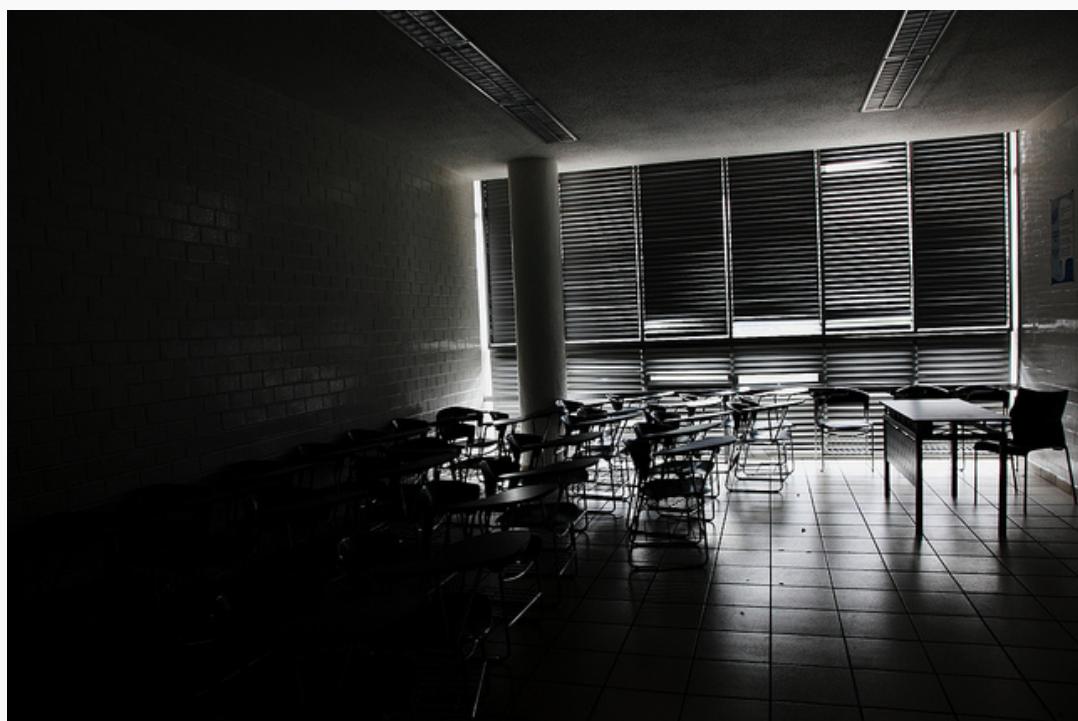


A political education portal which brings together currently disparate democratic information should be developed

By Democratic Audit UK

*In the aftermath of National Voter Registration Day, **Titus Alexander** outlines which principles should guide political education, which has a key role to play in increasing registration and political engagement more widely. He pinpoints the main resources we can use to education ourselves about politics in the run up to the general election, and argues that to simplify this plethora of information available a ‘political education portal’ should be developed.*



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As a discipline, political education has to be informed by two sets of principles. First, there are the Nolan principles of public life, drawn up after the cash for questions scandal in 1994: accountability, honesty, integrity, leadership, objectivity, openness and selflessness, which all politicians are expected to uphold. Second, I suggest the following principles from *Learning Power*.

1. pragmatic: start from where people are and help them achieve what they want;
2. pluralistic in funding, forms of provision, content and values
3. participative to develop confidence, communication skills and critical thinking
4. practical, to include techniques, knowledge and analysis relevant to active politics
5. peaceful: violence is a failure of politics
6. pro-poor: prioritise provision for people on low incomes with least access to politics and resources.

The opposite of these principles is political education that is ideological, partisan, didactic, coercive and exclusive, the kind which prevails in undemocratic societies. These ‘Alexander principles’ recognise that politics is about people creating practical solutions to problems by peaceful means in a pluralistic society, and that society benefits when all citizens take part, including the poor, disadvantaged and disenfranchised. To say that political education should be ‘pro-poor’ does not presume a particular ideology or political programme. Left, right and centre claim

their approach is better for the poorest. The principle is included because the poorest in society have least resources to take part and therefore need additional support to have some equality of influence with those who can employ lobbyists to make their case.

