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Visions of Democracy with and for Future Generations

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	YouthDecide2040 Consortium	Acronym
1	AIT AUSTRIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GMBH ¹	AIT
2	EDYN N.O.	EDYN N.O.
3	STRATEGIC DESIGN SCENARIOS SPRL	SDS
4	WEDO PROJECT INTELLIGENCE MADE EASYSL	WeDo
5	MISSIONS PUBLIQUES	MP
6	FRAUNHOFER GESELLSCHAFT ZUR FORDERUNG DER ANGEWANDTEN FORSCHUNG EV	Fraunhofer
7	INSTYTUT FILOZOFII I SOCJOLOGII POLSKIEJ AKADEMII NAUK	IFIS PAN
8	EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY	EPD
9	EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE	EUI
10	EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM	YFJ
11	MAKE.ORG	MAKE.ORG

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
EC	European Commission
WP	Work Package
EP	European Parliament

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Executive Summary

The Youth Decide 2040 project is funded by the EU Horizon Europe program and is designed to foster the co-creation of scenarios outlining preferred futures for democratic systems. These scenarios should demonstrate how democracy might evolve in a desirable manner - taking advantage of emergent opportunities that a changing world presents while remaining resilient to threats and challenges. By engaging with European youth in this future-oriented work, the project aims to support new policies and practices in Europe's democratic systems that reflect expectations and preferences across generations. The three-year project runs from January 2025 to December 2027, and its consortium includes 11 partners from across European research institutions, academia, and large youth-focused organisations.

The Youth Decide 2040 project includes a horizon scanning research process to identify context factors that might shift the conditions in which future democratic systems function. Researching these factors aims to elaborate factors and their influence on both democratic disconnect and democratic renaissance. This report represents the findings of that horizon scanning research, complementing other research components of the project that focus on present-day threats and challenges, and serving as an input for the co-creation scenario development workflow that is also being designed concurrently.

This report includes the results of horizon scanning research that was conducted in two parallel strands. One strand used traditional desk research methods for scanning relevant literature, news items, and cultural expressions for trends and signals of emergent change. From this strand of research, 26 context factors were identified and classified according to the STEEPLE framework for social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical changes that may have an important impact on the development of democracy. For each factor, relevant literature and outlines of potential impacts and future trajectories are provided as inputs for scenario co-creation processes.

The second strand used automated systems to conduct text mining and natural language processing on an open database of projects and experiments in participatory governance. This research analysed the Participedia database to identify societal conditions that motivated participatory action projects across Europe. The results outlined groups of these underlying conditions within each of the European Union regions we have used to organise research: Central/Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and 'Future' Europe. The regionally specific results also served as the basis for a transregional analysis to identify common, shared, and unique societal conditions shaping governance.

The method and results of each research strand are presented separately, followed by a discussion of the results and the implications of the findings of each strand, as well as some comparative analysis of the two sets of results. Concretely, our research outcomes emphasise that the context in which the future of democracy may unfold is shaped by concentrations of economic and political power, social and environmental pressures in an age of climate change, the legal interpretations and ethical implications that volatility evokes, and rapidly changing technological landscape. Lastly, the report provides recommendations about the inclusion of these results in further stages of the YouthDecide 2040 project, particularly within the co-creation workflow, and later phases involving the use of scenarios for strategic road-mapping and developing robust policy to foster the attainment of preferred futures for European democracy.

Introduction

The growth of democratic governing systems following World War II and hitting a crescendo with the end of the Cold War, was quickly followed by what has been termed 'democratic backsliding' or 'democratic regression' (Hyde 2020), 'democratic decay' (Daly, 2019 cite), and other terms that are often gathered under the concept of autocratisation (Luhmann et al. 2018). This trend has demonstrated particular intensity in the past 15 years, which has led many to call into question the adequacy of contemporary democracy to operate in modern world (EIU 2024). How democracy changes in response to new social pressures, new options for communication and information analysis, and the growth of democratic innovations will play an important role in shaping the democracies of tomorrow (Mackenzi et al. 2023). As today's youth will be the inheritors and participants in these systems, their participation in shaping democratic systems is needed in the present (Luhtakallio 2024).

In an effort to facilitate the productive imagination of what democracy could become and guard preferred futures against some of the risks and challenges future development might pose, the YouthDecide 2040 project has included a horizon scanning activity to identify contextual factors that may shape the conditions for democracy between 2025 and 2040. Horizon scanning is an important first phase of any strategic foresight initiative with scenarios as a key output (Cuhls 2020). During horizon scanning activities, factors that are driving change can be assessed and extrapolated, and weak signals of potential emerging issues can be identified (Sutherland & Woodroof 2009, Shultz 2006).

The aforementioned trends in de-democratisation have encouraged numerous research projects and reports regarding the approaches to improving or designing democratic systems. The YouthDecide 2040 horizon scanning work is neither the first nor the last effort in approaching the possible futures for democracy. We are grateful to researchers in past European research projects like H2020's [Imagi\(ni\)ng Democracy](#), [EUARENAS](#), [ISEED](#) and [EURYKA](#) that have laid the groundwork for projects in the future of European Democracy. We also look forward to working with other ongoing Horizon Europe projects like [MeDeMAP](#), [INCITE-DEM](#), [SCALEDEM](#) and the [CRITICAL CHANGELAB](#) whose work we hope to complement with our horizon scanning and collaborate with in the futures.

Our research has both drawn from and been guided by the greater body of existing literature and reports regarding the possible futures of democracy. While the total body of work in this direction vastly exceeds the capacities of our small research team, we have made efforts to account for a representative sampling. This includes reports from institutions like the OECD, the United Nations, the European Commission (outside of funded projects like those mentioned above), the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and a selection of reports by NGOs, CSOs, and think tanks.

Additionally, we draw from various academic (trans-)disciplines including various social sciences (political science, economics, futures studies, anthropology, science and technology studies (STS), etc.) and take into account some of the publications from climate science institutes (IPCC, NOAA (e.g. Deehan 2024), [UFZ](#), etc.) or the derivative academic journal articles, as well as some technical fields in so far as they have been noted in technological innovations or critiques. As democracy is the established governance model for most of the contributors to the above references, the shifts in democracy have found resonance across a wide spectrum of research. While scanning the entirety of democracy and governance model adjacent literature is far beyond the scope of this project, the selection of horizon scanning results presented in the report reflects the broad ranging elements that shape the environments for future democratic societies.

Our primary research questions guiding the Horizon Scanning can be summarised as:

- What are dynamic contextual conditions in the larger societal environment, both within and outside of Europe, which are likely to change over the next 15 years?
- How might these changing conditions impact or shape democratic processes and institutions within Europe?
- Can we trace some of these developments to real-world instances in which the identified context factors have impacted democracy in some manner?
- To what degree can we outline the spectrum of possible futures for each of the factors individually, using examples and appropriate literature and research?

To this end, we have worked in two parallel strands to help identify potential changes to the context in which democratic systems function. In one research strand, we conducted a more traditional literature review to outline social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical conditions that appear to be undergoing impactful change. In the other research strand, we used natural language processing tools and large language models to examine a pre-existing dataset of democratic experiments collected by the Participedia project.

While democracy as a form of governance may face challenges (e.g. democratic disconnect), the currently turbulent geopolitical and economic conditions combined with socio-technological upheavals are also accompanied by calls for democratic renaissance. This horizon scanning research aims to articulate the factors that shape both disconnect and renaissance of democracy in the near future. This way, the deliverable provides a ground for discussing trajectories and frameworks for new modes of democratic participation for ourselves and future generations..

Main Objective

Central to the YouthDecide 2040 project is the participatory development of scenarios depicting preferred futures for European Democracy. These scenarios are to be co-created by European Youth across five regional level workshops and twenty national assembly workshops. However, while utopian thinking can be productive for the articulation of preferred futures (Jameson 2007, Suvin 2010, Raven 2015, Bell 2017), the recognition of dynamic conditions is critical to ensuring that these futures are resilient and robust to future change (VanWoensel 2024, Tähtinen & Toivonen 2025, Dal et al. 2024, Ertan et al. 2021). This can be particularly important when considering the system transformations in Europe that are currently underway including industrial (Carayannis and Morawska-Jancelewicz 2022, McNamara 2023, Ghobakhloo et al 2023), educational (Cai and Ahmad 2021), the Twin Transition (JRC 2022, Barbero 2025, Dmioli et al 2025) and governance (Kohler-Koch 1999, 2003, Galego et al. 2021, Nikolaidis 2024).

One approach to the development of 'preferred futures' includes the identification of factors that can account for 1) existing process and systems that are moving in the direction of a vision, 2) existing process and systems that stand in the way of achieving a preferred future, and 3) new process and systems (including those that have yet to be developed) that a preferred future should include (Dator 1994). This approach has also been reconfigured as the 'futures triangle' (Inayatullah 2008, 2023, Abdullah 2024) – an activity that helps groups discuss and critique utopian visions in a productive and considered mode that allow multi-stakeholder perspectives on different factors. The research presented here is geared to contribute to that aspect of preferred future development, by providing a few starting points for such activities of conversations on a broad range of dynamic factors.

In the section presenting the Large Language Model approach to analysis of the Participedia we seek to use past examples of participator governance experiments to understand the types of underlying societal conditions that have contributed to local democratic innovation. While the past is not a reliable predictor, it can reveal patterns of system behaviour that can help in making sense of the additional research that has been conducted. As this research was based on a well maintained, contemporary, and open access database, we were able to analyse the Participedia data according to the same European regions used for organisational work across the YouthDecide work package two.

The horizon scanning report presents research findings on these turbulent conditions across the STEEPLE framework (Brehaut et al. 2005, Curnin et al. 2025) – including social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical factors – that could influence the evolution of democratic systems and change modes and expectations of future participation in society and its governance. It is important to note that the categories of the STEEPLE framework are not mutually exclusive, and that the consideration of the implications of phenomena should not be restricted to only the category that they have been assigned. The research team has attempted to address the issue of cross-category 'fertilisation' – that factors are often results of, and shaped by, the dynamics of phenomena in multiple categories *and* have the potential to influence developments of factors in other categories – by noting related STEEPLE topic categories for each of the factors we have researched.

Figure 1 - The STEEPLE category framework



Social	Technological	Economic	Environmental	Political	Legal	Ethical
Cultures of debate	'Artificial Intelligence' systems and synthetic identities	Work conditions	Urban infrastructures and planning	Populism	Broadening democratic representation	Mental health issues
Gender and Democracy		Democratising economic decisions	Land and Water Governance	Defence and Security	Fundamental Human Rights	Exploitative supply chains
Intergenerational relations	New media	Economic inequality	Nature-based solutions	Beyond nation states	Justice and the Rule of Law	Moral judgements
Ageing Europe	Political technologies	Global shift in economic powers	Effects of Climate Change	Political education	Legacy governing systems	
	Decentralised energy systems			Trust and Accountability		

The horizon scanning research is conducted in parallel with two distinct, but complementary, strands of research occurring in YouthDecide2040 work package (WP) one. This parallel research includes a review of the challenges facing democracy and facilitators of resilience (T1.1), a analysis of intergenerational differences in political attitude (T1.2), and research into contemporary Democratic Innovations (T1.3). Through communications with the other research teams, we were able to focus the horizon scanning towards the identification of factors that were not already being covered or highlight different aspects of these factors. For instance, given the work on challenges facing democracy (T1.1) placed more focus on the negative connotations of populism, we were reminded to include examples of populist movements that strengthened democratic practice in our own work on the factor. At the same time, the detailed and data driven conclusions of the demographic analysis of differences and convergences in political attitudes towards democracy in T1.1, allowed horizon scanning research to focus on demographic changes and their potential impact on pensions, community building, and stronger intergenerational social solidarity. The existence of the T1.1 research, and other project research streams, enabled the horizon scanning to focus on reporting on context factors whose complex nature allow for a more qualitative analysis and speculative approach to future projections. , allowed research to focus on demographic changes and their potential impact on pensions, community building, and stronger intergenerational social solidarity.

The work on Democratic Innovations (T1.3) was also instructive as it helped shape the analysis of the Participedia database and pointed towards factors that are driving democratic experimentation in our contemporary situation. In particular, the scope and variety of

democratic practices that are included in the different types of ‘citizen assemblies’ noted in this report demonstrate political configurations that respond to dynamics in the present societal context. For example, the [Democratic Odyssey](#) project is utilising “Blueprint” citizen assemblies to demonstrate the value of such an approach, and as an experiment in building novel trans-European democratic practices that are responsive to transnational issues. This includes the theorised European Citizens Assembly that might be applied to address ongoing decolonial movements, or counter the isolation of policy-making environments like the “Brussels Bubble” with more epistemic democracy (EUI 2025). The research on Democratic Innovations informed the horizon scanning research by highlighting some of the factors driving contemporary democratic permutations and pointing towards possible systemic responses that would clearly influence potential futures for democracy.

Guiding this horizon scanning research are questions concerning the conditions, both unique and shared, in which European democracies are being asked to function. Specifically:

- What are the conditions that have historically fostered experiments in democratic processes and institutions?
- Are there specific conditions that can be traced within each of the five regions identified by the YouthDecide2040 project?
- Are there conditions that are shared across European democracies? And if so, are there common or unique responses to these conditions that might point to either unique or universal democratic innovations that can be supported?

Through horizon scanning research, this section of the YD2040 project aims to better address these questions, so that the potential for future change to the conditions surrounding democratic systems can be anticipated and partially accounted for in creating preferred future scenarios. The findings from the Horizon Scanning research will be incorporated into the design of the scenario co-creation workflow (T2.2) and tested across the regional workshop series (T2.3) before being included in the final co-creation workflow package for use by the national assemblies in Work Package 3.

Horizon Scanning Approaches

Horizon scanning is a method used in the strategic foresight process to identify and analyse emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities that could impact the potential futures for a society, organisation, or a particular field of interest (Hines et al. 2019, Cuhls 2020). It involves systematically gathering and reviewing information from various sources, such as academic research, news articles, expert opinions, social media, and cultural expressions, to detect signals of change and novel or emerging issues. The goal of horizon scanning is to build an improved inventory of potential future developments over a longer time frame.

Following mainstream horizon scanning process (in bold below) the research team conducted the following work (outlined in the bullet points):

- **Defining Scope:** *Establishing the areas of interest and the time frame for scanning.*
 - Literary sources including academic journals, non-fiction books, news items
 - Commissioned Reports (EU, UN, etc.) and Project Deliverables from recently conducted research (H2020, Horizon Europe, etc.)

- A selection of cultural expressions ¹
- **Information Gathering:** *Collecting data from diverse sources to capture a wide range of perspectives.*
 - Initial information gathering was conducted between January – May 2025
 - Researchers used a shared Zotero library to create a shared research database
 - The research team convened weekly to discuss preliminary findings and select context factor candidates
 - Participedia research databases on democratic experimentation
- **Analysis:** *Evaluating the information to identify key trends, patterns, and potential disruptions.*
 - During this phase the researchers assessed factors according to their centrality and uncertainty, distinguishing factors at the core of democracy (e.g. party systems, election, authoritarianism, political polarization) from context factors, which are less discussed as shaping forces of future democracy
 - STEEPLE categorisation served as an analysis, a safeguard against creating research gaps
 - Automated Analysis of democratic project and initiative databases
 - Comparison between two strands of research methods: Desk research and Automated analysis
- **Synthesis:** *Summarising findings to highlight critical insights and implications for strategic planning.*
 - Synthesising results in the deliverable report
 - Creating STEEPLE Factor cards for scenario co-creation process prototype (Creative retreat)
 - Mapping Factors (T2.1), with challenges and facilitators of resiliency (T1.1) and secondary analysis of differences in intergenerational attitudes towards democracy and its alternatives T1.2)
- **Communication:** *Sharing the results with stakeholders to inform decision-making and strategic priorities.*
 - Publishing of the deliverable
 - Inclusion of long form Factor research in an online repository
 - Short form Factors to be included in a scenario co-creation process, likely as a form of wind-tunnelling or robustness testing of preferred scenarios

To help ensure that scenarios developed in a co-creation process are both reflective of preferences for European democracy and demonstrate preparedness for future uncertainties, the horizon scanning process pursued two distinct methods: a) desk research focused on literature, journals, and news, and b) automated text analysis conducted on a specific corpus. These two strands of research were conducted simultaneously, with bi-weekly meetings to compare research notes and progress towards goals. For clarity, each strand of research is presented separately below, with a cross examination of the results and their possible implications reported on in the discussion.

¹ The Initial definition of the scope of research was framed to also include arts and create expressions such as exhibits, games, music, film, and other cultural expressions that might signal changing aspects of democratic participation, critical voices, or additional insights into potential shifts in conditions of a democratic society. We do not focus on these results in this report.

Method One: Open Desk Research

In acknowledgement of the extensive literature on trends and topics addressing the future of democracy as documented in additional European research projects and programmes, as well as the body of literature related to this area, this research cannot be comprehensive, though it has worked to be thorough. Desk research is crucial in horizon scanning processes, particularly when analysing the conditions influencing democratic systems, as it allows researchers to gather existing information and insights without the need for primary data collection. Desk research for YD2040's horizon scan involved reviewing literature, reports, statistical data, and other secondary sources to create a foundational understanding of various factors (trends, topics, and emerging issues) that impact democratic structures, processes, and institutions. By synthesising findings from various studies, the desk research helps identify patterns, assess the potential for trajectories of change to impact different aspects of democratic models, and understand the dynamic context of specific democratic systems. Additionally, desk research helps in framing hypotheses for further investigation, ensuring that the speculation necessary for the development of robust scenarios remains grounded in established knowledge. In the context of rapidly changing political landscapes, this form of research aids scholars and policymakers in making informed decisions and recommendations based on comprehensive analyses of existing evidence.

Method One Results: Context Factors Shaping Futures of Democracy

Acknowledging the range of possible futures that can emerge from complex, interrelated context factors is an important component of developing alternative scenarios and articulating preferable futures that can guide governance and planning decisions. To this end, the concept of 'context' factors has been used to describe elements of a system's 'operating environment' that set the conditions for actions and activities related to that system.

A useful analogy could be: if the system under consideration were an ocean-going vessel, horizon scanning for context factors could include various types of environmental information affecting navigation like windspeed, water currents, air and water temperatures, humidity, depth and underwater topologies, additional vehicles both near and far, etc. For some context factors, like underwater topology, the expected future variance might be quite low, particularly if there are already good maps of the area. In these instances, major events might disrupt an otherwise stable future, and these should be monitored for the unexpected. For other context factors, like air and water temperature in this analogy, the dynamics might be apt to more sudden changes and could create the emergence of new threats (e.g. new storms, waves, or other conditions that change operations on the vessel) or opportunities to pursue (metaphorically speaking beacons or lighthouses).

While European democracies are varied in their institutional structures and rules, the dynamic environment of related context factors, both currently and in the future, will change the ways these democratic systems operate and act. The changing contextual conditions will not impact all European democracies in the same manner or intensity, and thus horizon scanning activities are primarily information gathering and the creation of a spectrum of possible developments – not prediction.

To this end, the results of this branch of research include a description that summarises each of the presented factors, and briefly outlines some of the ways in which that factor is currently viewed as effecting change. This description can include information on different aspects of the factor and some of the ways that they impact social governance by creating new challenges or opportunities for social actors to utilise. To the extent possible, these descriptions are accompanied by the references and citations to the relevant literature, though we remind all readers that the collected research references are only partial samples of a much broader literature base.

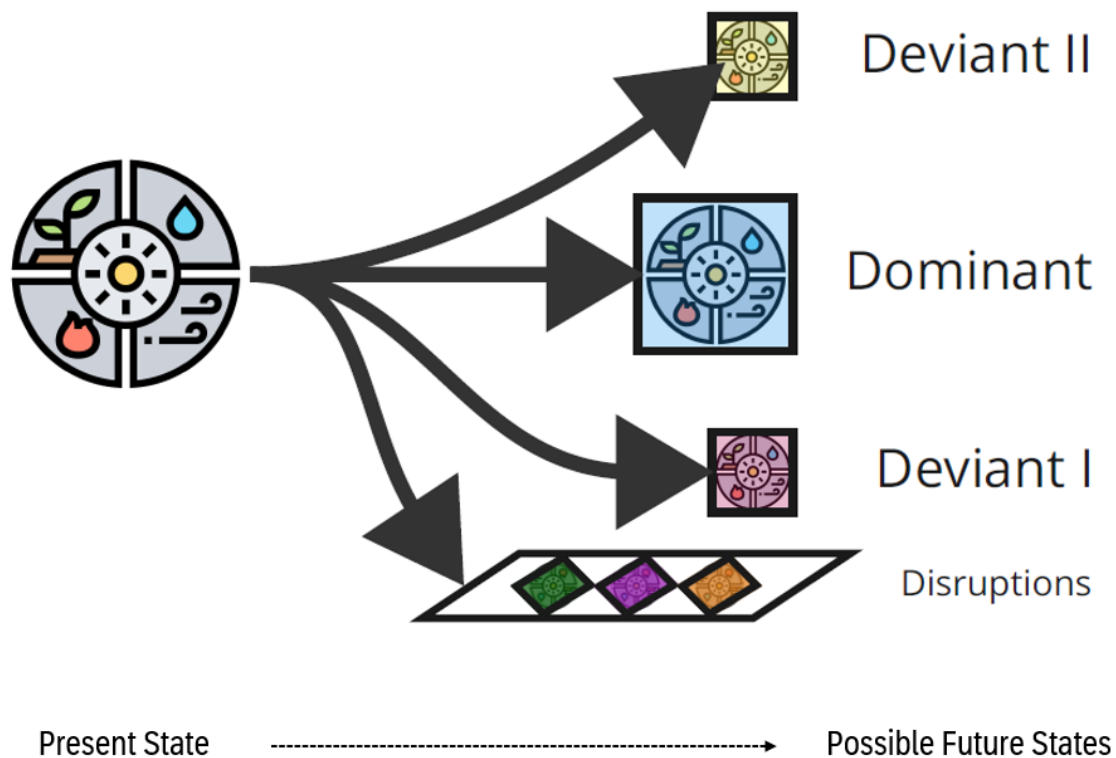
In order to increase the clarity of how these factors can shift the conditions for democratic systems, each factor section includes a statement of how the factor is related to, and has the potential to influence, democracy. These are ideas summarised from the relevant literature, presented in an accessible language and designed to begin lines of conversation that could be useful to locating democratic systems within a larger set of relationships with global change factors.

To make these relationships a bit more concrete, the research team has selected some example cases for each of the context factors. These cases are meant to illustrate how the described context factor can have an influence on democracy and approaches to social governance. Through providing direct references to projects, events, movements, and other real-world cases that exemplify the factors' potential to make future change possible, we invite each reader to think about the context factor through the lens of the not-so-distant past.

Given both the dynamic environment and the uncertain impacts, horizon scanning then attempts to present a view of the spectrum of possible futures for each context factor. These are outlined through the articulation of 'trajectories' for the context factor that can be derived through grounded speculation. These trajectories often include the 'continued' or projected development paths, and between 1-3 'deviant' paths that might still materialise.

Figure 2 - Illustration of different types of factor trajectories (Dominant, Deviant, Disruptive)

Context Factor Trajectories



Results of Desk Research

The desk research returned contextual factors within each of the STEEPLE categories that could play a role in shaping the conditions and directions of preferred democratic systems. In summary, the research identified 27 contextual factors (see Table 1.1) that we think are representative of a similar 'scale' of societal phenomenon and are thus worthy of consideration across different European contexts. Each of these Factors is presented here in a uniform framework, including:

- Factor Title – an accessible and understandable term to communicate the identified factor
- Primary STEEPLE categorisation – research team's assessment of the primary category for the factor
- Secondary STEEPLE categorisations – research team's identification of other STEEPLE categories that are related to or influenced by the factor.
- Description – a long form description of the context factor, and related 'sub-factors'
- Relevant Literature
- Cases – examples that demonstrate one or more aspects of the context factor influencing social and democratic conditions
- Potential impacts on Democracy – as identified in the literature
- Possible future trajectories, deemed plausible by authors

Overview of Results – STEEPLE Research

STEEPLE Tag	Context Factor Title	Short description
S1	Gender and Democracy	How does gender shape access, influence, and vulnerability within democratic systems? Whether and how gender is represented in the democratic process shapes a context factor for democracy.
S2	Cultures of Debate	What are the norms, values and ideals of political debate? Which paradigm dominates? This context factor describes how different ways of public debating shape democracy.
S3	Intergenerational Relations	How are potential conflicts of interest between different generations articulated in political debates? The relationship between generations, especially in ageing populations, can determine the context for democratic governance.
S4	Ageing Europe	Who will provide Europe with the labour its economy needs? Are our health, mobility, and social service systems prepared for the needs of an older population? The questions highlight the uncertain impact of ageing populations on democracy.
S5	Science and Education	What constitutes truth in a democracy? Who can produce and access knowledge? Science and education lay the epistemic foundations for the democratic process.
S6	Migration	How will European reactions to external and internal migrants, immigrants and asylum seekers evolve over the next 15 years? Are cultural practices, governance instruments, and social welfare systems prepared? How might they be made more resilient.
T1	'Artificial Intelligence' Systems and Synthetic Identities	What roles do "AI agents" play in creating political communities and groups? With increasing use of artificial intelligence systems in people's lives, AI becomes a context factor in the shaping of political attitudes in democracies.



