

# Forging a new democratic frontier in Europe

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# Table of contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A cultural transition on technological steroids</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>An assertive culture and representative democracy</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Democratic incongruence and its discontents</b>	<b>6</b>
1) Radical populism comes into its own	6
2) Citizens exit the arena of traditional politics	7
The inevitable reckoning	8
<b>Democracy as a blended and collective enterprise</b>	<b>10</b>
The great sifting	10
A horizontal value creation model	11
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>13</b>

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This paper was written as part of the conversations happening around the EPC's yearly Strategic Council and 2021 Annual Conference "Is Europe still in the global race?". The conference asks the question: in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges and a changing and unstable geopolitical landscape, can Europe hold its own, or is it destined to bring up the rear in the global race for power and influence?

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# Executive summary

Liberal democracy in Europe and beyond is facing a steady drumbeat of warnings about decay and collapse. Soaring public disenchantment with political elites and estrangement from traditional democratic processes no longer merely represents a mood, but points to a trend. People's dissatisfaction with the functioning of their political system – on the national and EU levels – plays in the hands of radical populists who ride the waves of electoral success by doubling down on their defiance of democratic norms. In response, some mainstream parties and governments try to push back, while others copy the populists' inflammatory vocabulary and policy positions. With the emergence of regional, European and global governance structures, power is distributed among more hands and at more levels than at any other time in history, and much of it has been shared with or transferred to entities outside the national realm of politics. This leaves democratic governments, especially in EU countries, scrambling and failing to effectively address crises in line with the interests and preferences of their electorates.

This paper argues that if democratic politics in the Union and its member states is not what we might have wished for, it is also because democratic institutions and practices have not kept up with societal change. The social modernisation of the post-war period produced a new breed of assertive citizen in the West, while the technological boom at the turn of the millennium super-empowered these individuals to be able to upload and globalise their activism, and thus to create impact on an unprecedented scale. The contemporary, assertive and tech-equipped European public expects more from

their national and European leaders, demands greater participation in public decision-making, and feels a greater sense of political competence. But the current democratic architecture at the national and EU level is neither able nor willing to satisfy European citizens' demands for more political participation and influence, or use technology to ease tensions with the wider public. In fact, European democracy seems out of touch with this popular reality, and the ensuing incongruence challenges it from within.

When there is a mismatch between citizens' demands and the ability and willingness of political institutions to address them, the outcome can be disorder and instability. A new democratic model – better attuned to its society's culture – is needed in the EU and the member states but it is not yet clear what it could look like. To hammer out a new democratic order, this paper suggests a dual track: sifting through the old theories and practices of government to decide what should be preserved, adapted or discarded but also innovating by harnessing the power of the many.

Empowered Europeans should be empowered further with a common political project – inventing the democratic future – and this requires experimentation and innovation. The public officeholder of the future in the EU and national arena of politics should become a hub of connectivity for communities and individuals working together to identify and solve problems, shape decisions, and produce change. By daring to stake out a new democratic frontier, Europe could show the way for democratic polities around the world.

# A cultural transition on technological steroids

As Thomas L. Friedman argues<sup>1</sup>, around the year 2000, it suddenly became possible for people on different continents to communicate, cooperate and compete with each other, fostering global integration in ways they had never dreamt of before. Globalisation was initially set in motion by countries (in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and then driven forward by multinational companies (in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). At the cusp of the millennium, Friedman contends, *individuals* became the key agents of change.<sup>2</sup>

He explains that the power of people to go global as individuals was unleashed by the fortuitous convergence of the personal computer – which allowed people to author their own digital content – with the fibre-optic cable – which brought information to people’s fingertips at speed light for next to nothing – and the rise of workflow software – which enabled people to collaborate from any distance or place.<sup>3</sup> Access to these tools permitted more people than ever, that is, “individuals, groups, companies, and universities anywhere in the world to collaborate – for the purpose of innovation, production, education, research, entertainment, and, alas, war-making”<sup>4</sup> – and thus to create impact by themselves on a potentially global scale.

But while this tipping point was reached by 2000 thanks to unprecedented breakthroughs in technology, the empowerment of individuals had been in the making since the end of the World War II. Industrialisation, urbanisation, the emergence of the welfare state, and mass literacy are the kind of developments that helped to produce unparalleled economic and physical security in the post-war period, especially in Western Europe, North America, Japan, and Australia.<sup>5</sup> From 1970s onwards, Ronald F. Inglehart<sup>6</sup> (later joined by other scientists) theorised and demonstrated in various seminal works that the post-1945 large-scale improvement in living conditions, the spread of formal education and, in time, the public’s increasing exposure to new forms of mass media (like the television) transformed the culture of advanced industrial societies.

