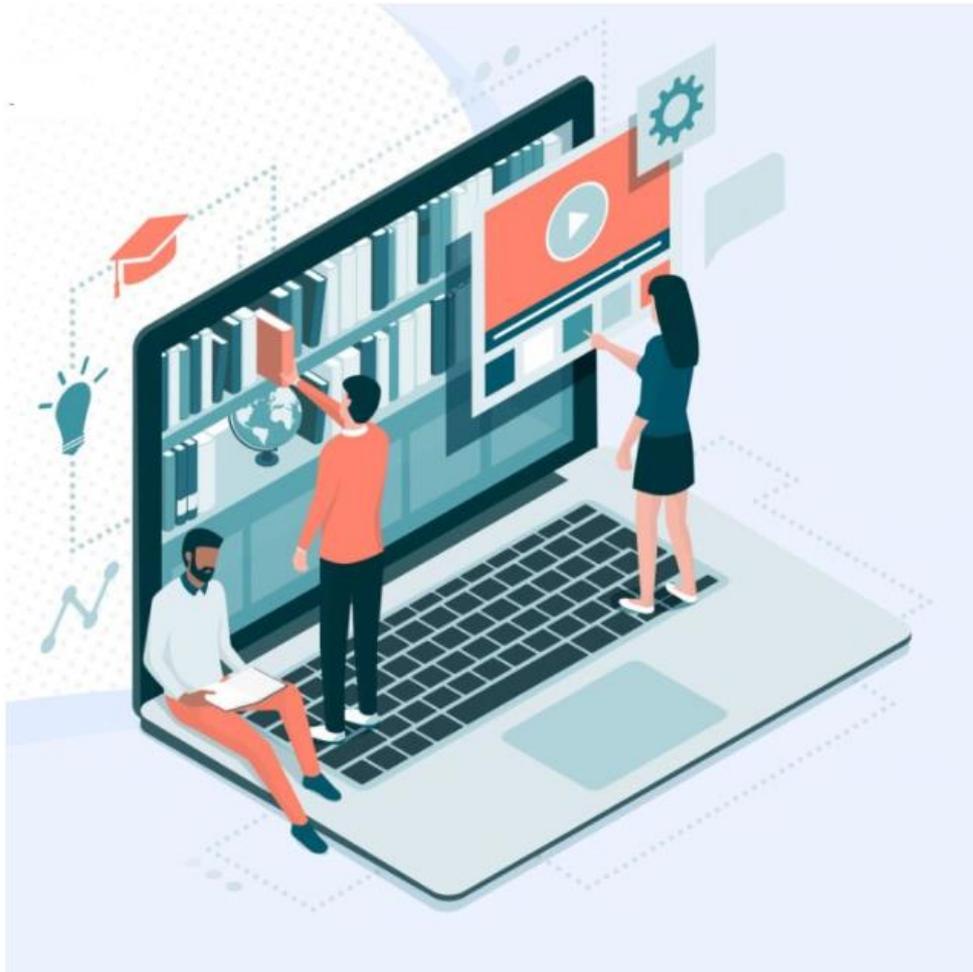




University  
of Glasgow

# PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP ONLINE

## RESEARCH INNOVATIONS



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**Project website**

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/democracyresearch/promotingdemocracy/>



## **Project DEMED**

The research project “Democracy under Threat: How Education Can Save It” (DEMED) is funded by a European Research Council Consolidator Grant led by Professor Anja Neundorf (University of Glasgow) and includes an international research team including Professor Steven Finkel (University of Pittsburgh), Dr Aykut Ozturk (University of Glasgow), Dr Ericka Rascon Ramirez (CIDE & Middlesex University), and PhD candidate Melek Hilal Eroglu (University of Pittsburgh).

### **Key findings: The Effectiveness of Online Civic Education Programs**

Our experimental research’s primary takeaway is the effectiveness of short, animated online videos that promote the virtues of democracy in shaping democratic attitudes and behaviors. Conducted across 33 countries, the study shows that these campaigns – which can be circulated via social media advertisement to reach millions of people – yielded consistently positive results in varied political and economic environments. We observed that these online videos positively impact – even after two weeks – key outcomes, such as:

- ◇ Bolstering preference for democracy;
- ◇ Reducing approval for non-democratic forms of governance;
- ◇ Increasing the inclination to vote for democratic candidates;
- ◇ Increasing knowledge about key components of liberal democracy;
- ◇ Enhancing respondents’ political engagement;
- ◇ Decreasing the negative impacts of partisan polarization;
- ◇ Enhancing sympathy for democratic parties.

