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# Orientation in time and world through history and civic education: curricular frameworks and teachers' perspectives in Austria

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## Abstract

This article explores the connection between historical and political learning as well as their contribution to the promotion of democratic consciousness in Austrian lower secondary education. The analysis is based on the assumption that students need not only historical orientation skills but also competence in political judgement and political action to develop into historically critical, mature citizens. Against this background, the Austrian curriculum for the combined subject of History and Civic Education at the lower secondary education level was categorised historically and examined for points of reference regarding the promotion of democratic consciousness. Using the deductively derived categories of democracy, orientation and maturity, the article finds that while the curriculum refers to democratic values and human rights as an overarching goal, historical and political competences are not consistently linked. In addition, it includes

teachers' perspectives on the subject combination of history and civic education and their teaching and learning objectives. The analysis of 43 expert interviews shows that the combination of subjects is mainly considered from the perspective of history teaching. Although the interviewed teachers make various references to democratic participation in the present or to citizenship, many of them find it difficult to systematically relate the different subject perspectives (historical, political, democratic) to each other. To further explore this relationship between historical consciousness and democratic consciousness, the article concludes that more interdisciplinary cooperation between the respective subject didactics is ultimately needed.

**Keywords** historical-critical thinking; democratic consciousness; historical consciousness; orientation; maturity; historically critical and mature citizens

## Introduction

In view of declining student numbers in history, Swiss historian and journalist [Marc Tribelhorn \(2024\)](#), when answering the question of the purpose of history, links the relevance of history to current social challenges: to train source criticism and media literacy, especially in the face of fake news, big data and artificial intelligence, war and anti-Semitism. To understand historical contexts, our culture and the world. To participate in the political process, especially in a direct democracy. Or, as the German philosopher Odo Marquard once pointedly put it: 'Future requires origin' (n.p.). Tribelhorn thus emphasises the connection between perception of the past, understanding of the present and future prospects ([Jeismann, 1985](#)) while pointing equally to goals of both historical and political learning. After all, a democratic society needs committed and mature (German: *mündig*) citizens, which places the ability to judge and criticise as well as the willingness to participate at the heart of historical-political education.

Following the paradigm shift towards competence orientation in German-speaking history didactics, there has been a debate about the extent to which historical competences contribute to dealing with current social challenges ([Trautwein et al., 2017](#), p. 116; [Ziegler, 2022](#)). In this particular context, historical and political thinking are interconnected, and their intersection is identified in the context of historical orientation skills, as these enable students to make use of history for their present and future ability to act ([Ammerer, 2019](#), p. 8; [Kühberger, 2009](#), p. 113). These assumptions form the basis for the current curriculum of the combined subject History and Civic Education at the lower secondary education level in Austria. The subject combination was introduced at the same time as the orientation towards competences in 2008, and the aim of promoting democratic consciousness was concretised during the curriculum revision in 2016.

As a matter of introduction of the subject History and Civic Education in Austria, the curricula of 2016 and 2023 are analysed in terms of the intersections of historical and democratic consciousness, and they are linked with teachers' conceptions of those intersections. To this end, theoretical considerations on history, civic and democracy education are used to deductively generate categories which are subsequently applied to the curricula and the data from expert interviews ( $N = 43$ ). This places a stronger emphasis on the teachers' perspective and their interpretation of the curriculum requirements. At the heart of the discussion is the assumption that the subject combination of history and civic education appears fundamentally well suited to contributing to the promotion of democratic consciousness among students. In this context, the importance of the interaction between historical orientation competence, political judgement competence and political action competence in subject lessons should also be discussed.

## Theoretical framework

### Democracy education, civic education, history education: similarities and differences

Empowering students to commit to and actively uphold democratic values and human rights is the normative concern of both historical and political learning processes. Yet this ability is increasingly demanded by educational policymakers (Oeftering, 2024), especially because democratic societies are perceived as being in crisis due to various challenges and uncertainties. In the context of an increasing tendency towards anti-democratic ideologies, educational institutions are faced with new expectations, and democracy education, civic education and history education in particular are being questioned in terms of their contribution to orientation within a present and future perceived as crisis-ridden and pervaded by growing authoritarian movements. Considerations on the overlaps between historical and democratic consciousness are likewise to be viewed in this context, which is why the different approaches of democracy education, civic education and history education must first be considered and examined with regard to their commonalities.

Democracy education is considered to be an interdisciplinary task. It refers to a holistic educational process focusing on a democratic educational mission and encompasses all educational subjects as well as the realm of school culture as a whole (Gloe, 2025). The discussion about what this means in concrete terms for specific didactic perspectives on democracy education has intensified in recent years (Achour, 2025; Ammerer et al., 2020a; Schöne and Carmele, 2024) and places responsibility on history teaching as well (Barth and Reeken, 2024; Kühberger, 2020). It should be noted that although the concept of democracy education plays a central role in educational policy discourse, it features certain ambiguities like all composites with the term *democracy* (Röken, 2020). On a normative level, democracy education is committed to democratic principles and thus to fundamental and human rights. From a didactic perspective, however, it is important to note that the political system and the legitimisation of the prevailing political order do not serve as the initial starting point for educational processes. Instead, the main focus is on the individual and the development of its civic maturity. In this context, the concept of civic maturity is understood as an individual resource of learners that cannot be imparted through learning processes (Darm and Lange, 2018). Instead, to promote civic maturity, reflection processes must be facilitated in which learners can develop the ability to think reflectively and situate themselves within social structures. Accordingly, democracy education is not purely affirmative in terms of preserving democracy but critically aimed at developing democracy – that is, the focus is on a critical and reflective examination of the democratic order (Kenner and Lange, 2022). Learners should also be familiarised with the possibilities of democratic co-determination and co-responsibility in matters that affect them.

