Policy Brief
Education inequalities and
political participation

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Executive Summary

The DEMOCRAT project has conducted a comprehensive and multi-faceted analysis of political participation, democratic values, misinformation and the impact of digitalisation on democracy in the European context. DEMOCRAT has examined different aspects of political engagement, including voting behaviour, formal and informal participation, and the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on these activities. The analysis comprises three distinct strands of research:

- A comparative analysis of data from the main international surveys: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS).

- An international online experiment on the ability to detect and the likelihood to disseminate misinformation.

- An analysis of the social bias of digital tools and their application taking as example the gender bias and gender stereotyping in the use of a mathematics learning platform in Spain.

The findings enable the refinement of the recommendation for Education for Democracy proposed in earlier reports produced by DEMOCRAT team, that can be summarized as follows:

- In the context of multidimensional societal change, Education for Democracy should not only provide students with theoretical knowledge of democratic principles but also equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary to analyse discrimination, exclusion, and inequality.

- As digital citizenship keeps evolving, Education for Democracy has also to address the challenge to empower children and youth by fostering critical thinking. The empowerment and fostering agency towards responsible democratic citizenship should be embedded across curricula, teacher education and training programmes, and digital education initiatives.

- Fostering agency towards responsible democratic citizenship and increasing political participation appears to be related to the experience of the effectivity of participation activities. Therefore, it is important to create opportunities for students to observe and experience how democracy works at first hand, using democratic principles in practice both in and outside schools.

- Education for democracy cannot be confined to school settings alone. It must be understood as a broader societal endeavour that extends beyond the classroom, engaging families and local communities as essential sites of democratic practice. Schools play a pivotal role in fostering democratic values, but their impact is significantly enhanced when students' learning experiences are reinforced within their families and (local) communities.

- A pivotal aspect in nurturing effective Education for Democracy is the presence of a highly qualified and motivated teaching staff. This can be facilitated through the provision of comprehensive initial teacher education and training programmes, supplemented by continuous professional development and self-directed learning opportunities.

1. Introduction

The DEMOCRAT project has conducted a comprehensive and multi-faceted analysis of political participation, democratic values and the impact of digitalisation on democracy in the European context. It examines different aspects of political engagement, including voting behaviour, formal and informal participation, and the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on these activities. The analysis comprises three distinct strands of research:

- The first strand is a comparative analysis of data from the main international surveys: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). Both sources provide information on the relationship between formal education, socio-economic background and civic and political democratic participation at the EU level.

- The second strand focuses on the ability to detect and the likelihood to disseminate misinformation. This study addresses an issue related to one of the four competences defined by DEMOCRAT - judging information – in relation to the accelerated circulation of true and false information in the digital society. An online experiment on misinformation was conducted among adults in four of the six countries, in which the project operates: Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. The experiment provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic determinants influencing the ability to detect misinformation and the likelihood of sharing it.

- The third strand addresses another key issue of the digital society: the social bias of digital tools and their application in the everyday life. It focuses on gender bias in the use of digital learning tools. It analyses the gender bias and gender stereotyping by analysing the use of a mathematics learning platform in Spain.

In the following, the key messages of the three strands of research are presented.

2. Comparative Analysis of political participation

The comparative analysis of political participation was carried out for the six countries, where the DEMOCRAT project operates: Estonia, Germany, Finland, Ireland, Poland and Spain – henceforth referred to as: LL-countries (Living Lab countries). The analysis uses the data of the European Social Survey (ESS) for the years 2012 and 2022, complemented by an analysis of the most recent International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) data.

In order to contextualise the comparison, the DEMOCRAT project identified two major political events that marked the decade of the 2010s: the financial crisis of 2008, which had a significant impact on the social and economic development of the EU, and the increase in the migration flows to the EU around 2015. The 2020s will be characterised by two other major events: the outbreak of the global pandemic of the coronavirus in 2020 and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. The confluence of these events, compounded by the looming threat of the climate crisis, has profoundly reshaped the political landscape of the EU and its member states. Concurrently, the ongoing crisis of European democracy, characterised by the ascendance of far-right parties and social movements, has further exacerbated existing challenges.