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T2	New Media	How do people communicate, relate to and trust information? This context factor encompasses the array of digital platforms, technologies, and content-sharing practices that collectively reshape public communication and political engagement.
T3	Political Technologies	How is the democratic process facilitated through technologies? How are elections organised? What tools are used? This context factor comprises the hard- and software shaping democratic processes and political decision-making.
T4	Decentralised Energy Systems	Who is creating energy, who is using it, and who is benefiting from these exchanges? In an age of increasingly decentralised energy production, and the need for newly integrated European energy distribution systems, answering these questions regarding a central consumer demand can deeply impact democracy at local, national and European scales.
EC1	Work Conditions	How are economic activities (work) and democracy linked? The labour movement has shaped democracies through the influence of trade unions, political parties and social movements by scrutinising the interest conflicts between capital and work. With new modes of rationalisation, automation and surveillance, working conditions change and continue to shape democratic politics.
EC2	Economic Inequality	How is wealth, income and consumption distributed and how do inequalities effect democracy? Economic power can influence democratic debates.
EC3	Shifting Global Powers	How are political systems legitimised by their economic performance? With shifts in the global economic order, political systems, such as liberal democracies, which have in recent history claimed economic superiority risk criticism for tardy and inconsistent decision-making.
EN1	Infrastructures	How do public spaces, artefacts and objects enable democratic processes? Material contexts lay the foundation for political processes, thereby shaping how democracy can be practised and enacted.
EN2	Land and Water Governance	How are the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems governed and regulated? Who benefits from extractive or conservation activities? Who bears the costs of depleted soil, deforestation, polluted waterways, or over-fishing? When communities are excluded from critical decisions about their surrounding ecosystems, is it a 'failure of democracy'?

EN3	Nature-based Solutions	How might rejuvenated ecosystems help enrich the lives of both human and more-than-human populations? How can restorative and protective policies be arrived at in a manner that respects community values, and the potential value of health ecosystems?
EN4	Effects of Climate Change	How can democratic systems decide and act accordingly, given the variable consequences and time horizons of climate change? While extreme weather events may cause more immediate crises, some phenomena will occur over years. All types of climate change effects can alter communities, and governing systems will have to respond.
P1	Populism	How do anti-establishment rhetorics shape democracy? The rhetorical division of society into antagonistic groups, such as ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, has a profound impact on the way democratic processes unfold and can foster authoritarianism.
P2	Defence and Security	How does democracy respond to conflict? Security issues, border conflicts and wars affect the polity and can challenge the democratic process.
P3	Against the State	How do anti-state political ideologies aim to shape and utilise democracy? Neo-libertarianism represents disruptive approaches that question centralised authority and reimagine democratic participation.
P4	Trust and Accountability	Do people trust the democratic process and its institutions? Trust in effectiveness and accountability of governance and public administration shapes the support for democracy. Urban and environmental planning, for instance, directly affects the livelihoods and wellbeing of people.
L1	Broadening Democratic Representation?	Who and what can be politically represented and participate in the democratic process? Who and what can hold rights? This context factor shapes democracy by legally (re-)defining legitimate political subjects, citizenship and the limits of representation.
L2	Fundamental Human Rights	How might democratic systems reinforce the fundamental human rights at the centre of European law and the foundation of the Union? How can the costs and responsibilities of supporting and protecting these rights be equally shared?
L3	Justice and the Rule of Law	How are checks and balances implemented and how is the legislative system organised in a democracy? As one of the central pillars of democracy, the legislative provides and interprets the rules and norms under which the democratic process unfolds.

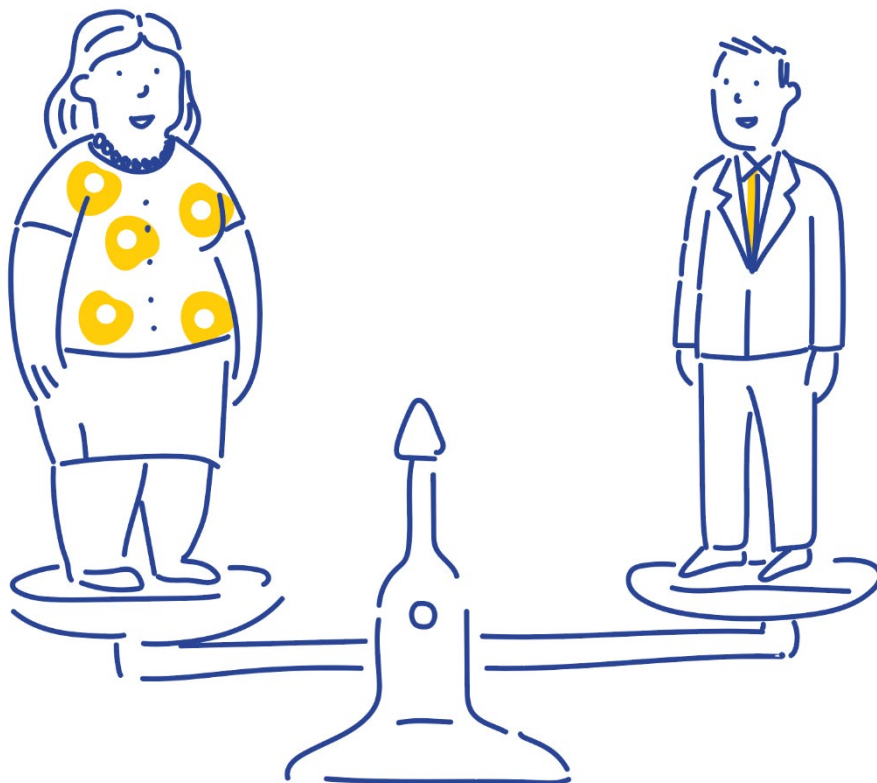
L4	Legacy Governing Systems	How do the established institutions and processes of government exercise their power? How might these systems resist or impede new democratic practices? As democratic systems are compelled to change, legacy systems can help or hinder that transition.
ET1	Mental Health Issues	How does mental well-being affect democratic participation? Citizens' mental health is crucial for maintaining active participation in political processes, ensuring that individuals can engage in debates, elections, and participatory activities without being hindered by psychological distress or stigma.
ET2	Exploitative Supply Chains	How do irresponsible economic activities affect democratic participation? In the Anthropocene era, exploitative supply chains have emerged as a critical factor undermining sustainability, equity, and democratic participation across global value systems.

Table 1.1 - Overview of Results – STEEPLE research

Social Factors

S1 - Gender and Democracy

Figure 3 - Gender and Democracy (Illustration Credit: Mario Magana)



STEEPLE Primary: (Social), STEEPLE Connected (Political, Legal)

According to the UN, “the ongoing transformation of democratic systems is marked by both opportunities and challenges, yet the question of gender remains insufficiently addressed within these developments” (UN Women, Facts and Figures, 2025). Despite decades of advocacy for gender-inclusive governance, many democratic reforms and innovations continue to overlook the ways in which gender shapes access, influence, and vulnerability within democratic systems and processes (Krook & Mackay, 2011). The failure to systematically integrate gender perspectives into democratic development is particularly concerning in times of rapid social, technological and environmental change, as these shifts can exacerbate existing inequalities. Women and marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by democratic backsliding, narrowing democratic space, and the rise of exclusionary populism (Krook, 2020). Environmental justice research also demonstrates that harmful consequences often fall on communities already marginalised by



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gender, as well as race, class, indigeneity, or rurality and relate to conflicts over knowledge – such as what counts as pollution, how health impacts are measured, and whose expertise is trusted, since what counts as “science” or who is seen as an “expert” often depends on the political and social context (Ottinger, Barandiarán, & Kimura, 2020). Gender disparities thus undermine the very principles of equality on which democratic systems are typically founded.

In addition, gender plays a central role for elections. On the one hand, many highly politicised election topics have a strong gender dimension (e.g. reproductive rights or LGBTQI+ rights). On the other hand, an analysis in the Financial Times recently suggested a “global gender divide,” noting that young men are increasingly shifting to the political right while young women are moving to the left (FT, 2024).

Without explicit attention to gendered dynamics and revealing how they shape access, influence, and vulnerability in democratic systems, efforts to strengthen democracy risk reinforcing the very inequalities they seek to dismantle. Participatory approaches and deliberative tools often reproduce existing power hierarchies, impacting both the quality and robustness of democratic governance. As democracies adapt to contemporary challenges, the integration of gender analysis is not only a matter of justice but a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy and future resilience.

Related literature

- Krook, M. L., & Mackay, F. (Eds.). (2011). *Gender, Politics and Institutions: Towards a Feminist Institutionalism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ottinger, G., Barandiarán, J., & Kimura, A. H. (2017). Environmental justice: Knowledge, technology, and expertise. In U. Felt, R. Fouché, C. A. Miller, & L. Smith-Doerr (Eds.), *The handbook of science and technology studies (4th ed., pp. 1029–1056)*. MIT Press.
- Levy, H. I., & Sakaiya, S. (2020). Effect of deliberation style on the gender gap in deliberative participation. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 21(3), 158–175. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109920000055.2>.
- Lupien, P. (2022). Participatory Democracy, Democratic Education, and Women. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 54(4), 617–645. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000517>
- Financial Times (2024): A new gender divide is emerging. <https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998>
- Wojciechowska, M. (2019). Towards Intersectional Democratic Innovations. *Political Studies*, 67(4), 895-911. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718814165>

How does it shape democratic futures?

- Gender balance ensures inclusivity and equity in democratic processes
- Young women, girls, and non-binary youth face systemic barriers, including discrimination, underrepresentation, and gender-based violence
- Gender-sensitive approaches are essential for shaping democratic futures that are fair and representative
- Democratic issues like climate justice and reproductive rights are better addressed when gender perspectives are included

- Youth-led movements often redefine political participation through digital activism, protest, mutual aid and art and Gender affects the form and visibility of these alternative political expressions

Example cases

Case 1: Women and Participatory Democracy

Many deliberative and participatory democratic frameworks fail to account for internal power dynamics and the persistence of structural gender inequalities. This case example draws on Lupien's (2022) empirical fieldwork in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Chile and points to the gap in research on how participatory practices affect women specifically. While participation often enables women to acquire valuable skills such as public speaking, negotiation, and organisational leadership, these are frequently developed within roles that reflect and reproduce traditional gendered expectations (e.g. caregiving or community service). The article challenges overly optimistic accounts of participatory democracy by highlighting how gendered norms and institutional structures constrain the emancipatory potential of such mechanisms. Without gender-aware approaches to participatory democratic theory and practice, participatory spaces may reinforce rather than transform existing power hierarchies.

Case 2: Effect of Gender in Deliberation Style and Participation

This case example draws on a study of the ways in which different deliberation styles influence gender dynamics in participatory settings following a repeated-measure experiment involving Japanese students (Levy and Sakaiya, 2020). Participants engaged in two forms of deliberation: evidence-driven (beginning with factual information) and verdict-driven (starting with opinion-sharing). The study yields three key findings. First, a significant gender gap emerged in verdict-driven discussions, characterised by male-dominated participation, while evidence-driven formats eliminated this disparity, enabling more equitable female engagement. Second, causal mediation analysis identified a psychological mechanism: women were less likely to conform to dominant male opinions in evidence-based settings, likely due to increased confidence when discussing empirical information. Third, the research highlights that deliberative structure – not just facilitation or group composition – plays a critical role in fostering inclusion. The researchers argue that deliberation style is a pivotal yet underexplored factor in addressing gender inequalities within participatory democracy. Their findings suggest that evidence-driven designs can help dismantle structural barriers to women's participation and should be considered in the development of more inclusive democratic practices. In a similar vein, research on intersectionality in democratic innovations have revealed shortcomings and argued for a more direct focus on facilitating leadership of the disempowered and diversification of the contexts of democratic innovations (e.g. Wojciechowska, 2019).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Democratic states move towards a gender balance that is representative of the constituency, through primarily social movements and grassroots initiatives.

- ➔ Democratic states implement more strict rules and policies regarding diversity and inclusion, including representational quotas and other rules governing the appointment of officials.
- ➔ Democratic states adopt rules and policies that limit the role of women, transgender identities, and non-binary gender identities in governance.

Under EC Review

S2 - Cultures of Debate

Figure 4 - Cultures of Debate



STEEPLE Primary: (Social), STEEPLE Connected (Political, Legal)

Debate is central to the democratic process. However, for a public debate to take place, specific conditions have to be met. That is, the exchange of reasonable arguments between participants who recognise one another as equals. In order to sustain these conditions, societies cultivate specific cultures of debate that allow for articulating solidarity, subversion, or opposition. They can range from consensus-seeking modes of deliberation to evidence-based informing of debates (Bächtiger, 2018; Courant, 2021), to an antagonistic way of approaching and shaping political issues (Mouffe, 2013), to creative and cultural practices co-producing democracy (Lugar a Dudas, 2025).

The effects of these different cultures of debate on democracy are profound. They may reinforce polarisation or foster resilience within democratic societies. The way in which arguments are brought to the fore also impacts if democracy is seen as a rather inclusive, constructive or contested process. Thereby, it is important not to misunderstand the underlying rationale of a specific culture of debate as the outcome. Intention and result may differ. Consensus-seeking approaches, while promoting unity, may occasionally stifle dissent and antagonistic debates, but seemingly divisive ones can sometimes invigorate democratic engagement and bring people together.

Related Literature

- Bächtiger, A., et al. (2018). The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy. Oxford Handbooks.
- Courant, D. (2021) Citizens' Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an "Irish Model" for Deliberative Democracy? *Front. Polit. Sci.* 2:591983. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2020.591983.

- Lugar a Dudas. (2025). *About us*. Retrieved May 3, 2025, from <https://www.lugaradudas.org/about>
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Verso Books.

How does it shape democratic futures?

- Public debate is central to democracy as it enables the exchange of arguments among participants who recognise each other as equals
- Different cultures of debate (e.g. consensus-seeking, evidence-based, antagonistic) shape how political issues are discussed and negotiated
- Debate cultures can either foster polarisation or strengthen the resilience of democratic societies
- The way arguments are presented influences whether democracy is perceived as inclusive, constructive, or contested

Example cases

Case 1: Deliberative democracy: Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland

Ireland is presented as an interesting case for a deliberative culture of debate in the literature due to its use of citizens' assemblies, which have been integral in addressing complex constitutional reforms (Courant, 2021). These assemblies consist of randomly selected citizens tasked with deliberating on significant political issues and have led to successful referendums, such as those on marriage equality and abortion. This approach to deliberative democracy is notable because it involves citizens directly in decision-making processes, rather than relying solely on elected representatives. In addition, to these official sites, the culture of debate was reflected in the many spaces where the assembly debates were followed (such as in pubs). The Irish model demonstrates how deliberative mini-publics and the discussions they spark elsewhere can potentially influence public policies by providing recommendations that resonate with the broader populace, thereby strengthening the democratic process. This model has attracted international attention, suggesting that deliberative assemblies can effectively engage citizens in meaningful discourse and contribute to informed policy-making, despite challenges in institutionalisation and ensuring consistent public impact.

Case 2: Everyday co-production of democracy through cultural practice in post-conflict Colombia

Another example is *Lugar a Dudas* in Cali, Colombia, a long-standing independent and non-profit space that integrates artistic practice with civic and political engagement. Founded in 2005, *Lugar a Dudas* (translated as “a place of doubt” or “a space to wonder”) functions as a laboratory for research, critical reflection, and experimentation through a diverse programme of exhibitions, workshops, and residencies (CLAB, n.d.). Rather than operating through predefined policy frameworks, the organisation evolves in response to local conditions, engaging youth and emerging artists in educational formats developed from the bottom up. It maintains a specialised library and archive with over 3,000 books, magazines, and videos focused on contemporary art, and until the 2019 COVID pandemic, supported a national and international residency programme (Lugar a Dudas, 2025). *Lugar a Dudas*

positions cultural production as inherently civic – young people participate in community archiving, visual storytelling, and post-conflict dialogue not as isolated art activities, but as ways to collectively negotiate political and social realities. Its model does not separate the governance of the space from the artistic practices within it; rather, it allows both to co-evolve through sustained, everyday interaction similar to projects like [EXITUTO](#).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Antagonistic democracy: Political processes are characterised by ongoing conflict and opposition among diverse groups, emphasising the role of dissent and disagreement in democratic governance.
- ➔ Consensual democracy: Careful and inclusive deliberations bring about agreement and collaboration among diverse groups, aiming to achieve decisions through compromise and consensus rather than conflict.
- ➔ Evidence-based democracy: The democratic process is characterised by balancing expert appraisal, public engagement and electoral politics in a rational manner.

S3 - Intergenerational Relations

Figure 5 - Intergenerational Relations



STEEPLE Primary: (Social), STEEPLE Connected (Economic, Political, Ethical)

In the context of digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change, the expectations and aspirations of different generations can become increasingly polarised. At the same time, there is a structural imbalance in contemporary political discourse, where the priorities and perspectives of younger generations are not adequately represented and even excluded (OECD, 2020). While young people express significant concern for issues that shape their future – ranging from education and employment to media and environmental policies – their core concerns are often sidelined in favour of short-term restrictive measures (Timmons et al., 2024). Timmons et al. (2024) argue that “power over political and corporate decisions resides overwhelmingly among members of older generations, who therefore bear the most responsibility for inaction” even though “[c]hildren, adolescents and young adults will also bear the consequences of the decisions taken by policy makers today for the longest time [...]” (OECD, 2020). The disconnect is further compounded by the economic and social uncertainties that young people face, as highlighted by the OECD (2020). Structural challenges – such as “increasing pension liabilities per worker and healthcare costs, high levels of relative youth unemployment, increasing government debt per person and rising housing costs” are reshaping the political influence of different age cohorts and may contribute to a sense of disenfranchisement among the younger population.

The so-called generational gap describes the underrepresentation of the younger generation’s interest in the democratic process. It asserts that the decision-making process remains skewed towards the preferences of older voters, leading to policies that not only fail to meet the aspirations of young people but also risk alienating them from the democratic

process (Timmons et al., 2024). In contrast to this alleged generational gap to influence politics and the proliferation of youth-only movements, there exist many examples for intergenerational solidarity in different fields of politics and in informal civil society activism (Nicolaidis et al. 2023). For example, studies have shown how intergenerational solidarity plays out in the climate justice movement (Chazan & Baldwin, 2019)

Related literature

- OECD (2020). Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice. Comparative assessment of the policies, laws, institutional capacities and governance tools put in place by national governments and the European Union to promote youth empowerment and intergenerational justice.
- Chazan, May; Baldwin, Melissa (2020): Granny Solidarity: Understanding Age and Generational Dynamics in Climate Justice Movements. In: SSJ 13 (2), S. 244–261. DOI: 10.26522/ssj.v13i2.2235.
- Timmons, S., Andersson, Y., & Lunn, P. D. (2024). Communicating climate change as a generational issue: experimental effects on youth worry, motivation and belief in collective action. *Climate Policy*, 24(10), 1457-1473.
- Narawad, A. (2023). [Global surveys show people's growing concern about climate change](#). Clean Energy Wire-Journalism for the energy transition.
- Leončikas, T., & Nivakoski, S. (2024). [Intergenerational inequalities: How to close the gaps?](#). Eurofound. Luxembourg. doi:10.2806/433641

How does it shape democratic futures?

- Addressing intergenerational gaps has been linked to democratic innovations like Youth Parliaments, Intergenerational Dialogues, mentorship programs, and participatory budgeting.
- Younger generations may face barriers to accessing political power, economic resources, and decision-making processes, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement.
- Established institutions may resist change and fail to adapt to the needs and preferences of younger generations.

Example cases

Case 1 – Germany's Climate Law Reform and Youth Mobilisation:

Global climate justice movements such as Friday for Future, Lost Generation or Extinction Rebellion show how climate activism is propelled by and expressed through intergenerational tensions. In Germany, for instance, the youth movement has been central to climate activism, notably opposing recent government attempts to weaken the Climate Action Law. Initially praised for legally binding the country to climate neutrality by 2045, proposed reforms would reduce accountability for emissions in key sectors, sparking national protests. Despite declining participation since its 2019 peak, the movement continues to highlight growing frustration among youth over political inaction. Many young activists perceive the government's shift as prioritising economic concerns over intergenerational justice, further deepening the generational divide in climate governance. The 2021 Constitutional Court ruling mandating stronger climate protections for future generations underscores the legal system's role in mediating these tensions. Still, the limited

public impact reported in recent surveys illustrates the ongoing struggle youth face in translating protest into policy (Narawad, 2023).

Case 2 – Housing Injustice Among Young Adults in Europe:

In many European countries, the lack of affordable housing has become a major barrier for young people striving for independence. Rising rents, stagnant wages, and insecure employment conditions have made it increasingly difficult for younger generations to access homeownership or even stable rental housing. As a result, many young adults are compelled to remain in their parental homes well into adulthood, often not by choice but due to financial necessity. Contributing factors include insecure labour markets, rising living costs, restricted access to credit, and lingering economic effects of the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. In several European countries, this has led to growing frustration, as young people feel trapped by systems that do not accommodate their needs or future aspirations. The delay in establishing independent households not only affects personal development and well-being but also reflects a broader intergenerational disparity in living conditions. This housing exclusion erodes trust in policy frameworks that continue to prioritise older, wealthier demographics, thereby reinforcing a sense of economic and social exclusion among younger generations (Eurofound, 2024).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Polarisation along generational fault lines
- ➔ Redistribution of political powers that reflects younger generations living with the consequences of today's decisions
- ➔ Intergenerational solidarity

S4 - Ageing Europe

Figure 6 - Ageing Europe



STEEPLE Primary: (Social), STEEPLE Connected (Economic, Political, Ethical)

As Europe's populations age, healthcare systems face rising demands, especially for long-term chronic care. Older individuals often experience disparities in access, particularly in rural areas, and face barriers to participation in decision-making. Additionally, gender inequalities, such as lower pensions and unpaid caregiving roles for women, highlight the need for more inclusive, responsive policies in ageing societies.

With the ageing population, elevated levels of healthcare and long-term care services are becoming increasingly important, particularly due to the growing prevalence of chronic non-communicable diseases, physical frailty, and neurodegenerative conditions (Szűcs, 2024). Consequently – and considering older people are far from a homogeneous group – political empowerment, inclusion, and their representation in policymaking must consider diverse needs and capacities. Public involvement in health research is tied to both ethical principles and the legitimacy of policymaking, yet many older individuals remain unaware of their rights to participate or are constrained by health, education, or accessibility barriers (Frögren et al., 2022). Szűcs (2024) argues for two further dimensions of this heterogeneity beyond policymaking. First, the persistent gender gap in pensions and long-term care disproportionately affects women due to longer life expectancy and career interruptions, which has implications for economic justice and long-term welfare planning. Secondly, geographic disparities play an additional role as older adults in rural or economically disadvantaged regions often face limited access to healthcare, infrastructure, and social services. In contrast, urban centres with stronger economic potential may better accommodate ageing populations through adaptive policy measures.

Related literature

- European Commission: Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, 2024 ageing report – Economic & budgetary projections for the EU Member States (2022-2070), Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2765/022983>
- Szűcs, P. (2024). Demographic Shifts and Economic Challenges in the European Union: Addressing the Impact of Ageing Populations on Social Security, Healthcare and Labour Markets. *Európai Tükör*, 27(1), 87-106.
- Frögren, J., Schmidt, S. M., Kylén, M., Jonsson, O., Slaug, B., & Iwarsson, S. (2022). Awareness of and attitudes towards public involvement in research on ageing and health among older people in Sweden. *PloS One*, 17(6), e0269993.

How does it shape democratic futures?

- The ageing population leads to increased demand for long-term healthcare services, putting pressure on public budgets towards hospitals, elderly care or aid programs.
- When older citizens are involved in policymaking and health research, it enhances democratic legitimacy and responsiveness, furthering trust in institutions.
- However, barriers such as digital exclusion, low health literacy, and mobility limitations often leave older adults underserved and politically marginalised.
- Gendered inequalities, such as the pension gap and women's disproportionate caregiving roles, undermine economic justice and skew democratic representation.
- If care systems remain inequitable or exclusionary, it can lead to political dissatisfaction, eroding perceptions of fairness and solidarity across generations, weakening democratic cohesion.

Example cases

Case 1 – Fertility Decline in Italy

Amongst other European nations, Italy faces a demographic challenge with its persistently low fertility rate and low female labour force participation (FLFP). Over the past 15 years, the country has seen a significant decline in the number of births, with fertility rates dropping to 1.2 births per woman, well below the European average (approximately 1.6 per woman). Additionally, FLFP remains markedly lower with a 20% gender gap between male and female employment. This paradox is largely attributed to structural barriers, such as a lack of childcare facilities and rigid labour market conditions, which make it difficult for women to balance work and family life. The so-called "motherhood penalty" – where mothers experience reduced earnings and fewer job opportunities – exacerbates this issue. As a result, Italy's low fertility and FLFP rates are intricately linked to the economic challenges, discrimination and stigma women face in the workplace, underscoring the need for adapted policies (International Monetary Fund. European Dept., 2024).