He revealed that **the forces of social modernisation in the decades following World War II reshaped the values and worldviews of the Western public**. People’s basic value priorities, especially among young cohorts, shifted away from traditional values of order, discipline, and security and towards greater emphasis on freedom of choice, individual autonomy, and equality of opportunity. Such orientations, whether labelled “postmaterialist”, “self-expressive” or “emancipative”, made individuals, including in Europe, more open-minded, more focused on self-actualisation and more assertive about claiming control over their lives than ever before.

In a recent extension of Inglehart’s research, Paul R. Abramson<sup>7</sup> showed that Europeans have continued to become steadily more post-materialist in their value orientations and that the generational patterns that Inglehart initially described in the mid-1970s have endured to the present. Neil Nevitte<sup>8</sup> also confirmed in 2013 that there has been an ongoing change, as depicted by Inglehart and others, from obedience to authority towards more individual autonomy in how people connect to each other in family, work, and politics.

So, when ground-breaking innovations in information and communications technologies (ICT) came about at the turn of the millennium, they found wide segments of the population in the West ready and eager to ‘plug in and play’. These people had the necessary skills and resources to take advantage of these new tools. Moreover, the arrival of the personal computer and the internet catered to the need for self-expression in these segments of the population, acting as a formidable stimulant. Little surprise, then, that ICT usage and software upgrading started to grow simultaneously and exponentially, reinforcing each other at an accelerating pace.<sup>9</sup> Assertive tools came to increasingly assertive publics and effectively turbocharged the cultural transition.

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Clearly, not everyone is already online, uploading, downloading or collaborating.<sup>10</sup> And despite constant progress in raising life expectancy, literacy rates and income levels worldwide, much work remains to be done.<sup>11</sup> According to Our World in Data, in richer countries, including the EU, more than two thirds of the population are online. Usage rates are much lower in the developing world, but they are increasing. The same source reports that the number of internet users has grown worldwide from only 413 million in 2000 to over 3.4 billion in 2016. With 27,000 new users getting online for the first time every single hour, the global trend points to an exponential growth. The forces of social modernisation and global communication seem to continue to touch more people all the time. Then again, while this ongoing cultural change on technological steroids might be flying high, it is still anyone’s guess where it will land.

# An assertive culture and representative democracy

The challenge posed by these transformations to liberal, representative democracies – in Europe and beyond – has been especially wrenching. Changing social values have carried over to political orientations across the West, increasing people’s cognitive mobilisation<sup>12</sup> – that is, their political skills and sophistication to process information and make their own decisions. “Even though postmaterialists are a minority even in the most postmaterialistic societies, they are a politically active and politically skilled minority.”<sup>13</sup>

The growth of this active postmaterialist minority has eroded the traditional bases of party alignments by contributing to a decline in class-based voting<sup>14</sup> and has transformed the traditional Left-Right continuum that had defined Western politics since the mass enfranchisement era. New social issues such as environmentalism and gender equality entered the political agenda, leading to demands for more radical policy changes but also to increased social movement activism.<sup>15</sup>

The shift towards postmaterialism has also had a significant influence on the rise of dissatisfied democrats, who combine a deep normative commitment to democratic ideals with more critical assessments of the performance of political elites and the political process.<sup>16</sup> In mature post-industrial societies, including those of Europe, assertive citizens even feel a greater sense of political competence and believe that they know and can do better than their leaders.<sup>17</sup> Such perceptions can fuel demands for direct political participation in decision-making and generate political pressure for democratic innovation. However, they can also call into question the need for mediation, and, as such, the legitimacy of representative institutions.

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Moreover, the development of new values with an overall emancipatory impetus and progressing social modernisation in the West have stimulated expressive and contentious political action.<sup>18</sup> The participatory revolution experienced especially by advanced democracies over the past four decades, in which the forms and levels of non-violent protest have expanded, is an inherently elite-challenging activity. The digital

revolution helps assertive citizens mobilise or join others online or offline to collectively voice their indignation and demand change. And just like that, “[t]oday, it is the person with the smartphone in one hand and the blank ballot in the other that [best] symbolises our democratic condition.”<sup>19</sup>

Such patterns are most evident in established democracies, in Europe and beyond, but they are also emerging in political cultures of developing countries in which living conditions are rapidly improving.<sup>20</sup> Wherever present, they hold the potential to transform the content and style of democratic governance.

