

How Mock Elections May (Not) Promote Thick Democratic Engagement

Isolde de Groot

1 Introduction

In most EU countries schools are legally required to prepare young people for their participation in the larger democratic community. This implies that schools need to include educational opportunities for students to develop their democratic competences. Schools can organize many kinds of participatory experiences. They can take place at classroom level (e.g., discussion of controversial issues, classroom deliberation) or at school level (e.g., school organized mock-elections, student council). Schools and NGOs can also create democratic experiences that (in part) take place outside schools. Many schools for example, organize civic and political advocacy projects, or participate in debate programs like Model United Nations. Empirical studies have provided some insight into the democratic participatory practices that schools offer, and into differences between countries in this regard.¹

What we still know little about however, are the issues that teachers face when they organize democratic experiences in schools. Moreover, we know little about the principles and aims that guide the organization of democratic experiences in schools. For instance, do they primarily aim to promote student participation in accordance with current democratic practices and procedures and, more or less intentionally, protect existing hegemonies? Or do they also seek to promote young people's abilities to ameliorate the quality of democratic practices and procedures in schools and society at large?

By engaging in classroom deliberation projects, students can practice their ability to constructively express their opinions as well as develop their listening skills. In order to vitalize democratic practices, however, students will also have to learn about power issues involved in political deliberations. By studying democratic theories and/or reflecting on their own deliberation experiences, students can gain insight into limitations of deliberation practices in school

and society. They can gain an understanding of how deliberation practices may work differently for students with different types of cultural and political capital. And they can learn about (proposed) policies and practices that (may) help to enhance participation of underrepresented student groups.

Building on earlier research on (critical) democratic citizenship education and mock elections, this chapter discusses the complexity of organizing democratic experiences in schools. Since I have conducted several studies on mock elections, I will use this particular type of experience as example. Mock elections are shadow elections that schools can organize in conjunction with the official national or local elections. In several EU countries as well as in several US states, mock elections have been organized for many decades.² The leading question in my mock elections research has been if, and how, this traditional participatory and educational practice also fosters competences of individual students that are associated with a 'thick' conception of democracy and with fostering a democratic school culture. The underlying premise is that it is important for democratic societies to foster multiple types of democratic engagement, rather than (unwittingly) promote one type of engagement.³ While I take mock elections as example, I do not contend that schools should be legally required to offer this particular democratic school experience. My argument, instead, is that it is important first, for schools and governments to provide sufficient opportunities for students to engage in democratic experiences at school and in society; and second, for teachers and policy makers to reflect on the quality of the democratic experiences that they offer.⁴

To shed light on the complexity of democratic school experiences, four dimensions that teachers will need to take into account when (co)organizing mock elections in their school. I will discuss: (1) underlying conceptions of democracy and democratic education; (2) opportunities for student participation offered in this context; (3) the educational quality of the democratic school experience and (4) the political, educational and school context. I will also provide more insight into mock election practices in the Netherlands in light of these four dimensions: Do coordinating teachers provide multiple opportunities for students to voice their opinion and to participate in decision making as well as in low key activities? Do they also invite students to challenge their opinions and actions in relation to different conceptions of democracy and interpretations of democratic values? Do they also invite students to formulate desirable criteria for (non) electoral political participation? What educational activities are organized to help students work towards these aims? And how may context factors impact the desirability and design of democratic school experiences like mock elections in the Netherlands and elsewhere?

2 Dimension 1: What Kind of Democratic Education?

Citizenship education scholars have eloquently explained how citizenship education may work towards different democratic outlooks, and spur different competences in students. In his work on democracy and diversity, for example, Walter Parker distinguishes between ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ democracies. Liberal democracies, he states, are more oriented towards liberty, equal rights, and justice, compared to other systems. Typical for illiberal democracies, on the other hand, is that democratically elected governments “ignore constitutional limits on its power and continue to deny civil rights and liberties to, and in other ways persecute, revile, and perhaps even kill, members of the marginalized minority group”.⁵ According to Parker, people are not born as democratic agents, neither do they naturally become democratic citizens. Hence, they risk becoming ‘idiots’, an idiot being:

one whose self-centeredness undermines his or her citizenship identity, causing it to wither or, worse, never to take root in the first place. An idiot does not know that self-sufficiency is entirely dependent on the community. [...] Idiocy threatens this struggle (for freedom and democracy) because idiocy simply and devastatingly pays it no attention.⁶

