
The practice of democracy

A selection of civic engagement initiatives



STUDY

EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

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Members' Research Service
PE 651.970 – June 2020

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A selection of civic engagement initiatives

This study is part of the 'Re-thinking democracy' series, launched in December 2019 and devoted to analysing current and future challenges facing direct and representative democracy. The study describes current challenges to democratic principles and infrastructure across the world. It then explores a selection of participatory initiatives run by local, national and supranational administrations. In doing so, the study identifies three trends that are driving innovation in democratic participation, as well as the key risks that threaten the success of participatory initiatives. In the concluding section, the study focuses on the European Union, and current attempts to foster transparency and inclusiveness in decision-making in the light of the preceding discussion.

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This paper has been drawn up by the Members' Research Service, within the Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services (EPRS) of the Secretariat of the European Parliament.

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LINGUISTIC VERSIONS

Original: EN

Manuscript completed in June 2020.

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PE651.970

ISBN: 978-92-846-6823-6

DOI:10.2861/73706

CAT: QA-03-20-398-EN-N

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Executive summary

Public powers are currently facing extraordinary challenges, from finding ways to revive economic growth without damaging the environment, to managing a global health crisis, combating inequality and securing peace. In the coming decades, public regulators, and with them academics, civil society actors and corporate powers, will confront another dilemma that is fast becoming a clear and present challenge. This is whether to protect the current structures of democratic governance, despite the widespread perception of their inefficiency, or adapt them to fast-changing scenarios (but, in doing so, take the risk of further weakening democracy).

The picture is blurred, with diverging trends. On the one hand, the classic interest-representation model is under strain. Low voter turnouts, rising populist (or anti-establishment) political movements and widespread discontent towards public institutions are stress-testing the foundations of democratic systems. Democracy, ever-louder voices argue, is a mere chimera, and citizens have little meaningful impact on the public decision-making process. Therefore, critics suggest, alternatives to the democratic model must be considered if countries are to navigate future challenges. However, the reality is more complex. Indeed, the decay of democratic values is unambiguously rejected by the birth of new grassroots movements, evidenced by record-speed civic mobilisation (especially among the young) and sustained by widespread street protest. Examined more closely, these events show that global demand for participation is alive and kicking.

The clash between these two opposing trends raises a number of questions that policy-makers and analysts must answer. First, will new, hybrid, forms of democratic participation replace classic representation systems? Second, amid transformative processes, how will power-roles be redistributed? A third set of questions looks at what is driving the transformation of democratic systems. As the venues of political discussion and interaction move from town halls and meeting rooms to online forums, it becomes critical to understand whether innovative democratic practices will be implemented almost exclusively through impersonal, ascetic, digital platforms; or, whether civic engagement will still be nurtured through in-person, local forums built to encourage debate.

This study begins by looking at the latest developments in the academic and institutional debates on democratic participation and civic engagement. Contributing to the crisis of traditional democratic models are political apathy and declining trust in political institutions, changes in methods of producing and sharing knowledge, and the pervasive nature of technology. How are public institutions reacting to these disruptive changes? The central part of this study examines a sample of initiatives trialled by public administrations (local, national and supranational) to engage citizens in policy-making. These initiatives are categorised by three criteria: first, the depth and complexity of cooperation between public structures and private actors; second, the design of procedures and structures of participation; and, third, the level of politicisation of the consultations, as well as the attractiveness of certain topics compared with others.

This analysis is intended to contribute to the on-going debate on the democratisation of the European Union (EU). The planned Conference on the Future of Europe, the recent reform of the European Citizens' Initiative, and on-going debates on how to improve the transparency of EU decision-making are all designed to revive the civic spirit of the European public. These efforts notwithstanding, severe political, economic and societal challenges are jeopardising the very ideological foundations of the Union. The on-going coronavirus pandemic has placed the EU's effectiveness under scrutiny once again. By appraising and applying methods tested by public sector institutions to engage citizens in policy-making, the EU could boost its chances of accomplishing its political mandate with success.

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1. Preserving democratic values

Captain Frank Ramsey is one of the main characters in *Crimson Tide*, the 1995 blockbuster directed by Tony Scott. Played by Gene Hackman, Ramsey is a long-experienced submarine commanding officer in the US Navy. Stubborn and determined, Ramsey shows very little patience for subordinates who question his decisions. At the climax of the movie, Hunter, Ramsey's new executive officer, played by a young Denzel Washington – clashes with Ramsey over the execution of an order to launch a nuclear missile. It is at that point that Ramsey, in a highly charged atmosphere, chastises Hunter with the immortal line: 'We're here to preserve democracy, not practise it!'

We are living in an age that has much in common with Ramsey's assertion. In the midst of heated debate, policy-makers, confronted by academics, pressured by activists and challenged by corporate powers, are having a tough time of conserving the traditional methods, values and infrastructures of democratic governance. Innovative approaches to the practice of democracy have been largely experimental, piecemeal and often unsuccessful. Hence the dilemma of contemporary democratic systems that are torn between preservation and practice.

On the one hand, the classic interest-representation model is showing evident, and perhaps irreversible, signs of fatigue. Everywhere in the West, low voter turnouts, rising populist or anti-establishment political movements and widespread discontent towards public institutions are stress-testing democratic structures. On the other hand, both Western and Eastern political systems are witnessing the birth of grassroots movements, record-speed civic mobilisation (especially among the young) and occasionally widespread street protests. Between 2009 and 2019 mass protests increased annually by an average of **11.5 %**.¹ From Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, global climate strikes and uprisings in Hong Kong – the size, scope and frequency of mass mobilisation efforts around the world is unprecedented. In stark opposition to claims that democratic values are in decay, these mobilised citizens prove that not only does global demand for participation exist, it is thriving. Blossoming engagement practices only need fertile ground to grow and develop.

The clash between these two contrasting tendencies, preservation versus practice, raises a number of key questions for policy-makers and analysts.

- First, will innovation eventually prevail over preservation? Put another way: will new, hybrid, forms of democratic participation replace classic, old-fashioned, democratic formulas?
- Second, in the midst of transformative processes, how will power roles be re-distributed? Many options are possible. It could be argued, for instance, that new practices of democratic participation will weaken the classic, horizontal, command-and-control regulatory model. Furthermore, and consequently, it could reasonably be claimed that the civically engaged citizens of tomorrow will likely have more political leverage than today. They might get closer to the archetypes of the 'policy-entrepreneurs', 'citizen-activists' or 'citizen-lobbyist' – i.e. self-conscious citizens who choose to participate because they share an interest in tailoring public policies for their own and common interests. The opposite, however, is also possible. Experimental approaches to civic engagement could generate unexpected results. Deluded by public arenas, citizens might progressively lean towards more passive roles, neglecting active citizenship's duties, and submissively becoming recipients of decisions.

¹ See S.J. Brannen, C.S. Haig and K. Schmidt, The age of mass protests. Understanding an escalating global trend, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020.

- A third set of questions looks at the drivers of the transformation of democratic systems. With online spaces now competing with physical spaces as venues for political argument and social interaction, it becomes crucial to understand whether innovative democratic practices will be developed and implemented almost exclusively through impersonal, aseptic, digital platforms, or whether civic engagement will continue to be nurtured through in-person, local forums built to encourage confrontation and debate.

The goal in this study is to provide preliminary answers to these questions by combining two approaches: first, by summarising the causes that are contributing to the crisis of democratic systems; second and subsequently, by mapping, categorising and evaluating a sample of initiatives run by local, national and supranational policy-makers to engage citizens in decision-making. The study is **divided in three sections** and develops as follows:

- The present section (Section 1 – Preserving democratic values) looks at the **general context and state of play of the debate on representative and participatory democracy**. It briefly analyses the latest developments in the academic debate on democratic participation and civic engagement. The section focuses on the causes that, according to many analysts, are contributing to the crisis in traditional democratic models, and the consequences for democratic systems. These include declining trust in political institutions, changes in the methods of producing and sharing knowledge, and the pervasiveness of technology. The conclusive part of this section offers an overview of the changing roles of public powers, citizens and corporations within fast-evolving democratic systems.
- Section II – The practice of democracy – moves on to examine a sample of initiatives trialled by public administrations (local, national and supranational) to engage citizens in policy-making. Although there are clear differences in the scope and execution between these initiatives, all demonstrate degrees of innovation in nurturing civic engagement. For the sake of clarity (and comparability), selected cases are categorised in accordance with three key drivers. (1) The private or public nature of democratic practices. In principle, all initiatives examined in this study are run by public administrations and are inherently public. However, the depth and complexity of cooperation between public structures and private actors may vary in reality. In many respects, the progressive incorporation of private actors into public decision-making is beneficial in terms of efficiency and innovation. However, it also raises concerns in terms of inclusiveness, security and privacy. (2) How democratic practices are designed. Design is becoming increasingly relevant to distinguish successful from unsuccessful civic engagement practices. Design thinking includes the use of nudges and other behavioural incentives to foster participation and encourage users' engagement. (3) The politicisation of democratic practices. The last driver is concerned with the level of politicisation of the consultations, as well as with the attractiveness of certain topics compared with others. Both are likely to impact on the outcomes of participatory initiatives, which explains why some initiatives are supported by wide participation, and others fail to engage citizens.
- Section III – Outlook: from preserving to practising EU democracy – looks at how **the latest trends and experiences in civic engagement and participatory democracy may affect the EU**. Now is a timely moment to reflect on both the opportunities and the risks for the Union in fostering new forms of civic engagement. Recent efforts, including the Conference on the Future of Europe, the recent reform of the European Citizens' Initiative, and on-going debates on how to improve the transparency and accountability of EU decision-making, are all focused on reviving the civic spirit of European citizens. These efforts notwithstanding, severe political, economic and societal challenges pose new risks for the ideological foundations of the Union. For all

these reasons, the EU is the perfect laboratory for testing new models of participatory democracy.

1.1. Democracy and research

Over **500** articles, reports and books with the word 'democracy' in the title were published in the first two months of 2020. A Google Scholar search for all academic papers published in 2019, and containing 'democracy' in the title, surpasses **4 700 units** – **29 000** if papers using the word 'democracy' in the text are included. It is quite an interesting statistic. Considering that approximately **1.8 million** academic articles are published each year, across 28 000 academic journals worldwide, it can be estimated that **6 %** of the world's entire academic output in a year is concerned with democracy.

Figure 1 – Academic focus on democracy



Public sector
Engage communities



Corporate sector
Brand activism

Source: EPRS.

Debates on democracy in the public sector

Democracy is popular in academia at the moment, and has been for a while. This popularity, however, is not just confined to university conferences and academic seminars. Debates on democracy are increasingly common in the **public sector**. From supranational to local administrations, efforts to understand how civic engagement works and how it could be further enhanced are on the increase. In particular, public decision-makers are looking for innovative methods to engage citizens and communities as a way to combat emergent populist rhetoric, or repair the damaged trust relationships with their constituencies.

Local administrators are at the forefront of efforts to establish collaborative and distributed digital decision-making processes so as to catalyse innovative solutions to urban problems.² Mayors of big cities have set up policy labs to enhance civic engagement more systematically: New York with Michael Bloomberg, for instance, or Seoul with Park Won-soon and the so-called 'Sharing City'. Also interesting are the cases of Barcelona (Fab Initiative) and Chicago. Other cities have followed, engaging citizen planners in all phases of urban management, from planning to service provision, by digital means.³

Supranational decision-makers are equally engaged in defending and fostering democratic values. The United Nations (UN), for instance, not only explicitly recognises the role of civil society organisations in Article 71 of its Charter, but it is also engaged in the promotion of democratic values across the globe. The World Bank (WB) strategic framework for

² On this point, see S. Ranchordas, 'Cities as corporations? The privatisation of cities and the automation of local law', *AdminLaw Blog*, 2018.

³ A definition of citizen planners is provided by V.A. Beard, 'Citizen planners: from self-help to political transformation', *The Oxford Handbook of Urban Planning*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

mainstream citizen engagement in policies, programmes, projects, and advisory services and analytics dates back to 2014.⁴ The strategy empowers citizens to participate in the development process and builds their perspective into development programmes. In addition, the WB's Governance Global Practice helps client countries to build capable, efficient, open, inclusive, and accountable institutions. Another international institution, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has tasked its Directorate on Public Governance with researching ways to achieve more open and inclusive governmental decision-making. The 'integrity and influence in policy-making' research stream, for instance, is most concerned with interest-representation and participation. The directorate's work on innovative citizen participation, meanwhile, aims to address some of these challenges while shaping the conversation around the future of democracy. The idea is to improve understanding of new forms of deliberative and collaborative decision-making, what works well and what does not. Another international organisation, the Council of Europe (CoE) in Strasbourg, is committed to fostering both democratic governance and sustainable democratic societies among its members. Lastly, when it comes to the EU, attempts to democratise policy-making are as old as the Union itself.⁵ The idea of enriching relations between EU institutions, citizens and stakeholders is now one of the European Commission's political priorities. The political guidelines of President von der Leyen, under the heading of 'A new push for European democracy', point to stronger interinstitutional cooperation, and a more transparent and, above all, inclusive decision-making process.⁶

Corporations engage in brand activism

More recently, even the **corporate sector** has begun to incorporate democracy and democratic values into communication and marketing strategies. In this case, the motivation is linked to practical concerns. Long celebrated for harnessing and distributing the energies of individuals, corporations have fallen under public scrutiny for their excessive political and social power.⁷ British sociologist Colin Crouch coined the term '**post-democracy**' to describe the rise in the power of corporations to influence decisions that were previously taken by national governments in response to popular pressure.⁸

Looking at **technology firms**, a 2020 study by the Knight Foundation and Gallup confirms that so-called 'techlash' is widespread and bipartisan, especially in the United States (US).⁹ 'Big Tech' meets resistance at both governmental and civic levels. Activists have entered in competition with technology companies in seeking citizens' attention.¹⁰ For policy-makers, the most pressing issues are data-protection, accountability of the information shared on digital platforms, and its impact on

⁴ See World Bank Group, *Strategic framework for mainstreaming citizen engagement in World Bank Group operations – engaging with citizens for improved results*, 2014.

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of democratic participation in the EU, see G. Sgueo, *Using technology to co-create EU policies*, EPRS, European Parliament, 2020.

⁶ See U. von der Leyen, [*A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe – political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024*](#), 2019.

⁷ On this point, see A. Winkler, *We the corporations: how American businesses won their civil rights*, Liveright, 2018. See also N.R. Lamoreaux and W.J. Novak, *Corporations and American democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2018.

⁸ See C. Crouch, *Post-democracy*, Wiley 2004.

⁹ See Knight Foundation, Gallup, *Techlash? America's growing concern with major technology companies*, 2020.

¹⁰ See J. Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, Cambridge University Press, 2018. While activists are interested in reaching out and mobilising as many people as possible, technology companies pursue the opposite goal. They try to filter irrelevant or uninteresting content to avoid their users switching off and stopping using their platforms.

opinion swings and voting behaviour.¹¹ Holding companies accountable for how content is amplified and targeted – argues a recent report by the think-tank New America¹² – may prevent surveillance-based business models from distorting the public sphere and threatening democracy. These demands are well summarised in a note published by Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg in November 2018: 'What content should be distributed and what should be blocked? Who should decide these policies and make enforcement decisions? To whom should tech companies be accountable?'.¹³ In an attempt to address these concerns, Facebook, soon followed by other tech companies,¹⁴ has committed to develop oversight and monitoring mechanisms and to filter harmful content proactively.

Other companies have adopted different strategies, developing what are referred to as '**brand activism**' approaches.¹⁵ According to Christian Sarkar and Philip Kotler, brand activism is a natural progression beyond values-driven corporate social responsibility and environmental, social and governance programmes.¹⁶ With brand activism, corporations seek to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values. Interestingly, corporate communication management and social responsibility practices are borrowed from those of social movements. In this way, companies aim to contribute to the social production of citizen-consumers' identity. Examples include the Nike campaign entitled 'Believe in something' and 'Pecan Resist' from the ice cream company Ben & Jerry. The former campaign featured Colin Kaepernick, a player in the US National Football League, owing to his ties with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Pecan Resist has been designed as a permanent protest against the policies of the current US presidential administration.

1.1.1. Debating the on-going democratic recession

Beyond some natural differences in perspective and approach, on-going debates about the state of democracy share a common concern: democratic values have entered a depressive stage worldwide.

An abundance of reports and studies stresses this point. The 2019 edition of the *Democracy Index* produced by The Economist Intelligence Unit, for instance, finds that the average global democratic score has fallen from **5.48** in 2018, to **5.44**. This is the worst average global score since 2006, when the first Index was published.¹⁷ Furthermore, also according to the Democracy Index, there are only **22 countries** in the world, home to **430m people**, that could be deemed 'full democracies'. In

¹¹ According to some authors, however, this focus might be too reductive. See, in particular, N. Marchal, 'Conceptualizing the impact of digital interference on elections: a framework and agenda for future research', available at SSRN https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3536281. The author argues that the threat of digital interference does not lie in its capacity to change people's views but rather in its power to undermine popular perceptions of electoral integrity, with potentially far-reaching consequences for public trust.

¹² See N. Maréchal and E. Roberts Biddle, [It's not just the content, it's the business model: democracy's online speech challenge](#), New America, 2020.

¹³ See M. Zuckerberg, A blueprint for content governance and enforcement, Facebook 2018.

¹⁴ Twitter, for instance, has decided to ban all political advertising on its platform.

¹⁵ The definition is used by J.L. Manfredi, 'Brand activism', *Communications & Society*, Vol. 32(4), 2019, pp. 343-359.

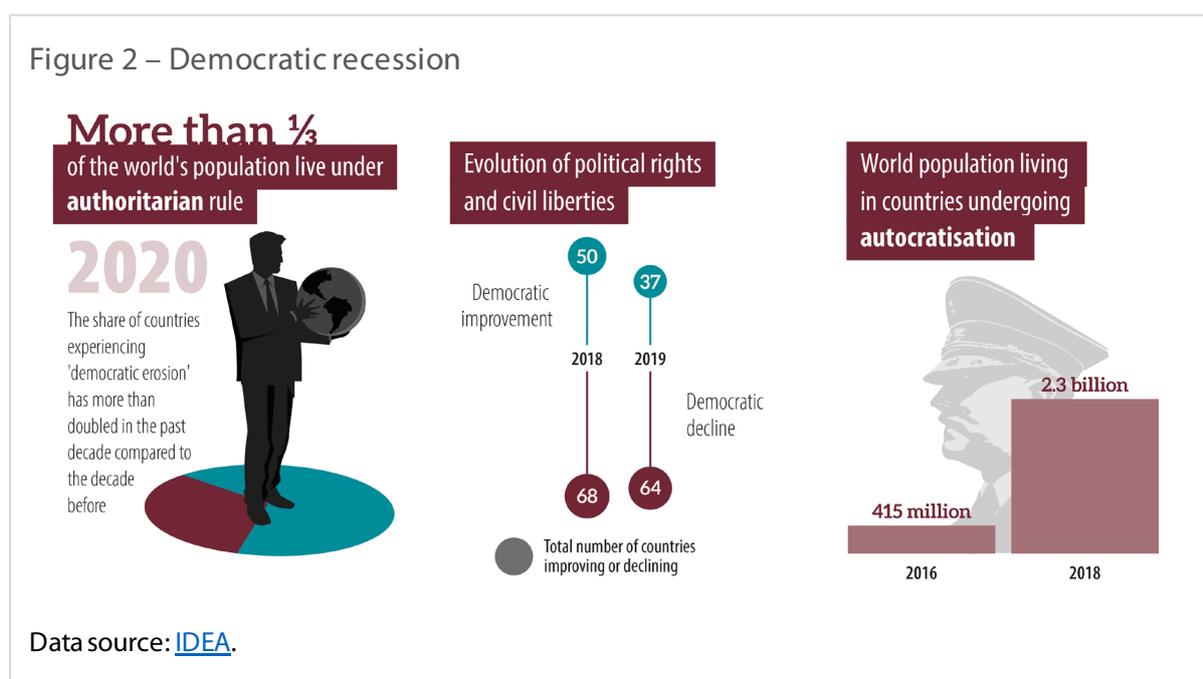
¹⁶ See C. Sarkar, P. Kotler, *Brand Activism*, Idea Bite Press, 2020.