The empowerment of people is a legitimising virtue for democracy and can allow the public to nudge the political system towards correction and improvement in democratic standards.<sup>21</sup> But demanding democrats can also be a potential source of trouble, eroding governments’ effectiveness and subverting the established order.<sup>22</sup>

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Scholars have argued that a stable regime requires institutions to be congruent with the culture of the society.<sup>23</sup> In contemporary times, this means that governments of European democratic states have to be able to resolve broad popular demands for more participation and influence in decision-making. And in doing so, they also have to figure out how ubiquitous and powerful digital technologies can help – or make it more difficult – to ease tensions with the wider public. Are European democratic systems at the national and the EU level up to the task?

# Democratic incongruence and its discontents

**If judged in terms of people's satisfaction with their political systems, democratic polities everywhere do not seem to be coping very well with the rise of the assertive citizen.** In 2008, Hans-Dieter Klingemann<sup>24</sup> found that about half of the adult populations in 43 European democracies negatively evaluated the performance of their democratic regimes. The study also revealed that in long-standing Western democracies, the proportion of citizens that value democracy as an ideal is higher and the level of negative performance evaluation is lower than in the newer Eastern European democracies. However, compared to 1999, the proportion of dissatisfied citizens has fallen by eight percentage points in the new democracies (43 to 35%) and increased fourteen points in the West (28 to 48%).

These findings mirror global trends. A 2020 opinion poll conducted by Pew Research Centre suggests that around the world people are more dissatisfied (52%) than satisfied (44%) with how democracy works in their country.<sup>25</sup> The reveals that discontent is still common even in some of the most established European democracies, including the UK (69%) and France (58%). Greece – the cradle of democracy – stands out with the highest share (74%) of dissatisfied citizens among all 34 countries surveyed.

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Critical evaluations of the functioning of democracy in Europe (and beyond) are linked to growing popular beliefs that national political establishments are dishonest, self-serving, and unresponsive to the opinions or interests of ordinary citizens.<sup>26</sup> A remarkable 69% of Europeans, on average, expressed this view in a 2020 Pew Research survey.<sup>27</sup> But public trust in the government and political institutions has been in free fall since the late 1960s and early 1970s,<sup>28</sup> with political parties – otherwise key markers of modern democratic government – being held in the lowest regard.<sup>29</sup> According to the winter 2020-2021 Standard Eurobarometer, 60% of Europeans distrust their national parliaments and governments, compared to 43% who “tend not to trust” the EU.<sup>30</sup>

Existing indicators are not specific enough to denote what this confidence gap between “critical citizens”<sup>31</sup> and their institutions implies for the general framework of representative democracy. Does it signal a desire or need to change central parts of the institutional setup? Reform input or output processes? Does it go beyond that? It is not yet clear what this picture means for the future of democracy. However, what is obvious at present is that this gap seems to be turning into an ever-widening void in European democracies, which breeds (1) popular support for radical political options and (2) indifference towards traditional politics.

## 1) RADICAL POPULISM COMES INTO ITS OWN

Since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, radical right parties have gained ground worldwide. In the EU too, both in national and European elections, the average share of the vote for populist parties of various stripes and persuasions has more than doubled since the 1960s,<sup>32</sup> with many winning support on a par with the biggest players in their country or outright dominating the electoral arena.<sup>33</sup> Also, during the same period, their share of seats has tripled, making them more relevant for government formation, by themselves,<sup>34</sup> in coalition with non-far-right parties<sup>35</sup> or backing minority governments.<sup>36</sup>

But how can this trend be squared with Inglehart's cultural shift towards social tolerance of diverse lifestyles, religions, cultures, international cooperation, democratic governance, and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights? The literature suggests that **the spread of such progressive values has also triggered a cultural backlash among people who feel threatened by this development.**<sup>37</sup> This is particularly the case among less educated and older white men, who become resentful of the erosion of their predominance and privilege, and more receptive to populists' defense of traditional values, rejection of outsiders, and endorsement of old-fashioned gender roles.

Research<sup>38</sup> confirms that **endorsement of populist options is largely connected to ideological appeals to traditional values which tend to be concentrated among the older generation, men, less educated, religious, and ethnic majorities.** The age gap was sharply evident in the autopsy of the Brexit vote, with the elderly casting ballots to leave while the younger generation opting to remain (but saw its hopes of educational and job opportunities in Europe dashed).<sup>39</sup> The fact that the generational gap is growing in Western societies means then that the salience of the cultural cleavage in party politics is likely to widen in the future, sustaining opportunities for populist leaders on the ideological Left and Right to mobilise electoral support and challenge the legitimacy of liberal democracy.