However, at the level of democratic school and teaching culture, democracy education is linked to two challenges. On the one hand, there are doubts as to whether students' experiences with democracy and participation within the framework of school culture can be transferred to the macro level of the democratic political system (Pohl, 2004). Oeftering (2024, pp. 157–8) therefore emphasises the relevance of subject-specific learning, which includes a critical and reflective examination of politics and democracy. On the other hand, the actual decision-making scope of students is rated as extremely limited due to the power structures and asymmetrical relationships in the institution of school (Budde, 2010; Wohnig, 2018). Accordingly, central elements of school democracy aimed at promoting democratic agency, such as class councils or the election of class representatives, are suspected of fulfilling more of an alibi function (Krammer, 2012, p. 36). The dilemma between aspiration and reality can hardly be resolved in mainstream state schools, but the ambivalence itself can be made a subject of learning. Such learning processes take place in civic education lessons (Krösche and Stornig, 2024).

Civic education in a formal sense, respectively as a subject of its own, shares with democracy education the promotion of civic maturity and participation skills as central target dimensions. Whether corresponding lessons should also aim to offer practical experience with democracy or focus on the analytical examination of existing social conditions and their challenges and controversies is not undisputed (Oeftering, 2024). For example, Werner Friedrichs (2020) argues that the skills acquired in civic education must be applicable in democratic practice and extend to its critical renewal. Political learning processes should therefore enable students to engage in self-determined political thinking and to actively participate in political processes. Accordingly, political judgement and political action competence are at the heart of competence-oriented political learning processes. From such a broad

social science perspective, which encompasses various related disciplines such as historical sciences, civic education promotes learners' capability to orient themselves within the social world (Autorengruppe Fachdidaktik, 2017, pp. 7–9).

Orientation is likewise a central concept in history didactics and history education. According to Jörn Rüsen (1994, 2020), the need for orientation in time is the trigger for the historical cognitive process. This begins with a question to which a meaningful answer is given in the form of a narration based on scientific procedures. Fostering this ability to think historically is the central goal of history education. In Jörn Rüsen's (1994) words, historical thinking is understood as part of a comprehensive mental practice which can be described as the formation of meaning in an interpretative treatment of the past (p. 2). Students should be encouraged to form meaning in history lessons so as to be able to orient themselves intentionally and based on experience in the course of their own life practice (p. 111). To this end, history lessons should establish a space for reflection in which the fundamental temporality of the world can be considered (Lücke and Zündorf, 2018, p. 38).

The FUER Group's competence model of historical thinking (Körber et al., 2007) that has been established in German-speaking countries builds on Rüsen's deliberations from which it derives four areas of competence: historical questioning competence, historical methodological competence, historical orientation competence and historical factual competence. With regard to the potential intersections with democracy education and civic education, historical orientation is of particular relevance because it involves all three domains of time, as the past continues to have an effect in the present and into the future. Accordingly, historical knowledge contributes to orientation in the present and future world. Dealing with the past and history attains meaning for life practice through orientation competence, to which the critical-reflective examination of dispositions for action as well as of the individual's own historical consciousness, experiences of alterity and their own identity contribute. According to Rüsen (2006), conceptions regarding the course of time enter into the cultural orientation framework of social practice (p. 138). The orientation function of history thus relates to time and the world. In this context, orientation competence is also considered a crossover between historical and political learning (Ammerer, 2019, p. 8) – an area of competence in which the tasks of history teaching and civic education overlap (Kühberger, 2009, p. 113). Following Reinhold Hedtke (2003), orientation can thus be characterised as a transdisciplinary paradigm.

However, when determining the relationship between historical consciousness and democratic consciousness, it must be borne in mind that no direct lessons can be derived from history and through history lessons as instructions for action in the present (Bühl-Gramer, 2018, p. 35). Although historical thinking contributes to orientation in time and thus also in the contemporary present world, the reflection of past actions does not allow a direct transfer of principles of action to present contexts (McLean, 2024). The insights gained through historical analysis methods are based on a retrospective, selective and perspectival construction of the past and therefore only have a limited claim to validity.