In this document, we briefly outline the main challenges to adult civic education before giving an overview of our research and key findings. At the end, we present our recommendations to organizations working in the field of democracy promotion.

## Adult Civic Education: Its Importance and Main Challenges

Adult civic education is important in fostering citizen support for democratic values, encouraging political participation, and strengthening resistance to authoritarian backsliding. Since the third wave of democratization in the 1990s, significant resources have been invested in civic education campaigns to foster democratic orientations among the public of newly democratizing countries. While schools are traditionally seen as the primary setting, civic education now occurs in various forms and contexts, targeting people of all ages.

Despite the sizeable amount of research on the effect of adult-oriented civic education programs conducted in many different countries, it is challenging to arrive at generalizations about their impacts. Studies are often limited to isolated programs, making comparing the results across countries or interventions difficult. Therefore, little is known about how these programs impact individuals and societies.



Today's civic education faces two main challenges:

- ◇ Extending its reach, particularly to those in ideological echo chambers and those difficult to reach with more traditional forms of democracy promotion, e.g. those less educated or interested in politics, younger people, and women.
- ◇ Finding innovative methods to effectively convey the critical role of upholding democracy amid increasing global skepticism.

Project DEMED addresses these challenges by using social media to conduct civic education campaigns, offering a cost-effective and wide-reaching method. Our online content is adaptable and reusable, providing a sustainable and versatile tool for organizations aiming to launch impactful civic campaigns.

DEMED's experimental studies reveal that democracy-focused videos circulated on social media have a positive global impact.

DEMED's approach allows us to engage millions of people, including those traditionally difficult to reach. Unlike standard civic education programs, we conduct our interventions across multiple countries with different political and economic contexts, ranging from well-established to emerging democracies, and even autocracies, allowing cross-country comparisons.

## Testing the Effectiveness of Online Civic Education

In Project DEMED, we are exploring the effectiveness of [short, animated online videos](#) in promoting democratic values and the rejection of authoritarian alternatives. We use paid social media advertisements to reach a broad audience, especially targeting adults with less civic education exposure. Given the rise of misinformation and external forces undermining democracy, we utilize social media as a tool for positive reinforcement and mobilization to support democratic principles.

To assess the impact of these animated online videos, we used an experimental approach where we randomly assigned online participants to watch videos supporting democracy (treatment groups) or to watch a video on a non-political, neutral topic about space exploration (control group). To measure the impact of these online interventions, we compare various key outcomes between individuals assigned to the treatment and control group.

