

Overview: Political Education in Germany

Arne Cremer

Political education in Germany can be looked at as a special feature of post-war Germany. Considering Germany's experience with various forms of dictatorial rule down through its history, the Federal Republic of Germany bears a unique responsibility to firmly anchor values such as democracy, pluralism, solidarity and tolerance in people's social conduct. In the beginning of the government-funded political education program back in the 1950s it was the broad based reeducation program of the allies, and in particular of the United States, that initiated a democratic process bottom up which lead to the system of political education as practiced nowadays.

While programs of political education are available to everybody in society a special attention is given to children and youth. In this context "Knowledge – Judgement – Action" has become the so called triad of political education that is prominently placed in the Children and Youth Plan of the German Government ([BMFSFJ, 2012](#)). In fact the main goals of political education are to impart knowledge, to enable judgement and to encourage participation:

"Political education shall impart people's knowledge about society, state, European and international politics and socially important developments in the fields of economy, culture, technology and science. It shall enable forming judgement on social and political events, enable one to claim one's rights as well to discharge one's tasks, assume responsibility towards fellow citizens, society and nature and encourage participation in the creation of free and democratic social and state order".

Besides this official statement political education in Germany is founded on the conviction that Democracy cannot be taken for granted no matter how strong the democratic system seems to be. A strong democracy needs responsible, autonomous, politically mature and active citizens who are not generated automatically by a democratic constitution. Or as Friedrich Ebert famously said: *"Democracy needs Democrats."*

Furthermore political education in Germany aims to motivate people for political or civic engagement and to support them in taking an active part in society, no matter their political orientation, age, education-level or socio-economic background. As political education must be available to all members of society, various programs of political education and a wide variety of educational programs are provided by different governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Young children receive a benefit from political education at school because it is part of the official curriculum. Besides the curricular activities of political education school is also a practical learning space for democratic participation in decision making. Students elect their own representatives who sit on various committees and provide opinions or take part in decision making about student and school affairs.

However, political education programs are not only taking place at school. Political education in Germany is defined as lifelong learning because there are always political, economic and social changes in a society that call for public debates in which solution for the relevant challenges need to be identified. All organizations of political education in Germany provide a facilitating environment for such debates without taking sides or pushing for a specific policy option. This imperative rule of impartiality is also the main outcome of the German discussion about official guideline for political education. It is spelled out in the so called “Beutelsbacher Konsens” which institutionalized three fundamental rules for political education:

1. **Prohibition of manipulation** (no indoctrination)
2. **Need of controversy and diversity** (discussion of controversial political positions)
3. **Adapted to the skills and competence level of participants and focus on empowerment and initializing political or civic activity**; not just teaching facts

These fundamental guidelines for political education constitute the common ground that was reached after long debates in the 1970's. In 2015 the so called “Frankfurter Declaration” added some principles to the guidelines of the Beutelsbacher Konsens. These additional precepts are addressing the evolving environment of political education the age of information society:

1. Political Education has to be about current political questions and phenomena
2. Controversy should get space but there should also be a focus on common solutions for political conflicts
3. Context specific and differentiated understanding of political statements
4. Political judgment is mainly based on facts but also on emotions and individual circumstances of life
5. Learning means acting, so people need to get involved with political practice to understand democracy

Besides these theoretical guidelines for political education exist a large number of German institutions and organizations that promote political education to all citizens. The most prominent and probably most influential institution is the “[German Federal Agency for Civic Education \(bpb\)](#)”. The agency is a federal public authority providing citizenship education and information on political issues for all people in Germany. The work done by the bpb centres on promoting awareness for democracy and participation in politics. Large amounts of information are made available on the website (www.bpb.de) and in a wide variety of print *publications*. The range of topics includes European integration, participation in politics and in society, issues relating to the economy and the financial markets, migration, and social change, as well as historical issues and democracy in general. Another key activity is the *ongoing creation of new projects* and the development of new *methods* to meet the special informational and educational needs of people with different learning abilities and people from different age groups and different walks of life.

