



## World Forum for Democracy

### “Democracy: A New Hope?”

#### CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS from the 10<sup>th</sup> Edition

Policymakers, activists, practitioners, and researchers shared their thoughts on the causes and consequences of democratic decline and how it can be reversed at the *10th World Forum for Democracy*, which took place in Strasbourg, France, between 7-9 November 2022. 900 participants from 80 countries exchanged ideas and experiences on how to create new possibilities today to enhance a democratic future.

#### Facts & Trends

We lack an agreed-upon definition of what democracy means, and researchers have come up with a large number of ways to think of - and measure - democratic performance. While there is scientific consensus on the causes of climate change and the steps that we need to take to limit its consequences, we are still far from understanding the roots of the current malaise and, more importantly, how to fix it.

The speakers and the participants of this 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the World Forum for Democracy helped to advance our understanding on what the challenges for democracy are and inspire new research and innovation projects. They provided countless ideas on what can be done to secure a democratic future for us all, a summary of which is listed below.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

##### To national governments:

- **Make citizen direct participation easier** by updating citizen initiative procedures in such a way that digital signatures can be used and by lowering the number of signatures required for an initiative to enter the parliamentary debate would.
- **Regulate the digital space** without censoring and by protecting citizen rights and privacy, protecting the public interest in the digital sphere from both private corporations and public actors.
- Use **open-source systems** for all e-democracy tools, as well as allow the independent analysis of open data. Making spending data available fosters transparency and prevents corruption practices. Relatedly, sharing the information and scientific advice used to make policy decisions fosters transparency and accountability.

## To regional and local authorities:

- Work on the institutionalisation of **citizen assemblies**, moving from the experimental stage to the becoming a true tool used by decision takers. For deliberative processes to be successful, they need to foster in depth dialogue, be transparent and ensure that the outcome will have an impact. Youth participation in the public decision-making processes could be improved through additional **city youth councils**.
- **Local and independent press** is valuable for democracy. Therefore, local and independent media should be supported, while incentivising the use of their local languages to make sure that all communities have access to political news.
- Implement **training programmes to prevent discrimination** (e.g., to prevent anti-Roma attitudes or prejudice against religious minorities), which could be carried out in both schools and community centres. Relatedly, governments might foster inclusion of alternative narratives in the **education of history** and the discussion of historical memories and narratives from different groups in society and other countries.

## To International Organisations including the Council of Europe:

- **Track democratic performance** with public indicators so that countries can learn from one another. Benchmarking among similar countries (instead of modelling western countries exclusively) can also promote democratic development in other regions of the world.
- **Promote gender equality** and granting access to education to girls around the world should be a priority in the face of current regression in some countries.
- **Reduce poverty** and ensuring the coverage of basic needs is a necessary step to foster democratisation. At the same time, more **financial support** is needed for citizen-led initiatives on human rights and civil and political rights.

## To Political parties:

- Parties should be more flexible regarding the types of participation and membership, and embrace the new opportunities that technology offers to open themselves to the electorate.

## To the civic society:

- **Strengthening a democratic culture.** Strengthening democracy does not only mean transforming the system, but also making sure that existing rights are exercised. For many citizens, the concepts of Human Rights, and the functioning of their national democracy are not always well understood or known. Spreading civic knowledge and making citizens aware of their rights is a powerful tool.
- **Using and sharing data.** Together with journalists, citizens should take advantage of the large amount of data made accessible by the transparency laws that are increasingly being passed in many countries. Scrutinising these public data is crucial

to keep politicians accountable and fight corruption. Similarly, citizen crowdsourcing of information on election days and citizen parallel monitoring of *offline* elections

- **Cultural diversity.** The inclusion of different groups of the population needs to be a crucial part of any civic activity, which should aim at creating of spaces for underrepresented communities.

### To the private sector:

- **Digital companies** should prevent the use of bots to alter public debates. They also have a responsibility regarding the information shared in their platforms and need to ensure they are not used to disseminate hateful messages or fake news.
- **Mass media** should democratise the agenda-setting process by allowing citizens to suggest topics and by making sure that politicians discuss and express their views on the issues that citizens raise.
- **Economic inequality** is not only a matter that governments can tackle through income redistribution. Private companies should rely fair trade policies and pay equity audits to prevent the widening of income and wealth gaps.