¹⁷ The EIU Democracy Index provides a snapshot of the state of world democracy for 165 independent states and two territories. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Based on their scores on 60 indicators within these categories, each country is then classified as one of four types of regime: full democracy; flawed democracy; hybrid regime; and authoritarian regime.

contrast, more than a third of the world's population live under authoritarian rule. The Freedom in the World 2020 report came to similar conclusions. According to its authors, political rights and civil liberties have been declining for an alarming 14 consecutive years, from 2005 to 2019. Not only has the global average score declined each year, but also countries with net score declines have consistently outnumbered those with net improvements. The report claims that the gap between setbacks and gains widened between 2018 and 2019, as political rights and civil liberties deteriorated for people in **64 countries**.¹⁸

These alarming data are confirmed by the 2019 V-DEM democracy report. According to the study, democracy still prevails in the majority of countries surveyed (**99 countries**, equalling to **55 %** of the total surveyed). The world, explain the authors, is thus unmistakably more democratic compared to any point during the last century. However, the number of liberal democracies declined from **44** in 2008 to **39** in 2018. There are **24 countries** severely affected by what is described as a 'third wave of autocratisation' (these include Brazil, India and the United States). Almost one third of the world's population – claims the report – live in countries undergoing autocratisation, surging from **415 million** in 2016 to **2.3 billion** in 2018.¹⁹

Another research institute, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), confirms that the share of countries experiencing '**democratic erosion**' – as the authors called it in their 2019 report – **more than doubled** in the past decade compared with the previous decade. North America, Europe, Asia and the Pacific are the regions most affected by this erosion, with more than half of countries in these regions falling into this category. In the specific case of the EU, the report stressed the fact that the quality of democracy had declined in as many as **24 of 28 EU Member States**.²⁰



¹⁸ See Freedom House, [Freedom in the world 2020. A leaderless struggle for democracy](#), 2020.

¹⁹ See V-Dem Institute, [Autocratisation surges – resistance grows. Democracy report 2020](#), University of Gothenburg, 2020.

²⁰ See Idea Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [The global state of democracy 2019. Addressing the ills, revising the promise](#), Stockholm 2019.

Democratic recession across authoritarian and democratic regimes

It is commonly believed that the main challenges to the exercise of democratic rights come from authoritarian regimes. This happens to be true, but only in part. Of course, mass surveillance and repression by illiberal governments are cause for global concern. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman recently wrote about 'informational autocrats' – i.e. autocrats who, rather than terrorising citizens into submission, artificially boost their popularity by convincing the public they are competent.²¹ To do so, they use propaganda and silence informed members of the elite by co-optation or censorship. Internet shutdowns are another way in which authoritarian governments restrain democratic freedoms. According to the not-for-profit organisation Access Now, 2019 was a record year, with **213 internet shutdowns** recorded. In less than a year, the number of countries that shut down the internet grew from **25** to **33**. Governments cut off the internet in an effort to stifle the voices of specific communities, such as members of oppressed or marginalised minority groups or refugees. In 2019, this happened in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Indonesia. Nationwide shutdowns have also increased during protests, periods of political instability and elections.²²

It would be a mistake, however, to limit understanding of the erosion of democratic values to authoritarian and illiberal regimes. Advanced democracies are not immune to the decline of democratic values. What actually emerges from current studies on the state of democracy worldwide is that '**democratic recession**' has become the new reality of democratic systems, both authoritarian and liberal. Rather than simply a momentary disruption of existing patterns,²³ democratic recession has been described as one of today's most pressing global challenges; a challenge that, it has been argued, concerns not the state model as such, but the democratic state specifically.²⁴ The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index,²⁵ for instance, stresses the fact that in 2020 the overall rule of law score declined for the third year running, and that this also concerned regions such as Western Europe and North America.

The challenge is so important that academics, policy-makers and activists are liaising and organising to share their knowledge and competences to identify common solutions, as demonstrated in the following four examples. In June 2018, Melbourne University launched the Democratic Decay & Renewal (DEM-DEC) research project with the aim of providing a useful hub, resource and platform for researchers and policymakers focused on addressing the deterioration and re-invigoration of democratic rule worldwide. In 2019, the Knight Foundation announced it would award \$50 million in grants to encourage the development of a new field of research centred on technology's impact on democracy. This investment will fund cross-disciplinary research at 11 American universities and research institutions, including the creation of five new centres of study – each reflecting different approaches to understanding the future of democracy in a digital age. In 2020, the Italian Institute for Research on Public Administration launched a new project aimed at studying emerging trends relating to technology and government, including their impact on democratic rights. Also in 2020, the Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford University launched a research project concerned with political polarisation of elites and the mass public, with a view to producing practical knowledge to reduce its negative effects.

²¹ See S. Guriev, D. Treisman, Informational autocrats, *Journal of economic perspectives*, Vol. 33(4), 2019.

²² See Access Now, [Targeted, cut off, and left in the dark](#), New York, 2019.

²³ See L. Diamond, 'Facing up to democratic recession', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26(1), 2015.

²⁴ On this point see L. Casini, *Lo Stato nell'era di Google. Frontiere e sfide globali*, Mondadori, 2020.

²⁵ The Rule of Law Index, which covers 128 countries and jurisdictions, relies on national surveys of more than 130 000 households and 4 000 legal practitioners and experts to measure how the rule of law is experienced and perceived around the world.

1.1.2. Causes and consequences of democratic decay

Having clarified that democratic values are declining everywhere in the world, and that the decline is common to both democratic and authoritarian regimes, it is necessary to investigate the contributing causes.

The debate is particularly complex. According to some analysts, concerns about democratic infrastructures arise from **economic reasons**. In economic studies, democratic consolidation is widely believed to be closely linked to economic development. Economists explain that no established democracy with gross domestic product per capita of over approximately US\$14 000 in today's terms has ever collapsed.²⁶ For this reason, global instability, economic inequality, uncertain job markets and rising poverty are described as major causes of the worldwide democratic downturn. Experts have linked the 2008 global economic crisis to the spread of feelings of uncertainty and pessimism about the future. Several authors, including Ian Kershaw,²⁷ Joseph Stiglitz²⁸ and Thomas Piketty,²⁹ explain how a lack of certainty in the future affects the general trust in democratic systems' ability to cope with pressing economic and social issues. The shock to the EU and global economies caused by the coronavirus pandemic has put democratic governance under stress once again.³⁰

Other academics focus on **political and societal threats** to democratic systems. David Runciman, professor of politics at Cambridge University, considers three types of threat to contemporary democracies. First are modern versions of 'coups'.³¹ These occur when governments remain formally in charge, but have their decision-making powers constrained. The international bailout programmes that provided EU countries with emergency financial support are a case in point: governments received financial assistance while accepting constraints to their decision-making powers. Second are 'catastrophes', described by Runciman as the emerging global threats that undermine the validity of democracy as an effective decision-making system. He mentions as valid examples climate change, welfare and security. Like Runciman, Nick Bostrom from Oxford University argues that democracies are inherently incapable of responding to future global challenges, on account of the tendency of voters' to wait for proof of a threat before acting.³² The third threat to democracy described in Runciman's book is technology and, specifically, the impact of technology on access to and consumption of information online.

Other studies contend that the crisis of democracy is fuelled by a combination of shortcomings and challenges. A 2019 study published by the European Commission's European Political Strategy Centre identifies 10 trends that impact on **'volatile' democracies**. These trends include declining trust in democratic infrastructures, the redistribution of power across political actors and systems, the rise of populist political offerings in Europe and beyond, and growing tensions between multilateralism and national sovereignty. The study also mentions the spread of misinformation,

²⁶ See, for instance, A. Przeworski and F. Papaterra, 'Modernization: Theories and Facts', *World Politics*, Vol 49 (2), 1997, pp. 155–183.

²⁷ See I. Kershaw, *To Hell and back. Europe 1914-1949*, Penguin 2015.

²⁸ See J. Stiglitz, [People, power and profit. Progressive capitalism for an age of protest](#), Norton & Company, 2019.

²⁹ See T. Piketty, [Capital et ideologie](#), Seuil, 2019.

³⁰ For information, see European Commission, [Spring 2020 economic forecast: a deep and uneven recession, an uncertain recovery](#), 6 May 2020.

³¹ See D. Runciman, [How democracy ends](#), Profile Books, 2018.

³² See, inter alia, N. Bostrom, 'The vulnerable world hypothesis', *Global policy*, Vol. 10(4), 2019.

rising inequalities and digital technology as potential threats to democratic values.³³ Another study curated by Chatham House presents three different prisms through which the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe can be understood: the first is populism, the second is what they term 'democratic deconsolidation' (i.e. the transition of democracy into an authoritarian state) and the third consists of the so-called 'hollowing out' of democracy (the idea that, throughout the West, democracy has been gradually hollowed out over several decades).³⁴

This study focuses on four conditions that can be considered particularly relevant to grasp the complexity of the democratic crisis. The first and second are **political apathy and declining trust in political institutions**. These two causes are inter-dependent. Data on political participation and engagement show a worrying trend of decreased trust and interest in political and civic life. As a result, approval ratings for democratic institutions are at near-record lows in several countries. A third cause contributing to the crisis of democracy consists of **profound changes in the transmission and consumption of information**, and the effects of these changes on political communication. The fourth and final factor contributing to the decline of democracy is **technology**, especially when analysed in terms of the capacity of public structures to adapt to technological advances.

1.1.3. Political apathy

Confucius once remarked that rulers need three resources: weapons, food and trust. If a ruler cannot hold to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next but should hold on to trust to the end. 'Without trust', explained Confucius, 'we cannot stand'. For public institutions, however, gaining trust and legitimacy has become an uphill battle. **Trends on political participation and civic engagement** have been in constant decline for the last century.

Already in 1975, Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki published a comparative report about political disaffection in European, American and Japanese democracies. They argued that this was the consequence of the excesses of previous decades.³⁵ Twenty years later, in 1995, in their book *Voice and Equality*, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Scholzman and Henry Brady showed that civic and political participation in North America was following a declining pattern. The authors stressed an important point: the decline was particularly pronounced among young and educated people.³⁶ In 2015 another classic – *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam – reached the same conclusion; disaffection with politics, claimed Putnam, is greatest among the better educated.³⁷

In 2013 Peter Mair described as a 'void' both the space left by a global political class that was abandoning its representative function and was retreating into the institutions of the state, and that left by citizens who were consequently retreating into apathy.³⁸ In the United States, voter turnout in national elections fluctuates, but on average remains lower than in most established democracies.

³³ See European Commission – European Political Strategy Centre, [10 trends shaping democracy in a volatile world](#), 2019.

³⁴ See H. Kundhani, *The future of democracy in Europe. Technology and the evolution of representation*, Chatham House, 2020.

³⁵ See M.J. Crozier, S.P. Huntington and J. Watanuki, *The crisis of democracy – trilateral commission 1975*, New York University Press, 1975.

³⁶ See S. Verba, K. Lehman Scholzman and H.E. Brady, *Voice and Equality. Civic voluntarism in American politics*, Harvard University Press, 1995.

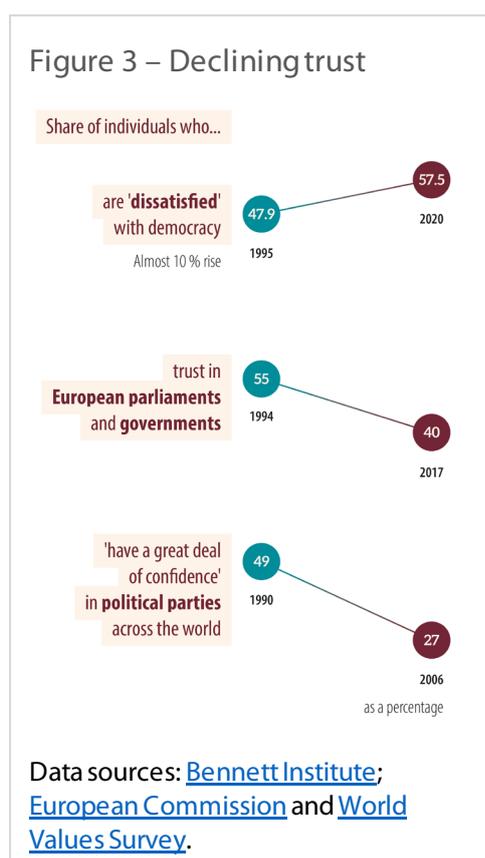
³⁷ See R.D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community: empirical foundations, Causal mechanisms, and policy implications*, *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Public Policy and Administration*, Oxford, 2015.

³⁸ See P. Mair, *Ruling the Void – The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso, 2013.

In recent elections, about **60 %** of the voting eligible population have voted during presidential election years, and about **40 %** have voted during midterm elections.³⁹ The situation is the same in Europe. When it comes to the European elections, the highest turnout occurred in the first set of European parliamentary elections, held in 1979, in which **61.99 %** of eligible Europeans voted. In the years following, voter turnout declined in every election, reaching a low of **42.61 %** in 2014. The trend, however, was reversed in 2019, when over **50 %** of the EU's eligible voters took part in the elections, with the highest turnout in 20 years.

1.1.4. Declining trust

Rational choice theory maintains that citizens weigh up the costs and benefits of joining in public affairs. If the expected utility exceeds that of not joining in, citizen participation takes place.⁴⁰ Looking at mistrust in democratic institutions from a rational choice perspective, it seems mistrust in the public sector may encourage citizens to refuse to express their voice in public arenas.⁴¹



First some data on national institutions: according to the World Values Survey (an instrument created by an international network of social scientists to study changing values throughout the world and their impact on society), the proportion of people who reported having a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in political parties across the world dropped from **49 %** in 1990 to **27 %** in 2006. Research conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics in 2014 found that young Americans (aged 18 to 29) exhibited record-low levels of trust in public institutions.⁴² In the 2020 edition of the Global Satisfaction with Democracy report it is reported that the share of individuals who are 'dissatisfied' with democracy has risen by around 10 percentage points, from **47.9 to 57.5 %** – the highest level of global dissatisfaction since the start of the series in 1995.⁴³ Echoing the Global Satisfaction with Democracy report, the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that **57 %** of the global population surveyed said governments serve the interests of only a few. In developed markets, less than

³⁹ Data provided by [fairvote.org](#).

⁴⁰ See J.H. Aldrich, 'Rational choice and turnout', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37 (1), 1993, pp. 246-278. See also B.S. Frey, 'Forms of expressing economic discontent', in N. Norpoth, M.S. Lewis-Beck and J.D. Lafay, *Economics and politics: the calculus of support*, University of Michigan Press, 1991, pp. 267-280.

⁴¹ Some, however, disagree on this point. According to 'stealth democracy' approaches, citizens use participatory mechanisms as a means of fixing unsatisfactory conditions created by untrustworthy delegates. See, for instance, E. Theiss-Morse and J.R. Hibbing, 'Citizenship and civic engagement', *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 8, 2005, pp. 227-249.

⁴² See Harvard Kennedy School – Institute of politics, [Low midterm turnout likely, conservatives more enthusiastic, Harvard youth poll finds](#).

⁴³ See Bennett Institute for Public Policy – Center for the future of democracy, [Global satisfaction with democracy 2020](#), 2020.

20 % of the general population expressed confidence in the system, while **73 %** was looking for change.⁴⁴

Quite a number of surveys confirm this. A Gallup survey shows that the percentages of American adults expressing 'a great deal' of confidence in the President and the Congress amount to **24 %** and **4 %**, respectively.⁴⁵ A 2014 poll commissioned by *The Guardian* revealed that only **11 %** of young Europeans could name one of their local Members of the European Parliament. According to the European Commission, trust in parliaments and governments in Europe fell from around **55 %** in 1994 to **40 %** in 2017.⁴⁶

The result of this combined reduced trust in both political institutions and institutional intermediaries such as political parties is a declining trust in democracy itself. As pointed out by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, data suggest that across the West the percentage of people who say it is 'essential' to live in a democracy has plummeted. People, and especially millennials, have become 'more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives'.⁴⁷

The trust deficit at supranational level

At supranational level, criticism of the public sector's legitimacy becomes even more acute. There is an entire vocabulary to address the supposed incapability of the supranational legal order to be truly democratic and innovative, with 'bureaucratic distance', 'democratic deficit', 'deficit of mutual awareness' (between civil society and public authorities),⁴⁸ and 'vertical incongruence' among the definitions most used. According to the International Social Survey Programme's National Identity module, one in two world citizens say international organisations are taking too much power away from their country. A dissatisfaction that is further exacerbated by two causes: the **complexity of international matters** (that puts supranational regulators beyond the immediate capacity of many citizens to appraise) and the **remoteness** of most supranational regulators from local communities, which encourages a sense of disempowerment in citizens.⁴⁹

In this respect, the EU is a perfect case study. Perennial narratives of the EU's democratic deficit paint a picture of a dysfunctional decision-making system run by elites located in Brussels: the so-called 'European technocrats'. An exclusive club of overpaid civil servants – EU critics claim – feeds an overly complex institutional environment, structured to 'please' corporate interests at the expense of ordinary citizens. Across 10 European nations recently surveyed by the think-tank Pew Research

⁴⁴ The 2020 Trust Barometer is Edelman's 20th annual trust and credibility survey. The research is conducted by Edelman Intelligence, a global insight and analytics consultancy.

⁴⁵ The survey is available here: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

⁴⁶ See European Commission – DG for research & innovation, *Past, present and future of democracy*, 2019.

⁴⁷ See R.S. Foa and Y. Mounk, 'The Democratic Disconnect', *Journal of Democracy*, 2016, pp. 5–17.

