

Election and Education – Need, Experience and Prospects

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It's said, elections were easy only in primitive society. A leader's candidature has been nominated and if the tribe was seconding him by common shouting, the leader was considered. Little by little elections became more complicated. For example, according to the Iroquois Indians custom only women were electing a leader of the tribe. Certainly, a procedure of elections was extended and some election campaign was needed because of that.

Nowadays elections are complicated social institute. It is spread to all society. That is why all society has to learn elections. That was a reason for understanding the need in such a kind of education that gradually was developed at the experts meetings. And the Association was setting its course to its organizing.

In this connection I recalled the novel 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. When Alice has asked the Cheshire Cat about which way she ought to go from there, it asked where she wanted to get to.

– 'I don't much care where' said Alice.

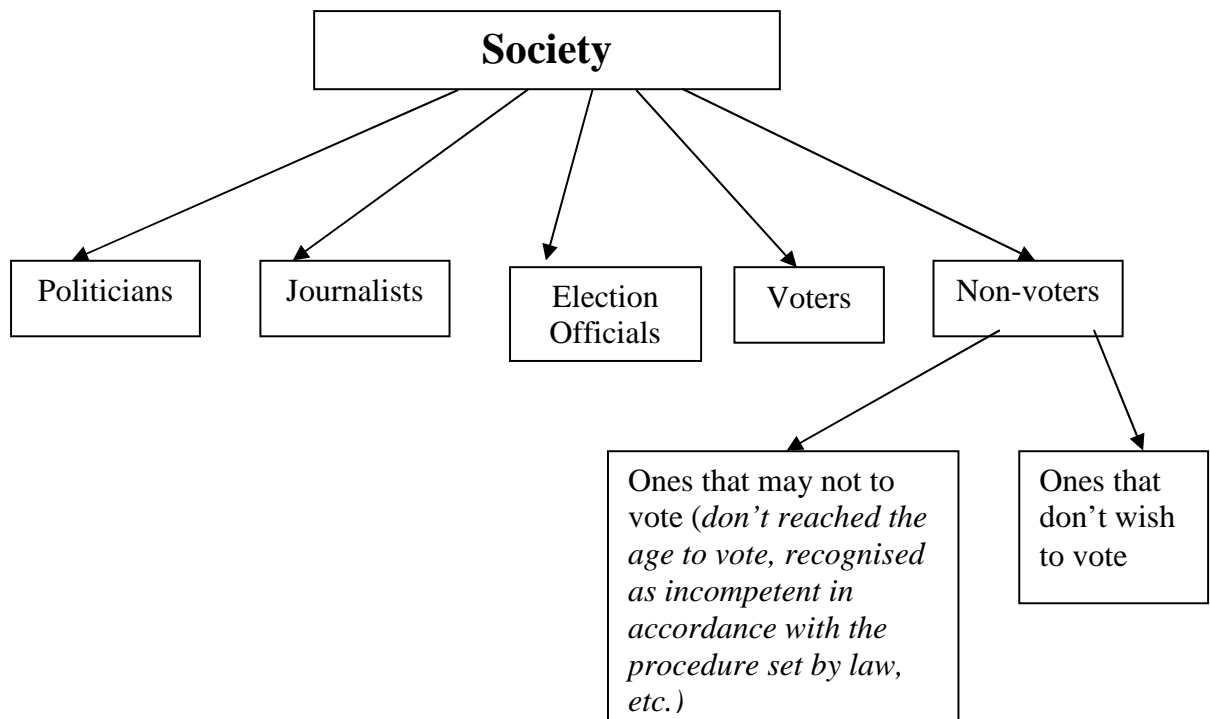
– 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

So that we wouldn't go in the election education 'doesn't matter which way', I would like to discuss with my esteemed colleagues some general, even probably, philosophical questions.

'Election education' has one characteristic feature, which differs it from another kinds of education. A usual education is directed to a market product as a result. It means someone gains his education in order to become a specialist and to sell one's knowledge. It is clear that the market principle doesn't fit election education. Election education needs much more higher motivation. This motivation must be supported by all society and in all lifetime of a person.

