Evolving Democracy With Europe's Next Generation

Evens Foundation

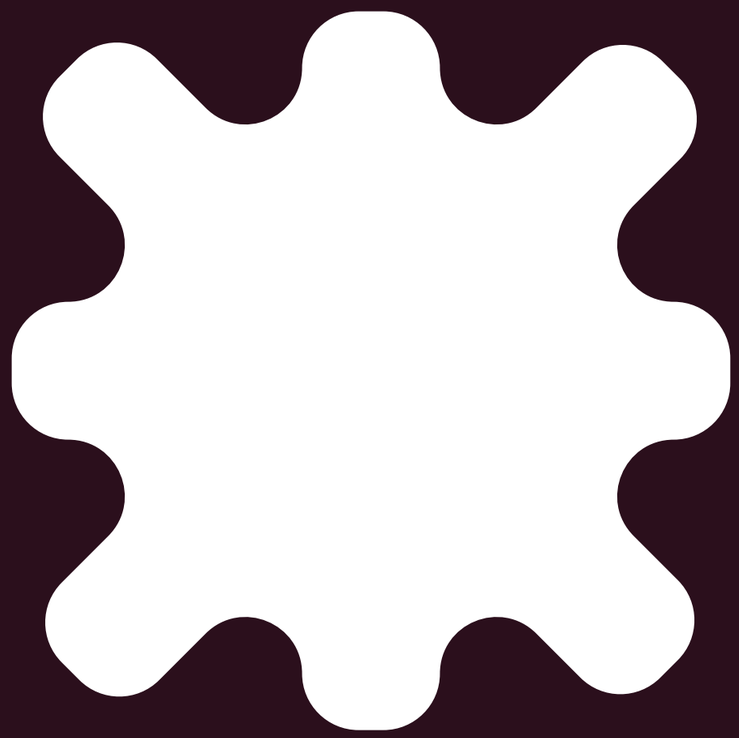
Vision Paper

Focus areas:

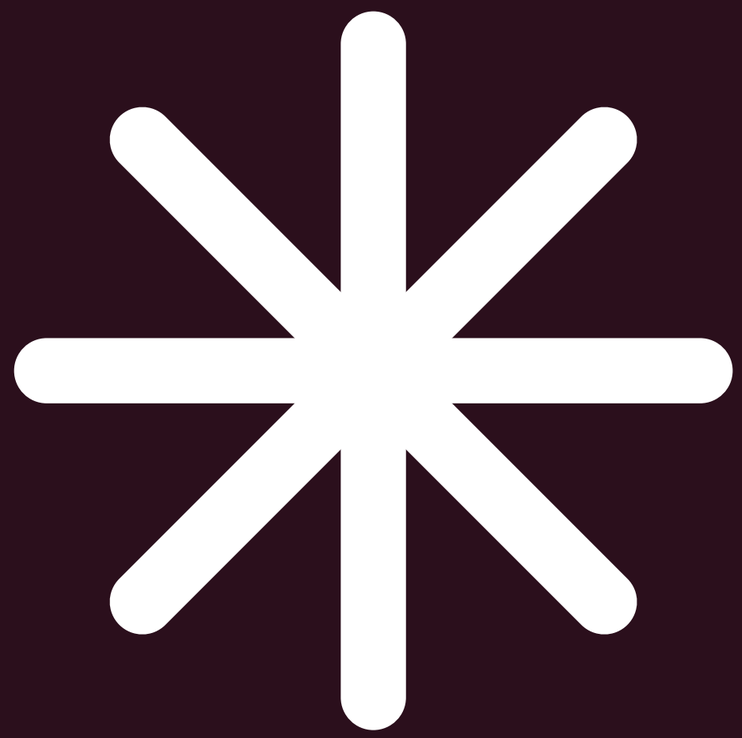
democracy, technology and youth



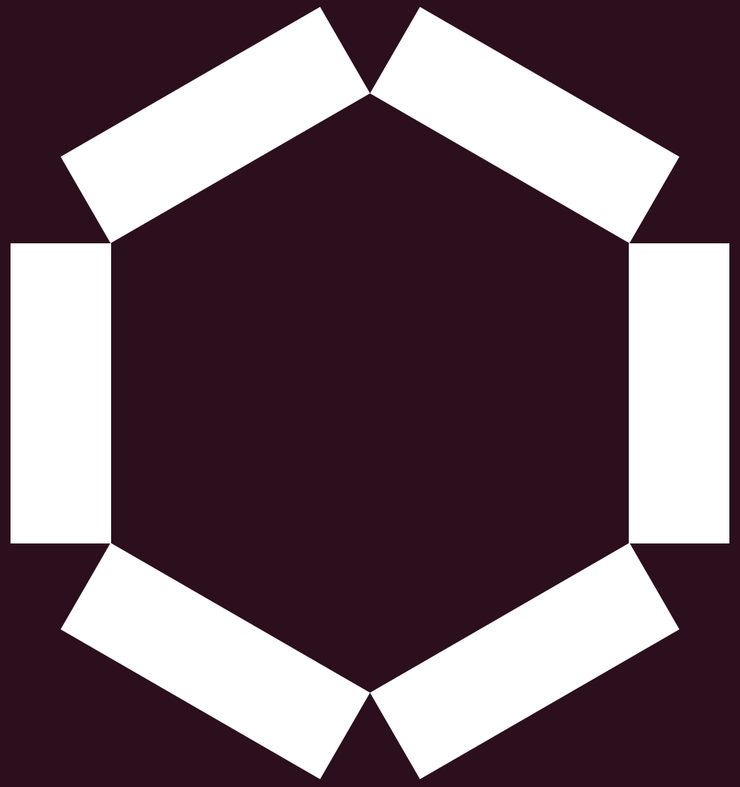
Executive Summary



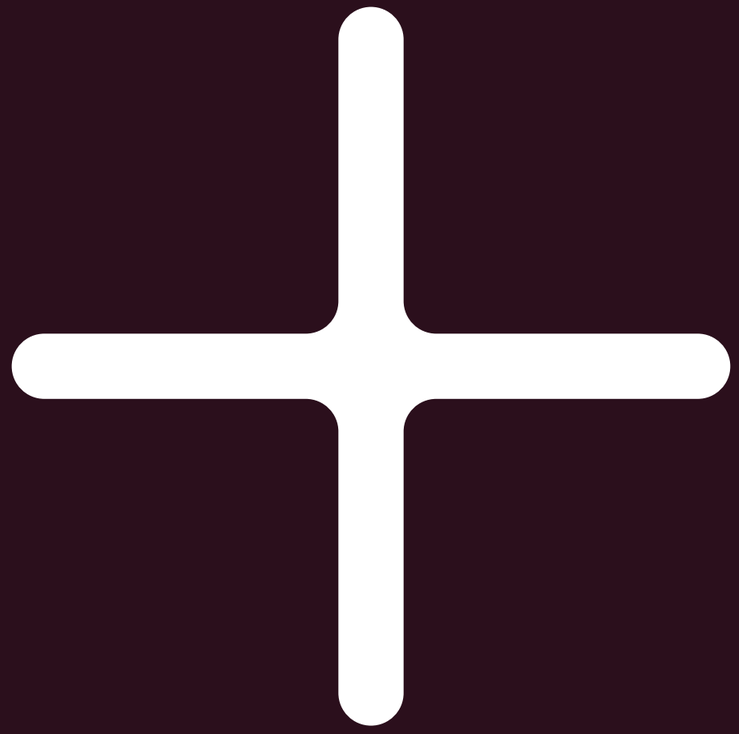
Background



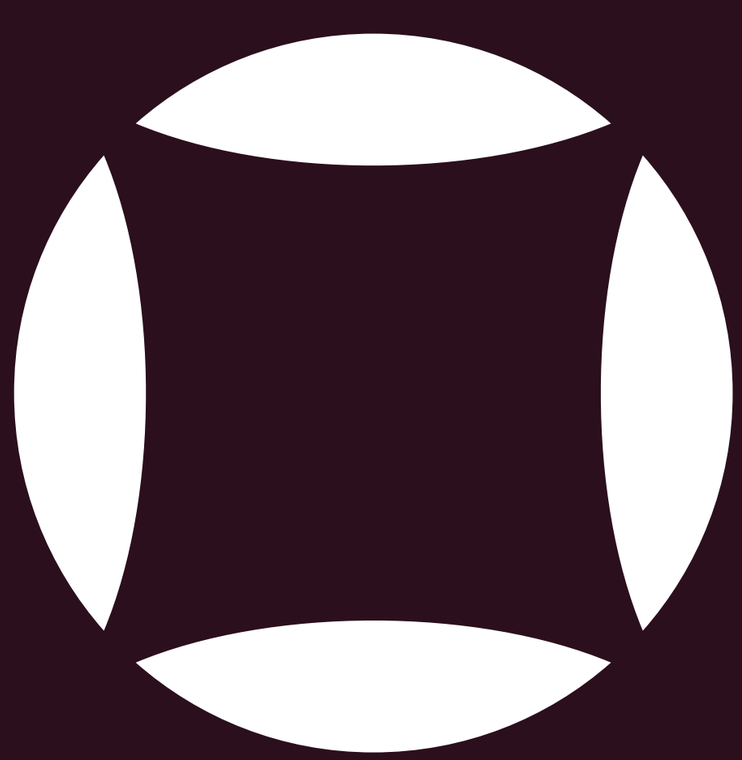
Role of the Evens Foundation



Glossary



Appendix



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01.



Executive Summary

This strategic paper outlines the Evens Foundation's plan to contribute to the evolution of democracy by working with Europe's youth. Part I identifies five factors driving a democratic crisis:

- Socio-economic and cultural fragmentation has created adverse conditions for democratic flourishing
- Crisis of representation and polarisation lead to failure in achieving democracy's objectives
- Youth are increasingly disengaging or rejecting democratic institutions and processes, using alternative means for political expression
- A modernisation gap for democracy has emerged from the advent of new information technology (i.e., the internet, digitalisation and now artificial intelligence)
- Modern autocracy has become a viable, concerted and competitive alternative and has gained considerable ground

Over the next decades, today's youth will become the political majority. Their beliefs and their actions will determine whether democracy flourishes, declines or is abandoned entirely.

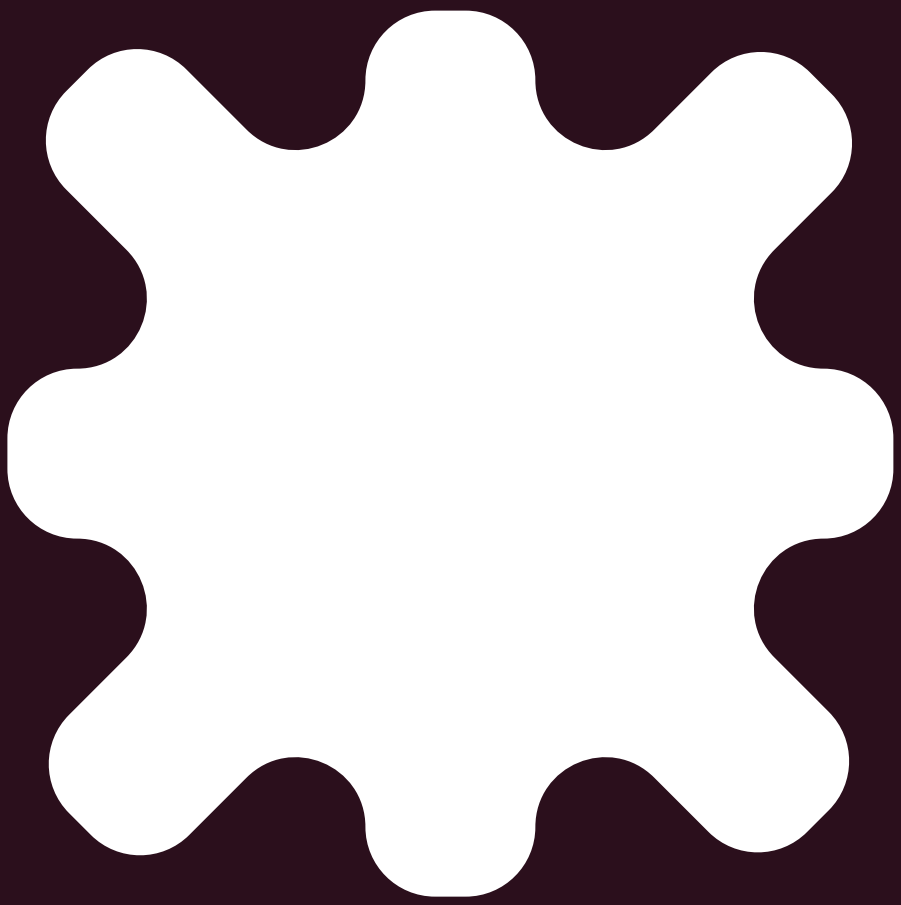
Part II outlines a practical foundation programme, structured around an aspirational dual-track agenda to drive systemic impact in responding to democracy's challenges:

- Reigniting a culture of constructive democratic conversation

- Supporting the creation of a digital democratic infrastructure

Over the next decade, the family Foundation will operate in a hybrid mode grounded in its European roots. It will take a maverick approach to most projects it undertakes, seeking systemic impact, taking a leadership role and embracing high and calculated risks. It will anchor all activities in its Ethical Charter, based on plurality, political neutrality and liberal democracy.