Through the national reports elaborate in previous work, the DEMOCRAT project was able to identify four transversal topics of the political agenda, which are present to varying degrees in all six LL-countries: social inequality, migration flows, gender issues and the polarisation of the political debate.

The analysis of the ESS data across the LL countries reveals common challenges and opportunities in political participation, shaped by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, education, digital engagement, generational differences, attitudes toward democracy, and immigrant participation. Political participation was distinction in three types:

- Voting, which in the ESS refers to voting in the last national elections.

- Formal and informal participation. Formal participation refers to activities as contacting a politician, worn or displaying a campaign badge and donating to or participating in a political party or lobby group all in the last 12 months.

- Informal participation includes activities such signing a petition, boycotting certain products, participating in demonstrations and posting or sharing something about politics online.

While each country's context possesses unique characteristics, these variables collectively underscore the complexities of cultivating inclusive and equitable political participation in contemporary democracies. The analysis of the ESS and ICCS are summarised as follows:

- *Education* is widely recognized as a pivotal element in political participation. The use of regression models to analyse the ESS data confirms that it exerts a significant positive effect on voting, formal and informal participation. However, its impact varies across countries. While higher levels of education tend to be associated with increased voter engagement, the relationship is not straightforward. For instance, in Spain, there is a convergence in educational levels, while in Ireland, the voting rate among the less educated is the highest.

- *Socioeconomic factors* are universally acknowledged as significant determinants of political participation, which is also confirmed by the use of regression models. The better the economic conditions of the household, the higher the probability of participation, and especially in voting. Across all countries, higher socioeconomic status is generally associated with higher participation rates, though Ireland presents an interesting case where lower-income groups show higher engagement.

- *Gender disparities* in political participation are a common theme across countries, though the nature and extent of these disparities vary. While Finland and Spain show higher participation rates for women, traditional gender roles and stereotypes still hinder full gender equality in political engagement, as seen in Poland and Ireland. Nevertheless, the use of regression models suggest that gender is only significant for formal political participation, where women are less involved than men. Among the factors that contribute to increasing the number of women involved in politics are policy measures such as gender quotas.

- *Generational differences* in political participation are evident across all countries. Younger people are generally more engaged in informal and digital forms of participation, while older individuals tend to

participate more in formal processes like voting. This evidence is also confirmed by the regression models.

- *Digital participation* is becoming a critical component of political engagement across all countries. While it has democratized access and facilitated new forms of participation, challenges remain, particularly concerning the digital divide and the effective use of digital tools for political engagement. Studies indicates that digitalisation and social media are correlated with an increasing political participation, which does not imply necessarily a better democratic quality.

- *Attitudes toward democracy* vary across countries but are generally characterized by a mix of support and disillusionment. While countries like Finland and Spain show high levels of democratic support, the rise of polarization and political dissatisfaction is evident in Germany and Poland. These attitudes influence political participation, with dissatisfaction sometimes driving engagement in new forms of political action, as seen in Spain and Poland.
  o The comparative analysis distinguishes five groups of political ideals: low ideal, medium ideal, high ideals, social ideals and political ideals. Belonging to the 'Low ideals' group leads to lower participation than belonging to the 'Medium ideals' group, while belonging to the 'Political rights' group leads to higher participation The 'High ideals' group is more likely to participate than the 'Medium ideals' group in formal and informal actions, but not in voting. The 'Social rights' group is more likely to participate in informal political participation (relative to the reference group), but not in the other forms of participation. In general, the perceived importance of living in a democratically governed country increases the likelihood of participation.
  o Position on the left-right axis is a significant factor in formal and informal participation (the further to the left, the higher the participation), but not in voting.
  o People's satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their country has opposite effects depending on the type of participation: while the higher the satisfaction, the higher the participation in voting, the opposite effect is true for both formal and informal participation, although the magnitude of the impact is small.