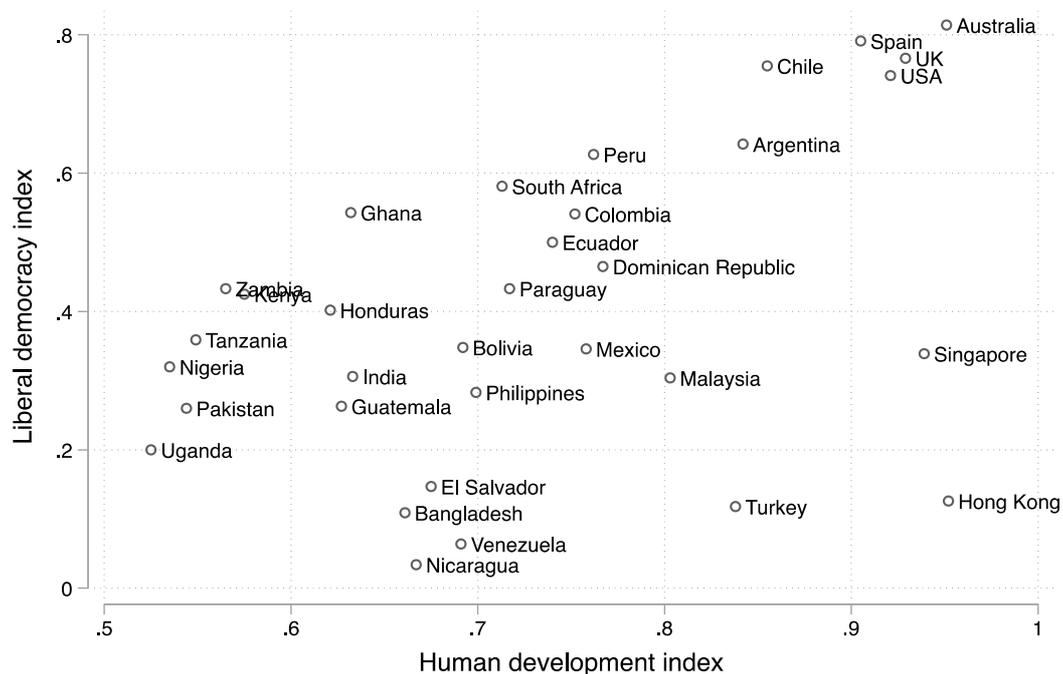
*Screenshots of educational videos*



## How the Studies Were Conducted

Our study included 33 countries where English, Spanish, or Turkish are predominantly spoken, enabling us to create multilingual content. This included a diverse range of countries, such as former British colonies like Singapore, Nigeria, India, Latin American countries, Turkey, the US, and Australia, covering various political and economic backgrounds (see Figure below). We conducted the experiments between May and October 2023.

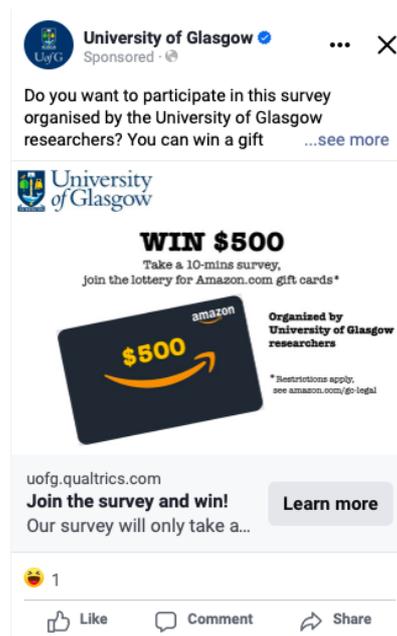
*Countries included in our study and their liberal democracy and human development score*



For participant recruitment, we leveraged social media advertising to reach adults aged 18 and above. We embedded the videos within a survey, randomly assigning different videos to participants. We intentionally kept the content of the videos general, avoiding specific country references; this allowed us to assess their impact universally, i.e., in both democratic and non-democratic settings. This also avoided any criticism of local autocratic regimes of our work as possibly interfering in national politics. The videos were crafted for easy consumption on social media platforms, targeting a wide audience range.

Our social media advertisements (see an example on the next page) were seen by 10.7 million people across 33 countries. Over 90,000 people saw the videos, and over 60,000 people completed surveys.

## Example advertisement to recruit research participants



## Main Results

Draft papers with more details about the research can be accessed on our [website](#). Here we briefly summarize the key findings from the various studies we conducted.

### I. Can Online Civic Education Promote Democratic Citizenship?<sup>1</sup>

One of the key questions is whether watching these short, animated videos on the virtues of democracy has any impact on people's democratic attitudes and behavior. To test this, we asked respondents of our study several questions after they watched the videos about democracy and compared them to the ones who watched the control video about space exploration. All our outcome variables capture the proportion of respondents expressing a strong and consistent commitment to democracy.<sup>2</sup>