02.



Background

Democracy has never been perfect and has always been a living system; yet it has created conditions for great human flourishing[1,2] by mobilising the knowledge and lived experience of the whole citizenry and emerging a form of collective intelligence unmatched by other systems of social organisation. The discovery, analysis, and deliberation process that shape policy decisions were made possible through four universal pillars which have balanced power, built mutual trust, and secured liberty for all members of society[3]. Throughout history, it has evolved through cultural and technological leaps, with each stage expanding participation and accountability: writing, printing, broadcasting, and now digital networks and artificial intelligence[4]. The challenge today is to adapt these principles to a new cultural and information environment.

Foundations of democracy

A combination of historical contingencies, cultures, institutions and technologies has enabled humans to invent and evolve foundational democratic principles and their practical implementation across vast populations, yielding coordination, representation, and accountability of power[4].

Human beings, even in small prehistoric bands of a few dozen, developed democratic-like behaviour through acephalous structures (recognition of others, individual identity, friendship, cooperation, mild hierarchy and others). These traits made small societies surprisingly functional without centralised power[3]. City-states such as Athens used the invention of writing to enable direct citizen involvement in decision-making and laid the groundwork for popular participation. The printing press played a key role in the spread of ideas[4], fuelling the Enlightenment to further refine these concepts by emphasising individual rights and the importance of a balanced government, extending democracy to larger states[6]. Modern democracy, at the scale of millions of humans, introduced representative institutions, universal suffrage, and embedded accountability as cornerstones of political life in the era of the telegraph, telephone, radio and television[4,7].

The following foundational democratic principles have traditionally made democracy the most resilient framework to ensure political power is derived from and accountable to citizens:

1. **Representation:** Decision-making rests on the consent of the governed. Elections are free, fair, open, and competitive. Institutions must secure effective representation so that all communities have a genuine capacity to shape outcomes[8,9,10].

2. **Participation:** Democracy flourishes between elections. Citizens are informed and active in civic life. Public deliberation is grounded in evidence, respect for truth, and plural perspectives. Participation depends on education, access to information and a healthy civic infrastructure that enables citizens to engage meaningfully[8,11,12].

3. **Rule of law:** All persons and institutions, including rulers, are subject to publicly known, impartially enforced laws. The legal system is independent, transparent, and resistant to manipulation[8,13,14].

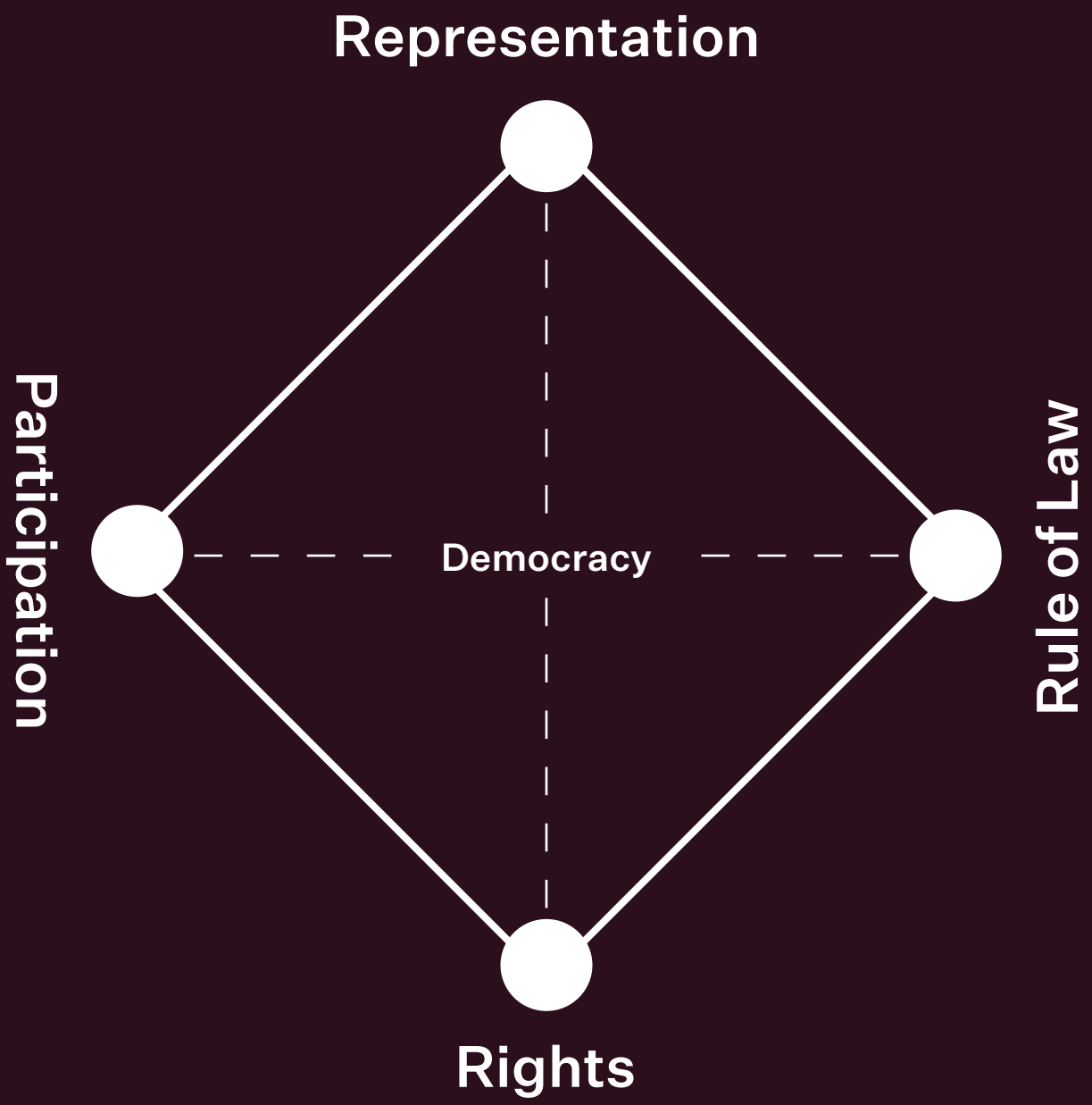
4. **Rights:** Every individual enjoys equal basic liberties, freedom of thought, conscience, expression, association, and property, compatible with equal liberty for all[8,15].

If properly deployed in practice, these universal pillars lay the foundation for a culture of constructive conversation, and embed continuous feedback loops allowing self-correction, leading to large-scale, functional societies, eventually delivering long-term societal improvements.

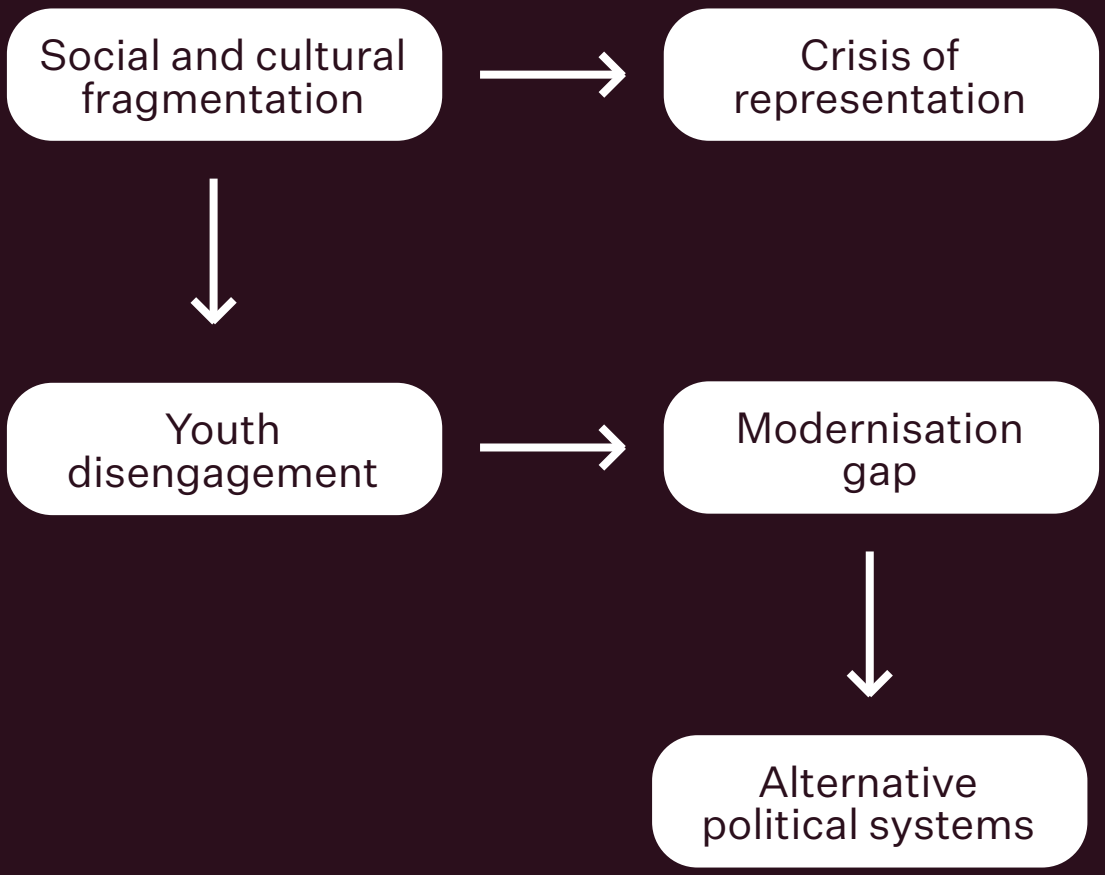
Democracy's crisis

While there is broad support and consensus for these four theoretical principles, the democratic mechanisms intended to translate them into effective outcomes are increasingly strained and no longer functioning as designed, rendering their practical implementation demonstrably challenging. Five key pressures interact to undermine democratic resilience: socio-economic and cultural fragmentation, a crisis of representation and polarisation, youth disengagement, technological disruption, and the growing confidence in authoritarian models. This dysfunction is now visible in the data, where by almost any meaningful metric, the health of democracy is in decline in Europe and globally[16,17,18].

4 pillars of Democracy



5 key drivers



Socio-economic and cultural fragmentation

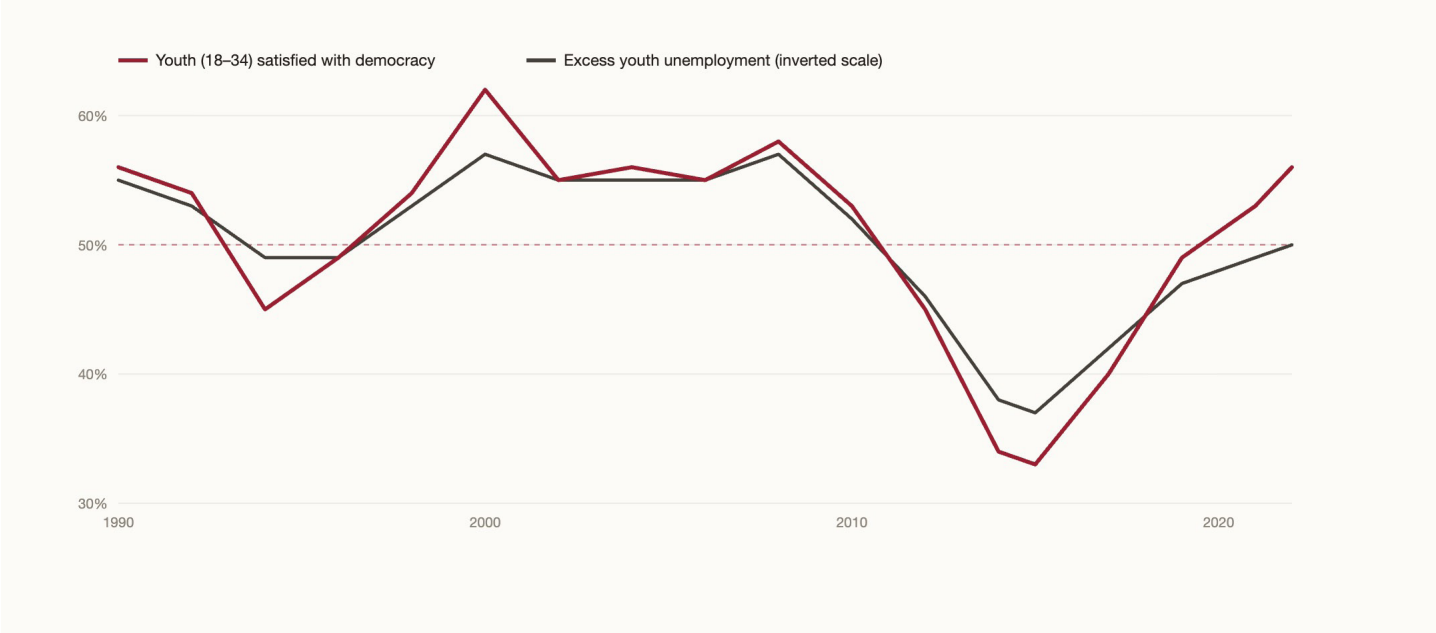
Arguably, since the acceleration of globalisation in the 1970s, the shrinking of the middle-class in advanced economies[19], the widening gap between return on capital and work remuneration[20,21], the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid pandemic, socio-economic and cultural realities have limited the capacity for democracy to thrive.