Parker therefore contends that democratic societies should actively foster democratic ‘enlightened political engagement’: (young) citizens who appreciate political, social and cultural diversity, and are able and willing to engage in political deliberation.⁷

Likewise, Carretero, Haste and Bermudez have distinguished between traditional and ‘New Civics’.⁸ Traditional civic education focuses on knowledge development, participation in the political domain, and preservation of existing power relations. Citizens are prepared to participate in the current election system by voting, for example, without critically reflecting on power imbalances that underlie – and sustain – the current election system and exploring venues towards a more just social and political order. The ‘New Civics’ approach, on the other hand, also attends to democratic processes in the social domain, and aims for social and political transformation. It introduces students to ‘democracy as an ongoing experiment’ and invites them to explore alternative configurations of the political order.⁹

In line with this New Civics approach, several scholars have argued that citizenship education should not be confined to the promotion of critical democratic literacy and agency of K-12 students, and that it is equally important to

support the development of democratic identity development. One aspect of identity that deserves attention in this regard, is the development of empowering citizenship narratives in students and empowering community narratives.¹⁰ Such narratives may enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to (re)envision themselves as citizens and may invigorate a sense of belonging to the larger political community. They may also incite a sense of interconnectedness with role models and social movements that address social injustices within and beyond the (inter)national democratic communities that one is part of. Moreover, empowering narratives may spur engagement in (digital) political participation practices and a sense of individual and collective agency.

2.1 *Thick or Thin Democracy*

After this brief account of possible outlooks and aims of democratic citizenship education I want to zoom in on how citizenship education theory, policy and practice are highly influenced by their particular conceptions of democracy and educational philosophy. In my own work I build on deliberative and radical democratic theories and the work of experts on critical democratic citizenship education and political liberalism, which is also constitutive of the new civics approach. This way, I have come to define democracy as: (1) a political system that is always under construction; (2) a culture that promotes respectful relations and structural equality; and (3) an ethos that implies examining and continuously reconstructing hegemonies within and beyond what Mouffe has referred to as ‘multipolar societies’.¹¹ The ethos concerns ongoing debate about their interpretations of key democratic values like freedom and equality. The ‘moral horizon’, as Taylor argues, informs the democratic culture: how people engage with each other in the public domain and how they organize the public domain itself.¹² It also informs – and is influenced by – how democratic political systems evolve. Understood in this way, democracy signifies an outlook, an ongoing experiment, rather than an accomplishment.

This ‘thick’ conception of democracy can be juxtaposed with a ‘thin’ conception, which builds on an aggregative model of democracy and resides with an orthodox liberal perception of democracy and democratic citizenship. Informed by a thin conception of democracy, traditional civic education will focus on preparing students for participation in accordance with existing democratic procedures (qualification focus) and norms (socialization focus). Informed thick conception of democracy New Civics, on the other hand, will also further what Biesta terms ‘subjectification’: students’ inclination and ability to interrupt the current political order in an informed manner.¹³ Let me further illustrate the possible impact of thin or thick conceptions of democracy and democratic education by taking mock elections as an example.

2.2 *Thick or Thin Democratic Citizenship Education: The Case of Mock Elections*

Teachers who organize mock elections in accordance with a thin conception of democratic education will typically focus on knowledge development. They will also take a ‘neutral stance’ which implies that they intend to teach politics in an ‘objective’ manner, focusing on knowledge about current political procedures, and on how to participate in current political procedures (and may believe that they serve students equally this way). They may also support the development of debating skills by organizing political school debates. However, they will probably not problematize discrepancies in participation between high and low performing students in mock election related student activities with students and colleagues. They will also be oblivious to how their teaching, the curriculum and the school system may silence perspectives of low SES students and students from ethnic minorities.¹⁴ Mock election practices that reflect a ‘thin’ conception of democracy thus typically have a socialization focus: they prepare students for participation within the current political system, in accordance with current political practices and procedures and dominant (and often hidden) norms and values. As such, these practices most likely sustain – or even increase – the so called ‘civic participation gap’ between student groups.¹⁵