## CONCLUSIONS:

This report aims at identifying the main topics of the latest Forum and the most often shared ideas that can apply to different cultural and political contexts. While many of the initiatives presented in the Forum and the talks held are focused on a given country or local context, this summary will not refer to any specific cases but try to find commonalities between the experiences and thoughts presented through the event. These ideas are grouped around the main pillars that have dominated this edition: political reforms, diversity, technology, education. Granted, these are not compartmentalised spheres, neither they exhaust the vast range of topics the participants addressed. Yet, they provide a structure to articulate the output of this Forum in a way that they can be remembered and put into action.

### 1. Political Reforms: A way towards inclusive decision-making and participatory democracy

Democracy is a popular idea, but citizens are frustrated with how it is working. The notion of political reforms is often mobilised but reaching qualified majorities to execute them has proved difficult in the polarised societies we live in. Political reforms, however, can be incentivised by tracking democratic performance in such a way that countries can learn from one another. Benchmarking among similar countries (instead of modelling western countries exclusively) can also promote democratic development in other regions of the world.

Some systemic issues related to the political systems were examined, like the increasing wealth inequality and what it means for social rights, or the technocratic trends amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, but no clear solutions were proposed. Nevertheless, there were fruitful discussions around some political reforms to complement representative democracy with deliberative mechanisms, to fight corruption, to restore political trust and participation, and to promote democratic governance in other countries.

**Deliberative democracy.** Participation has probably been one of the most used words in Strasbourg during the WFD 2022. Against a backdrop of increasing frustration about representative democracy, a burgeoning field of research and practice suggests new mechanisms to support it. The hope is that representative democracy assisted and supported by participatory democracy, including deliberative, seems to be a decision-taking approach that is better than could better represent the diversity of a society and its opinions and improve overall democratic culture.

Participants discussed how deliberative practices like citizen assemblies can be institutionalized, from the experimental stage to becoming a true tool used by decision takers. The experiences shared included both successes as well as shortcomings. Shortage of time and a wide range of issues to be discussed can limit deliberation to be “just” a dialogue without a clear focus. The lack of time can also end up giving experts a dominant role. For deliberative processes to be successful, they need to foster in depth dialogue, be transparent and ensure that the outcome will have an impact.

**Low trust, low turnout.** Political trust, particularly on political parties, is a matter of concern. To invigorate themselves, political parties should be more flexible regarding the types of

participation and membership, and embrace the new opportunities that technology offers to open themselves to the electorate. Such efforts could help increase turnout in elections, which has been continuously declining in many countries. Some discussions were held through the Forum on the need to institute compulsory voting and the extent to which that would result in more representative elections. Yet, participants tended to prioritise the reestablishment of trust as the best way to incentives electoral participation.

Related to the voting system, it was also pointed out that referendums or elections with dichotomous choices create winners and losers. Referendum results are not always enough to channel citizen demands, as there is a myriad of options between and within dichotomous options that need to be articulated and negotiated after the vote. Thus, there was a call to find efficient ways to incorporate input from citizens. Alternative voting mechanisms (e.g., plurality voting) that go beyond binary systems offer new ways of thinking of electoral processes.

**Corruption.** Corruption not only breaks the law, but it also distorts democratic governance. In order to oppose corruption, the rule of law alone is not enough: a democratic culture shift is needed so that the whole society condemns it. The effective implementation of the law and sufficient financial and human resources for the judiciary are crucial, but these need to be complemented by efforts from both authorities and civil society to foster cultural changes that rend corruption inexcusable. Journalists and the media also play a crucial role, and therefore need to be protected from external pressures. As pointed out earlier, technology fosters transparency and thus makes the fight against corruption easier. Thanks to open government initiatives, unprecedented data on public spending and activities can be accessed online.

**International challenges.** National politics are increasingly dependent on the international context, and therefore the promotion of democracy needs to tackle both the national and the supranational level. For example, preventing international prosecution of political activists and supporting their legal battles (while providing them with financial and psychological support) requires efforts at the local, national, and international level.

The war in Ukraine and the situation in Afghanistan have been discussed repeatedly through the Forum, and these dialogues have often raised the question on how the international community can defend democratic regimes internationally. In addition to the geopolitical tensions that constrain state actions, the use of conditionality and sanctions was both defended and questioned by Forum participants

## 2. Diversity: a plurality of voices

Ensuring that all voices are heard, or more generally, promoting diversity, was the fourth area that drew the attention of participants and, particularly, that of youth delegates. The protection of minorities is a cornerstone of democratic governance, but it is not enough. More needs to be done to include marginalised groups into the political process, and this includes migrants, racialised people, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community or individuals experiencing homelessness. In addition to these, differences between regions of

the world were appreciated during the WFD 2022, noting that different contexts and cultures need different approaches to foster democracy. Yet, some cross-cutting challenges apply to all countries and surfaced recurrently in most discussions.