Socio-economic fragmentation has fuelled frustration with governments that appear unable to act and with democracy's inability to deliver a prosperous future[79,80]: Over a fifth of the European Union's population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (and over a quarter for young people)[22]. Persistently high youth unemployment (above 20% in seven EU member states and as high as 26.1% in Estonia, against an EU average of 15.1%) undermines young people's belief in finding work[84].For aspirational youth, housing affordability[23] and a lack of stable entry-level jobs[24] (with increased pressure since the advent of Artificial Intelligence[25]) has resulted in lower economic mobility[26]. Many young people are delaying having children[27,28], and those who are creating families worry that their children will not have the same opportunities as they did.

YOUTH SATISFACTION · EMPLOYMENT

Youth satisfaction with democracy tracks closely with employment opportunity, and collapsed in the late 2000s [42].

Share of 18–34s satisfied with democracy, plotted against excess youth unemployment (inverted), 1990–2022.



Foa, R., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. & Slade, M. (2020) Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect? Cambridge: Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge.

Beyond socio-economics, society has shifted quickly: the social contract has grown tenuous, citizens increasingly conceive of life as a personal project rather than a collective one and many people feel isolated and purposeless as community bonds have disappeared[29]. For young people, community engagement has plummeted[30] and has been steadily replaced by online interactions, reducing opportunities for genuine, humane connection and weakening the sense of shared experience and belonging[31]. Religious houses[32] and neighbourhood initiatives[33] all see fewer and fewer young people turn up, leading to a decline in the informal ties that created a shared identity. Record numbers of young people report feelings of isolation, uncertainty and loss of purpose[34, 35].

When young people feel excluded from both opportunity and community, experience a sense of disconnection and meaninglessness, or anomie[36], trust in institutions erodes; Modern democracies have allowed the social contract to decouple from the necessity of a connected society, one that offers not just bonding relationships with social similars, but the critical bridging ties that empower citizens to transform initially costly friction across differences into beneficial cooperation. Reviving social connection has become a precondition for democratic renewal.

Crisis of representation and polarisation

As a result of the interaction between institutional safeguards and modern political incentives, democratic systems are vulnerable to sub-optimal solutions and paralysis. Rather than solving deep, systemic problems, political representatives often prioritise short-term solutions appealing to the next electoral cycle. Short periods between elections can also create paralysis, where system reforms are frequently undone or stalled. In a climate of complex and systemic crises, ranging from socio-economics to migration, global warming to foreign aggressions, modern democracy's inability to solve problems for citizens becomes apparent.

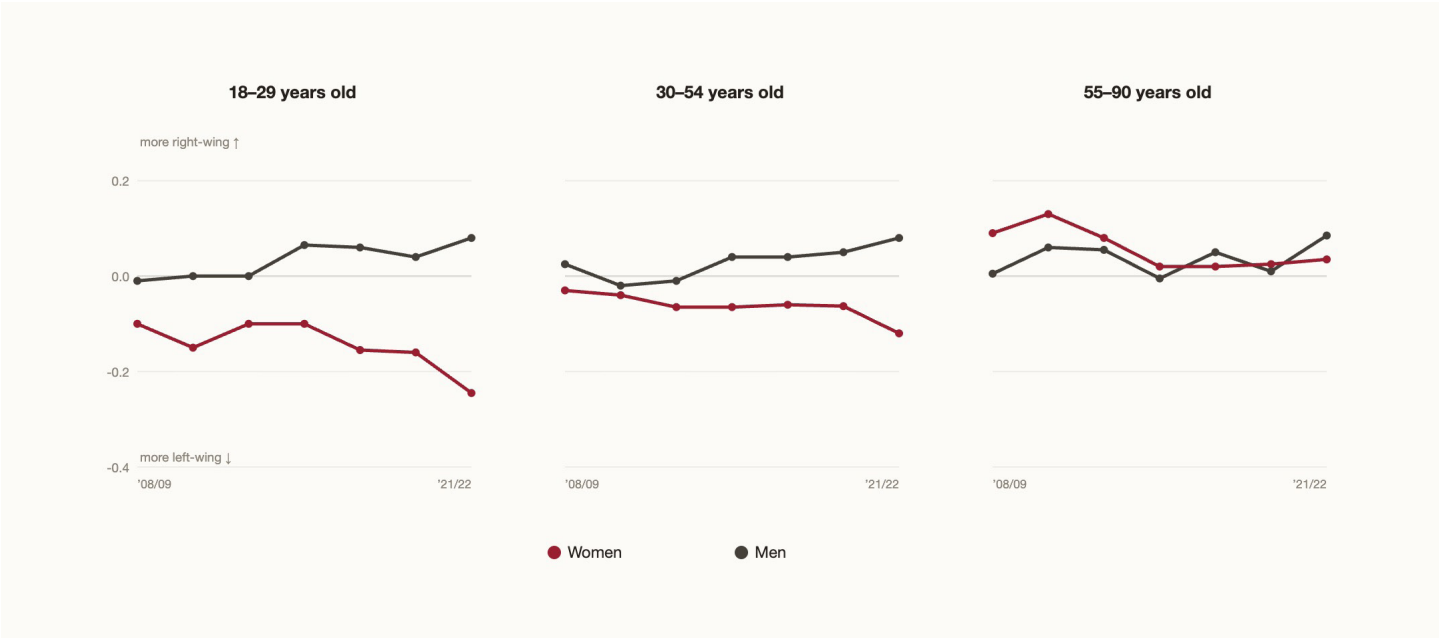
Compounded by widespread toxic polarisation, political leaders and citizens entrench themselves along their ideological lines, and it becomes increasingly difficult to articulate a vision capable of uniting a majority and delivering the corresponding tangible results over long periods of time. The outcome is a persistent sentiment among sizable segments of society that they remain outside the circle of effective representation.

The focus of citizens has shifted towards political parties' narratives on addressing specific issues, and has become highly dependent on their demographic group. The consequence, especially for the younger generation, is increased polarisation. The growing gap between young men's and women's political behaviour, for example, is a telling indicator[77].

POLITICAL DIVERGENCE BY GENDER

Young men and women are moving in opposite political directions, a divergence widening with each electoral cycle[37].

Relative distance to the national average political position, by age group and gender (European Social Survey).



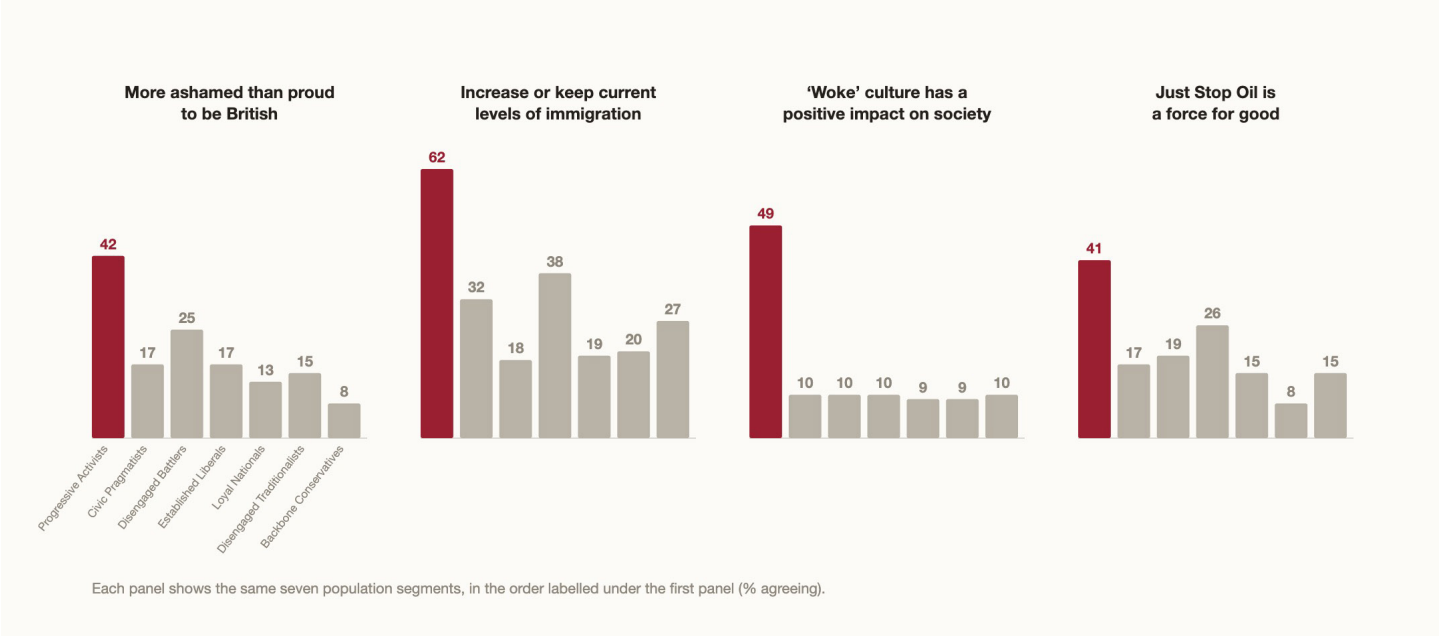
Bernard, A. & Jacobs, A. (2025) 'O género e as visões políticas na Europa: a brecha está a aumentar entre os jovens?', Observatório Social da Fundação "la Caixa", May.

Significant attitude differences are also observable by breaking down identities. More In Common's progressive activist cohort, for example, shows divergences from the rest of the population on issues related to migration, national pride, or aggressive action on climate change[39]. As these divides turn into chasms, "Enemyfication" and purity tests replace healthy polarisation between political adversaries and lead to political paralysis[39]. Even for those who recognise a responsibility to bridge these divides, the intent is often stifled; many remain ill-equipped to navigate the inevitable discomfort, and lack the structural opportunities to engage meaningfully with perspectives that differ from their own.

CULTURAL DISTANCE

Progressive activists are significantly out of step with the broader population on major cultural issues[38].

Percentage of each population segment agreeing with the statement above (UK; research suggests similar patterns exist across European democracies). Each panel shows the same seven population segments, in the order labelled under the first panel (% agreeing).



Hodgson, E. & Tryl, L. (2025) Progressive Activists. London: More in Common.

Trust levels in political parties are steadily below 20% across Europe[40]. Almost three-quarters (74%) of citizens believe that elected officials do not care about their opinions and nearly half (42%) say that no political party represents their views[41]. Democracy, therefore, is failing to meet its core purpose of faithful representation and good governance. A key way forward is to strengthen deliberative mechanisms and civic dialogue amongst citizens and with their representatives, thereby helping to rebuild trust.