Case 2 – Health/Care for the Elderly in Poland

Poland's healthcare system faces significant challenges due to its ageing population, with those aged 60 and over comprising more than a quarter of the population in 2020, a figure projected to rise to 40% by 2050. Two-thirds of the elderly suffer from chronic conditions such as hypertension, arthritis, and heart disease, yet how this constitutes a structural issue remains unaddressed. In response, Poland has focused on community-based care

initiatives like the Senior+ and Care 75+ programmes, which promote ageing in place and provide home-based support. However, these initiatives fall short in adequately supporting rural areas, where healthcare access remains limited. While the introduction of telemedicine and rehabilitation services has been positive, reliance on digital solutions often overlooks the elderly's struggles with digital literacy, creating further exclusion. Moreover, gender disparities persist, with women, especially those who raised children, receiving lower pensions and facing inadequate support for caregiving roles. This uneven approach underscores the need for more inclusive and equitable solutions in elderly care, particularly for those with complex needs (UNECE, 2021).

Case Study 3 – Migration and Brain Drain in Romania

Romania faces a significant socio-economic challenge due to the mass emigration of its young population, particularly to European Union countries. The brain drain is primarily driven by a lack of job opportunities, low wages, economic instability, and dissatisfaction with the educational and healthcare systems. As young, educated professionals seek better prospects abroad, Romania suffers from a reduced skilled workforce, which hampers its economic growth and exacerbates the demographic crisis, leading to an ageing population and increased pressure on pension and health systems. Additionally, the migration trends reflect a broader disillusionment with the political environment, where many young people feel that their efforts are better rewarded in more stable, transparent systems. While initiatives like the Erasmus+ program provide educational opportunities abroad, they also fuel the desire to leave permanently. To mitigate this trend, Romania must invest in creating more attractive opportunities for its youth, including improving job prospects, educational quality, and public sector transparency (Coserea, 2024).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Ageing populations may put pressure on public resources, leading to the need for rebalancing of distributive justice in democracies.
- ➔ Ageing populations remain a demographic majority in most European countries, retaining political power for social governance.
- ➔ Barriers like poor health or digital exclusion can further marginalise older adults from democratic participation.

S5 - Science and Education

Figure 7 - Science and education



In democratic systems, the legitimacy of political decisions also relies on citizens having access to knowledge and participating in the production of that knowledge. Science and education, at universities and schools, play a crucial role by establishing the epistemic foundations necessary for informed debate and rational decision-making. On the one hand, there has been discussions concerning public participation and the democratisation of science (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020). On the other hand, research has emphasised how knowledge can re-configure social order (known as co-production (Jasanoff, 2004)).

Next to the work at universities, research organisations and schools, citizenship education (also called political education) aims to provide accessible, reliable information on important societal and political issues through different channels, especially addressing young people. It makes use of diverse formats like social media, online resources, print materials, seminars, and public events. Its activities also focus on developing innovative projects and methods tailored to different age groups and learning needs, promoting critical thinking, media literacy, and participation in public life, while addressing topics such as historical remembrance and the prevention of extremism.

Recently, however, science and its institutions, such as universities, have come under increasing pressure. Science and education are becoming increasingly politicised. Political

leaders have attempted to undermine scientific integrity by spreading disinformation and delegitimising scientific findings and defunding science (e.g. DLF, 2025). This poses a serious threat to the democratic public sphere, as free access to knowledge and open discussion about truth are systematically obstructed. To protect the democratic processes, it is therefore essential to defend the independence of science and education.

Related literature

- Chilvers, Jason; Kearnes, Matthew (2020): Remaking Participation in Science and Democracy. In: Science, Technology, & Human Values 45 (3), S. 347–380. DOI: 10.1177/0162243919850885.
- Jasanoff, Sheila. (2004): States of knowledge. The co-production of science and social order. 1st ed.: Routledge (International library of sociology).
- DLF (2025): <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/wissenschaft-forschung-usa-trump-zensur-stellenabbau-verbote-100.html>
- EU Youth Wiki (2025) [Youth Wiki: Europe's Encyclopedia of National Youth Policies](#)

How does it shape democratic futures?

- Science and education impact democratic debate by empowering citizens to make informed decisions and think critically.
- By ensuring access to knowledge, science and education promote equality and participation in democratic processes.
- Citizenship education encourages active engagement and critical reflection, enabling people to contribute meaningfully to democracy.
- Maintaining the independence of science and education defends democratic institutions against manipulation and authoritarian influences.

Example cases

Case Study 1 – “The professors are our enemies” and the March for Science

Public statements such as “The professors are our enemies” (J.D. Vance, after DLF 2025) show how science has become politicised. As a reaction to this development, The March for Science serves as an example of the close relationship between science and democracy. Initiated for the first time in 2017 as a global movement, the March for Science brought together over one million participants in more than 600 cities worldwide (DLF 2025). Scientists, educators, and citizens united to advocate for the importance of scientific evidence in public decision-making and to defend the integrity of research against political interference. By publicly demonstrating for open access to knowledge, transparent communication and the protection of scientific institutions, participants highlighted that democracy relies on informed citizens and evidence-based decision-making. The movement emphasises that when science is threatened by political pressures or disinformation, democratic values such as transparency, participation and rational debate are also at risk.

Case Study 2 – Citizenship education in Europe

The Youth Wiki is an official European online platform that provides comprehensive information on national youth policies, including innovative citizenship education formats such as youth parliaments (Youth Wiki, 2025). As a case for how education shapes

democracy, the Youth Wiki demonstrates how transparent, accessible information about youth representation, participation, and educational opportunities supports democratic engagement among young people. By documenting structures such as youth councils, participation bodies, and civic education programs, the platform highlights efforts to empower youth, promote political literacy, and ensure their voices are heard in democratic processes.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Democracy risks being undermined by the increasing politicisation and restriction of science and education. Political interference, defunding, and delegitimising of scientific institutions may threaten the independence of science and education, weakening democratic processes as well as social and technological progress.
- ➔ Science and research could become more open to public participation, for example, through citizen science initiatives and at the same time more engaged in the democratic process.
- ➔ Civic education adopts a learning by doing approach to understanding social governance, public administration, and democratic institutions. This education program also helps foster the political agency and inclusion of younger generations.

S6 - Migration

Migration has become a pivotal structuring force in European democracies, particularly since the 2015–2016 asylum arrivals raised the salience of borders, identity, and inclusion. While long-term demographic and economic effects of migration vary across places, the democratic consequences unfold most visibly through party competition, the normative boundary-setting of liberal rights, and changed patterns of civic participation and representation.

Migration has catalysed a reorganisation of party systems. So-called issue entrepreneurs and challenger parties have used migration to mobilise voters along a cultural–cosmopolitan cleavage, leading to political polarisation and fragmenting parliaments (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020). The result is greater electoral volatility and coalition complexity, as mainstream parties recalibrate strategies on border control, integration, and multiculturalism. Evidence across Europe shows that challenger parties debate migration as a matter of sovereignty, security, and social order, reshaping political competition (ibid.).

Migration topics have been used to shape a “cultural backlash” among segments of the electorate who perceive rapid social change, such as globalisation, gender and minority rights, multiculturalism, as threatening established identities and norms (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This backlash has fed support for authoritarian-populist forces that champion majoritarian sovereignty over pluralist liberalism and are more willing to abridge minority protections, media independence, or judicial constraints. The democratic risk here is not migration per se but the norm contestation it enables: when migration stands as a proxy for broader anxieties about cultural change, support grows for actors willing to erode liberal-democratic guardrails.

Moreover, migration reshapes the practice of democratic inclusion. Parties may face trade-offs between mobilising voters and people with migration biographies as candidates, members, and voters (Dancygier 2017). This tension results in a participation of people with migration experiences that engage with democracy without necessarily leading to their political representation.

Related literature

- Dancygier, Rafaela M. 2017. *Dilemmas of Inclusion: Muslims in European Politics*. Princeton University Press.
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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Migration can redefine political cleavages and representation, by, for instance, empowering challenger parties and pressing mainstream actors to reconfigure coalitions, strategies, and candidate selection.
- It tests liberal-democratic norms and institutions. Elevated salience of identity and border control strengthens actors favouring majoritarian over liberal constitutionalism, raising risks to minority rights, media freedom, and judicial independence.
- Migration shapes the context for democracy as it transforms local democratic governance. Decisions on housing, education, and policing in diverse neighbourhoods become focal arenas of inclusion/exclusion, shaping trust in institutions and the political incorporation citizens with migration experience.

Example cases

Case 1 – Asylum-seeking in Germany

The 2015–2016 asylum arrivals, during which Germany received over one million asylum seekers, sharply increased the salience of migration. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6% on a platform centred on migration, security, and national identity. Parties recalibrated, tightening asylum procedures and expanding integration programmes. The case illustrates how migration can restructure party competition, stress liberal norms in public debate, and simultaneously catalyse civic engagement.

Case 2 – Social cohesion in cities

Malmö's high share of foreign-born residents and rapid demographic change made local schools, housing, and policing central to politics. Nationally, the Sweden Democrats leveraged migration salience to become a pivotal parliamentary actor; locally, Malmö invested in integration programmes and citizen dialogues to maintain social cohesion. The

tension between national securitisation frames and local inclusion practices demonstrates Dancygier's (2017) "dilemmas of inclusion": efforts to diversify representation and allocate scarce resources can face backlash, yet sustained incorporation strategies can lower conflict over time by normalising migrant-origin participation in mainstream institutions

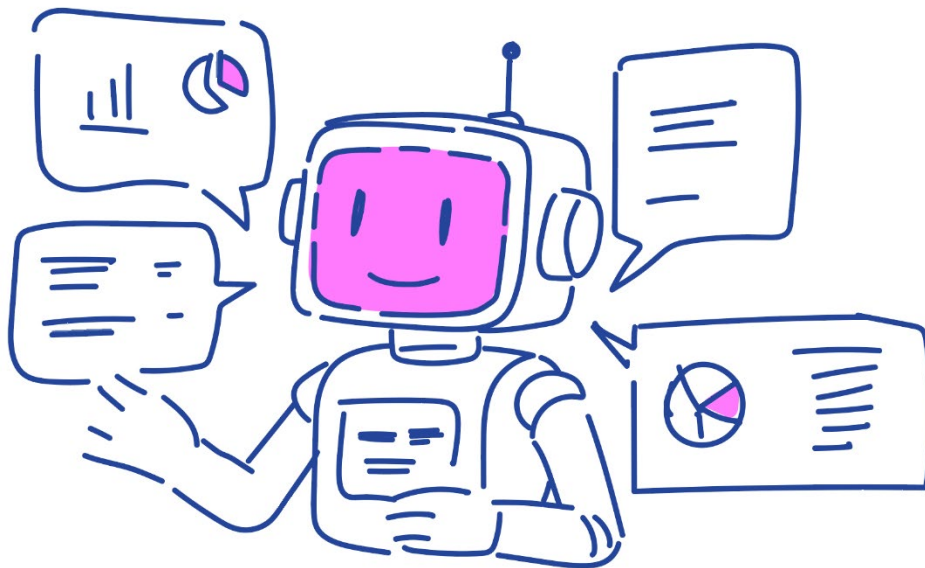
Possible trajectories

- ➔ Continued crisis framing (irregular arrivals, geopolitical shocks) and policy failures could cement support for authoritarian-populist actors who prioritise border fortification and national homogeneity over pluralist rights.
- ➔ If governments combine credible border governance with investments in integration (language, education, labour-market access) and visible pathways to political inclusion (candidate recruitment, party membership, consultative forums), the salience of migration may decline.
- ➔ Migration might slow if addressing local climate change effects was fiscally supported by those nations and global business entities with the largest ecological impacts over time. This could come in the form of formal climate reparations or a similar instrument/policy.

Technological Factors

T1- 'Artificial Intelligence' Systems and Synthetic Identities

Figure 8 - 'Artificial Intelligence' systems and synthetic identities



STEEPLE Primary: (technological), STEEPLE Connected (social, economic, environmental, legal, political)

Artificial intelligence systems present transformative opportunities and significant threats to democratic governance worldwide. While AI technologies offer unprecedented potential to enhance citizen engagement, improve government services, and facilitate large-scale democratic deliberation, they simultaneously pose risks through surveillance capabilities, disinformation campaigns, and the erosion of democratic accountability. Particularly, the questions that arise regarding the AI systems and synthetic identities in relation to democracy are: How do people make political decisions and take political actions that harmonise differences between digital and real-world identities? What roles do “AI agents” play in creating political communities and groups? How does participation change with the increasing use of artificial intelligence systems in people’s lives? What kinds of power and legitimacy are granted to AI decision-support systems, especially in social governance settings, and who has access to those systems?

The intersection of artificial intelligence, digital identity, and political participation represents one of the most significant challenges facing democratic societies in the 21st century. As individuals increasingly navigate complex relationships between their digital and real-world

personas, AI systems might fundamentally reshape how political communities form, how citizens engage in democratic processes, and how power is distributed within governance structures. AI has the potential to erode confidence in one's own epistemic abilities and obstruct the use of those abilities (Coeckelbergh, 2023). This transformation can raise critical questions about citizenship, representation, legitimacy, and access that require careful examination across multiple dimensions of democratic participation.

On the other hand, the emergence of AI agents as potential political actors represents a paradigm shift in how political communities might organise and make collective decisions. Theoretical research from artificial intelligence, particularly multiagent systems and computational social choice, proposes “21st-century” techniques for developing voting avatars, that are autonomous agents debating and voting on behalf of each citizen (Colley et al., 2021). The proponents argue that this approach can address the cognitive burden on voters in complex modern societies, where citizens would otherwise need to submit informed opinions on an excessive number of issues (Colley et al., 2021). Some AI researchers also argue it may facilitate fairer collective choices while biases and a lack of explainability need to be overcome (Majumdar et al., 2024).

Related literature

- Coeckelbergh, M. (2023). Democracy, epistemic agency, and AI: Political epistemology in times of artificial intelligence. *AI and Ethics*, 3(4), 1341–1350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-022-00239-4>
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- Stockwell, S., Hughes, M., & Swatton, P. (n.d.). AI-Enabled Influence Operations: Safeguarding Future Elections. Retrieved May 30, 2025, from <https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/publications/ai-enabled-influence-operations-safeguarding-future-elections>

How does it shape democratic futures?

- Integrating 'artificial intelligence' systems into various types of social governance activities raises important questions about decision making power and the distribution of democratic agency.
- If individuals or communities rely more heavily on the assessments of AI systems to inform their planning and actions, this also shapes the epistemic and experiential foundation of social governance.
- AI can generate and spread misinformation or deepfakes, undermining public trust in media and elections.
- AI-driven data analytics and microtargeting allow political campaigns to tailor messages to individuals, raising concerns about manipulation and privacy.
- Democracies face the challenge of regulating AI in a way that balances "innovation" with ethical standards and human rights protections.

Example cases

Case 1: Estonia - AI as a Democratic Enhancement Tool

Estonia exemplifies how artificial intelligence can strengthen democratic governance when implemented thoughtfully and transparently. Since regaining independence in 1991, this Baltic nation has leveraged AI technologies to build what officials describe as a transparent, efficient, and citizen-centric government. The Estonian government has developed AI-powered health information systems that integrate data from various healthcare providers, enabling real-time access to patient records and facilitating better decision-making by healthcare professionals (Hamer, 2024). Beyond healthcare, Estonia is currently developing a cross-government, AI-enabled data management tool designed to expand citizens' access to federal information and resources, with hundreds of AI use cases already deployed across government agencies (Rohaidi, 2019). This comprehensive digital-first approach has not only improved service delivery but also enhanced the country's national security and economic competitiveness, demonstrating how AI can bolster rather than undermine democratic institutions when proper safeguards and transparency measures are in place (e-Estonia, 2025).

Case 2: Electoral Interference and Disinformation Campaigns

The manipulation of democratic processes through AI-generated disinformation has emerged as a critical threat, exemplified by recent electoral interference cases across Europe and beyond. Romanian authorities called for TikTok to be suspended amid suspicions that its AI-driven algorithm amplified content favourable toward a far-right, pro-Kremlin presidential candidate, highlighting how digital platforms can undermine democratic processes through targeted manipulation (Csernaton, 2024). Similarly, British Members of Parliament lodged a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights against Russia, alleging that sophisticated AI-powered disinformation campaigns influenced the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the 2019 UK general election through deepfakes, social media bots, and targeted online advertising (Csernaton, 2024). While analysis of the 2024 US presidential election revealed no conclusive evidence that AI-generated content manipulated the results, researchers found that deceptive AI-generated content still influenced election discourse, amplified harmful narratives, and entrenched political polarisation (Stockwell et al., 2024). These cases demonstrate how malicious actors can exploit AI technologies to manipulate public perceptions, disrupt

electoral processes, and amplify misinformation, potentially tipping the scales in closely contested elections or influencing voter turnout in key demographics.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Governments are integrating AI systems and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) into various areas of governance, such as healthcare, policymaking, security, and education, which could lead to more efficient administration, but also raise concerns about surveillance and manipulation.
- ➔ Citizens receive tailored or personalised information on political and societal issues and can vote directly on these matters without the need for political representatives.
- ➔ "Digital twins" or "artificial agents" representing citizens automatically express their political preferences, reducing the need for individuals to engage directly in political processes.

T2 - New Media

Figure 9 - New Media



STEEPLE Primary: (technological), STEEPLE Connected (social, economic, ecological, legal, political)

New Media encompasses the array of digital platforms, technologies, and content-sharing practices that collectively (re)shape public communication and political engagement. It comprises dynamic elements such as social media, algorithmic news feeds, visual culture, and participatory digital spaces, challenging traditional media hierarchies as well as enhancing participation, but simultaneously new forms of manipulation and necessitating new forms of information validation (e.g. [EDMO](#) network).

While the spread of disinformation is not a new phenomenon in democracies, targeted disinformation campaigns in new media provide unprecedented challenges for liberal democracies. Disinformation campaigns are not merely isolated technical phenomena but are embedded in longstanding patterns of political distrust, overflow of politically charged information, and societal polarisation. Persistent disinformation strategies – ranging from AI-generated deepfakes to carefully crafted misleading narratives – function to obscure the complexity of socio-political dynamics. These campaigns not only disseminate inaccuracies about important societal issues (for instance, misrepresenting migrant-related policies) but also exacerbate public scepticism towards traditional media and established institutions (Nadal & Jančárik, 2024). The manipulation of content by political actors is particularly concerning for its capacity to destabilise the public sphere. When disinformation is utilised to frame critical socio-political issues, it can serve to justify exclusionary policy measures and undermine normative democratic values (Fielitz & Thurston, 2019). Further complicating this digital sphere of (mis-)(dis-)information is the unchecked circulation of deepfakes and other forms of synthetic media, bypassing fact checking mechanisms. Therefore, the inherent difficulty in distinguishing genuine information from fabricated content introduces an epistemic crisis (Hameleers et al., 2022; Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim, 2020). Moreover, contemporary propaganda strategies exploit sophisticated digital techniques, ultimately confusing public opinion, diminishing rational debate, and thereby undermining institutional trust (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021).

Echo chambers and filter bubbles are another visible implication of new media in democracies. They represent phenomena wherein digital platforms – as a result of both algorithmic processes and individual user behaviours – lead to ideological assortments of information. While algorithms tailor content based on historical engagement data, human actors reinforce these boundaries by predominantly seeking information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This mechanism not only limits exposure to diverse perspectives but also cultivates conditions conducive to the persistence of misinformation and ideological polarisation (Zimmer et al., 2019; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021).

Related literature

- Tumber, H., & Waisbord, S. (2021). Media, disinformation, and populism: Problems and responses. In *The Routledge companion to media disinformation and populism* (pp. 13-25). Routledge.
- de Nadal, L., & Jančárik, P. (2024). Beyond the deepfake hype: AI, democracy, and “the Slovak case”. *HKS Misinformation Review*, 5(4).
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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Disinformation erodes public trust in media and institutions, making democratic debate vulnerable to manipulation and cynicism and reducing citizens’ ability to make informed decisions.
- Filter bubbles and echo chambers reduce exposure to dissenting views, weaken democratic dialogue, amplify confirmation bias, and reduce empathy for different perspectives. This fosters identity-driven polarisation, where political disagreement becomes personalised and emotionally charged.
- Elections and democratic procedures become increasingly susceptible to foreign or domestic influence through digital propaganda, and Minority opinions or marginalised voices may be silenced or drowned out, affecting pluralism and inclusion.
- Ultimately, unchecked disinformation can trigger an epistemic crisis, where shared facts no longer exist, undermining the very foundations of deliberative democracy, and filter bubbles and echo chambers can produce civic disengagement, especially among those alienated from mainstream discourses or misled by curated realities.

Example cases

Case 1 – Memes as Tools of Soft Power:

In the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, memes have become a central tool in the digital sphere between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Russia utilises memes to

promote sharp power narratives, glorifying its leadership (especially Putin) while portraying democratic leaders as weak, thereby reinforcing authoritarian legitimacy and sowing distrust in liberal institutions. These emotionally charged, visually potent memes simplify complex geopolitical issues and spread rapidly across platforms like Telegram and VKontakte, exploiting the viral nature of new media to manipulate perception. In contrast, Ukraine leverages memetic warfare to mobilise civic sentiment, critique social inequality (e.g., draft dodging), and explore the balance between freedom and civic duty. This memetic struggle illustrates the dual nature of participatory culture – used both to empower democratic discourse and to undermine it through disinformation. Ultimately, memes in this context act as affective agents within digital virality, shaping group identities and public sentiment in the broader struggle for narrative dominance. The authors argue that “[t]he topic is particularly significant in today’s landscape of information threats, where democracies face the challenge of balancing freedom and security, while authoritarian regimes exploit these vulnerabilities to their advantage” (Liagusha & Iarovyi, 2025).

Case 2 – 2023 Slovak Election and Deepfake Disinformation:

The 2023 Slovak parliamentary election illustrates how disinformation in the new media environment can exploit low-trust contexts, algorithmic amplification, and participatory digital spaces. Two days before the vote, a viral deepfake audio clip falsely depicting pro-European candidate Michal Šimečka discussing election fraud circulated widely on Telegram, a platform known for its lax moderation and ideological echo chambers. Despite quick denials, the deepfake thrived under Slovakia’s electoral silence period, capitalising on the absence of fact-checking and traditional media coverage. The case underscores how algorithmically sorted and ideologically curated platforms facilitate the unchecked spread of synthetic media, blurring lines between fact and fiction and deepening public scepticism toward institutions. Amplified by political actors and embedded in long-standing pro-Russian narratives, this disinformation episode destabilised rational debate and reinforced filter bubbles. The Slovak case thus exemplifies how new media not only enable novel forms of manipulation but also intensify existing political polarisation and epistemic fragmentation (de Nadal & Jančárik, 2024).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Manipulative media ecologies: Disinformation and Deep Fakes shape the development of political opinions and erode trust in the democratic process.
- ➔ Enlightened media ecologies: The open availability and sharing of information allows collectives to organise and make decisions.
- ➔ Increasingly fragmented media landscapes make creating shared positions on difficult decisions more challenging for large and diverse populations
- ➔ Emergence of new forms of crowdsourced fact checking and decentralised defences against Disinformation.
- ➔ New media formats facilitate communication and interaction in novel ways, broadening the opportunities for individuals and communities to learn, discuss, and co-design.

T3 - Political Technologies

Figure 10 - Political Technologies



STEEPLE Primary: (technological), STEEPLE Connected (social, economic, ecological, legal, political)

Technologies play a crucial role in facilitating democratic processes. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) promise to enhance communication, participation, and transparency, thereby shaping technopolitical infrastructures for (digital) democracy in many ways. Concepts such as Policy Making 2.0 and Open Government are seen as promising models for the future of democracy (Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2019). They encourage the use and co-creation of open data and user-centric technology to improve governance and citizen engagement. While digital tools can empower citizens and enable more participatory and open government, they also raise concerns about transparency, accountability, and exclusion. The future of democracy in the digital age faces major challenges from predictive technologies, AI, and data-driven decision-making, which risk increasing inequality, centralising power and undermining democratic values (Süß, 2024). In addition, communication technologies pose a risk for democracy as they can be used for foreign interference in elections or public debates.

The organisation of elections has been significantly transformed by technology. Traditional methods, such as paper ballots, have been supplemented or replaced by electronic voting systems, which aim to reduce human error and expedite the voting process. These technologies offer end-to-end verifiable elections, ensuring the integrity of the voting process through cryptographic tools that run alongside existing vote-counting infrastructure. Moreover, blockchain technology is being explored to create decentralised voting systems that enhance security and transparency. ICTs can also enable broader public participation in decision-making, allowing citizens to engage with local government agencies and stakeholders more effectively. As such, different technopolitical infrastructures facilitate deliberative democracy by providing the hard- and software for public deliberation and engagement.

The integration of digital technologies into democratic processes presents several challenges that can impact their effectiveness and fairness. Security concerns, such as hacking, data breaches, and manipulation, pose significant risks to the integrity of digital systems. Additionally, the digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities, limiting access and participation for certain groups who lack the necessary technological resources. Furthermore, algorithmic bias can arise in decision-making processes, potentially introducing unfairness and skewing outcomes in favour of certain demographics. These issues highlight the need for careful consideration and mitigation strategies to ensure that digital technologies enhance rather than hinder democratic participation and equity.