Teachers who organize mock elections in accordance with a thick conception of democratic education, on the other hand, will (also) foster critical democratic literacy, e.g. provide students with ‘powerful knowledge’ about strengths and weaknesses of current democratic procedures (e.g. knowledge about who’s voices are underrepresented in elections and in public debate) and about ways in which current democratic deficits may be addressed.¹⁶ In line with this thick conception, teachers will actively seek to provide opportunities for *all* students to voice their opinion and participate in decision making and/or low key activities in the design or facilitation of a mock election program (e.g. man the ballot office; escort students to the ballot office). Teachers will also actively invite students to challenge their opinions and actions in relation to different conceptions of democracy, democratic values and desirable criteria for political participation in this regard.¹⁷

3 **Dimension 2: Opportunities for Mock Election Related Student Participation**

As introduced earlier, my own research on mock election practices is conducted in the Netherlands. To contextualize the research findings, I will first provide some information on the Dutch context and the study designs.

3.1 *Citizenship Education in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands is a North European country with 17 million inhabitants. It has a multiparty system and can be defined as a consensus democracy.¹⁸ Currently over 16 parties hold a seat in the Dutch national parliament, and the local and national governments always comprise a coalition between several parties. Of the total Dutch population, 22.1% are first- or second-generation immigrants.¹⁹ About half the immigrants are of non-Western origin, with the majority coming from Morocco, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba, Suriname, and Turkey.

For a long time, the Netherlands has had a relatively meagre policy on citizenship education, compared to neighboring countries, like Germany and Sweden.²⁰ Students learn about democratic systems in *Study of Society* (in Dutch: Maatschappijleer), a one-year subject taught in upper secondary education. This subject was introduced in 1962 in order to complement the existing social studies curriculum (history and geography). It originally focused on preparing youth for participation in social and political life; it now focuses on (assessment of) social and political knowledge and higher order thinking skills. The 2006 citizenship education legislation in the Netherlands required schools to foster 'active citizenship', yet there was no actual time allocated in the curriculum for participatory learning activities, and schools may choose not to offer any opportunities for participation. This has changed with the installation of a new citizenship education law in August 2021. This law requires that schools promote respect for and knowledge about democratic values as anchored in the Dutch constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Schools are now also obligated to foster democratic citizenship competences and cultivate a democratic culture in schools.

Although practices vary across the EU, a recent study into teaching democratic values in EU countries indicates that the Netherlands is not an exceptional case. Based on available research, experts from Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Spain reported that the organization of democratic experiences within and outside schools is also not widespread in their countries.²¹ Hence, the Dutch case may be illustrative for practices elsewhere in the EU as well, in terms of opportunities offered, and the conceptions of democracy and democratic education that inform mock election practices.

3.2 *The Sources of Data*

In this chapter I will discuss two research projects. One qualitative project and one survey study. The qualitative study explored how coordinating teachers organized mock elections in eight secondary schools in the context of the 2012 national elections in the Netherlands.²² A thematic analysis of data from

semi-structured interviews and education materials was conducted in Atlas-ti. The survey study examined how mock elections prior to the 2017 national elections were organized in the Netherlands by coordinating teachers from all high schools that chose ProDemos, the National NGO for democracy and education, as a venue to organize their mock election.²³ Our sample (N = 96), one fourth (24%) of the research population, proved to be geographically representative and mirroring the variety in school-background among publicly funded schools in the Netherlands who organize mock elections through ProDemos. These include denominational schools, open schools and non-traditional schools that are founded on pedagogical principles (e.g. Montessori schools). We explored the self-reported current and desirable situation regarding (a) the pursued objectives; (b) the organized educational activities; (c) the groups of students invited to participate in the design and planning; (d) the mode of student involvement in organizing the elections; and (e) constraints that teachers identified.

