

Democracy requires the critical engagement of practitioners and experts alike if it is to thrive in these challenging times

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By Democratic Audit UK

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In a recent special edition of the journal *Global Policy* entitled “[Changing the European Debate: A Rollback of Democracy](#)”, contributors tackled key questions about the immediate challenges that democracy, both at the national and international level, face. **Helmut K. Anheier** looks at some potential problems to the broad issues that democracy faces in an age characterised by what might be described as a global ‘hollowing out’ of democracy.



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Recent developments in a number of European countries, but also in the United States, have given rise to serious concerns about the current state of democracy generally. The erosion of trust in government and in established parties, the rise of (nationalist) populist movements and parties, lower voter turnout, and new forms of political engagement, the empowerment of executive branches – all these factors pose growing challenges to the future prospects of democracy.

We might indeed witness what the [late Peter Mair](#) termed the “hollowing out” of Western democracies – an increasing “anti-political” sentiment from citizens and politicians alike. Other observers diagnose a “rollback” of democracy, a backsliding into somewhat semi-authoritarian practices. However labelled, democracy, it appears, seems stalled in most, even retreating in some, and progressing a very few countries. What are the implications of such findings?

The most important lesson is probably that these developments must be set into context – geographically as well as historically. First of all, while the erosion of trust in established democratic institutions is indeed a widespread, even transatlantic phenomenon, the degree to which a “hollowing out” or “rollback” of democracy takes place varies across countries and regions.

Second, the worrisome developments, in particular the erosion of trust in established democratic institutions, have

different origins. They are driven by multidimensional, highly interwoven processes, which might be hard to disentangle across cases, if at all. In other words, they are as much more deep-seated, and not only a product of recent events and developments. This makes the “democracy problem” a rather complex one. While such problems might prove difficult to solve, they can nonetheless be addressed. They require, to be sure, patience, careful analyses and critical discussions.

What can be done?

The question arises as to which structures and practices have to be changed to strengthen public participation and to enhance the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the medium and long term, and at what levels? There is no one-size-fits all solution. Instead, any solution requires a comprehensive approach tailored to national and regional needs and political agendas. Something new is needed, it seems.

One way forward is to better clarify what we mean by democracy and democratic practices in the first place. A democratic order must not be defined by its existing procedures and political institutions – elections, referenda, parties, parliaments – since they are always in flux, but by its very purpose: collective self-determination. Each historical time requires different answers to achieve that goal, given prevailing social, economic, technological conditions. Underpinning concepts such as “equality”, “freedom” and “representation” *could* and maybe *should* be imagined differently in the 21st century.

Another set of more medium-term suggestions points to a strengthening of civil society and a greater participation of the electorate in political processes and decisions. Suggestions include greater NGO involvement, more use of referenda and forms of deliberative democracy, and new rights for citizens to contest executive decisions (“right to challenge”) to allow for the accommodation of a wider range of political preferences.

What such policy recommendations share is the promotion of a more inclusive concept of democracy, and the notion that popular involvement should not be restricted to voting alone. The solutions aim at enhancing legitimacy and responsiveness of democratic systems through more participatory channels and ways of inclusion. The goal here is to empower “the people”, by giving them a greater voice in multiple processes as well as ways and means.

Other proposals target the efficacy, accountability and transparency of governance at regional, the national and the local levels. Ideas revolve around adding a social accountability component to decisions and increasing the “watchdog” function of different political institutions to safeguard certain political standards and rights. Such a rights-based approach empowers the rights-holder. It seeks to strengthen institutions on the European Union (EU)-level and the member state level to uphold the rule of law.

Of course, these measures are far from exhaustive and exclusive. Moreover, they are no guarantee against democratic backsliding or a “hollowing out” of Western democracies. By contrast, a range of alternative strategies and measures might be relevant and warrant future analysis:

Technological innovations, for example, offer another potential mean to engage citizens. Social media lower the cost of communication and allow for more interactive approaches with a wider public. A more digitally-empowered civil society could help re-connect citizens to political institutions, processes and enhance decision-making. With the right platforms and know-how, digital technologies could bring more voices to the political arena, and across different levels.

Another possibility to counter the distrust in established democratic institutions is the reform of organizations. Distrust in parties, for example, could be countered by internal party reforms that allow for more flexibility such as intra-party alliances. In other words, existing parties could arrange for caucuses, political wings, and support organizations in more systematic ways such as to counteract the possibility of technocratic and populist majorities and elites.

Overall, parties should remember they are often the outcome of political and social movements, and that they rest

on a lived connection to civil society. They are social creatures that require legitimacy beyond their actual or potential success at the ballot box. By being open and re-rooted at different levels, parties would add voice to civil society and thereby become more responsive to different and changing demands.

Résumé: The future prospects for democracy

While there was probably never a “Gilded Age” of democracy, there are without doubt better and worse times for democracy, just as there are some developments that give rise to hope or concern. Yet, overall, it seems that democracy as a normative order seems to be not in acute danger, however defined. And, yet, public content with the performance of democracy is declining on both sides of the Atlantic. This is alarming in its long-term consequences.

A well-performing democracy requires ‘work’, a certain stewardship: it requires periodic, if not constant, renewal and a persistence in asking questions that “no-one dares to ask”, as Ralf Dahrendorf so aptly put it when pointing to the role of the intellectuals, and, in the context of democracy, national and transnational elites. As such, democracy requires the critical engagement of practitioners and experts alike.

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