Instead, historical learning can be defined as the productive, intrinsically (German: *eigen-sinnig*) meaningful appropriation of past realities as self-imagined (German: *selbst-imaginierte*) and/or self-narrated (German: *selbst-erzählte*) stories (Brüning and Lücke, 2013). This should be distinguished from the objective of civic education, which is to encourage the critical analysis of current political conditions, including in democracies, and to enable participation in social life (Kolleck, 2022; Oeftering, 2024). Despite the existence of divergent disciplinary perspectives within the domains of democracy education, civic education and history education, the educational goal of democracy can be identified as a fundamental common point of reference. Furthermore, there is an overlap in the target dimensions of civic maturity and orientation in time and the social world. To promote historical and socio-political orientation, historical and political thinking operations are therefore required – or, from the perspective of subject teaching, both historical and political skills, that is, political judgement and action skills, as well as historical orientation skills. History lessons and specialised civic education can thus complement each other fruitfully and contribute to democracy education and to a better, more pluralistic and democratic coexistence (McLean, 2024, p. 183). Accordingly, a combined subject in which the two disciplines of history and civic education are interwoven fundamentally, as is the case in Austria, offers favourable conditions for the development of democratic consciousness.

## Potentials of historical-critical thinking for democracy

As [Edling et al. \(2025\)](#) point out, ‘the connection between *history* education and *democracy* education is generally not explicitly described’ and the ‘two ideas of *historical thinking* and *democracy* are not brought together’ (p. 5; emphases in original). This article takes up this desideratum and argues from a didactic perspective that history and civic education and the promotion of historical and civic competences must work together in order to develop students’ democratic consciousness.

The discussion about the relationship between civic and history education dates back to the 1950s. In this context, the historian and expert on historical didactics [Annette Kuhn \(1974\)](#) was particularly concerned with the potential of historical knowledge and historical learning to support democratic skills. She argued for a critical and emancipatory orientation of historical learning processes, thereby placing history education in a clear relationship to what is understood as democracy education today. She therefore considered the task of history teaching to be practicing historical-critical thinking (p. 13). The basis for this, Kuhn states, is the natural interest of students in history, which arises less from a need for orientation within a given historical space with recognised norms and legitimised systems of interpretation (p. 27) than from their interest in maturity, by which she means the critical appropriation of pasts in the sense of an unconstrained, emancipatory interest in knowledge. History lessons must therefore be geared towards students’ desire for maturity: In this way, the student can – in keeping with his emancipative interest – experience past norms and decisions for action as norms that are also valid for him, question them with regard to the basis of their interests and finally assert them as his own norm of action (p. 28). Kuhn thus emphasises the contribution that engagement with the past can make to students’ ability to orient themselves in contemporary society.

[Philipp McLean \(2023\)](#) takes up this line of argument, characterising maturity as a fundamental aim of history education and condensing it into a concept of emancipative maturity. This in turn can be related to maturity as a normative guiding principle of civic and democratic learning and refers to the ability to form self-determined judgements. In addition to orientation in time and the world, which is the trigger and goal of the historical thinking process, maturity can thus be seen as an area of overlap or interdisciplinary paradigm of history and civic education and their joint contribution to a democracy education based on the individual subject perspective.

It is from these considerations that the historically critical, mature citizen can be derived as a model for historical-political education (see also [Ständige Wissenschaftliche Kommission der Kultusministerkonferenz, 2024](#)). Nevertheless, the challenges to implementation in learning processes specific to individual teaching subjects remain considerable, as empirical studies on the impact of history didactics have so far shown that German-language history lessons do not sustainably promote either historical thinking operations or democratic convictions but primarily stabilise everyday theories ([Köster, 2021](#)). Still, practising historical thinking can make a contribution to democracy education by focusing on critical appropriation of the past as stipulated by [Annette Kuhn \(1974\)](#). In this context, historical-critical thinking means considering the students with their preconceptions and emancipatory cognitive interests as the starting point, making it possible to experience the alterity of past lifeworlds and relating them to current life practice as well as critically reflecting on the process of historical thinking and historical knowledge itself (see also [Köster, 2021](#)).

## Methods and sample

In the first step of the analysis, the expansion of the history subject to include civic education within Austrian lower secondary education is contextualised historically and the curriculum subsequently examined with regard to references to democratic consciousness using the deductively formed categories of democracy, maturity and orientation. However, the extent to which the Austrian curriculum for the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education (which was renamed History and Civic Education in 2023) contributes to the development of democratic consciousness among students can hardly be assessed without the perspective of the teachers. The curriculum frames the teaching practice and is the starting point for teachers’ didactic decisions, which shape the design of lessons. The second step of the analysis is dedicated to the ideas of Austrian lower secondary teachers about the subject combination in question. The analysis of the interview data collected addresses two research questions:

- What do lower secondary teachers think of the combination of history and civic education?

- To what extent do lower secondary teachers establish links between the subject-related learning objectives of the subject combination of history and civic education and the concerns of democracy education?

A qualitative approach is appropriate to answer these questions, and data from guideline-based expert interviews conducted in 2021/22 to survey teachers' attitudes towards the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education is analysed. The aim of guideline-based expert interview is to explore the interviewees' knowledge of the subject being researched – in this case, teachers' knowledge regarding the interpretation of the curriculum. It is therefore a reconstructive study whose central characteristic is open dialogue (Gläser and Laudel, 2010, pp. 11–15).

