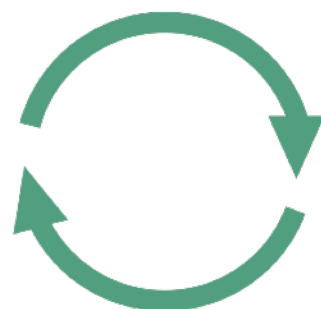


ROTATING STUDENT GOVERNMENT

A step-by-step guide
to increasing civic participation
in your school with rotation



DEMOCRACY
IN PRACTICE



About this Guide

Who is this Guide for?

This Guide is for educators and students who think leadership and civic education in their school could and should be better. It first introduces Rotation as an alternative to full-year terms of office in student government, and then explains how you can get started implementing this innovative practice in your school. If you are already familiar with Rotation and its advantages, feel free to skip the introduction and get right into the implementation!

Who created this Guide?

We are **Democracy In Practice**, a small non-profit dedicated to democratic experimentation, innovation, and capacity building. We have worked in high schools and elementary schools in Bolivia, experimenting with and developing innovative approaches to leadership and civic education, like the one highlighted in the Guide. Everything we share here comes from years of work directly with students and teachers.

Learn more about us and find more resources on our website, connect with us on social media, and let us know about your experience using this Guide!



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Introduction

Full-year terms of office limit participation

Student governments are typically formed toward the beginning of the school year in a single election, and their term of office typically lasts for the entire school year. Elections create many problems in a school context, as explained and addressed in our Guide on Student Government Lotteries. In this Guide, we take aim at the conventional practice of full-year terms. Maintaining the same few students in the student government for the entire school year creates a major problem: it restricts this rich civic educational experience to only a few students.

“I’d like to continue, but everyone should have the chance to enter the [student] government and lose their fear of speaking in public as I have.”

-8th grade student at the end of her 3-month term in her school’s student government

Full-year terms of office also risk discouraging the participation of those students who cannot or do not want to take on such a long commitment, but might involve themselves if required only 3 or 4 months. Additionally, given the age group, such a long commitment can result in student government members losing interest or burning out.

Rotation allows more students to participate

Rotation is a simple solution to the problem of full-year terms. Shortening terms of office to 1/2 or 1/3 of the school year can double or triple the number of students who get to be a part of the student government and develop leadership and civic skills. Toward the end of each shortened term, a new group of students is oriented and brought up to speed with the help of outgoing student government members, and the new students carry on the work.

In addition to increasing participation, rotation has a number of other advantages over full-year terms of office:

- Shorter term lengths lower the barrier to entry and encourage participation from students who cannot or do not want to assume a full-year time commitment (which may conflict with other attractive school activities and groups)
- Shorter term lengths decrease the chance that students in the student government lose interest or burn out
- Rotating new students into the student government brings new perspectives and fresh energy to meetings and initiatives

Note: We strongly recommend using Student Government Lotteries to form student governments instead of student elections. So, in this Guide we explain Rotation in the context of a school that is using Lotteries, although you could use and gain some benefit from Rotation even if your school continues to use standard elections. Find more information about Student Government Lotteries on our website.



Left: Outgoing student government members administering a Lottery to select their replacements after a 1-semester term of office.

Rotation allows more students to participate directly and keeps the experience of student government fresh and engaging.

Right: Two outgoing student government members (standing on far right) orienting newly selected students on different aspects of the student government, with one of our advisors (Raúl) beside them.

Peer learning can deepen the educational experience, and it is often more effective (i.e. students listen more attentively) than when oriented by a teacher alone.



Just be aware that Rotation can mean more work!

While Rotation has many advantages over full-year terms, be aware that doing it well usually requires more adult/educator support. Providing 2-3 times more students a rich educational experience means providing intensive orientation and capacity building 2-3 times during the same school year, instead of only once at the start of the year. It also means creating more certificates, photos, videos, etc. if you plan to provide these to students who finish their term of office.