From this perspective, as Eric Kaufmann argues, “[d]emography and culture, not economic and political developments, hold the key to understanding the populist movement.”<sup>40</sup> This is not to conceal or underestimate economic anxiety. At the heart of the fears animating citizens, media coverage or the populists’ campaign trails are actual issues, like economic and social inequality,<sup>41</sup> the loss of future perspective, especially among the younger generations, and some of the challenges of multiculturalism and immigration. But it does suggest that economic justifications for the ascendancy of populist parties have limited explanatory power.<sup>42</sup>

The analytical distinction drawn between economic inequality and cultural backlash theories may also be somewhat artificial. Interactive processes may well link these factors, for example, when structural changes in the workforce and social trends in globalised markets heighten economic insecurity.<sup>43</sup> It then becomes more a question of relative emphasis rather than either/or. This also relates to the observation that significant parts of populations around the world support important aspects of the populist set of ideas at all times and that these attitudes remain dormant until specific circumstances (like the socioeconomic or socio-political context) favour their development or manifestation by expanding the perception of a threat to a society.<sup>44</sup>

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This could explain why the ‘poly-crisis’<sup>45</sup> of the past decades has acted as such a catalyst for populist attitudes among the voters, clearly benefitting radical right parties. As Mudde explains: “The perfect storm emerged in 2015. You had the refugee crisis, which went together with nativism. The terrorist attacks, which go together with authoritarianism. And the European crisis goes together with populism. This is absolutely the perfect storm for these parties; all the three features at the core of their ideology are triggered.”<sup>46</sup> Exploiting such circumstances, radicals challenge the political class and pledge to vindicate people’s sense of disappointment with their governments’ crisis management. They spoon-feed voters bitterness about European integration, immigration, crime, corruption, and other alleged culprits blamed for national decline.

**The radicals’ anti-liberal discourse and style is certainly toxic for democracy, but their real danger is in ‘defining deviancy down’ – making previously stigmatised conduct acceptable.**<sup>47</sup> This happens when, in response to radical parties, “unloved elites” start

treading “a careful line between red-meat populism and mainstream respectability.”<sup>48</sup> Because of the uncritical response of some of the political mainstream – that is, media and traditional parties – which increasingly borrows populist arguments and policy positions,<sup>49</sup> what was previously seen as abnormal and unacceptable behaviour becomes the standard. This is how the epidemic of norm-breaking takes off.

A contagious authoritarian reflex of governments – including those elected in free, albeit not always fair, elections – has been reflected in a steep global decline of liberal democracy over the past 10 years. The 2021 Democracy Report argues that while the world remains more democratic today than it was in the 1970s or 1980s, “the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990.”<sup>50</sup> The 2020 Democracy Index reveals that, in Europe, Nordic countries like Norway, Finland and Denmark still top world rankings as best performers. However, it notes that no democracy in Western and Eastern Europe (or North America) has advanced during the past decade. Rather, several countries, including Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia have declined substantially as a result of repeated government-led attacks on the judiciary, media, and civil society.<sup>51</sup>

## **2) CITIZENS EXIT THE ARENA OF TRADITIONAL POLITICS**

But the widening rift between citizens and political elites/institutions is not only encouraging citizens to vote for populist challengers. It also discourages them from engaging in the sort of conventional politics that has long been seen as necessary to endorse democracy and ensure democratic legitimacy. It is by now well-documented that dissatisfied citizens vote in fewer numbers and with a weaker sense of partisan consistency, and are increasingly averse to committing themselves to political parties or other traditional institutions (such as trade unions), whether in terms of identification or membership.<sup>52</sup>

This disengagement is largely fuelled by a general popular perception that the political system is unresponsive. And here is the paradox: despite having more rights, better education, greater access to information, and the ability to easily organise themselves in order to resist state authority, demand political participation and deliberate issues, people *feel* that their voice does not really matter anymore in the governing of their country. The frustration of the empowered can be seen as a sign of democratic incongruence between citizens and institutions and its growing prevalence throws into question the sustainability of the current democratic model.

People’s perception is not entirely misguided. In part because of the sheer complexity of issues in a vastly interconnected and globalised world, but also as a result of a gradual shift in decision-making competences to political bodies outside the domestic political

sphere (notably at the EU level), European democratic governments increasingly find themselves in the situation of having to implement mandates given to them by the likes of the European Commission, the European Central Bank or the International Monetary Fund rather than by citizens.<sup>53</sup> As a result, voters feel less powerful in their national political contexts. But they also feel less powerful in the complex and more distant arena of European politics. This feeling of disempowerment is in fact a key commonality of the democratic crisis both in the member states and the EU, even if the scale, scope or saliency of the problem can vary across countries and tiers of governance.