At the time of data collection, the modularly designed 2016 curriculum was still in force. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of the interviews were conducted online in the form of video conferences. Although this ensured that visual information was retained, the interview situation was nevertheless different from face-to-face interviews. The expert interviews, carried out in German, were supported by preparing narrative suggestions and detailed questions in advance and bundling them thematically in an interview guideline. The questions focused on the teachers' professional convictions regarding the similarities and differences between history and civic education and their assessment of whether the combination of the two domains within a single teaching subject creates added value or leads to deficits. The participants were not specifically asked whether the subject or the subject curriculum contributed to strengthening students' commitment to democratic values and human rights. However, the general learning objectives of the subject combination were a central topic of the guided interviews. The answers, translated into English for this article, will be examined to determine whether and to what extent the development of democratic citizenship and associated values is described as an objective in the interviews. To analyse this part of the question, the same deductively formed categories as in the curriculum analysis were used: democracy, maturity and orientation. However, the category system for answering the question concerning the teachers' assessments of the subject combination in general was developed inductively (Mayring, 2022).

The sample consisted of teachers at the lower secondary in Austria who, based on the 2016 curriculum, taught the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education either at lower secondary of general secondary schools (German: *Allgemeinbildende höhere Schulen/Unterstufe* – AHS-US;  $n = 23$ ) or at upper secondary schools (German: *Mittelschulen* – MS;  $n = 20$ ). Teachers from the Austrian provinces of Tyrol, Upper Austria and Salzburg with varying degrees of professional experience were included (see Table 1). At the beginning of each interview, consent to participate in the study as well as to the recording and analysis of the interviews was obtained.

**Table 1. Expert interview sample overview.**

Educational level	School type	Federal state	Interview number	Sex			Years of professional experience
				male	female	diverse	
Lower secondary school	AHS-US	Upper Austria	10	5	5	0	17
		Salzburg	1	1	0	0	3
		Tyrol	12	8	4	0	18
		<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>16</b>
	MS	Upper Austria	8	3	5	0	19
		Salzburg	1	0	1	0	26
		Tyrol	11	4	7	0	8
		<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>13</b>



## Findings

### The Austrian curriculum for the subject combination of history and civic education and its contribution to the development of democratic consciousness as of 2016

While in some European countries such as Spain (Moreno-Vera, 2025) or Finland (Löfström, 2025) history is taught as a separate subject, there are other countries such as Norway (Ammert and Hovland, 2025) and Austria where history lessons are combined with other subjects. This results in different settings for analysing European curricula in terms of how the development of democratic consciousness is embedded. In line with Edling et al. (2025), curriculum documents are also understood here as political texts 'that are designed around specific discursive strategies' and 'are never neutral' (p. 13). However, although the curricula are issued by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the individual subjects are revised on the basis of current didactic findings. To this end, working groups are formed in which both teachers and subject didactics experts are represented. Accordingly, subject-specific didactic principles and developments are incorporated into the curricula and are taken into account in the following analysis.

In Austria, teaching in the subject combination of history and civic education is considered the key setting for democracy education (Ammerer et al., 2020b, p. 10). The merging of history lessons with civic education was preceded by an intensive discussion about the introduction of a separate subject for civic education beginning in the 1970s (Hellmuth and Klepp, 2010, pp. 66–8). The lowering of the voting age to 16 in 2007, which was unprecedented in the European Union at the time, lent additional impetus to the debate. There was no doubt that accompanying educational policy measures were necessary to prepare young first-time voters for casting their ballots (Stornig, 2021, pp. 40–7). It was on this basis that the History and Social Studies/Civic Education curriculum and a new syllabus were implemented at the secondary level in 2008/9. The competence model for civic education, which was likewise developed in 2008, contributed to this formal upgrade (Stornig, 2021, p. 42). Acquiring political competences should enable students to orient themselves with regard to political problems of the small and the large world (Krammer, 2012, p. 27) as well as democratic participation. The concrete consideration of political competences in the 2008 curriculum is assessed in very diverging ways, however. While Kühberger (2020, p. 90) views it as a decisive step towards the emancipation of political education from history education in Austria, Krammer (2012, p. 27) sees civic education as remaining an add-on to the subject of history that presents teachers with major challenges given their already limited time resources. It should also be noted that history lessons in Austria, according to current empirical data, are hardly ever designed with an orientation towards competences (Brait, 2021; Pichler, 2016). It therefore remains questionable to what extent key skills for democracy education and the development of civic maturity, such as competence in historical orientation, political judgement and political action, are actually promoted in the classroom.