Youth disengagement

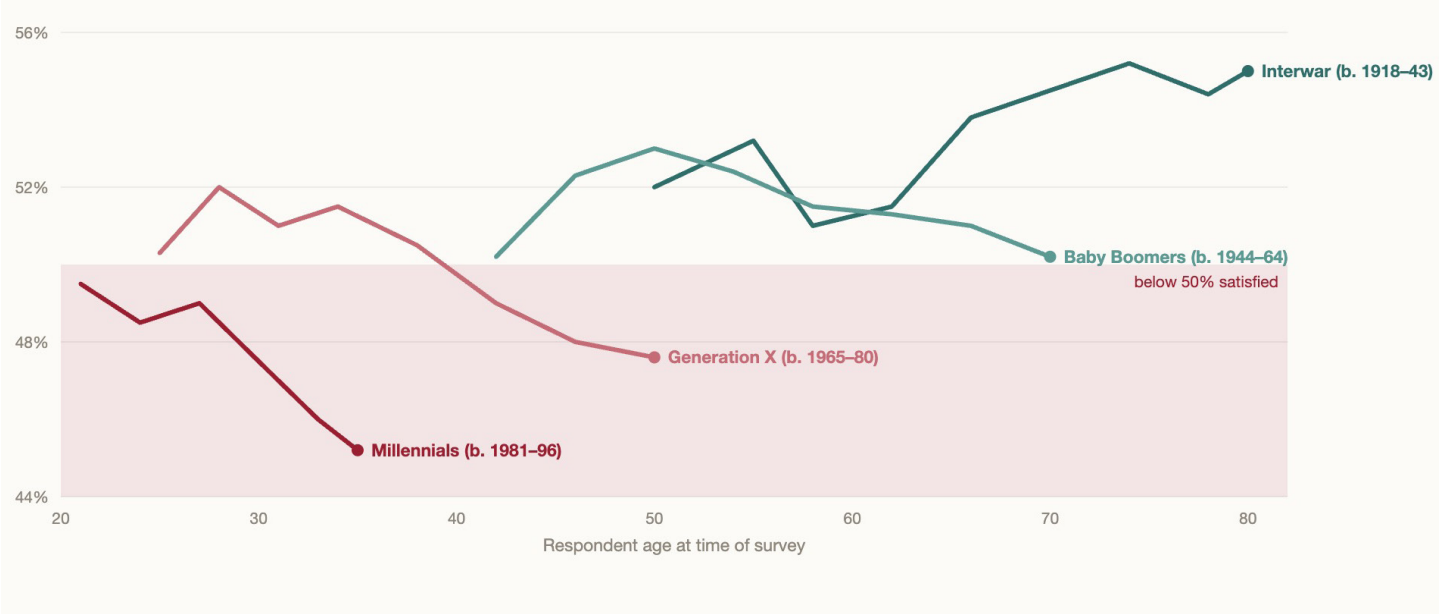
Younger generations are no longer engaging with democracy as their elders did. Across European democracies, there has been a steady decline in voter participation, with turnout dropping from 80-85% in the postwar decades to 60-65% today. The OECD observes this is more pronounced in youth cohorts (18-24) who are, on average, 12% points lower than all other groups when it comes to turnout[27]. When asked 'how satisfied with democracy are you', Millennials (1981-1996) show less than 46% are satisfied with democracy: A majority are unsatisfied[42]. Similar trends can be observed in Gen Z[43].

Younger generations have increasingly withdrawn from traditional participation and compensated with a surge of activity in alternative channels, particularly online[44]. Young people redirect their voices into other arenas: Over a quarter regularly post or share political content[44]. They also engage in politically motivated consumption, boycotting or buying products for ethical reasons significantly more than other generations[46]. Nearly a quarter take to the streets in protests[45]. It shows that parts of youth are not apathetic but are expressing disillusionment and anger through digital platforms, issue-driven activism, civil disobedience, verbal aggression and even a subsegment who have a high tolerance for physical violence[47].

GENERATIONAL DECLINE

Each new generation starts less satisfied with democracy than the one before and the trend shows no sign of reversing[42].

Share satisfied with democracy by respondent age, traced for each birth cohort.

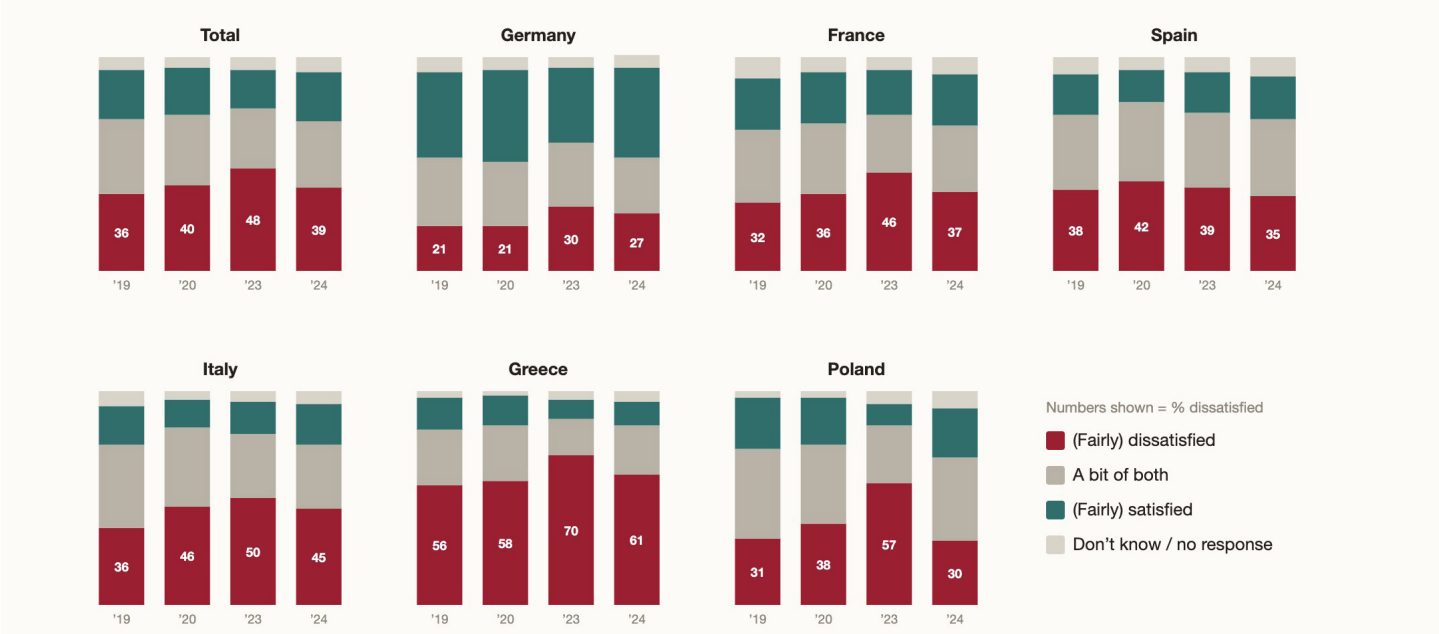


Foa, R., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. & Slade, M. (2020) Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect? Cambridge: Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge.

DISSATISFACTION BY COUNTRY

Dissatisfaction with democracy is not fixed. Sharp shifts in a single year show how quickly national conditions can change the picture[43].

"How satisfied are you, all in all, with democracy as it exists in [country]?" — 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024.

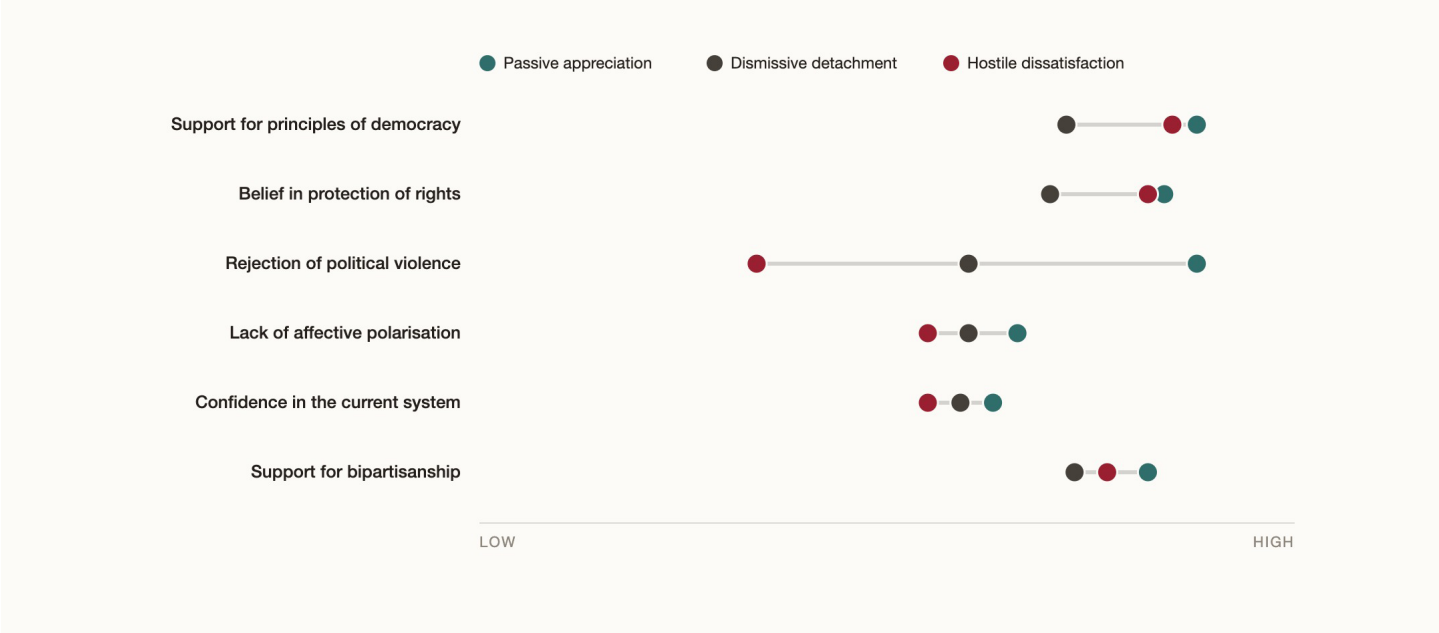


TUI Stiftung/YouGov. (2025) Junges Europa 2025 — Jugendstudie der TUI Stiftung. Berlin: TUI Stiftung.

THE FACETS OF DEMOCRACY

Gen Z is not a monolith. Attitudes towards democracy vary widely, with the sharpest divide on tolerance for political violence[47].

Using three attitudinal profiles — passive supporters, disengaged sceptics, and hostile dissenters — this chart maps where each group sits across six dimensions of democratic attitude.



Protect Democracy Project. (2025) How Does Gen Z Really Feel About Democracy? Washington, DC: Protect Democracy Project.

Because they are bypassing the formal mechanisms where democratic power is exercised, political decision-makers are left with giving too much or too little credit to these alternative means of expression of youth opinion.

The deficit for youth expression in democratic processes is also partly exacerbated by:

- **The sharp contrast in administrative complexity of civic engagement in democratic institutions, compared with everything else they do in their daily life (lack of digital tools and platforms)[45]**

- **The tendency of existing platforms to amplify divisive voices, rather than nuanced voices, is coupled with media literacy and critical-thinking deficits, and leads to flawed deliberation, lack of civic virtue, privatised censorship with infringement on freedom of speech and the rule of law[48, 49]**

Europe's youth are at the forefront of many of the systemic pressures leading to record dissatisfaction in democracy[42]. If this trend continues over sustained periods of time (as young people replace the old), it will lead to a fundamental realignment of democratic systems. It is therefore essential to meet youth where they are and co-create spaces and tools that turn protest and creativity into democratic participation.

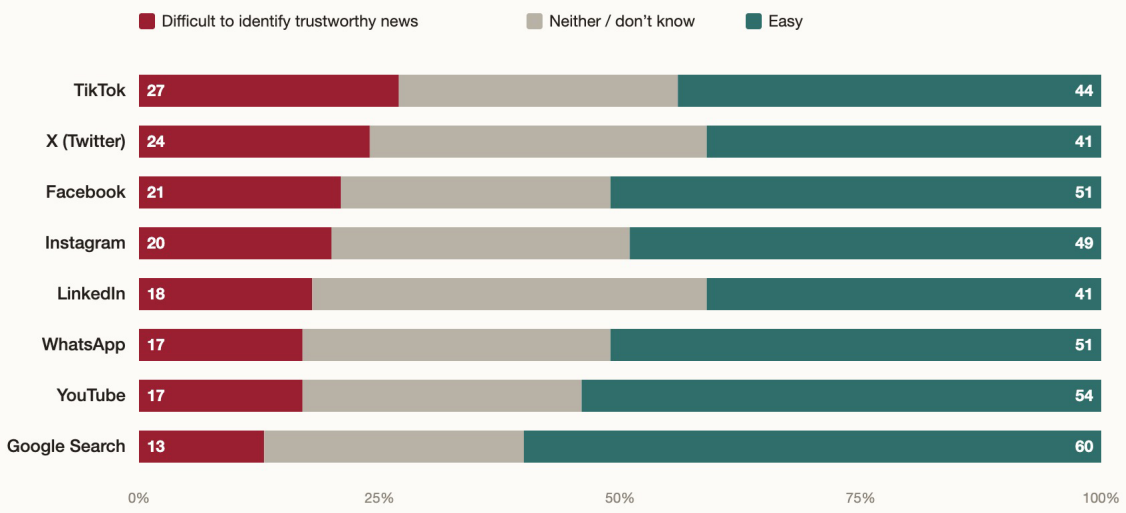
Democracy's modernisation gap

While humans have always altered their surroundings, the past few decades have dramatically intensified the transformation of our social fabric[50]. Digitalisation has rewritten how we interact with each other, consume information and form opinions. While its advent has brought countless benefits, from universal access to knowledge to instantaneous communication, it also introduced profound new challenges for democracy: fragmented public spheres, the court of Tiktok superseding due process, micro-targeting in election campaigns and a growing gap in speed of content versus the speed of facts.