- *Political polarization* in Europe is influenced by a mix of historical legacies, social divides, and emerging political movements. While some countries like Finland and Ireland maintain relatively low levels of polarization due to consensus-driven politics and social cohesion, others such as Germany, Spain, and Poland are witnessing increasing polarization, driven by factors like the rise of the far-right, historical grievances, and social inequalities. Estonia's polarization is shaped by its unique Soviet legacy and linguistic divides. The overall trend indicates that while some European nations manage to maintain political stability, others face growing divides that could challenge their democratic processes in the future.

- While *religion* is not a significant factor in political participation in Finland, Estonia, and Germany, it remains a potent influence in Ireland, Spain and Poland. In Ireland and Spain, the Church's influence has diminished, though it still plays a role in shaping national identity and, in Spain, far-right rhetoric. Conversely, in Poland, Catholicism continues to be deeply intertwined with political life, significantly shaping political discourse and participation, particularly among older, more religious populations. The influence of the catholic church in all three countries is considerable. This highlights the varying degrees

of religious influence on politics across Europe, with a notable divide between more secular and religiously engaged countries.

-   *Immigrant participation* is a significant issue across several countries, with structural barriers leading to lower engagement levels. While digital platforms and informal participation offer some opportunities for greater involvement, addressing legal, social, and educational barriers is crucial for fostering more inclusive political participation among immigrant communities.

The analysis of the ESS data is complemented by an analysis of the data of the ICCS with the focus on the expected political participation making a distinction between electoral participation and active political participation beyond voting. Regarding the expected future electoral participation, the statistical analysis of the ICCS data suggests that among the school-related factors, the level of civic knowledge acquired is revealed as the one with the highest positive impact on students' future voter turnout, followed by participation in civic activities at school and at a greater distance by the positive perception of the student-teacher relationship. Of the remaining factors, variables related to students' willingness to engage, trust in institutions and parents' interest in political and social issues emerge as the factors with the strongest association with electoral participation, while students' immigrant background is revealed as the factor with the strongest negative impact.

The picture is different with regards active political participation beyond voting. These results of the statistical analysis suggest that, while students with higher levels of civic knowledge and greater civic awareness tend to express a willingness to vote in elections, they are less likely to expect to engage in more active forms of participation. This is consistent with the results of previous ICCS surveys in 2009 and 2016 and may be related to the fact that students with greater knowledge of the complexities and potential problems of the functioning of the political system are likely to be more critical and reluctant to participate more actively in politics, at least in the more conventional forms of participation such as joining a political party or a trade union or standing as a candidate in local elections.

3. Ability to detect false information and disposition to share it

The results from the experiment conducted within the DEMOCRAT project show that respondents are generally more prone to classify a headline as true than false (credulous). Older individuals and those in higher income brackets generally exhibit better media literacy, accurately assessing the veracity of news headlines more frequently. Gender and education level seem not to be factor influencing the capacity to detect misinformation.

The propensity to share news on social media is influenced by various factors, including age, income, and political extremism. Interestingly, individuals who trust misinformation are more likely to share dubious information, these individuals could benefit from tailored educational campaigns to enhance their ability to discern credible information.

Efforts to improve judgement of information among social media users should cover all stages: source selection, information selection, and react on information. This is essential to mitigate the spread of false information. These efforts should not only focus on technical aspects, but also on social aspects such as critical thinking and ethical behaviour. It should not be conceived as a transversal effort as Mis- and disinformation

affects all subject areas of formal education. Therefore, it should be conceived as a transversal and iterative task of all subject areas, so that judgement of information will form part of the digital behaviour patterns of all citizens.

4. Gender bias and stereotyping in the use of digital learning tools

It is a well-studied phenomenon that digital tools often include codes discriminating against certain collectives by promoting social discriminating stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes. Therefore, the selection of a digital tools for education purposes should be based on a careful analysis of the social stereotypes included in the codes of the tool. The treatment of gender stereotypes and more in general gender equality is a core element of the competence democratic resilience as defined by the project DEMOCRAT in reference to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EU 2012) and the fundamentals of the Model of Democracy of the European Union.

Mathematics is an education subject in which the gender bias in learning achievements is still persistent in many countries although the gap has been narrowed in the course of time. Therefore, it is important to understand if the time investment made by parents and the effort put in by children could reduce or invert the gender gap in mathematics, especially when using digital/online learning tools.