Or, it may mean taking the time to develop a system in which outgoing students orient and teach incoming students, and in which the student government develops its own end-of-term materials. Either way, increasing the number of participating students will mean an increased workload and commitment.

Also keep in mind that conducting 2 or 3 Student Government Lotteries (or elections) during the school year will require more cooperation and collaboration from your school's administration and teachers. If you can provide or find the support needed, Rotation is a great way to improve your school's student government. If you can't, stick with full-year terms of office and look at some of our other Guides showcased on page 13 for different ways to improve your student government, such as Student Government Lotteries and Horizontal Teamwork.

Rotation Around the World

Rotation doesn't just have advantages for student governments, in fact the rotation of public office is an ancient practice that is still used in many innovative ways today. The ancient Athenians placed strict 1-year term limits on most public offices and did not allow anyone to hold the same office twice. Rotation is also central to the 'Allyu' system of governance traditional to many Andean communities in South America, as well as the 'Good Governance Councils' of the Zapatistas. Find an interactive map with examples of different innovative democratic practices on our website:

democracyinpractice.org/bigger-picture



Implementation

Ready to take action and improve leadership and civic education in your school? The following pages provide essential information you need to successfully incorporate Rotation in your student government. We'll address important aspects related to timing, explain the resources you might need, and lay out each step in the process. This will give you a template to follow to get started, but be sure to adapt your approach to fit your school as well as the resources and support available to you. Also be sure to change your approach over time as you see what works and doesn't work in your unique context.

Timing

Your options: You can shorten terms of office to virtually any length. You could set terms at a specific number of weeks or months, or have them correspond to school semesters, or seasons - there are many options!

We recommend: 1/2-year terms

Why? 1/2-year terms are great if you are just starting out with your student government or you are planning to experiment with other significant changes, such as introducing Student Government Lotteries. Having two groups in the student government during the same school year doubles student participation and allows you to get some experience with Rotation. If you find that orienting and building the capacity of 2 groups in the same year is easy, then we recommend moving to terms that are about 3 months long. We have experimented with half-year as well as 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-month terms with different ages and in different school settings, and have found 3 months as a sweet spot to increase participation and allow students to have a full experience that finishes before some start to lose interest or burn out.

Keep in mind: Our recommendation is based on our work with high school students, as well as two years of work with 4th-8th grade students. We have no experience with younger students, but would love to hear from you if you do!



Resources

You definitely need:

- At least one educator willing to provide orientation and capacity building throughout the school year and not just at the beginning, OR multiple educators who can rotate this responsibility
- Commitment from your school administration and teachers to provide the time and be present for more than one Student Government Lottery during the school year

You might need: More certificates, photos, videos, etc. if these are given to students upon finishing their term of office.



Teachers participating in a lottery to decide the order in which they will rotate advising the student government



Steps

-
1. Gain support and buy-in
 2. Decide how the Rotation will work
 3. Secure accessible spaces, dates, and times
 4. Explain & implement
 5. Evaluate & adjust
-

1. Gain support and buy-in

Meet with school leadership, teachers, and students to present the idea of Rotating student participation in student governments and explain the need to shorten term lengths. If possible, inform parents/guardians about the change. Note that we provide short videos on our website that you can use in your presentation.

***Keep in mind:** Invite them to share questions and concerns, offer ideas, and voice support for the initiative. If you are wanting to implement other related innovations, like Student Government Lotteries and Horizontal Teamwork, discuss these changes with school leadership, teachers, and students as well. See page 13 for links to step-by-step Guides like this one that explain how you can randomly select your student government to make it more inclusive, and how to foster horizontal teamwork to create a richer educational experience.*

2. Decide how the Rotation will work

If possible, discuss with students and teachers how the Rotation will work. Propose a specific term length and number of rotations in the school year and explain your reasoning, but invite school leadership, teachers, and students to ask questions, express concerns, and voice support for your proposal. Change your proposal if need-be.