**Youth.** The lack of representation of young citizens in mainstream politics and decision-making processes was deplored. As a consequence, there were calls to ensure youth participation in the public decision-making processes through city youth councils and youth organisations that create safe spaces for youth participation.

As noted by the Youth Rapporteur, Ijeoma Okereke-Adagba, forty-eight youth delegates from around the world participated in the WFD 2022. During the Laboratories and Forum Talks, fifteen youth delegates served as discussants and one as the moderator. These include human rights activists, students, journalists, politicians, youth activists and content creators who are using their voices and platforms to make a difference in their societies. Their interventions, Okereke-Adagba reported, “amplified the voices of those who are too often excluded from these conversations discussed how both local and international actors can ensure that all groups and individuals benefit from equal opportunities; whether existing tools and mechanisms are enough to eliminate social exclusion; and the solutions to create a system that will be flexible to adapt to the challenges that the future might have in store for us”. Many initiatives were presented in the Lab sessions with the aim to include the younger generation into the political process, connecting them with representatives, through training projects or via digital tools.

**Gender.** This WFD had a Gender Rapporteur, Sylvie Bollini, who made sure that gender balance in the Forum itself as well as in relation to the topics discussed through the Forum. She highlighted that anti-discrimination laws and policies do not seem to work and female representation in politics increases (very) slowly. Moreover, new forms of democracy mean new challenges for gender equality: from imbalances in access to e-democracy, to gender biases in algorithms used in artificial intelligence.

As regard the Forum itself, the Gender Rapporteur appreciated the notable advances in gender balance in terms of participation to the Forum, although she claimed that in some panels there still was lack of female participants and, in several others, the gender perspective was neglected.

**Hate Speech and discrimination.** The issue of polarisation, segregation and echo chambers emerged recurrently in different panels dealing with a wide range of topics. One of the most harmful consequences of these processes is the enabling of hate speech, particularly online. Several initiatives were presented during the Forum implementing different ways to combat online and offline hate speech and providing training on media literacy to distinguish information from fake news targeting marginalised groups.

In addition to these recent challenges at the heart of some innovative initiatives, other organisations shared that they face resistance when trying to discuss the rights of the LGBTQ+ community in schools, dampening the implementation of the civic education programmes that we so desperately need (see section 3).

**Plurality of voices.** As discussed, when referring to the education of history, raising awareness of historical narratives from minority groups whose stories are often missing from historical accounts but are vital in enhancing our understanding of both the past and present. Some projects focused on the collection of diverse personal stories today, particularly in contexts lacking written records. The dissemination of these personal stories fosters understanding of the past and current experiences of others without falling into the process of “othering”. Such recollection of personal narratives does not need to be by interviews only, but also by creating spaces where underrepresented communities can tell their stories by artistic means.

**Social inequality.** Increasing inequalities are resulting into the segregation of spaces between social classes, with the already mentioned risks of division and polarisation. Additionally, economic inequalities prevent equitable access to quality education and hinder the development of a political culture for individuals. Economic hardship is disproportionate common among minorities, and therefore adds up to their exclusion from debate spaces and political participations and decision-making. On the opposite side of the inequality spectrum, great concentration of resources makes it easier for wealthy citizens to influence or exert political power, posing a threat to representativeness. Lastly, it was highlighted that in extremely unequal (and impoverished) societies citizen look for security above all, to the detriment of their civil rights or the improvement of democratic governance, which become second-order priorities.

**The cumulation of disadvantages.** To conclude this section, it is important to refer to the notion of intersectionality. The different forms of discrimination and oppression discussed above intersect and overlap, creating complex systems of inequality that impact people's lives and experiences in democratic processes and life in unique ways. This can include factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination. When trying to include marginalised groups into social and political processes, these factors cannot be understood in isolation from one another.

### 3. Technology: A new E-democracy for a digital world

We live in a digital age with institutions that were created in a completely different world, and they are struggling to catch up with the increasingly fast pace of changes that technological innovation bring forward. Technology is a double-edged sword: while it has presented new challenges for our democracies, it is also being used to educate, spread political awareness, and increase democratic engagement. The potential of the internet was demonstrated by most participants in the Forum's Labs, who rely on digital tools to strengthen democracy. However, participants also reflected on the myriad of ways in which the internet has changed our lives, and what it means for democratic governance. In what follows, some of these ideas are presented.