That's why I would like to say some words not only about education of election organizers, but about election education of all society, too. In respect to elections a society can be divided in the following way:

- politicians;
- journalists;
- election officials;
- voters;
- non-voters.



Every of these groups needs 'election education'. Non-electors need it because the most of them will become voters. I think elections like reading and writing skills must become an object of the elementary, perhaps even the preparatory school education. Education work is also necessary with those who don't wish to vote, because ones unwillingness to vote mostly comes from insufficient understanding of their role in politic processes.

Voters need such kind of education so that their participation in the elections would be skilled and deliberate. Politicians need it because they have to know both - conditions of them being elected and reelected. Journalists need it because the reflection of elections for society must be highly professional and with profound competence. Journalists have to decide themselves very often (and for us) a contradiction between the freedom of speech and responsibility for their words.

Undoubtedly, it's necessary to begin with education of voters and non-voters. An uneducated democracy sometimes could be worse than lack of democracy. The other groups in any case depend on the previously mentioned ones. That is the maximum task. We have always to keep it in mind.

But now I would like to talk about the minimum task - about education of election officials and briefly about Latvia's experience in this field.

Subjects of Election Officials Education

The topic of such a kind of education can be divided into the following issues:

1. Legal regulations of organizing elections (laws and instructions, its correct and uniformed application).
2. Development of the legal regulations of election process.
3. Technical equipment for holding elections, including computer technologies.
4. Election management.
5. International studies and recommendations on elections organization.
6. Election observation, rights and duties of an observer, principles of the international observation.
7. Work with mass media.
8. Methods of counteraction to elections and how it is possible to resist these methods.
9. A history of elections (both world, and local).
10. Election financing.

Training methods

Taking into consideration specific features of election officials' job, in my opinion the following form and methods are the most convenient for training:

1. Ordinary seminars – training without real work experience. There are both lectures and practical studies in the seminar program.
2. Interactive subject groups – a group comes together in order to study one or a few topics. Lecture material is minimal, but the main part of lecture is devoted to discussions and practical studies.
3. Trainings – a group gets to know the topic beforehand and then the topic is performed by the members of the group themselves, leaded by a task manager. Seminars, trainings and studies for interactive groups can be conducted at study centers or organized on the site.
4. Distance education via the Internet.
5. Education by using handouts.

Latvia's Experience in the Election Officials Education

In general election education in Latvia is similar to that in other countries. The Central Election Commission holds seminars for the heads of regional election commissions during a preparatory period of elections or referendum. Regional commissions organize training of polling stations' staff independently.

Basically the educational model we apply is seminar. But sometimes trainings were also applied. For example, one of such seminars was carried out for journalists to discuss the subject “Can election commissions falsify election results in Latvia?”

Actually, the study and methodological center is created at the Central Election Commission. We work out both – topics, handouts and visuals. Sometimes researches are carried out, for example, in history of election legislation in Latvia.

1. We regularly issue series of short cartoons in order to educate voters. All stages of polling, principles of election commissions’ work, some of legal regulations are shown in a simple, humorous manner. Journalists, politicians and non-voters also watch these films together with the electorate, including children. Something what a child has seen in a funny cartoon becomes as an ordinary fact of his/her life. It means that elections come into child’s life long before he/she achieves the age of rights to vote. Besides, when these films have been demonstrated on television, a number of unreasonable claims from journalists and politicians decreased.
2. Some years ago, when we had a long elections free period, we organized information campaign named ‘Prepare a sledge in summer, but carriage – in winter’. That is a Latvian proverb, which means that it is worth to prepare everything beforehand. The educational campaign included articles in the regional press and competitions for the readers on different subjects connected with elections. And again, the campaign got in the centre of attention not only of voters, but of other groups of society as well. Accordingly it influenced their level of election education in a direct or indirect way.

Conclusions

Taking into account the situation and gathered experience I think professional education of election organizers shouldn’t be isolated from election education of the other groups of population. But education of voters and non-voters shouldn’t have occasional character. We have to use the boiling frog effect. That is to maintain constant level of information for population and target groups. That is the only way to raise activity of the electorate in a long-term perspective.