3. Secure accessible spaces, dates, and times

Once the school is generally in agreement with rotating student participation in the student government, work with teachers and administrators to settle on dates, times, and location(s) for the Lotteries to prevent scheduling conflicts with other parts of the school curriculum. If time with the whole school is difficult to obtain, the first Lottery (or election) could be with the whole school in a large space, and the second and/or third could be administered in each classroom, as seen below. Try to get as many teachers and staff as possible to commit to being present and assisting with the Lotteries.



Outgoing student government members conducting a Lottery in a classroom to select a female representative

4. Explain & implement

Explain the Rotation to all students before forming the student government at the start of the year, so that they all understand when they will have another chance if they are not selected in the first Lottery. Then conduct the different Lotteries, orient each group, and connect with parents/guardians as explained in our Guide for Student Government Lotteries.

5. Evaluate & adjust

Evaluate the Rotation and its effects on student government toward the end of the school year. What worked well? What didn't? Were term lengths long enough for students in the student government to have a full and rich experience? Or did students' time expire before they could accomplish anything worthwhile? Did some students lose interest or burn out toward the end of their term? Were many more students eager to participate than were given the opportunity? Answering these types of questions with students who participated in the student government (and some that didn't!) can help you understand if term lengths are correctly set, or if they should be lengthened or shorted. Once you evaluate and reach some conclusions, make necessary adjustments before starting up the process the following school year.

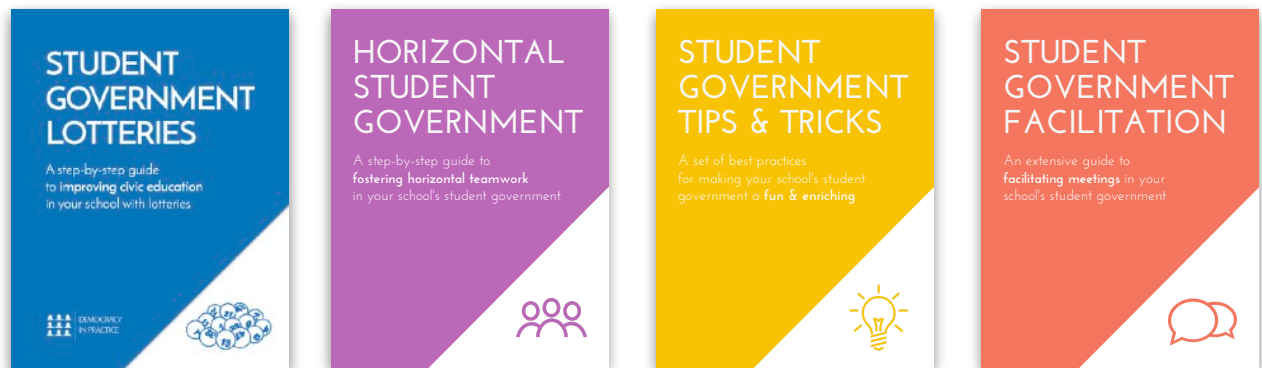
Conclusion

Our goal is that having read this Guide, you're ready to start sharing these ideas and finding others in your school who want to make student government more participative. On the following page, you can also find information about other Guides that will help you improve other aspects of your student government. Whether you're an educator or a student, with enough time, creativity, and hard work, you can gather the support needed to rotate participation in your school's student government and provide leadership and civic education to more students!

So, what are you waiting for?

Other related Guides

While the focus in this Guide is on Rotation, we typically combine Rotation with two other innovations previously mentioned: Student Government Lotteries and Horizontal Teamwork. On the 'Resources' Page of our website, we have step-by-step guides like this one, as well as how-to videos for incorporating these and other student government innovations: www.democracyinpractice.org/resources/



But even if your school only incorporates Rotation and changes nothing else about its student government program, it will make leadership and civic education far more participative!

Sharing this Guide

Please feel free to share this Guide, any other resources we provide, and the ideas they contain. After all, we want to get the word out! We only ask that you credit our work.

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