Related literature

- Barandiaran, et al. (2024): Decidim, a Technopolitical Network for Participatory Democracy
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- Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020) [Digital Democracy - What Europe can learn from Taiwan.pdf](#)

How does it shape democratic futures

- Some digital technologies can increase the transparency and traceability of decision making and related actions, and could reinforce both participation and legitimisation of democratic processes.
- Digital technologies also introduce the possibility to approach traditional democratic processes like voting, policy creation, agenda setting, budgeting, and other essential governance tasks with greater input from constituents, stakeholders, and private citizens.
- E-government applications and platforms shape accessibility to services, decision-making, critical dialogue, and interaction with social governing institutions. Such technologies carry new opportunities, but introduce additional challenges.
- Digital technologies are increasingly facing cybersecurity threats to data integrity, privacy, functionality. Democratic processes reliant on technologies should be prepared with non-digital redundancy or other contingency plans.

Example cases

Case 1: Taiwan's digital democracy

Taiwan is frequently cited as a best practice example of technopolitical infrastructure due to its integration of digital tools and civic participation into its democratic processes. Under the leadership of Digital Minister Audrey Tang, Taiwan has developed platforms like vTaiwan and Join, which facilitate effective citizen engagement and policy-making through digital means. Taiwan's vTaiwan initiative, born from the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, represents one of the most sophisticated implementations of AI-augmented deliberation at national scale. The platform integrates Pol.is—an open-source tool using machine learning to map

opinion clusters—to manage contentious technology policy debates among millions of participants. The process begins with crowdsourcing stakeholder perspectives through short text statements. As the digital minister Audrey Tang calls “assistive intelligence”, Pol.is’ algorithm then circulates these statements semi-randomly, prompting participants to agree, disagree, or pass. Machine learning clusters responses into opinion groups, visualised through interactive maps showing consensus areas and divisive points (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020). This enables policymakers to craft legislation addressing the majority concerns while acknowledging minority positions. Between 2015 and 2023, vTaiwan facilitated 26 national policy consultations on issues ranging from Uber regulation to telemedicine, with 80% resulting in concrete legislative action (vTaiwan, 2023). The country’s approach to digital democracy has proven effective in both societal governance and crisis management, notably during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Case 2: Decidim, a technopolitical infrastructure

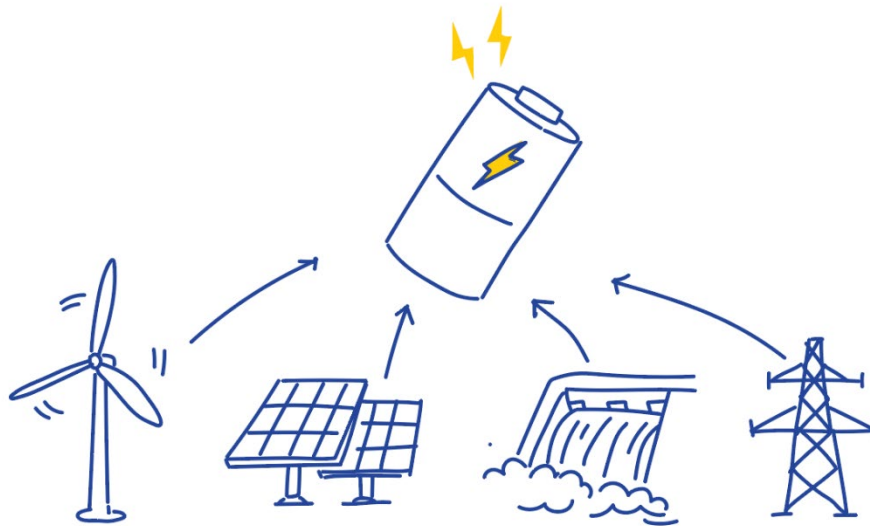
Decidim is often regarded as a best practice example for technopolitical infrastructure in participatory democracy due to its comprehensive approach that extends beyond being merely a digital tool. It goes beyond the idea of electronic democracy, seeking to integrate digital, social, and political elements to transform power relationships. It aims to connect traditional political arenas, such as public meetings and demonstrations, with digital platforms, enhancing participatory opportunities and restructuring outcomes. Inspired by movements like 15M and free software principles, Decidim embodies a vision of technopolitical democratisation that seeks to politicise and democratise various social fields (Barandiaran, et al., 2024). By facilitating direct participation and enabling citizens to engage in decision-making processes, such as in the Conference on the Future of Europe (Gaiba 2022), Decidim exemplifies the potential of technopolitical networks to foster a radically democratic society, making it a model for other nations exploring participatory democracy.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ **Networked State:** A social network with a consensual government limited by a social smart contract, an archipelago of crowdfunded physical territories, a virtual capital, and an on-chain census.
- ➔ **Liquid democracy:** A socio-technical, networked ICT system for collective decision-making through direct participation and representation.
- ➔ **Digitalisation of government functions and democratic decision making** can create new types of power asymmetry depending on the data policies and security measures in place, the administration of the infrastructure, and the verification procedures
- ➔ **Digital Patchworks** describes community adoption and use of digital systems to provide specific solutions to local problems of organisation, communication and governance processes. While useful in these contexts, such systems are not guaranteed to be secure, interoperable, or recognised as legitimate by other institutions.

T4 - Decentralised Energy Systems

Figure 11 - Decentralised Energy Systems



STEEPLE Primary: (Technological), STEEPLE Connected: (Economic, Social, Political)

Decentralised or distributed energy production, storage, and distribution systems are part of a larger European energy transition aimed at reducing Europe's emissions of greenhouse gases and reinforcing Europe's self-sufficiency. These systems are often rooted in the promotion and creation of non-fossil fuel energy production facilities such as solar, wind, hydro, and even nuclear energy technologies. Such 'decentralisation' strategies can range from small communities to cities, regions, and even national scales. Additionally, the updating of legacy distribution grids and the creation of both new distribution capacities coupled with advanced monitoring, analytics, automated controls (often called 'smart grids'), and energy storage facilities allow for efficiency gains and improved reliability. Europe's '[Energy Union](#)' strategy has provided essential guidance for states building towards a new system during the energy transition, and annual reports provide evidence of Europe's progress on this strategy ([9th State of the Energy Union Report](#)). At the same time, the EU is facing a challenging new geopolitical landscape as it continues on its energy transition (Proedrou 2025).

Additionally, there are competing narratives about what the possible futures of these energy systems can mean for social equity (Hoffman et al. 2021), accompanied by strong 'imaginaries' (Genus et al. 2021) and expectations for their impact on societies across Europe. Decentralised energy production often initially carries a 'bottom-up' narrative that underscores local conditions and citizen participation that communities can leverage to foster support for projects. However, as the messages of decentralised energy systems travel across communities, some of the key differentiators between locally owned operations and private sector operations are lost, thus cutting out communities from the potential savings and 'rent-free' systems (David & Schönborn 2018). Driven by the recent energy cost spikes, and the EU's initiatives (like Clean energy for all Europeans package, and the

Renewable Energy Directive), many different types of citizen-led projects have emerged (Wieczorek, et al. 2024) as have legislative, governance, and stakeholder participation challenges (Bonfert 2024).

Related literature:

- REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS State of the Energy Union Report 2024 (pursuant to Regulation (EU)2018/1999 on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action) COM/2024/404 final
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How does it shape democratic futures

- Ownership of and co-management responsibilities for energy infrastructure assets can help with the redistribution of economic power and draw citizens into greater participation (e.g. budgeting and planning processes).
- High visibility energy projects can make climate change mitigation measures more concrete and increase trust in public institutions; however, conflicts over taxation and aesthetics can also create new community fragmentations.
- A pluralistic approach to ideas and experiments in community energy models can enrich democratic learning and test new processes, but excessive differences can make interoperability difficult and slow de-carbonisation efforts.
- Community energy projects can improve resilience and reinforce internal social solidarity if, for instance, energy sources remain available during a widespread blackout. However, 'energy islands' may also promote social divisions and reduce broader solidarity and undermine national or international goals.
- Shifts in lobbying blocs might emerge, with corporate energy lobbies becoming less powerful, but creating opportunities for community lobbies to form and pursue protectionist policies or regulations.

Example cases

Case 1: Kagu Energiaühistu

Kagu Energiaühistu is a non-profit 'commercial association' in Setomaa, Estonia. Founded in Värsk, public leaders and citizens are working with the municipal energy utility and a local NGO. The cooperative benefits from a supportive regional plan for energy self-

sufficiency, a unique legal form that limits member liability, and a strong indigenous (Seto) tradition of communal action. Its goals are to demonstrate citizen-led renewable projects and to attract investment from across Estonia and Europe. Major obstacles include very high grid-connection costs, a lack of specific investment incentives for cooperatives and the limited purchasing power of local households. In response to such conditions, the group has chosen land with existing grid access and is exploring a power-purchase partnership with a private company. By framing the project as a mode of combating rural depopulation, the organisers have successfully fostered local interest and political support.

Case 2: Solarcomplex AG

Solarcomplex AG is a citizen-owned renewable-energy company founded in 2000 in Singen (Konstanz district, Baden-Württemberg) with the declared goal of making the western Lake Constance region 100 percent renewable and emission-free, ideally by the early 2030s. The firm has more than 3,000 mainly local shareholders and operates on a “citizens’ utility” model: profits are reinvested in new projects and dividends are modest, keeping the focus on regional benefit. The Solarcomplex portfolio already covers every major renewable technology in the area and runs roughly 50 MWp of ground-mounted and rooftop PV systems, nine modern wind turbines totalling about 25 MW, several biomass/biogas plants, and a growing number of wood-chip- and solar-heated district-heating networks that supply towns such as Überlingen-Bambergen, Eigeltingen and Aach. A 12,000 m² solar-thermal field in the town of Radolfzell feeds one of the largest solar district-heating schemes in Germany. To address key challenges like grid connections and high tourist density, Solarcomplex partners closely with municipalities, offers co-ownership stakes to neighbours, and increasingly pairs solar PV with battery storage to relieve local grids.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Community (Solar) Gardens Bloom: Energy distributions monopolies might be regulated, forcing increased competition for carrying energy products to end users and helping prosumer communities realise benefits of their investments more quickly and thoroughly.
- ➔ Unequal distributions: The gaps between states with and without fiscal capacity for investing in clean energy production and distribution infrastructure create new strata across the EU and reinforce long standing inequities.
- ➔ Centralised clean energy could see energy production and distribution operations consolidated, and with more powerful actors emerging outside of democratic process or oversight.
- ➔ Privately owned energy concerns remain a bottleneck in the development of energy projects and the utilisation of the energy that they produce, intentionally inhibiting distributed energy that threatens profitability.

Economic Factors

EC1 - Work Conditions

Figure 12 - Work Conditions



STEEPLE Primary: (Economic), STEEPLE Connected: (Legal, Technological, Social)

Throughout modern history, the labour movement has played a decisive role in shaping democratic societies. Beginning with the industrial revolution, labour movements pressed for universal suffrage, collective bargaining, and social protections such as the eight-hour workday and social insurance. By organising strikes, forming trade unions, and advocating for political representation, workers not only improved their own conditions but also expanded the scope of democratic rights and participation for all citizens. This legacy continues to influence how societies address issues of justice, equality, and inclusion today. Due to societal, economic, environmental, and technological changes, work conditions have kept shifting over the decades. The rapid development of automation (e.g. AI, robotics, digital technology, physical and cognitive augmentation technology) creates different settings for work conditions.

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation into labour markets is fundamentally altering both economic structures and democratic processes. According to the World Economic Forum, 60% of businesses globally will undergo significant automation-driven transformation by 2030, with routine tasks in sectors like finance and manufacturing most vulnerable (World Economic Forum, 2025). According to recent research, AI and automation have already had an impact to the job market. While automation may increase productivity gains in some fields, its uneven adoption has exacerbated economic disparities, potentially fuelling political polarisation. This aligns with findings from Oxford University, which linked automation anxiety to increased support for populist candidates in the 2016

U.S. election, as displaced workers sought alternatives to perceived systemic neglect (Frey et al., 2018).

The erosion of traditional labour protections and increase in worker precarity (Azmanova 2019), particularly in the gig economy (or sharing economy, access economy, platform economy, etc.), has intensified debates over workplace democracy. Platforms like Uber and DoorDash classify workers as independent contractors, circumventing minimum wage laws and collective bargaining rights. This misclassification deprives workers of social security benefits, and exacerbates economic inequality, with full-time gig workers in Texas earning just 30% of a living wage (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In response, trade unions and cooperatives are advocating for inclusive models that extend democratic principles into economic spheres. Ståhl argues that protecting democracy begins in the workplace, where participatory decision-making fosters accountability and reduces alienation (2025).

Economic democracy represents a transformative approach to organising economic decision-making that extends democratic principles beyond the political sphere into the economic realm. This movement has gained momentum as societies grapple with rising inequality, corporate concentration of power, and citizens' desire for greater control over economic policies that affect their daily lives. Economic democracy fundamentally challenges the traditional model where corporate shareholders and managers hold primary decision-making power over economic resources. This socioeconomic philosophy proposes shifting ownership and decision-making authority to a broader group of stakeholders, including workers, consumers, suppliers, communities, and the general public (Groos & Sorg, 2025). The movement addresses critical concerns about how modern property relations externalise costs, prioritise private profit over general well-being, and deny citizens democratic voice in economic policy decisions (ibid.).

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Job Displacement and Inequality: Automation can lead to significant job losses, especially in sectors with repetitive tasks, potentially increasing economic inequality and social unrest
- Shift in Workforce Skills: As technology advances, there is a growing demand for high-skilled workers, which may widen the gap between those who can adapt and those who cannot
- Worker rights and organisations: some work is more fragmented and more "replaceable", which may limit the worker rights and give more power to the organisations
- Nomad work: digital nomads can impact to local community, economy, and politics with their financial capacity and political engagement
- Privacy and Surveillance Concerns: The rise of digital technologies can lead to increased surveillance, raising concerns about privacy and the potential misuse of data by governments or corporations

Example cases

Case 1: Spain's Mondragon Corporation

Worker-owned cooperatives like Spain's Mondragon Corporation demonstrate the viability of democratic enterprises. Mondragon's 80,000 worker-owners participate in strategic decisions through equal voting rights in general assemblies, achieving both economic resilience and high employee satisfaction (Peeters & Schouteten 2024). Similarly, Brazil's Semco have implemented flat hierarchies and profit-sharing models, proving that workplace democracy enhances organisational commitment without sacrificing competitiveness (Sekar 2024). These examples contrast sharply with the gig economy's top-down control, highlighting the potential for structural reforms to reinforce democratic values.

Case 2: Remote Work Monitoring: The Dutch Webcam Termination Case

A landmark 2022 Dutch court ruling exposed the limits of employer surveillance in remote work environments. A Florida-based company, Chetu, fired a Dutch telemarketer for refusing to keep his webcam active during all working hours. The employee argued that screen-sharing provided sufficient oversight, making constant video monitoring an unjustified privacy invasion. Citing the European Convention on Human Rights, the court awarded him €75,000, ruling that employers cannot mandate "invasive surveillance without demonstrated necessity" (BBC 2022). This case set a precedent in the EU, where 89% of remote work policies now require explicit justification for video monitoring (Arntz 2022). It also revealed jurisdictional challenges: though Chetu operated in the Netherlands, its U.S.-based

management initially imposed surveillance practices incompatible with EU privacy standards. The ruling emphasises that worker consent and proportionality are vital principles increasingly adopted globally.

Possible Trajectories

- ➔ The advancement of automation and robotics reduces the demand for human labour. With the implementation of universal basic income, citizens may have more resources and time to engage in political and societal issues.
- ➔ In the absence of effective policies to adapt to changes in the labour market, public trust in government may erode, leading to increased support for authoritarian regimes.
- ➔ Widespread job displacement and the fluidity of employment have significant societal impacts. Large corporations with the capacity to integrate advanced technologies dominate the market, often relying on the exploitation of gig workers. These workers, under constant surveillance, may align their views with those of their employers out of fear of losing their jobs.
- ➔ Digital nomads relocating to lower-income countries often become involved in local political matters. In response, local governments may prioritise the economic interests of these nomads, potentially at the expense of the needs and rights of local residents.

EC2 - Economic Inequality

Figure 13 - Economic Inequality



STEEPLE Primary: Economic, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Political

Economic inequalities, such as in wealth or income, present a major challenge for democracies. While inequality between countries has decreased, within-country inequality has increased in many places, potentially fuelling political polarisation and distrust in democratic institutions. Inequalities can function as a catalyst of change. They may be key

drivers for populist support or democratic renewal, as the academic debate and history have shown (Solt, 2008).

Economic inequalities not only threaten core democratic values such as social justice and equal participation but also help extremist parties to gain ground when governments fail to protect those most affected by economic changes. Traditional economic indicators alone do not fully capture the impact of inequality on democracy; citizens' perceptions are key. These perceptions are shaped by factors such as wealth, location, employment, education, and migration background. There is a need for more comparative research that examines perceived inequalities, especially from intersectional and intergenerational perspectives.

Research demonstrates that economic inequality systematically depresses political participation, especially among lower-income groups, and increases the participatory gap between rich and poor (Solt, 2008; Filetti, 2016). There is little evidence for the idea that rising inequality mobilises the disadvantaged. Instead, many studies find that greater inequality leads to the political disengagement of the less affluent, further skewing representation and undermining the democratic ideal of equal participation (ibid.). These findings highlight that economic inequality can erode the foundations of democracy not just by fuelling polarisation or populism, but also by silencing large segments of the population.

Related literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Economic turmoil can destabilise social cohesion, as workers and communities, feeling alienated from the political system, support movements that reject the mainstream democratic establishment.
- Populist rhetoric amplifies the divide between economically prosperous urban areas and struggling rural regions, further entrenching social divisions and making it harder to find common ground for democratic problem-solving.
- This economic shift may destabilize social cohesion, as workers and communities, feeling alienated from the political system, support movements that reject the mainstream democratic establishment.
- If unaddressed, economic disparities will continue to fuel populist movements, reducing faith in democratic systems and fostering resentment toward global institutions that are perceived as out of touch with local economic struggles.
- The pursuit of increased equality can provide democracy with legitimacy.

Example cases

² Translation: On the sidelines? : On the connection between perceptions of inequality and political participation

Case 1: Evidence for reduced political engagement

Economic inequality not only threatens democratic values but also reduces political participation, as shown by Solt (2008), who analysed data from advanced democracies and found that higher income inequality significantly decreases political interest, political discussion, and voter turnout among all but the wealthiest citizens. This "relative power" effect means that as wealth concentrates, the interests and voices of less affluent citizens are marginalised, leading many to disengage from politics altogether, which in turn undermines democratic representation and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. In addition, research has examined the link between perceptions of political efficacy and economic inequality, showing that economically disadvantaged people feel politically powerless and disconnected (Busemeyer et al., 2025). Thus, research illustrates how rising economic inequality can directly erode the foundations of democracy by discouraging broad political engagement.

Case 2: The European case

Drawing on Filetti (2016), economic inequality in Europe is shown to depress overall political participation, especially among lower-income groups, thereby widening the participatory gap between rich and poor. Using data from the European Social Survey, Filetti finds that higher income inequality is linked to lower involvement in both conventional and alternative forms of political engagement, such as signing petitions or boycotting, with the negative effects being strongest for the poorest citizens. Contrary to the "conflict theory" that suggests inequality might spur political mobilisation, the study supports the "relative power theory," demonstrating that as inequality rises, the wealthy dominate political participation while the disadvantaged increasingly disengage. This case illustrates how economic inequality undermines the democratic ideal of equal participation.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Persisting and rising economic inequalities may further depress political participation among lower-income groups, undermining democratic representation.
- ➔ Economic inequalities could continue to fuel support for populist or extremist parties, especially if citizens perceive that established institutions fail to address these issues.
- ➔ Alternatively, targeted policies and reforms addressing both objective and perceived inequalities might help to restore trust, promote broader engagement and renew democratic legitimacy.

EC3 - Shifting Global Powers

Figure 14 - Shifting Global Powers



STEEPLE Primary: Economic, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Technological, Environmental, Political

Over the past two decades, China, and increasingly India and the ASEAN bloc have moved from the periphery to the centre of global economic activity. China's contributions to global production have quadrupled since 2000, and the country is now the European Union's largest trading partner in imported goods (Eurostat 2025). At the same time, India and Southeast Asia have also become pivotal nodes in manufacturing and consumer-market expansion (DG TRADE 2025, ASEAN 2025). This shift in economic power and influence has reduced the combined economic weight of the trans-Atlantic corridor to roughly one-third of global GDP, down from about one-half at the turn of the century. As a result, value chains, investment flows and R&D hubs have become genuinely multipolar, forcing European firms and policymakers to navigate a far more complex web of standards, currencies and geopolitical sensitivities.

In parallel, high commodity prices have channelled profits to energy and mineral-exporting states in the Middle East, Russia and parts of Africa and Latin America (Eurostat 2025), expanding those countries' geopolitical leverage (Downie 2022, Proedrou 2025). Parallel to this, market power in the digital economy is consolidating around a handful of U.S. and Chinese platforms that set de facto global norms for data governance, artificial intelligence and e-commerce (Garcia 2024). The green-technology race compounds

Europe's vulnerability as China already commands much of the world's solar-PV, battery and rare-earth supply chain, potentially eroding Europe's industrial base (Hira 2025).

For European democracies, these trends carry broad risks. First, growing external dependencies for critical minerals, digital infrastructure and even export markets can translate into political leverage that authoritarian or illiberal regimes may exploit, complicating the EU's ability to set autonomous policy. Additionally, the offshoring of manufacturing capacity and the uneven distribution of green-tech benefits threaten to widen socio-economic divides within Europe and weaken EU solidarity. Furthermore, global competition might push member states toward more interventionist industrial policies and stricter trade screening, moves that require delicate democratic oversight to balance national interests with the integrity of the single market.

Related literature (non-exhaustive)

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Supply chains and energy: Heavier reliance on products and production capacities (China), fossil fuels for energy and petro-chemicals (OPEC, Russia, North America),

and external sources of critical raw minerals (China, African nations) gives non-EU states political leverage via threats of export bans, price spikes.

- Offshoring and import competition might continue to hollow out some regional economies and impact voting patterns and political ideologies.
- Populist parties use de-industrialisation narratives and criticism of EU trade policy to mobilise support, complicating coalition building in national parliaments and the European Parliament.
- Foreign-funded media outlets and social-media campaigns exploit economic grievances to sway public opinion or undermine trust in EU institutions.
- Creation of new financial instruments (e.g. Recovery & Resilience Facility, Sovereignty Fund proposals) to maintain competitiveness; these increase the EU's fiscal footprint, raising questions of democratic oversight by national parliaments versus the European Parliament.
- Budget re-prioritisation can squeeze social programmes, fuel domestic disputes, and test solidarity between frugal and high-debt member states as key fault lines in EU politics.

Example Cases

Case 1: EU Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA)

Proposed in 2023, the EU's CRMA seeks to diversify the supply of a basket of over 30 raw materials that are deemed essential to European industry. This Act aims to address the EU's reliance on a small number of third-country providers of raw or refined materials by exploring new trade partnerships, new sources internal to EU member states, and the development of new recycling capabilities and capacities. A new classification of 'strategic raw materials' was created in the Act's proposal, noting a shift in the EU's view of the changing geopolitical landscape. According to Müller (2023), the CRMA follows an approach to diversification that Japan has been pursuing since 2004 through the Japan Oil, Gas, and Metals National Cooperation, underscoring the recognised importance of raw material supply diversification as a de-risking tactic. Through this Act, the EU looks to safeguard against raw materials being used for political leverage on the EU or its individual member states, leverage that could undermine democratically created policies directly, or weaken trust in democratic systems through the erosion of quality of life through higher prices, job losses, and other potential impacts of CRM supply chain disruptions.

Case 2: Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Prior to the Russian military's invasion of Ukrainian territory in 2014 with Crimea and the ongoing war that began in 2022, Russia had deployed numerous economic and political interference tactics to impede Ukraine's closer association with the EU. According to some analysts, many disputes over natural gas transit and supply, some of which resulted in the complete cessation of Russian natural gas to Europe for varying periods of time, could have geopolitical motivations running in parallel to the more public fiscal disagreements. The Euromaidan and the Dignity Revolution were preceded by the failure of the then-Ukrainian president Yanukovich to sign the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement despite

broad support in the Ukrainian parliament. Given the state of the ongoing hybrid war being fought in 2025, the support that Russia has garnered from other neighbouring powers, and the accusations of Russian interference in other countries with European aspirations (e.g. Moldova) and in EU member states (e.g. Hungary), the role of shifting global powers will continue to impact democracy into the future.

Possible Trajectories

- ➔ A fragmented, multipolar geopolitical landscape creates incentives for EU member states to pull closer together based on shared values, governance systems and the shared perception that their consolidated effective power allows for the pursuit of policy agendas and improved negotiations.
- ➔ In a more bipolar world, with the United States and China serving as core power centres, Europe could become subservient to either, at the risk of being picked apart through bilateral agreements if negotiated at the state level.
- ➔ Relatively new geopolitical power 'networks' - such as the African Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, MERCOSUR, and other regional organisations – create complex tensions in security and trade that threaten democratic peace.

Environmental Factors

EN1 - Infrastructures

Figure 15 - Infrastructures



STEEPLE Primary: Environmental, STEEPLE Connected Political, economic, technological, social

Infrastructures are the systems that make services possible – requiring constant monitoring and maintenance to ensure reliable function. Urban and rural planning governs land use, affecting sustainability, climate resilience, and public well-being. It is observable through zoning laws, green space distribution, and responsiveness to citizen input in planning processes. This includes smart city or regions planning approaches, for example, through climate-sensitive design, and the use of digital tools for civic engagement, especially in addressing urban heat island effects and promoting adaptive infrastructure. Thus, understanding infrastructure is key to understanding how democracy is materially produced, limited, or expanded.