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A 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey<sup>54</sup> reveals that a majority of respondents do not feel that they have much, or any, say over decisions, laws or policies affecting them. This perception increases as the sphere of governance becomes more distant: 53% feel they do not have influence over decision-making in their local political arena but as much as 70% hold this belief for matters agreed on the EU level.

Yet, **popular withdrawal from traditional political process does not mean that people are abandoning democratic politics.** In fact, the past decades have also seen growing public re-engagement via new participatory channels, both online and offline (like petitions, boycotts, demonstrations, or single-issue movements).<sup>55</sup>

The first European Quality of Life Survey by Eurofound<sup>56</sup> found that over 95% of Europeans participate in one way or another in civil life (such as in voluntary and/or informal organisations), and the COVID-19 pandemic only helped to boost their engagement.<sup>57</sup> The 2021 Youth Survey mentioned above also shows that almost nine in ten (87%) respondents engage in at least one political or civic activity. While voting is the top response (46%), it is followed closely by other, more direct forms of action, including creating or signing a petition (42%), posting opinions on social media about a political or social issue (26%), boycotting or buying certain products on political, ethical or environmental grounds (25%), and participating in protests and demonstrations (24%).

This suggests that citizens are looking for novel ways and more effective means to have their opinions heard

and counted in decision-making.<sup>58</sup> Democratic polities, including the European Union, are therefore increasingly under pressure to evolve in order to better accommodate civic dialogue and public involvement in political affairs.

## THE INEVITABLE RECKONING

Seen from this perspective, the scope and level of modern European democratic politics has not kept pace with the scope and level of cultural and technological developments over the past decades. This mismatch between society and its political infrastructure is destabilising for both individuals and the system as a whole. Ignoring this incongruence does not make it go away. If anything, it increases the pressure on the existing democratic model.

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So what can be done? Is there a silver bullet or a few-bullet-points solution? The diagnosis seems clearer than the prescription and this paper is only able to propose a general approach and some general principles that might help in the process of developing a solid answer at some point in the future.

As a general approach, this paper advocates facing up to the democratic crisis. This is not equivalent to throwing out the rulebook that has served us well for a long time. Questioning whether European polities still have appropriate means to translate democratic goals into practice is not about contesting liberal democratic principles and values.

A ‘self-cure’ is also not synonymous with reversing globalisation, technological advancement or European integration. Such attempts are futile and can come at great costs to human development.

It does not mean engaging in small tinkering and damage control either – “muddling through”<sup>59</sup> like in all recent crises – and calling it a job done. As experience has shown, sticking plaster solutions to structural problems make the next (migration, financial or political) crisis both more likely and possibly more disruptive.

The lesson from European history is clear: “societies cannot overcome their problems unless and until they are squared in the face.”<sup>60</sup> The answer, therefore, lies in undertaking some potentially uncomfortable soul-searching<sup>61</sup> to establish what in the theory and practice

of democratic government should be preserved, discarded or adapted, and where most efforts should be concentrated on.

Without the willingness to demonstrate capacity for reflection and renewal, liberal democratic polities risk becoming as unpredictable and vulnerable as their surroundings.

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Democracy has already faced major transitions in the past (such as when moving from an agricultural to an industrial-based society) and survived epic challenges (like economic depression, war or authoritarianism) – all because it managed to get over that huge speed bump called political and institutional reform. The key has never been consistency but rather adjustment: changing institutions, policies, approaches, roles, and ideas to respond to altered circumstances and the threat of competition. Once again, at present, a “new political science is needed for a world [that is] itself quite new.”<sup>62</sup>

**Inventing the future** – by staking out a new democratic frontier – can, of course, be a daunting and laborious endeavour. It **requires creative energy to chart a new course and the political will to pursue that new direction. Neither is possible without perseverance.**

It is worth recalling that consolidated liberal democracy only came to Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after hundreds of years of grinding work. It was first necessary to discard the political, social, and economic legacies of the old regime – a process that lasted from 1789 to 1945. As Sheri Berman explains, “by 1918 monarchical dictatorships and empires were gone, but across most of Europe it proved impossible to reach a consensus on what should replace them.”<sup>63</sup> It took the tragedies of the interwar period and World War II for the liberal democratic order to triumph and for the understanding of what would make it work to emerge.

So perhaps “we are not yet ready – intellectually, philosophically, or morally – for the world we are creating.”<sup>64</sup> With a bit of luck, it will only take time and not another historic tragedy – like democratic collapse or war – to be able to conceive and implement a democratic model fit for the current, complex realities. For that,

however, democratic polities should get busy looking for ways to fuel constructive collective imaginations.