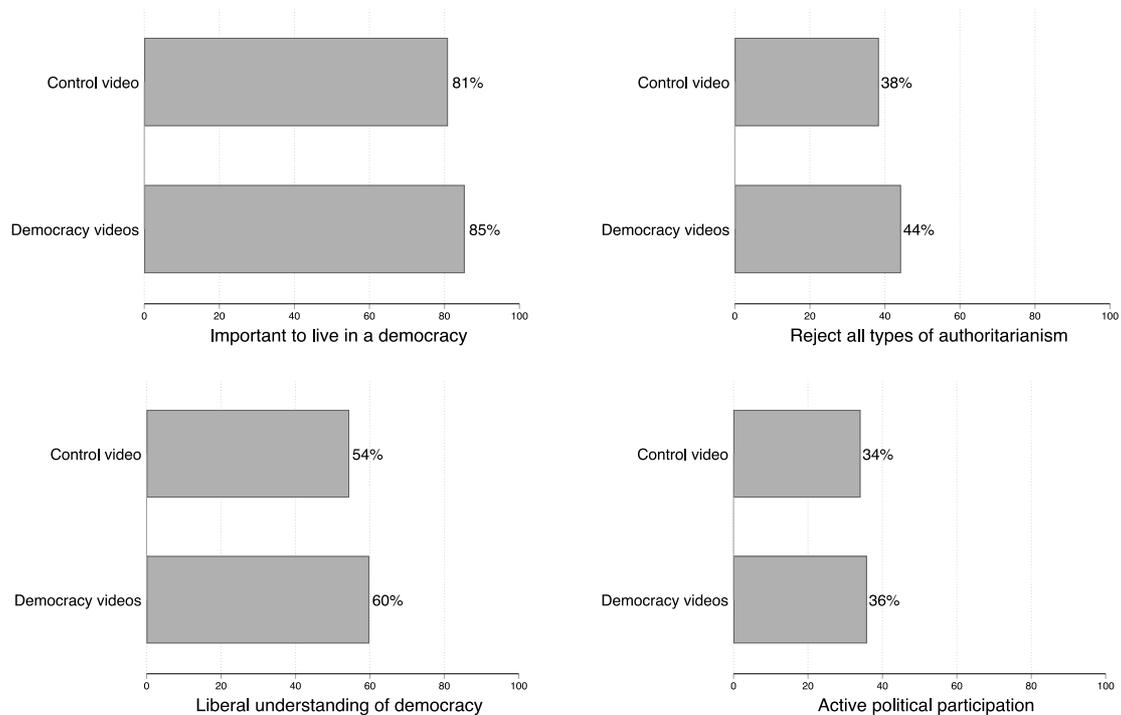
As Figure 1 shows, a higher proportion of those who watched the democracy videos state that it is very important to live in a democracy (5% increase compared to the control video), rate all forms of authoritarian government as bad or very bad (14% increase), define liberal

<sup>1</sup> Neundorf, Anja, Aykut Öztürk, Steven Finkel, and Ericka R. Ramírez. 2023. "(When) Does Civic Education Work: Evidence from a Cross-national Online Experiment." OSF Preprints. December 21. doi:10.31219/osf.io/ue6qj. Link to paper: <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/ue6qj>

<sup>2</sup> Questions with a scale from 0 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic), we coded values higher than seven as democratic. The only exception is "rejecting authoritarianism", which has a scale of four response options. In this case, we show the proportion of respondents selecting "bad" or "very bad" for all three types of authoritarian regimes (strong man rule, army rule, single-party regime). All variables except "important to live in a democracy" are built of three questions; in these cases, we require responses to every single question to show democratic commitment.

democratic institutions (courts, elections, and freedom) as essential to democracy (11% increase) and are more likely to intent to participate in non-electoral politics (6% increase).

**Figure 1:** Comparing people’s democratic attitudes, knowledge, and political participation who were exposed to the democracy videos or control video



It is remarkable that watching a three-minute video only once already has an impact on how people think about democracy and their role as citizens. We expect that if people were exposed more frequently to this kind of content and to more extensive online interventions, the effects would manifest and get even stronger.

**How Long do the Effects of Online Civic Education Last?**

A crucial discovery was the persistence of these effects even after two weeks, indicating a potential for lasting impact through repeated exposure. To demonstrate this, we re-contacted our participants in Turkey after they watched our democracy or control videos.

- ◇ The positive effect of the democracy videos is still statistically significant after almost two weeks. Again, these results are driven by the exposure to a single video of three minutes.

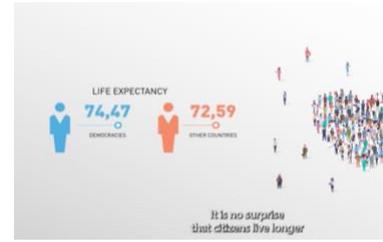
## Which Pro-Democratic Arguments Have the Strongest Impact?



*Institutional constraints on executive power and promotion of the rule of law*



*Protection of individual rights and liberties*



*Performance in providing positive economic, health, and environmental outcomes*

What content should these civic education videos have? How can we best sell the virtues of democracy? Our three short videos represented different arguments favoring democratic political systems. Testing different videos allowed us to test which content has the strongest impact.

