PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AMONG ROMANIAN LAW STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ways democracy and democratic principles are perceived by Romanian 2nd year of study law students, given the fact that Romania has been a democracy for over 20 years now, and the respondents involved in this research have benefited from three semesters of legal education. The research revealed that the principles of democracy are known, respected and valued by young citizens and that the young generation’s general perception on democracy is a positive one. The existence of negative perceptions related to the actions of those in power indicates that a part of the young generation is dissatisfied with and questions the current political order of the country, which represents an indicator of political and social instability.

KEYWORDS: democracy, democratic principles education, perception, government

1. Introduction

It is known that regimes based on popular sovereignty are called democracies; however, this feature is one among many aspects that define a democracy nowadays. The term democracy encompasses a far broader meaning and ideal; it includes individual liberties, self-improvement, and the provision of necessary means for achieving all these. Democracy represents a desirable ideal all over the world.

Adolescence and youth is recognized as a critical period in the development of all human beings. The manner in which young people’s way of thinking, mentalities are shaped and educated plays an important part in this process, which has repercussions on their political attitude, opinions, and behavior in later years. Consequently, it is important for both students and teachers to realize that democratic ideology and responsibility are often shaped in formative years, while young individuals are still enrolled in the education system. Studies also suggest that young people who live in politically competitive areas, mainly urban agglomerations, are more likely to become more politically involved and display stronger political attitudes and beliefs than their peers who live in rural regions [1].

Democratic attitudes and actions vary from urban to rural areas, but also from culture to culture. A variety of factors such as national history, social structure, and political traditions shape democratic practices.
Most definitions of democracies focus on freedom of expression, separation of powers, people's sovereignty, a system of checks and balances, and fair electoral competition as the key characteristics, but little attention has been paid to the perceptions of younger generations. An analysis of younger generations’ perceptions could reveal their understanding of democracy, since democracy features do not only vary from country to country, but also from one generation to the other.

Research that analyzes younger generations and their perceptions of democracy can shed light into the question of how each generation thinks of their country’s policy. If a generation is politically conscious than, they devote their time to the issues that they consider to be of interest and relevant to their life and needs. However, these issues may differ significantly as they are related to the differing circumstances under which each generation grows up. For example, before the 1990s Romanian youths (as well as all generations of that time) had no or only limited access to political information due to the existence of only a few channels of communication. Today’s young generations are more exposed to information through various media channels including a great variety of Romanian and foreign television news programs, newspapers, literature, virtual communities, and social networks. Thus, a survey of youths’ perceptions of democracy can help us to understand the type of democracy that has been developing in Romania over the two last decades.

Undoubtedly, many sources that influence the young generation in their perception of democracy can be identified. For example, the influence of family and parenting, the environment and the entourage, schools and teaching style, curriculum and Political Science or Legal education, religious practice, civic education, exposure to news, discussion and information, the role of mass media, political environment, and exposure to online virtual politics all contribute to the young student’s political attitudes and are likely to foster democratic disposition and civic engagement in maturity years. It is important to take into account the fact that memories, ordeals, and experiences of young people of a particular generation regarding the political situation during their coming of age, and their youth period can be correlated directly to their political perceptions and concerns regarding democracy.

2. Some Aspects of Democracy

Democracy first appeared in ancient Greece nearly 2,500 years ago, but to the present day it has not been possible to identify a commonly accepted definition of democracy. Democracy cannot be described solely as a social structure or a form of government [2]. For the establishment and development of democracy within a society, the presence of certain political, individual, and social elements needs to be ensured. The ideal of democracy is based on the principle of individuals’ well-being and good governance. Democracies represent a form of government in which political decisions are made with the participation of people and by majority vote, the government is used by the people to serve the people, basic and general decisions regarding governance are made by elected individuals and institutions. The continuity of a democracy depends on ensuring that “the majority becomes the minority, and that the minority also reciprocally becomes the majority” [3].

The main characteristics of democracy are the political representation of the people, and the exercise, as well as the limitation of parliamentary authority. Nonetheless, democracies also include various social and economic elements and it represents a way of thinking and its associated lifestyle. This is why one of the prerequisites of democracies is the existence of individuals who do not see their own views and beliefs as absolute truths, but accept different world-views.
Moreover, citizens in a democracy are not born with an intrinsic comprehension of fundamental democratic values such as liberty, equality, tolerance, freedom, respect, and human rights. Yet, democracy requires that these values are learned and adopted by individuals, and that they live in a community that nurtures these values.

