

Demand and Supply in Democracy Promotion: The Danger of Civics Stagnation, *by Richard A. Nuccio and Liza J. Prendergast*

Milton Friedman and the “Chicago Boys” are famous, or infamous in the view of some, for “supply-side economics,” the notion that increasing the “supply” of goods and services would lead to increased economic growth. Their theories were embraced or perhaps distorted in the tax-cutting, deficit producing policies of President Ronald Reagan.

Although we do not believe that there is a “law of supply and demand” for democracy, in our view the democracy promotion pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the “supply” side of democracy—towards elections, parties, and government institutions—and too far from the “demand” side of democracy—including citizenship education and civil society strengthening.

Elections are perhaps the most universally accepted criteria of what separates democratic from non-democratic countries. The ability of voters to “throw the rascals out” and hold officials accountable for their actions at the ballot box is the most basic expression of democracy. It is also the one in which the United States and other international donors invest enormous resources. Teams of election experts roam from country to country providing advice about electoral rolls, voting machines, ballot procedures, and other election details in a quest to boost voter participation and ensure that elections are “free and fair.” These efforts are important, but they are also highly technical. One might wonder if the significant investment in them reflects an objective assessment of their overall contribution to the building of a democratic culture or if rather the technical nature of election support causes it to be seen as less controversial and more acceptable to funders.

Democracy experts like Eric Bjornlund of Democracy International have pointed out that though a necessary step on the path to democracy, elections alone are not sufficient to the creation of a broader culture supportive of democratic governance. Too narrow a focus on electoral machinery at the expense of citizenship education can lead to dashed expectations for what a democratic election can actually achieve. This arguably has contributed to the authoritarian nostalgia afflicting many new democracies in which significant portions of the population look back on the “good old days” when the messy business of democratic policymaking was not on display. Leaders chosen through elections may represent the public, but they may not be very skilled at governing, i.e., fulfilling the undeliverable or unwise promises they made to constituents. A voter uneducated in the give and take of democratic citizenship might conclude that democracy itself is responsible for the failure of elections to solve their problems.

Democracy education, or civic education as it is better known in the United States, emphasizes that democracy is a process, not a solution. In its best form it gives young people the tools—intellectual, procedural, and attitudinal—to play a meaningful role in defining the purposes of government. Although civic education can be useful for adults, its principal target is youth both in and out of school settings. Fundamentally, an investment for the long

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term, it may be less appealing to funders looking for quick and measurable solutions to complex and deeply rooted problems. Unlike elections, which can provide funders with an immediate snapshot through which to interpret the status of democracy within a country, civic education is like compound interest and only delivers its results over time, contributing not to one particular election cycle but rather to democratic culture and governance well into the future.

Democracy education offers the possibility of balancing the pent up demands of citizens able to express their desires for the first time with the generally weak ability of new governments to deliver the services for which they are asking.

Some argue that developing countries cannot afford the “luxury” of democracy education when the most basic government services, including education, are lacking. Yet if voting is to remain a key measure of democracy and if voting rights are granted to all citizens regardless of their economic or educational level, not investing in citizenship education undermines the long run ability of a country to govern itself. By giving citizens the tools to participate actively in their political system, democracy education increases the potential for that participation to result in stable, governable countries more likely to deliver the peace and prosperity their citizens expected from democratic rule.

“Supplying” democracy through elections is only one part of a successful democracy equation. Policymakers, funders, and NGO professionals should be giving equal attention to the “demand” side of democracy by implementing democracy education programs at the earliest opportunity in the lives of citizens.

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Originally published in ElectionGuide.org