- ◇ We found that emphasizing democracy's liberal aspects, particularly its rights and institutions, to be more effective than arguments emphasizing democracy's economic benefits.

## Do these Interventions Work Better in Some Countries or Individuals?

We conducted our study in 33 countries, which greatly varied in their political and economic development (see Figure above). Some countries represented rich and advanced democracies, but we also included countries that are autocratic and/or poor. This allowed us to test whether our online videos are more or less effective in specific countries.

- ◇ We did not find any noteworthy country differences. Online civic education interventions were found to have similar average effects across all kinds of countries in our sample.

Our sample also includes people with different demographic and social characteristics to test whether our interventions worked better among some groups than others.

- ◇ In many cases, the effects of the videos were greatest among those who have a greater need for political education, for example, younger individuals and those with less political interest. This shows promise for the ways that online civic education can help build democratic support for individuals with less pre-existing political information and experience.

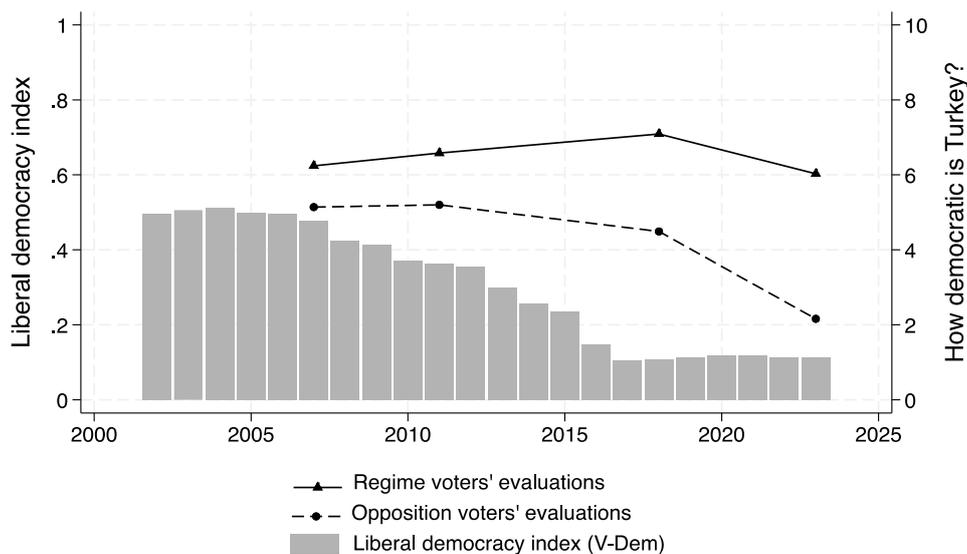
## II. How to Best “Sell” Democracy in Autocracies?<sup>3</sup>

Conducting civic education in autocratic contexts faces specific challenges:

- Autocratic regimes often criminalize and punish criticism, especially from civil society organizations that threaten their stability.
- Autocratic regimes are frequently accompanied by increased polarization and political propaganda, which strengthen partisan identities.
- In such environments, conducting civic education campaigns that openly criticize the regime’s authoritarian nature can be risky or counterproductive.
- Citizens living under these regimes often have serious misconceptions about the anti-democratic nature of their political systems.

As the figure below shows, despite the level of democracy declining in Turkey (based on the data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute), voters of the governing parties remain very positive about the state of Turkey’s democracy, while opposition voters became more critical with how they evaluate democracy in the country.

**Figure 2:** Development of liberal democracy in Turkey (grey bars) and the perceived level of democracy among government and opposition voters (lines)



In this study, we produced different versions of the individual rights video that frame the importance of civil liberties from two different perspectives.

- 1) We compare the effect of a positive pro-democratic message, which evokes positive emotions and focuses on democratic gains – such as emphasizing the freedom to

<sup>3</sup> Öztürk, Aykut, Steven Finkel, Anja Neundorff, and Ericka R. Ramirez. 2023. “Keep Positive and Defend Democracy: Building Democratic Support Under Authoritarianism.” OSF Preprints. May 16. doi:10.31219/osf.io/fqn5g. Link to papers: <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/fqn5g>.

speaking against incumbents, joining independent associations, and enjoying equal treatment under the law.

