

EMPIRICAL STUDY

Fortress of Democracy: Engaging Youngsters in Democracy Results in More Support for the Political System

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The Radicalisation Awareness Network (a European Commission–sponsored initiative) included educational interventions teaching youth about democracy as a method to prevent radicalization. In two experimental studies ($N = 228$ and $N = 225$), effects of the interactive exhibition “Fortress of Democracy” were assessed. The exhibition led to an increase in knowledge about democracy, and bootstrap analyses showed an indirect effect of increased knowledge on, respectively, greater trust in the government and less support for ideology-based violence via more positive attitudes toward democracy (Study 1). Study 2 showed an increase in positive attitudes toward democracy (ethnic minority participants) and trust in the government (both ethnic minority and majority participants). During data collection, the Dutch government stepped down, reducing trust in the government and lessening positive attitudes toward democracy. This was restored by the exhibition. Results are discussed in terms of the strengths and limitations of preventing radicalization through educational interventions.

Public Significance Statement

This research demonstrates that educational interventions teaching youth about democracy (which can be easily implemented in the school curriculum) can help counter radicalisation.

Keywords: education, democracy, trust, radicalization

Currently there exists great interest among policymakers, practitioners, and scholars regarding how to prevent radicalization,

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which could ultimately result in terrorism. For example, an initiative in the European Union called the [Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016](#)) has identified a series of programs designed to prevent, suppress, or counter radicalization. Only a few of these programs have been assessed in terms of effectiveness (i.e., [Feddes & Gallucci, 2015](#); [Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2007](#)). One of the ways to prevent radicalization is to educate young people on citizenship, democracy, and democratic values. The idea is that through education, young people's trust in the political system, and thereby resilience against radicalization, is increased.

Indeed, previous research by Doosje and colleagues ([Doosje, Loseman, & van den Bos, 2013](#); [Doosje, van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, & Mann, 2012](#)) has shown that greater perceived illegitimacy of authorities was associated with greater support for ideology-based violence as well as greater intentions to use ideology-based violence. This was found both in ethnic majority Dutch participants ([Doosje et al., 2012](#)) as well as in ethnic minority participants ([Doosje et al., 2013](#)).

The present research assesses the impact of an educational intervention called the “Fortress of Democracy” (in Dutch: “Het Fort van de Democratie”; [Tuinier & Visser, 2013](#)). In September 2008, the exhibition “Fortress of Democracy” opened in a renovated bunker (formerly an atomic shelter). The goal of this interactive exhibition is to engage youngsters in democracy. The following hypotheses are tested in the first study: It is expected that the interactive exhibition will result in more knowledge about

democracy, greater trust in the Dutch government, and more positive attitudes toward democracy (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, it is expected that more knowledge about democracy will be associated with greater trust in the Dutch government and less support for ideology-based violence, which is mediated by more positive attitudes toward democracy (Hypothesis 2).

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 228 individuals (83% female, M age = 18.52, SD = 3.16) participated. In the Dutch education system, children complete their primary school when they are around 12 years old and then continue a secondary school education enrolling in, respectively, prevocational education (VMBO; students are between 12 and 16 years old), a middle-level applied education (MBO) that follows the prevocational education (students are normally between 16 and 20 years old), a higher general continued education (HAVO; students are between 12 and 18 years old), or a preparatory scholarly education (VWO; students are between 12 and 18 years old). In our sample, 37 participants (16%; two school classes) did a prevocational education (VMBO). The remaining 84% (11 school classes) did a middle-level applied education (MBO). The participants came from five different schools across the Netherlands. Twenty-four individuals (10%) had a non-Western migration background (either the participant or one of the parents was born in a non-Western country). An experimental design was used: Half of the participants (n = 114) completed a short questionnaire before and the other half after the exhibition. Participants needed about 7 min to complete the questionnaire. Participants or parents (in case of participants under 16) gave their informed consent before participation. Ethical permission was obtained beforehand from the ethical board of the Department of Psychology at the University of Amsterdam.

Questionnaire

Knowledge about democracy. Six items measured knowledge about democracy. The items were based on what participants encountered in the exhibition. Participants had to answer a question with “yes” or “no.” The correct items were summed so the score on knowledge ranged from 0 (*low knowledge*) to 6 (*high knowledge*). An example is the following: “In a democracy you can believe in what you want.”

Attitudes toward democracy. We constructed four items to measure attitudes toward democracy. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with four statements. An example is “I think freedom of speech is important” (scale ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *absolutely*). The scale had a reasonable reliability (Cronbach’s α = .69).

