How we think about civic participation has changed dramatically in the last decade. This affects research education, practice and policy. These changes derive in part from changing perspectives on democratic processes. In summary, the definition of ‘civic’ has expanded considerably beyond voting behavior in conventional parliamentary elections. ‘New civics’ includes ‘unconventional’ forms of voice, including both legal and illegal protest, and the wide variety of communication routes now available for making one’s voice heard. It includes organization designed to challenge power, whether local macro or global. It pays attention to volunteering, it also recognizes the importance of single issue activism, not only partisanship. Particularly striking is that ‘new civics’ discussion has made explicit the inherent tension between the goal of creating citizens who will be actively involved in sustaining the existing socio-political system, and the goal of creating citizens who are equipped to challenge critically the status quo a tension which is evident in public discussion of civic education.

What has contributed to these changes? First, the radical upheavals of late twentieth century led to recognition that social movements were a significant aspect of political life not anomalies of extremism; protesters became agents of democracy not pathological deviants.

Second, social media have had a huge impact. Traditionally, the citizen could influence government policy indirectly through voting or pressure group membership, their voices heard through petitions, letters to newspapers or radio phone-in programs. The sense of agency was limited; influence was constrained. Social media has transformed the traditional hierarchies and gatekeepers of communication and voice. Digital media democratizes, in the sense that anyone can – in principle – gain a worldwide audience. This has its dark side as we all recognize, and also there is the ‘echo chamber’ effect: on the whole people tune in what is familiar and also largely consonant with their existing views.

While having ‘voice’ does not necessarily mean having ‘influence’ we have seen massive evidence of the ‘bottom-up’ power of media to mobilize, recruit, organize and publicize social movements with great impact. We see also the effect on participants. Exercising voice, especially when this has a tangible outcome, builds a sense of efficacy in participants and equips them with new civic skills. Quite small investment in technology enables formerly marginalized or disempowered groups to develop and implement strategies for impacting power structures and institutions, and in particular linking with collaborators across regional and national boundaries. Use of media has enabled young people in very deprived contexts, such as favelas and refugee camps, to tell their own story through the use of cellphone videos, also in so doing, acquiring basic technical skills; both enhance efficacy and competences. Finally, a major democratizing factor of digital media is the pressure for public accountability that it places on people in power and in the public eye.

Traditionally, civic education has been conceptualized as, and researched as, school-based, defined by what is feasible within the school environment, especially classroom practice. There has been a particular emphasis on civic knowledge, especially knowledge relating to the structure and processes of the country’s government, and also
to the history narratives that sustain national identity. An emphasis on civic knowledge reflects a cognitive primarily of fact-based model of learning with the assumption that understanding how laws are made and how governance is structured will motivate young people actively to sustain the system by voting. New civics challenges much of this and expands the agenda.

**How conceptualizing ‘democracy’ directs education**

Underlying any conception of civic participation and the goals of civic education are assumptions about how democracy does, and should, function. We can identify four conceptions informing different emphases in civic education programs: *procedural democracy, deliberative democracy, democracy as social justice,* and *democracy as a mode of living.* Each implies different goals for civic education and different learning processes.

*Procedural democracy* implies a system of political organization and decision-making based on representative and participatory procedures that are grounded on principles of freedom, equality, and the rule of law. Civic education aims to provide students with the knowledge necessary for voting in elections or campaigning for parties. In practice however, procedural democracy privileges majority views, achieving consensus, compliance with convention, and keeping order in a stable system. This may marginalize minority, controversial, novel, or particularly complex alternative views on public issues.

*Deliberative democracy* shares the principles of procedural democracy, but also emphasizes the pervasiveness and importance of conflict, moral controversy, and dissent in social and political life. Therefore, it is important that citizens actively engage in the deliberation of public issues. Civic education for deliberation focuses on developing the capacities for critical inquiry, moral and political argumentation, and participating effectively in controversial dialogue.

Proponents of *democracy as social justice* argue that focusing on political procedures does not adequately represent the complex, unequal, and conflictive nature of citizenship in contemporary societies. An “authentic” or “deep” democracy must be committed to equality and dignity in equal terms for all. Unless socioeconomic (distributive) justice is guaranteed, the essential values of democracy are at stake. Civic education programs informed by democracy as social justice stress developing students’ capacity to critically understand the multiple forms of systemic violence, oppression, and exclusion, preparing them to analyze power relationships, investigate the ambiguities of political issues, and embrace opportunities for social change.

In a fourth conception, *democracy is a mode of living* founded on values of inclusiveness, pluralism, fairness, cooperation, dialogue, and non-violent resolution of conflict. This requires developing sensitivity, habits, and capacities to build and preserve relationships and connection across lines of difference.

While all these require civic knowledge procedural models views emphasize knowledge of political institutions and constitutional procedures, deliberative models add knowledge of current public issues, and social justice models add knowledge of socioeconomic dynamics. Procedural models emphasize cognitive skills for effective analysis of information, whereas deliberative and social justice models emphasize skills for critical inquiry and controversial dialogue. Democracy as a way of life requires cognitive and
socio-emotional skills necessary for resolution of conflict.