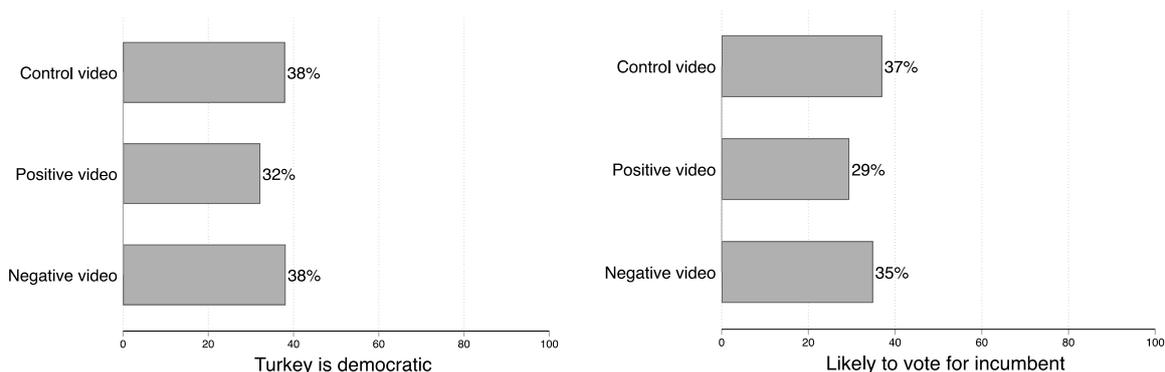
- 2) We compare a negative message frame, emphasizing the losses of political rights in autocracies and which evokes negative emotions.

### Do People Understand how (Un)democratic their Country is?

In Turkey, using a *positive* pro-democracy frame was found to be more effective than a negative frame focusing on democratic losses. Research participants watching the positive video updated how they evaluate the current level of democracy in Turkey (reduced by 16% compared to the control video) and whether to support the incumbent party (reduced by 21% compared to the control video). The results, as presented in the figure below, support the idea that the positive democratic civic education frame made people see their government as less democratic and reduced their likelihood of voting for the ruling party, even though the civic education videos made no mention of Turkey or the current regime.<sup>4</sup> This shows another promising aspect of civic education in even difficult political contexts.

In Turkey, the more positive frame of democracy presented a starker comparison to what people were experiencing in the present and produced more positive results in terms of democratic support. Thus, for example, respondents watching that video, emphasizing the gains from democracy, were more likely to say that Turkey's democratic performance was worse than many other countries in the world.

**Figure 3:** Comparing democratic attitudes among those exposed to the democracy versus and control videos in Turkey



<sup>4</sup> We asked about Turkey's democratic level on a scale from 0 (not democratic at all) to 10 (very democratic) and about the likelihood to vote on a scale from 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (very likely). For both questions, the figures show the proportion above the middle value of the scale.

### III. Can Online Tools be Used Effectively on “Real World” Internet or Social Media Feeds of Civil Society Organizations?<sup>5</sup>

Civil society organizations, particularly in the developing world, have limited resources to reach people outside metropolitan areas. Authoritarian conditions, such as the lack of legal guarantees and political polarization, make it even harder for civil society organizations to expand their volunteer base in provincial cities. In our study, we partnered with Vote & Beyond, Turkey’s leading civil initiative in the field of election integrity, to investigate whether social media advertisements can provide an alternative method for recruiting, capacity-building, and mobilization under these circumstances.

#### Are Social Media Advertisements Effective at Recruiting Election Monitors?

During the campaign period for the 2023 general election, we conducted an online field experiment. We excluded the major metropolitan districts in Turkey, including all districts in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. The remaining 820 districts were randomly assigned into treatment and control groups. In the treatment group districts, we assisted Vote & Beyond in running Facebook and Instagram advertisements for two weeks. These ads aimed to invite social media users to sign up as election volunteers. An example of these online advertisements can be seen in the figure below.