We were the first to examine a specific participatory citizenship education practice (mock elections) from a critical democratic citizenship education perspective. Therefore we derived 43 items from Dutch syllabi of social studies and social sciences and democratic citizenship education literature to measure teachers' aims.²⁴ The items addressed knowledge, skills, attitude and identity. We then developed scales to measure the extent to which organizing teachers also aimed to foster a thick type of democratic development of individual students and advance a democratic culture. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to examine how often teachers attend to basic and complex aims (1: not at all; 2: a little bit; 3: some; 4: quite a lot; 5: a lot) in the context of mock elections. We also examined the number of hours that teachers offered on educational activities on this theme, prior to and following the elections, in social studies/sciences and cross-curricular projects, and related teacher aspirations. Six items measured the groups of students invited to participate in the design and planning (e.g., members of the debating team). Three items measured the mode of student involvement in organizing the elections (none, share ideas, decisive power).²⁵

3.3 *Student Involvement in the Organization of Mock Elections in the Netherlands*

Our analysis of student involvement showed that coordinating teachers would like to increase the use of mock elections as a way to exercise student political participatory competences.²⁶ With regard to the invited student groups, they would like to involve students more in the design and planning of mock elections, and they would prefer to invite all students. Similarly, with regard to the applied modes of student involvement, half of the coordinating teachers

would like to make students co-organizers of the event, and half of them would like to give students an opportunity to share their views on desirable practices. Overall, the survey results showed that opportunities for participation in mock elections vary widely across Dutch high schools, and that teachers are willing to provide more opportunities for students to voice their opinion, participate in decision making as well as in low key activities.

The survey findings confirmed earlier findings from a qualitative study.²⁷ For this qualitative study I developed a participation model that distinguishes six modes of student-staff collaboration in the context of Mock elections (see Table 15.1).²⁸

TABLE 15.1 Modes of student participation

Students as	Type of student participation cultivated
Sources of data	Staff collect and examines data on student appreciation of previous mock elections to decide about desirable adjustments
Active respondents	Staff invite students to discuss desirable changes to the mock election and related educational activities
Co-organizers	Staff invite students to participate in the design, planning and/or implementation of the mock election and/or related educational activities.
Leading organizers	Students organize the ME under supervision. Staff serve as consultant in furthering student ideas about the design and planning of the event.
Partners in co-constructing the event	Students and staff work together to organize the mock election. They examine and discuss its desirable scale and subsequent design and planning choices.
Partners in advancing the quality of political spaces	Collaboration between students and staff is envisioned as a political project in itself. Discussed are also a) the desirable impact of the mock election on the quality of political spaces within and outside the school, and b) the organizational or legal conditions within which the mock election can be designed and planned, c) the rationale behind (and merits of) current arrangements, and d) the desirability of altering political and organizational structures in the school.

Important to note here is that such participatory practices are not necessarily democratic. They may align with certain democratic values and outlooks. However, one can think of many examples in which this is not the case. In the context of mode 1, for example, a teacher may fail to report back to students on the survey findings and intended actions, or even ignore the results. A survey may also contain questions that are in conflict with democratic principles (e.g. should teachers who share their personal views on a political issue be fired?). In addition, since democracy is a contested concept, what constitutes a democratic practice is always up for debate.

Analysis of qualitative data revealed how Dutch students in the eight participating schools had limited opportunities to practice meaningful and critical democratic participation in this context. In these schools, students were rarely envisioned as sources of data or as active respondents (modes 1 and 2). More commonly, students were invited to facilitate the mock elections (mode 3), in particular in schools that organized mock elections for multiple grade levels. Students were rarely appointed as the main organizers (mode 4). Moreover, in 2012, student-staff collaboration in these schools was not framed or utilized as a political project; this would entail, among other things, that teachers and students examine the conditions in school and society that may impact, and should inform, decision-making processes within a mock elections context (modes 5 and 6), e.g. political polarization, wariness of political indoctrination, and student dialogical, deliberation and digital participation competences.