**What makes civic education effective? The centrality of culture**

‘New civics’ participation needs more than transmission of factual knowledge and conventional values, primarily aiming to socialize students into the existing sociopolitical order. The growing individual actively processes information and experience, successively restructuring and reflecting, producing increasingly complex and abstract understanding. What elements of civic education are necessary to scaffold active learning and deep understanding? What happens in civic learning with increasing age? How is what happens in civic learning helped by opportunities to engage with civic issues? Education should foster increasingly sophisticated understanding of civic matters, and provide experiences and contexts to facilitate active, effective, and meaningful processing.

Learning results not only from information, but also from individuals’ action and interaction within a social context. Meaning and understanding are co-constructed and negotiated in social and cultural interactions, through dialogue with others and with cultural resources for example, linguistic and institutional messages about ethnicity, power, and norms of behavior. Effective civic learning needs to use such cultural resources to facilitate interaction, critical reflection, and negotiation. This includes paying attention to classroom and school climate, community experience, service learning, family interactions, cultural narratives, norms and expectations, socioeconomic factors, and increasingly, social media.

**The components of civic competence**

Four strands of skills and competence contribute to the effective citizen, each has distinct educational implications. These are: civic knowledge and understanding; civic skills; civic values, motivation, and identity; and civic action.

**Civic Knowledge and Understanding**

Teaching facts about democratic institutions and national history is being challenged by a growing consensus that citizens also require knowledge and understanding about controversial issues, intergroup relations, local and community affairs. Further, civic knowledge alone is not enough to foster active and responsible civic engagement. An active civil society requires also understanding of concepts and principles, the skills for reflective and responsible action, willingness to engage, and commitment to democratic values. Knowledge is more meaningful when integrated with conceptual understanding. For example, students may “know” the list of core human rights, but they may not understand what the concept of “rights” actually entails, why they were codified in a particular historical time, or how they relate to specific conceptions of state.

**Civic Skills**

Civic skills are often divided into intellectual skills, participatory skills, and socio-emotional skills. Youth are expected to make sound political choices, to take part in collective decision making, conflict resolution, and negotiation, to discuss controversial social and political issues, or monitor government action on behalf of public interests. Knowledge and conceptual understanding are about ‘knowing what’; civic skills are
procedural – ‘knowing how’: the capacities to analyze and synthesize information and arguments, as well as to evaluate, reach conclusions, take and defend positions. Examples include considering different perspectives, interrogating and interpreting political communication, and supporting positions with evidence and good argumentation. Participatory skills are capacities for working with others, building coalitions, seeking consensus, negotiating differences, and managing conflict. There are skills for communication (public speaking, petitioning, lobbying, protesting), organization (mobilizing, securing funding, leading meetings), and collective decision making (coordinating perspectives, evaluating alternative solutions, etc.) and also skills for group membership and for conflict resolution.

Socio-emotional and interpersonal skills include handling oneself in healthy relationships with family, peers, and community members. Examples include dealing positively with peer pressure, developing non-abusive relationships, avoiding risky behavior, and coordinating one’s needs with the needs of others.

**Civic Values, Motivation, and Identity**

A third dimension of civic learning comprises values, motives, and identities that promote effective democratic practices, such as taking responsibility voting and helping others, upholding the law, monitoring current affairs in the media, tolerance and respect for diversity, and concern with rights, welfare, freedom, or justice.

Value development is rooted in active meaning making and social negotiation. Discussion of moral and civic dilemmas fosters development of moral judgment and social values. Moral values motivate civic action because they make issues personally relevant. While young people express very little interest in conventional “politics”, they are concerned about and active in many community and environmental issues especially single issues that are affectively experienced as morally charged, contributing to a sense of personal responsibility. For effective education it is essential to start from where young people’s concerns and interests are, and to understand what motivates them to engage. Individual and collective identities are increasingly recognized as key features in the definition of civic motivation and commitments.

Civic identity is an active and fluid psychosocial process though which citizens make sense of their social reality. It includes agency and efficacy; feeling one is a meaningful actor, responsible to one’s community, having confidence in one’s ability to take action, and achieve results.

**Civic Action**

Long before they become formal political citizens, young people experience civic environments which provide learning opportunities, for example situations that call them to stand up against prejudice, discrimination, and harassment. School government affords opportunities for civic voice. Families, peer groups, and social media are sites for discussing controversial issues. Real-life authentic civic action experience contributes to civic identity; motivation, purpose, responsibility, agency, and efficacy.

Youth organizing and how community-based civic action are particularly salient among marginalized communities. Participation requires and fosters coming together, working with others, mediating differences, managing conflict, and establishing shared goals in
order to regulate, direct, and develop common affairs. Community activism is characterized by social responsibility and commitment to partner with others in understanding problems, and developing and implementing solutions.

Implications

The broadening definitions of ‘civic participation’ gives both researchers and practitioners far more scope for understanding what contributes to being a citizen, recognising that citizenship is far more than voting behavior, and that civic identity is as much a part of the self as moral or national identity. It challenges the long-standing distinction between our public and private lives, a distinction difficult to maintain once we understand the origins and contexts of motivations for civic action and engagement. This recognizes that civic competences, reasoning, affect and behavior are not explicable only in terms of individual characteristics, nor can effective civic education be achieved if the learner is seen as isolated from the social context. The roles of cultural experience, resources and dialectic are inherent in all aspects of civic competence, expression and the education for their development.