The impact of civic education programmes on political participation

KEY FINDINGS

- Civic education programmes can have meaningful and relatively long-lasting effects in terms of increasing political information, feelings of empowerment, and mobilizing individuals to engage in political participation.
- Civic education programmes are much less likely to affect more ‘deep-seated’ democratic values such as political tolerance, support, and trust.
- The size of these effects depends on how these programmes are designed, the kinds of pedagogical methods employed and the quality of the facilitators or trainers.
- The full potential for larger-scale changes in democratic orientations through civic education is not being realized in practice.

About civic education programmes

Civic education programmes provide explicit instruction to ordinary citizens about democratic institutions, values, and procedures. They include voter education programmes, programmes that provide instruction about the social and political rights of women, neighbourhood problem-solving programmes that bring individuals in contact with local authorities and promote local collective action, programmes combating election violence and vote-buying, and programmes promoting tolerance and the peaceful resolution of political disputes in post-conflict settings.

Civic education programmes have proliferated as a means of democracy promotion through aid over the past three decades. Donors from a majority of OECD countries, as well as multilateral organizations such as UNDP and the World Bank, have devoted resources to these programmes in order to foster democratic values and behaviours among ordinary individuals in emerging democracies. Many of these programmes consist of individual NGOs providing information to voters related to national or local elections, but an increasing number encompass issues such as constitutional reform, political decentralization, alternative dispute resolution, and the rights of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups.

Positive effects of civic education programmes

Based on results from four impact evaluations of civic education programmes, it appears that civic education programmes do contribute to the development of a democratic political culture amongst participants. These programmes have been found to significantly increase individuals’ political information, feelings of empowerment, and levels of political participation.

For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, people who participated in education sessions were significantly more democratically aware over time than those in villages where sessions did not take place. In Kenya, individuals who attended civic education workshops were more likely to report increased awareness of the contents of the constitution and of various proposals being discussed to reform the constitution, as compared to people who did not attend workshops.

Long-term effects

In the Kenyan case, the impact of civic education exposure was still evident for more than a year after the programme had ended. Individuals who engaged in face-to-face civic education were significantly more participatory at the local level, more knowledgeable about politics, more aware of how to defend their rights, and more informed about constitutional issues and the desirability of public involvement in the constitutional review process. Long-term effects on other areas were much more limited, however. Thus,
Civic education appears to be primarily effective in terms of political empowerment over the long term, but is less effective at changing values and increasing support for democratic political processes.

**Civic education in areas of conflict**

In Kenya—which, in the wake of a contested election outcome, had become engulfed in large-scale ethnic violence—the ensuing violence did not reduce the impact of civic education activities. In fact, in terms of attitudes related to ethnicity, the programme had a longer-lasting impact among people who had experienced the political upheaval directly. Moreover, people who took part in the programme and had experienced violence were less pessimistic about their role in Kenyan democracy—and more willing to consider the views of other ethnic groups—than those who experienced violence but did not participate in the programme. Thus, civic education may have the effect of inoculating individuals against some of the more deleterious effects of violence.

**The limitations**

At the same time, far weaker effects have been found from these programmes on fundamental democratic values, such as political tolerance, support, and trust—indispensable components of stable democracies—than on the empowerment and engagement factors mentioned above. Moreover, the impact of civic education depends critically on how programmes are designed, the kinds of teaching methods employed, and the quality of the programme’s facilitators or trainers.

First, the frequency of attendance at civic education activities is the most important determinant of individual change. Multiple workshop exposures have produced relatively large gains, while a single civic education workshop may have no impact.

Second, more active, participatory teaching methods have been significantly more effective in stimulating democratic change.

Finally, workshops have been most effective when participants reported that the trainers were ‘knowledgeable’, ‘inspiring’, and ‘interested’. Trainers who did not engage or were not well-regarded by the participants had little success in transmitting democratic knowledge, values, or participatory inclinations.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- In order to be effective, civic education needs to consist of multiple workshops, not one-off events.
- Instructional methods must involve and engage participants actively in order to impact individuals’ attitudes about democracy.
- Programmes that devote more resources to teacher recruitment and training will likely see a greater impact on participants.

*This Research brief is based on WIDER Working Paper 2013/64 ‘The impact of adult civic education programmes in developing democracies’ by Steven E. Finkel.*