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‘Constructive’ is a key word here because there is no guarantee that powerful technological tools in the hands of assertive citizens will be used for the greater good. As Commission President Ursula von der Leyen remarked in her [2021 State of the Union Address](#): “Disruptive technology has been a great equaliser in the way power can be used today by rogue states or non-state groups. You no longer need armies and missiles to cause mass damage. You can paralyse industrial plants, city administrations and hospitals – all you need is your laptop. You can disrupt entire elections with a smartphone and an internet connection.”

National governments and EU institutions should therefore not underestimate the vicious aspects of cultural and technological changes and look for ways and discourses that channel people’s creative energies into imagining and designing a future that celebrates interdependence, inclusion, openness, opportunity, and hope. And they should also muster the political courage to experiment with ensuing ideas.

Reinvigorating democracy is likely to take different forms at different levels. Will it mean further institutional reforms to alter the ‘balance of power’ in the EU? Will it entail additional roles and powers for national, local or regional governments? Will it involve more reliance on direct forms of popular participation in elections and decision-making, including in the EU? Such efforts would not be new but some could still be part of the democratic recalibration process.

Or perhaps new actions will be taken, for example, to embed deliberative democracy in how political institutions function at national and EU level. Plenty of good practices and inspiration in this regard come from hundreds of citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ panels, citizens’ juries and other participatory initiatives already successfully trailed at local, regional, national, and supranational level across the globe.<sup>65</sup>

Will the political establishment find the creativity and will to change its workings in such a fundamental way and permanently? Will it really have to do so? How will technology be harnessed in this quest for better

democratic congruence? Will politico-institutional engineering suffice? If not, what else will do?

The precise shape of the next democratic model still escapes us. And whatever changes will be made, they will not be final at any rate. Since there is no end state to democracy, the search for a static, ultimate answer is futile. “There is no one best way for the system to work. There is only the best we can do right now”.<sup>66</sup>

In this case, we must address the growing mismatch between the political infrastructure and society, which is becoming unsustainable. But the search for democratic

congruence is bound to continue thereafter. The point is rather to acknowledge and embrace the certainty of change.

Europe could show the way if the member states accept that democracy is forever a work in progress, and if they step outside their comfort zone to test new ways of governing modern societies. **If the West does not take the lead now, someone else will – and they might not share the EU’s vision for a democratic future.**

## Democracy as a blended and collective enterprise

While it is not yet clear what a new, more congruent democratic political system at national or EU level will look like, two principles seem certain in the process of getting there. One demands sifting through the theory and practice of representative government as we know it while the other foresees building anew through horizontal cooperation.<sup>67</sup>

### THE GREAT SIFTING

First, the existing system has to be put through a sieve to be able to isolate what is important – sacred values, institutions and practices – and decide what works well, what has to be reformed, and whether anything has to be discarded.

Recent crises, from the economic and financial crises to the migration/refugee crisis and now the COVID-19 pandemic, have exposed key pain points in the system and brought to the fore some inevitable hard questions: What is the right balance between the market and the state? Is it possible to have a successful currency union without a banking union and transfer union? Can the free movement of people exist without a common European external border force? Is the emancipation of minorities still possible when majorities feel threatened? Should national democracy continue to be the point of reference for organising political life? How can the need for supra-national coordination and cooperation be reconciled with national sovereignty? Is political mediation and party political representation still useful and feasible in the age of globalisation and new technologies? How can representative and participatory democracy be squared? Can the welfare state cope with an aging population? Is better government or more government needed? Where should the state do more and where is it overstretched? What is the role of technology in the public sector across Europe? How can the EU’s strategic foresight and crisis-management capacity be improved?

Starting to answer some of these questions is a necessary step to establish not only what *has* changed, but also what *hasn’t* but *should*. And the responses could prove very disruptive for traditional representative institutions, concepts and practices which are slow or resistant to change. Perhaps the conclusion will be that nothing short of wholesale – almost revolutionary – reform is required at national and/or EU level. Or maybe it will lead to the decision to stay the course with only minor tweaks to the current system. The point of this reflection process is precisely to establish the red lines – the attitudes, values and concepts that are up for compromise and the ones that are sacred – and to identify and own up to the faults and limitations in the current democratic model.

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**The new European democratic system will not only be a blended model, combining the old and the new; it will also have to be a collective enterprise.**

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Yet, as much as this sorting out is needed, it will not suffice. To invent our democratic future and solve the democratic dilemmas of our times, governments, corporations, media organisations, innovators, IT specialists, virtual communities, scientists, and empowered individuals should be involved in the political debate. The new European democratic system will not only be a blended model, combining the old and the new; it will also have to be a collective enterprise.