⁴⁸ See N. Lebeassis and J. Paterson, *Developing New Modes of Governance*, European Commission, Forward Studies Unit, 2000. See also H. Kriesi, D. Bochsler, J. Matthes, S. Lavenex, M. Buhmann and F. Esser (eds.), *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁴⁹ The ISSP national identity module series comprises three cross-national surveys conducted in 1995, 2003, and 2013. Successive surveys are always partial replication of earlier surveys. ISSP National Identity modules mainly deal with issues, such as respondents' global, national or ethnic identification, aspects of national pride and support for their own nation, attitudes towards national and international issues, attitudes towards foreigners and foreign cultures, and views on what makes someone a true member of one's own nationality. On complexity in international matters and remoteness of supranational organisations, See R. Dahl, 'Can international organisations be democratic? A sceptic's view', in I. Shapiro and C. Hackerford (eds.), *Democracy's Edges*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 19.

Centre, a median of **62 %** say the EU does not understand the needs of its citizens.⁵⁰ Of the six 'political tribes' that, according to Chatham House and Kantar Public, exist within the EU today, 'hesitant Europeans', together with 'EU rejecters', the 'austerity rebels' and 'frustrated pro-Europeans', make up **68 %** of the total EU population.⁵¹ The 2020 Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report found that nearly **60 %** of European citizens were dissatisfied with democracy in 2019. According to the report, Europeans fall into two broad categories: those living in the *zone of complacency* across Nordic countries (Scandinavia, Germany and the Benelux) and those populating the *zone of despair*, encompassing southern European countries and France.

Political ignorance

When it comes to identifying the causes of the loss of credibility and legitimacy of political and institutional actors, three seem to be of particular concern. The first is **political ignorance**. According to Ilya Somin, the majority of citizens could be defined as knowing nothing about politics.⁵² Philip Converse found as early as 1964 that most people do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have been at the centre of intense political controversies for substantial amounts of time.⁵³ Following in the tradition of Converse, Samuel Popkin's 'low information rationality' theory stipulates that the majority of citizens have basic impressions about politics, and thus their voting choices are often determined by shortcuts.⁵⁴ According to these authors, citizens' lack of knowledge is fuelling their declining trust in democratic institutions.

Some go as far as to suggest that this proves that democracies are outdated. It is necessary to move forward – they continue provocatively – and adopt more efficient decision-making systems. Among those who take this radical line is Jason Brennan from Georgetown University. Brennan claims that less, not more, participation is in fact desirable.⁵⁵ Most people, argues Brennan, do not have the knowledge or capacity to understand political discourse. They should therefore not worry at all about politics, but should leave public engagement to a small number of individuals.

Martin Gillens and Benjamin Page also side with those who maintain that democracies should be replaced with different (i.e. more efficient) systems of government. Gillens and Page demonstrated that the opinions of the bottom 90 % of income earners in America have a 'minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact' on politics.⁵⁶ Therefore – they provocatively claim – why not shift to more realistic decision-making systems that reflect the opinions of those who actually have a chance to impact on policies? Similarly to Gillens and Page, the Belgian writer David Van Reybrouck considers elections the 'fossil fuel of politics'. He suggests returning to 'sortition', a system that operated in ancient Athens and in the Renaissance states of Venice and Florence. With sortition,

⁵⁰ See R. Wike, J. Fetterolf and M. Fagan, [Europeans credit EU with promoting peace and prosperity, but say Brussels is out of touch with its citizens](#), Pew Research Centre, 19 March 2019.

⁵¹ See T. Raines, M. Goodwin and D. Cutts, *Europe's political tribes. Exploring the diversity of views across the EU*, Chatham House, 2017.

⁵² See I. Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

⁵³ See P.E. Converse, 'The nature of belief systems in mass publics', *Critical Review*, Vol. 18(1), 1964, pp. 1-3.

⁵⁴ See S. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁵⁵ See J. Brennan, *Against Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2016. In reality, the list of advocates for the need to attribute governmental responsibilities to educated elites rather than common citizens is long. It includes Freud, Aristotle and Plato (the latter described ordinary men, in contrast to philosophers, as unable to make judgments about the common good).

⁵⁶ See M. Gillens and B.I. Page, 'Testing theories of American politics: elites, interest groups, and average citizens', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 12, pp. 564-581, 2014.

representatives are appointed based on chance, through randomly selected juries.⁵⁷ Likewise, political scientist Hel  n   Landermore envisions a model called 'open democracy', in which citizens are selected to serve in legislation much like they would be chosen for jury duty.⁵⁸ Following this line of argument, Glen Weyl and Eric Posner popularised the concept of 'quadratic voting'.⁵⁹ According to them, decentralised technologies allow, at scale, the sort of public input on a wide range of complex issues that would have been impossible in the analogue era. Hence, they claim, alternatives to traditional voting can be tested. Unlike a binary 'yes' or 'no' vote for or against one thing, quadratic voting allows a large group of people to use a digital platform to express the strength of their desire on a variety of issues. Or perhaps democracies might just become obsolete over the coming century, suggests Israeli scholar Yuval Harari. In his view, this is likely if information technology is partnered with biotechnology, allowing its algorithms to access and act on human thought. Democracies might thus be replaced by tech-tyrannies, or just by new, more elaborate, political systems.⁶⁰

The reputation age

After political ignorance, a second reason for declining trust in democratic institutions that stands out is the transformation that the concept of **reputation** has undergone in recent years. In her latest book, Italian philosopher Gloria Origgi clarifies how contemporary society is experiencing a fundamental paradigm shift in its relationship with knowledge and reputation. According to Origgi, society is moving from the 'information age' towards a 'reputation age'. In the age of reputation, information is valuable if it has a 'good reputation', meaning that it has already been filtered, evaluated and commented upon by others. It might seem empowering for citizens, but in reality, it has the exact opposite outcome. With reputation becoming the gatekeeper to knowledge, people are acknowledged by relying on what are the inevitably biased judgments of other people, most of whom are not even known to them.⁶¹

Apply Origgi's intuition to politics and it becomes immediately clear how precarious the trust relationship between governments and citizens has become. At no other point in history have public powers been so vulnerable to attacks on their reputation and legitimacy. In a recent essay, Professor Eyal Benvenisti makes the case in relation to '**mega-regional trade agreements**'.⁶² The primary aim of these international agreements is ostensibly to reduce trade barriers. More often than not, however, they include rules aimed at harmonising regulations, setting environmental standards, protecting intellectual property or limiting state-owned enterprises. In part because of the complexity and variety of the issues regulated, and in part because of the strict confidentiality under which these agreements are negotiated, explains Benvenisti, public opinion has a negative perception of mega-regional agreements. They are criticised for violating principles of accountability, transparency and inclusiveness. Which is exactly what happened with the surge of street protests from 2015 to 2017 in Brussels against the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership (TTIP). Protests were fuelled by the discontent of the general public but, interestingly, the accuracy

⁵⁷ See D. Van Reybrouck, *Against elections: the case for democracy*, Seven Stories Press, 2013.

⁵⁸ See H. Landermore, *Democratic reason: politics, collective intelligence, and the rule of the many*, Princeton University Press, 2013.

⁵⁹ See E.A. Posner and E.G. Weyl, Voting squared: quadratic voting in democratic politics, *Coase-Sandor Institute for Law & Politics Working Paper No. 657*, 2014.

⁶⁰ See Y. Harari, *Homo deus. A brief history of tomorrow*, Harvill Secker, 2016.

⁶¹ See G. Origgi, *Reputation. What it is and why it matters*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁶² See E. Benvenisti, Upholding democracy amid the challenges of new technology: what role for the law of global governance?, *Working paper series*, Tel Aviv University, 2018.

of the allegations against the TTIP was never a matter of concern; they looked plausible, and for the protesters that was enough.⁶³

The attractiveness of democracy

Finally, trust in democratic institutions is declining on account of **the lack of 'attractiveness' of democratic institutions**. At this point, it may seem questionable that being 'attractive' falls within the duties of a public administration. The reality, however, seems to suggest that it does. The availability of technology means that ordering food, booking a hotel room, buying a train ticket or even finding a partner have become actions that can be performed in just a few 'clicks'. Fast, reliable and intuitive: mobile apps and online platforms are designed to engage and reward people with the promise of becoming more resourceful and knowledgeable. Industry statistics give a sense of this. According to the consultancy Gartner, more than **two-thirds** of marketers at business organisations say their firms compete primarily on the quality of customer experience they provide.⁶⁴ A survey from Qualtrics reveals that in 2020, **80 % of marketers** expect to compete almost exclusively through the experience of their customers. No company would dare make major changes to its platform without first running experiments to understand how these would influence user behaviour.⁶⁵

The pervasiveness of customer-centric approaches, however, is having an impact on democratic systems, and it is not a positive one. Paradoxically, it seems that the more connected citizens are, the less willing they are to interact with their administrations. Citizens expect a personalised, secure, experience from their governments. To their disappointment, however, standard interactions with administrations are much less rewarding and engaging compared with available technology.

In 2019, **64 %** of European citizens had used an online public service at least once.⁶⁶ When asked to comment on their experience, many reported poorly designed websites, unnecessarily complex procedures and poorly planned timing (e.g. online consultations occurring late in the legislative process). Inadequate feedback was the most common complaint. Citizens expect administrations to consider their contributions and, if not, to provide an explanation. It goes without saying that inadequate or non-existent feedback damages the trust relationship between the citizens and the administration. Some progress has been made in 'user-centricity' (i.e. availability, usability and mobile friendliness). However, standard interactions with public structures are still, for the most part, time-consuming and rather disappointing for citizens. Even worse, the generally inadequate response of public institutions to overcome gaps in immediacy and ease-of-use for users, has transformed democracies into '**populocracies**', to borrow from Catherine Fieschi.⁶⁷ In other words, public structures self-reinforce the sense of inadequacy by remaining unresponsive to the new dynamics unleashed by social media.

⁶³ To know more about this problem, see M. Bauer, *Manufacturing Discontent: the rise to power of anti-TTIP groups*, European Center for International Political Economy, 2016.

⁶⁴ Key findings from the survey are available here: <https://www.gartner.com/en/marketing/insights/articles/key-findings-from-the-gartner-customer-experience-survey>.

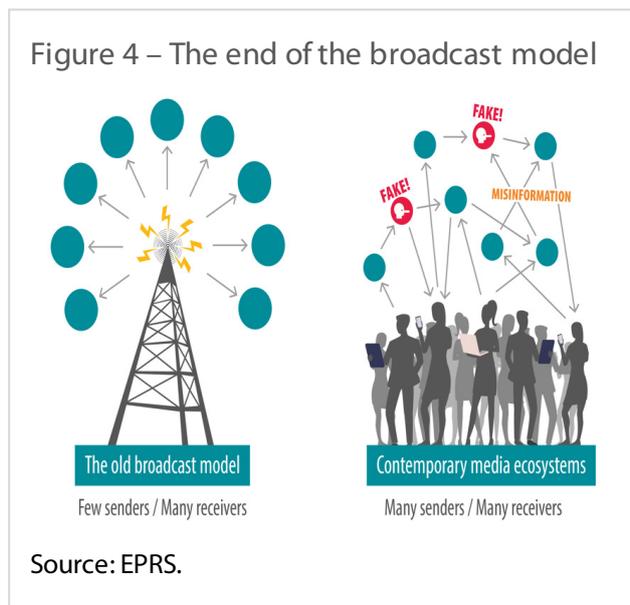
⁶⁵ On randomised controlled trials see M. Luca and M.H. Bazerman, *The power of experiments*, MIT Press, 2020.

⁶⁶ See European Commission, *The Digital Economy and Society Index – DESI 2020*, 2020.

⁶⁷ See C. Fieschi, *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism*, Agenda Publishing, 2019.

1.1.5. An information-free diet – the end of the broadcast model

As explained above, the way information is produced, distributed and consumed is undergoing profound changes that are contributing to declining trust in democratic institutions. To further clarify this point, media scholar Ethan Zuckerman suggests focusing on observing how media has changed between the 1990s and today. Twenty years ago, information was circulated through the '**broadcast model**'. Under this model, explains Zuckerman, news was transmitted in a linear and fairly predictable way. Producers wrote stories and handed them off to distributors to share with audiences locally or around the world. Fast forward to today. When modelling the contemporary media ecosystem, continues Zuckerman, it should be noted that citizens are much more powerful than before. They can amplify content they like, or they can create content themselves, entering the news cycle as producers.⁶⁸



Undoubtedly, today's citizens have vastly more influence over the media agenda than in earlier models. The cost is high, however, with echo chambers, polarisation, conspiracy theories, trolling and harassment just some of the problems proliferating today. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the use of the term 'post-truth', increased by **2 000 % between** 2015 and 2016. Researchers at US RAND corporation use the definition 'truth-decay' to capture four related trends: growing disagreement about facts, blurred lines between opinions and facts, the increasing influence of opinions over facts and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.⁶⁹ According to Nobel prize laureate Robert Shiller, whether true or false, stories transmitted by word of mouth, by the news media and, increasingly, by social media, may have major impacts on the economy by driving collective decisions about how and where to invest, and how much to spend and save.⁷⁰

Digital parties and hyper-leaders

Further exacerbating the decay of truth is political communication. Political actors have quickly adapted to these changes, contributing more or less voluntarily to the diffusion of distorted information among citizens. Populist narratives, in particular, have become very effective at harnessing voter dissatisfaction, with demagogic political candidates promising to dismantle the fabric of democratic institutions. The data is revealing. In less than two decades, explains Cas Mudde,⁷¹ populist parties have more than tripled their support, capturing a broader and more varied electoral base. In such scenario – explains the Director of the Centre for Digital Culture at King's College in London, Paolo Gerbaudo – new political formations have emerged. While

⁶⁸ For more information: E. Zuckerman, Four problems for news and democracy, Medium, 2018.

⁶⁹ See N. Bentzen, From post-truth to post-trust?, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018.

⁷⁰ See R.J. Shiller, *Narrative economics: how stories go viral and drive major economic events*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

⁷¹ See C. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39(4), 2004, pp. 541-563.

traditional political parties have suffered from a continued drop in membership (both in absolute numbers and in terms of share of the electorate),⁷² new '**digital parties**', run by '**hyper-leaders**' in Gerbaudo's terminology,⁷³ have grown in popularity. From the margins of mainstream politics, these parties have found their way to leadership positions. Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy, for example.

This situation has generated two problems. The first is a problem of communication. Hyper-leaders measure their political influence through social media metrics (likes, followers and shares). This explains why in communicating to the electorate they adopt the colloquial and demotic style of YouTubers and Instagram influencers, becoming often histrionic or even excessive (especially when compared to 'old' politicians). The second is a problem of inclusion. The diffusion of online platforms used by digital parties to debate, propose, or vote could potentially open policy making to more people; but, in fact, in many cases it has restricted the opportunity to participate to those with a formal affiliation to digital parties, reducing *de facto* the political freedoms of the others.

1.1.6. The 'Borg complex' – technology and democratic values

Opinions about the benefits that digital technology would bring to democracy have followed a cyclical pattern. Each new wave of technologies has been accompanied by claims and expectations about the positive impact on power relations. Back in 1841, François-René de Chateaubriand wrote about technological advances expected to bring about an international society. Several years prior, in 1827, Sismondi in the *Revue Encyclopédique* celebrated the acceleration of communications that had brought the disappearance of distances and sped up the circulation of thought.⁷⁴ Tech-enthusiasts returned at the beginning of the century with the spread of new communication infrastructures, then again in the 1980s and 1990s with the advent of cable television and the internet. Each time telecommunication networks and digital infrastructures have grown more complex, enthusiasts have celebrated the beginning of a new chapter for democratic systems.

Following the arrival of ultra-fast internet connections and artificial intelligence, optimistic narratives returned to applaud the positive impact of technology on democratic decision-making. Internet supporters praised the reduced costs and adaptability of digital technology. Many used as examples the Zapatista Movement (which began as an almost entirely web-based endeavour), and the campaigns against the Multi-lateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) or in favour of the development of the International Treaty to Ban Landmines. Both the MAI and Landmines campaigns provide seminal examples of the usage of web-related technologies in raising awareness and coordinating an on-going response by a multitude of actors. Likewise, many admired the spread of **online petitions platforms** such as MoveOn, Avaaz, Change or iPetitions. These platforms have successfully attracted millions of members, raised tens of millions of dollars, and campaigned for a vast array of issues.

Supported by an abundance of terminology, scholarly analysis has described positively the effects emerging technology would have on future attempts by public powers to engage citizens digitally. Beth Noveck, for instance, idealises the idea of collaborative governance through digital means with

⁷² See I. Van Biezen, P. Mair and T. Poguntke, 'Going, going, ...gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 2012.

⁷³ See P. Gerbaudo, *The digital party*, Pluto Press, 2018.

⁷⁴ See C.L. Sismondi, 'L'Amérique', *Revue Encyclopédique*, 1827, p. 22.

the term 'wiki-government'.⁷⁵ Oren Perez terms digital participatory processes as 'collaborative e-rulemaking'.⁷⁶ César Hidalgo, Director of MIT Collective Learning group, describes as 'augmented democracy' the use of digital twins (i.e. personalised virtual representations of a human) to expand the ability of people to participate directly in a large number of democratic decisions.⁷⁷ At the New York University, a broad research project focused on the use of technology to improve the quality and effectiveness of law and policymaking through greater public engagement has been named 'CrowdLaw'. Professors Archon Fung and Hollie Russon Gilman name 'digitally direct democracy' one of the six models they use to describe the impact of digital technologies on democratic politics⁷⁸. A 2019 report from the Joint Research Centre describes future scenarios of government in terms of 'super collaborative government', the hypothesis of artificial intelligence-boosted governments with real-time understanding of socioeconomic problems.

More recently, however, optimistic views about democracy and the Internet have given way to disillusionment⁷⁹. Despite its advantages, both in terms of empowering and problem solving, internet and digital technology have not been quite the apotheosis that some expected. Many authors have begun to suggest more cautious approaches. Critical voices caution against falling into the trap of technological determinism – also known as the 'Borg complex'⁸⁰ – by presuming that the most advanced technological solution is inherently the best one to address contemporary issues.

Not surprisingly, these assumptions have found confirmation in everyday reality from both non-democratic and democratic regimes. Authoritarian regimes have found ways to turn technology into a weapon, rather than being held back by it. Take the People's Republic of China for example. Since the Internet's arrival in 1994, digital technologies have provided a critical channel of communication for Chinese citizens. Yet as technology has spread, Chinese authorities have intensified their efforts to set up a series of mechanisms aimed at asserting their dominance in cyberspace⁸¹. Since the coronavirus outbreak in January 2020, authorities from China to Russia have increased surveillance and clamped down on free speech, with the risk that these measures will persist even after the situation eases. Another case in point is the notorious China's '**social credit scoring system**', announced in 2014 (and expected to be rolled out by 2020).⁸² A 2019 study published by the not-for-profit organisation Algorithmic Watch showed that much of the African

⁷⁵ See B.S. Noveck, *Wiki government. How technology can make government better, democracy stronger, and citizens more powerful*, Brookings Institution Press, 2010.