The subject-specific content and competences were more clearly defined in the revised curriculum of 2016/17 for the lower secondary by structuring it into modules. These modules in turn correspond to thematic blocks. In addition to separate historical and political modules, modules from the overlap area of historical-political were also introduced. All modules had to be taught from Grade 6, that is, for three years. This further increased the share and independence of civic education within the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education (Kühberger, 2020, p. 90). Although the integration of civic education, and thus also democracy education, into the subject of history is supported by teachers in Austria (Brait, 2021, p. 150), the problem pointed out by Krammer of the almost unmanageable amount of material continues to exist. Consequently, teachers rate the importance of historical learning within the combined subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education higher than that of political learning (Stornig, 2021, p. 292), which also corresponds to the proportions in the curriculum and thus in the textbooks. In addition, there is a conceptual problem with the 2016 curriculum: although suitable thematic concretisations are formulated for the overlap area of the two subject perspectives, only historical – not political – sub-competences are assigned within the historical-political modules. This is only partially compensated for by the fact that some of the historical-political modules are intended to contribute to the promotion of historical orientation competence, which combines historical and political learning (Krösche, 2024, pp. 237–9).

The structuring of content and competences into modules for the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education in the 2016 curriculum contributes to greater consistency and increased authoritativeness for teaching practice. In particular, systematic development of the respective subject-specific competences is supported. For this reason, a modular curriculum for combined subjects

where different subject perspectives such as history and civic education must be taken into account without more time resources being available is highly beneficial. It allows content and competences that contribute to a critical examination of current democratic societies, transformation phenomena and threats to democracy, as well as strengthening consciousness of democratic principles, to be more clearly identified without being lost in the abundance of historical facts. It must therefore be considered a disadvantage that the modular structure was undone again with the curriculum reform of 2023 – especially with regard to the visibility of civic education, the teaching of democratic values and the ability to participate in political processes. Beyond this, little was changed in the 2023 curriculum besides renaming the subject to History and Civic Education.

Nevertheless, the contribution of specialised historical and political learning to democracy education in Austria is firmly anchored in both curricula (2016 and 2023), and the promotion of democratic consciousness and democratic capacity to act is thus normatively framed. What this means in concrete terms can be analysed by deductively applying the developed interdisciplinary paradigms of maturity and orientation skills alongside democracy. In doing so, it is immediately noticeable that the concept of maturity as a target perspective for political and democratic learning is not used in the curricula. The reason for this is that the subject combination of history and civic education in Austria is approached more from the perspective of history didactics, in which maturity is not yet established as a central category or target dimension despite occasional references to Kuhn. This is apparent, among other things, in the fact that the dictionary of history didactics does not contain an entry on the keyword 'maturity' (German: *Mündigkeit*) (Mayer et al., 2022). However, if history lessons are to support students' democratic consciousness, maturity must be taken into account as an essential aim of history education. Maturity is the prerequisite for a critical examination of social and – following Annette Kuhn (1974) – historical phenomena, for differentiated judgement and for self-determined action in democracy.

The terms *democracy* and *democratic*, meanwhile, appear multiple times in the curriculum. Since 2016, the Austrian curriculum for Grades 6 to 8 of secondary education makes explicit reference to democratic values in its educational goals. Historical and political learning should contribute to increasing students' consciousness with regard to democracy and human rights (BGBl. II 1/2023; BGBl. II 219/2016). Democracy can be found as a topic of learning in the content priorities for all three school levels, but it is most strongly represented in the requirements for Grade 8. A comparison between the modular structure of the 2016 curriculum and the currently valid curriculum of 2023 without modules is helpful for a more detailed analysis. It shows that democracy in a historical perspective – that is, in the original historical modules – is given significantly less weight at Grades 6 and 7 than at Grade 8. This is due to the predominantly chronological approach in lessons and thus the historical period covered in Grade 8, which includes the interwar period as well as the Second Austrian Republic. Based on the 2016 curriculum structure, it is also clear that the included civic education components (political and historical-political modules) in particular help to promote students' understanding of democracy. These contain central elements such as engagement with basic democratic values and opportunities for political co-determination.

The curriculum is introduced with a description of the educational and teaching goal for all school levels, which states that teaching in the subject combination of history and civic education should contribute to the orientation of students in time and space, to finding their identity in a pluralistic society and to the development of independent historical thinking respectively political thinking and action (BGBl. II 1/2023). The fundamental objective of the subject thus formulated refers equally to history and civic education, that is, it represents a kind of bracket linking both subject perspectives. The passage can be related to all three deductively formed categories: democracy, orientation and, ultimately, maturity. It formulates a social objective which, according to Löfström (2025), for example, is lacking in the history curriculum for lower secondary in Finland. What specifically constitutes 'the link between the theoretical grasp of historical knowledge and its societal or political use' (Löfström, 2025) is explained neither in the Austrian curriculum nor in the Finnish one. However, a specialised subject curriculum can hardly achieve this; it is primarily a control instrument (Schratz, 2019, p. 42) subject to the principle of the exemplary (Zierer and Wernke, 2019, p. 444). At the content level, there is always a selection problem, meaning that only specific focal points can be defined. In addition, curricula always lag behind the dynamics of societal development (Schratz, 2019, p. 42).

A reference to maturity is once again not explicitly made in the quoted passage, but historical and political thinking and action are to be oriented towards independence, and thus towards the students' own abilities. While independence is not the same as self-determination, which is closely linked to



maturity and regarded as a central democratic value, the curriculum excerpt places the individual at the centre and implicitly addresses the development of mature citizens capable of judgement. Assuming that curricula exert little influence on teaching practice and tend to have an indirect effect (Vollstädt, 2003), the consistent use of subject-specific terms in curricula does not appear to be irrelevant.