Overall, findings from both studies indicate that opportunities for political participation vary widely among schools in the Netherlands. Some schools do offer multiple opportunities and invite a large group of students to participate in design or facilitation. However, the majority of schools provide limited opportunities to participate in mock elections. This implies that mock elections in the Netherlands primarily foster a thin type of democratic engagement. Attention to key elements of thick democratic engagement is less widespread in the context of this particular democratic school experience.

4 **Dimension 3: The Educational Quality of Democratic School Experiences**

The quality of democratic experiences in schools is not only defined by the types of participatory practices that are offered, but also by the type and quality of educational activities organized in this context.²⁹ In light of possible attention to elements of a thick democratic education, I wondered: do teachers also organize educational activities that spur reflection on the quality of their

mock election experience, and the quality of the electoral and democratic system at large? Do they organize educational activities that inform them about agents and social movements that seek to address democratic deficits? The third factor discussed, therefore, is an educational dimension: what aims do teachers pursue, and what kind of educational activities enable students to progress towards those aims?

Both the qualitative and the quantitative study explored (self-reported) teachers' current aims and educational practices and the discrepancies with teacher ideals. Analysis of survey data on teacher aims revealed that teachers paid limited attention to critical, value-related aims and aims directed at strengthening a democratic school culture in mock election-related education in 2017.³⁰ Analysis also revealed that half of participating schools offered less than one hour of mock election-related educational activities. We also identified a gap between the current and the desirable situation: One-third of teachers stated that they would like to offer additional educational activities. Interestingly, in light of earlier reports on lower (self-reported) involvement of high school students from pre-vocational education tracks in civic/democratic activities in schools in the USA and in the Netherlands, we did not find variation among school types in terms of the self-reported attention devoted to critical aims in the context of mock elections and concomitant educational activities.³¹ This finding suggests that, within our sample of mock election organizing schools, teachers from all school types intend to pursue critical aims to a similar degree.

In a similar vein, analysis of the organized educational activities revealed how the ideal situation significantly differs from the current situation with regard to all seven activities: more teachers would like to invite students to prepare them as volunteers in polling stations, inform the school community about the upcoming (mock) elections, the voting procedures and the results, explore ideas with classmates about the desirable scope of the elections and desirable learning activities, and evaluate the election process and results in light of relevant literature on political participation. The survey findings thus confirmed findings from an earlier qualitative study, which showed how only a few teachers offered educational activities after the (mock) elections, or had even considered offering them.³² This means that few students in the Netherlands, so far, have been invited to interpret the election results together and/or engage in dialogue about moral and political emotions that were aroused during the election process, or in the aftermath of the elections.

Overall, both studies indicate that the focus and quality of mock elections related educational activities varies widely. In some schools, teachers do pursue thick democratic citizenship aims and offer various educational activities along the way, in line with earlier established criteria for meaningful and

robust political education.³³ Yet, the majority of high schools in our research population seem to offer mock elections as a side-dish, and do not systematically pursue educational objectives that actively prepare students for thick democratic engagement. These results may raise questions about the influence of contextual factors (e.g. citizenship education policy; policy instruments; professional development), which is the topic of the next section.

5 Dimension 4: The Political, Educational and School Context

All education is situated in contexts. This means that mock elections will be conducted within a certain context, and – the other way around – may contribute (modestly) to sustain or transform certain contextual factors (e.g. a taboo on discussing politics in schools). This is why I identify ‘context’ as a fourth dimension that needs to be taken into account when organizing democratic school experiences. In this section, I explore how contextual factors may impact the desirability and design of mock elections and other democratic school experiences in the Netherlands and elsewhere. As this is not the place for a complete or in-depth discussion of contextual factors, I highlight three clusters of factors: political, educational, and the actual school context. I also provide examples of how coordinating teachers may attend to these factors.

5.1 *The Political Context*

While mock elections have been organized for decades in the Netherlands and several EU countries, teachers in other countries may be wary of bringing politics, and politicians, into schools. In Spain and Poland, for example, organizing mock elections will be difficult because of the ‘politicization’ of citizenship education debate.³⁴ A vibrant political debate on citizenship education implies that the government and other stakeholders actively debate desirable adjustments to citizenship education policy in the light of societal developments, civic issues, and insights from education research. When citizenship education debate becomes politicized, however, politicians are more interested in pleasing selective groups within their electorate than in developing a sustainable Teaching Common Values policy.