⁷⁶ See O. Perez, 'Collaborative e-Rulemaking, Democratic Bots, and the Future of Digital Democracy', *Digital Government: Research and Practice*, Vol. 1(1), 2020.

⁷⁷ The TedTalk by Hidalgo is available here: https://www.ted.com/talks/cesar_hidalgo_a_bold_idea_to_replace_politicians.

⁷⁸ See A. Fung, H. Russon Gilman and J. Shkabatur, 'Six models for the internet + politics', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 15, 2013, pp. 30-47.

⁷⁹ See, inter alia, D. Schuler, 'Can Technology Support Democracy?', *Digital Governance: Research and Practice*, Vol. 1(1), 2020.

⁸⁰ The Borg is a species appearing in the *Star Trek* television series. As described in a recent article ('Can technology plan economies and destroy democracy?') in *The Economist*: 'Borg uses nanotechnology and computers to assimilate all those whom it encounters into its own collective. Its members all hear what each hears, all see what each sees, all will what each wills: there are no individuals; there are no aims but those of the collective'.

⁸¹ See X. Qiang, 'The Road to Digital Unfreedom: President Xi's Surveillance State', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30 (1), 2019, pp. 53–67.

⁸² The social credit system develops profile scores of citizens, based on their online and offline activities. Depending on their score, citizens might be eligible or not for certain activities, as for instance travelling outside of their country, or have high-speed internet at home. See R. Creemers, 'China's Social Credit System: An Evolving Practice of Control', Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3175792>.

continent is well on its way towards comprehensive biometric registration, which could enable comprehensive citizen scoring or automated surveillance in the near future.⁸³

Democratic regimes are not without concerns caused by the digital disruption of democratic practices however. '**Deepfakes**' offer a striking example. Artificial intelligence technologies used to produce videos in which politicians or other public figures are portrayed as doing and saying things they never did or said are raising concerns about their potential for mass manipulation.⁸⁴ Not everyone agrees on the dangerousness of deepfakes in political discourse.⁸⁵ Yet the list of new cases brought to the attention of the public grows day by day. Examples include the famous video portraying US President Barack Obama and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. In February 2020, Manoj Tiwari, an Indian politician, was reported using a 'lip-sync' deepfake algorithm to make videos of himself speaking multiple languages, and so targeting voters he might not otherwise have been able to reach as directly.⁸⁶

At least on one point, analysts agree: leaving the issues of digitalisation of democracy unquestioned would further erode the building blocks of democracy. In 2016 the prestigious Nine Dots Prize sponsored by the Kadas Prize Foundation with support from the University of Cambridge to promote innovative thinking on tackling problems facing the modern world asked the question 'are digital technologies making politics impossible?'. The winner of the prize, James Williams, speculated on how technology is competing for our attention, distracting us from more urgent matters. In a survey conducted in 2019 by Pew Research Center and Elon University among 979 technology innovators, developers, activists and researchers, **49%** of respondents said they expected technology to weaken core aspects of democracy and democratic representations.⁸⁷ In a study published by the World Bank Group, Tiago Peixoto and Tom Steinberg make **11 predictions** on risks and values created by emerging digital technologies. They warn in particular about the perils of deepfake technology, the spread of social scoring systems, and the impact of automation on certain kinds of citizen feedback and on the mobilisation of public opinion.⁸⁸

Public administrations and technology – structural and knowledge gaps

This study focuses on a specific (and perhaps underestimated) cause for concern relating to technology: the uneven consequences of technological progress. As Johanna Peña-Bickley put it: 'Moore's law caught democracies by surprise'⁸⁹. While citizens (and corporations) have greatly benefited from technological advancements, public administrations have not profited to the same extent. This is not to suggest that public administrations have never reviewed their management practices or innovated their working methods with the support of technology. Quite the opposite,

⁸³ See N. Kayser-Bril, *Identity management and citizen scoring in Ghana, Rwanda, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe and China*, Algorithm Watch, 2019.

⁸⁴ See, for instance M. Balmas, 'When Fake News Becomes Real: Combined Exposure to Multiple News Sources and Political Attitudes of Inefficacy, Alienation, and Cynicism', *Communication Research*, Vol. 41(3), 2014, pp. 430-454; H. Huang, 'The Pathology of Hard Propaganda', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80(3), 2018, pp. 1034-1038.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, C. Wittenberg, A. Berinsky, J. Zong and D.G. Rand, [The \(Minimal\) Persuasive Advantage of Political Video over Text](#), 2020.

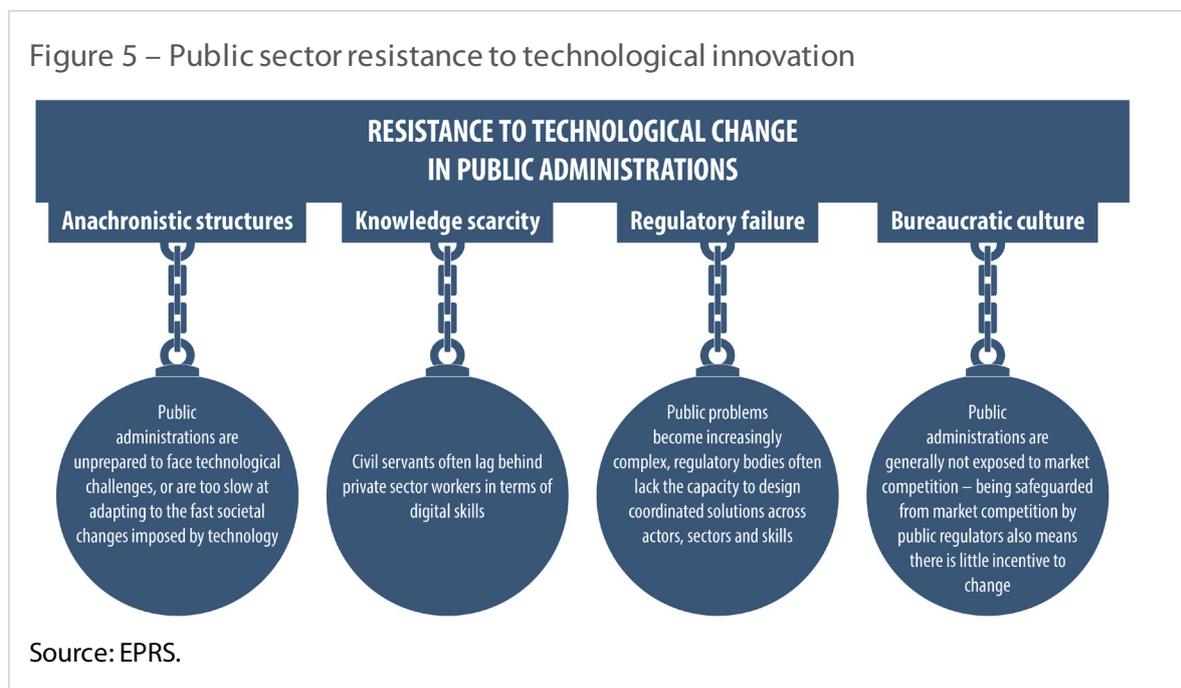
⁸⁶ See K. Lyons, 'An Indian politician used AI to translate his speech into other languages to reach more votes', *The Verge*, 18 February 2020.

⁸⁷ See J. Anderson, L. Raine, [Many tech experts say digital disruption will hurt democracy](#), Pew Research Center, 2020.

⁸⁸ See T. Peixoto and T. Steinberg, *Citizen Engagement. Emerging digital technologies create new risks and value*, World Bank Group, 2020.

⁸⁹ Moore's Law is a computing term that originated around 1970; the simplified version of this law states that processor speeds, or overall processing power for computers will double every two years. For further information see [Joanna Peña-Bickley.com](#).

in fact. There are excellent examples of public sector institutions making constant attempts to keep pace with technological progress, the European Parliament being one of those.⁹⁰ For most public regulators, however, the reality of meeting the demands of tech-empowered, hyper-connected, civics has not matched the early promises of technology for more participatory and inclusive governance.



The reasons are partly structural – **anachronistic structures** may mean that public administrations are unprepared to face technological challenges, or too slow in adapting to the fast societal changes imposed by technology – and partly related to **knowledge-scarcity**. Civil servants often lag behind private sector workers in terms of digital skills. In a survey run by the consultancy Deloitte in 2015, Over **70 %** of the administrators surveyed admitted lagging behind the private sector in terms of digital skills.⁹¹ Inadequate training, blunt management tools, and funding cuts often impede their innovative potential.⁹² These structural and knowledge gaps mean public structures have limited capacity to engage meaningfully with citizens. According to the 2018 GE Global Innovation Barometer, only **9 %** of business executives globally nominate governments and public authorities as top drivers of innovation in society, compared to **23 %** and **18 %** of executives mentioning, respectively, multinational corporations and start-ups. In a recent comparative study of 10 parliaments (five European and five from the Americas) that focused on how legislative bodies use

⁹⁰ On this point, see G. Vilella, Working methods of the European Parliament Administration in Multi-actors World, European Press Academic Publishing, 2019.

⁹¹ See Deloitte Digital, Digital government transformation, Deloitte, 2015.

⁹² On this point see B. Noveck and R. Glover, [Today's problems, yesterday's toolkit](#), Australia and New Zealand School of Government, 2019. See also P. Zelikow, [To regain policy competence: the software of American public problem-solving](#), *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2(4), 2019. The article describes various attempts to educate civil servants in the United States.

digital tools to promote participation, a worrying tendency emerged: all the parliaments sampled were reluctant to use ICT tools to reconnect with citizens.⁹³

Regulatory failures

Regulatory failure plays a role, too. With public problems becoming increasingly complex, regulatory bodies often lack the capacity to design coordinated solutions across actors, sectors, and skills. Several authors have investigated the issue of complexity in public decision-making, suggesting that collaboration is key to addressing public issues that cannot be handled by a single regulator.⁹⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, however, knowledgeable public regulators are not safe either. More often than not, they are impaired by the scarcity of another fundamental resource: time. The exponential growth of technology has made more data continually available to them. Yet, making decisions on the basis on tech-generated information obliges governments to move fast. They need to avoid contradictory information that could complicate or prove their decisions wrong. Haste, however, threatens the reliability of sound decision-making, because it leaves insufficient time for thorough exploration of consequences. Data offers a good example of regulatory failure. We have a global 'datasphere' that is expected to grow to **163 zettabytes** by 2025,⁹⁵ yet many governments have thus far underestimated the potential (and also the risks) of big and open data. According to the Open Data Barometer, in 2018, after almost one decade into open data, leading governments had opened fewer than **one in five datasets**.⁹⁶

A bureaucratic culture

Finally, public sector resistance to harnessing technology in order to become more accessible and participatory has a **cultural explanation**. Public administrations are not generally exposed to market competition, for justifiable reasons. Yet for public regulators, being safeguarded from market competition also means that they have limited incentives to change. The result is that governments either persist in addressing demands for participation with traditional, inefficient, regulatory approaches, or – at worst – completely disregard the innovative potential of technological innovation. On this point, how public administrations harness and make use of the internet is telling. Traditionally, public authorities have used the internet as a one-way publishing and distribution network, rather than as a medium to connect the many to the many. In doing so, they largely miss out on the internet's potential in terms of interaction and accountability.⁹⁷

⁹³ See S.G. Luque, I. Villegas Simon and T. Duran Becerra, 'Use of the websites of parliaments to promote citizen deliberation in the process of public decision-making: Comparative study of ten countries', *Communication & Society*, Vol. 30(4), pp. 77-97, 2017.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, B. Gray and J. Purdy, *Collaborating for the future: Multi-stakeholder partnerships for solving complex problems*, Oxford University Press, 2018; J.E. Innes, and D.E. Booher, *Planning with complexity: An introduction to collaborative rationality for public policy*, Routledge, 2018.

⁹⁵ On this point See D. Reinsele, J. Gantz and J. Rydning, *Data Age 2025: the evolution of data to life-critical*, IDC White Paper, 2017.

⁹⁶ The Open Data Barometer is available here: https://opendatabarometer.org/?_year=2017&indicator=ODB.

⁹⁷ On this point, see D. Schlosberg, S.W. Shulman and S. Zavetoski, 'Virtual environmental citizenship: Web-based public participation in rulemaking in the United States', in A. Dobson and D. Bells (eds.), *Environmental Citizenship*, MIT Press, 2006. See also W. Sack, 'Discourse architecture and very large-scale conversation', in R. Lat-Ham and S. Sassen (eds.), *Digital Formations: IT and New Architecture in the Global Realm*, Princeton University Press, 2005.

1.2. Paradigm shift: from disengaged to autonomously engaged communities

The Brazilian philosopher Umberto Unger once argued that in contemporary democracies it is crucial to enable people to see themselves as individuals capable of escaping their confined roles.⁹⁸ Drawing on Unger's claim, it can be argued that citizens' roles within democratic systems are undergoing a major transformation. This transformation can be summarised by looking at the distinction between two forms of civic engagement.

Traditional understandings of civic and political engagement define the role of citizens in democracies by looking at the actual impact they have on their governments. From this perspective, civic engagement is measurable in terms of laws passed or rejected, or corporate policies adopted or abolished. In this context **civic engagement is described as 'thick'** – i.e. intensive, informed and deliberative. It relies on small-group settings, either online or offline, in which people (also described as **'committed publics'**) decide how they want to help to solve problems and then use their resources (time and money) to influence decision-making. In Hahrie Han's taxonomy, thick engagement would correspond to **'organising'** – capacity-building activities that create new power by bringing people together to take action as a community. Organising, explains Han, can lock in sustained support in ways that commitment to a single issue – the type of motivation on which mobilising approaches tend to rely – may not.⁹⁹

Thick engagement is a powerful concept, but has its downsides. To begin with, the idea that civic engagement is thick seems at odds with the notion that citizens have almost no impact on contemporary democracy. If that were true, intensive, informed and deliberative engagement would be useless. However, even if that were not true, thick engagement would still imply a substantial investment of time and money for citizens interested in having an impact on public decision-making. For these reasons, some scholars describe contemporary acts of engagement as **'thin'**.¹⁰⁰ These acts require fewer material efforts compared with traditional engagement. They are intended primarily to show support, opposition or identification with a cause. **Thin engagement** is faster, easier and potentially viral – it encompasses mainly online activities that allow people to express opinions and affiliate themselves with a particular cause. Thin engagement is typical of **'attentive publics'**: the portion of the broader general public that shares the same issue-perspectives and values. Attentive publics are based on solidarity. They are open to anyone who shares the values or issue position that they advocate for; environmentalists are a case in point.¹⁰¹ From a thin engagement perspective, nobody would expect the voice of each individual participant to lead to concrete and measurable outcomes. Yet the belief is that, collectively, thin and symbolic acts of engagement might change the climate in which that change could occur. In Han's

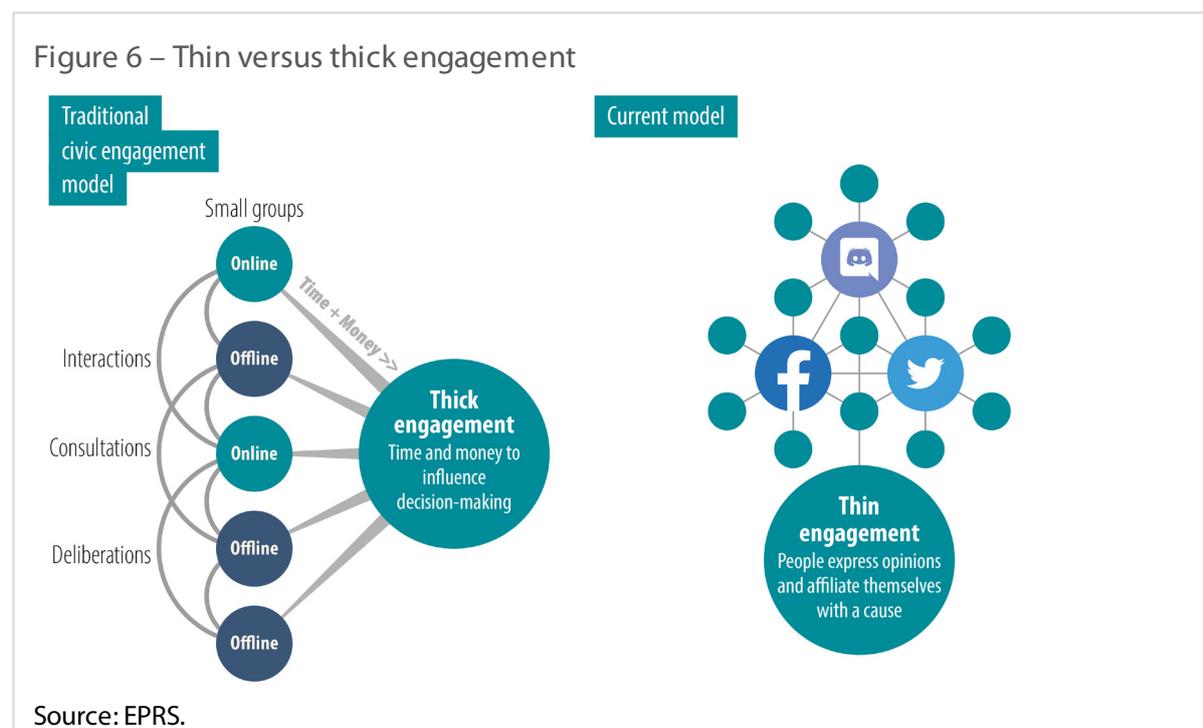
⁹⁸ See R. Unger, *Democracy Realized: The Progressive Alternative*, Verso, 1998.

⁹⁹ See H. Han, *How organisations develop activists: civic associations and leadership in the 21st century*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ The difference between thick and thin acts of engagement is explained by E. Zuckermann in [Beyond the 'crisis in civics'](#), 2013.

¹⁰¹ See P. Lowe and J. Goyder, *Environmental Groups in Politics*, George Allen & Unwin, 1983.

terminology this would correspond to **mobilisation**. The latter is obtained by means of e-mail lists and online petitions, and normally leverages powers that already exist.



From conventional to unconventional forms of participation

Following this line of thought, it has been argued that the total capital of civic engagement has not depleted, but it has simply transformed. Political and civic participation has decreased and been replaced partially by forms of '**unconventional participation**'. While the former targets more traditional political processes and institutional environments, the latter refers more to non-institutionalised actions, for example protests, flash-mobs, demonstrations and social movements.