The quoted excerpt from the educational and teaching goal also takes up the interdisciplinary paradigm of orientation and relates it to time and the social world. Since the competences included in the Austrian curriculum are based on the FUER model, it is hardly surprising that the historical orientation competence with its sub-competences is to be promoted in all three relevant years of the lower secondary. In connection with insights and meanings gained from sources and narrations, the main aim is to develop references to the present. By contrast, orientation is not linked to the political competences defined in the curriculum.

The value of history lessons in and for democracy (Kühberger, 2020, p. 95) has been clearly recognised in the Austrian curriculum for the subject History and Civic Education since 2016. It is apparent that the combination of history and civic education is extremely fruitful for promoting democratic consciousness, which is also reflected in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the two subject perspectives of history and civic education are not yet genuinely interlaced, and the allocation of competences remains additive. Against this background, the question arises how teachers assess the curriculum requirements and their objectives.

### Teachers' perspectives on the combined subject History and Social Studies/ Civic Education

Although the assessment of the subject combination by the interviewed teachers effectively cannot be separated from the learning objectives described in the interviews within the presentation and discussion of the results, a corresponding breakdown with regard to the two formulated sub-questions is undertaken here.

To answer the first sub-question, it can generally be stated that the majority of the interviewed teachers consider the combination of history and civic education in a joint subject for the lower secondary in Austria to be an added value due to their complementary contents. At the same time, the challenge of combining subjects with limited given resources as mentioned by Krammer (2012, p. 27) is confirmed. In several interviews, reference was made to the double burden of a large amount of material and limited teaching time (for example, AUL13, AUL14, AUL 19, ML09, ML12). As an example, one respondent summarised the situation as follows: 'sensible in terms of subject matter; impossible in terms of time required' (ML18), and another added that the framework conditions required 'courage to leave gaps' (ML19).

However, there are also contrary assessments describing the combination of subjects as a loss or deficit. The deficit is consistently identified on the side of civic education, 'because civic education always loses out' (AUL08). One reason for this is identified in the structure of the textbooks for the lower secondary, in which political topics and issues are invariably placed on the last pages (AUL08, ML08). As textbooks are still considered the primary medium for teaching history in Austria, as is also true in Norway (Ammert and Hovland, 2025, p. 88; Bernhard, 2019), and many teachers work through them from cover to cover over the course of the school year, civic education falls victim to a lack of time in teaching practice more often than history education. Ultimately, this is due to the curriculum of 2016, in which the political modules are placed last at each school level; this structure is directly mirrored in the textbooks since they are required to implement the curricular demands. However, the modules do not have to be taught in the order chosen for the curriculum but can instead be customised to suit individual teaching preferences (Hellmuth and Kühberger, 2016). Apparently, few teachers make use of this option.

The imbalance between historical and political content in the Austrian curriculum for the subject combination of history and civic education is also reflected in its practical implementation. During the interviews, the participants were asked to specify the proportions of historical and political learning in their lessons as well as for each of the three relevant years in the lower secondary. As suspected by Stornig (2021, p. 292), this results in a clear dominance of history over civic education in teaching practice. On average, respondents rated the historical component at two thirds and the political component at one third, with no major difference between the two types of school (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Distribution of political and historical content**

Educational level	School type	Weight Political Education	Weight History
Lower secondary school	AHS-US	34	66
	MS	31	69

When the data is analysed by education level, an increase in the proportion of political learning processes from Grades 6 to 8 is recognisable. Regardless of the curriculum, this points to the long-disproved assumption by some teachers that children at the beginning of lower secondary education are still too young for political learning processes. Accordingly, one interviewee described civic education as ‘very complex’ for Grade 6 (AUL15), and another characterised students at that age as still ‘very childlike’ in the context of political learning (AUL23).

Against the backdrop of these results, it is hardly surprising that most interviewees assessed the similarities and differences between the two subjects from the perspective of history teaching. Accordingly, some participants regarded historical knowledge as a prerequisite for political understanding. This is apparent, for example, in statements such as: ‘So this historical learning is somehow almost a fundamental prerequisite for me ... to also understand this political aspect’ (AUL14), or: ‘To me, there is no civic education without historical knowledge’ (ML11). Another interviewee assumed that historical competences are needed before political competences are promoted (ML04). Overall, many of the interviewed teachers found it difficult to specify the differences or similarities between historical and political learning with reference to didactic principles. It is particularly striking that civic education was often equated with civic history. For example, it was argued in some interviews that the thematisation of Louis XIV (AUL20) or fascism (AUL23) simultaneously involves political learning processes. This does not take into account the fact that such lessons primarily offer a historical view of political events or actors in the past, observed and interpreted from a contemporary perspective.

