



Democracy by Degrees

The Screening Guide

Every voter was once a student. Which is why what happens in public schools shapes our democracy.

What happens in schools doesn't stay in schools. A classroom is where a person first disagrees with someone and keeps listening. Where they meet a history that is not their own. Where they learn to tell the difference between what is true and what is convenient.

Democracy by Degrees is a 13 minute documentary built to start a conversation. The film does one job: it makes the connection between public education and democracy, with a degree of emotion that does not usually surface in an ordinary conversation about schools.

In this guide

The link to the film, this guide, and What Happens Next, a one page handout for your audience with ideas for where to go from here.

What the film does

The film looks at pressures on public education that have built over decades. It does not name a party, a person, or a single moment as the cause. That is deliberate. It keeps the room together long enough for people to make the connection themselves.

Three data points appear on screen, and each one opens a different door:

- Nearly 9 in 10 children in grades K-12 attend public school. That's 49 million kids. U.S. Census Bureau, 2024. This is the everyone number. It is why this is not a parents' issue.
- Over 50% of teachers report limiting classroom discussions of political and social issues even where no state or local restrictions apply. RAND, 2024. This is the one that tends to sit with people. It describes teachers pulling back without being told to.
- Public schools spent \$3.2 billion responding to political and cultural fights, on security, legal costs and staff time, in the 2023-24 school year. UCLA, 2024. This is money that did not reach a classroom. It reaches audiences who have not thought of public education as their concern.

Who is in the room

The film was created with two primary audiences in mind and they need different things.

People who already agree.

Nothing in the film is news to them. What is useful to them is Pedro's line near the end: politicians are not leaders, they are followers, they look at the polls. That is a mechanism, not a sentiment. It says public attention is the lever.

What they bring is their connections and their passion for putting the film in front of people who would never have sought it out. That is the second audience.

People who are concerned but disengaged.

The film speaks to them directly. Claudia says it doesn't matter if you don't have kids anymore, or you're in your 30s and have decided not to have kids, it's going to affect you. That is the moment a person who assumed this was not about them finds out that it is.

They are not ready for an assignment. Ask someone who has never engaged to show up at a school board meeting and they hear that this is for other people. They say no, and you have lost them.

Let them in where they are. Thinking about it counts. Talking about it counts. Sending the film to one person counts, and that is the step that carries this film further than any other.

Start them in the shallow end. They will go deeper on their own.

That is what What Happens Next is for. Hand it out at the end, or drop the link in the chat. It gives people a range of ways in, from thinking about it to voting, so everyone can start where they are.

Run of Show

Welcome	5 minutes
Film	13 minutes
Conversation	30 minutes
What's next	10 minutes

Screening in person

The film streams from Vimeo. Use this link: <https://tinyurl.com/democracybydegrees>

Test the film at the venue at least a day ahead of time using the venue's wifi. Keep a phone hotspot ready just in case. If the connection isn't reliable, or you're in a large venue, get in touch. We can arrange a file for you.

Setting up

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ Laptop
- ☐ Television, monitor, or projector
- ☐ HDMI cable to connect to video source and audio (best: venue wired speakers, better: external speakers, avoid: laptop audio and bluetooth)
- ☐ Copies of the **What Happens Next** flyer (described on page 5)

WHAT YOU'LL DO

- ☐ Connect your laptop by HDMI, which carries picture and sound.
- ☐ Check that audio is coming out of the room speakers, not your laptop. Look at your system sound output, not just the cable.
- ☐ Laptop speakers won't fill a room past about a dozen people. Use house sound or a portable speaker. Be aware that a Bluetooth speaker will likely make it appear as if the audio and video are out of sync.
- ☐ Turn on Do Not Disturb. Close your other tabs. Turn off sleep and screensaver.
- ☐ Right before you play
- ☐ Open the link and set the player to 1080p rather than letting it choose.
- ☐ Be aware of closed captions and turn them on or off as desired.
- ☐ Play it through with the sound down to confirm everything works, then reload.
- ☐ Go fullscreen first, then press play.

Screening virtually

The film streams from Vimeo. Use this link: <https://tinyurl.com/democracybydegrees>

Most video conferencing platforms, like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, compress video and lag on screen share. Your audience gets better picture and sound watching on their own browsers and coming back to the meeting platform to discuss.

Setting up

- ☐ In the virtual conference platform (i.e., Zoom) settings, mute participants on entry, and turn off.
- ☐ Allow participants to unmute themselves.
- ☐ Welcome, 5 minutes
- ☐ Introduce your organization and frame the film.
- ☐ Film, 15 minutes
- ☐ Paste this Vimeo link in the chat: <https://tinyurl.com/democracybydegrees>
- ☐ Then say something like: We're going to watch on our own browsers for the best picture and sound. The link is in the chat. Mute your meeting window, click the link, press play. We'll come back here at [time] to talk.
- ☐ Click Mute All. Share a slide that reads: Film in progress. Conversation begins at [time].

The film runs 13 minutes. Build in a couple of minutes for people clicking in.

After 15 minutes or so, stop sharing and enable participants to unmute themselves.

Conversation

Five questions, in this order. Start small and let it widen.

1. What stayed with you?
2. Over half of teachers said they limit what they discuss even where no rule requires it. What do you think produces that?
3. One teacher says the problem has never been books, the problem is empathy. What did you make of that?
4. Another says that if you don't have children, it will still reach you. Where do you see that here?
5. The film says politicians follow attention rather than lead it. If that's true, where does your attention actually reach?

These are suggestions. Use the questions that serve your room and build your own around the work you want to advance.

What's next

Your room holds people at very different distances from this. Don't ask all of them for the same thing. A single big ask leaves most of the room out.

Hand out **What Happens Next**. It's a ladder: think, talk, ask, vote. People find themselves on it.

Action isn't always something you can see. Someone who leaves still turning it over, or who tells one person what stayed with them, has done something real. That's how this film travels.

For virtual screenings, **paste this link** to the **What Happens Next** pdf in the chat before people drop off.

Inviting people

For an email

Subject: A 13 minute film I'd like you to see

I'm hosting a screening of Democracy by Degrees on [date] at [time], at [location].

It's a short documentary about what public schools have to do with our democracy, and why that connection should matter to you.

The film runs 13 minutes. We'll watch together and then discuss it for about 45 minutes. Nothing to prepare.

Trailer: <https://tinyurl.com/DbD-trailer>

Hope you can join us.

For an events page or newsletter

Every voter was once a student. Which is why what happens in public schools shapes our democracy. Democracy by Degrees is a 13 minute documentary exploring how what happens inside classrooms reaches far beyond them, shaping our communities, our elections and our civic life. Join us for a screening and conversation.

Register your screening

Please fill out the form at DemocracyByDegrees.org each time you screen. It takes two minutes and it's how we know where this film is working.

The film starts the conversation. What happens next depends on the people in the room.

Be a degree of change.