In 2013, for example, the Popular Party in Spain changed education legislation in order to suppress the subject *education for citizenship* and to return to the old subjects *ethical values* in compulsory secondary education and *civic and social values* in primary education. This subject is now only taught to those children not taking the subject [Catholic] religion.³⁵ In a similar vein, the current government in Poland has banned sexual diversity education, because

they believe that this type of education provides a threat to family values. As citizenship education is a facultative course in Spain and in Poland, the very existence of LGBTQ+ people is being denied, and it may be difficult for teachers in these countries to organize mock elections in an 'equitable, efficacious and self-protective manner'.³⁶ Here, equitable means that participation is oriented towards social change in line with democratic values. Efficacious means that participation will yield results, and being (self-)protective means that you yourself, your loved ones and the groups that are affected by your actions will not be harmed by the spin-off of your actions (e.g. lose their job; receive threats on social media). Thus, when newly installed governments adjust citizenship education policies to the value preferences of specific groups within their electorate, it hinders the development of consistent, democratic and research informed policies and practices.

The Czech Republic provides a slightly different case. Here, school leaders and teachers are reluctant to address politics in schools, a reluctance that can be traced back to the time before the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. During the communist regime, staff-members were forced by the government to report deviant behavior of teachers and students. Although the political and educational situation has changed a lot since then, teachers are still afraid to indoctrinate students in their teaching.³⁷ Interestingly, the fear for indoctrination does not withhold teachers from organizing mock elections. With assistance from NGO programs, mock elections are offered in many Czech schools.³⁸

5.2 *Relative Importance of Democratic Citizenship Education*

A second factor, in addition to (educational) policies that hinder students' introduction to a democratic way of life, underlying democratic values, and (self-)censoring of teachers, concerns the relative importance of democratic citizenship education in national and school policies. In countries that prioritize a 'core curriculum', there will be limited opportunities for teachers to organize democratic experiences. Moreover, teachers will have insufficient pedagogical and didactic competences to organize such experiences in a responsible manner. As a consequence, there will be limited space in the curriculum for students to practice participatory skills and engage in related educational activities, and for teachers address discrepancies in democratic competences across student groups.³⁹

This factor seems particularly influential in the Dutch context, where recent studies have critiqued the lack of a coherent curriculum on citizenship in most schools in the Netherlands. Here they cite a lack of clarity about legal standards, and limited space in the curriculum for value-oriented subjects.⁴⁰ Our own survey, which also explored teacher perceptions on conditions that may, or may not, constrain the organization of mock elections, yielded similar

results.⁴¹ Half of the teachers critiqued the lack of compensation for curriculum development. Three quarters of the teachers were critical about the current school-policy on citizenship education, one fifth critiqued opportunities for extra-curricular projects, and one third criticized attention to relevant teacher competences in (post)initial teacher education.

In contexts where teachers cannot organize mock elections in a self-protective and ethical manner, it is very defensible to refrain from organizing such events, or offer a minimalistic version. Social studies teachers may decide, for example, to organize the elections for their own students only. Alternatively, however, and depending on the level of freedom that students and teachers have, teachers may put the following questions at the centre of educational dialogues with students and colleagues: Is it possible and desirable to organize mock elections (and invite politicians) in the school? Why (not)? And what role do school leaders, policy makers and educational organizations have in furthering spaces in which students have opportunities to discuss controversial issues, and grapple with power issues and political emotions. What role do they have in providing spaces where students can contemplate about what constitutes a democratic school culture and a democratic society, speak up, and have real influence?

5.3 *The School Context*

The third cluster of factors that I draw attention to concerns the school context. While there are many factors at the school level that may stimulate or hinder the organization of mock elections (e.g., management culture and the school vision) I here focus on the student population. Is there a dominant political party affiliation among students (and parents); Are there tensions between student groups that are linked to, or center around, political party affiliations? And how can one optimally guard a safe and open classroom and school climate and organize political simulation events in a safe and inclusive manner?