Despite the numerous overlaps identified, neither the two subject perspectives nor their objectives can be equated. The central educational and teaching goal of the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education in Austria, namely to promote students’ consciousness regarding democracy and human rights, can only be realised if concrete learning opportunities encourage critical engagement with democratic values and processes and incorporate both historical and political skills. The views of the interviewed teachers outlined earlier ultimately highlight the challenges associated with combining different subject perspectives in one subject. One of the reasons for this is teacher training, in which neither the time resources nor the credit points are equalised to the additional subject perspectives in combined subjects as opposed to individual subjects. In the spirit of increasing economisation (Engartner, 2020; Obermaier, 2008) in German-speaking education systems, the merging of individual subjects into subject combinations is based on educational policy decisions which, however, have no consequences for teacher training. Accordingly, the curricula for the subject History and Civic Education in Austria are dominated by history compared with civic education.

### Democratic consciousness as a teaching and learning objective

To answer the second sub-question, the interview data were analysed with regard to the deductively derived categories of democracy, maturity and orientation. The focus here was on the teachers’ views of the learning objectives for the subject combination of history and civic education. In this context, the question whether references to strengthening democratic consciousness were made during the interviews was of particular interest. In some of the interviews, the importance of the normative dimension of democracy in the Austrian combination of subjects was mentioned. However, only a few participants explicitly formulated ‘education towards democratic understanding’ (AUL19) or ‘the value of democracy, human rights in systems in general’ (AUL23) as a central teaching and learning objective.

One teacher saw 'democracy as a way of life' as the overarching goal of the historical-political subject combination, linking this with the responsibility to 'actively stand up for it'. According to the interviewee, this also includes fundamental values such as 'creating an understanding for things that are different, also for things that are foreign, and learning to deal with prejudices' (ML01). In another interview, history was categorised as the 'most responsible subject' at the lower secondary, and this responsibility was justified with democracy education (ML17). A further participant made an indirect reference to democracy education by emphasising: 'My primary, overriding goal is to give the children the ability to act politically for the future' (ML04). They thereby addressed a central competence for promoting democratic consciousness that is otherwise rarely mentioned in connection with history lessons. This teacher explained what they mean in more detail:

Children, I want you to be able to take action, to know how you can change things, whether on a small or large scale. And how you can obtain information so that you can think critically, and that means thinking critically with your own thoughts and not with thoughts that others tell you ... the ability to act politically is actually the top priority for me. (ML04)

To this teacher, history lessons should primarily contribute to students' ability to 'make well-founded decisions' (ML04), for which they chiefly need critical thinking skills. Critical thinking and the ability to act politically are the prerequisites for making use of opportunities for democratic co-determination. This means that this respondent indirectly referred to maturity as the ability to make self-determined judgements. Similar to the curriculum, the term 'maturity' was hardly mentioned in the interviews, but there were isolated references to the capability for critical thinking, linked to the idea of involved and mature citizens as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. Another teacher cited critical faculty as a central goal of the subject combination of history and civic education, linking it to a sense of responsibility:

The realization that I am responsible. I am responsible ... for what happens in the world. As I said, the ability to criticize or reflect, the ability to self-reflect, to assume responsibility. (ML02)

Although maturity resonates implicitly as an objective in such statements, there were very few teachers who explicitly formulated it as an objective. One interviewee did point out that it was important to them to 'educate students to become mature citizens' (AUL05), tying this not just to the ability to reflect but also to the ability to judge and act. At this point in the interview, however, they were explicitly referring to civic education and not to historical learning or the subject combination. Another teacher mentioned maturity as a teaching and learning goal specifically in connection with historical-political learning: 'I would like for the [students] to be mature citizens in ten years or whatever; that would be the goal for me' (AUL03). A further teacher who specified maturity as a target perspective not only made reference to the curriculum but also derived consequences for lesson organisation:

What is in principle ... in the curriculum anyway, that is, the teaching of competences, which then leads to them [the students] being somehow mature themselves and then somehow being able to live out that maturity without the guidance of a teacher and obtain information themselves, check information, think critically, think reflectively ... This means that on the one hand it involves effort for students, but on the other hand it is also a different kind of teaching because they have to become active themselves, less passive and more active. (AUL01)

In contrast to maturity, there are significantly more examples in the interview data in which the question about the teaching and learning objective of the subject combination of history and civic education was answered with orientation in time and the social world. However, the question concerning the area of competence in which historical and political learning overlap produced extremely heterogeneous answers. Although only a handful of teachers identified historical orientation competence as an intersection, they did comment in great detail on its importance as a link between the two subject perspectives (for example, AUL13, AUL14, ML11, ML06). For example:

I think that orientation competence is also somehow an exciting link for the two subjects, because they are quite different ... it seems to me that in history, orientation competence ... somehow often more or less poses the question of what this has to do with me or what my opinion is. And ... in civic education [it] is somehow much more about one's own position and self-analysis, it seems to me. (ML06)

On the one hand, this statement clearly shows the participant's awareness that the subject combination is based on two different disciplines. On the other, they clearly differentiate between temporal orientation and social orientation. Another participant added the following:

If you think of these competence grids again, it's the orientation competence where everything actually comes together. Ultimately, they [the students] should find their way in our society, should also have the ability to scrutinize certain things, to reflect, to understand systems and perhaps also ask the right questions ... History benefits greatly from the fact that you actively think for yourself. And that's what history lessons should encourage, that you somehow ask questions that stir you and ... to find your way in society. That's the key task to me. (ML11)

In this quotation, the name of the subject is reduced to history, but instead of temporal orientation, it emphasises orientation in and participation in social processes. It contains points of contact with maturity in the sense of the ability to think for oneself, and therefore also with democratic learning.