Democracies do not have inherent mechanisms to compel, they only describe a set of abstract principles, and it is up to individuals to follow and achieve their own specific pathway in accordance with these principles. Studies conducted in an attempt to set a list of criteria that make a country democratic highlighted that democracy is a multi-faceted concept, thus any analysis of democracy should consider examining institutional criteria, as well as social, cultural, historic, and economic factors. In a study conducted on 21 democracies Lijpart revealed some features of democratic countries: they are more prosperous than countries without democracies, the large majority of workers are employed in the industry and service sectors, they are all part of the broader Judeo-Christian culture (Japan being the exception), they are geographically concentrated on the Northern Atlantic region of the World [4].

Studying countries with continuous democracies, as well as countries whose democratic systems have had interruptions, Huntington identified the following traits that support democracy: a high level of modernity, the existence of a developed market economy, a high level of prosperity, economic growth, without there being any large income gaps within the society, the existence of a strong middle-class, a high level of education, social pluralism, and a culture of tolerance and conciliation, respect for the law and individual rights, and the existence of politicians who adhere to and respect the values of democracy [5].

3. Methodology of Research
This study is based on qualitative research conducted through the use of semi-structured interviews and completion of questionnaires during the first semester of the 2013-2014 academic year. To this purpose 19 second-year Law students from Dimitrie Cantemir University of Târgu-Mureș, Romania (males and females, aged 20 to 24) were interviewed to provide insight on the investigated theme. It was of interest to find out, through conversation, discussion, as well as questioning, in what way a participant’s voice might problematize assumptions, from the students’ perspective, on how they perceive democracy, what are the aspects that they consider the most beneficial, the positive/negative outcomes of living in a democratic system, their personal experiences and the privileges brought about by democracy that they see as the most valuable.

Semi-structured interviews were employed in the current research project for the following reasons: it provides the opportunity to generate rich data; language used by participants was considered essential in gaining insight into their perceptions and values of democracy; contextual as well as relational aspects were seen as significant to understanding their perceptions; the data generated in interviews can be analyzed in different ways.

The questionnaire population sample included 61 second-year Law students from Dimitrie Cantemir University of Târgu-Mureș, Romania (males and females, aged between 20 and 29). The questionnaire included open-ended questions and identification of positive and negative feelings regarding democracy and their personal experiences related to living in a democratic system. The respondents had to name the most valuable privileges that democracy provided for them.

4. Results and Findings
At a first glance the data provided by interviews and questionnaires revealed and re-confirmed the idea that both negative and positive emotions are an inherent part of students’ perceptions of democracy. The main question here is the role their
perceptions have in the feeling of confidence towards democracy in general, democratic institutions and values. Most of the respondents (89%) confirmed the existence of an overlap between their own democratic values and the values of the political system. The rest of the respondents (11%), despite the fact that they valued the principles of democracy, positioned themselves at a distance from the political system of their country. This political dissociation reflects the fact that these individuals feel that the system is not responsive to their needs and demands.

All respondents tried to give a definition of democracy, or to identify the basic features of a democratic system, which showed that their perception of democracy as a theoretical concept is entirely positive: “democracy is the best form of government”, “democracy means people sovereignty”, “democracy consists in values such as liberty, justice and equality”, “democracy is the most developed form of state organization”, “democracy is a way of thinking, a responsibility”, “democracy is defined by separation of powers, free elections, political pluralism, compliance with human rights and freedoms, majority rule and minority protection, in one word, power of the people”, “the essence of democracy is the participation of citizens in public life”, “democracy is the regime of freedom and rights”, “democracy encourages self-reliance, initiative and trust”. Nevertheless, there were four respondents who viewed democracy as the best form of government, but not the right form of government for Romania ”most countries are better with a democratic system, but in our country we would be better with another system”, “democracy is more of an art of persuasion”, “democracy is an illusion designed to lure middle and lower classes”, “if we had applied correctly the principles of democracy we could have built a modern and functional democratic system”, “although democracy itself is not at fault, in our society it is responsible for gross inequities and sharp class divisions”.

An examination of the student’s answers revealed that as an alternative to describing democracy as a form of government, the respondents mostly chose to come up with metaphors regarding the individual and social aspects of democracy, such as equality, freedom, justice, pluralism, elections, human rights, and safety. Based on this observation, it can be concluded that students who have a positive perception of democracy consider it a valuable and indispensable element for him/herself as an individual and for the society he/she lives in.