Material contexts lay the foundation for political processes, thereby shaping how democracy can be practised and enacted. The concept of material participation (Marres, 2015) argues that conventional democratic theory often overlooks the role of material objects in political life. From mundane practices and low-tech devices that make environmental problems visible and knowable to ‘datafied’ publics (Møller Hartley et al., 2023), material participation

can be an overarching concept for understanding democratic participation beyond the discursive or the institutional. Through their design, affordances, and embedded norms, artefacts and practices can prompt new forms of engagement or foreclose others, thereby influencing the contours of democratic participation. In this view, practices, technologies and objects are not neutral but participate in the co-construction of publics, issues, and forms of governance. Material configurations can invite, direct, or hinder engagement, thus becoming sites of democratic practices, negotiation, resistance, or innovation. Paying attention to material participation can thus help imagine a wider and more inclusive concept of democratic futures and foster more nuanced approaches to environmental and social justice.

Related Literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Shapes conditions for democratic engagement, especially for youth, by structuring how people gather and express dissent.
- Acts as both material and symbolic scaffolding of everyday life, influencing political imagination and behaviour.
- Can enable or suppress public participation depending on its design, condition, and surveillance features.
- Events like infrastructure collapse (e.g. Belgrade dorm roof) serve as flashpoints for broader democratic demands and institutional accountability.
- Material objects co-construct publics, issues, and governance, playing a role in how democratic concerns are surfaced and addressed.
- Objects become sites of negotiation, resistance, and innovation, influencing the shape and scope of public life and democracy.

Example cases

Case 1: Material Participation in a Time of Environmental Crisis

This qualitative research project was conducted with French families and explored how everyday life-maintenance activities – such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing – intersect with environmental devastation (Ourabah, 2025). The study finds that, in the face of overwhelming environmental challenges, traditional forms of political participation – often centred on public speech and debate – may feel inadequate or even impossible. In this context, the silent, material work of maintaining daily life becomes a crucial but overlooked form of participation. The research highlights that these life-maintenance activities are not neutral and are shaped by gender, class, and race. Women, in particular, are often tasked with reproductive labour, which is frequently undervalued and invisible in public discourse. While the environmental crisis challenges the authority of expert discourses, paying attention to everyday care work can help us move beyond simplistic dichotomies (those who

care about the environment versus those who do not) and recognise that caring can be enacted through material practices, even when it is not verbally expressed. Ourabah (2025) introduces the concept of "reprod-estr-uctive labour" to capture the tension between sustaining life and having to confront environmental collapse.

Case 2: Coping with Datafication in the Data Justice Lab

The Data Justice Lab at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture (JOMEC) conducted a three-year research project to explore how datafication – the transformation of social activities into quantifiable data – affects civic participation and social justice. The project highlights how public sector agencies increasingly use data analytics to assess, profile, and "score" citizens – automating decisions about resource allocation, eligibility for services, and even risk assessment. This practice reconfigures state-citizen relations, making them more opaque and less participatory. Citizens often have little understanding or control over how their data is used, which undermines traditional forms of democratic engagement and accountability. The research highlighted that, as public services become more data-driven, traditional forms of civic participation, such as public meetings or voting are less effective. Instead, new forms of engagement, such as citizen audits of data systems, are emerging as crucial ways for communities to assert agency and demand accountability. The project proposed "democratic auditing" as a framework for involving citizens in scrutinising and influencing how data is collected, analysed, and used by public institutions. This approach emphasises the importance of enabling people to participate materially in data governance, beyond symbolic or discursive forms of engagement. The Data Justice Lab's work highlights the need for new democratic tools and approaches to ensure that datafication supports, rather than undermines, social justice and active citizenship.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Innovative and sustained public infrastructures (e.g. squares, parks, museums, libraries) hold the potential to foster democratic processes in local settings.
- ➔ After decades of privatisation of public infrastructures and the build-up of new infrastructures for digital services, democracies may debate increasing control over critical infrastructures.
- ➔ Continued privatisation of infrastructure risks eroding a shared perception and control of the polis.

EN2 - Land and Water Governance

Figure 16 - Land and Water Governance



STEEPLE Primary: Environmental, STEEPLE Connected Political, Social, Technological

Systems of land and water governance are essential for sustainable development as they determine how terrestrial and aquatic resources are managed, who has access to those resources, and who bears the consequences of environmental degradation. Whilst democracies theoretically offer mechanisms for public participation and accountability, empirical evidence shows that their effectiveness in protecting ecosystems hinges on the strength of institutional governance. For example, democracies with robust institutions are more likely to reduce forest loss, whereas weak democracies may exacerbate degradation through corruption, exclusionary policies and/or enforcement gaps. Thus, forest degradation is not only a product of direct pressures like illegal logging and land conversion but rather constitutes an essential topic as it combines both spheres of land as well as water governance (Opoku & Sommer, 2023). Within the topic of water management, there is a shift towards transnational regulation. The European Union's water diplomacy promotes international cooperation through legal frameworks such as the Water Framework Directive and multilateral agreements. These initiatives reflect not only environmental priorities but also geopolitical strategy, enhancing the EU's normative power. Besides forest loss, they aim to stabilise water governance in politically sensitive areas, but their effectiveness relies on public inclusion and alignment with local needs (Arcá, 2024).

Furthermore, in land-use governance, similar challenges appear. As Cruz (2016) shows, the deployment of distributed renewable energy systems depends on how local governments manage zoning laws and reduce transaction costs for actors. Cities with dedicated

sustainability staff and supportive networks are more likely to adopt renewable-friendly policies. Yet, these arrangements can favor well-organised interest groups over marginalised communities unless equity is intentionally embedded in policy frameworks. This goes hand in hand with urban planning and its intersection with climate adaptation. Many European countries have recently experienced Urban Heat Island effects, particularly in densely built areas with little vegetation. This highlights the consequences of poor spatial planning and the urgent need for green infrastructure to mitigate climate. Castelnovo et al. (2015) argue that “smart city” frameworks must move beyond digital optimisation to include citizen participation in evaluating and shaping public value outcomes. Urban land governance thus becomes an imperative issue for technological, ecological, and democratic innovation.

In sum, land and water governance are deeply politicised topics that are in need of more holistic approaches that acknowledge the intersection of land and water governance, such as environmental regulation, institutional capacity, and local/national inclusion.

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Democratic futures rely on fair distribution of costs and benefits, ensuring that environmental governance doesn’t reinforce inequality.
- Effective governance often involves decentralised authority as challenges like water security or urban heat islands affect both local needs as well as global issues.
- Transparent governance of land and water resources through open data on zoning, deforestation, or water quality reinforces core democratic principles like the rule of law and freedom of information.
- Resource conflicts over water access or land rights can destabilise societies. Robust governance can mediate such conflicts fairly and peacefully in order to contribute to more inclusivity, where all voices are being heard.

Example cases

Case 1: Urban Overheating in Hannover, Germany

Urban Overheating poses a growing threat to public health, urban ecosystems, and infrastructure, particularly as climate change intensifies the frequency and severity of heatwaves. With densely built environments absorbing and retaining heat due to materials like concrete and asphalt, and reduced vegetation diminishing natural cooling, cities face heightened risks of heat stress, respiratory issues, and increased mortality, especially among vulnerable populations. Thus, Hannover provides a critical example of how urban

planning and land governance intersect with climate resilience. During extreme heat years (2018 - 2020), the city exhibited intensified Urban Heat Island effects, especially at night, compared to a non-heat year (2017). Inner-city areas faced the strongest temperature increases, underscoring the role of dense urban structures and limited vegetation in exacerbating overheating. The findings highlight the importance of preserving and integrating green spaces into urban landscapes as local cooling zones, reinforcing the governance need for strategic land-use planning. This case illustrates the impact of spatial design choices, such as building density and street layout, on urban microclimates and public health, thereby underscoring the necessity of adaptive land governance frameworks that prioritise climate-sensitive urban design and community well-being (Kabisch et al., 2023).

Case 2: Participatory Water Governance in Júcar-Vinalopó, Spain

The Júcar-Vinalopó water transfer project in Spain highlights how regional water security is shaped by the complex interplay between ecological integrity, infrastructural planning, and participatory governance. Designed to address overexploited aquifers and urban water deficits in the Vinalopó-Alacantí region, the project faced strong opposition from environmental groups and traditional farmers concerned about downstream ecological degradation and water access. In response, a Technical Committee – comprising state agencies, regional authorities, NGOs, and stakeholders – was convened to re-evaluate the project through a jointly developed Decision Support System (DSS) using the AQUATOOL platform. This process enabled transparent assessment of multiple hydrological and ecological scenarios, narrowing stakeholder disagreements and facilitating a shared vision grounded in scientific legitimacy. Ultimately, the intake point was relocated downstream to better protect the Júcar River and Albufera wetlands, illustrating how participatory water governance can serve as a form of inclusive soft power within environmental diplomacy. Furthermore, the case underscores the opportunity that technological tools as well as transparent institutions can have in aligning water infrastructure decisions with democratic principles, ecological sustainability, and multilateral cooperation (Andreu et al., 2009).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Governance evolves toward AI-based, data-driven, efficiency-focused systems where sustainability is achieved, but public participation is limited to consultative roles, thereby local voices are still not thoroughly included.
- ➔ Governance frameworks evolve to recognise non-human entities, such as rivers, forests, and animal species, as legal subjects with standing in democratic deliberation and decision-making.
- ➔ In a centralised manner, states increasingly consolidate authority over land and water resources, framing ecosystem governance as a matter of national security and geopolitical strategy.
- ➔ In a polycentric manner, a dynamic intersection of local, regional, and transboundary institutions co-manages ecosystems, relying on flexible rules, mutual learning, and inclusive governance structures to address shifting climate and resource pressures.

EN3 - Nature-based Solutions

Figure 17 - Nature-based Solutions



STEEPLE Primary: (Environmental), STEEPLE Connected (Political, Social)

Rejuvenated ecosystems, enabled through Nature-based Solutions (NbS), offer tangible co-benefits for both human and natural as well as animal populations by enhancing biodiversity, ecosystem services, and socio-economic well-being. Empirical research has shown that NbS deliver a high return on investment, while providing critical ecosystem services such as heatwave mitigation, flood regulation, and carbon sequestration (González-García et al., 2025). These interventions simultaneously restore habitat quality and ecological connectivity, benefiting a wide range of species, particularly in wetland and forest ecosystems, which are linked to priority conservation habitats (Network Nature, 2023). Moreover, qualitative studies have illustrated the positive side effects of “conserving biodiversity through land conservation practices demonstrating that by preserving specific species’ habitats, it is possible to simultaneously reduce CO₂ emissions and mitigate climate change” (González-García et al., 2025).

However, the extent to which NbS contribute to equitable and lasting transformation depends heavily on their governance. Dominant market-oriented framings often risk sidelining local and diverse knowledge systems and community perspectives, leading to superficial participation and reinforcing existing inequalities (Hafferty et al., 2025). To avoid this, restorative policies must be grounded in participatory governance models that acknowledge power asymmetries and promote co-design with affected communities (Hafferty et al., 2025; Dunlop et al., 2024). When policy processes are inclusive, especially

of marginalised or vulnerable populations, they are more likely to reflect local values, foster social justice, and yield durable ecological outcomes (Network Nature, 2023). Moreover, acknowledging the multifunctionality of ecosystems and the interdependence of human and non-human well-being is central to shaping effective and ethical environmental strategies. As recent research highlights, NbS must go beyond ecological restoration to address intersecting societal challenges, including health, food security, and economic resilience, especially under conditions of global crisis (Dunlop et al., 2024).

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Healthy ecosystems lay the groundwork for green democracy, where environmental rights and civic rights are interlinked.
- Rewilding and restoration efforts invite collective agency and responsibility, encouraging citizens to co-govern common natural resources.
- Marginalised communities often face exclusion from ecological planning, leading to unequal access to green spaces and environmental benefits.
- Localised restoration projects challenge centralised power and enable place-based, community-rooted forms of democracy with local knowledge.

Example cases

Case 1: A Coruña – An urban garden green network for social cohesion

In A Coruña, Spain, the municipality developed a network of urban gardens designed to combine ecological restoration with social inclusion. The gardens were co-managed by citizens and the city council, with special emphasis on engaging marginalised groups such as elderly people, migrants, and individuals experiencing social isolation. These spaces served not only as areas for food production and biodiversity enhancement but also as platforms for education, intergenerational exchange, and community empowerment. The project emphasised participatory governance, allowing citizens to contribute to the planning and maintenance of the gardens, thereby strengthening civic responsibility. The initiative

promoted well-being and environmental awareness while reducing barriers to green space access for vulnerable populations. In doing so, A Coruña's model demonstrates how NbS can support urban resilience and social cohesion through inclusive design and long-term community involvement.

(Network Nature, 2023)

Case Study 2: ReDuna - Restoration of S. João da Caparica Sand Dunes proving local employment

The ReDuna project in Almada, Portugal, focused on restoring the sand dune system of S. João da Caparica to protect against coastal erosion and enhance biodiversity. Importantly, the project generated local employment by involving unemployed residents in restoration tasks such as planting native vegetation, removing invasive species, and building dune protections. ReDuna combined ecological goals with a social mission by training participants in environmental practices and fostering a sense of ownership over the landscape. Community engagement was further expanded through volunteer events and environmental education activities with schools and local associations. These efforts contributed not only to ecological regeneration but also to long-term stewardship and local identity-building. The project illustrates the capacity of NbS to address environmental degradation while also delivering inclusive economic benefits and promoting democratic participation in ecological care.

(Network Nature, 2023)

Possible trajectories

- ➔ The European Commission works with both member states and other nations to foster a variety of nature-based solutions across Europe and its neighbouring countries.
- ➔ All European Economic Area create and fund a nature-based solutions action research and innovation network that can be accessed by local communities in partnership with research organisations.
- ➔ Nature-based solutions remain only a small portion of the funded efforts to address climate change and to remediate ecosystems. Advanced technologies to remove pollutants from air, land, and waterways, and bolster other ecosystem services have been embraced as drivers of innovation and economic stability.
- ➔ Nature-based solutions are not widely used, given the lack of international cooperation and/or fiscal support.

EN4 - Effects of Climate Change

Figure 18 – Effects of Climate Change



STEEPLE Primary: Environmental, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Political

Climate change presents a multi-scalar governance challenge, with both immediate crises, such as floods, wildfires, droughts, but also migration pressures as well as long-term disruptions like sea-level rise and desertification. Countries facing frequent and overlapping climate shocks are more likely to experience democratic backsliding, particularly where governments resort to repression in response to civil unrest driven by unmet social and economic needs. These compounded shocks diminish democratic resilience, especially in contexts of low state capacity or inadequate climate adaptation (Beacham et al., 2024). In response, democracies are expected to act responsively to citizen grievances, yet the temporal mismatch between short-term political cycles and the long-term nature of climate change limits proactive planning. Voß and Kemp (2006) argue that sustainability challenges demand reflexive governance, that is, adaptive, iterative processes rather than linear decision-making. This shift requires institutions that can handle ambiguity, long-term uncertainty, and contested social values. However, political leaders often hesitate to attribute these events to climate change, fearing backlash that could undermine their perceived competence (Hai & Perlman, 2022). This fear is especially persistent among conservative constituents when looking at the rise of right drift among traditional voters.

Beyond sudden disasters, slow-onset phenomena such as desertification, agricultural loss, and sea-level rise are already reshaping livelihoods and migration patterns, contributing to long-term social strain. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Central America, prolonged droughts and disrupted agricultural cycles have increased rural poverty, driving migration

and social unrest (Beacham et al., 2024). Thus, climate change also has spatially uneven effects that exacerbate other existing inequalities. Sustainability-related challenges like those in the housing or transport sectors often manifest in second-order governance problems, such as efforts to solve one issue (e.g. decarbonization) creating new, unforeseen complications (e.g. gentrification, energy poverty) (Voß & Kemp, 2006). Consequently, the tangible effects of climate change, be it extreme weather events or flooding, affect sociopolitical issues such as resource-based migration and then move over to political mistrust, altering the terrain on which democratic institutions operate. Hence, those feedback loops further intensify the pressing need for reflexive governance.

Related Literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Droughts, floods, and crop failures can push people to migrate or protest, and some governments react with repression instead of reform, putting democracy under pressure.
- Democracies often struggle to deal with long-term issues like sea-level rise or desertification due to election cycles and the following policy changes, but also short public attention spans.
- Many young people see climate inaction as a failure of democracy, as conservative governments tend to neglect issues of climate change, thus leading to a distrust in governments, as well as mass protests or activism outside traditional politics.
- Climate adaptation and mitigation efforts can drive innovation in participatory governance, including citizen assemblies and local collective decision-making in environmental planning.

Example cases

Case 1: California Wildfires and Political Attribution

The 2020 wildfires in California, intensified by prolonged droughts and rising temperatures, exemplify the increasingly visible consequences of climate change. Despite growing scientific consensus around the causal link between extreme weather events and global warming, politicians have remained cautious in attributing disasters to climate change. In the case of Governor Gavin Newsom, public communications often focused on firefighting efforts and federal disaster aid while deliberately avoiding references to climate change, especially during politically sensitive moments like the 2021 recall campaign. Hai and Perlman (2022) show through survey experiments that such reluctance is not unfounded: when politicians explicitly linked wildfires to climate change, Republican respondents perceived them as less competent and were less likely to support adaptive policy measures such as energy taxes. This case highlights a core democratic tension, while democratic

systems ideally rely on transparent communication and evidence-based policymaking, climate change attribution can trigger partisan backlash, limiting both public support and institutional responsiveness (Hai & Perlman, 2022).

Case 2: Intergenerational Epistemic Divide in Climate Policy

The growing involvement of young people in climate activism, from school strikes to global protests (see Fridays for Future), reveals a deep intergenerational conflict in the politics of climate change. While younger generations are most vulnerable to the long-term effects of climate breakdown, ranging from biodiversity loss to economic instability, they remain structurally underrepresented in democratic decision-making processes. Jebeile and Stilgoe (2022) argue that this divide is not just political but epistemic, in that sense, institutions often discount or marginalise the forms of knowledge and urgency expressed by youth. This disconnect generates frustration with established democratic mechanisms, pushing many young activists to seek influence through protest rather than formal political channels. The case points to a legitimacy crisis within democracies that fail to adequately integrate long-term thinking and the voices of those most affected by future climate impacts (Jebeile & Stilgoe, 2022).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ As climate shocks intensify, states may impose restrictions (e.g. on water use, mobility, i.e. public transport vs. car use, or land rights), raising fundamental questions about how to safeguard democratic freedoms in times of ecological constraint.
- ➔ Democracies gradually adopt reflexive governance approaches that integrate uncertainty, long-term planning, and participatory innovation, i.e. citizens' assemblies and intergenerational representation, into formal institutions.
- ➔ Governments increasingly justify emergency powers and centralised control to manage climate-related disasters, gradually sidelining democratic processes in favour of technocratic or securitised approaches.

Political Factors

P1 - Populism

Figure 19 - Populism



STEEPLE Primary: Political, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Technological, Ethical

While populism has largely been discussed by liberal political actors as a threat to liberal democracy, it has recently also been defined as a rhetorical tool to mobilise marginalised groups and encourage participation (Pacewicz, 2023). Following others (e.g. Judis 2016; Kazin 2017b; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Urbinati 2014, 2019a), Mansbridge & Macedo (2019) also distinguish between populism in opposition and in power. While the former can invigorate democracy by challenging dominant elites and introducing marginalised concerns, the latter often carries moral absolutism and divisive rhetoric. It is thus important to consider both sites where populism might be present and how some forms of populism might be used for supporting democratic futures. Because populism is often defined as “the people in moral battle against the elites”, it is important to guard against the moral antagonism central to populism as it threatens to erode democratic norms of mutual respect, including toward elites, thus diminishing the capacity for negotiation and compromise within democratic institutions (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019).

Although tension between populism and liberal democracy seems natural, recent shifts in populism studies allow for a more nuanced conceptualisation, clearer identification criteria, and a move beyond the focus on the radical right. Recent scholarship regards populism as a “subatomic matter” of political communication (Aslanidis, 2016, as cited in Pacewicz, 2023) and points towards the ways in which populist rhetoric can reinforce democratic engagement and moreover, shifting the focus from political messages to their reception by an audience in constituting their liberal democratic subjectivities (Pacewicz, 2023). In this argument, populist rhetoric is performative and might help simplify political decisions, resonating in both

liberal and illiberal ways. Populist rhetoric often helps voters simplify political choices, particularly when they feel cross-pressured by competing identities (Pacewicz, 2023). While some voters use populist rhetoric to reaffirm moderate political preferences and reject illiberal appeals, citizens alienated from traditional political structures might embrace anti-science stances (e.g. environmental science (Gottenhuber & Mulholland, 2020) and authoritarian views. Thus, the effects of populism depend on the health of democracies and party systems: when political parties are stable and embedded in institutions that prevent from authoritarianism, populism is not necessarily a threat for democracy.

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Populism fosters illiberal tendencies that put pressure on democracies.
- Conversely, it may also enhance democratic participation by helping voters simplify complex political choices and express preferences.
- As a rhetorical tool, populism gives voice to marginalised groups and fosters engagement by presenting politics in accessible, relatable terms—particularly through the “people vs. elite” narrative. It can strengthen the connection between voters and political institutions when those institutions are stable and socially rooted.
- Populism’s influence on democracy is context-dependent: in systems with weakened parties or disengaged communities, populism may undermine democracy by enabling cynicism, conspiracy thinking, and authoritarianism.
- Populism plays a dual role, with the potential to reinforce or erode democracy based on the institutional environment in which it operates.

Example cases

Case 1: Antagonistic democracy: Hungarian populism

Hungary offers an example for the role of populism and antagonistic rhetorics. In this regard, the country has been subject to studies (Csehi, 2019). Hungarian populism has effectively reconstructed the antagonistic relationship between "the corrupt elite" and "the pure people", transitioning from economic-driven conflicts to identity-based politics. An analysis of Orbán's selected speeches and the political and legal initiatives of his regime reveals how these strategies collectively contribute to the extension of his populist governance in Hungary (ibid.).

Case 2: The 'Occupy' Movement

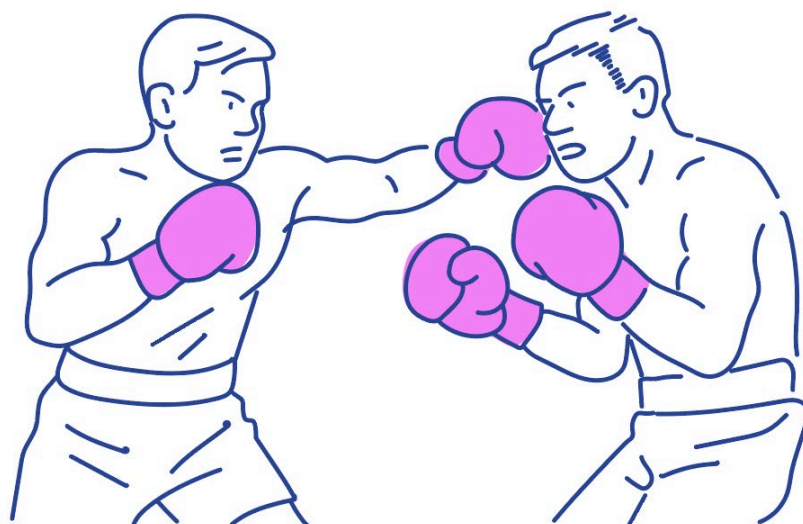
The Occupy movement might be best known for the Occupy Wall Street of Zuccotti Park in New York City which started September 2011 and quickly spread around the world to hundreds of cities and communities. Scholars have pointed to its roots in California student protests, and its ties to predecessors like the Spanish Indignados and the Arab Spring movements (Byrne, 2012). Regardless, as a single or agglomerated populist movement, the Occupy camps around the world were viewed as spaces of radical self-governance practice, inspired by 'democratic villages' models of activist action and clearly found resonance with the "We are the 99%" slogan. While 'Occupy' was short-lived and had almost entirely been de-camped by early 2012, the movements' legacies, particularly as populist un-organisations and experiments in new governing approaches accompanied by novel uses of human-technologies for communication, continue to inspire to this day.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ A Democratic Corrective: populist discourse can help citizens to express dissatisfaction with the status quo and mobilise around shared concerns. This form of populism can enhance political participation and bridge gaps between citizens and political elites.
- ➔ A Vehicle for Authoritarianism: populism can exploit the "people vs. elite" narrative to delegitimise opposition and undermine democratic norms. By fueling political cynicism and supporting authoritarian leadership styles, this form of populism narrows the democratic space and normalises exclusionary or anti-pluralist practices.

P2 - Defence and Security

Figure 20 - Defence and Security



STEEPLE Primary: Political, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Ethical

Security issues, border conflicts and wars affect the polity and can challenge the democratic process. Security is a multifaceted contextual factor that shapes democracy in various ways. It can both challenge and reinforce democratic principles, depending on how security policies are implemented and governed. Ensuring democratic accountability, protecting civil liberties, and integrating security with human rights are essential for maintaining a healthy balance between security and democracy. The interplay between security and democracy requires continuous scrutiny and adaptation to uphold democratic values in the face of evolving security challenges.