Although in many other interviews historical orientation was not mentioned as a competence area in which the teaching and learning objectives of history and civic education are interlinked, the importance of references to present and current affairs was often pointed out. These passages can likewise be assigned to the aspect of orientation in time and the world. [Waltraud Schreiber \(2007\)](#) characterises relevance to the present as a central element of historical orientation, since historical cognisance should be related to the present and future. For a considerable number of the teachers interviewed, the reference to the present is essential for historical learning processes, as the following interview extract illustrates:

So I try not to cover any topic where I don't think there is a connection to the present. And ultimately it's about learning from the past in order to be better equipped for the present, to be able to learn from mistakes. (AUL21)

Another teacher saw the relevance of links to the present in preventing anti-democratic positions: 'if you are familiar with history, I think you are much more ... sensitized to the present ..., especially when it comes to populist speeches and so on' (ML04). What this means for the actual organisation of lessons is not described in the interview. From a history didactics perspective, the question whether or how students learn from history needs to be discussed in this context.

## Conclusion and discussion

[Edling et al. \(2025\)](#) describe the dynamics between historical and democratic consciousness as follows:

Without a temporal orientation that is sensitive to both continuities and discontinuities in people's meaning-making, there is a limited space for pluralism and democracy; democratic pluralism is hinged upon the aim of people working for a better future while recognising the past both as a resource and a restraint to their thoughts and actions in the present. (p. 4)

The Austrian curriculum for the subject History and Social Studies/Civic Education at the lower secondary level contains various points of reference for the fact that a critical awareness of history contributes to the development of responsible citizens capable of making judgements. Nevertheless, the subject combination is confronted with various challenges in both teaching practice and teacher training, which is reflected in the teachers' perspective. Even the theoretical discussion of the similarities and differences between history education, civic education and democracy education shows how controversial and complex the intersections of historical and democratic consciousness are. Ultimately, the question is what competences students need to be able to transfer democratic experiences made within the school environment or as part of historical learning processes to social processes, and thus to their living environment. In addition to the abilities, skills and willingness to engage in methodical historical thinking – and thus the ability to create meaning-making – this transfer also requires a critical and reflective examination of the democratic political system, which history lessons alone cannot achieve. Accordingly, [Ammerer et al. \(2020b\)](#) point out that the ability to take democratic action requires both conceptual or operational political knowledge and specialised informedness and a differentiated scientific knowledge that enables the resolution of complex social questions (p. 9). History does not provide clearly

transferable answers or maxims for action for the numerous challenges of the present (Bühl-Gramer, 2018). The past is not completely absorbed into the present and cannot be fully understood from the present perspective (Buck, 2017). The importance of historical orientation skills should by no means be questioned, but they alone do not seem sufficient to strengthen democratic convictions and values in the long term and enable mature participation in a democratic society. Rather, political judgement and action competence must also be taken into account in order to promote historically critical, mature citizens and the ability to orient oneself in time and society.

For learning processes at school, a combination of the two subject perspectives of history and civic education can therefore productively bridge the respective gaps and promote democratic consciousness in the long term. In the course of integrating civic education into the Austrian curriculum for history lessons, clear references to democratic values and human rights were ultimately established as a central educational and teaching goal up to and including the current version. However, analysis of the curriculum also clearly shows that the transferability of sometimes complex didactic principles and theories into a normative framework for teaching practice has its limits, since curricula are a control instrument with a limited scope that are also subject to educational policy regulations. Nevertheless, it should be noted, on the one hand, that the modular structure of 2016 for merging two subject perspectives into a single curriculum contributes to structural clarity. On the other hand, a consistent implementation of the subject combination would require assigning political competence areas alongside historical orientation competences to content in the historical-political overlap segment.

The challenges of combining history and civic education in Austria, which are evident from the curriculum analysis, are also reflected in the interviews with teachers at the lower secondary. Nevertheless, the combination is predominantly rated positively, with historical orientation competence and the creation of references to present and current affairs in particular assessed as beneficial for the development of democratic consciousness and other aspects.

The limitations of the collected data are mainly due to the fact that the interviews were not conducted specifically to answer the question of the extent of the subject's or the curriculum's contribution to students' democratic consciousness. However, the analysis showed that the deductive approach in particular was able to provide valuable initial insights into the question. Ultimately, lessons would need to be observed in order to make statements about how teachers deal with the requirements of the curriculum in their teaching. It might also be interesting for future studies to analyse in depth the transfer of knowledge and skills for understanding democratic processes to social reality. This would require an empirical impact research design.

## **Data and materials availability statement**

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## **Declarations and conflicts of interest**

### **Research ethics statement**

Not applicable to this article.

### **Consent for publication statement**

The author declares that the research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was obtained prior to publication.

### **Conflicts of interest statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest within this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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