efficacy as well as the role of schools in boosting democratic habits, values, and attitudes which are important to mitigate the impacts of populism on society.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

'Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe' — 'DEMOS'

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BUDGET

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https://demos-h2020.eu/

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FURTHER MATERIALS

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