Security policies often create tensions with democratic accountability, debate, and rights. In the European Union, the unique transnational citizenry and multi-level decision-making system contribute to redefining the relationship between security and democracy (Kantner & Liberatore, 2006; Kier & Krebs, 2010). This tension becomes evident in the political balancing act between liberty and security, where security measures sometimes risk undermining democratic principles. This tension has become especially visible in the case of surveillance and other measures of counterterrorism policies.

While democracies are generally less likely to engage in conflict, the presence of territorial issues can override the pacifying effects of democracy (Park & James, 2015). In turn, war poses significant threats to democratic institutions and principles, often leading to a compromise of core democratic values. As such, war often leads to the expansion of executive authority, with leaders gaining more control over decision-making processes. This can undermine the checks and balances typically present in democratic systems. During wartime, civil liberties such as freedom of speech can be significantly restricted. This is often justified by the need for national security. However, history also provides examples where

war prompted stabilisation of liberal democracies (Kier & Krebs, 2010). Ultimately, and most importantly, the democratic question is also about whether the citizens have a say on questions of war and peace

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Security issues or war can undermine principles and values of liberal democracies, such as freedom of speech or checks and balances to the executive and legislative power
- Wars may compromise core democratic values and institutions
- Surveillance and counterterrorism measures can limit freedoms and challenge democratic accountability
- Well-governed security policies can strengthen democracy by ensuring accountability and protection of rights

Example cases

Case 1: Counterterrorism in the post 9/11 era

The events of September 11, 2001, have significantly influenced liberal-democratic governance, prompting debates on how to balance security threats with the rule of law. This period has seen an expansion of executive authority and restrictions on civil liberties worldwide, reinforcing tensions between security and democratic principles (Kier & Krebs, 2010). Security policies and policing in Europe often developed as a reaction to concrete terrorist acts of the past decades, have substantively co-shaped democracies.

Case 2: Democracy during the war in Ukraine

According to recent research (Kutsenko, 2025), the case of Ukraine demonstrates that war does not always undermine democracy. Instead, the author argues, the Russian invasion has sparked a renewed commitment to democratic values, freedom, and civil society. Survey data and democracy monitoring show that, in contrast to Russia's authoritarian turn, Ukraine's society has become more united around democratic principles, using the war as a catalyst for strengthening democratic resilience and resisting authoritarian pressure. This example highlights how, under certain conditions, war can reinforce rather than weaken democratic principles.

Possible trajectories:

- ➔ Increasing security threats and frequent conflicts can lead to expanded executive powers, greater surveillance, and restriction of freedoms, resulting in a steady decline of democratic accountability and civil liberties.
- ➔ Democracies continuously adapt to security challenges by balancing security measures with robust oversight and protection of rights, trying to maintain democratic values while addressing emerging threats.

Under EC Review

P3 - Against the State

Figure 21 - Against the State



STEEPLE Primary: (Political), STEEPLE Connected (Social, economic, legal, ethical)

The rise of post-national models of political rule challenges the dominance of nation-states as the primary unit of democratic life. Neo-libertarian movements question existing notions of territory, citizenship, sovereignty, and decision-making (Davidson and Rees-Moog, 1997, Drapalova & Wegrich, 2020). These radical political ideologies prioritise voluntary association, unregulated technological innovation and private ownership, aiming to create libertarian governance beyond existing state structures and national boundaries. On the one hand, researchers argue that unlike pure libertarianism's advocacy for virtually no government involvement, neo-libertarianism combines "the libertarian's moral commitment to negative liberty with a procedure that selects principles for restricting liberty on the basis of a unanimous agreement in which everyone's particular interests receive a fair hearing" (Sterba, 2013, p. 66). On the other hand, critiques have been articulated towards this techno-optimistic, anti-democratic movement, arguing that it is problematic due to its neo-colonial physical acquisition of land and exploitation based on inequalities (Garrod, 2024).

Initiatives such as the so-called Network States or Seasteading exemplify efforts to build such communities. Network States leverage digital platforms to form highly aligned, opt-in communities that may eventually acquire physical spaces and seek legal recognition (Srinivasan, n.d.). Similarly, Seasteading experiments with autonomous floating communities ostensibly outside the legal reach of states to prototype alternative forms of governance. Blockchain-based governance further illustrates how the introduction of new technologies is envisioned to disrupt existing legal frameworks, such as how contracts are made and recorded (Kerley et al., 2022). Blockchain initiatives such as Bitnation have aimed to create voluntary, transnational "crypto nations" with distributed governance.

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Fragmentation of Governance: The rise of decentralised and privatised governance models leads to a fragmented landscape where traditional democratic institutions coexist with various alternative systems, potentially weakening the coherence and authority of nation-states and physically bounded communities.
- Enhanced Individual Freedom: These models emphasise personal autonomy and self-governance, offering greater individual freedom and flexibility in choosing governance structures. However, this can also result in reduced collective decision-making (e.g. technocracy) and potential inequalities.
- Economic and Financial Independence: Technologies like cryptocurrencies and decentralised finance may promote financial autonomy, reducing reliance on state-controlled monetary systems and potentially undermining traditional economic governance.
- Innovative Governance Experiments: Concepts like seasteading and network states provide platforms for experimenting with new forms of governance, which can offer insights and alternatives to traditional democratic systems but may also challenge global democratic norms and regulatory frameworks.
- Privacy and Surveillance Concerns: The extensive use of technology in these models, particularly in smart cities, raises significant privacy and surveillance issues, which can undermine democratic freedoms and civil liberties.

Example cases

Case Study 1: The French Polynesian Seasteading Project

In 2017, French Polynesia signed a memorandum of understanding with the Seasteading Institute, potentially enabling the first "seastead" community off the island of Tahiti. This agreement specified that the project would need to demonstrate economic benefits for the local population and environmental safety before proceeding to develop a "unique governing framework" (BBC, 2017). Unlike more radical seasteading visions situated in international waters, this project would operate within French Polynesian territory, requiring approval from both local government and potentially France. This compromise highlights the practical challenges of establishing truly autonomous governance spaces outside existing legal frameworks, while still representing a significant step toward experimenting with alternative governance models.

Case Study 2: Akon City, Senegal, Blockchain Urbanism in Development

Announced in 2018 by Senegalese-American singer and entrepreneur Akon, Akon City represents an ambitious attempt to create a "real-life Wakanda" in Senegal using blockchain technology and cryptocurrency. Located 100 km south of Dakar, the planned city would include condominiums, offices, parks, a university, and various amenities (Agbetiloye, 2024). Akon's vision explicitly draws inspiration from science fiction (particularly the movie *Black Panther*) and aims to leverage blockchain technology and cryptocurrency to create innovative governance and economic systems. While construction was supposed to begin in 2023 and be completed by 2028, the project's current status remains unclear, with only a welcome centre partially constructed. This highlights the gap between visionary post-national concepts and the practical challenges of implementation.

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Driven by neo-libertarian initiatives to connect people across borders, state power shifts away from comprehensive governance toward managing only local issues such as infrastructure, gradually eroding collective decision-making.
- ➔ Crypt cities, often emerging in low-income countries, represent a new form of settler occupation and (digital) apartheid, raising serious ethical and political concerns.
- ➔ Wealthy individuals and criminal actors exploit neo-libertarian states to evade taxation and legal jurisdiction, contributing to rising crime rates and deepening social inequality.
- ➔ By framing political issues as technical or economic challenges best addressed through market mechanisms or expert consensus, neo-libertarianism risks depoliticising governance—alienating citizens from political engagement and weakening democratic culture.

P4 - Trust and Accountability

Figure 22 - Trust and Accountability



STEEPLE Primary: (Political), STEEPLE Connected (Social, economic, ethical)

The social contract that legitimises democratic systems as a form of governance is built on a foundation of trust between citizens that is then extended to elected representatives. In the context of the “crisis of Democracy”, linkages have been explored between declining public trusts and the backsliding that been observed (Van der Meer 2017b). While the democratically organised expression of distrust is an essential feature of the democratic process, general distrust and pose problems.

Recent studies have provided evidence that political trust in governments is trending downward (Worboys, 2024) and organisations like the OECD have conducted research into the formation and maintenance of public trust with respect to government. According to the most recent OECD study, social trust is at a critical juncture given the various challenges facing democratic governments that are attempting to transform their society’s infrastructural and systemic basis towards goals that align with addressing climate change and the UN’s SDGs.

In Europe, according to recent analysis of Eurobarometer survey data, while public service outcomes impact citizen trust, it is the processes by which public administration operates, and particularly the absence or presence of perceived corruption in those processes, that determines overall citizen trust in governing institutions (Van de Walle 2020). According to Transparency International, Europe’s strong democratic tradition has contributed to much less perceived corruption across most member states, with ex-Soviet countries scoring

lower than Western and Southern Europe, while Northern Europe nations are consistently viewed as the least corrupt (Transparency International 2025). At the same time, regional inequalities (economic, social, etc.) may also play an important role in building or eroding public trust at both the individual and national level (Van der Meer, 2017a) Lipps and Schraff 2021).

That said, there have been marked reductions in public trust related to ‘crisis events and the years following those events as government responses, and their consequences, play out. Such trends were noted in the years directly following the ‘Great Recession’, with some scholars making a direct link to democratic backsliding (Armingeon et al. 2014). Similarly, despite some initial boosts in public trust towards government at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, frustration toward national governments and health institutions eroded trust over the duration of the pandemic (Stivas 2023, Kukovic 2022, Nielsen 2021). Such events underscore both the importance of messaging and transparency during times of crisis (de Ruijter et al. 2024) and efforts to strengthen public trust in governance continuously, in anticipation of future crisis events.

Related Literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- As social trust is a foundational principle for democratic societies, erosion of individual and general social trust creates conditions for further democratic backsliding.
- Through carefully crafted and consistent messaging, institutions can help counter the perceptions of non-transparency or possible corruption that erode trust.
- Democratic reforms or practices that help to counter perceived or real corruption through increasing accountability benefit the broader ‘health’ of democratic governance.
- If people are unsatisfied with how democratic governance shapes planning and directly influences their lives, trust risks being jeopardised. Eroding trust can lead to dissatisfaction with the democratic process.
- A crisis of trust and accountability can create the conditions for democratic innovation and experimentation.

Example Cases

Case 1 – Corruption Watch (South Africa)

With the goal of eliminating corruption in South African governing institutions, the Corruption Watch organisation focused on whistleblowing research and outreach. The organisation crowdsources its initial corruption reporting, giving any citizen the opportunity to bring instances of corruption to the attention of the Corruption Watch team for further investigation (Corruption Watch 2024³). Upon selection for investigation, the organisation’s research capacities are resourced to gather information and evidence, compiling a substantiated report for distribution to the relevant authorities. The group also conducts mobilisation efforts to help raise public awareness in an inclusive and community-focused way, helping to organise campaigns and gather relevant stakeholders for raising and sustaining public pressure. Lastly, the organisation creates toolkits and resources for community organisers and publishes annual reports on the state of corruption in South Africa, their organisational activities, and important litigation.

Case 2 – Sidewalk Toronto project - Cancelled

The Sidewalk Toronto project was a flagship initiative for Sidewalk Labs, a company that was a subsidiary of Google, to investigate data collection and use in urban planning and development of smart cities. Smart cities are roughly understood as urban areas where layers of infrastructure (mobility, energy, water, buildings, etc.) are built or updated for

³corruptionwatch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/19631_Corruption-Watch_Annual-Report-2024_D5.pdf

improved monitoring of each system and increased communication of data between systems. Sidewalk Labs had planned the project to be a community-driven development project, incorporating participatory planning practices and engagement methods, including public consultations, public roundtables, resident reference panels, design jams, a fellow program, and neighbourhood meetings and forums. As reported in Participedia⁴, through these citizen engagement efforts, community concerns regarding data privacy and security, the potential misuse of collected data (e.g. surveillance), sensitive spatial and infrastructural information, public space design and accessibility, and environmental concerns. In the end, the community called for a strong data governance plan to maintain trust and accountability, and voiced concerns over the commercialisation of public spaces. In the end, in the spirit of maintaining a fragile citizen trust, the project was cancelled as assurances from the private side of the project failed to reassure citizens or their elected representatives.

Case 3 – Participedia Results (this report)

The issue of Trust and Accountability was noted as an important motivating factor for a number of European projects and initiatives listed in the Participedia database and analysed as part of section two of this horizon scanning report. These projects highlight instances where new types of participatory governance were used to address citizen concerns about corruption, opaque decision-making, control by social, political or economic elites, and other conditions that have eroded public trust. While a more comprehensive list of the Participedia projects reviewed is available in the annex, here is a selection of projects addressing (re-)building public trust: OSALE Public Consultation Platform (Estonia), Romanian Constitutional Forum, PUC Olbia Laboratory (Italy), Radioactive Waste Management Plan (Belgium), Citizens' Jury on Finnish Democracy (Finland), Mitreden-U (Germany), Macedonia Deliberative Poll (North Macedonia), "We the Citizens" (Ireland), LiquidFriesland (Germany).

Possible Factor Trajectories

- Public trust continues to erode in OECD and across the European Union due several other factors (e.g. regional disparities, disinformation, and real corruption)
- Democratic societies develop new forms of practice that foster social trust, for example, e-governance or new modes of planning and budgeting.
- Social trust across the EU continues to fluctuate, with some governing bodies repairing relationships damaged during events (e.g. COVID-19, revealed corruption), some lose trust to new events, and others build new bases of social trust through democratic initiatives.

⁴ <https://participedia.net/case/participatory-planning-in-the-sidewalk-toronto-project>

Legal Factors

L1 - Broadening Democratic Representation

Figure 23 - Broadening Democratic Representation



STEEPLE Primary: Legal, STEEPLE Connected: Environmental, Political

The limits of democratic representation depend on who is considered a legitimate political subject. Adults who are citizens of a nation are the primary participants in democratic processes, possessing the right to vote, run for office, and engage in civic activities. This inclusion is generally facilitated through legal frameworks that define citizenship and political rights, often excluding non-citizens, minors, and sometimes even specific groups within the citizenry such as incarcerated individuals or certain marginalised communities. Notably, women's voting rights are a relatively recent development in many democracies, having gained traction as late as in the 20th century. Also, racial and ethnic discrimination has historically been a source for political non-representation. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion are shaped by historical, legal, philosophical, cultural, and socio-economic developments, influencing the extent to which various groups can be politically represented.

The limits of democratic representation and the definition of legitimate political subjects are shaped by legal and institutional frameworks that define who can participate and hold rights. These frameworks play a crucial role in shaping the inclusivity of democracy by determining the boundaries of political subjectivity. They can either expand or contract the scope of participation, impacting which voices are heard and which interests are prioritised in policymaking. As societies evolve, there is often a push to redefine these limits, advocating for more inclusive policies that recognise the rights of marginalised groups and non-citizen residents. However, such changes are frequently met with resistance, highlighting the complex interplay between legal definitions, societal values, and political power in shaping

the dynamics of democratic representation. Different related trends can be observed in the present. For instance, the democratic representation of 'nature' has gained traction around the world. Based on the interactions of an academic discourse (Latour, 2020; Descola, 2014) with indigenous ways of valuing 'nature' as a partner in more-than-human communities rather than segregating it through the modern nature-culture dualism, eco-political movements have enacted assemblies, legal texts and demonstrations to provide legal rights and democratic representation to 'nature.'

Related literature

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- Kopnina, Helen; Spannring, Reingard; Hawke, Shé; Robertson, Colin D.; Thomasberger, Alessio; Maloney, Michelle et al. (2021): Ecodemocracy in Practice: Exploration of Debates on Limits and Possibilities of Addressing Environmental Challenges within Democratic Systems. Visions for Sustainability, More Visions online (2021). DOI: 10.13135/2384-8677/5832.
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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Determines who is included or excluded from democratic participation, shaping whose voices and interests are represented.
- Expanding representation (e.g. to women, minorities, non-citizens, or nature) can potentially lead to more inclusive and forward-looking democracies.
- New forms of representation, such as for nature or future generations, and experiments with these encourage governments to consider long-term and collective interests in decision-making.
- Ongoing debates and legal innovations continuously reshape the boundaries of democracy.

Example cases

Case 1: Eco-jurisprudence

Granting legal rights to natural entities is part of an international, legal and political activism aiming to develop eco-centric jurisprudence and rethinking legal orders in relation to the materiality of the world (Kopnina et al., 2021). Prominent European examples include the Parlement de Loire or the Embassy of the North Sea. The Eco-Jurisprudence Monitor lists over 500 initiatives worldwide aiming to enforce the rights of nature (Kauffman et al., 2025). These initiatives bring together law, research, art and politics to engage with different publics thereby exploring ways for 'giving nature a voice'. The implications of successful legal innovations concerning, for instance, the granting of personhood rights, like in the case of

the Mar Menor Bay in Spain, are far-ranging. Who can claim rights violations in the name of the bay? Who, how and based on what kind of legitimacy can 'nature' be represented?

Case 2: Representation and Rights of Future Generations

The Urgenda case demonstrates how the legal representation of future generations via a civil society organisation can directly shape democratic decision-making by holding governments accountable to long-term interests, such as climate protection. The Dutch courts, recognising the State's duty of care under human rights law, required the Netherlands to set more ambitious emission reduction targets, even when such actions went beyond existing political or EU policy commitments. By empowering NGOs and individuals to litigate on behalf of collective and future interests, the judiciary provided a mechanism for integrating scientific evidence and precautionary principles into policy, ensuring government actions align with the rights and needs of both present and future generations.

Potential trajectories

- ➔ Restricted democracy: The exclusion of certain segments of the population (e.g. pensioners or people with specific gender identities) from the democratic process.
- ➔ Inclusive democracy: The expansion of democratic rights to new groups in societies (e.g. children or migrants).
- ➔ More-than-human-democracy: Natural entities, such as rivers or forests, and machines, such as AI agents, are granted personhood rights and their interests are represented through assemblies.

L2 - Fundamental Human Rights

Figure 24: Fundamental Human Rights



STEEPLE Primary: Legal, STEEPLE Connected Social, Political, Ethical

The establishment, protection, and enforcement of fundamental human rights is a cornerstone of democratic systems as they establish the basic principles of dignity, freedom, and equality. Protecting human rights reinforces the rule of law, ensuring that laws are applied equally and fairly, preventing abuse of power by authorities. Upholding human rights fosters social cohesion and stability by promoting tolerance, diversity, and respect among different communities, which is crucial in multicultural societies (Brkan, 2019). While fundamental human rights form the legal and normative foundation of the European Union, recent years have witnessed increasing tensions between rights-based obligations and securitised border regimes. The EU claims a foundational commitment to fundamental human rights, enshrined in documents such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. Yet, in practice, the enforcement and interpretation of these rights remain fragmented and politically contested. As Pye (2017) demonstrates in the context of the Eurozone crisis, fundamental rights, especially social and economic rights, were deprioritised or even suspended in favor of market stabilization and austerity. This points to a structural deficiency within EU governance, where rights protection is often subordinated to fiscal discipline, undermining the democratic credibility of the Union itself.

Beyond economic governance, structural exclusions persist within domestic systems of rights implementation. Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2020) show how even in inclusive

welfare democracies like Sweden and Finland, access to protection and equal treatment is racially conditional. The “racial welfare state” selectively allocates public safety and social benefits based on perceived national belonging, revealing that fundamental rights are unevenly distributed despite formal universality. Particularly under the pressure of populist discourses and national political anxieties, democratic states have adopted policies that criminalise migration and cast migrants as threats to societal cohesion and public safety (Sa’di, 2025). These trends disproportionately affect racialised groups and non-European migrants, revealing a racialized order within liberal democratic regimes (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2020). Therefore, the logic underpinning these developments is deeply rooted in colonial legacies and the structural hierarchies of Western democracies, where the inclusionary ideals of rights and equality often coexist with mechanisms of exclusion and surveillance that infringe data and privacy rights (Banerjee, 2022; Sa’di, 2025). Therefore, scholars of radical and feminist democracy call for more inclusive and reflexive democratic institutions that recognise marginalised knowledges, positionalities, and lived experiences.

Related literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Different social groups (e.g. political parties, religions, businesses) may argue for exemptions from fundamental human rights protections for specific people or groups (e.g. asylum rights, sexual rights, labour rights, privacy rights).
- Technologies can be used to undermine human rights (e.g. digital surveillance, geo-location, generative AI) before policy and law can be established to safeguard aspects of the EU’s Fundamental Rights Charter.
- The interpretation of and case law regarding differences between the EU’s Articles outlining fundamental rights and actions of Member States remains a critical space for establishing legality of different state activities.
- It demands a rebalancing of economic and social priorities in EU governance to restore legitimacy and public trust.

Example Cases

Case 1: Racialised Access to Welfare and Justice

The criminalisation of immigration and/or immigrants – often referred to as *crimmigration* – is a multifaceted phenomenon involving the political, legal, and societal framing of migrants as inherently suspicious, dangerous, or ‘other’. This process encompasses xenophobic policies and extends to inherently racist law enforcement practices, such as racial profiling, which can result in the (re)production of social hierarchies. In their comparative study of Finland and Sweden, Schclarek Mulinari and Keskinen (2020) illustrate how welfare systems and policing practices operate through racialised logics, granting full rights and protections to those marked as belonging to the national community, while subjecting racialised others to conditional inclusion or surveillance. Even though this process is not limited to political discourse, it is structurally embedded in governance practices. At the institutional level, racial profiling plays a central role in this criminalisation process, rooted in a legacy of colonial power structures and often justified as a broader “civilizational” process within the European Union. These ostensibly neutral law enforcement practices mask a deeper system of racialising and othering that disproportionately targets non-white, non-native and non-Christian individuals, thereby reinforcing a mostly homogenous society (Schclarek Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022).

Case 2: Privacy and Data Protection in the EU Legal Framework

The jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) on privacy and data protection illustrates a critical site where fundamental rights are being tested and defended in the face of expanding surveillance regimes. In landmark rulings such as Digital Rights Ireland, Schrems I/II, and La Quadrature du Net, the Court has articulated that the “essence” of the rights to privacy (Article 7) and data protection (Article 8) under the EU Charter must be upheld, even in contexts where security or economic interests are at stake. These decisions have pushed back against indiscriminate data retention, mass surveillance, and transatlantic data transfers that failed to meet EU rights standards. The case highlights the tension between national security imperatives and individual freedoms, revealing how digital infrastructures can reproduce structural conflicts within fundamental rights regimes. It also demonstrates the democratic significance of judicial oversight, as courts act as counterweights to executive overreach and reinforce the normative boundaries of human rights-based governance. Yet, the ongoing evolution of surveillance technologies and questionable algorithmic systems continues to challenge the ability of democratic institutions to safeguard these rights in practice, making privacy and data protection a frontline in the broader struggle over the future of democratic accountability and personal autonomy in the EU (Brkan, 2019).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Democratic institutions need to evolve to better recognise and enforce human rights through inclusive policymaking, expanded social protections, and intersectional legal frameworks.
- ➔ States might maintain formal commitments to rights but increasingly apply them unevenly based on national interest, identity, or economic utility, deepening societal divides.
- ➔ Grassroots and transnational actors reshape democratic practices by embedding decolonial, feminist, and anti-racist principles into how rights are claimed, defined, and governed.

L3 - Justice and the Rule of Law

Figure 25 - Justice and the Rule of Law



STEEPLE Primary: Legal, STEEPLE Connected: Political, Social

The rule of law and the integrity of judicial systems are essential pillars of liberal democracy as these principles ensure that political power is exercised within a framework of predictable, impartial, and (ideally) publicly justifiable norms. The independence of the judiciary, ranging from both political interference and undue influence of public opinion, is a necessary condition for upholding democratic rights and constitutional checks and balances (Bühlmann & Kunz, 2011). However, across Europe, these foundations are facing increased pressure, not only from within political systems but also from shifting societal dynamics. In recent years, several EU member states have experienced forms of democratic backsliding, where governments have attempted to exert control over constitutional courts, judicial appointments, and disciplinary mechanisms (Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017). At the same time, the European Union's ability to respond effectively has been hampered by its own institutional limitations, such as weak enforcement of Article 2 TEU as well as Article 7 TEU and the political shielding of autocratic allies within EU party coalitions (Kelemen, 2020; Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017). Kelemen (2020) argues that this has contributed to what he called an "authoritarian equilibrium", a situation in which EU mechanisms are insufficient to deter or reverse violations of judicial independence.

Compounding these institutional vulnerabilities is the ambivalent role of public opinion. While democratic legitimacy ultimately depends on public trust in institutions, the judiciary must maintain a degree of insulation from short-term political pressures and populist sentiments (Gibson, 2007). A judiciary overly responsive to public opinion risks undermining minority rights and legal consistency, yet a complete disregard for societal expectations can erode confidence in the justice system (Bühlmann & Kunz, 2011; Gibson, 2007). Moreover, an independent judiciary can sometimes be itself captured by power and then become impervious to reform (Merdzanovic & Nicolaïdis 2021). At the same time, public perceptions of judicial fairness and independence, what Bühlmann and Kunz (2011) call *de facto independence*, are shaped less by constitutional guarantees than by lived experiences and visible outcomes. In highly polarised societies, even procedurally sound rulings may be delegitimised in the public eye when courts lose their underlying “reservoir of goodwill” (Gibson, 2007). In parallel to these sociopolitical dynamics, institutional safeguards themselves reveal critical structural weaknesses. At the institutional level, existing legal mechanisms, such as infringement proceedings or domestic litigation, offer only a limited response to democratic erosion, particularly when applied reactively or in isolation (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017). Hence, democratic backsliding often proceeds through a legalistic strategy in which formal procedures are manipulated to entrench executive power while maintaining a façade of the rule of law (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Related literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Weak rule of law undermines public trust and can lead to democratic disengagement.
- Politicised or dependent judiciaries erode checks and balances, enabling authoritarian drift, and can enhance the rise of right-wing extremism.
- Institutional resilience in the justice system helps maintain long-term democratic stability in the future as well as (human) rights protection.
- Legal systems influence how power transitions are managed, shaping the stability of future democracies.