Trust in the government. This variable was measured with one item, “I trust the Dutch government” (scale ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *absolutely*).

Support for ideology-based violence. This variable was measured by two items (from Doosje et al., 2012): “I would be prepared to use violence to accomplish something I think is important” and “The use of violence against people who think differently than I do is permitted” (scale ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *absolutely*). The two items correlated significantly, r = .46, p = .001, and were collapsed to create one measure. Higher scores indicated greater support for ideology-based violence.

Results and Discussion

Univariate analyses of variance were conducted with condition (preexhibition vs. postexhibition) as the predictor variable, and age, gender, and education were included as covariates. The outcome variables were, respectively, knowledge about democracy, attitude toward democracy, trust in the government, and support for ideology-based violence. The means and standard deviations on the four variables in the pre- and postconditions are given in Table 1. The results showed that participants in the postcondition had more knowledge about democracy than in the precondition, $F(1, 223) = 16.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. No differences in pre- and postcondition were found for attitude toward democracy, trust in the government, and support for ideology-based violence, all F s < .99, *ns*. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, partly confirmed: The exhibition resulted only in more knowledge about democracy.

Next, the associations between the variables were examined. For this purpose, we collapsed the data across conditions. In Table 2, the correlations between the variables are given. Bootstrap analyses were conducted following the method outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The results showed an indirect association between more knowledge about democracy and more trust in the government via attitudes toward democracy (5,000 bootstrap samples, 95% confidence interval [.0015, .0517]). In addition, more knowledge about democracy was associated with less support for ideology-based violence via more positive attitudes toward democracy (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% confidence interval

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations on Knowledge About Democracy, Attitude Toward Democracy, Trust in the Dutch Government, and Attitude Toward Ideology-Based Violence in the Preexhibition and Postexhibition Condition (Study 1)

Variable	Condition, M (SD)	
	Preexhibition	Postexhibition
Knowledge about democracy (scale: 0 = low to 6 = high)	3.64 (1.27)	4.30 (1.14)
Attitude toward democracy (scale: 1 = negative to 4 = positive)	3.30 (0.47)	3.37 (0.42)
Trust in the government (scale: 1 = low to 4 = high)	2.55 (0.78)	2.63 (0.68)
Support for ideology-based violence (scale: 1 = low to 4 = high)	1.81 (0.75)	1.72 (0.68)

Table 2

Correlations Between Knowledge About Democracy, Attitude Toward Democracy, Trust in the Government, and Attitude Toward Ideology-Based Violence Across All Participants in Study 1 (N = 228)

Variable	Knowledge about democracy	Attitude toward democracy	Trust in the government	Attitude toward ideology-based violence
Knowledge about democracy	1	.229**	.069	-.008
Attitude toward democracy		1	.149*	-.247***
Trust in the government			1	.026
Attitude toward ideology-based violence				1

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

[-.0668, -.0148]). The indirect effects are shown in Figure 1. These results support Hypothesis 2: Greater knowledge about democracy is associated with more positive attitudes toward democracy and, in turn, associated with less support for ideology-based violence and greater trust in the government.

In Study 1, a small number of participants had a migration background. In the second study, we aimed to get a larger number of ethnic minority participants to explore whether levels of trust in the government and attitudes toward democracy differ between the ethnic minority groups and the ethnic majority. Even though the association between migration background, political participation, and political trust is a complex issue, previous research in the Netherlands and its neighbor country, Denmark, does suggest that participation rates in politics among ethnic non-Western migration groups is relatively low (Berger et al., 2001; Fennema & Tillie, 1999; Togeby, 2004). Feeling not represented in the democratic system could result in feelings of relative deprivation, which is an important root factor of radicalization (Doosje et al., 2012, 2013, 2016; Moghaddam, 2005). The exhibition is, therefore, expected to be particularly effective for ethnic minority participants who may feel excluded from the Dutch democracy due to their minority position.

Besides political discrimination, ethnic minorities may also feel excluded from Western societies as a result of perceived discrimination. In Table 3, an overview is given of the largest non-

Western ethnic groups in the Netherlands on January 1, 2012 (during the period when this study was conducted; at the time of writing, these are still the largest non-Western ethnic groups in the Netherlands). Andriessen, Fernee, and Wittebrood (2014) conducted a study on experiences of discrimination among these ethnic minority groups and found that one third of Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch, 25% of Surinam-Dutch, and 20% of Antillean-Dutch experienced discrimination in the 12 months before the study was conducted. The possible effects of the exhibition may be particularly valuable, taking into account that Van Bergen, Feddes, Doosje, and Pels (2015) report that youngsters with a Moroccan and Turkish background who feel less connected to Dutch society are also more supportive of ideology-based violence to instigate social change.