TRUST IN PLATFORMS

TikTok is the platform where users find it hardest to identify trustworthy news, ahead of all other major platforms[51].

Percentage rating each platform difficult or easy for trustworthy news.



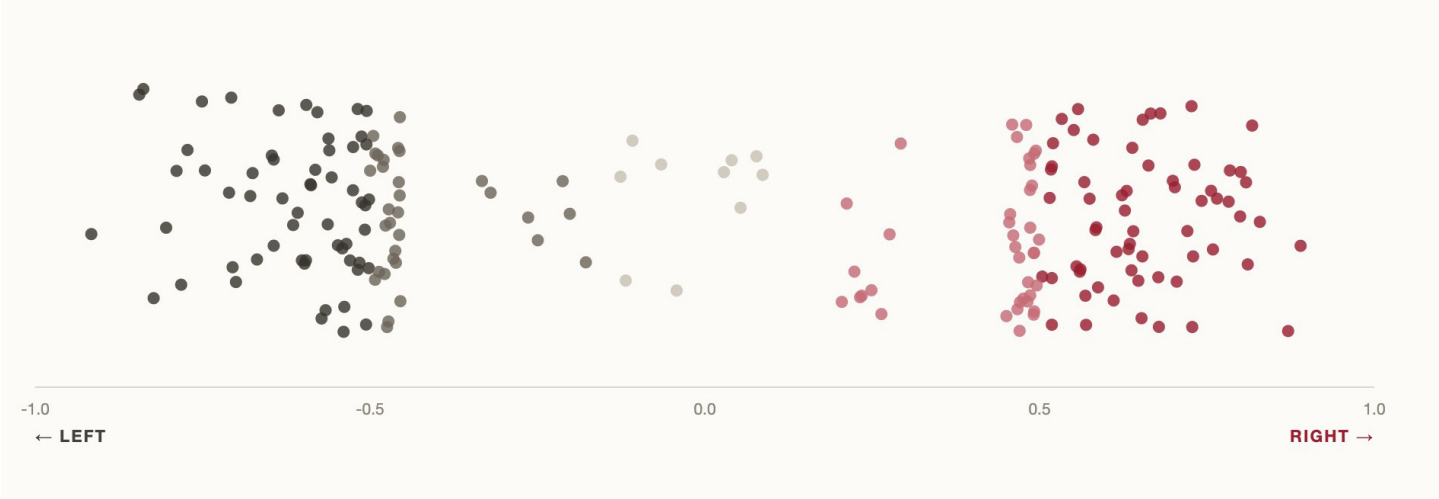
Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C.T., Ross Arguedas, A. & Nielsen, R.K. (2024) Digital News Report 2024. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Traditional democratic institutions have failed in adapting to this new environment, leading to a world which feels increasingly post-truth, polarised and populist. Social interactions, built on reputation and identity, now operate in an environment where privacy is fragile, voices are many, and the consequences of exposure are far larger and harder to contain. Digital transmission has amplified shame and humiliation, from local and slow to global and instantaneous. Cyberbullying has hardened into a new tribalism based on ideological affinity[52,53]. As the era of Artificial Intelligence unfolds, the complexity will only grow and challenge democracy at the epistemic, material and foundational levels[54]. As demonstrated by a study of over a hundred million content items from users on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Gab, focusing on controversial topics such as vaccination, abortion, and others, democracy has lost a protected public sphere[55] that can result in collective problem-solving, finding common ground and practical solutions to deep, long-term issues such as demographic shifts, climate change or a renewed social contract. Looking at the general picture, this transformation has so far not benefited democratic rule, because digital networks have outpaced democracy's institutional imagination.

IDEOLOGICAL CLUSTERING

On TikTok, ideological content clusters at the extremes — the middle ground is almost entirely absent[56].

Each dot represents an account, plotted by estimated ideological position from left to right.

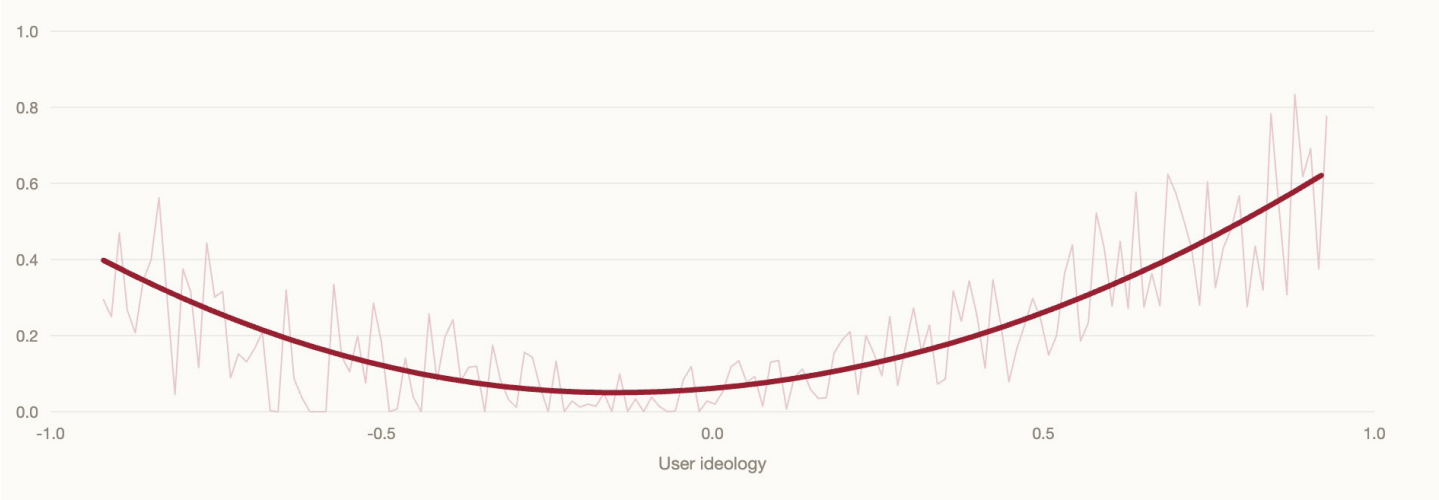


Li, Y., Cheng, Z. & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2025) 'TikTok's political landscape: Examining echo chambers and political expression dynamics', New Media & Society.

EXPRESSION AND EXTREMITY

Users with strong ideological views post far more frequently than those in the centre — pushing moderate voices to the margins[56].

Posting frequency as a function of user ideology; the smoothed fit over the raw signal.



Li, Y., Cheng, Z. & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2025) 'TikTok's political landscape: Examining echo chambers and political expression dynamics', New Media & Society.

"Digital networks have outpaced democracy's institutional imagination."

In a sharp contrast to democracies, authoritarian countries have embraced this change in environment and re-adapted their own political system to modernity, by embracing surveillance tools, giving very little or no data rights to citizens, mass-censorship, mass-media control, and mass-surveillance[57]. So far, the new environment has benefited the modus operandi of autocracies, as technology has allowed an increase in their effectiveness[58].

Democracy has yet to fully enter, reform and adapt to the modern era, and evolve alongside significant changes in the social environment presented by digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence.

To remain a credible and effective form of governance, democracy must match technological change with institutional imagination and innovation.

A successful countermodel to democratic governance

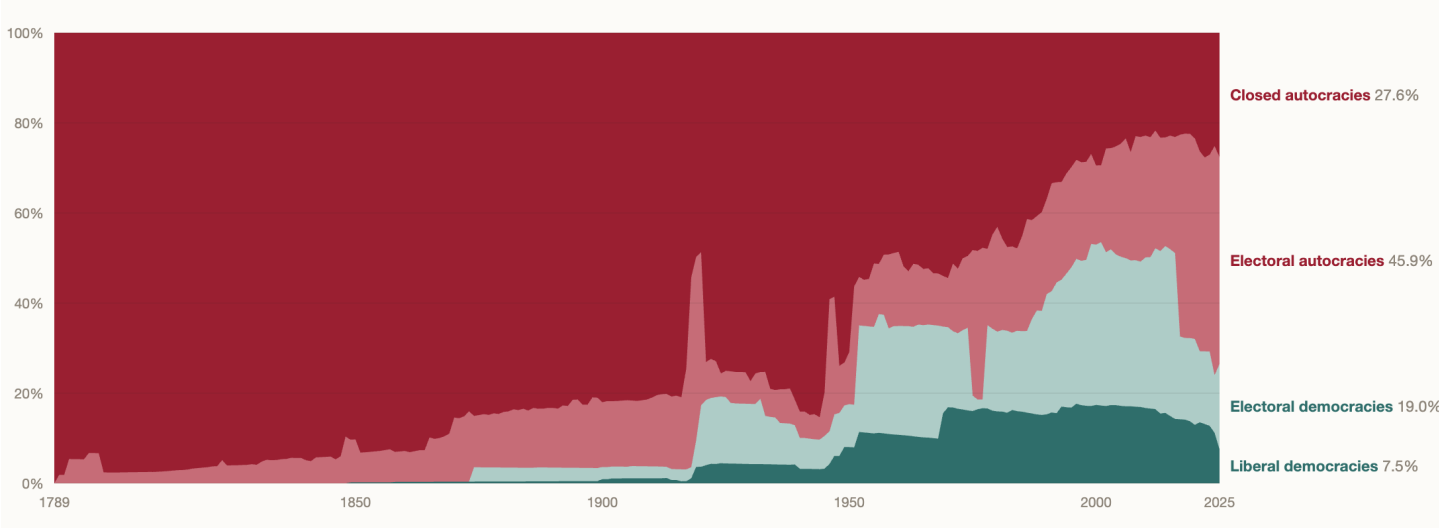
On the global scene, democracies have also been losing ground as the political system of choice, as demonstrated by the number of democracies, the narrative battle and economic strength. The current competition with other political systems, especially with authoritarian regimes banding together, such as China and Russia, sees democracies on the losing side[59].

In 2025, 74% of the world's population lived in autocracies, and autocracies outnumbered democracies (92 to 87) for the second year running. For the average person, democracy is back at 1978 levels[60].

A WORLD LOSING DEMOCRACY

Nearly three in four people now live in autocracies, up from one in two in 2005.[60]

Share of the world's population living under four regime types, from liberal democracy to closed autocracy, 1789–2025.



Nord, M. et al. (2026) Democracy Report 2026, V-Dem Institute; data via Our World in Data. Shares are of the population living in countries with a regime classification; the unclassified population (about 18% in 1789, under 0.1% by 2025) is excluded. Shares use Our World in Data population estimates, so they can differ slightly from the figures in V-Dem's report, which uses World Bank population data (2025: 73% in autocracies here, 74% in V-Dem's report).

Global freedom declined for a twentieth consecutive year in 2025: 54 countries scored worse and only 35 improved. Just 21% of the world's people now live in countries rated Free, down from 46% two decades ago[16]. According to The Economist's Democracy Index, only about 8% of people live in full democracies[61].

In the battle of narratives, autocracies have had some success in talking up their achievements and their ability to deliver on what they say "matters": stability, execution, effectiveness, infrastructure[62,63,81], and building the future[82]. Because free societies with free circulation of ideas fundamentally challenge their authoritarian model of censorship and full control, democracy's existence is a threat





Left: Guangzhou, China's third largest city in 1970 (top) and 2021 (bottom). Right: New York, again in 1971 and 2021. Guangzhou's pace of urban transformation far outstripped its Western counterpart[83].

"Democracy's existence is a threat to their existence."