### 4. Online Governance

**E-democracy.** New digital tools should be used to reverse the downward trend of citizen trust in political institutions. The use of open-source systems for all e-democracy tools, as well as the availability of open data for independent analysis, can result in more citizen engagement

and empowerment, enhanced accountability of elected representatives, and more direct participation, both in deliberative processes as well as electoral ones. Electronic voting has the potential to be used in both ordinary elections as well as in extraordinary circumstances, like times of conflict.

While electronic voting is already a reality in some countries, there is much to be done to ensure a reliable and trustworthy electoral process online. However, e-voting systems are vulnerable to interference from hackers, and it remains to be seen if transparency and open-source data can effectively deter them on a scalable level. In addition to robust to external threats, electronic voting systems needs to be accessible and transparent. Lastly, in addition to the digitalisation of votes, technology also enables citizen crowdsourcing of information on election days and citizen parallel monitoring of *offline* elections.

**Online inputs for offline legislation.** Several initiatives presented in this edition used online citizen initiatives and petitions to bring citizens and policymakers closer. For example, citizens' legislative initiatives can be channelled through online platforms, making it easier for citizens to elevate their concerns to their representatives (compared to its traditional offline format requiring paper signatures). For this to succeed, regulations are required to guarantee that online initiatives are debated in parliament if they reach the support of a given number of citizens. Similarly, online citizen consultations can help elaborate and track citizen preferences on a given topic. Moreover, a project asked citizens what should be the regional or country priorities and then ensuring that politicians and the media comment on them democratises the agenda setting process. Citizens not only express their opinions on the topics that political parties or mainstream media select (top-down) but reverse the agenda-setting process by pushing the media and political leaders to position themselves on the topics that citizens themselves deem relevant (bottom-up).

**Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the digital transformation of many activities, including democratic innovation projects that had to adapt to restrictions on in-person gatherings. Some of these online initiatives have survived the pandemic and have become permanent digital spaces for citizen consultation and participation. However, not all technological solutions developed during the pandemic have proven to be sustainable in the long term, and many organizations have returned to traditional, in-person methods of operation.

## 5. Online Media

**Immediate news.** News consumption is faster than ever in the digital age. We don't need to wait for the radio or TV news at a given time of the day, but just need to take our phones out of our pockets and check our preferred social media platform to get the latest news. This has transformed the way in which governments and other democratic institutions communicate and, ultimately, act. We expect faster reactions from our representatives, but we have yet to articulate ways for faster governance that match the speed of the new news circuit. Speeding up decision-making risks sound and responsive policies; we therefore need to either set the right expectations about the time required to ensure good democratic governance, or

alternatively, create new ways to involve expert and citizen insights into the policy making process in a more agile way.

**Independent news.** The availability of easy and fast ways to disseminate information has not only impacted the institutional side of communication but also the media landscape. New platforms have opened a window of opportunity for independent media and citizen journalism, which are in a better position to challenge dominant narratives and frameworks. Such initiatives strengthen freedom of information and enrich the media landscape, often constrained by either ownership concentration or political actors. This is crucial at a time where freedom of press is under pressure, with increased prosecution of and violence towards journalists around the world.

**Social Media.** Just like citizen journalism, social media has given voice to more citizens and has terminated the unidirectional flow of information from traditional media to a passive audience. The democratisation of information flows has it easier for anyone to participate in public debates, but also for anyone to manipulate them, not only by disseminating fake news but also by using *bot armies*.

Despite its apparent openness, the digital space has generated a tremendously unbalanced power dynamic, with powerful non-state actors like private companies that can buy bots (that is, create false automatized social network profiles that further disseminate political messages). More importantly, these powerful actors (be it big corporations or individual millionaires) can also set the rules of private platforms that have become public *agoras*.

A main challenge for legislators is to find the right balance to regulate digital communication without censoring and protecting users' privacy. However, authoritarian governments can also use digital technologies in their favour, as denounced by researchers are already studying and tracking *digital authoritarianism*, focusing on four: information operation, mass surveillance and censorship. Therefore, regulation needs be constantly updated to protect the public interest in this ever-changing environment, from both private and public actors that can use digital tools against the interests of citizens.