In Study 2, we were interested in whether the exhibition would differ in the effect on ethnic minorities versus ethnic majorities. However, an important political event occurred during the data collection. On Saturday April 21, 2012, the Dutch government stepped down after negotiations about budget cuts had failed. It was decided to hold a new election on September 12, 2012. Previous research in the Netherlands had already shown that negative functioning of the government and the government stepping down negatively influences political trust (Bovens & Wille, 2008). In addition to examining the effect of the exhibition on minorities versus majorities, this event gave us the unique opportunity to examine the potential negative conse-

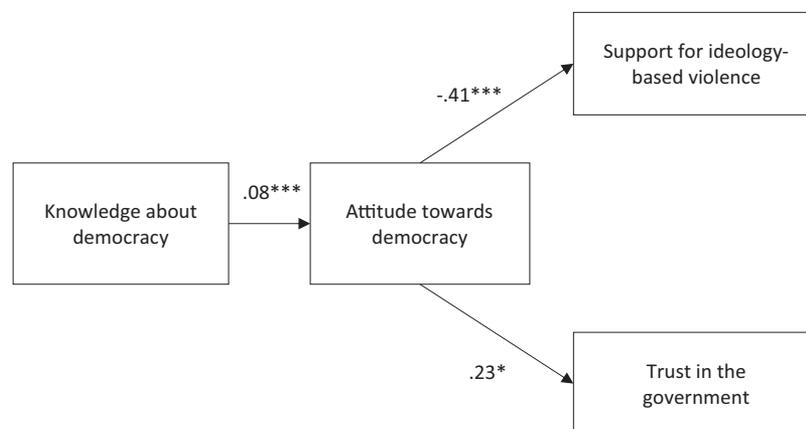


Figure 1. Results of bootstrap analyses showing that more knowledge about democracy is associated with less support for ideology-based violence and more trust in the government via more positive attitudes toward democracy (Study 1). Unstandardized coefficients are presented. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Size of Largest Ethnic Minority Groups in the Netherlands as of January 1, 2012

Ethnic group	<i>N</i> (× 1,000)	% of total population
Turkish	393	2.3
Moroccan	363	2.1
Surinam	347	2.1
Antillean	144	0.9
Other non-western	691	4.1
Total Dutch population	16,730	

Note. Source: Central Bureau for Statistics (2012).

quences for participants' attitudes toward democracy and trust in the government and whether participation in the exhibition could restore political trust. Finally, in Study 1, political trust was measured with only one item. In Study 2, we overcame this limitation by adding two more items.

Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 225 individuals participated in the study (49% female, *M* age = 17.32, *SD* = 3.84). Forty-nine participants (31%) followed a prevocational education (VMBO), and the remaining 69% followed a middle-level applied education (MBO). As in Study 1, the participants came from schools from different parts of the Netherlands. In regard to ethnic background, 47 (21%) of the 225 participants had a non-Western migration background. A participant was coded to have a migration background when he or she or at least one of his or her parents was born in a non-Western country. Twenty-one participants (9%) had a Turkish or Moroccan ethnic background; the remaining 26 participants were born themselves, or one of their parents was born, in the Dutch Antilles (*n* = 5), Surinam (*n* = 4), Afghanistan (*n* = 3), Indonesia (*n* = 2), Iraq (*n* = 2), Algeria (*n* = 1), Brazil (*n* = 1), Sierra Leone (*n* = 1), Vietnam (*n* = 1), Syria (*n* = 1), Macedonia (*n* = 1), Egypt (*n* = 1), Sri Lanka (*n* = 1), the Philippines (*n* = 1), or the Dominican Republic (*n* = 1).

The same experimental design and procedure of data collection was used as in Study 1. As shown in Table 4, 51% of the participants completed the questionnaire before the exhibition. The other 49% completed the questionnaire after the exhibition. For the analyses on the consequences of the Dutch government step-

Table 4
Overview of Number of Participants in Study 2 Divided Across Condition (Before or After the Exhibition) and Across Participation Before or After the Dutch Government Stepped Down

Condition	Before or after the Dutch government stepped down		Total, <i>n</i> (%)
	Before	After	
Before exhibition, <i>n</i>	78	36	114 (51)
After exhibition, <i>n</i>	60	51	111 (49)
Total, <i>n</i> (%)	138(61)	87(39)	225 (100)

ping down, this sample was subdivided: 61% participated before the government stepped down, and 39% participated afterward. The data collection was finished in May 2012, several months before the election of a new government (which took place in September 2012).