Pierre Rosanvallon and Arthur Goldhammer, for instance, admit that the steady erosion of confidence in representatives has become one of the major political issues of our time. Yet they oppose the idea that the world has entered a phase of general political apathy, and refer to the spread of activism in the streets, in cities across the globe and on the internet.¹⁰² In 2019 alone, according to a study from the Center for Strategic International Studies, massive anti-government movements occurred in **114 countries, 31 %** more than a decade ago.¹⁰³ The sheer scale of the protests was remarkable. On June 16, 2019, nearly a quarter of Hong Kong residents marched in the streets; from 2017 to 1 January 2020, almost **11.5 million** Americans participated in **16 000 protests** across every US state. In May and June 2020, protests over the death of George Floyd, calling for police reform and an end to systemic racism, spread through the 50 states of the US. Other countries around the globe followed in a show of solidarity.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² See P. Rosanvallon and A. Goldhammer, *Counter-Democracy: politics in the age of distrust*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁰³ See S.J. Brannen, C.S. Haig and K. Schmidt, *The age of mass protests. Understanding an escalating global trend*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ For further information, see J. Hadden and W. Cheong, [Photos show where around the world Black Lives Matter and anti-police brutality protests are erupting, from Tokyo to Amsterdam](#), Business Insider, 6 June 2020.

American political theorist Benjamin Barber agrees. The 'small d democrats', in Barber's terminology, are citizens who participate at multiple levels, both individually and collectively, in activities such as volunteering and voting. These citizens, however, are disappearing. According to Barber, they have been replaced by '**quiet citizens**', nurtured by the decline of trust in democratic institutions. Quiet citizens are far from inactive. In a study published in 2017 by the Woolf Institute at Cambridge University, quiet citizens are described as individuals that place trust in organisations based on their effectiveness, and that decide to contribute positively in their communities, often without recognition or reward for their work.¹⁰⁵

The participatory makeover

While citizens may be organising in communities and engaging in non-conventional forms of participation and willing to produce social change at grassroots level, they remain distant from conventional channels of participation. Therefore, the challenge for public administrations is understanding how to handle the paradigm shift in civic engagement. How can citizens who share similar issue-perspectives and values, but who are disengaged from traditional participation, be transformed into citizens formally committed via participatory initiatives? Suggestions, proposals and attempts to solve this issue are many and varied. Although the '**participatory makeover**' is a common trend among public administrations around the world,¹⁰⁶ there is little uniformity in the scope and degree to which it is taking place. This raises another question: does the makeover work? The following section examines a wide range of initiatives aimed at engaging citizens and in doing so attempts to give a preliminary answer to these questions.

¹⁰⁵ The study can be downloaded here: <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/assets/file-downloads/Trust-in-Crisis-Report.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ The expression 'participatory makeover' is used by C. Hendricks and A. Kay, 'From 'opening up' to democratic renewal: Deepening public engagement in legislative committees', *Government and Opposition*, 2017, pp. 1-27.

2. The practice of democracy – a sample of civic engagement practices across the world

This section examines a selection of initiatives implemented by public administrations aimed at making democratic structures 'resilient' to anti-democratic threats. Aiming to shed light on how public structures are reacting to democratic regression, the sample emphasises both best practices and failures in fostering public engagement and stimulating the development of democratic regimes.

When it comes to the methodology used to select the cases, despite key differences in terms of length, design, structure and outcomes, the selected cases share **two common traits**:

First, they represent '**invited spaces of consultation and deliberation**'. In other words, and with the one exception of vTaiwan, which is formally unaffiliated from the government, the selection was made from examples of public administrations that invited citizens to take part in debating or drafting new policies. Also referred to as 'induced' spaces of participation, *invited* spaces are different from '*claimed*' spaces. The latter are claimed by civic actors and social movements in confrontation with public powers (and thus fall outside the scope of this study).

Second, they show **a distinctive degree of innovation compared with traditional practices of civic engagement**. The range and scope of innovation may of course vary, ranging from *moderately* innovative (i.e. participatory procedures are supplemented by tools aimed at increasing citizens' active involvement) to *extremely* innovative (i.e. the design of procedures is meant to bolster the legitimacy of and trust in public structures). This, however, does not mean that failed attempts to innovate democratic practices are not considered. On the contrary, the sample includes cases in which citizens did not respond as expected by public administrations, trust in public sector institutions was not restored or participation was no more than window-dressing, i.e. used to legitimise decisions that had been already taken or that would not be adapted to the outcomes of consultative processes.

The table in the annex lists and attempts to order all the civic engagement initiatives examined in this study. For this reason, it offers only a snapshot of relevant information about each case, namely: the number of participants, the procedural steps, the administrative level (local, national, supranational) and the outcome of the consultation. Second, the table serves to draw out meaningful insights from the relationship between the cases assessed and **three key drivers** related to them. The drivers are: the role of private actors in (co-) running civic engagement initiatives; the design of participation; and the degree of politicisation. Some of the initiatives reported in this section are characterised by the presence of only one of these drivers. In the majority of cases, however, at least two (or even all three) drivers are involved.

2.1. The role of private actors in public sector consultations

The first driver to consider is the **private, public or hybrid nature** of the initiatives mapped in this study. For the sake of clarity: all cases analysed in this section were organised and implemented by public administrations. In doing so, however, public institutions occasionally decided to cooperate with private actors. The latter offered public administrations a variety of services, including online polling platforms, back-office assistance or general support in communication and marketing. Interestingly, the outcome is a kind of '**hybridisation**' of participatory initiatives: coordinated by public actors and co-implemented with private companies.

Hybrids of this kind can be seen as both beneficial and problematic. On the one hand, the complex set of bonds and interactions between individuals, public organisations, and tech companies used to engage citizens in policy-making is beneficial: it helps public administrations to overcome structural and cultural gaps in innovation. Experts see '**GovTech**' as an area destined to grow, fuelled by increased attention from investors. This, claim some authors, is particularly true of the field of '**democracy tech**'.¹⁰⁷ The number of initiatives proposed to support governmental activities with online voting, citizens' participation or political activities (e.g. candidates' fundraising) is enormous. Examples include: 'Swap My Votes', intended to contrast political apathy and disillusion; '*They Work for You*', which aims to inform the public by making open data from the UK parliament easy to follow; '*The Good Lobby*' in Brussels, which matches civic organisations with a pool of professionals committed to pro bono consultancy; and, finally, the '*New Citizenship Project*' and '*The Decision Lab*', both dedicated to using creative strategies to democratise the public sector, promote the role of people and encourage better participation in society.

GovTech can generate concerns about the legitimacy of public structures delegating regulatory functions to private companies, however. Although this is not a new theme (Brinton Milward and Keith Provan analysed the progressive replacement of the public sector with a network of third-party providers and services in a famous article published at the turn of the century),¹⁰⁸ the problem of **third-party accountability** has been reignited in recent years. In the field of civic engagement, the problem applies in particular to the liability of private actors (mostly tech startups) contracted by public administrations to provide assistance in engaging citizens in the co-production of public policies. What happens, for instance, if the company goes bankrupt, or it is acquired by another company? What are the implications of security breaches in the databases' owned by private companies?

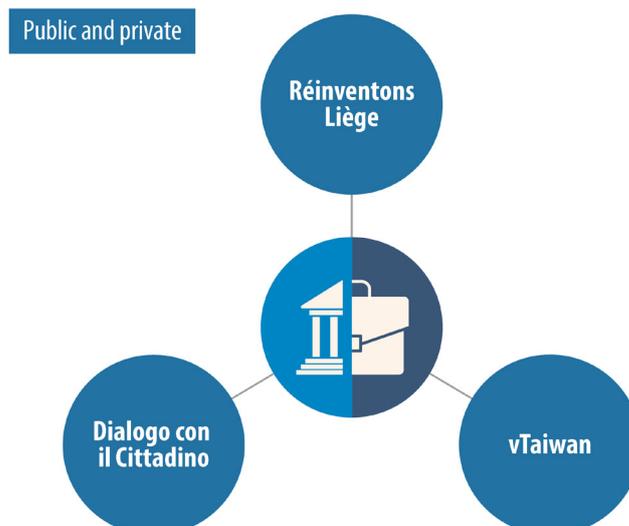
Academics suggest various solutions. The Bennet Institute for Public Policy at Cambridge University, for instance, recommends certification standards for the accountability of companies providing public regulators with disruptive digital innovations.¹⁰⁹ Other options being evaluated include emulating the approach used for 'automated decision-making', that is procedures in which decisions are partially or completely delegated to another person or corporate entity, which then use automatically executed decision-making models to perform an action. A further alternative would be the adoption of approaches similar to open-source operating systems such as Wikipedia or Linux. These platforms allow oversight by their users to ensure an absence of bias or other infringements.

¹⁰⁷ See R. Scott, Democracy tech will be the next hot investment space, *Wired*, 10 February 2020.

¹⁰⁸ See H.B. Milward and K.G. Provan, 'Governing the hollow state', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 10, 2000, pp. 359-379.

¹⁰⁹ See T. Filer, *Governing GovTech*, Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2019.

Figure 7 – Examples of private actors in public consultations



Source: EPRS.

2.1.1. Réinventons Liège

In 2017, Liège, one of the biggest cities in Belgium's Wallonia region, opened up a wide-ranging participatory plan to 'rethink' the city. The process began with an open call to ideas. For **4 months**, citizens were encouraged to share opinions and ideas. At the end of the first phase, **983 projects** had been submitted. The following phase consisted of a vote to designate the best ranking proposals that would make up the City Plan. In total, there were **95 000 votes**, resulting in the selection of **77 priority actions**. These covered a range of domains including culture, art, social inclusion, urban agriculture and mobility. The municipality committed to implement these projects over the following years.¹¹⁰

Réinventons Liège (which translates as 'let's reinvent Liège') provides a good example of a consultative process run by a public administration through a digital platform designed and owned by a private actor. In the case of Liège, the platform for the online consultation was provided by the Belgian civic tech startup CitizenLab. Founded in 2015, CitizenLab developed an online platform to be used by public administrations (or civic actors) to engage targeted communities in consultative processes. Clients of CitizenLab include municipalities (Vancouver, Leuven and Schiedam for example), intercommunal structures (Grand Paris Sud, for instance) and social movements (e.g. Youth4Climate).

The tasks were shared between the municipality of Liège and CitizenLab. The municipal administration took care of all communication and marketing activities, both online (by means of social media networks and a dedicated newsletter) and offline, with personal presentations of the project by the mayor to neighbourhood committees. CitizenLab had two main tasks. First, it helped the municipality to moderate the debate on the platform (the CitizenLab platform downgrades

¹¹⁰ The list of projects is available here: https://www.reinventonsliege.be/projets#b_start=0.

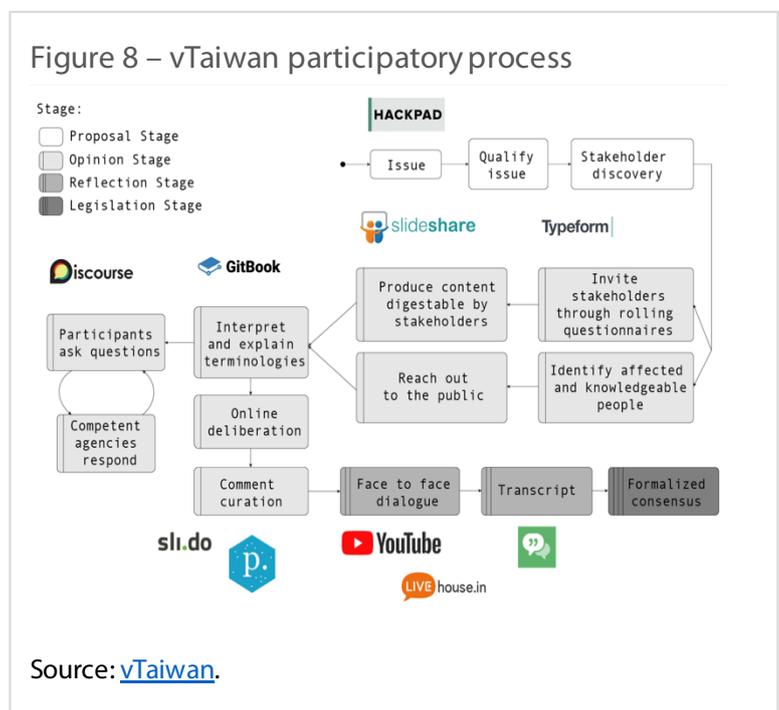
inappropriate content to the bottom of the public display)¹¹¹. Second, it provided advice on the use of the platform and on ways to combine online and offline approaches to consulting citizens.

2.1.2. vTaiwan

In Taiwan, roughly half the country currently participates in policy-making through an online and offline platform named vTaiwan.¹¹² Launched in 2014, in the aftermath of the Sunflower Movement, a student-driven protest,¹¹³ vTaiwan involves a mix of online (e.g. visual clusters of participants who agree and disagree on an issue) and offline activities (typically questions and suggestions collected through the platform and later addressed in public meetings) aimed at encouraging Taiwanese citizens to **reach a consensus on specific policy issues**. According to data released by the Taiwanese government, by the end of February 2018 **26 cases** had been discussed through the vTaiwan process, and **80 %** of them had led to some decisive government action. Examples include the regulation of UberX in the country, the approval of the fintech sandbox regulation and the introduction of new regulatory measures about non-consensual intimate images.

The vTaiwan process is designed to facilitate constructive debate and stakeholders' interactions. Two aspects are noteworthy. The first is that the consultative process is articulated in **four successive stages** – proposal, opinion, reflection and legislation – supported by a selection of collaborative open source engagement tools. Various stages are intended to foster different forms of engagement. In the 'objective' stage, the consultation group forms and develops the necessary background regulations and rules; the subsequent 'reflective' stage allows participants to share thoughts and opinions; the 'interpretive' stage combines online and offline working groups to develop findings and recommendations; and, finally, at the 'decision' stage the findings are delivered to the government, in order to have them accepted or rejected.¹¹⁴

Second, the platform allows for the use of tools to facilitate the engagement of participants. In some cases, for instance, stakeholder dialogues were live-streamed through 3D-cameras to allow observers to immerse themselves in virtual reality representations of those conversations.¹¹⁵



¹¹¹ According to the [data](#) available, the Liège platform manager only had to ask users to moderate their posts five times out of more than 1 000 ideas, i.e. in less than 0.5 % of cases.

¹¹² See <https://info.vtaiwan.tw>.

¹¹³ For further information, see I. Rowen, 'Inside Taiwan's Sunflower Movement: Twenty-four days in a student-occupied Parliament, and the future of the Region', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74 (1), 2015.

¹¹⁴ For further information on this point see J. Simon, [Digital Democracy: The tools transforming political engagement](#), Nesta, 2017.

¹¹⁵ In spite of these features, vTaiwan's participation has remained remarkably concentrated among a small group of people for quite a long time. Only a few thousand people have subscribed to the initiative's mailing list, and very few contribute to the discussion forum.

The case of vTaiwan is particularly interesting on account of its hybrid public-private nature. On this point, it is worth recalling that the initiative is formally **unaffiliated with the Taiwanese government**. Nonetheless, vTaiwan has managed to achieve buy-in from high-ranking government leaders. This has given the platform credibility and has facilitated the translation of several consultation findings and recommendations into policy outcomes. At the same time, the independence of the initiative from the government has enabled the platform to be flexible and adaptable to changes imposed by new and unforeseen circumstances.

As shown in the picture above, the vTaiwan participatory process is **builds in private-service providers** such as YouTube and Slido. In a way similar to the city of Liège, part of the consultative process is run through a privately-owned digital platform: **Pol.is**. This is a US startup created with the aim of building a communication system for large scale interactions, based on the principle that all ideas have equal standing in online conversations (and therefore minority opinions should be preserved rather than 'outvoted'). Pol.is offers an interactive survey tool that can be used to generate maps of public opinion that help citizens, governments, and legislators discover the nuances of agreement and disagreement on contentious issues. Following the example of vTaiwan, other political and institutional actors have begun to use this platform. One example is Alternatives, a Danish progressive political party that is using the platform to engage its constituency in the co-drafting of political proposals and policies.¹¹⁶

2.1.3. Dialogo con il Cittadino

In 2012, hit by the global economic crisis that had erupted three years earlier, Italian institutions were facing a growing sense of discontent and criticism.¹¹⁷ The public sector's (perceived) inability to approve long-awaited structural reforms had fuelled public demands for enhanced civic engagement in public decision-making. To address these phenomena, political and institutional actors shifted progressively from centralised, top-down to bottom-up, inclusive approaches. Of particular interest was the initiative launched by the government led by prime minister Mario Monti, named '**Dialogo con il Cittadino**' (in English: dialogue with the citizen).¹¹⁸

This web-based platform offered the government a viable way to boost its legitimacy and accountability. The Dialogo sought to foster public debate on topics of relevance on the governmental agenda, to strengthen the legitimacy of the reforms to be adopted and, in so doing, overcome political parties' opposition. Moreover, with the Dialogo the government could inform citizens promptly about its decisions, using a variety of documents, ranging from press releases, in-depth analyses and position papers.

Citizens responded positively to the initiative. During the first quarter of 2012, there were **150 537 visitors** to the web space that hosted the Dialogue. The trend remained steady in the following two quarters. Over time, the Dialogue became the front office of the Italian government.

¹¹⁶ For info: <https://alternativet.dk/>.

¹¹⁷ In less than 50 years, the number of official supporters of political parties in Italy halved. In 1955, there were an estimated 4.2 million political supporters. In 2012, the combined number of supporters for the four major parties (PdL, PD, Sel, and LegaNord) was under 2 million; see S. Vassallo (ed.), *Il divario incolmabile. Rappresentanza politica e rendimento istituzionale nelle regioni italiane*, Il Mulino, 2013.

¹¹⁸ For further information see G. Sgueo, 'Web-based participatory democracy: findings from Italy', in C.G. Reddick and L. Anthopoulos (eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Public Administration. Innovation from developed countries*, Routledge, 2015. See also <http://qualitapa.gov.it/sitoarcheologico/nc/services/news/article/dialogo-con-il-cittadino-la-bacheca-online-del-governo-italiano/index-internal-link=&cHash=0c4c703714581fb5b7fa14c3e44a0456.html>.

After 18 months, roughly **90 000 people** had used the platform to contact the government. On average, the back-office received **5 000 e-mails a month**.¹¹⁹ While the team of civil servants charged with reading and answering citizens' queries did not change over the two years of life of the initiative, during peak periods, the Dialogo relied on the support of third parties, contracted to provide back-office functions. This happened in particular with online communication activities. Back in 2012, the Italian government had decided not to engage with Facebook; but it had opened an official account on Twitter to inform citizens and media of governmental activities and in particular of on-going and new online consultations. In autumn 2014, the government contracted a sentiment analyst to study conversations on the social network and report on citizens' most pressing concerns and demands.