The study conducted shows:

- It appears that mathematics learning at home with parental support does not reduce the gender bias although differences are observed contingent on whether the father or the mother are the main supporters. The results of the analysis of online math learning with parental support point to the existence of a gender gap in both effort and relative performance outcomes in favour of boys.

- The results of this and other studies suggest that gender stereotypes impact in preschool education, primary and secondary education as well as in home mathematics learning achievement, so that boys are favoured. It can be assumed that gender stereotypes do not affect only mathematics, but also other educational subjects.

- The results also point to the importance of the presence of more egalitarian gender norms, which is associated with inverting the gender gap in effort outcomes. That suggests that gender stereotypes and gender equality should be a learning issue across all academic disciplines and included into teachers' education with the aim of creating a classroom and school climate imbued with egalitarian gender norms.

- Digital tools, particularly serious video games are proven as beneficial education means in different education areas such as science, medicine, history and politics. It is also proved that digital tools have the potential to treat social problems such as gender stereotypes, gender violence, but also (cyber)bullying.

- It appears that (serious) video games engaged students in active learning and can be used to connect school-based learning and home learning with parental support. There are few serious games on gender

equality, which can be used in school and at home, also engaging parents to learning on gender stereotypes and gender equality.

- These results give valuable inputs not only regarding the design of digital learning tools, but also broader insights of relevance to teachers and other practitioners for selecting and using digital tools to support on-site learning in the field of education in general and more specifically of Education for Democracy.

5. Recommendations

These three DEMOCRAT research outputs contribute to the ongoing discussion on the impact of social inequalities on political and civic participation. The findings enable the refinement of the recommendation for education for democracy proposed in earlier reports as the Vision of Education for Democracy (EfD) (Krüger et al., 2024), the Outline of a European Curriculum for EfD (Hytti et al., 2024), the Policy: European Curriculum for EfD (Sandström & Hytti, 2024) and the Design of local pilot projects (Kalev et al., 2024):[1]

- <u>Societal challenges</u>: Social inequality is reflected in education inequality. The transition to a digital society added the dimension of the digital social divide to the traditional inequalities. Despite the increasing educational inequality (Breen et al. 2009) and its constraints, education is perceived as a mechanism for equalisation. In the context of multidimensional societal change, Education for Democracy should not only provide students with theoretical knowledge of democratic principles but also equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary to analyse discrimination, exclusion, and inequality. More importantly, students should be empowered to take action as active citizens in addressing these challenges, education for democracy should explicitly empower students to challenge discriminatory practices by:
  - o Integrating inclusive and equitable education practices into curricula.
  - o Fostering discussions on social inequality in political representation.
  - o Encouraging equal participation of pupils from various groups in school governance structures.
  - o Allocating funding for the development and implementation of programmes designed to enhance the inclusion of children from marginalised groups.

- <u>The four competences for responsible democratic citizenship</u> as defined by DEMOCRAT are encompassed in a broader concept of digital citizenship. As digital citizenship education also EfD addressed the challenge to empower children and youth by fostering critical thinking. The

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[1] Hytti, M.; Sandström, N.; Kalev, L.; Mallon, B. & Eren, E. (2024) OUTLINE of a European EfD Curriculum. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14512483

Kalev, L.; Hallik, M.; Sandström, N.; Hytti, M.; Salamon, E, Horgas, J. & Krüger, K. (2024) Design of local pilot projects (LPPs). https://democrat-horizon.eu DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14513594

Krüger, K.; Hallik, M.; Kalev, L.; Kostakos, G.; Toscano, B. & Virchow, F. (2024) Conceptual Framework and Vision: Responsible Democratic Citizenship and Education for Democracy. https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14044316

Sandström, N. & Hytti, M. (2024) Policy Brief: European Curriculum for Education for Democracy (EfD). https://democrat-horizon.eu. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14512745

empowerment and fostering agency towards responsible democratic citizenship should be embedded across curricula, teacher education and training programmes, and digital education initiatives:

- o It should be integrated into all subjects, ensuring that students are challenged to analyse, interpret and question (true) information.
- o Content should be designed to support the development of analytical reasoning, ethical decision-making, and independent thought.
- o Content should integrate theoretical knowledge with practice, equally emphasising the development of knowledge, skills, and practical competencies.
- o Teachers and educators should be equipped with effective pedagogical strategies that encourage reflection and participation, enable them to create classroom climate promoting intellectual curiosity.
- o Schools should also develop digital competences and media literacy by teaching pupils to critically evaluate information sources, detect bias and manipulation, and assess credibility, particularly in political and social context. Leveraging digital tools can foster analytical skills, creativity, and independent reasoning in students.