## A HORIZONTAL VALUE CREATION MODEL

This is why the second principle that is sure to guide democratic innovation and reform is horizontal cooperation. “With accelerating speed, we have moved from the industrial society via the knowledge society to the present stage of a disintegrating society” on our way to “a new global collaborative society”.<sup>68</sup> One elected official, one institution or one country alone can no longer solve the problems of many. It can take a community to develop solutions to today’s complex challenges. So, the technological political model of the future will have to revolve to a greater extent than until now around the power of assertive citizens and their continuing involvement in conversations about policies, processes, modernisation, and other decisions that affect their lives. The more diverse the network, the more likely for it to be resourceful and geared towards delivering beneficial new standards and practices for all.<sup>69</sup>

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**The report found that deliberative processes can lead to better policy outcomes, enable policymakers to make hard choices, and enhance trust between citizens and governments.**

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The thinking and efforts at the national and European level are slowly but surely following in the spirit of these principles. In 2020, the OECD published a report<sup>70</sup> that identified, studied and compared close to 300 deliberative initiatives which engaged hundreds of thousands of citizens worldwide in decisions about real issues: for example, how to spend a city’s budget, how to tackle online hate and harassment, how to improve the quality of air, whether to legalise same sex marriages, and so on. The report found that deliberative processes can lead to better policy outcomes, enable policymakers to make hard choices, and enhance trust between citizens and governments. Moreover, according to Claudia Chwalisz, one of the report’s lead authors, they also create the conditions for ordinary citizens to grapple with complexity, find common ground with others – not just express an opinion – and act as citizens’ representatives. In fact, **by treating citizens not just as participants but also as representatives of other citizens, deliberative processes could help to strengthen – rather than risking to undermine – existing representative democracy.** The work has already started.<sup>71</sup>

In a similar vein, the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) builds on these multiple past attempts to engage citizens in public decision-making<sup>72</sup> and tries to go just that much further. The Conference marks a departure from previous similar exercises in that it substantially raises the scope and stakes of the conversation: everyone is a full participant in discussions about a broad range of key policy issues to take big decisions about the future. Such a flagship initiative with such a bold title suggests that European democracies are starting to take the need to innovate seriously and do something about it.

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**By daring to try something new in a horizontal collaborative manner among all tiers of governance, this Conference is another stepping stone in the process of adapting and improving modern democratic practice to new realities.**

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Regardless of whether or not this ambitious process will, in the end, generate structural reforms that renew the political shape of democracy in the member states and the EU to keep up with the times, its undeniable merit is in promoting experimentation. By daring to try something new in a horizontal collaborative manner among all tiers of governance, this Conference is another stepping stone in the process of adapting and improving modern democratic practice to new realities. Perhaps it will deliver at least some solutions/proposals for reforms that are inclusively-developed and help the EU get in a better position to deal with current and future challenges. Or maybe it will contribute to the creation of a genuine culture of openness around EU institutions and national governments about democratic participatory processes. As such, maybe it will inspire and foster efforts to establish a more permanent mechanism of citizens’ participation in European policymaking. A mechanism that perhaps will strengthen democracy by synthesising national and European democracy but also representative and participatory democracy, just like the Conference seeks to do. Irrespective of how much will be achieved this time, future initiatives seeking to reinvent the democratic polity and the way it functions should and will be able to build on the CoFoE’s model and its lessons.

# Conclusion

So, there is hope. The more European political elites and people recognise that democracy is high-maintenance and engage in experimentation and innovation to keep it effective, the more likely it is that they will succeed in making it work for this time and age. The peculiarity of today's democratic challenge in Europe and beyond is that external shocks and pressures to the system – like migration, terrorism, competition among world powers or climate change – have to be dealt with at the same time as the challenge posed to old institutions and processes by an increasingly assertive culture thriving on global (technological) trends. In other words, **the task in the EU and elsewhere is not only to defend democracy against powerful external threats, but also to prevent it from dying from within.**

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**Confronting the “enemy within” will require a fundamental change in how we think about politics and how we practice democracy.**

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Confronting the “enemy within”<sup>73</sup> will require a fundamental change in how we think about politics and how we practice democracy: Europe's future technological political model will have to be about connected *individuals* coming together to question, adapt, improve, resolve, and shape their reality. And it will likely take time to get there: “the generation which commences a revolution rarely completes it.”<sup>74</sup> It is still possible that the ensuing European political order can go for better or for worse. But for now, it is important to hold on to the belief that, “when survival is at stake, humans usually rise to the occasion.”<sup>75</sup>