2.2. Design-thinking and participatory procedures

A second driver that can be used to assess the civic engagement initiatives analysed in this section is **design-thinking** or, in other words, the approach to policy-making from a design perspective.¹²⁰ This is the well-established idea that policy-making should be designed in accordance with specific needs or to accomplish certain goals efficiently. Already in 1969 Herbert Simon called public administration a 'design science'.¹²¹ He argued that public administrators ought to diagnose problems and devise optimal ways to deal with them. Since then, several scholars have underlined the idea of public administrations as a design science.¹²² The attention paid to designing policy, however, has increased over the last decade,¹²³ with designers stepping up and playing a pivotal role in empathetically approaching the dynamic relationships between legislators, communities and technology. Today, design-based approaches are credited with opening up new options to policy-makers, and thus helping them to explore potentially more effective regulatory solutions.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ 45 % of the contacts were from northern regions, compared with 24 % from central regions, 18 % from southern regions, and 8 % from islands. Nearly 5 % of contacts were from citizens living abroad. On average, citizens were aged between 35 and 50, with no significant differences in gender. In the first quarter of 2012, 69 % of the messages received through the platform were answered within three weeks of reception. Overall, at the end of the year, 95 % of the messages received had been answered.

¹²⁰ See P. Zelikow, 'To regain policy competence: the software of American public problem-solving', *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, 2019. The author notes that usage of the word 'design' can vary in important ways. Design-thinking in business is synonymous of greater creativity about what the firm should do. In academia, scholars of public management draw attention to the multi-layered nature of modern policy design. See also M. Howlett, I. Mukherjee and J. Jie Woo, 'From Tools to Toolkits in Policy Design Studies: The New Design Orientation Towards Policy Formulation Research', *Policy & Politics*, Vol. 43, 2015, pp. 297-299.

¹²¹ See H. Simon, *The sciences of the artificial*, MIT Press, 1969.

¹²² See, for instance, R.F. Shangraw and M.M. Crow, 'Public administration as a 'design science'', *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 21 (6-8), 1989, pp. 153-160; and R.M. Walker, 'Globalised public management: an interdisciplinary design science?', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 21(1), 2011, pp. 53-59.

¹²³ At EU level, debates and reflection the application of design-thinking to policy-making are recent. In 2018, the European Political Strategy Centre stressed that equality should be addressed not only through ex-post, redistributive tools and policies, but also through design. See European Commission – European Political Strategy Centre, *State of the Union 2018. Our destiny in our hands*, Brussels, 2018. The following year the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission dedicated a report to the future of governing. The report considers design-thinking as a crucial step in the development of people-centred governance models, responding to changes from citizens' perspectives, and experimenting with new modes of knowledge creation. See Joint Research Centre, *The future of government 2030+*, Brussels 2019. Finally, in the annual report published by EPRS analysing the key trends for the year ahead, design-thinking and nudging appear in the list of the most promising policy trends for 2020. See *10 issues to watch in 2020*, EPRS, European Parliament, 2020.

¹²⁴ See C. Bason (ed.), *Design for policy*, Aldershot 2014; T. Fisher and L. Gamman, *Tricky design: the ethics of things*, Bloomsbury, 2019; P. Ehn, E.M. Nilsson and R. Topgaard, *Making futures: marginal notes on innovation, design, and*

An appropriately designed approach helps public regulators to answer important questions about new rules: can they be delivered? What types of outcomes are likely to emerge? How are stakeholders likely to react?

Many reasons may explain the growing relevance of design thinking in the public sector, with **adaptability** being just one. Compared with traditional problem-solving approaches, design thinking presents three advantages.¹²⁵ First, design-thinking defines problems more tentatively, and admits that definitions go through iterate changes (depending on the type and quantity of new information available to the regulator). This argument asserts that testing alternative policy options will result in usable knowledge. Second, design-thinking implements a bottom-up approach. The underlying assumption is that public services may be co-designed with end-users (i.e. citizens) based upon the needs and perspectives of the latter and therefore increasing their satisfaction. Third, and fundamentally, in design-thinking a broader array of tools and techniques are brought to the table. This coincides with the rise of 'behavioural science' approaches – policy interventions that are designed in order to influence citizens' choice architecture¹²⁶ – and with the growing number of behavioural insight teams or policy labs that have formed in many countries to assist governments in designing policies. Examples include the United Kingdom, the US, Australia and Canada. Supranational regulators such as the EU and the World Bank have also created 'nudge units' to help them increase the impact of their policies.

Design-thinking as prosumerism

What makes design-thinking extremely interesting in the field of civic engagement is that it portrays a **collaborative vision of policy-making**. Designing policies involves setting up prototypes and adapting their design in order to learn how to improve them through trial and error. Everyone benefits from this process. The regulator benefits from the skills and expertise provided by citizens, who in turn have the opportunity to shape new policies according to their needs. In this respect, design approach is reminiscent of '**prosumerism**' – i.e. the development of personalised services along with overspread distribution.¹²⁷ According to this ideological scheme, co-creation results from the active flow and exchange of ideas and information between and within citizens and public administrators. This 'flow' is supposed to facilitate both engagement and empowerment of civic actors in all stages of policy-making. Furthermore, it accelerates the renovation of political and institutional attitudes, stimulating institutions to correct goals routinely, and to re-imagine their interaction with citizens and communities in original ways.

The level of engagement of participants

There is, however, a probability that design choices can lead to unexpected results. This is especially true in the field of civic engagement and, more specifically, with regard to the level of engagement of participants in consultation processes. The question is to what extent the choices of participants

democracy, Boston 2014. See also IBM, *Creating the ultimate government experience. How to use design-thinking to put citizens at the centre of public sector services*, 2018.

¹²⁵ See J.M. Bruson, B.C. Crosby and D. Seo, 'Using a design approach to create collaborative governance', *Policy & Politics*, 2019. More generally about design-thinking, see N. Cross, *Design thinking: understanding how designers think and work*, Berg, 2011.

¹²⁶ See R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, *Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*, Yale University Press, 2008. See also S. Grimmelikhuijsen, S. Jilke, A.L. Olsen and L. Tummers, 'Behavioral public administration: combining insights from public administration and psychology', *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 77(1), 2017, pp. 45-56.

¹²⁷ Coined in 1980, prosumerism describes a market in which the basic needs of consumers are already satisfied by mass production and companies initiate processes of mass personalisation by mass producing highly personalised products. Prosumers participate in both the design (as producers) and the consumption (as consumers) of products through mass customisation. See A. Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, 1984.

can be influenced by the subjective decisions that policy-makers make as they design participatory processes. Recent research trials show that different design approaches inevitably lead to significant variations in (the number and the level of engagement of) participants.¹²⁸ Academic literature highlights this as a problem, especially when the comments received at the end of the consultative process amount to short statements of approval or disapproval, simply echoing the opinions of few dominant players.¹²⁹

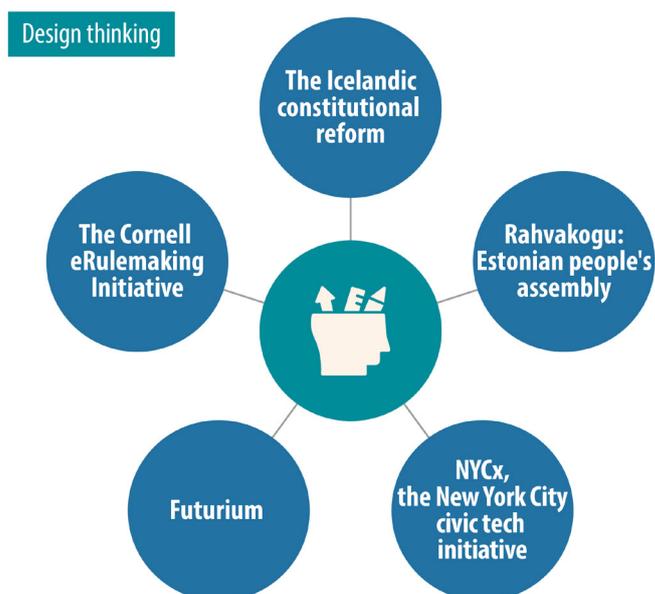
To substantiate this difference, plenty of studies on participation separate '**hard-core participants**' from '**unqualified masses**'. The former are people who participate a lot. Their commitment shapes them into extraordinary experts on specific issues and they dominate participation. They are, however, a minority. Only those citizens with preferential access to three fundamental resources – time, money and knowledge – can be included in this category. They are normally male, college-educated, middle-aged and wealthier than the average citizen. The unqualified masses are at the opposite end of the spectrum. This is a large social group. It includes citizens who participate occasionally, who do not generally commit for long periods, and who show little interest in engaging in conventional forms of participation. Unqualified masses include women, racial and linguistic minorities, and people with low-paid jobs and poor education.

The sample of cases analysed in the following pages shows a variety of interesting approaches adopted by public administrations to keep interactions with participants alive and possibly extended to a vast pool of citizens. In some cases, participatory processes were structured across different stages, to allow citizens to step in and out, depending on their willingness to share comments or ideas. Alternatively, participants were offered different ways to engage, from minimal to more consistent and time-consuming activities. In other cases, participatory options were designed to discourage certain participants from dominating the debate.

¹²⁸ See, for instance, J.F. Landy and L. Tiokhin, 'Crowdsourcing hypothesis tests: making transparent how design choices shape research results', *Psychological Bulletin*, 2020.

¹²⁹ See G. Mucciaroni and P. J. Quirk, 'Rhetoric and reality: Going beyond discourse ethics in assessing legislative deliberation', Vol. 4(1), *Legisprudence*, 2010, pp. 35–52; C. R. Farina, M. J. Newhart and J. Heidt, 'Rulemaking vs. democracy: Judging and nudging public participation that counts', *Michigan Journal of Environmental Administrative Law*, Vol. 2(1), 2013, p. 124.

Figure 9 – Design thinking examples



Source: EPRS.

2.2.1. The Icelandic constitutional reform

In 2011, Iceland was recovering from a financial crisis that had severely undermined trust in the financial sector and public institutions. In order to rebuild trust in democratic decision making, the government decided to involve Icelanders in constitutional reforms. The participatory process was designed in consequential stages, in order to obtain the broadest possible participation from citizens and ensure that the outcomes of the consultation would reflect the views of all engaged citizens and not only a minority of them.¹³⁰

The crowdsourcing process was **divided into four phases**.¹³¹ In the first phase, citizens were invited to participate in national assemblies where they shared their views and perspectives. The input provided by the nearly **1 000** participants was summarised in a conceptual map.¹³² The second phase consisted of the **election of 25 representatives** chosen from among average citizens rather than career politicians. The elected representatives would then make up the Constitutional Reform Council. The third phase, which lasted for two months after the election, consisted of **writing the new drafts of the Constitution** and publishing them on a specific website and on the Facebook page of the Council, at regular intervals. Icelanders had the chance to comment on these drafts and to send an email or a letter to Council members. The fourth phase involved a **referendum**. Nearly half of Iceland's 235 000 eligible voters took part in the referendum. Two thirds of them (**66 %**) voted in favour of the draft.

¹³⁰ For further information: <https://blog.openingparliament.org/post/45227421464/crowdsourcing-the-icelandic-constitution-myth-or>.

¹³¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the process, see T. Aitamurto, *Crowdsourcing for Democracy – A new era in policy-making*, Parliament of Finland, Committee for the future, 1/2012.

¹³² The map is available here: <http://thjodfundur2010.is/nidurstodur/tre/>.

Subsequently, the draft did not find the necessary majority in the newly-elected parliament. This, however, did not interrupt the transformative process initiated in 2011. To begin with, the Icelandic political parties gradually acknowledged both the need to change the constitution and the need to engage the public in that process. In 2018 the government announced a new constitutional process to be completed in a **seven-year period**. The new process began in September 2018 with a conference entitled 'Democratic Constitutional Design – The Future of Public Engagement'.¹³³

2.2.2. Rahvakogu: Estonian people's assembly

The Estonian Rahvakogu (people's assembly) provides another interesting example of design-driven participatory processes. Participation was initiated online, through a crowdsourcing website where citizens' ideas and proposals to amend the country's electoral and political party laws could be posted and debated. Three offline, technical, phases followed, the goal being to refine the ideas proposed by citizens and submit them to the national parliament for approval. The process exemplifies a growing trend among policy-makers, to focus on crowdsourcing ideas from citizens, in order to design better policies.¹³⁴ This dramatic expansion of crowdsourcing initiatives has been fostered by technological progress, the increased complexity of regulatory challenges, and demographics.¹³⁵

The Rahvakogu approach was similar to the Icelandic one: structured in **four steps**, online and offline. During the first phase, Estonians were encouraged to share ideas and comments about five issues that had been selected in advance, including the reform of the electoral system and political parties, the role of civil society in politics between the elections and the politicisation of public offices. Within three weeks more than **3 000 ideas** were submitted, half of them concerning elections. As reported by the Estonian government, **200 users** registered on rahvakogu.ee and published **6 000 posts**.¹³⁶

A second (offline) phase followed. This consisted of classifying the input provided by citizens into **59 categories**. In this phase the contribution of 30 expert analysts was crucial to group the proposals (each of the five main topics was divided into a number of subtopics) and to support them with an impact analysis on the respective outcomes. During the third phase (also offline) **five subject-specific seminars** were organised to let political representatives, experts and citizens who had contributed to the original proposals debate how to single out those ideas that had been put forward on the online platform that could best solve the problems that had sparked the initiative. As a result, the **18 most important issues** were selected for the deliberation day. The fourth and final phase consisted of a gathering of more than 300 people in Tallinn for '**Rahvakogu deliberation day**' – a microcosm of Estonian society in which gender, age, local origin, and

¹³³ As explained by I. Olafsson, 'Democratic constitutional design: the Icelandic constitution continued, 2018: 'The conference has two main objectives. One is to create a venue for a discussion of newest developments in democratic participation and public engagement (...). A second objective is on the one hand to facilitate exchange between academics and policy-makers and on the other to connect academic discussion of public engagement with an informal citizens' meeting, which will be organized in a cooperation with political parties represented in the parliament'. See also A. Hudson, 'Will Iceland get a new constitution? A new revision process is taking shape', *International Journal of Constitutional Law Blog*, 2018.

¹³⁴ See A. Taeihagh, 'Crowdsourcing: a new tool for policy-making?', *Policy Sciences Journal*, Vol. 50(4), pp. 629-64, 2017.

¹³⁵ According to Vili Lehdonvirta and Jonathan Bright (see V. Lehdonvirta and J. Bright, 'Crowdsourcing for public policy and government', *Policy and Internet*, Vol. 7 (3), pp. 263-267, 2015), 'if elections were invented today, they would be called 'Crowdsourcing the Government'.

¹³⁶ For further information, see <https://rahvakogu.ee/peoples-assembly-in-2013/>.

education were taken into account. In the end, **15 initiatives** were selected by the Estonian parliament, three of which were made into laws and four of which were approved after amendment.

2.2.3. NYCx, the New York City civic tech initiative

The NYCx is a programme run by the New York City Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer. Its goal is to advance a more inclusive technology ecosystem where minority and women-run tech startups have fair access to opportunities and resources that support and promote growth.¹³⁷ Among the several initiatives sponsored by the programme, the public challenges are particularly noteworthy. These open competitions are addressed to the local community of entrepreneurs, technologists and tech professionals to solve specific problems of urban management. Each challenge is meant to advance the implementation of the principles laid out in the New York mayor's OpenNYC plan: growth, equity, sustainability and resilience.¹³⁸

Borrowing from civic hackathons, policy challenges are deemed as particularly effective at encouraging participants to share skills and technical expertise to solve topics of public relevance: security, environment or law enforcement, for instance. The US federal government has a dedicated website to crowdsource solutions to public policy problems. The website is designed to help federal and national agencies find participants for prize competitions and challenges by providing a centralised list of all competitions sponsored by federal agencies.¹³⁹ At EU level, examples include the Social Innovation Competition and the EU contest for young scientists.

The most interesting challenges organised by NYCx include 'Moonshots' and 'Co-labs'. **Moonshot competitions** encourage global entrepreneurs to partner with the municipality to propose solutions to large-scale urban problems, such as internet connectivity and the impact of climate change, and deliver ground-breaking business models that transform and improve citizens' lives. For example, in 2018 the city ran a Climate Action Challenge to gather ideas to help replace all petrol-powered vehicles with charging electric ones. The six finalists were awarded US\$13 000 and asked to present a live demonstration of how to bring their proposal or technology to life. The winners would have elements of their submission included in the City's EV charging roadmap. In contrast to moonshot challenges, **Co-Lab competitions** are designed to forge partnerships with residents and community groups in neighbourhoods throughout the city to tackle local issues, such as zero-waste initiatives and night-time safety. In January 2020, for instance, the municipality launched a new challenge to develop a system to support tenants with tailored information about their housing rights. Winning ideas would be awarded \$20 000 and the possibility to partner with city agencies to implement their projects.¹⁴⁰

Public challenges show an innovative and promising approach to civic engagement, but they also have a limit: in general, participants in such initiatives do not represent all interests of a community. Rather, they express the position of a small number of committed stakeholders – also referred to as '**policy-entrepreneurs**'. In 1984, John Kingdon was one of the first academics to use this expression. He named policy entrepreneurs those actors who use their knowledge of political processes to further their own policy ends. These may be elected politicians or leaders of interest groups who seek to exploit windows of opportunity to promote their solutions to policy-makers.¹⁴¹ In the context

¹³⁷ For further information, see <https://tech.cityofnewyork.us/teams/nycx/>.

¹³⁸ The plan is available here: <https://onencityofnewyork.us>. Of particular relevance in the plan is Action 2/9, concerned with fostering a 'Vibrant Democracy'.

¹³⁹ See <https://www.challenge.gov>.

¹⁴⁰ For further information on the challenge, see <https://www1.nyc.gov/html/nycx/housingchallenge/challenge>.

¹⁴¹ See J.W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Little, Brown & Co., 1984.

By way of example, users can express their preference on a future scenarios according to its desirability (how much they want a future to become reality) or, alternatively, to its likelihood (the probability that a future will materialise or will continue if it is already an established trend). However, they can also like or dislike policies' impact and 'plausibility' (i.e. the overall assessment of the possibility to implement the policy). Or they can just express support for or objection to a particular policy, in simple formats, such as a 'like' or 'dislike'.

The underlying idea of Futurium is that applying game elements and principles within the policy-cycle could foster users' engagement, encourage organisational productivity, and possibly nurture civic engagement. This point is worth some further consideration. The application of game design in non-game contexts is commonly known as '**gamification**'. Where gamification has been trialled, it has returned promising results. Examples include user engagement, organisational productivity, learning, employee recruitment and physical exercise. The use of gamification in policy making is a nascent trend in the public sector.¹⁴⁵ The earliest cases date back less than 10 years, and, for the most part, concern national administrations. Few supranational regulators have experimented with game-design, while the EU has proactively engaged in trialling game-features in a number of areas.