- Fostering agency towards responsible democratic citizenship and increasing political participation appears to be related to the experience of the effectivity of participation activities (political self-efficacy). Therefore, it is important to create opportunities for students to observe and experience how democracy works at first hand, using democratic principles in practice and fostering their citizenship as part of their education, both in and outside schools. This requires:
- o It is vital to promote and practice democracy in everyday school life through giving meaningful opportunities for students not only to express their opinions but also to participate in the decision-making processes and, through this, to build and strengthen their self-efficacy.
- o Educators should work towards a classroom culture that encourages not only discussion, but also participation and decision-making and thus empower students to take active roles in their communities and the broader political landscape. Through the implementation of suitable pedagogical methodologies, engaging in discourse, and the integration of students in social initiatives, educators can foster the cultivation of their civic aptitudes. Pedagogical approaches that facilitate participation, such as constructive learning, creative participation, experiential learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, situational learning and game-based learning, should be incorporated into teaching processes. Student-centred pedagogy should be promoted.

- Education for democracy cannot be confined to school settings alone. It must be understood as a broader societal endeavour that extends beyond the classroom, engaging families and local communities as essential sites of democratic practice. Schools play a pivotal role in fostering democratic values, but their impact is significantly enhanced when students' learning experiences are reinforced within their families and (local) communities.
- o Research indicates that children's social and political interest, as well as their likelihood of future electoral participation, is strongly associated with the political and civic engagement of their parents or legal guardians. Research also suggest that social stereotyping should be a shared issue between schools and families. If families, particularly in the first educational

stages, do not support democratic behaviour and interests, the effectiveness of school-based civic education faces serious limitations. Schools should not only serve as space for family engagement, but also as environments for learning for family members themselves. Through participation in various events and activities, families can expand their knowledge, broaden their perspectives, and challenge stereotypes that contribute to different forms of discrimination, including those based on gender, ethnicity, race, migration status or religion.

- o Political self-efficacy should not only be experimented in the schools and classrooms but also in broader environment, for which the local communities are of particular relevance. Examples such as service learning or community learning have positive impact on civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions of political participation. Education should encourage community engagement and practical learning initiatives that enable students to address real-world issues and contribute positively to their communities. Moreover, experience in having impact on their communities should enhance students' self-efficacy, which is decisive for their future participation in democratic processes as well as their civic participation in general.

- o The development of democratic agency requires meaningful interactions between students and key democratic institutions. Schools should establish partnerships with local government bodies, NGOs, political parties, and civic organisations to facilitate experiential learning.

- A pivotal aspect in nurturing effective Education for Democracy is the presence of a highly qualified and motivated teaching staff. This can be facilitated through the provision of comprehensive initial teacher education and training programmes, supplemented by continuous professional development and self-directed learning opportunities. Such activities could be conducted through workshops with experts, practical exercises, and case studies. The enhancement of educators' competences can be further supported through the establishment of structured peer learning communities and mentoring programs, which facilitate knowledge exchange and encourage pedagogical innovation. The effective realisation of these initiatives requires appropriate financial support to provide high-quality teacher training, implement evidence-based educational practices.

Ensuring the effective contribution of education to the maintenance and development of democracy as a societal practice requires commitment from a number of stakeholders. In particular, schools, teachers and families must be dedicated to this cause, but the responsibility for providing a political and institutional environment that supports high-quality education for democracy in schools and outside of school lies with political decision-makers. The consequences of failing to prioritise this commitment are evident in the rising acceptance of authoritarian principles among young people.