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire was completed by the participants, including questions on demographic variables, a measure of attitude toward democracy and trust in the government.

Attitude toward democracy. This was measured by five items; the same four items were used as in Study 1, and one item was added. Answers could be given on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*absolutely*). The scale had a good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$).

Trust in the government. This variable was measured with the same item as in Study 1, and two items were added. The answer could be given on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*absolutely*). Reliability of the scale was reasonable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .68$).

Results and Discussion

The means and standard deviations for participants before and after the exhibition are presented in Table 5. In Table 6 the means and standard deviations are given before and after the Dutch government stepped down. Trust in the government and attitude toward democracy were found to be significantly positively correlated, $r = .40$, $p = .001$. Univariate analyses of variance were conducted with condition (preexhibition vs. postexhibition) as the predictor variable and age, gender, and education as covariates. Attitude toward democracy and trust in the government were outcome variables. A main effect of condition was found for attitude toward democracy, $F(1, 200) = 9.42$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and trust in the government, $F(1, 212) = 5.03$, $p = .026$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Participants in the postexhibition condition showed more positive attitudes toward democracy and greater trust in the government compared to participants in the preexhibition condition. The main effect of attitude (but not trust) was qualified

Table 5
Mean Levels of Attitude Toward Democracy and Trust in the Government Among Ethnic Minority and Majority Participants and All Participants Together (Study 2)

Condition	Variable, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	
	Attitude toward democracy	Trust in the government
Majority participants		
Before exhibition	2.99 (.69)	2.62 (.77)
After exhibition	3.15 (.56)	2.87 (.72)
Minority participants		
Before exhibition	2.64 (.64)	2.62 (.85)
After exhibition	3.19 (.69)	2.91 (.84)
All participants		
Before exhibition	2.92 (.69)	2.62 (.78)
After exhibition	3.16 (.59)	2.88 (.74)

Table 6
Mean Levels of Attitude Toward Democracy and Trust in the Government Before and After the Dutch Government Stepped Down (Study 2)

Condition	Variable, <i>M (SD)</i>	
	Attitude toward democracy	Trust in the government
Before the government stepped down		
Before exhibition	2.98 (.72)	2.77 (.71)
After exhibition	3.11 (.56)	2.88 (.73)
Total	3.03 (.66)	2.82 (.72)
After the government stepped down		
Before exhibition	2.81 (.62)	2.32 (.85)
After exhibition	3.18 (.61)	2.88 (.76)
Total	3.02 (.64)	2.64 (.84)

by a marginally significant interaction between condition and ethnic group, $F(1, 200) = 2.89, p = .09$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. For ethnic majority participants, there was no significant difference in the before-and-after condition. Ethnic minority participants did

show more positive attitudes toward democracy after the exhibition compared to before. Trust in the government was found to be higher after the exhibition in both majority and ethnic minority group members.