2.2.5. The Cornell eRulemaking Initiative

From 2005 to 2017, a multidisciplinary group of researchers at Cornell University engaged in the **Cornell eRulemaking Initiative** (CeRI). Researchers partnered with US government agencies and civil society groups to discover how the design and process of online engagement can support public discussion that is informed, inclusive and insightful. Albeit related to academic endeavours and not directly linked to actual public decision-making, CeRI offered a valuable opportunity to demonstrate how design-thinking may be determining the success or failure of online participatory processes. CeRI, in fact, was based on the insight that simply providing citizens with the opportunity to comment online is not enough to facilitate widespread and epistemically valuable deliberation.¹⁴⁶

In order to prove their research assumption, the Cornell team developed a web-based consultation platform (the **Regulation Room**) based on purposeful design of digital tools and intensive human support. The trained facilitators who guided the deliberation process had supported the design. The Regulation Room team demonstrated that increased participation and substantive citizen contributions can be successfully encouraged with the right design. The project, however, also underscored the fact that eliciting citizens' participation requires the investment of considerable effort, both by citizens and by those who seek their informed policy input.

The initial Regulation Room was developed on a customised version of the WordPress multi-user platform, and offered several customised WordPress plugins (Digress.it, for instance, the application that allows for targeted commenting). After each consultation the site was modified in order to incorporate new features that would help to facilitate public participation, for example by adding new virtual rooms where users could debate specific topics.

Two **examples of consultations** held on the platform are the one on Consumer Debt Collection Practices and on Home Mortgage Consumer Protection. The first consultation related to the rules proposed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau on how creditors and debt collectors can act to get consumers to pay overdue credit card, medical, student loan, auto and other loans. The consultation was divided in two phases: the first for gathering information and brainstorming, and

¹⁴⁵ See G. Sgueo, *Games, Powers and Democracies*, Bocconi University Press, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ For further information See C.R. Farina, H. Kong, C. Blake, M. Newhart and N. Luka, 'Democratic deliberation in the wild: the McGill online design studio and the regulation room', *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, Vol. 41, 2014, pp. 1 527.

the second, which would follow specific proposals by the bureau and would consist of specific comments on such proposals. Similarly, the second consultation took place after the US mortgage crisis. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau was going to adopt new federal regulations to avoid a similar crisis in the future. Participants could read about the new proposals, react to them, and discuss them with others.

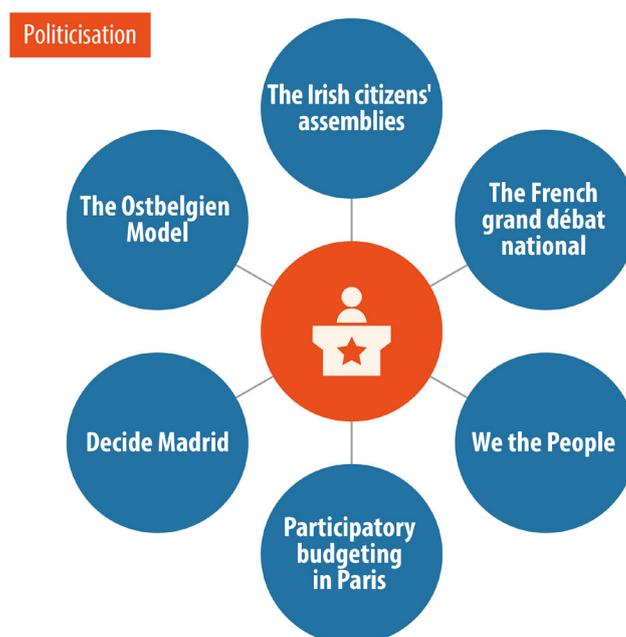
2.3. The politicisation of civic engagement

The last driver of civic engagement initiatives is politicisation. This driver aims to capture the **degree of politicisation of participatory initiatives run by public administrations**. In principle, not all civic engagement initiatives are necessarily politicised. A look at the examples analysed in this study would confirm this: in many cases, public administrations intentionally avoided any attempt to politicise their attempts to engage citizens. Or, at least, avoided further exacerbating political tensions with regard to the topics debated by citizens engaged in participatory processes. There are cases, however, in which political values become predominant. Examples include the French Grand Debat National and the US We the People platform. Both initiatives were primarily aimed at legitimising the government, rather than fostering public debate on public policies. Differently from other initiatives, civic engagement was instrumental to reinforcing (rather than reforming) the public sector.

This is not to suggest that a degree of politicisation of a civic engagement initiative is a problem. It can actually help policy-makers to gain greater legitimacy, or it can be used to reinforce democratic values through debate. Politicising participatory experiments, however, requires careful design to meet citizens' expectations. It is known that when citizens decide to engage in participation, they also expect feedback about the proposals they submitted and discussed. They do not necessarily expect their ideas to be implemented by public administrations, but they certainly demand transparency about how the concerned institution processed their ideas, whether and when the ideas will be implemented, and what reasons led to their adoption or rejection.

Furthermore, it is not only public consultations, but also the **topics of such consultations** that can be highly political, notwithstanding the technical nature of the consultative process. When the topics of consultation are linked to political values, the outcomes of participatory processes are likely to be influenced. While, in fact, certain topics are more popular than others (take, for instance, environmental matters compared to fiscal gains) and therefore easier to communicate and to be engaged with, excessive popularity does not necessarily play in favour of policy-makers. In this respect, the literature highlights two problems. The first concerns the possibility that citizens' feedback is poor in quality. This point has already been discussed above. The second problem relates to the quantity of participants. Many consultative processes fail to attract a sufficient number of participants. For example, most of the proposals published on Regulations.gov, the central hub for citizens' comments on US federal regulations, get little or no attention, while only a small number of proposals receive a significant number of comments. Low participation levels can undermine both the legitimacy of e-rulemaking initiatives and their capacity to generate novel ideas. This indicates that both the topic and the communication should be carefully adapted to the needs and expectations of the participating public. In this regard, the case of citizens' assemblies (to be further discussed below) provides a good example.

Figure 11 – Politicisation of civic engagement: examples



Source: EPRS.

2.3.1. The Irish citizens' assemblies

The Irish reformative process that led to the amendment to the Irish constitution to legalise abortion provides a good example of the political relevance of topics addressed by public consultations. The referendum came at the end of a long process of public deliberation, run through an innovative system of **citizens' assemblies**. As a result of this methodology, David Farrell and Jane Suiter (co-leaders on the Irish Citizens' Assembly Project) in 2019, were awarded a Brown Democracy Medal – a prize recognising outstanding individuals or groups that produce innovation to further democracy in the US and around the world.¹⁴⁷

The project began in 2009, when Ireland was in the midst of an economic and social crisis. A severe recession, aggravated by bank failures and followed by the activation of a bail-out programme by the International Monetary Fund, the EU and the European Central Bank, had severely impacted on public trust. The same year, an Irish Times MRBI poll found that public trust in the government had fallen from 46 % to 26 %, one of the lowest scores among EU countries. To respond to this crisis of trust, as early as 2009, members of the political science departments of Irish universities set up a working group to implement a series of initiatives focused on promoting political reforms that could increase responsiveness, openness and accountability at governmental level. During the 2011 elections, for instance, the group relaunched two interesting initiatives. The first was a blog (Politicalreform.ie) dedicated to examining specific policy failures and offering solutions. The

¹⁴⁷ See D.M. Farrell and J. Suiter, *Reimagining democracy. Lessons in deliberative democracy from the Irish front line*, Cornell University Press, 2019.

second, Reformcard.com, was an online measurement tool that ranked each party based on the quality of their proposals for political reform.

The group of academics focused in particular on proposing bottom-up, citizen-oriented approaches centred on the use of deliberative forums. They named it '**We the Citizens**'. The project was inspired by other examples of small groups of randomly selected citizens, operating according to deliberative principles that had been piloted elsewhere in the world.¹⁴⁸ We the Citizens was organised in **two phases**. For the first phase, public meetings were held in seven different locations around the country. These meetings served three objectives: (1) they provided an opportunity for people to share ideas and concerns that could feed into the eventual national Citizens' Assembly; (2) they helped participants to get familiar with this consulting methodology; (3) they served as awareness-raising tools among the population. The second phase was about forming the Citizens' Assembly. The assembly was composed of citizens randomly selected from a pool of **1 242 Irish citizens**. Just one selection criterion was applied: the overall group had to be as representative as possible of the Irish population. This included people ranging from 15 to 80 years old, employed, unemployed or retired, with different political opinions. For two days, participants were asked to deliberate on a number of political reform questions relating to representation and on **divisive topics** of interest to Irish citizens at the time, such as the appropriate balance between taxation and spending, property taxes, water charges, the sale of state assets and student fees.

The **Convention on the Constitution** was announced in November 2012. In contrast to the We the Citizens process, the membership of the convention comprised **66 citizens selected randomly from the greater population** by a market research company, combined with **33 legislators from the Irish parliament** (nominated by their respective parties), including representatives from the political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.¹⁴⁹ The convention had to consider **eight politically sensitive topics**, including the voting age of citizens, marriage equality, and electoral reform. The convention met over 10 weekends for day-and-a-half sessions. Each meeting had three components: (1) a presentation by experts of papers that had been circulated in advance; (2) a debate between groups advocating on either side of an issue; and (3) roundtable discussions involving facilitators and note takers.

In total, the convention made **43 recommendations**, 18 of which would require constitutional amendment by a referendum. To date, there have been **three such referendums**, two successful (on marriage equality in 2015 and blasphemy in 2018) and one unsuccessful (on reducing the age requirement of presidential candidates).

2.3.2. The French Grand Débat national

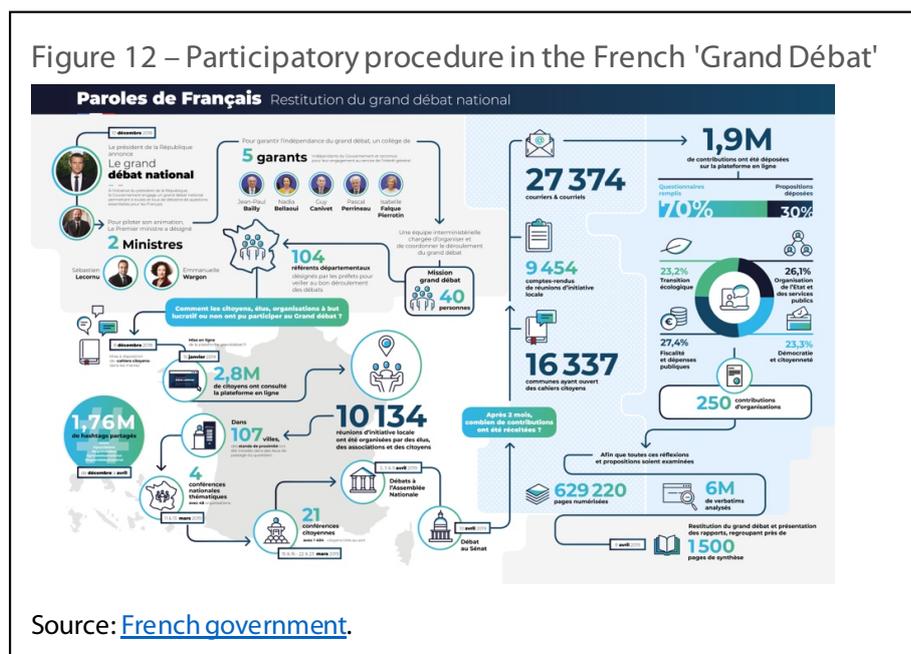
The Grand Débat was held in France from January to April 2019, led by two ministers and a *Collège des Garants* and organised by a dedicated taskforce (*Mission Grand Débat*). The initiative made use of **six different and complementary formats**, including a web platform that received over **1.5 million contributions from citizens**. More precisely: there were **1 932 884** online

¹⁴⁸ These included James Fishkin's deliberative polls originated in the 1990s, and the Canadian and Dutch experiences of the early 2000s. See P. Fournier, H. van der Kolk, K. Carty, A. Iais and J. Rose (eds.), *When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizens Assemblies on Electoral Reform*, Oxford University Press, 2011. See also D. Farrell and P. Stone, *Sortition and Mini-Publics: a different kind of representation*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ The one hundredth member was the chair, Tom Arnold, a respected individual from the charity sector.

contributions, 10 134 local meetings, 16 337 municipalities having looked at citizen's submissions, and 27 374 letters and emails received.¹⁵⁰

Figure 12 – Participatory procedure in the French 'Grand Débat'



Source: [French government](https://www.gouvernement.fr).

The **21 Grand Débat conferences**, in particular, were divided into **three categories**: 13 were held in the regions of mainland France, 7 overseas, and 1 at the national level specifically for young people. Events took place simultaneously over two weekends (15-16 and 22-23 March) and followed the same protocol, from coming up with a joint diagnosis to presenting

collective proposals, alternating between group and plenary work, with the help of facilitators.

All of these processes were designed with the help of participatory democracy experts, and the discussion methodologies were prepared through a long development process involving, in the case of the Grand Débat, the members of the *Collège des Garants*, who were in charge of ensuring compliance with the key principles of the debate. The outcomes, however, were entirely political. It will be up to the President to decide whether and when to implement the proposals suggested by French citizens.

2.3.3. We the People

We the People was launched in September 2011 by the Obama administration. The original goal of the platform was to give 'all Americans a way to create and sign petitions on a range of issues affecting our nation'. The initiative was part of a broader programme of reforms through which the administration meant to spread the use of technology in the public sector, and make government more transparent, participatory and collaborative.¹⁵¹

We the People let anyone 13 years of age or older create a new account, which enabled users to create new petitions or sign existing ones. New petitions required users to identify a title and add a short description of maximum **800 characters**. In addition to that, users could choose up to three of **20 tags** (including, for instance, criminal justice, welfare, firearms) to categorise their petitions. Once the petition had been created, users were encouraged to use their own systems to communicate it in order to reach the required threshold of signatures needed to receive an answer from the government.

¹⁵⁰ For further information, see <https://granddebat.fr>.

¹⁵¹ For further information, see <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/09/22/petition-white-house-we-people>.

At the launch of the initiative the threshold was set at **5 000 signatures** (to be collected within 30 days of the publication of the petition). Two weeks from the launch of the initiative, the threshold was raised to **25 000 signatures** owing to the unexpectedly high traffic on the website. According to the White House, in less than two weeks the website had already collected **7 500** petitions and recorded **375 000** users' accounts. In 2013, the threshold was raised for a second time to **100 000 signatures**. This time the measure was necessary to prevent futile proposals from reaching the required number of signatures and forcing the government to answer. This had actually happened with a petition asking the White House to study the possibility of building a real-life Starship Enterprise like the fictional vessel in the television series *Star Trek*. This is a common problem with public petitions. In Switzerland, for instance, a 2009 popular initiative signed by as few as 100 000 citizens forced national referendums on sensitive topics such as banning the construction of minarets. In 2014, another request to restrict voting on immigration quotas parked a prolonged diplomatic crisis with the EU.

In the years the site existed, the share of petitions receiving the signatures needed to receive an official White House response decreased dramatically. Most of those decreases can be attributed to the two occasions when the White House increased the signature thresholds. According to data provided by the White House, in 2016 the site had hosted more than **28 million registered users** (12.5 million with verified addresses). Overall, **38.5 million signatures** had appeared on **473 000 distinct petitions**.

In the nearly five years of existence of the initiative, **268** petitions reached the signature threshold to require a response from the White House. The White House wrote more than **227 different responses**. While the initiative made a great contribution to the perceived legitimacy of the US federal government, it was not without its critics. We the People was particularly criticised for being ineffective at impacting on US policies. Successful petitions did not have a direct link to the US Congress, the ideal place to have them debated. It was the US government that decided whether or not the proposals should be sent to Congress. In many respects, this is the same critical remark that has affected the EU-based European Citizens Initiative (ECI).¹⁵² It was only in December 2019, when the European Court of Justice confirmed the General Court's judgment in 'One of Us', that it was clarified that the most immediate and clear advantage of the ECI is that it creates opportunities for EU citizens to initiate debates on policy within the EU institutions without having to wait for a legislative procedure to be launched. Therefore, further clarified the Court, the ECI should not be seen as a real right of initiative, but rather as a tool to promote wider political debate.

2.3.4. Participatory budgeting in Paris

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a method of democratic decision-making whereby participants engage in deliberation regarding how public resources ought to be allocated and distributed. PB is believed to allow civil society and public administrators to determine spending priorities jointly, through 'co-decision' measures. Cooperation is expected to reduce conflicts and to favour broader acceptance of budgetary decisions. Trials of participatory budgeting practices have taken place in North America, Africa, Oceania, India, Korea, Japan, China and Latin America.¹⁵³

¹⁵² See the [ECI website](#).

¹⁵³ It is estimated that there are between 618 and 1 130 current examples of participatory budgeting in Latin America, representing almost one third of PB cases worldwide (the total number of which is estimated at between 1 269 and 2 778). Almost all Latin American countries have implemented PB, including Argentina, Chile (with 4.7% of the population involved in PB), Colombia, Mexico and Peru. Under a 2003 law, PB is compulsory at regional and local level

European governments' experiments with public participation in budgetary matters have been broader in scope than those in Latin America. Rather than targeting social justice, PB in Europe was born of the need to revive democratic participation, strengthen civil society, modernise public services and combat corruption. PB has grown considerably over the past 10 to 15 years. Between 2005 and 2012, the number of European examples of PB increased from **55** to over **1 300**.¹⁵⁴ In this respect, the case of France is particularly interesting. Following the 2002 Loi Vaillant, which introduced local bodies called *conseils de quartier* in all French municipalities with over 80 000 inhabitants, several local authorities launched PB experiments. Examples include the 'budget workshops' in Saint-Denis, the 'Let's talk frankly' initiative in Bobigny, and the 'district portfolios' in Morsang-sur-Orge.¹⁵⁵

The French municipalities that have experimented with PB include Paris. Three reasons make this city worth analysing: first, its scale and scope; second its reliance on digital technology; and, third, its socio-political context (Paris is a city that has historically made little room for citizen participation). 'Budget Participatif' is an online and offline platform for citizens to submit ideas and share decisions in the allocation of the municipal investment fund.¹⁵⁶ Introduced by the new mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, the first cycle ran with a relatively small budget and only allowed citizens to vote on project proposals submitted by City Council. Parisians, however, were keen to participate: the total number of voters exceeded **40 000**. Following the success of this trial, the project was rolled out to the rest of the city.

As reported by the municipality of Paris, the budget of the city is divided into two categories: operational funds (**82 %**, €7.7 billion, in 2017) and investment funds (18 %, €1.7 billion in 2017). For the 2014-2020 period, the municipality dedicated €10 billion for investments, with **5 % going to PB**. PB is open to all residents of Paris regardless of age or nationality. In order to submit a proposal or vote, people must provide their first and last name, address, date of birth, and email. All Parisians can submit project proposals, either individually or collectively. During the project proposal and voting phases, however, special attention is given to the mobilisation of lower-class neighbourhoods and young people. The process is organised around an **annual cycle**: proposals are submitted in January, according to 14 thematic areas.¹⁵⁷ From March to April projects undergo a technical evaluation of their feasibility and costs, then enter a phase of 'co-construction and collective discussion' between their proposers and neighbourhood councils and civic associations. From April to August the selected projects are evaluated by the city's operational departments and then submitted to a commission comprising the mayor of Paris, elected officials, representatives of local democratic bodies, city service representatives, and a randomly selected group of citizens. Once the selected projects are announced online, all Parisians have two weeks in September to vote.

in Peru: 150 000 Peruvians take part in PB every year). Brazil, with around 300 such experiments, has one of the highest densities of PB in the world. For further information see Banco Mundial, *Evaluación del Presupuesto Participativo y su relación con el presupuesto por resultados*, 2011.