The bpb also provides professionals of political education with training sessions and materials on teaching methods, as well as offering them its expertise on political, social, and economic issues. Material is available for the teaching of different age groups and for teaching in different learning environments, such as schools, workshops, or informal learning settings. The training activities include such things as seminars, study trips, and involvement in professional networks. Furthermore the bpb has set up a department dedicated solely to developing and testing new approaches to reach young people with low political affinity and

has also identified young children as an important target group of political educational work. Being an institution entrusted with providing the kind of civic education specified in the German constitution, the bpb also supports events organized by more than 300 approved educational establishments, foundations and non-governmental organizations involved in civic education in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Also every Bundesland runs an own regional agency for political education which are more focused on regional education programs than the bpb but are sharing the similar aim of improving citizens' participation and promoting target specific material and projects to all their citizens. Even the Landeszentralen work on similar goals they are independent from the bpb's work. While the bpb is financed by the federal government, the Landeszentralen are financed by the regional governments. ([Overview on Regional Agencies for Political Education](#)).

Besides these public agencies which try to aim all citizens a lot of non-governmental organizations and civic initiatives which are providing political education exist. Most of them focus on specific policy issues and provide specialized political education.

Trade unions for example are running their own agencies and centres for political educational work and are mostly focused on issues of the labour market and industrial relations. Political foundations share the political values of the parties they are related to and concentrate on issues which are relevant in this context. This makes for a wide diversity in their political education program and reflects the political pluralism in German society.

Political foundations for example share the political identities with their related political parties which are reflected in their political education programs. Accordingly the main focus of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung as political foundation is more related to programs which promote the idea of social justice. International NGOs like Greenpeace or Amnesty International are also taking part in political educational work. Greenpeace for example is mostly working on issues like global climate change or ecological sustainability. A relative new working field of political education in Germany is "media education". Since digitization has become an elementary part in modern societies life and multinational companies as Google or Facebook became actors with political weight, issues of developing political guidelines for data privacy protection are part of political education. Therefore Civic organizations as the "Chaos Computer Club" run their own school education program and provide workshops for young children to reflect their activities on social media platforms. Another well-known German organization that wants people to work on issues of digitization is "Netzpolitik.org". This organization provides material and tips to increase the own data privacy to everyone. Also once a year "Netzpolitik" organizes the biggest conference about all kinds of issues and challenges of digitization for societies in Europa, the "re:publica". Media education has become an important working field for the federal agency of political education as well.

In addition to these bigger institutions and organizations exist hundreds of smaller regional associations in nearly every bigger German city which are running their independent political education programs. Often small staffs organize workshops or study trips from an office and the practical educational work with a group of participants is realized by voluntary trainers. One example for a small agency that is providing political education is the "Association for strengthening political activities". This association is mainly run from a small office in Bonn where three project managers are organizing workshops about different political issues for students, study trips to Brussels or Berlin and also provide special trainings for students who

are members in school committees. All events are managed by volunteers who want to provide political information because of their personal political biography and conviction on strengthening civic society. On the one hand skills like political rhetoric or project management are provided as soft skills of political work, on the other hand the association provides workshops about concrete and current political issues. A workshop usual takes three days and is placed in so called educational centres, mostly on weekends from Friday to Sunday.

Types of non-governmental organizations that provide political educational work in Germany:

- Political Foundations ([FES](#); [KAS](#); [RosaLux](#); [FNS](#); [HSS](#); [HBS](#))
- Trade Unions ([DGB-Bildungswerk](#); [DGB Jugend](#))
- Youth Organizations of the bigger Parties ([JuSos](#); [JU](#); [JuLis](#); [Grüne Jugend](#), [Solid](#))
- Small and independent Associations and NGOs

So the landscape of political education in Germany is a immensely diverse and political education is not promoted by one or two central agencies alone. While every single product of political educational work has to consider competing political point of views on an issue the high number of organizations providing political education guarantees the pluralism of political education. No matter what kind of organization or institution provides political educational work, all of them are unified in the goals of promoting understanding for political issues, consolidating democratic awareness and increasing the disposition for political involvement by the citizens.

For further information about the political education in Germany in general and from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in particular follow these links:

English language:

<http://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/138852/federal-agency-for-civic-education>

German language:

<https://www.fes.de/de/politische-akademie/>

<http://www.fes.de/de/forum-jugend-und-politik/>

About the author:

Arne Cremer studies the Master program "Political Science" at the University of Bonn and works as an intern for the FES Korea.