**Digital eco-chambers.** The penetration of internet has brought about both the widespread use of social media and the fragmentation of the media landscape, with a large number of new online media in a wide range of formats (digital newspapers, YouTube channels, video streaming, podcasts, etc.). This new universe of possibilities has meant that we can choose who to connect with, and where to get the information from, and in both cases, we tend to follow the profiles and news sources that align with our (political) views, immersing ourselves in echo-chambers of people who think alike. These digital bubbles limit the diversity of opinions people is exposed to, and thus have adverse effects on their open-mindedness, and more generally, the democratic debate, and a healthy public sphere, which becomes highly polarised as a result. A number of ideas in the education and diversity section discuss avenues for intervention to depolarise societies and to break eco-chambers down.

## 6. Education. Fostering democracy literacy and competences for democratic citizenship

For democracy to function, we need informed and educated citizens. But how do we educate for democracy? We need to raise awareness of one's rights, enhance citizen responsibility and empowerment, disseminate democratic values. Education never ends and it does not always need to be institutionalized: cross-generational exchanges and dialogue across partisan, ethnic, or religious divides can continue to teach us through our lives.

**Dissatisfied but democrats.** Citizens around the world are more dissatisfied with democracy today than they were some decades ago. While dissatisfaction with the current functioning of democratic institutions does not mean giving up on democracy, dissatisfied citizens can turn their back to mainstream parties and vote for parties that challenge minority rights and other core principles of democratic governance. Thus, dissatisfaction with democracy is, albeit indirectly, a threat to democracy. Education can prevent citizens from embracing anti-democratic values as a reaction to their frustration, while empowering them to engage in politics to make a positive change.

In addition to informed citizens, democratic governance requires trained leaders. Unfortunately, economic hardship, corruption, and insecurity and even war force young people out of their local communities or countries. An additional challenge many countries in such situations end up facing is that of so-called brain drains. To cope with this, some initiatives focus on training and providing political education for young citizens, with the aim of support the next generation of political leaders.

**Better informed citizens.** Democracy needs informed citizens, and as we have discussed in the previous section, technology opens new opportunities to be constantly informed. Yet, in some contexts, citizens do not know how their political system works and might not even be aware of their own rights. The winner of the Democracy Innovation Award 2022 addresses precisely this issue. The Justice Code Foundation Trust in Zimbabwe has been awarded the award for its human rights remedy application, *Astrea Justice*. This innovative solution helps to ensure that citizens' rights are protected and promoted and provides education and information on legal rights such as the right to administrative justice, the right to vote, demonstrate, and petition, and the right to equality before the law. It also provides information on the rights of arrested individuals and personal security, and is available in three local languages: Shona, English, and Ndebele.

**Education for all.** One of the challenges of (democratic) education is that of demographic heterogeneity. Forum participants referred repeatedly to the need to ensure that education is available in different languages and using plain writing. A way to ensure that information is accessible to all is to ensure that complex concepts are explained from scratch, without assuming previous knowledge or using complex vocabulary. Proof of how important this is the popularity of "explainer" videos on the internet, which clarify how political institutions function and provide the necessary context to understand the political debates of the moment. We have seen several initiatives taking this approach, providing civic education both online and offline. In that regard, participants emphasised the importance of taking the

information to where the citizens already are (local communities, social networks, WhatsApp, etc).

**Learning from the past.** The teaching of history in the public sphere often fails to acknowledge and include alternative perspectives, instead prioritizing a dominant and exclusive narrative. To build pluralistic, democratic societies, it is important to introduce multiple perspectives into our collective history through the sharing of diverse experiences. Cultural institutions such as museums and folk traditions like storytelling can facilitate this process of inclusivity. However, in order to balance the need for recognition of difference and plurality with the requirement for a certain degree of consensus within a political community, it may be necessary to simplify academic history-writing for the purpose of education. This can be achieved through the inclusion of alternative narratives in history classes and the discussion of historical memories and narratives from different groups in society and other countries.

**Segregation in education systems.** Education does not need to be *on* democratic values to create improve the public sphere. The very context in which education takes place is important and can help bringing societies together. Ending segregated education is crucial to build more cohesive societies and prevent more division and polarisation, particularly in contexts of high national or ethnic heterogeneity. Relatedly, it is important that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are not isolated from one another. In addition to bringing students together in the classroom, this Forum has featured examples of training programmes to explicitly prevent discrimination –e.g., training to prevent anti-Roma attitudes and Islamophobia- which could be implemented in both schools and community centres.

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