5.4 *Moving beyond Narrow Accounts of Political Education and Political Identity*

The US provides an interesting example: its two-party system has generated polarization among both politicians and groups of citizens. In such a climate, any political activity in classrooms risks being condemned as partisan. Showing the 2013 inauguration speech of Obama (a Democrat), for example, may be deemed undesirable by Republican voters and their children, independent of the pedagogical and didactic quality of the activity.⁴² Among citizenship education scholars in the US there is wide agreement that discussing politics in schools, when organized in a thoughtful manner, is key if schools commit to promoting democratic literacy and engagement. Engaging in political issues in class, they argue, enables students to “build deep knowledge about important

controversies facing the body politic and [...] learn how to talk and disagree about political controversies in ways that are inclusive and productive”.⁴³ It thus prepares them to normalize and deal with democratic discord.⁴⁴

I agree with these scholars that deliberating political issues should be part and parcel of democratic education. Such debates can be particularly enriching when combined with engagement in democratic practices like mock elections: when students can directly benefit from what they have learned in deliberation processes. With these scholars, however, I also want to highlight the need to anticipate possible undesirable consequences of organizing election simulations for the student population in schools. By inviting politicians for school debates, for example, schools risk becoming campaign sites (e.g. used to generate positive media coverage) rather than educational sites (which prioritize students’ socio-cultural and educational needs). Inviting a politician with a xenophobic agenda will offend (part of) the school population. Also, students with ‘deviant’ political views may risk being excluded from group work because of their views. Hence, mock elections may deepen tensions between student groups or advance partisan politics in school. If teachers are not equipped to deal with such issues, and protect the ‘dignitary safety’ of students, it is unlikely that such events will turn into a constructive democratic learning experiences and sustain or support a positive attitude towards politics and the democratic political system.⁴⁵

In addition, when teachers and students focus on only one particular aspect of people’s political identities – development of one’s party affiliation – during mock elections related education, they risk advocating a narrow conception of political identity. Thick democratic citizenship education, on the other hand, requires attending to multiple aspects of political identity: e.g., one’s inclination to engage in political practices, one’s identification with (inter)national political communities, one’s citizenship narratives and one’s sense of ‘political friendship’.⁴⁶ Building on the work of Aristotle, Allen introduced the notion of *political friendship* to denote the trusting and equity-oriented friendship relations that are needed in the public domain, where we are all strangers to each other.⁴⁷ In order to attend to public issues in pluralist societies, democratic societies require citizens who are able to talk to strangers, listen to and ‘bear with’ strangers.⁴⁸

5.5 *Steering Accounts of Youth and Mock Election Results on (Social) Media*

Another undesirable consequence to take into account, in addition to the politicization of schools, social exclusion of students and socialization into a minimalist view of political identity, concerns the depiction of youth in the media and its impact on the school’s image. Earlier mock election results in the Netherlands show that young people are more likely to vote for novel parties and parties at

the extremes of the political spectrum, compared to the general population. In the Netherlands, the NGO ProDemos publishes both the overall voting scores and scores of individual schools online (<https://scholierenverkiezingen.nl>). This means that schools may risk negative media coverage if their students vote for a party on the far left or right of the spectrum. When organizing mock elections, therefore, I contend that it is important for teachers to reflect on the rationale for organizing elections (e.g., how it also aims to contribute to a positive school climate, a sense of political efficacy, and a sense of political friendship), and how they can prevent or leverage undesirable media coverage of the mock election event in light of this rationale.