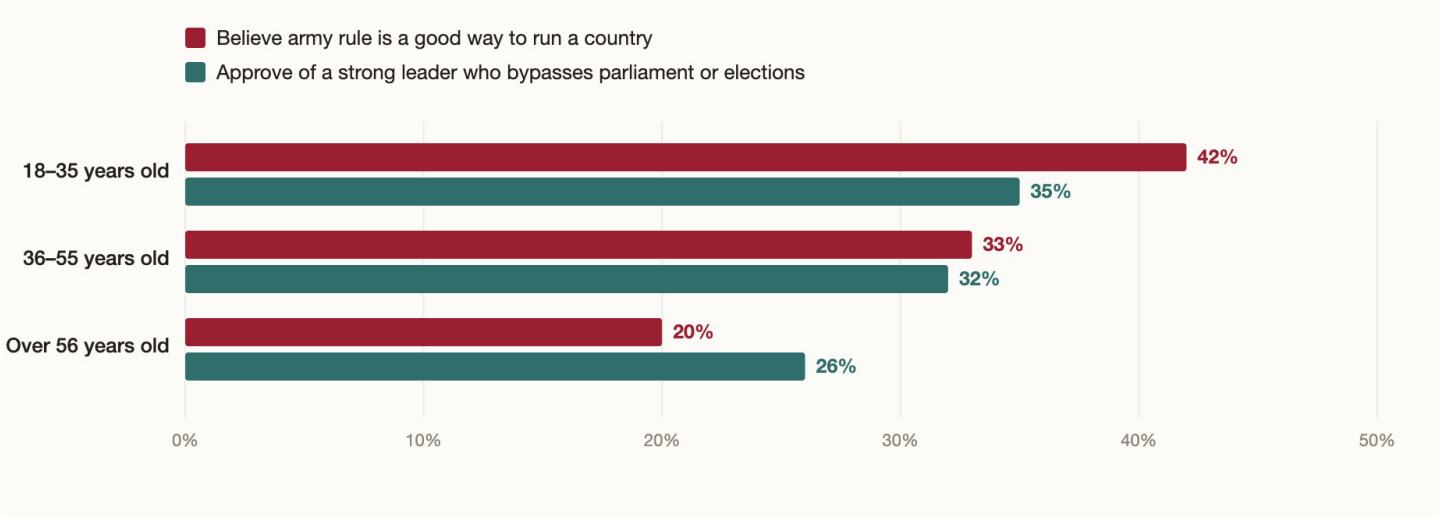
to their existence. This has led these regimes (notably China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and Venezuela) to produce slogans, state-controlled media content, and conspiracy theories to paint democracy as chaos (polarisation, corruption, slow decision-making[64]) in order to weaken the idea of democracy from within[59].

On the economic front, China has succeeded in maintaining robust economic growth (about 8%) for over three decades and lifted around 800 million people out of poverty[65]. In addition to many other factors, centralisation of power coupled with economic pragmatism has enabled the Chinese Communist Party to set long-term priorities and deliver large developmental outcomes, which contrasts with democracy's perceived inability to alleviate poverty on this scale and speed[66,67].

OPENNESS TO AUTOCRACY BY AGE

Younger generations are significantly more open to autocratic rule than their elders, reversing assumptions about generational progress[68].

Global averages by age of respondents who believe army rule, or a leader who bypasses parliament, is a good way to run a country.

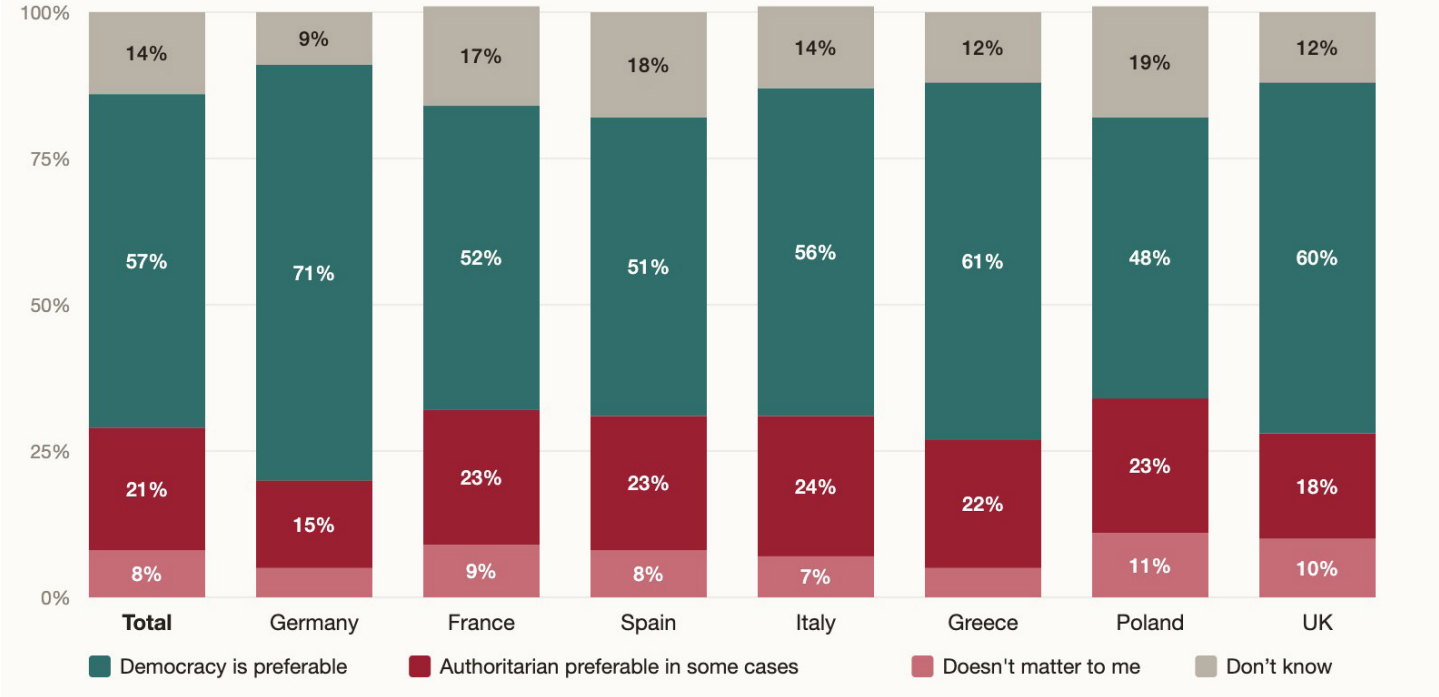


Open Society Foundations. (2023) Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver? September.

OPENNESS TO AUTOCRACY BY COUNTRY

Across Europe, a significant minority of Gen Z are open to authoritarian government. In some countries, those who don't prefer democracy outright are approaching a majority, and US surveys show the same pattern[43,47].

"Which statement best represents your opinion?" — by country.



TUI Stiftung/YouGov. (2025) Junges Europa 2025 – Jugendstudie der TUI Stiftung. Berlin: TUI Stiftung.

It would be a mistake to overlook their relative success, given the growing appeal of modern autocracy models, particularly among younger generations. In a large survey of Gen Z in the United States, nearly one-fifth expressed openness to authoritarian forms of government[47], revealing the inadequacy of democracy's current implementation in addressing their expectations. A large minority of young people surveyed worldwide (over 40%) believe that military rule is a good way of running a country, while 35% think that having a strong leader who bypasses elections or legislatures is an acceptable form of governance[68].

Autocracies are gaining ground not only by the numbers, but by delivering material results and controlling public discourse; they have become a viable, concerted, competitive alternative to democracy as a political system and their appeal across the globe has only increased. To counter this trend, democracy must renew its narrative by demonstrating its capacity to deliver and to inspire in the face of an alternative model of governance.

03.

Role of the Evens Foundation

The Evens Foundation's work is anchored in a clear ethical commitment: to defend and strengthen liberal democracy while remaining politically neutral and open to the full spectrum of views. The Foundation facilitates dialogue rather than dictates outcomes, embraces dissonance as a path to understanding, and confronts honestly the tensions inherent in this work.

Having survived World War II and found new hope in Belgium, Irene Evens-Radzyminska and George Evens founded the Evens Foundation in 1990 as a commitment to the European project: a vision of unity and solidarity over division and a contribution to a just and harmonious Europe, and preventing the horrors of the past. By doing so, they encouraged the furthering of values shaped over centuries of cultural and human progress. Under the leadership of their daughter, Corinne Evens, the Foundation expanded its focus to education, intercultural dialogue, and strived towards greater understanding between cultures and communities by supporting innovators and leading practitioners across multiple disciplines.

The Foundation has focused on two strands, which have generated a continually evolving global network of citizens, scientists, researchers, academics, Non-Governmental Organisations, institutions, artists, educators, media, philanthropists, and philosophers; a unique network helping to forge Europe’s future.

- Through projects, where experimentation is central, it has stimulated pilot programmes that test scientific hypotheses, innovative pedagogies, or artistic processes, turning early ideas into real-world impact.

- Through prizes, via its Evens Prizes for Education, Art, Journalism, and Science, it has sought out and recognised practitioners and organisations breaking new ground.

Building on a tradition of determination and innovation, well captured by Georges Evens' maxim inscribed on his gravestone, "il est inutile d'espérer pour entreprendre, ni de réussir pour persévérer", the strength of the Evens Foundation has always been its willingness to pose difficult questions, to pursue pioneering projects that others dare not try, to embrace failure, to adopt a maverick approach, to seek out unique initiatives, and to prioritise people-centred solutions. It has applied a distinctive method, combining nimbleness, creativity, clarity, intellect, and its unique identity to discover and follow through on worthy projects.

Today, a new generation of the Family is steering the Foundation forward, ensuring it stays dedicated to addressing the most pressing issues impeding its mission, while staying true to its history, identity and know-how, built over decades. Recognising socio-economic and cultural fragmentation, institutional distrust and polarisation, youth disengagement, a modernisation gap, and the success of alternative governance models as key challenges to democracy, Jonathan Evens and Déborah Flon have reoriented the Foundation's strategy: the renewed focus aims to evolve democracy through collaboration with youth to strengthen its ability to remain resilient, adaptive and future-fit and to continue to stand as the "worst form of government, except for all the others", as Winston Churchill once said. The Foundation's core hypothesis is that revitalising the culture of democratic discourse, underpinned by a new democratic digital infrastructure, are central to reversing democracy's decline and can impact all five of its key drivers.

"The worst form of government, except for all the others."

“Culture of democratic conversation”

+

Digital tools

↓

Youth engagement

+

Recognition of democracy’s benefits

+

Stronger social cohesion

+

Better representation

+

Modernisation of democratic processes

↓

More resilient democracy

Prioritisation frame

In order to focus the foundation's efforts, a scoping exercise was undertaken (see appendix). By first mapping democratic threats which disproportionately impacted young people's democratic experience, two linked clusters emerged:

The culture of democratic conversation
Digital democratic infrastructure

These were set as core pillars. To move from strategy to programmes, five prioritisation criteria were built (below). Projects that fall into our two pillars and satisfy these criteria (not necessarily exhaustively) will be considered for funding.

Systemic impact

Priority is assigned to interventions that address the structural root causes capable of exerting a systemic effect on several key drivers of democratic decline simultaneously rather than treating them in isolation. For instance, addressing algorithmic polarisation was prioritised because it meaningfully impacts the information ecosystem, which is a prerequisite for closing the modernisation gap, re-engaging youth, and restoring representation. On the contrary, initiatives focused on elevating European issues over national politics were deprioritised. While important, such interventions address the content of political discourse without resolving the structural dysfunction of the channels through which that discourse occurs.

Distinctive niche

The intervention must align with the Foundation's raison d'être and comparative advantages: its agility, high risk tolerance, capacity to act as a 'bridging leader' across sectors and distinctive skillset. Areas of action where the other actors possess a strong mandate or superior resources and skills were deprioritised; examples of potential interventions excluded from the portfolio are:

• Economic structural reform; while economic precarity prevents democratic flourishing, upskilling the workforce or alleviating broad economic inequality is a well-defined policy area dominated by large NGOs and government ministries requiring fiscal scale and legislative levers. The Foundation has no unique edge in this domain and its resources would be diluted with negligible systemic impact.

• Countering foreign interference; while disinformation and foreign interference from autocracies are real threats, this domain requires sovereign powers, such as intelligence gathering, military power and sanctions to influence the geopolitical balance between democracies and autocracies

Critical path

The Foundation seeks to fund critical early-stage, high-risk high-reward, endeavours that other actors may be more reticent to engage with. It deprioritises areas where the pathway is well-trodden (e.g. by government grants or corporate CSR).

This criterion led to the deprioritisation of standard youth mobility and leadership programmes where model (e.g., Erasmus) is established. In contrast, advocating for pro-social recommender systems and open-source algorithms for public deliberation occupies a critical gap, as it is unfunded by the market (due to commercial incentives) and the state (due to experimental risk and lack of expertise).

Focus on youth

The outcomes must go beyond passive benefit, engaging youth in the democratic process. Areas of actions should fundamentally strengthen the democratic capacity of the next generation.

For example, given the strong decoupling between younger generations and legacy media, for philanthropy to support legacy media infrastructure effectively means subsidising content for an ageing demographic, while failing to meet youth where their conversations already occur. Instead, priority is given to digital content creators and algorithmic tools, ensuring democratic values are embedded in the spaces where youth is already present.

Experimental

Regardless of the long-term goal, the intervention must allow for rapid validation through experimentation. Because traditional foundations are often risk-averse or slow to adapt to newer domains, the Foundation can utilise its agility to test, validate, and scale results faster than most. While vital, work in traditional civic education is deprioritised because it is characterised by institutional inertia, such as lobbying ministries, rewriting textbooks and training teachers. Instead, the Foundation will focus on trying novel and testable solutions rather than overcoming institutional inertia.

In addition to the five criteria, the Foundation's broader operating approach (see section " Operating approach") informed the final selection. Its commitment to acting as a hybrid, risk tolerant, and high-ambition family Foundation further refined which interventions were realistically suited to its operations. The highest-ranking interventions determined through this process converged around two major themes within the solution space: Digital democracy and the culture of democratic conversation.

