Political Trust Starts in the Classroom

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Young people rarely interact directly with political institutions, yet they already develop levels of political trust. Research suggests that experiences of fairness in schools play an important role in shaping these early attitudes.



How Does Political Trust Develop?

Political trust is seen as a cornerstone of democratic stability. Citizens who trust political institutions are more likely to accept political decisions, comply with rules, and participate in democratic processes. Yet a fundamental question receives less attention: **where does political trust originate?** While most research focuses on adults' evaluations of government performance, adolescents already display relatively stable levels of political trust. This raises an interesting puzzle. Young teenagers rarely interact directly with parliaments, courts, or government agencies, yet they already form attitudes about the trustworthiness of political institutions.

During adolescence, political attitudes develop through processes of **political socialization**. Experiences with families, peers, media and schools provide young people with their first points of reference for understanding how authority and institutions function. Schools are considered a key site

for the development of democratic attitudes, such as political interest or political efficacy. But what about political trust? Citizenship education aims to prepare students to become active and responsible citizens. The expectation seems rather straightforward: learning about democracy and experiencing participation should foster trust in the way our democracies are organized, including the functioning of the institutions.

However, empirical evidence suggests that the story may be more complex.

Using comparative survey data on 14-year-old students of 14 European countries, I examined three forms of citizenship education: civic learning opportunities, open classroom discussions about political and societal issues, and student participation in school decision-making. In initial analyses, these variables showed small positive associations with political trust. Students who reported more learning opportunities about voting or the protection of citizens' right, who feel encouraged to discuss societal issues with people having different opinions, or who participated actively in a debate about how the school is organized, tended to express slightly higher trust in political institutions.

Yet, these effects changed substantially once another factor was taken into account: **students' perceptions of fair treatment by teachers**.

Fair Treatment by Teachers as a Key Factor

Students were asked whether teachers treat them fairly, listen to their opinions, apply rules consistently, and care about their wellbeing. These items capture what social scientists call *procedural fairness*. Research among adults has shown that fair treatment by authorities, such as police officers or public officials, plays an important role in shaping institutional trust. For adolescents, however, teachers are among the most important authority figures they encounter while growing up.

The results show that perceptions of fair treatment by teachers are strongly associated with political trust. Students who feel fairly treated report significantly higher levels of trust in political institutions. Moreover, once fairness perceptions are included in the analysis, the effects of open classroom discussions and student participation become statistically insignificant, while the effect of civic learning opportunities becomes substantially smaller.

The mechanism behind this relationship lies in **trust in schools**, mediating the relationship between fair treatment and political trust. When students perceive their treatment by teachers as fair, they are more likely to trust the school as an institution. This trust then extends beyond the school context and shapes how students evaluate political institutions more broadly. In other words, young people generalize their everyday experiences with authority figures in schools when forming expectations about institutions in society.

Democracy Is Learned Through Everyday School Experiences

These findings have important implications for debates about democracy

education. Teaching students about democratic institutions and encouraging classroom debate remain important educational goals. Civic learning opportunities, classroom discussions, and student participation have been shown to play an important role in shaping a range of democratic attitudes and forms of political engagement later in life. However, the results suggest that **everyday experiences with authority in schools play a particularly important role in shaping political trust**. When students feel that teachers treat them fairly, they are more likely to develop trust in the school as an institution, which in turn is associated with higher levels of trust in political institutions. Students therefore learn about democracy not only through formal curricula, but also through the way authority is exercised in everyday interactions with teachers and school institutions.

If schools function as environments where rules are applied fairly, where students' voices are heard, and where authority is exercised with respect, they provide young people with concrete experiences of institutional legitimacy. These experiences can become an important foundation for political trust later in life.

Political trust among adolescents therefore may not originate primarily from evaluations of government performance. Instead, it begins much closer to home—in classrooms, corridors, and everyday interactions with teachers. Democracy education can start on the first day of school, but it succeeds only when democratic principles are not only taught but also practiced.

Note: This article is based on the presentation "The Role of Schools in Adolescents' Political Trust? An Accountability-based framework", given by Dr Lies Maurissen at the Aarau Democracy Days on 12–13 March 2026.

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