An analysis of the reasons and explanations provided by students that formed negative opinions revealed that they mainly perceived democracy as a form of government. Negative perceptions regarding the concept of democracy were regarded as deceptive, illusory, and these students believed that when democracy was implemented in their country it became something different from what democracy stands for in theory. In their opinions democracy is perceived as a system used by those in power for their own interests, where inequality, injustice, corruption and discrimination make their way in the allegedly democratic political system. Such a system comes to have no meaning for the individual, fails to meet the needs and demands of the individuals, and prevents individuals from achieving their ideals and goals, eventually leading to a rupture or estrangement of the individual from the system. Reviewing this group’s answers led to the conclusion that these students are emotionally affected by the current political situation in Romanian society, lost confidence in the democratic system and feel that democracy in Romania is fragile, ineffective, irrelevant and unstable because it failed to resolve its problems.
Another important aspect that emerged during the study is related to what respondents see as the most valuable privileges or benefits fostered by democracy. These privileges can be translated into a sense of political effectiveness and relevance, which is one of the preconditions of any democracy. Political effectiveness refers to the conviction that the individual benefits from the existing political system by influencing it, thus acting as an incentive for individuals to become more politically interested and knowledgeable. The areas identified by respondents as the most important and relevant for themselves were the following: “equality of men before the law is the most important aspect of democracy”, “democracy is being heard and being listened to”, “the youth are educated, taught that their voice matters and their vote counts”, “the right to express ideas, the freedom to explore, which brought progress”, “acceptance and tolerance of what is different from the mainstream”, “democracy, like a car, gives you what you put into it; if you do not maintain its engine it will fail you”, "freedom of expression”, “it gives everyone an opportunity to become what they really are”, “respect for every one of its citizens”, “it is important to educate people to know what they want from the government”, “no one is above the law”, “having open borders and free movement”. An analysis of these elements reveals that among the areas listed by respondents as the most important benefits of democracy, one can find the very essence of a democratic system. Once individuals identify areas of interest and relevance, they realize that democracy provides them with opportunities, benefits, privileges, thus their next logical step is to direct their political participation towards the respective areas. Their political participation should increase to the extent that their demands and needs are satisfied, and this is how they gain the sense of effectiveness, fell empowered and confident in the values of democracy which are validated by their belief that individual actions, ideas, behavior influence events and developments, decision-making, and shape their own future. On the other hand, those who feel they cannot influence or become involved in the political environment can lose their sense of effectiveness, become alienated from the system and resort to other methods of political participation: boycotts, strikes, manifestations, barricades, traffic blockages, or other forms of protest.

5. Conclusions

When describing democracy the majority of the students provided answers that defined democracy and/or its principles in positive terms, positioning themselves as participants to the democratic system. Those who described the democratic system of Romania in negative terms were not dissatisfied with the principles of democracy in themselves, but with the way they were implemented in their country, mostly because they felt that essential values of democracy such as justice, equality, freedom, or the rule of law did not apply equally to all citizens. In this context, on the one hand, it is very important to note that in a relatively young democracy, such as Romania, the principles of democracy are known, respected and valued by its citizens and that the young generation’s general perception on democracy is positive. On the other hand, the existence of negative perceptions related to the actions of those in power should not be neglected, since it points out that a part of the young generation is dissatisfied with and questions the current political order of the country, which represents an indicator of political and social instability. However, students with negative perceptions of democracy did not indicate any alternative system, which suggests that they do not oppose democracy but rather criticize and lack confidence in the policies of the current political system.

The establishment of a democracy in a society is achieved at a first stage by implementation of democratic principles,
but the essence of democracy is its citizens, their understanding of democracy, and their ideals and beliefs. But citizens of a democracy are not born with democratic values, they acquire these values through education. Participants in this study were Law students who had been familiarized with democracy-related concepts, namely elections and voting, equality and justice, rights and liberties, governing power etc. They demonstrated that they were accustomed to electoral mechanisms and were able to conceptualize their perceptions of democracy by making use of and linking the above-mentioned concepts together. In the answers they provided, respondents often employed terms they had previously encountered during their three semesters of Legal Studies to elaborate concepts of governing power, equality and justice, rights and liberties, rule of law. Based on these insights, it can be concluded that democracy-related education is beneficial for the understanding, establishment and development of democracy, and the early introduction of democracy-related topics and subjects could help students become more knowledgeable, articulate and descriptive in their conceptualizations of democracy, and more interested in active participation in the democratic process.

The results of the study also point out that individuals who display a tolerant, open-minded and respectful attitude towards their peers, who communicate efficiently, flexibly and try to reach agreement, will show the same type of behavior in their relation with democratic institutions. There are cases when an individual’s beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, judgments, and expectations are different from the values and rules of a democratic system, which inevitably leads to a conflicting situation. The respective individual is faced with two choices: to lose interest in social and political problems, or to participate and try to have a say in the political system. Political participation reinforces individuals’ belief in democracy, and at the same time educates participants on democratic values. Moreover, individuals’ involvement in political and social life reinforces solidarity and understanding between individuals, and individuals and institutions, fostering a climate of tolerance, equality and common values, and making institutions more responsive to the requirements of society.

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