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# Reclaiming democracy through online civic education

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## The power and paradox of democracy

I was born in the **German Democratic Republic**, a state that called itself democratic but denied its citizens the rights that democracy requires. Decades later, in my home village in Thuringia, more than 40 per cent of voters now support the far-right **Alternative for Germany (AfD)**. During the national election campaign in early 2025, their posters proclaimed »Take a chance on more democracy!« and »Complete the transition« (*Wende vollenden*). Their rallies echoed the old GDR chant »Wir sind das Volk« (We are the people), but this time turned against liberal institutions, migrants and the European Union.

This is far from not an isolated story. In 2023, Turkey's President **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** declared after re-election that the country had »celebrated a festival of democracy«, even though election observers had criticised the fact that the campaign had been heavily skewed in favour of his ruling party (Esen and Gümüşçü 2023). In Hungary, Prime Minister **Viktor Orbán** proudly describes his system as an »illiberal democracy«. In Russia, tightly controlled elections are mere masquerades to provide the fiction of popular legitimacy.

Across continents, autocrats and extremists cloak themselves in democratic language. They claim to speak for »the people«, to stand for »true democracy« against corrupt elites or foreign influences. The word »democracy« has become so powerful, so morally charged that everyone wants to claim it. But this very universality creates a paradox: **when everyone claims democracy, its meaning becomes hollow.**

Democracy's moral appeal lies in the promise of fairness, equality and voice. Yet that same power makes it vulnerable to manipulation. When people no longer understand what democracy truly entails; when they equate it only with elections or majority rule; its liberal foundations can quietly erode, even as its symbols remain intact. Ballots are cast, parliaments meet and constitutions endure, but pluralism, rights and accountability fade.

## When people misjudge democracy

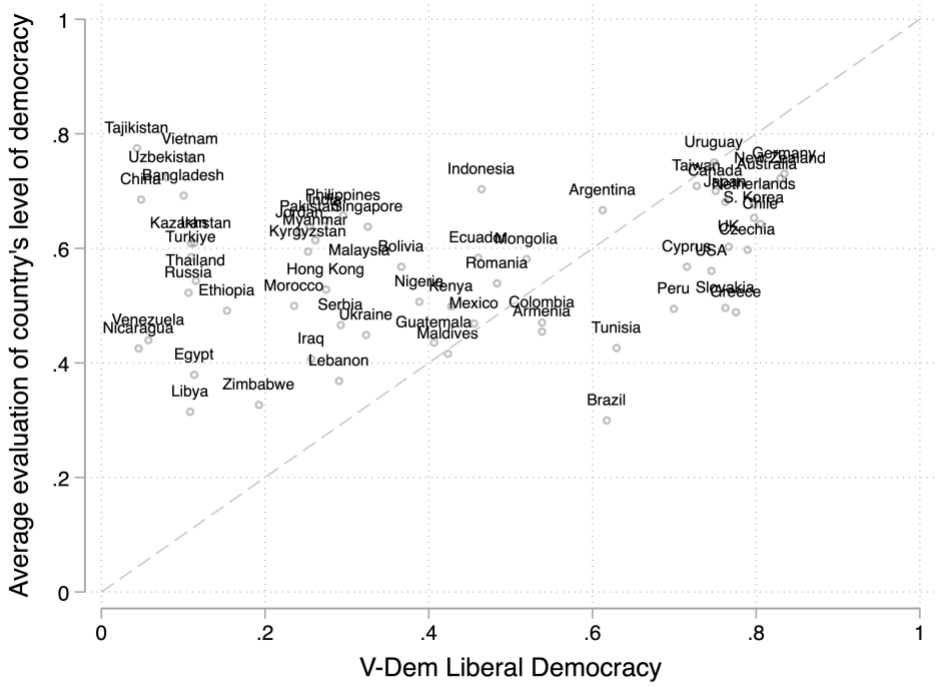
The **global rise of populist and authoritarian movements** reveals how fragile democratic understanding has become. Surveys show that many citizens define democracy primarily through procedural features, such as free elections, majority rule and government responsiveness, while neglecting liberal principles such as **checks and balances, judicial independence and minority rights** (Chu et al. 2024; Neundorf et al. 2024).