- How fairly laws are enforced affects whether citizens feel represented and protected.

Example Cases

Case 1: Competitive Authoritarianism in Hungary

Hungary has become emblematic of democratic backsliding within the EU, exhibiting features of competitive authoritarianism while maintaining the appearance of democratic institutions. The government has systematically curtailed judicial independence through centralised control over court administration and politicised judicial appointments (Kelemen, 2020). Legal reforms have eroded the checks on executive power while complying with the letter of the law, making it difficult for EU institutions to intervene effectively. As noted in the Nations in Transit 2024 report, Hungary's judiciary no longer functions as an effective check on the ruling party, with judicial decisions increasingly aligning with governmental interests, thereby sidelining its impartiality. Moreover, judges critical of government policies have faced disciplinary measures, marginalisation, or forced retirement (Freedom House, 2024).

Simultaneously, civil society and media freedom have been weakened, and independent institutions hollowed out, oftentimes through restrictive NGO laws and smear campaigns. EU mechanisms like Article 7 TEU have had limited effects, as Hungary benefits from political shielding and continued access to EU funds. This circumstance ultimately sustains a situation in which external support helps stabilise an internally illiberal regime (Kelemen, 2020). Hungary thus illustrates how formal legal structures can coexist with the erosion of substantive democratic norms.

Case 2: Erosion of Judicial Independence in Poland

In Poland, the Law and Justice (PiS) party has used formal legal reforms to assert political control over the judiciary since 2015 (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). Changes to the Constitutional Tribunal, the Supreme Court, and the judiciary council have restructured key institutions in ways that undermine their independence. Furthermore, the government has implemented a disciplinary regime for judges that penalises those critical of state reforms (Freedom House, 2024). Many of these measures have been justified in the name of efficiency, national sovereignty, or decommunization. However, they follow a clear pattern of concentrating power within the executive while shielding it from judicial review (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). European institutions have condemned the reforms, and the Court of Justice of the European Union has issued multiple rulings against them. Yet compliance has been partial at best, with the government either ignoring decisions or delaying their implementation (Freedom House, 2024). Judges have been intimidated, transferred, or removed from politically sensitive cases. Public resistance has emerged in the form of protests and legal mobilisation, but these have only modestly slowed the reforms. The combined effect is a judiciary that is structurally weakened and politically constrained (Pech & Scheppele, 2017). Most recent developments, since the liberal democratic win in the 2023 elections, have demonstrated the difficulties of reversing the illiberal tide and restoring the rule of law and independent judiciary (Bill and Stanley, 2025).

Case 3: Legacy Governance and the Rule of Law in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan presents a clear example of how legacy governance structures persist beneath formal institutional reforms. Despite public efforts under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to modernise the state, the judiciary remains embedded in a neopatrimonial system where informal loyalty networks shape formal outcomes. Judges are often selected and promoted based not on legal merit but on political reliability and ties to power holders. This dynamic reflects continuity with the authoritarian governance practices of Islam Karimov, where the rule of law served regime durability rather than constraint. Courts are thus perceived not as neutral arbiters but as instruments aligned with executive priorities. Legal decisions frequently reflect the interests of political elites, and trials involving opposition figures, activists, or economic rivals rarely display procedural independence. While judicial rhetoric emphasises reform, the underlying institutional logic continues to rely on patronage, selective enforcement, and political signalling. The judiciary functions within a broader regime structure where informal influence outweighs constitutional guarantees. This has stunted the development of autonomous legal institutions and discouraged meaningful checks on executive authority. Uzbekistan's case underscores how authoritarian resilience can be maintained through the adaptation rather than the dismantling of judicial institutions (Ruiz-Ramas & Morales Hernández, 2022).

Possible trajectories

- ➔ Populist backlash and institutional weakening may lead to further politicisation of courts, eroding democratic checks and enabling executive overreach.
- ➔ Digital disinformation and AI-driven propaganda could undermine public trust in judicial rulings, fueling polarisation and delegitimising legal institutions.
- ➔ Civic mobilisation, legal reforms and legal activism may grow in response to perceived injustices, fostering bottom-up pressure for transparency and accountability increasing citizens' ownership of the rule of law, which may help rebuild legitimacy and restore public confidence in the justice system.

L4 - Legacy Governing Systems

Figure 26 - Legacy Governing Systems



STEEPLE Primary: Legal, STEEPLE Connected: Political, Technological

Within democratic models, different kinds of governance systems can be embedded. These governance systems often exhibit different structures for decision making, resource allocation, as well as setting and enforcing policies and practices (Hooghe & Marks, 2021). Such systems are frequently shaped by institutional legacies that persist beyond their original context, leading to what scholars describe as "increasing returns" and "path dependence", where early institutional choices reinforce themselves over time and resist subsequent reform (Pierson, 2000). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in post-authoritarian or post-centralised systems where hierarchical governance frameworks, originally designed for efficiency or control, remain embedded within newly democratic structures. In these contexts, governance practices may continue to operate through inherited logics of centralised regimes even as political institutions adopt participatory or deliberative models (Klimovský et al., 2019).

This friction is observable in areas such as innovation governance, where efforts under frameworks like Horizon Europe attempt to promote co-creation and "inclusion of bottom-up and citizen-engaged public-private partnerships" when addressing global challenges (Robinson et al., 2021). Thus, the challenge lies in the fact that even well-intentioned reforms may be constrained by legacy mechanisms that limit adaptability and pluralism. Coordination dilemmas in multilevel governance structures exacerbate this problem. Consequently, when authority is fragmented across levels but historically concentrated at the top, legacy modes

of coordination often prevail, undermining responsiveness to new democratic demands (Hooghe & Marks, 2021).

Moreover, transitions away from, or towards to, authoritarianism illustrate that dismantling legacy systems is not simply a matter of legal or electoral reform, but of navigating entrenched institutional – oftentimes elitist – incentives. Comparative studies of regime change emphasise that background structures, such as entrenched bureaucratic interests, security institutions, or inherited resource distribution, play a decisive role in shaping the direction and durability of democratisation (Lachapelle et al., 2021). These structural constraints not only shape what is institutionally possible but also influence how actors perceive viable democratic futures. As such, legacy governance systems must be understood as active forces that shape democratic functionality from within, long after their original regimes have passed (Lachapelle et al., 2021; Pierson, 2000). This persistence is not merely accidental but structured through mechanisms of path dependence and increasing returns, which reinforce the costs of institutional change and encourage actors to adapt within existing frameworks rather than overhaul them (Pierson, 2000; Klimovský et al., 2019).

Related Literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- Citizens may lose trust in democratic institutions when legacy structures consistently block responsiveness, transparency, or accountability.
- They shape political behaviour by influencing how actors perceive what is possible or legitimate within democratic institutions.
- Inherited governance structures can create coordination dilemmas between democratic ideals and actual policy implementation.
- Path dependency may reinforce elite dominance or technocratic control, limiting inclusive participation.
- At the same time, reform efforts that visibly challenge legacy structures can foster renewed public confidence and democratic momentum.

Example Cases

Case 1: Ecological Sectors in CEE

The post-accession phase in Central and Eastern European countries reveals how legacy governance systems continue to shape democratic capacity and policy performance. During the EU accession period, external conditionality encouraged the adoption of formal democratic and policy frameworks, particularly in sectors like energy and environment. However, once membership was secured, the momentum for reform weakened, and many countries reverted to older, centralised governance practices. This was particularly evident in the area of renewable energy, where top-down decision-making, lack of institutional coordination, and weak stakeholder inclusion persisted despite EU directives. The accession legacy, once a driver of modernisation, began to lose its transformative power in the absence of strong domestic ownership. As a result, institutional inertia and political instrumentalisation increasingly shaped how EU norms were implemented—or bypassed. The continued dominance of informal networks and administrative fragmentation undermined both democratic accountability and policy effectiveness. These patterns reflect deeper path dependencies rooted in the pre-accession governance cultures of technocratic centralism and weak horizontal coordination. Consequently, democratic norms were preserved more in form than in substance, especially in cases where elite interests aligned poorly with EU policy goals (Mišík, 2021) (<https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1932137>).

Case 2: Post-Yugoslav Democracy in North Macedonia

North Macedonia's democratic framework continues to be shaped by legacy governance systems that reflect institutional patterns inherited from its post-socialist and post-Yugoslav past. Despite formal democratic structures, executive power remains highly centralised and frequently operates with minimal transparency or public consultation. Anti-corruption institutions, though formally independent, are often used selectively, reinforcing patterns of politicised enforcement rather than impartial oversight. This selective application of the law contributes to elite capture across its governance system, where appointments and institutional functioning serve political loyalty over public service. The judiciary remains vulnerable to external pressure, undermining both its independence and public confidence in legal accountability. These features reflect deeply embedded administrative cultures that prioritise vertical control, discretionary authority, and informal power networks; traits that persist despite North Macedonia's EU integration ambitions. While electoral competition exists, substantive democratic reform is constrained by bureaucracy and a legacy of non-transparent governance practices. Furthermore, public dissatisfaction with institutions continues to grow, particularly as legal mechanisms fail to address systemic corruption. These dynamics illustrate how legacy systems can survive democratic transition by adapting to new political contexts while maintaining old operational logics (Smeltzer & Karppi, 2024). ([A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy | Freedom House](#))

Case 3: Administrative Legacy in Portugal

Portugal's democratic governance continues to be shaped by longstanding institutional legacies. Despite over four decades of democratic rule and EU integration, the country still exhibits strong features of centralised, hierarchical administration inherited from its authoritarian and early post-transition governance periods. These legacy characteristics continue to hinder progress in areas such as environmental policy integration, where inter-ministerial coordination remains weak and agencies frequently operate in isolation. These governance patterns are not primarily the result of legal constraints but are sustained by deeply embedded administrative routines and professional cultures that resist change. Hence, the persistence of top-down implementation logics undermines public participation and cross-sectoral collaboration, despite formal commitments to inclusivity and sustainability. Reform efforts have often resulted in surface-level procedural adjustments, while unresponsiveness to public and local desires persist. While Portugal has complied with EU environmental directives on paper, legacy governance dynamics significantly limit the quality and effectiveness of democratic policymaking. The inability to change this paradigm is "creating dependency at the local level whilst sustaining the centralised approach of the State government" (Rowbottom & Velthof, 2022). (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2022.115598>)

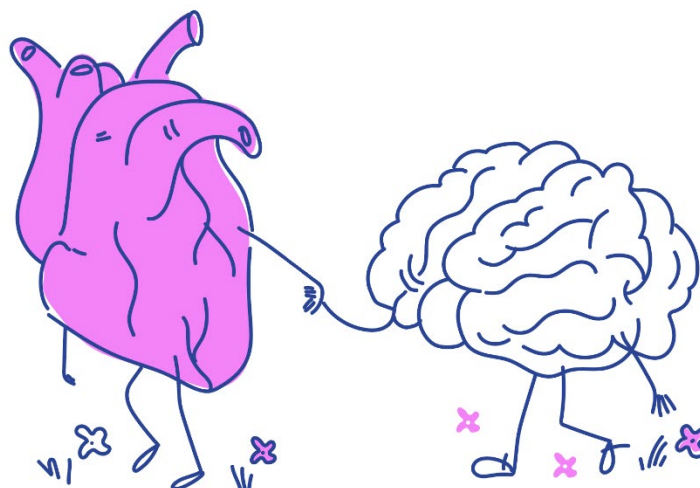
Possible Trajectories

- ➔ Citizens and civil society actors increasingly challenge institutional legacies through raising awareness, participation, activism, and public pressure, prompting selective reforms.
- ➔ Supranational bodies (e.g. the EU) use conditionality, funding, or benchmarking to incentivise structural change, with mixed results depending on domestic political will.
- ➔ Targeted reforms in public administration, justice, and policymaking slowly dismantle inherited structures, increasing transparency, accountability, and participatory governance.
- ➔ Authoritarian political actors might instrumentalise legacy systems by centralising control or through informal networks under democratic guise while preserving formal institutions.

Ethical Factors

ET1 - Mental Health Issues

Figure 27 - Mental Health Issues



STEEPLE Primary: Ethical, STEEPLE Connected (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental)

Mental health encompasses psychological, emotional, and social well-being, affecting how individuals think, feel, and act. A surge in conditions such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, stress, and mental disorders has been witnessed. This evolving nature of mental health is influenced by outside and inside factors including various life experiences, social determinants, including societal pressures or exclusionary sentiments, a decline in health systems as well as a rise of digital media usage, and economic or political disparities (Santini & Koyanagi, 2021; Cabeza Martínez et al., 2025; Jenkins et al., 2011). Notably, global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic or climate change have additionally exacerbated mental health challenges (Santini & Koyanagi, 2021; European Commission, 2023). Moreover, in countries with fragmented welfare systems, like in Southern and Eastern Europe, mental health challenges are more prevalent, leading to higher levels of stress, depression, and societal unrest. Weak social safety nets and austerity measures, which are often seen in less resilient democracies, contribute to mental health deterioration, increasing the risk of societal discontent and undermining public trust in government. Therefore, political trust in democratic institutions plays a major role in reducing stress and social isolation (Ribanszki et al., 2022).

The impact of mental health on democratic governance can be seen in several ways. The abovementioned social determinants influence the well-being and social stability of

individuals, which in turn affects the broader political engagement. In democratic systems, citizens' mental health is crucial for maintaining active participation in political processes, ensuring that individuals can engage in debates, elections, and participatory activities without being hindered by psychological distress or stigma (European Commission, 2023; Santini & Koyanagi, 2021). Furthermore, the equitable distribution of mental health resources can strengthen or weaken democratic principles. "According to the EU Charter of fundamental rights, everyone has the right of access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices." (European Commission, 2023). Mental health is intricately linked to economic stability and access to healthcare. In low- and middle-income countries, mental health issues exacerbate poverty cycles, limiting access to education, employment, and healthcare. This dynamic also highlights the importance of economic and social policies that address broader determinants of mental health, such as access to employment, education, and health services (Jenkins et al., 2011).

Related Literature

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How does it shape democratic futures?

- The associated economic and social conditions that are affecting mental health undermine individual stability and political engagement.
- Marginalised groups often experience discrimination, stigma and exclusion impacting social and political participation.
- If certain technologies become increasingly integrated with democratic systems, the risks of such technologies that impact mental health might become an even more critical topic in the safeguarding of political participation.

Example Cases

Case 1 – Austerity and Mental Health:

In Greece, the economic crisis and the alarming rise in suicides highlight the detrimental effects of austerity measures, particularly in the public health sector. The correlation between rising unemployment and increased suicide rates reflects the psychological toll of economic instability, where individuals' sense of self-worth diminishes as their financial and social situations worsen. The crisis not only escalated unemployment but also restricted access to mental health services, leaving the most vulnerable, such as long-term unemployed individuals, without support. This gap in mental health care exacerbated depression and suicidal behaviours, especially as those without insurance were denied necessary treatment. The findings point to a critical failure in policy, where economic austerity measures overlooked the importance of safeguarding mental health, ultimately worsening the societal impact of the crisis. A more integrated approach to crisis management is needed, one that balances economic recovery with the preservation of public health and well-being (Madianos et al., 2014).

Case 2 – Mental Health and Social Media:

Social media has become a double-edged sword, with both positive and negative effects on mental health, especially among young people. On one hand, it fosters frequent and intense peer relationships, enhances social connection, and offers opportunities for humour, identity formation, and creative expression. However, it simultaneously includes an increased risk of cyberbullying, which can lead to self-inflicted harm, suicidal ideation, and depression. Studies have found a reciprocal relationship between social media use and feelings of depression among young people. Despite these concerns, social media platforms also serve as spaces for entertainment and connection, with 81% of students reporting a boosted sense of connectedness. Policymakers often overlook the diverse ways in which individuals engage with digital technology, treating it as a generic activity, when in fact its impact varies greatly depending on usage patterns (Khalaf et al., 2023).

Case 3 – Sexuality, Gender norms and Mental Health:

Research has established that individuals who identify as gay, sexual, or gender-diverse (GSD) face significantly greater mental health challenges compared to their heterosexual peers. These challenges include increased psychological distress, low mood, self-harm, and suicidality, with GSD individuals often encountering discrimination and heterosexism within health services. Minority Stress Theory explains that affected individuals face both external stressors, such as victimisation and institutional discrimination, and internal stressors, like internalised stigma and fear of rejection. These experiences of marginalisation create significant psychological strain (Dunlop & Lea, 2023). This further becomes evident in *The Mask You Live In*, which highlights how societal pressure on boys to conform to rigid gender roles leads to emotional suppression and mental health struggles. The documentary showcases how these harmful expectations foster isolation, low self-esteem, and difficulty in forming authentic relationships. By featuring interviews with experts, athletes, and everyday men, it advocates for a more inclusive, emotionally expressive version of masculinity that allows men to embrace vulnerability without fear of judgment (Siebel Newsom, 2015).

Possible Trajectories

- ➔ Increasing recognition of mental health issues and support for the treatment of individuals across Europe, helping to develop a citizenry prepared to engage in politically impactful discussions
- ➔ Preventative measures are taken to provide stable economic conditions, helping to reduce the frequency and severity of mental health issues.
- ➔ Creation of protected digital spaces for social participation that safeguard individuals' mental health and fitness while still allowing for contention and disagreement.
- ➔ Intensification of mental health epidemic for youth around the world, implying additional social withdrawal and detrimental behavioural patterns.

Under EC Review

ET2 - Exploitative Supply Chains

Figure 28 - Exploitative Supply Chains



STEEPLE Primary: Ethical, STEEPLE Connected: Social, Political, Environmental

In the Anthropocene, exploitative supply chains have emerged as a critical factor undermining sustainability, equity, and democratic participation across global value systems. Whether in fast fashion, industrial agriculture, or extractive industries, profit maximisation often comes at the expense of labour exploitation, environmental degradation, and dubious transnational operations (Angelini et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2022). These systems, largely driven by multinational corporations (MNCs), operate across jurisdictions with complex ownership structures and weak regulatory oversight, which undermines mechanisms of democratic accountability (Angelini et al., 2023; Sarfaty & Deberdt, 2024). As Angelini et al. (2023) argue, global value chains shaped by neoliberal ideologies and financialised capitalism erode democratic institutions and exacerbate structural inequality. Their analysis reveals how corporations not only evade accountability but also actively shape regulatory agendas, co-opt public institutions, and perpetuate harmful business practices under the guise of corporate social responsibility. Further emphasis has been placed on how the EU's global regulatory state struggles with balancing technocratic governance and democratic legitimacy, highlighting the structural disconnect between market-driven regulation and participatory politics (Weimer, 2025). This foundational framework is essential for understanding exploitative supply chains not as isolated ethical lapses but as systemic outcomes of economic models that prioritise shareholder value and global market efficiency over justice, rights, and inclusive development.

Efforts to govern these transnational chains, particularly in the European Union, have been marked by a growing shift toward private, technocratic instruments of oversight. Voluntary standards, corporate due diligence frameworks, and social auditing regimes have proliferated in recent years, yet their effectiveness remains limited and accountability diffuse. Sarfaty and Deberdt (2024) argue that such tools enable "governance at a distance", where corporations gain regulatory authority without democratic legitimacy, operating through metrics and disclosure practices that often obscure on-the-ground conditions. However, this technocratic form of governance bypasses traditional democratic procedures, replacing public deliberation with expert-led compliance systems (Sarfaty & Deberdt, 2024; Weimer, 2025). The EU, while making normative strides in developing due diligence legislation and sustainability standards, often reinforces this dynamic by relying heavily on market-based instruments and externalising costs to the Global South. Moreover, EU consumption continues to generate significant environmental and labour-related harms abroad, revealing a contradiction between internal regulatory ambitions and external impacts (Malik et al. 2023; Weimer, 2025). These transboundary externalities, embedded in food, fashion, and electronics supply chains, not only bear neo-colonial undertones and deepen global inequality but also obscure democratic responsibility within consumer societies (Bercero 2022).

Related Literature

- Angelini, A., & et al. (2023). Rebalancing disruptive Business of multinational corporations and global value chains within democratic and inclusive citizenship processes (Working Paper No. ISSN: 2239-2734). *Department of Management at Università Ca' Foscari Venezia*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4569268>
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- Malik, A., Lafortune, G., Mora, C. J., Carter, S., & Lenzen, M. (2022). International spillovers embodied in the EU's supply chains. Tracking forced labour, accidents at work and climate impacts in the EU's consumption of fossil and mineral raw materials. *UNSDSN*.
- Nicolaidis, K., & Youngs, R. (2023). Reversing the gaze: Can the EU import democracy from others?. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 61(6), 1605-1621.
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- Weimer, M. (2025). The EU global regulatory state and the search for transnational democracy – reflections from the edges of Europe. *European Law Open*, 4(1), 118–133.

How does it shape democratic futures?

- The entrenchment of voluntary standards over binding regulation dilutes democratic control over labour rights, environmental protection, and social justice, especially in low-enforcement contexts.
- By shifting governance to corporate-led, technocratic tools, exploitative supply chains weaken democratic accountability.
- Transnational supply chains often bypass national democratic mechanisms, undermining the sovereignty of smaller or countries of the Global South.
- Communities and individuals most affected by exploitative supply chains are often marginalised or subject to discrimination, leaving them excluded from meaningful democratic participation and decision-making processes.
- Emerging EU regulatory frameworks offer an opportunity to re-democratise supply chain governance, but their impact on democratic futures depends on how inclusively and transparently they are designed and enforced.

Example cases

Case 1: EU's consumption of fossil and mineral raw materials

The EU's reliance on fossil fuels and critical mineral imports reveals deep structural dependencies that externalise environmental and social costs to producing countries. Countries such as Russia, China, and the Democratic Republic of Congo are key suppliers of gas, oil, and minerals like cobalt and lithium, often under governance conditions marked by low transparency and limited human rights protections. This externalisation undermines democratic accountability, as European consumers and policymakers remain disconnected from the social and ecological consequences of their supply chains. According to the SDSN (2022) study, 13% of global emissions embedded in EU consumption stem from the extraction and processing of fossil fuels abroad. The governance of these supply chains typically excludes affected communities from decision-making, especially Indigenous and rural populations living near extractive zones. Such patterns reproduce colonial dynamics, where environmental harm and exploitation are concentrated in the Global South, while regulatory and economic benefits accrue to the North. Furthermore, voluntary standards and corporate reporting mechanisms have proven insufficient to address these democratic deficits, offering only superficial transparency without enforceable rights. The EU's proposed Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive signals a shift toward binding regulation but still faces resistance from corporate actors and uneven support across member states. Without inclusive mechanisms that empower affected populations and frontline communities, efforts toward ethical sourcing risk replicating existing hierarchies (Malik et al. 2023).

Case 2: EU's Role in the Fast Fashion Industry

A decade after the Rana Plaza disaster -which killed over 1,100 garment workers producing clothing for European brands including Benetton, Mango, and Primark- European policy responses have remained largely reactive, fragmented, and ineffectively enforced (Kijewski et al., 2023). Companies continue to bypass accountability through outsourcing, subcontracting, and the use of intermediaries, insulating themselves from direct legal

responsibility. Centobelli et al. (2022) argue that the linear economy model underpinning fast fashion, with its emphasis on speed and low cost, is fundamentally incompatible with environmental and social sustainability. These dynamics not only harm workers and ecosystems but also erode democratic governance by sidelining public input, obscuring responsibility, and allowing corporate actors to define the terms of “sustainability”. While the EU’s 2022 Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles introduces policy ambitions for transparency and extended producer responsibility, enforcement remains inconsistent and largely reliant on corporate cooperation (Kijewski et al., 2023). Furthermore, the use of sustainability labels often masks continued structural abuse, contributing to greenwashing and consumer misinformation. Workers in producing countries are rarely included in decision-making processes, exemplifying the democratic disconnect between consumers, regulators, and producers (Centobelli et al., 2022). (Kijewski et al., 2023: [Fashion’s real victims: 10 years after Rana Plaza, EU scrambles to prevent future tragedy – POLITICO](#)) (Centobelli et al., 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsc.2022.100684>)

Case 3: Industrial Food Systems

Industrial food systems are often structured around profit-maximizing supply chains that emphasise efficiency, scale, and commodification, frequently at the expense of environmental and social sustainability. These systems prioritise low-cost, high-volume production and tend to marginalize small-scale producers. This oftentimes happens by obscuring the origins and impacts of food as well as limiting consumers’ ability to make informed ethical choices (Smith, 2008). In response, companies like Oatly have emerged as disruptors by promoting plant-based alternatives and embedding sustainability into their business model (UNEP, WWF & GlobeScan, 2022). As Smith emphasises, sustainable supply chains depend not only on internal business practices but also on a willingness to influence both suppliers and consumers, requiring cooperation across sectors. While transparency and traceability are often limited in complex commodity chains, smaller or identity-preserved supply chains (like those Oatly depends on) can provide trust, environmental performance, and ethical sourcing. Thus, Oatly’s transparency campaigns, such as publishing carbon footprints and exposing legal pressure from the dairy lobby, highlight the need for public accountability and consumer empowerment. While still operating within market logics, they thrive as an example of disrupting food norms by promoting plant-based diets that align more closely with environmental ethics, animal welfare, and democratic food governance (UNEP, WWF & GlobeScan, 2022). ([Oatly: Case Study on Communicating Food Sustainability Information to Consumers | One Planet network](#)) (Smith: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2007.2187>)

Possible Trajectories

- ➔ The successful implementation of binding human rights and environmental due diligence laws (e.g. in the EU) strengthens democratic oversight by empowering affected communities and enhancing transparency.
- ➔ Grassroots movements, worker alliances, and transnational activist networks might gain influence, pushing for more localised and transparent supply chain governance from the bottom up.