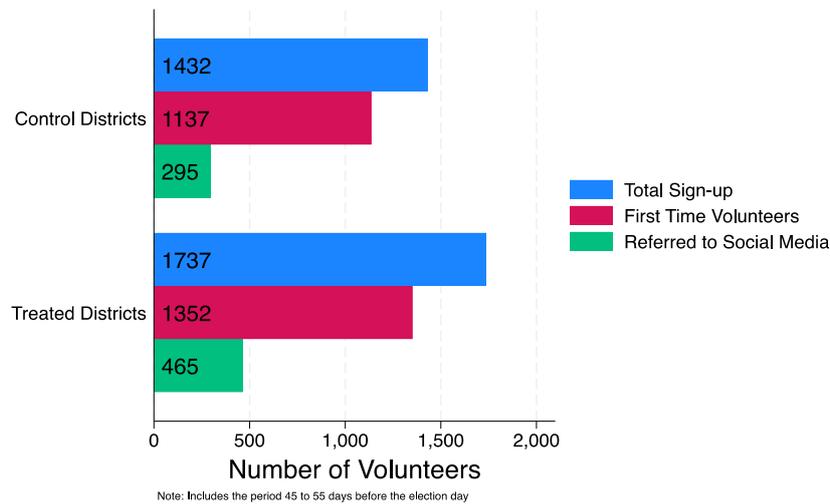
*An example of online advertisements used for the Vote and Beyond campaign*



<sup>5</sup> Öztürk, Aykut, Steven Finkel, Anja Neundorf, and Ericka R. Ramírez. 2024. “Promoting Democracy Through Social Media Advertisements? A Field Experiment in Mobilizing Election Monitors.” OSF Preprints. September 24. doi:10.31219/osf.io/g5cya. Link to paper: <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/g5cya>

The results presented in Figure 4 demonstrate that social media advertisements increased the number of volunteers by over 20% and the number of people reached through social media by nearly 60% during the advertising period.

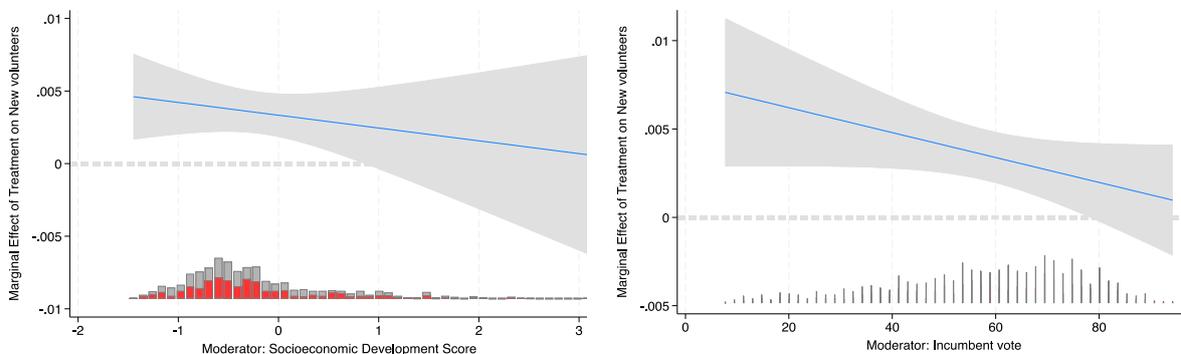
**Figure 4:** Effect of social media ad campaign on volunteer recruitment in Turkey



### In which Districts were Online Advertisements Most Useful?

We conducted additional analysis to understand how effective social media advertisements are in recruiting election monitors across different districts. The figure below shows that these advertisements are more effective in districts with lower socioeconomic development levels and a lower share of incumbent votes. We argue that these are districts where the potential human resources are not fully utilized due to macro-political or socio-economic conditions, and online tools can help overcome this problem.