This narrowing of meaning has real-world consequences. When democracy is reduced to voting rituals, so-called »strongmen« can claim to be its truest defenders. In their logic, independent courts, critical journalists and civic activists become enemies of »the people«. As Norris (2011) and Mattes and Bratton (2007) have shown, citizens' attachment to democracy depends less on material performance than on the protection of rights and institutional integrity.

If people misunderstand what democracy is, they may also misjudge **how democratic their country really is**. Using data from the **World Values Survey (2017–2022)**, respondents were asked in dozens of countries: »How democratically is this country being governed today?« The *y*-axis in Figure 1 shows people's average evaluation of

democracy (scaled 0–1), while the *x*-axis plots the country's real liberal democracy score based on **V-Dem** data from the same year.

*Figure 1 Perceptions vs reality: misjudging democracy*




Note: Citizens in autocracies overestimate, while those in established democracies underestimate how democratic their country is. The figure shows the average evaluation of the country´s level of democracy (on the vertical axis) and its V-Dem Liberal Democracy score (horizontal axis). The pattern shows, that citizens in autocracies overestimate, while those in established democracies underestimate how democratic their country is. (Average self-assessment of democracy WVS 2017–2022 vs. V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index.)

The pattern is striking. People living in **consolidated autocracies** (low V-Dem score, *x*-axis) often believe they live in genuine democracies, while citizens in established democracies tend to **underestimate** the quality of their systems. In other words, propaganda works: autocrats have successfully claimed the democratic brand, while citizens in healthy democracies are increasingly disillusioned.

At the lower end of the chart, inflated perceptions are likely to reflect **state propaganda**, as autocrats insist that »their democracy« is purer than that of the West. At the upper end, the opposite bias may stem from **critical public discourse**, in which media and political debates focus on scandals, failures and division rather than on democracy's everyday successes. Bad news sells better than good news.

The result is a troubling symmetry: those deprived of democracy may think they have it, while those enjoying it may think they have lost it. Both misunderstandings weaken democracy's credibility and resilience.

**Understanding democracy therefore requires education**; not indoctrination, but civic learning that helps citizens to identify when democracy is threatened and why liberal values matter. Yet civic education is under strain. In many democracies, it is marginalised in school curricula, treated as politically risky or absent altogether. And adults – those already beyond formal education – are rarely reached at all.

## Relearning democracy

We need to **teach democracy again**, not as an abstract constitutional principle, but as a *lived practice* of rights, accountability and pluralism. People can defend only what they understand.

Civic education must move beyond the classroom to meet citizens where they already are: **online**. Today's information environment is dominated by actors who exploit democratic ignorance to sow distrust and division. Yet the same digital platforms can also be tools for learning, connection and empowerment.

As Louisa Slavkova, co-founder of the Civics Innovation Hub, put it: »When democracy deteriorates, you need more and better civic education. If there's a pandemic, you send in the doctors; in a democracy crisis, you send in the civic educators« (Tugend 2025).

Unfortunately, civic knowledge is declining almost everywhere. The **International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS 2022)** found that not a single participating country had improved its scores since 2016. In the United Kingdom, only one in five 16-17 year-olds – who will soon be eligible to vote – say that school has prepared them to understand politics and elections (John Smith Centre 2025). Meanwhile, teachers increasingly self-censor out of fear of causing political controversy (Tugend 2025).

The result is a widening knowledge gap at the very time citizens are more exposed than ever to political messaging, but less equipped to interpret it.

## Evidence from 33 countries

Our ERC-funded project »Democracy under threat: how education can save it (DEMED)« tested whether civic education can strengthen democratic values in today's digital world, and whether it can do so across very different contexts (Neundorf et al. 2025).

Working with a global sample of 33 countries and surveying over 40,000 participants, we designed short, animated videos that explain the core principles of liberal democracy.[1] Each focused on one of three themes:

(i) civil rights and liberties;
(ii) checks and balances; and
(iii) democracy's social and economic benefits.

Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of these short videos or a neutral »placebo« about space exploration. We then measured changes in democratic knowledge, attitudes and engagement.

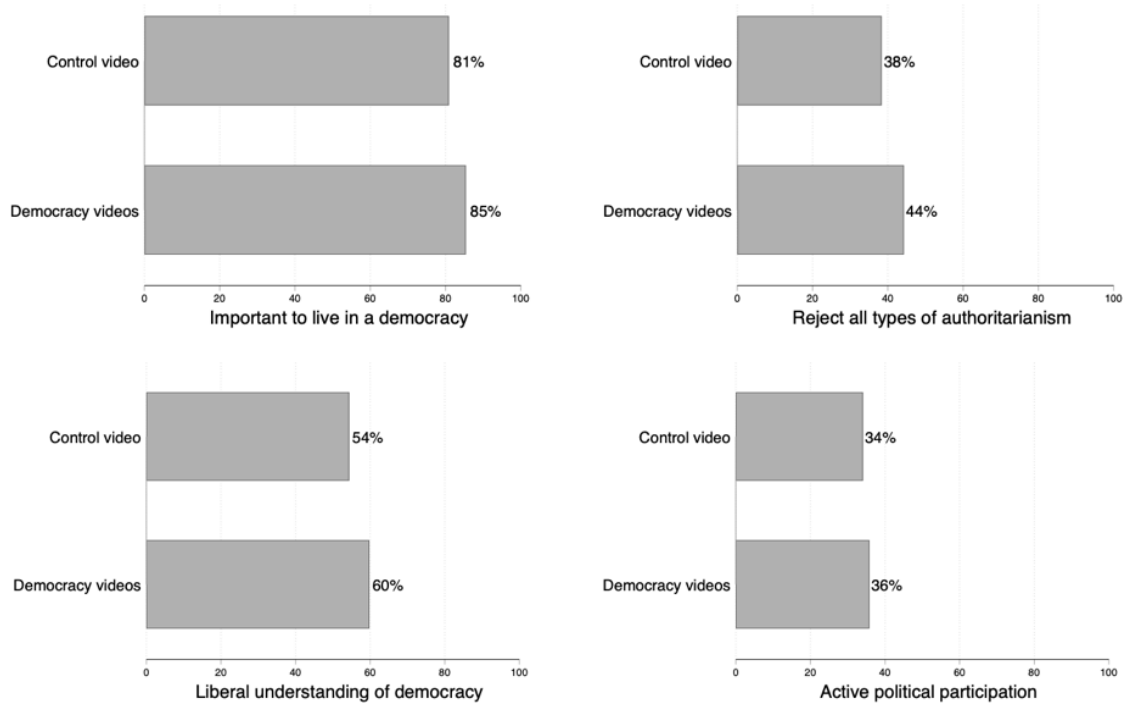
The results were striking. Across all countries, viewing a three-minute civic education video **increased support for democracy**, **reduced acceptance of authoritarian rule** and **improved factual understanding** of democratic principles (Neundorf et al. 2025). These effects remained measurable for at least ten days, a remarkable impact for such a brief intervention.

The videos worked particularly well among the young and politically uninterested, the very groups most often dismissed as apathetic. Moreover, further research in Turkey found that, respondents who watched a positively framed video promoting civic rights adjusted their perception of the country's democratic quality closer to objective democracy indicators. This suggests that online videos can also help address the problem of misjudging democracy. Correcting these evaluations, in turn, reduced support for the ruling AKP (Öztürk et al. 2025).

These findings challenge the assumption that civic education must be deeply localised to be effective. When content focuses on universal liberal principles rather than partisan or national narratives, it resonates across cultures and political systems (Yameogo et al. 2025).

[1] The videos are available here:
https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/democracyresearch/promotingdemocracy/civiceducationinterventions/

*Figure 2 Civic education works – everywhere*




Note: Short, positive educational content improves democratic understanding across 33 countries, especially among young and politically disengaged citizens. The figure shows, that short, positive educational content improves democratic understanding across 33 countries, especially among young and politically disengaged citizens. Compared to control videos, the change in attitude was always slightly higher.