The full prioritisation framework, with a chart of assessed interventions, is set out in the appendix.

Culture of democratic conversation [“People”]

Democratic systems rely on a public sphere where citizens can engage in rational and critical debates that sustain trust, deliberation, and pluralism. A thriving democracy must, beyond its formal institutions, hold a culture of democratic conversation. To enact changes across the five key drivers of democratic decline, it is key to focus on spaces where young people meet, on and offline, to co-create and implement ideas that build a culture of better dialogue and disagreement, where content matters more than identity, and there is wide inclusion (especially when the authenticity of some might be difficult for others). It requires monitoring and addressing polarisation, as well as nurturing and valuing core democratic principles: representation, participation, rights and rules. The Foundation will ideate, lead, incubate and scale a variety of projects to strengthen the culture of democratic conversation, blending creativity and data-driven insights, designed to resonate with young audiences.

“Content matters more than identity.”

Areas of action

The Foundation will focus on three key areas to reignite a culture of constructive democratic conversation; below are the priorities for the next three years.

Renewal of physical youth spaces and connection with “the other”

A constructive democratic conversation begins with an enabling environment: spaces where disagreement can occur without fear of social sanction, where young people can interface meaningfully, practise democracy through trial and error, engage with other generations, discuss contentious topics, debate their arguments and develop an appreciation for nuance, a condition increasingly rare in the digital environment. Yet across Europe, youth spaces, once vital arenas for social connection and civic engagement, have steadily declined in both number and relevance. As societies grow more polarised and

digital interaction replaces in-person exchange, there is a need to renew physical interactions. Reviving social connection with "the other" demands a new generation of youth environments that are plural and imaginative; places where young people can experiment with community, explore shared purpose.
The Foundation will help reimagine and rebuild such spaces by piloting and supporting innovative models that foster renewed social fabric, and by catalysing a wider movement, in partnership with youth organisations.

From toxic polarisation to constructive dialogue

As toxic polarisation has reached new highs, it has shifted disagreement from ideas to identities, turning debate into division and political opponents into enemies. Beyond designing pro-social, pro-democratic recommender systems (addressed in the following section), it is essential to reshape how disagreement unfolds online by reducing hostility and 'othering' without requiring the abandonment of core convictions and through argumentative literacy.

Showcasing constructive disagreement at scale is a missing part of the digital landscape. Many role models for youth are not adequately supported or incentivised to model democratic disagreement, compromise and engagement, as norms and shared ethics are distorted by the online environment. Fostering constructive conversations requires a shared belief in open exchange, active listening, and viewing disagreement as a route to shared understanding and the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints, rather than self-assertion. The Foundation will advance research and create training methods on how to engage with polarising topics, aiming to resist reactive conflict and divisiveness, foster robust "clash of ideas", find shared language and when possible, common ground. These novel approaches will be transformed into creative and scalable interventions, using trust-driven digital brands with content creators, art or shared experiences, built by and designed for youth, with the aim of catalysing a depolarisation movement of the online conversation. Complementing this, new tools and indicators will be developed to track trends in youth polarisation, generating insights to guide more effective initiatives for action.

Voices for democracy

The Foundation's hypothesis is that it can strengthen democratic resilience from within by helping citizens renew their belief, trust and pride in the value and purpose of democracy, which is essential for its vitality and competitiveness against alternative systems in an era of information warfare.

Actors supporting countermodels to democratic governance have understood the dynamics of digital discourse, influenced sentiment and created social groups and trends. They have historically been faster, louder, more agile, and have significantly impacted the narrative. In parallel, democratic societies have failed over many decades to highlight the benefits, foundations and purpose of democratic principles, often assuming those to be self-evident.

The Foundation will work to both evolve democracy into an object of common value and common care and offer a compelling and positive story of this shared societal project. The focus will be on building a shared, central community of democracy practitioners that span generations and political perspectives and bringing stories about democracy to the forefront of youth attention, by shining a light on its achievements. It will rely on the creativity and appeal of content creators, journalists, artists, grassroots knowledge and action, and draw from personal experiences, including from people having lived under both dictatorship and democracy.

Objectives

Renewal of physical youth spaces and connection with "the other"

• Objective 1.1 - Reimagine youth spaces

Pilot, host and support innovative "broad church" youth spaces that enable and foster renewed social tissue

• Objective 1.2 - Create a movement to reimagine and rebuild youth spaces

Catalyse a European community of practice and build a targeted advocacy strategy to reverse the decline of such youth spaces at scale

From toxic polarisation to constructive dialogue

• Objective 2.1 - Elevate and create a network of role models

Showcase and build a network of individuals and communities, content creators, journalists and artists, who model constructive disagreement and democratic engagement, with an emphasis on social media storytelling and youth-oriented online spaces

• Objective 2.2 Develop polarisation research, indexes and training methods

Advance state-of-the-art of polarisation research, develop tools to measure polarisation at scale and build training material and methods to support networks of democratic role models

Voices for democracy

• Objective 3.1 - Campaign to rebuild hope in democracy

Build, support and fund a community of democracy practitioners and digital-first campaign that creatively re-frames and promotes the positives of democracy, shines a light on its achievements and widely engages across generations and partisan divides

Trusted partner and public voice

• Objective 4.1 - Create a drumbeat of content delivery and events

Share the Foundation's views publicly in the democracy space through a range of communication channels (e.g. podcasts, social media, events)

• Objective 4.2 - Model dialogue through the Foundation's own platforms

Become a role model in fostering a culture of democratic conversation by consistently demonstrating constructive, evidence-based dialogue on complex topics related to democracy

Digital democratic infrastructure [“Tools”]

Alongside a culture of democratic conversation, a supporting digital infrastructure provides tools enabling citizens to converse at scale and match the tempo of modern life, bringing continuous feedback loops to reach key political decisions. Architecting digital democracy is not merely a technical challenge, but a social undertaking designed to draw on the knowledge, experience, and resources of the whole citizenry, fulfilling democracy’s inherent potential to achieve a collective intelligence superior to any alternative political paradigm.

Architecting digital democracy is not merely a technical challenge, but a social undertaking.

While it is a nascent field, there are already valuable learnings from several democracies which have built components of the digital democratic infrastructure to successfully support the core principles of democracy. Taiwan improved digital citizen engagement through a civic collaboration tool (i.e., Pol.is), which contributed to increasing trust levels from around 10% in 2014 to around 70% by 2020[69,70]. Switzerland’s plebiscites (which could be digitised in the future) have brought citizens and government closer together, shifting public attention towards debating issues rather than idealising politicians, and increasing trust in government (62% vs an OECD average of 39%)[71]. By pioneering e-voting, Estonia has increased turnout in some cohorts[73], although not overall, contributed to higher trust in government[72], and showed that e-voting is a secure method[74]. At the level of the European Union, legislative innovation (e.g., AI Act, Digital Single Market and pending Digital Fairness Act) institutionalises safeguards against social scoring and manipulation by AI, which will have a direct effect on digital democratic infrastructure tools.

Drawing from these emerging successes, the Foundation recognises that the precise shape of this infrastructure must be discovered through rapid, iterative experimentation and use, demanding a dual approach:

• Inside-out or technology push: Leveraging unique affordances of new technologies (What novel approaches does this specific technology enable that were previously impossible?").

• Outside-in or market pull: Deeply diagnosing civic and societal needs (What is the "Job to be Done" for citizens and society, and where is the current friction?).

Through this continuous feedback loop, the Foundation will identify the specific areas of democracy most ripe for digital intervention; it will invest time and resources into building key components of the digital democratic infrastructure: tools, platforms, and systems that adapt core democratic functions to the digital age to close the modernisation gap. It will ideate, incubate, and federate a diversity of ambitious infrastructural projects alongside a broad network of partners, allowing real-world learnings and the lived experiences of citizens to continuously reshape its priorities.

Areas of action

The Foundation will focus on two key areas to build the digital democratic infrastructure; below are the priorities for the next three years.

Technology stack for democracy

A dedicated technology stack embedding democratic principles is required to keep pace with modernity, and especially digital systems and Artificial Intelligence, which increasingly govern how citizens connect, deliberate, and decide.

The Foundation will support the groundwork of identifying gaps in the digital democratic infrastructure, as well as mapping and building a network of partners who are innovating and tackling the 'modernisation problem' of democracy. As AI progressively becomes the dominant digital platform there are unique opportunities to make use of its potential to strengthen democracy in the digital era; thus, projects that centre on this new technological frontier will be prioritised. The Foundation envisions projects such as the following.

From AI-assisted decision-making tools for political leaders, which could improve representation of citizens and surface their nuances, to safe and secure tools to vote electronically making civic life seamless for citizens, there is a unique opportunity to modernise representation in the digital era.

AI-augmented deliberations, by scaling citizens' assemblies[76], could allow a plurality of voices to complement or cut through the politically dominant voices and bring nuance to the democratic conversation. AI-based bridging systems could also improve deliberation to help citizens better understand different perspectives and even find common ground[75].

Having reached a post-truth world, improving media literacy has become paramount to ensure deliberation of moral and intellectual substance. A trusted and transparent AI political companion grounded in facts and reason could help citizens decipher through the large information bias across the public sphere, improve their critical-thinking and steer them towards reflecting on their own assumptions and political views.

As much of the public discourse now unfolds online, the formal court of law often trails the informal court of social media, by which time the damage is already done. Digital tools could help close the speed gap between judiciary/legal processes and offenders and help prevent the privatisation of censorship, a common practice online.

While many of these tools are yet to be built, others are already part of the digital democratic infrastructure and require experimentation and tuning.

Transition to pro-social, pro-democracy recommender systems

Social media platforms' algorithms shape what information citizens see, by determining which topics trend, thereby influencing how people perceive current events. They can reinforce existing views, prioritise emotionally charged content, and thus exacerbate toxic polarisation. By filtering and ranking vast amounts of online information using personalisation techniques, they can lead to filter bubbles or echo chambers, and limit exposure to diverse perspectives and hinder critical thinking. They play a significant role in shaping public opinion, much like traditional media with editorial oversight, and have thus become a de facto part of democracy's decision-making infrastructure.

The choices made in the design of recommender system algorithms involve a complex interplay of engineering, ethical, philosophical and epistemic choices, none of which are entirely separable. This mirrors the way in which decisions in pharmaceutical development integrate scientific evidence, clinical judgement, ethical review, and regulatory standards to determine a drug's safety profile. Yet, whereas pharmaceuticals are overseen by robust and highly institutionalised regulators such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA), no comparable authority or process exists to oversee the governance, safety, and democratic integrity of recommender systems, despite their role as critical infrastructure for public discourse and systemic effects observed for years. These dynamics point to the necessity of a pro-social, pro-democracy redesign. Improving on the status quo of Recommender Systems[78] is not obvious and will require experimentation with the system providers, civic society, elected representatives and users. The Foundation will aim to land legislative and evidence-based impact for a pro-social, pro-democracy redesign of recommender systems and to build bridges between all relevant stakeholders.

Objectives

Technology stack for democracy

• Objective 5.1 - Map and support innovation in the digital democracy space

Expand the Foundation's network of partners in Europe and globally, and identify gaps, search for and encourage innovation to build a digital democratic infrastructure

• Objective 5.2 -Lead, support and scale at least five highly ambitious digital democratic tools

Build at least one AI-based tool to improve the decision-making of political representatives through better representation

Build at least one AI companion to increase first-voter turnout and enhance critical thinking and civic engagement

Build at least three digital democracy tools, with one focused on scaling citizen assemblies

Transition to pro-social, pro-democracy recommender systems

• Objective 6.1 - Land legislative and evidence-based impact

Produce, fund and advocate for research and amendments to EU legal frameworks (AI Act revision, Digital Fairness Act etc.) to promote experimentation in the recommender systems space, leading to a pro-social, pro democratic online environment

Explore building bridges between civil society, recommender systems corporations, political representatives and users

Trusted partner and a public voice

• Objective 7.1 - Create a drumbeat of content delivery and events

Share the Foundation's views publicly in digital democracy space through a range of communication channels (e.g. podcasts, social media), including at major AI and digital democracy events

Operating approach

The Evens Foundation will operate as a hybrid foundation; an organisation not bound to a single mode of action or way of working but selects actions that are strategically aligned and are most likely to contribute to the Foundation's overall mission. This enables greater agility by combining Foundation-driven and field-driven activities, drawing on its in-house expertise or collaborating with complementary partners, and determining for each initiative whether to implement directly or rely on trusted partners. This approach helps the Foundation achieve greater impact while maintaining responsible stewardship of its resources.