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- 3 Friedman (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- 4 Friedman (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- 5 Inglehart, Ronald F. (2018), *Cultural evolution: people's motivations are changing, and reshaping the world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 6 Inglehart, Ronald F. (1971), "The silent revolution in Europe: inter-generational change in post-industrial societies", *American Political Science Review* 66, pp: 991-1017; Inglehart, Ronald F. (1997), *Modernization and post-modernization: cultural, economic and political change in 43 societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Inglehart, Ronald F. (1977), *The silent revolution: changing values and political styles among Western publics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Inglehart, Ronald F. (1990), *Cultural shift in advanced industrial society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. See also Inglehart, Ronald F. and Welzel, Christian (2005), *Modernization, cultural change and democracy*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
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- 8 Nevitte, Neil (2013), "The decline of defense revisited: evidence after twenty-five years" in Welzel and Dalton (2013), *op. cit.*, pp. 35-58.
- 9 It could be argued that the surge in ICT use and development was driven just as much by commercial reasons.
- 10 Especially in some of the poorest countries, like Eritrea, Somalia, Guinea-Bissau, the Central African Republic, Niger, and Madagascar, fewer than 5% of people are online. Also, in authoritarian countries, like North Korea, access to global internet is granted only to a very small elite. See Roser, Max, Richie, Hannah and Ortiz-Ospina, Esteban, (2015), "[Internet](#)", *OurWorldInData.org*.
- 11 Worldbank.org, ourworldindata.org.
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- 13 Abramson (2013), *op. cit.*, p. 33. See also Carena, Neil, Gholshalb, Andrew Raj and Ribasa, Vanesa (2011), "A social movement generation cohort and period trends in protest attendance and petition signing", *American Sociological Review*, 76, pp. 125-151; Dalton, Russell (2014), *Citizens politics: public opinion and political parties in advanced industrial democracies*, Washington DC: CQ Press; but also Knutsen, Oddbjorn (2013), "Party choice" in Silke, Keil I. and Gabriel, Oscar W. (2013) (eds.), *Society and democracy in Europe*, New York: Routledge, pp. 244-269.
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- 34 Like Fidesz, PiS, and the Croatian Democratic Union.
- 35 Such as in Austria (The Austrian People's Party in coalition with the Freedom Party of Austria from 2000-2005 and 2017-2019), Bulgaria (National Union Attack in Bulgaria), Greece (Popular Orthodox Rally in Greece), and Italy (Five Star Movement in coalition with Lega Nord from 2018-2019).
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- <sup>50</sup> Democracy Report 2021, "[Autocratization turns viral](#)", V-Dem Institute, p. 13.
- <sup>51</sup> "[Democracy Index 2020: in sickness and in health?](#)", *Report by the Economist Intelligence Unit*, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>52</sup> Mair, Peter (2013), *Ruling the void. The hollowing of Western democracy*, London: Verso. Like the pattern evidenced by climate change, turnout sometimes bucks the overall trend. However, data suggest that the overall direction and reach of the change is unmistakable.
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- <sup>54</sup> Flash Eurobarometer (2021), "[European Parliament Youth Survey](#)".
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- <sup>56</sup> European foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, first European Quality of Life Survey: [Participation in civil society](#), 2006.
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- <sup>66</sup> Klein, Ezra (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 267.
- <sup>67</sup> As inspired by Friedman (2006), *op. cit.*, especially Chapter 4.
- <sup>68</sup> Friedman (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 238.
- <sup>69</sup> See also Friedman (2006), *op. cit.*, pp. 504-506 and 238-239.
- <sup>70</sup> OECD (2020), *op. cit.*
- <sup>71</sup> As this paper goes to print, in October 2021 alone, the European Commission launched a [Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy](#), the Paris City Council established a permanent citizens' assembly that will be able to draft bills for voting by the Council, suggest citizens' juries, request evaluation reports, and decide on the topics of the city's participatory budget, and a national citizens' assembly could also be in the making in Germany to advise the new government. All these initiatives suggest that citizens' participation in political affairs is slowly but surely becoming more mainstream.
- <sup>72</sup> Stratulat, Corina and Greubel, Johannes (2020), "[Preparing for the Conference on the Future of Europe: the 'known knowns' of citizens' participation](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*, Brussels: European Policy Centre and Stratulat, Corina and Butcher, Paul (2018), "[The European Citizens' Consultation: evaluation report](#)", *EPC Book*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
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- <sup>75</sup> Inglehart (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 216.

This paper was written as part of the conversations happening around the EPC's yearly Strategic Council and 2021 Annual Conference "Is Europe still in the global race?". The conference asks the question: in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges and a changing and unstable geopolitical landscape, can Europe hold its own, or is it destined to bring up the rear in the global race for power and influence?

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