## Why online civic education matters

The internet is often portrayed as democracy's downfall, a place in which polarisation and disinformation thrive. But it can also be democracy's classroom. Digital platforms make it possible to reach audiences traditional education cannot: young people, those outside formal institutions and citizens in authoritarian contexts (Boas et al. 2020).

Our research shows that **digital civic education works** because it is accessible, visual and emotionally engaging. Short, well-crafted videos prompt curiosity rather than defensiveness. They invite reflection instead of resistance, making them powerful even in polarised settings (Eroglu et al. 2025).

Moreover, online civic education is **cheap and scalable**. Paid social media campaigns can reach millions for the cost of a single public event and can be repeatedly tested and adapted.

Not all messages are equally effective, however. Videos highlighting **rights and institutional constraints**, rather than economic outcomes, produce stronger and more durable democratic support (Neundorf et al. 2025). Positive, hopeful content performs better than fear-based appeals. People are inspired by democracy's achievements, not by its decline (Öztürk et al. 2025).

## Breaking the bubble

A major challenge for pro-democracy actors is that organic online content rarely escapes its own audience. Paid advertisements, by contrast, can reach those who would never encounter democratic messages otherwise, including citizens sympathetic to populist or far-right narratives.

In Turkey, our partnership with **Vote and Beyond**, a civil society organisation promoting electoral integrity, showed that targeted paid ads during the 2023 election campaign increased volunteer sign-ups for election monitoring by **20 per cent** in the districts involved (Öztürk et al. 2024).

Digital civic education is not just about awareness; it can mobilise citizens to act. Yet the regulatory environment is becoming more restrictive. New European rules on digital political advertising, designed to combat disinformation, risk silencing non-partisan civic education campaigns. Well-intentioned as they are, such policies may inadvertently prevent democrats from communicating about democracy itself.

If we want to defend democracy, we must also defend the ability to talk about it.

*Figure 3 Reclaiming democracy online*


Note: Digital platforms can be reclaimed as civic spaces. Figure shows, that paid social media ads make it possible to have a reach beyond echo chambers, which then leads to an increased understanding of liberal democracy; and fostering engagement and the defense of democracy.

## Policy takeaways

**(i) Reclaim digital platforms for democracy**
Authoritarian and populist actors dominate online spaces. Pro-democracy educators and institutions must actively re-enter them with credible, creative, and emotionally engaging content.

**(ii) Invest in civic education, especially online**

Digital civic education is one of the most cost-effective tools for strengthening democratic resilience, particularly among young and politically disengaged citizens.

**(iii) Protect paid civic content**

Regulations on political advertising should distinguish between manipulative campaigning and non-partisan, pro-democratic education.

**(iv) Keep messages positive and hopeful**

Fear-based appeals reinforce division. Hope and pride in democracy's achievements inspire learning and engagement.

**(v) Focus on liberal-democratic principles**

Teaching about rights, institutions and pluralism has more lasting effects than emphasising material benefits or national pride.

## Reclaiming the word – and the idea

Democracy has always been contested. Today, that contestation is not only political but also semantic. When populists and autocrats claim to be the »true democrats«, defenders of liberal democracy must respond not only with policy but also with pedagogy.

Reclaiming democracy begins with **knowledge**, with citizens who understand why rights, pluralism and accountability matter. Our research demonstrates that even brief, scalable civic education can strengthen these values across continents and political regimes.

The challenge is no longer whether civic education works – it does – but whether we have the political will to support it. We must treat democratic learning not as a nostalgic relic of the past, but as a **living defence of democracy's future.**

Democracy will not die because we run out of ideas. It will die if we forget how it works.

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### About the author


Anja Neundorf is Professor of Politics at the University of Glasgow. Her research examines democratic support, authoritarian legacies and the impact of civic education on political values. She leads the ERC-funded DEMED project on the effectiveness of online civic education in promoting democratic values across diverse contexts.