**Figure 5:** Where were the online ad campaigns more successful?

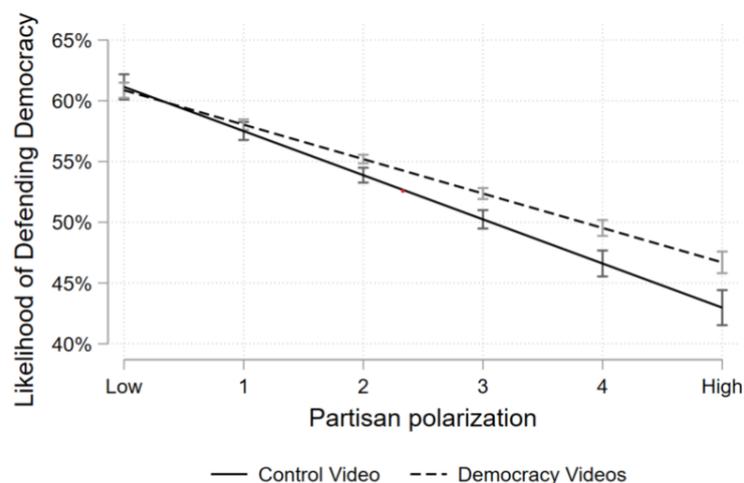


## IV. Can Online Civic Education Mitigate the Negative Consequences of Extreme Partisan Polarization?<sup>6</sup>

Partisan polarization – when individuals rate their party very highly and others very negatively – poses a threat to democracy because it can lead to polarized individuals becoming less supportive of democratic norms as they vote for candidates of their party even when they undermine democratic institutions. Through online civic education videos, we show that citizens are less likely to vote for their preferred party when it engages in anti-democratic practices.

As can be seen in the figure below, highly polarized people are much more likely to choose an anti-democratic candidate when they do not receive the civic education video (shown by the solid line). However, when these polarized individuals watch the video about the benefits of democracy (shown by the dashed line), their tendency to choose anti-democratic candidates decreases significantly. Our videos reduced the negative impact of partisan polarization on anti-democratic choice by more than 20% among the most polarized voters.

**Figure 6:** Vote choice for a democratically-oriented candidate of an opposing party, by level of personal partisan polarization



We also find that individuals who watched the democracy videos evaluated *democratic* parties, in general, more positively than did individuals in the control group. Both results complement each other, showing how civic education encourages people to support parties that are more democratic.

Finally, we show that all these effects are greater in more autocratic countries and those with higher political polarization, suggesting again that civic education makes more of a difference where it is most needed.

<sup>6</sup> Eroglu, Melek H., Steven Finkel, Anja Neundorff, Aykut Öztürk, and Ericka R. Ramirez. 2024. "Choosing Democracy over Party? How Civic Education Can Mitigate the Anti-democratic Effects of Partisan Polarization." OSF Preprints. April 29. doi:10.31219/osf.io/pk4gz. Link to paper: <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/pk4gz>

## **Recommendations for Practitioners and Democracy-Promoters**

### **◇ Give Greater Emphasis to Online Platforms**

Our work shows that social media platforms can be highly useful for disseminating civic education content, offering a cost-effective, scalable approach to reach substantially greater numbers of individuals than traditional in-person methods. Paid social media advertisements can help not only in the dissemination of information but also help pro-democracy organizations with the recruitment of new volunteers to assist their efforts. These methods can be effective even in authoritarian contexts where greater restrictions exist for the activities of civil society organizations.

Overall, our study presents a hopeful perspective on online campaigns' role in advocating for democratic values worldwide. One promising next step is to embed civic education interventions within the actual social media feeds of civil society organizations such as Vote & Beyond in Turkey which would allow educational content to reach even more individuals who may follow or share videos or other forms of pro-democracy civic content.

### **◇ Customize Messages for Political Context**

Our work shows the need for tailoring civic education messages to address specific challenges in different contexts to enhance their effectiveness. In authoritarian contexts, it may not be advisable to have the content of the messages make direct references to the regime or regime parties; in these cases, more general information about democracy can still have an impact, in leading individuals not only to support democratic values but also to see the democratic deficiencies in their own country and to withdraw support from regime-allied political parties.

### **◇ Extend Efforts to Combat the Anti-democratic Effects of Political Polarization**

Our work demonstrates the strong negative impact of political and partisan polarization on democratic attitudes, with likely impacts on political elites as well. It is urgent to develop new interventions to heighten individuals' awareness and understanding of antidemocratic elite and political party practices, which stress the importance of defending democracy by voting against even one's party when it or its candidates engage in undemocratic practices.

### **◇ Target Marginalized Groups and Underrepresented Groups**

Our work points to the promise of online civic education interventions in affecting the democratic attitudes and behaviors of even those with lower levels of political information and prior political experience. Future campaigns should exploit this potential by focusing on other more marginalized or underrepresented groups, for example, women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBT community, to empower these groups of individuals to engage fully with the political process and to promote democratic change through the increased inclusiveness and responsiveness of existing political systems.