Project leadership and development

The Foundation conceives, develops, and delivers projects with its own team and its large network of partners (e.g., NGOs, corporations, public bodies), bringing together the most relevant skills, internally or through partners, to achieve the desired outcomes

Grant+ giving

Grants enable quick interventions, tap into collective thinking, foster partnerships, and explore potential pathways for future projects. This includes technical assistance and evaluation support, not only funds

Collaborative funding

It allows the Foundation to launch EU-funded projects (public-funding) or bring other Foundations along on particular initiatives (pooled-funding)

Advocacy

The Foundation will initiate and support policy changes in Europe, using evidence-based research and applications

Prize giving:

The Foundation's prize programme will help identify new ideas, reward innovators and doers and build its network of partners

In parallel, the Foundation's criteria for choosing projects is defined by:

High Ambition

Projects must aim to tackle problems with the potential to have large, positive, systemic effects

Maverick approach

Intellectual honesty is more important than popularity. The Foundation will experiment beyond institutional comfort zones, uncover what others overlook and operate where conventional actors hesitate

European

The Foundation will continue to build a strong network at the policy level and with EU leadership and focus on Europe first

High and calculated risk

The vast majority of projects undertaken by the Foundation will involve experimentation, incubating projects with high and calculated risk of failure. It will both embrace and be forensic to diagnose failures

Leadership and bridging

The Foundation must hold a leadership role by bridging diverse stakeholders with their unique strengths (itself, corporations, political representatives, civil society, citizens, CSOs and others) to collectively find and build solutions. It will support leading thinkers, with a bias towards builders. Any project undertaken requires the Evens Foundation to be on the critical path

Speed

Build on opportunities quickly, with light processes to get resources and derive measurable outcomes fast

“Intellectual honesty is more important than popularity.”

On ethics and politics

From the outset, the Evens Foundation has been dedicated to promoting peace and enabling human plurality, grounded in liberal democracy. As its work increasingly engages political issues, such as youth participation, polarisation, or pro-democracy narratives, it is now essential to anchor all activities in a clear ethical compass and outline the norms and principles that will guide its work.

Democracy, political neutrality and plurality

• Defend the four pillars of democracy, recognise and publicly oppose (e.g., through social media) those who seek to undermine them

• Maintain openness to a wide spectrum of political views, without any alignment to partisanship (left/right), identity labels, or ideology

• Engage with all actors where their views are expressed (e.g., on X, BlueSky or other platforms), with special focus on those who do not believe in a just, plural and democratic space but could be persuaded

Dialogue for conflict resolution

• Facilitate and encourage dialogue; allow solutions to emerge organically rather than dictating them

• Embrace dissonance and conflict as potential paths to understanding and unity, while always respecting differences

• Engage with young people as equal partners, avoiding both paternalism and narratives of victimhood

Ethical anticipation and innovation

• Proactively apply scenario planning and futures methodology to anticipate and identify emerging concerns for democracy and pioneer ideas to solve them

• Accept the risks of misunderstanding that come with being ahead of public discourse. Ambition, boldness, risk tolerance and risk assessment are core to the Foundation's modus operandi

”Embrace dissonance and conflict as potential paths to understanding and unity.”

Consistency, accountability & legacy

• Live by democratic principles and align actions with values in the ethical charter. Commit to speaking out with evidence, clarity and strongly to the appropriate audience

• Recognise contradictions inherent to any organisation: Promoting democracy without operating as a democracy, believing in technology’s opportunities while mitigating its risks, and supporting youth independence while providing guidance. These tensions are natural and acknowledged

• Invite critical voices into both the design and evaluation of our work

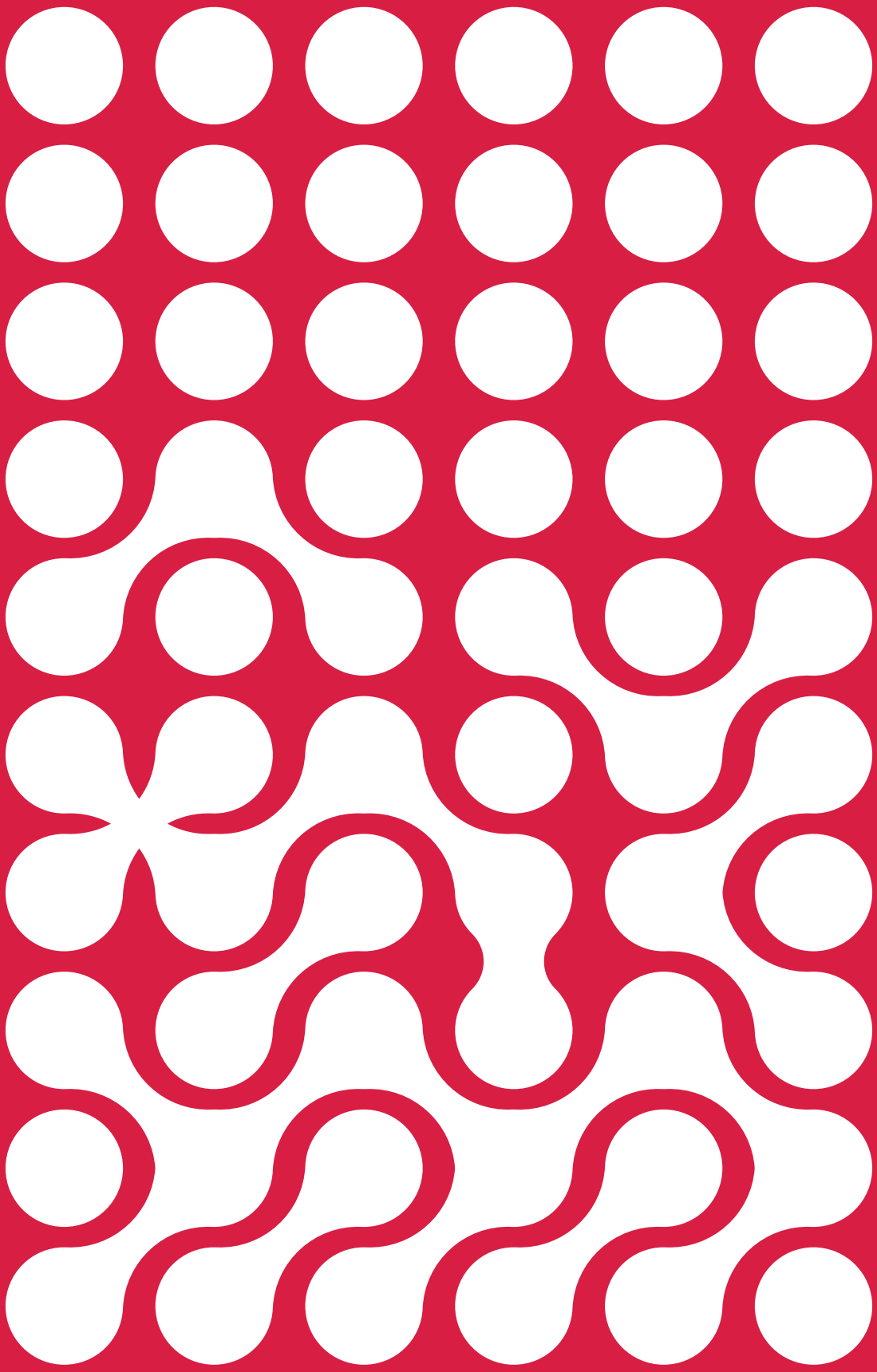
• Honour the founding vision of the Foundation: integrate the family’s concerns and aspirations into vision and activities

Duties and limits

• The Foundation’s agenda is not defined by current political events; its work transcends transient partisan debate to remain foundational, forward-looking and works for the long haul

• While political nuances are welcomed, when political movements or actions are clearly at odds with the four core pillars of democracy, the Foundation has a duty to voice its opposition.

Democracy



Technology

04.



Glossary

Human flourishing
Human flourishing is the idea that the ultimate goal of a democratic system is to cultivate conditions where every citizen can live a healthy, meaningful and self-actualised life, and is empowered to participate in shaping their society.

Young people / Youth
Individuals roughly aged 16–29 whose social, economic and political experiences are still forming and who will in time become the political majority.

Plurality
Political plurality is a core democratic principle where power is shared and competed for among many diverse groups, parties and viewpoints. It ensures that no single entity holds absolute control, and is a prerequisite for finding common ground across polarised populations.

Digital democratic infrastructure
Digital democratic infrastructure refers to the tools, systems and platforms that enable the four core principles of democracy to function effectively in the digital era.

Culture of Democratic Conversation
Shared norms and practices that support open, respectful dialogue across differences, enabling collective problem-solving.

Hybrid foundation
A foundation that works through mixed modes—project leadership, grants, prizes, advocacy and partnerships—rather than a single model.

Maverick approach
A willingness to take calculated risks, challenge convention and explore innovative or uncomfortable ideas in pursuit of systemic impact.

Polarisation
The process by which opinions or identities grow increasingly distant, reducing space for compromise and shared dialogue.

Toxic polarisation
A form of political division where disagreements shift from ideas to identities, producing hostility, mistrust and an “us versus them” mindset.

Affective polarisation
When people increasingly dislike or distrust those who support opposing political groups, regardless of the issues themselves.

Healthy polarisation
Constructive disagreement based on ideas and values, where competition between viewpoints strengthens democratic decision-making.

Enemyfication
The escalation of political opponents into perceived enemies, often driven by identity-based conflict rather than substantive debate.

Purity tests
Demands that individuals fully align with a group's ideological stance, discouraging nuance and punishing deviation.

The other
Individuals or groups perceived as outside one's own community, identity or worldview, often becoming targets of stereotyping or exclusion.

05.

Appendix

Pillar	Threat	Dem Impact (1—5, higher = more impact on democracy)	Youth Impact (1—5, higher = dispropotionate impact on youth)	Uncertainty (1—5, higher = more uncertain)	Speed
Representation	Older voters and elites shape policy priorities at youth's expense	4	5	4	Mid
Representation	Extreme parties exploit youth disillusionment with establishment politics	4	5	4	Short
Representation	Young candidates face barriers to entering party lists or EU politics	3	5	3	Mid
Representation	Rural and marginalised youth feel voiceless	2	2	2	Mid
Participation	Independent journalism is underfunded and politically pressured	5	2	4	Mid
Participation	Alternative "truth bubbles" and ideological camps make problem-solving difficult	4	4	2	Mid
Participation	Civil society funding is shrinking in some member states	3	3	3	Short
Participation	Economic insecurity discourages sustained civic engagement	5	5	1	Short
Participation	Young climate and social activists face state pushback	3	4	3	Short
Participation	Media narrows viewpoint diversity	4	4	3	Mid
Participation	Authoritarian rhetoric creates civic apathy	3	3	3	Short
Participation	Young people rarely see tangible outcomes from civic activism	3	3	3	Mid
Participation	Youth participation platforms exist but lack real influence	3	4	3	Mid
Participation	Youth movements struggle to scale influence beyond protests	3	4	3	Mid
Participation	Polarisation across various identities diminishes the space for compromise	5	5	3	Mid
Participation	Polarisation degrades the ability to have a shared truth across groups	5	5	4	Mid
Rule of Law	Police overreach and surveillance laws threaten protest rights	3	4	3	Short
Rule of Law	Strategic lawsuits silence journalists and activists	3	2	2	Short
Rights	Press freedom declines through intimidation and economic pressure	5	2	3	Mid
Rights	Political rhetoric normalises xenophobia and exclusion	3	2	3	Short

Pillar	Threat	Dem Impact (1—5, higher = more impact on democracy)	Youth Impact (1—5, higher = dispropotionate impact on youth)	Uncertainty (1—5, higher = more uncertain)	Speed
Representation	Disinformation and foreign interference undermine election integrity	5	4	4	Short
Representation	Corporate lobbying in Brussels distorts representation bending rules towards big tech interests	5	2	2	Mid
Representation	AI increasingly shapes democratic representation	4	4	4	Mid
Representation	EU institutions communicate poorly in accessible, youth-friendly formats	2	3	2	Short
Participation	Misinformation on social media polarises European debates	5	5	1	Short
Participation	Disinformation campaigns from within the EU erode democratic trust	4	4	1	Short
Participation	Algorithmic amplification favours outrage over dialogue	5	5	1	Short
Rule of Law	Media capture undermines watchdog accountability	4	2	3	Mid
Rule of Law	Whistleblowers face digital retaliation and inadequate EU-wide protection	3	3	3	Mid
Rule of Law	Disinformation campaigns erode faith in judicial impartiality	3	2	3	Short
Rule of Law	Cross-border digital policing lacks transparency and safeguards	2	2	4	Mid
Rights	Freedom of expression is limited by online censorship and hate laws misuse	3	3	3	Short
Rights	Data protection is inconsistently enforced across member states	2	3	3	Mid
Rights	Digital platforms exploit personal data with weak accountability	3	4	3	Mid
Rights	Youth in rural and disadvantaged regions lack digital inclusion	2	3	2	Mid
Rights	AI-driven content moderation chills free expression online	3	4	4	Mid

06.

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