5.6 *Constructing Inclusive Mock Election Practices*

Finally, students may also have multiple ‘personal’ reasons not to join (mock) election processes in school or society at large. Students may consider it sinful, for example, to participate in (mock) elections, because of their interpretation of a specific religious doctrine (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses). Students’ may also be stateless, which means that they have no citizenship rights, let alone the right to vote in elections. The hyphens on ‘personal’, signify that these matters are not merely personal: they are also matters of public and political debate. In the context of mock elections, teachers may use mock elections as a venue to instigate related debates and dialogues in schools. They may invite students to reflect on cultural/religious claims about the role of citizens, and organize educational activities that invite students to ponder on how undocumented migrant youth may experience (mock) election processes, contemplate about desirable practices, and explore or engage in transformative activities in this regard.⁴⁹

6 **Concluding Remark**

As I have demonstrated above, mock elections are multifaceted events. They are also highly context dependent: if – and how – mock elections can be organized in an ‘equitable, efficacious and self-protective manner’ will vary across contexts.⁵⁰ That said, one’s choices do have consequences. When teachers decide to focus on introducing students to the political landscape, they may help preserve existing hegemonies. By also attending to critical components of democratic citizenship education (e.g. exploring power relations and limitations of current election procedures; by contemplating about conditions for political friendship and ways in which political friendship can be promoted in the mock election process) teachers may contribute to the vitalization of democratic communities and systems. Moreover, teachers may unintentionally hinder the development of a democratic culture in schools and society by not

attending to tensions among student groups, and by not supporting students in developing a realistic sense of political efficacy: e.g. realistic expectations of the impact of their future vote; and realistic expectations of what individual politicians, opposition and governing parties can accomplish on issues of their concern. Overall, I have argued that it is important for teachers to contemplate the conceptions of democracy and democratic citizenship education that inform their citizenship education practices; the opportunities for student participation that they currently offer when organizing mock elections (and other democratic experiences); the pursued objectives and subsequently offered educational activities; and the contextual factors that will affect the quality of students' democratic learning experiences. By doing so, teachers can use mock elections and other democratic school experiences to (further) strengthen a democratic culture in schools and societies within and beyond western democracies.

Notes

- 1 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti & Friedman, 2018.
- 2 De Groot, 2017a.
- 3 De Groot & Veugelers, 2015.
- 4 De Groot & Eidhof, 2019; De Groot & Lo, 2020.
- 5 Parker, 2012, p. 1.
- 6 Parker, 2003, p. 3.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 8 Carretero, Haste & Bermudez, 2015.
- 9 Biesta, 2011.
- 10 Apple, 2008; De Groot, 2017b; Levinson, 2012.
- 11 Mouffe, 2005.
- 12 Taylor, 1989.
- 13 Biesta, 2011.
- 14 Apple, 2008.
- 15 Kahne & Middaugh, 2008.
- 16 Young, 2013, p. 117.
- 17 See also De Groot & Veugelers, 2015; De Groot, 2018.
- 18 Lijphart, 1999
- 19 CBS, 2016.
- 20 Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 De Groot, 2017a.
- 23 De Groot & Eidhof, 2019.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Sum variables were calculated for critical aims (13 items, alpha value 0.91) and democratic culture aims (13 items, alpha value 0.95). To examine relations between the three school

types and the categorical variable teachers' aims (more/less critical), the Chi-square test was used. Paired sample t-tests were used to examine relations between the current and ideal involvement of students in the organization of mock elections.

- 26 Ibid.
 27 De Groot, 2017a.
 28 De Groot, 2018.
 29 De Groot & Lo, 2020.
 30 De Groot & Eidhof, 2019.
 31 Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Munniksma, Dijkstra, Van der Veen, Ledoux, Van de Werfhorst, & Ten Dam, 2017.
 32 De Groot, 2018.
 33 Lo & Parker, 2016.
 34 Veugelers, De Groot, & Stolk, 2017, p. 171.
 35 Buxarrais, 2017.
 36 Allen, 2016.
 37 Moree, 2013.
 38 Moree, 2017.
 39 Kahne & Middaugh, 2008.
 40 Educational Inspectorate, 2016; Munniksma et al., 2017; Veugelers et al., 2017.
 41 De Groot & Eidhof, 2019.
 42 Hess & McAvoy, 2015.
 43 Hess & Gatti, 2010, p. 19.
 44 Levinson & Fay, 2019.
 45 Ben-Porath, 2017.
 46 De Groot, 2017a.
 47 Allen, 2006
 48 Allen, 2006; Lo, 2017.
 49 De Groot, 2018; Dabach, 2015.
 50 Allen, 2016.

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