¹⁵⁴ A 2008 study estimated that 5.3 % of the Spanish population, 1.4 % of the German population and 1 % of Portuguese and Italian citizens lived in cities that used PB. Overall, over 8 million European citizens are actively involved in PB. See Y. Sintomer, C. Herzberg and A. Rocke, 'From Porto Alegre to Europe: potentials and limitations of participatory budgeting', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 32(1), 2008. See also G. Sgueo, *Participatory budgeting. An innovative approach*, EPRS, European Parliament, 2016.

¹⁵⁵ All initiatives are described by G. Allegretti and C. Herzberg, *Participatory budgets in Europe. Between efficiency and growing local democracy*, Transnational Institute and the Centre for Democratic Policy-Making, Briefing No. 2004/5.

¹⁵⁶ See the [Budget Participatif website](#).

¹⁵⁷ The areas are: quality of life; transportation and mobility; the environment; culture; education and youth; sport; solidarity; cleanliness; prevention and security; intelligent city and new technologies; citizen participation; economy and employment; housing; and other.

The last part of the year is dedicated to adding the projects with the most votes to the city budget and beginning their implementation.

According to a 2018 assessment report, **11 253** projects have been submitted and **416** projects approved and voted on by over **200 000** Parisians since 2014. The report highlights two interesting aspects. First, more than half of projects voted on concern only three thematic areas, namely: quality of life, urban mobility and the environment. Second, the distribution of approved projects is very different. There is an intense concentration of projects in the centre of Paris. The districts with the lowest number of projects are the 7th, 8th, and 16th *arrondissements* which are the wealthiest districts with older and less diverse populations.¹⁵⁸

2.3.5. Decide Madrid

Decide Madrid provides another interesting example of innovative participation, with a remarkable political dimension. This web platform, which is aimed at engaging the residents of Madrid in local decision-making through direct and binding mechanisms, was initiated when the Podemos political movement came to power and committed to a more deliberation-intensive democracy. Since February 2016, the platform (which is based on **Consul** – a open source software implemented by several public organisations around the world, many of which are located in Spain and Latin America) includes an online voting system to let residents decide about issues of local relevance – for example urban transport or waste recycling.¹⁵⁹

Participation in Decide Madrid takes **five forms**: debates, proposals, polls, processes and participatory budgeting. Citizens can participate across **three phases of the policy cycle**: (1) agenda setting; (2) policy analysis and preparation; (3) policy formulation (and, to some extent, policy monitoring). In all cases, the topics eligible fall within Madrid council competences. Furthermore, only residents can take part in the deliberations. Decide Madrid has a **three-tiered system** to determine the actions that participants can take. Users can decide not to register, in which case they are only allowed to browse site content. Alternatively, they can decide to become basic verified users. Verification is made through residence data and a mobile phone number. Basic verified users are allowed to participate in online discussions, create and support proposals. The most important feature however, voting, is permitted only to those who register as completely verified users. Verification in this case is carried out in person or via email.

According to the strict rules concerning the debate and approval of proposals, ideas move to the voting phase if at least **1 %** of participants express interest in them. Data released by the municipality show that over **27 000 Madrileños** over the age of 16 are regular visitors to the website.¹⁶⁰ Yet, at the beginning of 2017, the municipal council had enacted only two ideas submitted through the platform. This particularly low threshold has been criticised by some. Indeed, of 482 Madrileños surveyed by the municipality (from a pool of residents who had not registered on the platform), **11 %** judged participation in Decide Madrid pointless. For this reason, in 2017 the platform started a partnership with Participa Lab, a joint public/common initiative acting as a bridge between citizens and local governments. **Observatorio de la Ciudad**, run by ParticipaLab, is an institutionalised body composed of 49 randomly selected participants. They rotate every year after

¹⁵⁸ The assessment report is available here: <https://www.apur.org/fr/nos-travaux/ville-autrement-initiatives-citoyennes-urbanisme-temporaire-innovations-publiques-plateformes-numeriques>.

¹⁵⁹ The website of the initiative is available here: <https://decide.madrid.es/condiciones-de-uso>.

¹⁶⁰ See Municipality of Madrid, Accion de gobierno del ayuntamiento de Madrid (2015-2019), available here: <https://www.madrid.es/UnidadesDescentralizadas/UDCMedios/noticias/2016/07Julio/05%20Martes/NotasdePrensa/DebateEstadoCiudad/ficheros/ACCIÓN%20DE%20GOBIERNO.pdf>.

eight sessions of work. Their main task is to review proposals coming from the platform. They write a short report for every proposal before putting it to the public in the form of a referendum.

2.3.6. The Ostbelgien Model

The 'Ostbelgien Model' is a permanent and institutionalised citizen council set up by the government and parliament of Ostbelgien, the German-speaking region of Belgium. The initiative was launched between 2018 and 2019, following a call by the Belgian government for a group of experts to help design a model for public participation in policy making. The experts' mandate included the identification of appropriate deliberative processes and random selection.¹⁶¹

Established in September 2019, a fixed citizens' council – the Bürgerrat – sets the agenda for one to three citizens' assemblies every year. These assemblies come up with recommendations for regional policy, with the regional parliament required to respond. The citizens' council is composed of **24 citizens with a mandate of 18 months, rotating every 6 months**. The citizens' assembly, meanwhile, is composed of approximately **50 citizens** drawn by lots, who work for three weekends over three or four months. Once the recommendations are ready, the citizens' council and citizens' assembly present them to the parliament. The latter (including the government and the relevant parliamentary committee) commits to answer these recommendations.

Interestingly, the initiative adopted in Ostbelgien inspired another innovative initiative in Belgium. In December 2019, the parliament of the Region of Brussels amended its internal regulations to allow the formation of 'deliberative committees composed of a mixture of members of the regional parliament and randomly selected citizens. Similarly to what was piloted in Ireland, the parliament approved a change in the internal regulations that would allow the establishment of a parliamentary committee composed of 15 parliamentarians and 45 citizens to draft recommendations on a given issue.¹⁶² Any inhabitant of Brussels older than 16 years of age has a voice in matters falling under the jurisdiction of the Brussels regional parliament. Citizens are selected through a two-step process: a first draw from among the whole population, followed by a second draw taken from those who have responded positively to the invitation (selection criteria take into account gender, age and geographical distribution).

Once the themes have been selected, they are open to the public. As in the case of Madrid, if **1 000** citizens support the theme, the bureau of the parliament selecting the topic is obliged to consider the proposal. Signatures are collected after a call published on the parliament website. The recommendations adopted by the randomly selected citizens are voted on separately. There is a consultative secret vote to avoid undue public pressure on members of the parliament. Then there is a public vote by absolute majority of the parliamentarians who were part of the committee, on each proposal for a recommendation.

¹⁶¹ See D. van Reybrouck, *Deliberative democracy makes citizens happy*, *International politics and society*, 2019.

¹⁶² For the French-speaking parliament of Brussels (officially called French-speaking community commission – COCOF) the numbers of parliamentarians and citizens will be 12 and 36 respectively.

3. Conclusion and outlook – From preserving EU democracy to practising it

The analysis made in the earlier sections of this study highlighted key trends that are emerging from the civic engagement projects currently being piloted by public powers at local, national and supranational levels. These trends give rise to a number of general observations:

- First, democratic revitalisation seems to be effective at engaging citizens in public decision-making when it structures participatory processes across two levels: **online and offline**. Opting for digital technology alone is sub-optimal. Unless it is intentional (as in the case of policy challenges), neglecting non-digital channels of interaction can result in low engagement of certain types of participant. Administrators hoping to increase participation from people with both high and low levels of engagement in civic life need to work simultaneously on developing online spaces to interact with individuals who are digitally-competent, while also providing offline spaces for public interaction. Cases in point include the Icelandic constitutional reform and the Estonian Rahvakogu.
- Second, given that civic engagement is more likely to be encouraged through a mix of online and offline approaches, it is also true that the 2020 **pandemic** has accelerated the use of digital tools in public decision-making and consultations. However, while several legislative bodies, including the European Parliament, decided to shift their activities online temporarily, for civic engagement initiatives full digitalisation seems to be more problematic and demanding in terms of time and cost.
- Third, innovative approaches might be tempting, but the cases examined in this study seem to suggest that citizens are more likely to become engaged in democratic participation and re-gain trust in public decision-making **if there is a balance between tried and tested participatory experiences and original solutions**. Many academics insist on the importance of innovation. Serge Abiteboul and Gilles Dowek, for instance, describe contemporary democratic institutions as inadequate to keep the pace with the fast-moving exchange of information, and thus encourage innovation.¹⁶³ John Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering claim that the practices and modes of thinking that inspire modern institutions are unfit to respond to the challenges of the 'Anthropocene'.¹⁶⁴ In reality, as shown by cases such as the Irish citizens' assemblies, vTaiwan and Decide Madrid, civic engagement is best nurtured by a combination of innovation and tradition. The connection between the participatory process (and its outcomes) and institutional endorsement can take place at different stages and to various degrees of formality. It is, however, necessary for the results of participation to be ratified by democratic structures.
- Fourth, **the scale of the consultative process** needs to be carefully calibrated on the actual needs of policy-makers. Large-scale participatory processes may serve more political goals: gaining legitimacy, for instance. In such cases, however, participants do not know each other, and there is almost no opportunity for reciprocity, which exacerbates the collective action problem. Small-scale participatory initiatives, by contrast, attract citizens with stronger motivation to contribute and therefore demand a responsible feedback from decision-makers.
- Fifth, **issues of privacy and anonymity** are pervasive in experimental forms of civic engagement and remain a crucial issue. Anonymity has positive outcomes because it allows people to express critical and controversial views without worrying about

¹⁶³ See S. Abiteboul and G. Dowek, *The age of algorithms*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ See J. Dryzek and J. Pickering, *The politics of Anthropocene*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

potentially adverse effects. However, user anonymity can lead to uncivil forms of behaviour, as it reduces people's accountability for their conduct. Uncivil forms of communication, especially those that are interpersonal, can undermine people's willingness to take part in deliberative processes, and prevent them from expressing their views freely and sincerely. Privacy is related to anonymity, but does not overlap with it entirely. The cases show that there can be various degrees of intrusiveness in citizens' private spheres. In some cases, such as *Decide Madrid* and *We the People*, users had to register and identify themselves to participate. In other cases, such as the *Dialogo con il Cittadino*, only basic data were requested from citizens.

In the light of the above considerations, how is the EU performing in terms of encouraging civic engagement? Severe political, economic and societal challenges jeopardise the very ideological foundations of the Union. In her last book, Anu Bradford described with the term the 'Brussels effect' the significant and highly penetrating power of the EU to unilaterally transform global markets and penetrate numerous aspects of people's everyday lives. The EU's regulatory hegemony, argues Bradford, is challenged by a number of external and internal threats, including the rise of China as a new global superpower, the retreat of globalisation, and technological progress. Among the threats that could potentially hamper the Brussels effect there is growing anti-EU sentiment. The most relevant political divide in Europe today, writes Bradford, is not between the right and the left, but between those who are turned inward and those who embrace further integration.¹⁶⁵

How can the EU boost its chances of accomplishing its political mandate successfully? One way is to move from preserving to appraising and applying methods tested by public sector institutions to engage citizens in policy-making – in other words: practising democracy. **The new structure of the European Commission** led by Ursula von der Leyen includes five vice-presidents (Maroš Šefčovič, Josep Borrell Fontelles, Věra Jourová, Dubravka Šuica, and Margaritis Schinas) with a single coordinating role for specific policy priorities. For the specific case of democratic rights, the Commissioner group devoted to 'A new push for European democracy' will be led by the Vice-President for Values and Transparency (Jourová), but Vice-Presidents Šefčovič and Šuica will chair the points on the agenda falling under their respective responsibilities. There are two possible reasons for this distinctive feature. First, it relates to the interlocking competences assigned to the three vice-presidents in relation to the organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the bid to strengthen EU democracy through different means. Second, and closely related to this, it flows from the means devoted to strengthening EU democracy.¹⁶⁶

The Commission's commitment to **organise a two-year conference on the Future of Europe for citizens of all ages across the EU and to follow-up on the agreed actions** seems like a unique opportunity to engage large groups of citizens in collective thinking, so as to shape future structural and procedural aspects of the Union. The success of this project, however, will depend on the capacity of the Commission to adapt this consultative process to the needs and expectations of Europeans. This is even more crucial at a point in time when the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic are posing new threats to democratic systems. According to the Covid19 civic freedom tracker, **76 countries** around the world have adopted emergency measures to contain the spread of the virus and **21 of them have constrained personal freedoms**. Moreover, in **85 countries**, parliamentary assemblies have been affected by contingency measures.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ A. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union rules the world*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ See E. Bassot, *The von der Leyen's Commission priorities for 2019-2024*, EPRS, European Parliament, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ The tracker is available here: <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>.

Also key to reinforcing democracy in the EU is the attempt to engage more systematically in **strategic foresight**. The mission letter for Vice-president Maroš Šefčovič tasks him with focusing on long-term trends and identifying areas in which policy, research and technological developments are most likely to drive societal, economic and environmental progress. The goal is to help the EU policy-makers improve the way they design laws and initiatives, and to develop future-oriented policies. During his hearing before the European Parliament, Šefčovič further clarified his mandate, by making key commitments to putting foresight at the heart of better policy-making. In particular, he drew attention to the establishment of an **EU strategic foresight network**, bringing together the best resources of the EU's institutions and Member States, and the preparation of a **yearly foresight report** on the most relevant emerging trends. As explained by Šefčovič, this report will inform the **State of the Union** speech and future programming exercises. Based on it, Šefčovič would foster strategic debates in the European Parliament and also at the European Council. The ultimate aim is for the three EU institutions to agree on the transformative megatrends needed to take a strategic approach to developing a long-term vision for the Union.

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4. Annex – Summary of civic engagement initiatives analysed in this study

| Name of the initiative | Key drivers | Administrative level | No of participants | Procedural steps | Outcomes |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---|--|---|
| Réinventons Liège | Private/public | Local | 95 000 voters selected 77 policy options | First phase – broad consultation Second phase – citizens voted on specific projects | The municipality committed to implement the ideas with the most votes |
| vTaiwan | Private/public Design-thinking | National | N/A | 4 sequential stages: proposal, opinion, reflection, legislation | As of 2018, 26 cases discussed, 80 % led to government action |
| Dialogo con il Cittadino | Private/public Politicisation | National | 90 000 citizens used the platform in the 18 months of duration of the initiative | N/A | On average, 5 000 mails per month were answered |
| The Icelandic Constitutional Reform | Design-thinking | National | 1 000 citizens engaged in the first phase. Half of the 235 000 eligible voters participated in the referendum | 4 stages: participation, election, drafting, referendum | No political consensus in parliament. In 2018 the government kicked off a new process |
| Rahvakogu | Design-thinking | National | Online phase: 200 users publish 6 000 posts and submit 3 000 ideas. Final public event attended by 300 citizens | 4 stages: online crowdsourcing, impact assessment, subject-seminars, public event | 15 proposals submitted to the parliament (3 made into law, 4 approved after amendments) |
| NYCx New York City's civic tech initiative | Design-thinking | Local | N/A | N.B.: Different formats available. Moonshot and Co-Lab competitions usually in 3 stages: competition, award, implementation | Ideas awarded are implemented at political and administrative levels |
| Futurium | Design-thinking | Supranational | N/A | Users can engage in different formats | Ideas and opinions contribute to co-create EU policies |

| Name of the initiative | Key drivers | Administrative level | No of participants | Procedural steps | Outcomes |
|-------------------------------------|---|----------------------|---|---|--|
| The Cornell e-Rulemaking initiative | Design-thinking | National | N/A | Different formats, depending on the consultation | The US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau adopted a new set of rules based on the suggestions provided by participants |
| We the citizens | Politicisation Design-thinking Private-Public | National/Local | 100 citizens composing the citizen convention | 3 phases: local meetings, citizen assembly, citizen convention | 43 recommendations (18 requiring constitutional amendment by a referendum) to date, 3 referenda (2 successful) |
| Le Grand Débat national | Politicisation | National | 1 932 884 online contributions; 27 374 letters and emails received | 10 134 local meetings 16 337 municipalities looked at citizens' submissions 21 Grand Débat conferences: 13 in mainland France, 7 overseas, 1 national (for young people) | It is up to the president to decide if and when to implement the proposals suggested by French citizens. |
| We the People | Politicisation | National | 28 million registered users. 38.5 million signatures on 473 000 petitions (data 2016) | After registration, users upload a petition request and collect a threshold of signatures (raised from 5 000 to 100 000) to receive an answer | In 5 years of existence, 268 petitions reached the signature threshold. The White House wrote 227 different responses. |
| Participatory budgeting in Paris | Politicisation Design-thinking | Local | 200 000 Parisians voted in the first three editions of the PB | 5 % of budget devoted to PB. Process organised around an annual cycle and 14 thematic areas | 2014-2018: 1 253 projects submitted, 416 approved |
| Decide Madrid | Politicisation Private/public | Local | 27 000 visitors to the platform | Participation in 5 sections (debates, proposals, polls, processes, participatory budgeting) and 3 phases of the policy cycle: (agenda, policy analysis, preparation, policy formulation) | As of 2017, 2 projects voted and implemented by the Municipality of Madrid |
| The Ostbelgien Model | Politicisation Design-thinking | Local | N/A | Bürgerrat (24 citizens , mandated for 18 months) evaluate and submit recommendations to Citizens' Assembly (50 citizens drawn by lot working 3/4 months). Proposals sent to the Parliament | N/A |

Source: Compiled by the author.

Public authorities are currently facing extraordinary challenges. These include managing an unprecedented public health crisis, restoring economic growth without damaging the environment, combating inequality, securing peace, and many more. In the coming decades, public regulators, and with them academics, civil society actors and corporate powers, will have to confront another dilemma that is fast becoming a clear and present challenge: whether to preserve and protect the current structures of democratic governance, in spite of the widespread perception of their inefficiency, or to adapt them to fast-changing scenarios (and in doing so run the risk of further weakening democracy). The tension between these two opposing tendencies raises a number of key questions, to which policy-makers and analysts need to find answers. What is driving this transformation of democratic systems? Should new, hybrid forms of democratic participation replace classic democratic structures? And, lastly, amid these transformative processes, how are power roles to be redistributed?

This is a publication of the Members' Research Service
EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service

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PE 651.970
ISBN 978-92-846-6823-6
doi:10.2861/73706