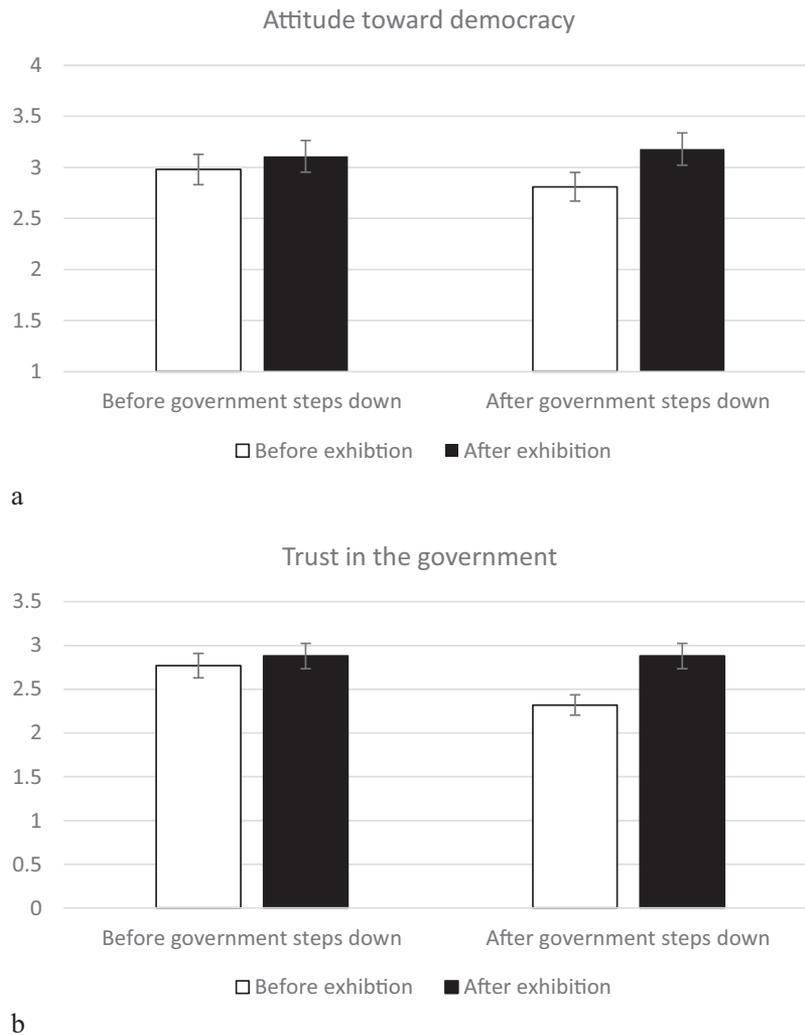


Figure 2. Attitude toward democracy (a) and trust in the government (b) before and after the government stepped down and before and after the exhibition (Study 2). Five percent error bars are depicted.

We then examined whether the incident of the Dutch government stepping down affected attitudes and trust. Univariate analyses were conducted controlling for age, gender, and education. Participants were significantly less positive about democracy, $F(1, 200) = 9.50, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and had less trust in the government, $F(1, 212) = 13.11, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, after the government stepped down. However, both main effects were qualified by an interaction between, respectively, whether participants were in the group before or after the government stepped down and between condition (whether participants completed the survey before or after the exhibition): The interaction was marginally significant for attitudes, $F(1, 200) = 3.68, p = .056$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, and significant for trust, $F(1, 212) = 7.57, p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. The interactions are depicted in Figure 2. These results imply that the exhibition restored positive attitudes and trust, which had been negatively affected by the government stepping down.

Conclusion

The results confirmed that the interactive exhibition on democracy indeed increases knowledge about democracy (Study 1). In addition, it was found to restore attitudes toward democracy and trust in the government after a decrease due to the government stepping down (Study 2). Notably, attitudes toward democracy were found to improve in minority members, but not majority members, after visiting the exhibition. In regard to radicalization, this is a particularly interesting finding. Those who feel underrepresented in the democratic system may feel procedural injustice, which could, for a small minority, be a reason to explore nondemocratic ways to counter this injustice (see also Doosje et al., 2016; Moghaddam, 2005). It should be noted, however, that not only ethnic minorities may feel procedural injustice. The current rise of right-wing populism illustrates that also ethnic majorities may look for extreme alternatives. Indeed, Doosje et al. (2012, 2013) found that higher levels of relative deprivation and feelings of injustice among ethnic minorities in the Netherlands as well as Dutch majority youth were associated with greater perceived illegitimacy of authorities, which, in turn, predicted greater support for ideology-based violence.

It should be noted that participants in our studies were already quite positive about democracy and showed considerable trust in the government. Future research is required to also investigate the impact of educational interventions on support for the democratic system in individuals who have very negative attitudes toward democracy or very low levels of trust in the government. A limitation of our studies is that the percentages of minority group members in our samples were quite low (10% in Study 1, 20% in Study 2). A follow-up on the present studies should aim to recruit more participants from minority groups. It would be particularly interesting to investigate associations between educational interventions on democracy, attitudes toward democracy, and political trust among different minority groups to disentangle similarities and differences. Given the fact that some minority groups report more experiences of discrimination than others, we think it is fruitful to explore both the potential effect of the exhibition, as well as the potential differences in terms of associations between knowledge about democracy and attitudes toward democracy, on one hand, and political trust and support for ideology-based violence, on the other hand.

Even though we did not measure relative deprivation or feelings of injustice in the present study, we believe the finding in Study 1 that greater knowledge about democracy is associated with reduced support for ideology-based violence and greater trust in the government (via more positive attitudes toward democracy) supports the use of interactive educational interventions to increase confidence in the democratic system. Considering that educational exhibitions can be relatively easy implemented in school curricula, we consider this is an effective route to counter radicalization and create greater political involvement at an early stage.

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