So what can political education do? Political education can do three things during the election campaign:

1. Promote discussion and critical thinking by creating spaces for people to explore the issues that concern them and party policies.
2. Provide independent analysis and information about the arguments presented by candidates, as well as the political process, strategy and tactics used, to develop a deeper understanding of the issues, political process and system.
3. Encourage and equip people to take part as citizens, by learning how the system works and questioning candidates, campaigning for a cause, joining a party or even standing for election themselves.

Political parties, their candidates, campaign staff and supporters are also political educators, but they are not neutral, and people may learn more from the interaction between candidates, which is why hustings and television debates are useful, and also from engaging directly with candidates themselves. Public political education, like the BBC, should not take sides between parties, but increase people's understanding, knowledge and ability to take part in politics as equal citizens. Also like the BBC, political education should challenge politicians on their claims, and equip citizens with analysis and information to do the same.

There are many different sources of independent information about politics. The [Institute of Fiscal Studies](#) has set up an election website to provide objective, accurate analysis to assess the claims and put the facts in the public domain. Many specialist organisations have detailed analysis of party policies on most issues, from crime, education, and health to aid, foreign policy and science. [Full Fact](#) is an independent fact-checking organisation which provide free tools, information and advice, so that anyone can check claims from politicians and the media.

The BBC is required to be impartial in its election coverage and ensure that "due weight is given to hearing the views and examining and challenging the policies of all parties." The BBC's Manifesto watch summaries where the main parties stand on issues voters care about according to pollsters IPSOS Mori. In 2010 the BBC produced *Where They Stand: Guide to party election policies* summarising policies from most parties standing five years ago.

[Vote for Policies](#) makes it possible to decide who to vote for by comparing policies on nine key areas to see which party you really support (take the survey [here](#)). [Votematch](#) also enables people to see which party policies are closest to them. [Isidewith.com](#) is another online quiz to find out how close your stance is to that of eight of the parties standing in the general election, as well as quizzes on other topical issues. Another useful resource is [TheyWorkforYou](#), which gives the record of sitting MPs in Parliament, and a list of marginal constituencies, which shows where political education could make most difference.

If we believe democracy matters, then educators and civil society organisations should do everything possible to encourage people to use these wider sources of evidence to understand the issues and take part in the election. This is not just about using websites however; there are many other examples of how practical political education can happen. We can find out what the hot issues are in the area and organise a study group, workshop or public debate with experts on the issue, or a panel meeting with candidates from all parties. We can encourage artists, theatres and performers to engage people in issues and the election, using processes such as Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil, which is being used by InterAct in Edinburgh, Small World Theatre in Wales, and Cardboard Citizens who work with homeless and excluded people in London and the UK.

Moreover, we can work with community groups to draw up local manifestos about issues they want politicians to address, and invite candidates to respond to them, as 2,500 members of Citizens UK did in their Leaders Debate on 3 May 2010 and are organising for this year. Or we can set up "speakers' corners" and hustings for people to debate issues – and invite candidates to take part. Many schools are organising 'mock elections' in which pupils stand and campaign for different parties. 'Democracy Centres' can be created in public libraries to give citizens

information on local issues and opportunities to book meetings with official and elected representatives, as in the ‘Democracy City Falun’ in Sweden. Or we can create ‘Democracy Champions’ to talk with people about the issues that concern them, tell them about the election, promote voter registration, like ‘Democracy Navigators’ do in Falun, Sweden.

Information on issues and political processes is scattered across websites of newspapers, broadcasters and specialist organisations. Perhaps that is as it should be. But also, it may be useful to have a ‘political education’ portal, equivalent to the IFS, where people can find links to authoritative information on issues and the political process under the following three headings:

1. How to take part: Opportunities and ideas on how citizens can influence the agenda and political debate, including topics like voter registration, organising hustings, getting commitments on issues from politicians, using social media, with a link to an Events page.
2. Issues: Where to find analysis and reliable evidence on issues, such as austerity, health, immigration, Europe, the deficit etc.
3. Process: Commentary and analysis on the use of social media, community organising, advertising, polls, the television debates, the slogans and other aspects of the campaign process

Note: this post originally appeared on the [Crick Centre blog](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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