- ➔ Multinational corporations might adopt sustainability narratives and voluntary standards primarily as legitimacy tools, enabling greenwashing and deflecting public pressure without transforming exploitative practices.

Under EC Review

Method Two: AI-supported Analysis of Large Data Repository

A semi-automated approach to Horizon Scanning efforts was also deployed for this research, in an effort to utilise natural language processing algorithms and large language models to analyse additional data sources. Natural language processing modules are able to automate tasks like keyword extraction and topic modelling from a large text corpus. Large language models (LLMs), similarly, conduct textual analysis according to prompts designed by users and additional inputs that might be provided. LLMs are capable of many different types of analysis and were used by the research team to generate specific summarisations and suggestions for clustering based on the text analysis. At the same time, LLMs are created through the statistical analysis of words and their relationships, and as such can be prone making mistakes when generating outputs due to biases in the corpus of texts on which they are trained. We take this up, to some degree, in the discussion section.

The semi-automated approach to text analysis offers the benefit of being able to automate various types of analysis on text collections that might be unapproachable for a team of humans under time constraints. There are, however, dangers to these methods (e.g. LLM hallucinations) that have been corrected for in the process, namely through quality monitoring processes, fact-checking and query restructuring.

Participedia Analysis Diagram

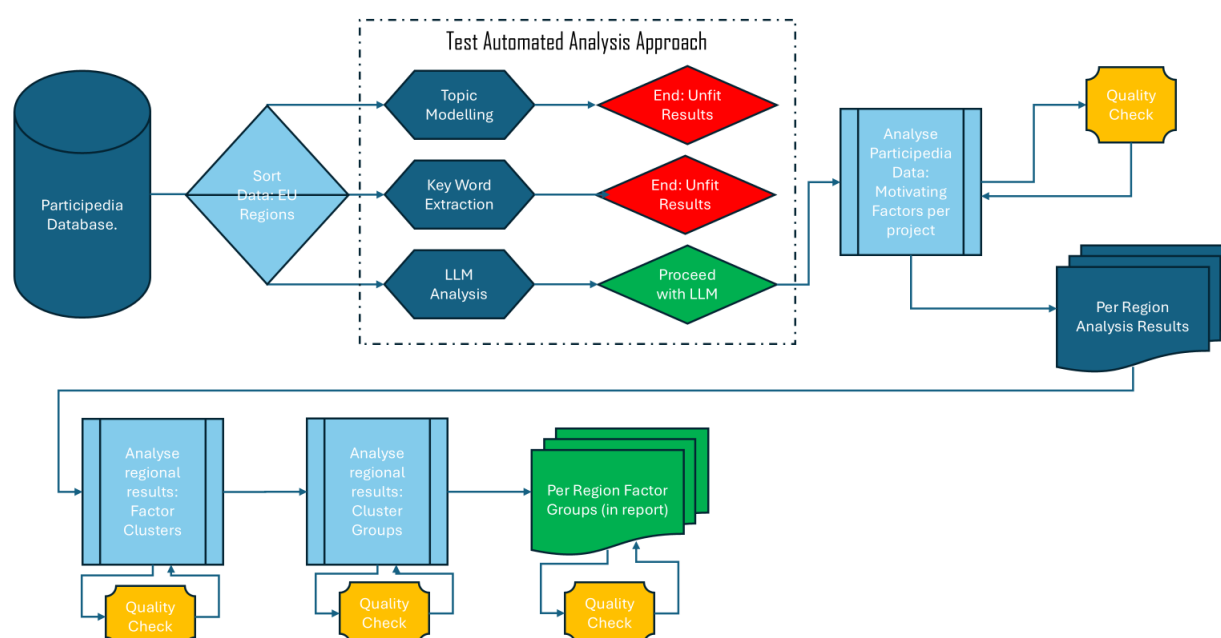


Figure 29 - The phases of the semi-automated identification of context factors. The Participedia analysis diagram illustrates how the LLM approach was selected, how the analysis was conducted, and the integration of quality checks through the process.

In the following sections we briefly outline how the semi-automated research stream evolved over the course of the research (see above figure), the organisation scheme developed to help presentation of the analysis results, and the results themselves.

YD2040 Participedia Analysis - Preliminary description

Given YouthDecide 2040's project approach at identifying democratic innovations ("seeds") and using those as basic inputs for the co-creation of scenarios, the research team decided to focus its automated analysis efforts on the examination of select portions of the Participedia database. According to their website, Participedia ([link](#)) is "a global crowdsourcing platform for researchers, activists, practitioners, and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations", which has opened its databases for research under a Creative Commons license. Viewing it as a primarily historical record of past democratic experimentations, the Participedia dataset was chosen as a repository with materials suitable to answer the research questions useful in this project, and as potentially supporting some of the STEEPLE horizon scanning efforts, specifically:

- What are the conditions that have historically fostered experiments in democratic processes and institutions?
- Are there specific conditions that can be traced within each of the five regions identified by the YouthDecide2040 project?
- Are there conditions that are shared across European democracies? And if so, are there common or unique responses to these conditions that might point to either unique or universal democratic innovations that can be supported?

Within the Participedia database were unique profiles of over 2000 reported initiatives across 160 countries. These profiles include layered, detailed information on the project's inception, duration, geographical location, and a description of the motivations for the project's inception. Through these data points and textual descriptions written by project organisers or participants, information on the social conditions that gave rise to different kinds of participatory experimentation within local communities is available for analysis.

The types of governance experiments recorded in the Participedia database include participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and co-planning and strategic efforts. In comparison with the literature review that supports the STEEPLE results in section one, the scope of this research was constrained for a number of reasons, including a) the need to focus, if possible, on EU projects, b) the identification of factors based on narrative descriptions of experiments that had already occurred or were possibly ongoing, and c) using data that was available only because the participatory experiments had self-selected to report their stories on the Participedia website. As a consequence, these results are less speculative, given that cited cases for each factor provide narrative evidence of historical events. By the same token, the consideration of large-scale and interconnected STEEPLE issues may not be accounted for in narratives about often highly localised experiments in democracy.

Additionally, it must be noted that the concept of context factors used to describe the results of the automated analysis of the Participedia projects does not align fully with the understanding of context factors that guided the STEEPLE research. In part, this discrepancy is a result of the data that is provided by Participedia entries. As projects

recorded in Participedia are documented by project participants (including organisers, documentarians, participants, or public administrators) the provided information is already biased towards a particular perspective of someone who may be intimate with the project, but not necessarily the broader STEEPLE context in which the project took place.

Let's return to the analogy that was used to help understand context factors as changes in the societal conditions or operating environment of a (democratic) system – an ocean going vessel. Whereas the STEEPLE research in section one was akin to an examination of various navigational data resources (wind, temperature, topology, and emergent conditions like storms), the research data from Participedia is more analogous with a series of journal books from other sea captains, mates, or crew (and it is not always clear who the author is or their role). As such, the analysis of Participedia is much more limited to the information that is available through project documentation or participant recall, but is far less likely to consider some of the shifts in societal conditions that might have given rise to the project – particularly if those shifts might be traced to forces external to the project locale.

Thus, the term 'context factor' in this section of the analysis does not reflect the scale or scope of the context factors identified in the literature review. Rather, at best, the Participedia analysis results are comments on the more localised 'context' of the databases projects themselves.

While we have attempted to account for this discrepancy in our quality check on the language and framing of factors identified during the automated analysis outputs, it seemed disingenuous to use prompts that asked the LLM to make even more assumptions. Given the statistical nature of LLM analysis, prompting it to make inferences about dynamic, large-scale forces that might be at work within a specific, localised, participatory project did not seem likely to produce useable results without significantly more time investment. Given the challenges that were already being faced in attempting to utilise this tool for the analysis , and the limited resources that had encouraged us to attempt this research path from the onset, we opted to utilise the term 'context factor' more liberally to the results produced by the LLM analysis.

In the segments below, the term 'context factor' should be regarded as reflective of the more localised context of the participatory projects themselves. This does not render them entirely valueless, rather that they should be considered on a different scale if compared to the STEEPLE context factors. In the following description, you may trace the research decisions that were made in our efforts to utilise LLM analysis and draw your own conclusions regarding the utility of the 'factors' that the Participedia analysis has provided.

Participedia Data - Source and Standardisation

For the Horizon scanning research, the Participedia "cases" dataset of 2270 initiatives was downloaded from the organisation's website on February 18, 2025, in its original .csv format. Vital information about every initiative in the database, such as its *ID number, title, short description and full-body description, country of origin, start and end dates, general and*

specific issues the initiative deals with, as well as, *its Internet URL* were selected for further analysis.

To access the most textual information available about each initiative, the “body” column of the data file was chosen as the central one for this exploration. This column was selected because it represents what Participedia terms the ‘entry narrative’ for each project. In the guidelines for creating a project for the database, the ‘entry narrative’ outlines information sections about ‘Problems and Purpose’ and ‘Background History and Context’ specifically. Given the focus of the horizon scanning research, these data entries represent a unique collection of descriptions about what types of social, political, economic, and legal issues set the stage for experiments in democracy.

After identifying the focal data for our analysis, the data were pre-processed, cleaned, and standardised to ensure uniformity. This process involved using Python libraries to put the database texts into a data frame in string format, remove unreadable symbols, missing cells, and repetitions. Additionally, as part of cleaning and standardisation, initiatives with an empty or uninformative “body” field were removed, and the initiatives that did not belong to the geographical areas targeted by the project were excluded from the dataset. The final resulting set of “body” texts was used in the subsequent analysis stages.

It is essential to note that there was a very high discrepancy noted in the numbers of useable project’s listed in the Participedia database. At once, there is tremendous discrepancy between the recorded projects compared between regions with Western and Southern Europe having hundreds of project entries, and ‘Future Europe’ having less than 30. Similarly, there are notable discrepancies within each region as some countries have reported a significantly higher number of projects via the Participedia platform. We are unable to say what these discrepancies might entail with respect to the overall analysis presented below, but we present them nonetheless for consideration.

Machine Learning - Techniques and Challenges

Following this process, we received a sufficiently large corpus of 583 initiatives to be used to apply the semi-automated research methodology. As an initial step to achieving the main aim of the research, that is, finding the background factors influencing the introduction of the initiative, several machine learning techniques for keyword extraction and summarisation were iteratively tested. These techniques included: KeyBERT model with plugged-in sentence transformers, Yake! keyword extractor, and BART text summarizer. Below is a brief overview of the models used:

KeyBERT is a simple yet effective keyword extraction technique that utilises BERT embeddings to generate keywords and key phrases most similar to a given document. It was designed as a straightforward approach for extracting meaningful keywords. It uses BERT embeddings combined with cosine similarity to identify sub-phrases within a document that most closely align with its overall semantic content. The process involves three steps: (1) extracting document embeddings using BERT to obtain a document-level representation, (2) generating word embeddings for N-gram words/phrases, and (3) applying cosine similarity to identify the most representative words/phrases. These are then selected as the keywords that best capture the document's essence. Although not a novel

approach, KeyBERT serves as a quick, practical tool for exploratory analysis or rapid keyword generation, similar to other lightweight methods.

YAKE! is a lightweight unsupervised automatic keyword extraction method that uses text statistical features to select the most important keywords from a document. It requires no training, external corpus, or dictionaries, and works across multiple languages and domains regardless of text size, which is why it was selected as one of the means of analysis.

As a summary generator, BART employs a standard sequence-to-sequence (seq2seq) architecture, featuring a bidirectional encoder (similar to BERT) and a left-to-right decoder (similar to GPT). It excels in text generation tasks when fine-tuned and performs competitively on comprehension tasks. It matches RoBERTa on GLUE and SQuAD benchmarks with comparable resources, while achieving state-of-the-art results in abstractive dialogue, question answering, and summarisation tasks, with improvements of up to 6 ROUGE points. A pretrained BART model was used to generate 200-character summaries of the initiatives.

To see if the models could pick up any of the background factors previously identified by human experts, they were applied in a chained fashion to a randomly selected set of 25 initiatives with the goal of extracting 10, 15, 20, and finally 25 keywords from each “body” text and then generating its 250-character summary. However, after the keywords were subjected to analysis by foresight experts, and the keyword content was compared to the original texts, it became clear that the chosen methods were more suitable for discovering the most relevant and hence “foreground” information that dealt with the subject matter of the initiatives, rather than the background factors. As a follow-up measure, topic modelling with BERTopic was also carried out to determine if topics present in the corpus could lead to background factors. BERTopic is a topic modelling approach that uses sentence transformers and class-based Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (c-TF-IDF) to generate coherent and dense clusters. This methodology facilitates the extraction of interpretable topics while preserving the significance of key terms within the topic descriptions. The results were equally unsatisfactory due to mostly foreground information being present, which led us to the second phase of our Participedia study.

Generative AI - Extraction and Clustering

In the second phase, we used a proprietary generative AI solution, Fraunhofer Genie (FhGenie), to extract background factors from the texts. According to the developers at Fraunhofer, FhGenie is a customised chat AI that builds upon large language models (LLMs) and generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) architecture. It was developed to enable Fraunhofer staff to leverage this technology while ensuring confidentiality and compliance with data protection regulations. GPT models are general-purpose language prediction models that can analyse, extract, summarise, and otherwise use information to generate content based on a user’s prompt – a query submitted by the user to the AI model that shapes the model’s response during the interaction.

Phase I - Identifying Context Factors

After the lists for all the initiatives were obtained, they were compiled into separate documents corresponding to the target regions (Northern, Southern, Western, Central-

Eastern and Future Europe, derived from WP1.1 research). The AI prompts to extract those factors were designed to offer a list of top 5 factors that led to the introduction of a given initiative, complete with a brief description. The analysis was conducted on the “body” column as well, since Participedia guidelines determine that they should ideally contain the following useful information: problems and purpose; background history and context; organizing, supporting and funding entities; participant recruitment and selection; methods and tools used; what went on: process, interaction and participation; influence, outcomes and effects; analysis and lessons learned.

The prompting process was established iteratively, with the following prompt structure emerging as the best one after a series of tests:

I'm going to send you some texts about initiatives that are separated by numbers. I would like you to make a list of top five factors with a brief description that led to these initiatives being introduced for each of those texts, either based on the texts themselves or extrapolation. Can you do that?

Here's an example of the output I would prefer for each initiative, please modify accordingly:

- **Dissatisfaction with the Existing System:** *A decade of increasing dissatisfaction with the electoral system prompted the government to seek reform, particularly highlighted by the 1996 election results, where the Liberal Party won the popular vote but lost the majority of seats.*
- **Perceived Legitimacy:** *The desire for recommendations made by ordinary citizens rather than politicians aimed to produce a fairer, more legitimate electoral system that would be accepted by the public.*
- **Imbalance in Representation:** *The "First Past the Post" system often resulted in significant disparities between the percentage of votes received and the number of seats won, leading to underrepresentation of certain parties, particularly smaller ones.*
- **Political Promise:** *The establishment of the Citizens' Assembly was part of the Liberal Party's 2001 election platform, reflecting a commitment to reform and a response to public demand for change.*
- **Public Engagement:** *The initiative aimed to involve ordinary citizens in the deliberative process, fostering civic engagement and addressing concerns about political elites making decisions without public input.*

Keep the original numbering, focusing on problems and reasons behind the initiatives, not aims.

Researchers are aware that the provision of examples, such as the one above, has an influence on the results that Large Language Models produce. While it is impossible to track that influence, awareness of this potential led the research team to attempt giving dynamic examples for the different queries – meaning that the example given above was not reused, but rather serves as a template for other examples that could be given to the LLM in the prompt. In other words, different prompts would include similar examples in terms of text structure, with entirely different content.

Context factors emerging from the textual analysis were recorded on a case-by-case basis. Each bullet point is a ‘context factor’ cluster title created by the automated process during its analysis. The machine-generated titles for each context factor are reflective of, but not quoted from, the language used in the project descriptions provided in the Participedia database. While Participedia entries are encouraged to follow a uniform data entry process, the differences in narrative length and descriptive language resulted in a variable number of identifiable context factors.

Example 1 - Context Factors Extracted from Participedia Entry, Central-Eastern Region

1181. Bucharest Bicycle Movement

- **Inadequate Infrastructure for Cycling:** The lack of safe and accessible cycling infrastructure in Bucharest created a hostile environment for cyclists and discouraged bicycle use.
- **Social Stigma Against Bicycles:** The perception of cycling as a transportation method for the lower socio-economic classes limited public support for cycling initiatives and infrastructure improvements.
- **Distrust in Alternative Transportation:** Public scepticism about the safety and practicality of cycling compounded the reliance on cars, hindering efforts to promote sustainable transportation options.
- **Historical Resistance to Change:** A long-standing culture of car dependency made it difficult to shift public attitudes towards embracing cycling as a viable mode of transport.
- **Government Inaction on Bicycle Rights:** The initial ban on cyclist circulation and subsequent lack of governmental support for cycling rights galvanised advocacy efforts to demand better conditions for cyclists.

Phase II - Clustering Context Factors

For each regional dataset, another prompt was introduced to group similar factors together into clusters, while still referencing the initiatives they belonged to. Clustering was required because over 2,900 factors were extracted, and it was necessary to identify similarities and reduce them to a manageable number through clusters. Topic modelling grouped factors based on foreground information rather than background, which highlighted the need for an alternative method. The goal was to group similar background factors, but BERTopic lacked the advanced capabilities of a large language model (LLM) for this task.

On examining the maximum number of resulting clusters, it was decided that due to technical concerns, such as the LLM's response production time, infrequent failure to recognise changes in the prompt and repetitions while producing factor descriptions, a total of 15 clusters with 10 background factors per region would be sufficient to continue the analysis.

Clustering the identified context factors from different projects within each region allowed us to begin looking at conditions that encourage democratic participation across the countries in the region. Each cluster listed the identified context factors and associated project names, and the cluster titles were suggested by the automated system.

Table 1 - Example - Context Factor Clusters with Supporting Evidence

Example - Context Factor Clusters with Supporting Evidence

Cluster 4 - Historical Context and Legacy Issues	Cluster 7 - Environmental Concerns
<p>🇬🇧</p> <p>Historical Marginalisation of Roma (7391 Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma Issues)</p>	<p>🇬🇧</p> <p>Climate Emergency Recognition (8235 Budapest Assembly)</p>

Historical Resistance to Change (Bucharest Bicycle Movement)	Urgency of Greenhouse Gas Reduction (8236 Kraków Citizens' Assembly)
Historical Economic Struggles (5583 Maribor Participatory Budgeting Initiative)	Persistent Air Pollution Issues (8239 Lublin Citizens' Assembly)
Response to Economic Challenges (Latvia's Sustainable Development Strategy)	Inadequate Response to Climate Change (8237 Poznań Assembly)
Historical Context of Discontent (Deliberative Poll on Crime in Bulgaria)	Rainwater Management Challenges (8238 Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly)
Political Discontent with Existing Framework (Romanian Constitutional Forum)	Social Mobilisation Post-Protests (5583 Maribor Participatory Budgeting Initiative)
Past Reviews of the Constitution Lacking Effectiveness (Romanian Constitutional Forum)	Need for Sustainable Development (12918 Érd Citizens' Assembly)
Fragmented Public Discourse (Croatian Anti-Corruption Strategy Development)	Impact on Local Ecosystems (8238 Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly)
Previous Ineffectiveness of Anti-Corruption Measures (Croatian Anti-Corruption Strategy Development)	Growing Public Concern About Crime (Deliberative Poll on Crime in Bulgaria)
Historical Exclusion from Decision-Making (Sopot Participatory Budgeting Initiative)	Desire for Diverse Perspectives (8237 Poznań Assembly)

Phase III - Grouping Context Factor Clusters

After reviewing the clusters suggested by the automated analysis, the research team noted similarities between clusters and decided to perform an additional grouping analysis. As the final stage, we manually joined together several clusters that deal with similar subjects and put them into groups, arriving at between 3 and 10 groups of clusters per region. Thus, in the results section, each group is composed of multiple clusters, with each cluster being composed of context factor similarity between separate regional projects. The 'group' titles were initially generated by the automated analysis, though some titles were revised based on human review of the group's content to provide greater clarity and differentiation between regional groups. Please find the detailed list of groups with the titles of the corresponding clusters in Section ____ Results of Automated Analysis: Participedia

Table 2: Example - Regional Grouping of Context Factor Clusters

Group 2: Civic Engagement and Participation			
Cluster 2 - Civic Engagement	Cluster 9 - Youth Engagement	Cluster 17 - Youth Involvement and Empowerment	Cluster 13 -Public Awareness and Education
Lack of Citizen Engagement (People's Assembly Initiative in Estonia)	Historical Disengagement of Youth (Youth Participation Initiative in Cluj-Napoca)	Insufficient Practical Experience (IYLC)	Need for Civic Education and Engagement (Youth Participation Initiative in Cluj-Napoca)
Insufficient Practical Experience (IYLC)	Low Civic Engagement Among Youth (12508 Participatory Budgeting Initiative in Lithuanian Schools)	Historical Disengagement of Youth (Youth Participation Initiative in Cluj-Napoca)	Limited Understanding of Public Finances (12508 Participatory Budgeting Initiative in Lithuanian Schools)

Thus, for each European region, results from the automated contextual analysis conform to a united schema (See Table 3 below). Using this schema, we can trace common and unique conditions that motivate democratic experimentation across European nations.

Table 2 - Example Schema for Data presentation in Results

European Region	Group 1	Factor Cluster 1.1	Sample 1.1.1	Factors
			Sample 1.1.2	Factors
		Factor Cluster 1.2...	Sample 1.2.1	Factors
			Sample 1.2.2	Factors
	Group 2...	Factor Cluster 2.1	Sample 2.1.1	Factors
			Sample 2.1.2	Factors
		Factor Cluster 2.2...	Sample 2.2.1	Factors
			Sample 2.2.2	Factors

Results of Automated Analysis: Participedia

The results of the automated analysis of the Participedia database are organised below by the same European regions that have defined the early stages of this project. For each region, we present an overview of the Participedia data that was used in the analysis, the overall structured factor groups and clusters, and a more detailed explanation of each of the factor groups that emerged from each regional dataset.

Central-Eastern Europe

The Central-Eastern Europe region, as defined for the horizon scanning research purposes of the YouthDecide 2040 project, followed the original classification as was used in the project proposal. Thus, this region includes the following countries: Poland, Romania,

Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Czechia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Participedia 'cases' database contained 40 narrative entries of projects from these countries, though 11 entries were only partial entries and were removed from the analysis, resulting in the texts of 29 projects being used in the Central European regional analysis (see table 4).

Among the types of participatory projects that were engaged within this region are activities that include citizen monitoring of police detention, people's assemblies, the development of new digital platforms for hosting public consultation, participatory budgeting experiments, and organised outreach and engagement with the public and government concerning infrastructure. Some of the specific issues around which such projects emerged ranged from the creation of bicycle commuter systems to examining national constitutions in Romania, the development of digital tools for citizens to interact with government (Estonia), and the deliberation on Roma poverty and discrimination against them in Bulgaria.

Table 3 - Participedia Cases for Region Central-Eastern Europe

Participedia Cases for Region Central-Eastern Europe	
Bulgaria	3
Croatia	1
Czechia	4
Estonia	4
Hungary	4
Latvia	3
Lithuania	1
Poland	13
Romania	5
Slovakia	1
Slovenia	1

After the textual analysis identified 10 top-level Groups, each containing 2-4 related clusters of localised context factors identified in the Participedia entries for the projects.

Group 1: Public Trust and Accountability

This group of factor clusters speaks both to the more general trend of reduced social trust in government, leadership and public officials, and policy enforcement institutions. Underlying numerous projects was the public's perception that decisions were being made in a fashion that disregarded public official accountability or transparency (e.g. The International Youth Leadership Conference and Warsaw Participatory Budgeting). Corruption of officials was also a common motivation behind some of the projects, including participatory budgeting in Warsaw and anti-corruption initiatives in Latvia and Croatia.

Factor Clusters:

- Trust in Governance
- Public Accountability and Trust
- Corruption and Accountability
- Civic Responsibility and Ownership

Group 2: Civic Engagement and Participation

A lack of public involvement in local political decisions and actions was a commonly noted trait across projects, with many projects across Central Europe citing a historical precedent for such governance practices (e.g. People's Assembly Initiative (Estonia) or the Maribor Participatory Budgeting Initiative). Other projects, such as Warsaw's participatory budgeting noted a more recent decline in public engagement, or a recent fragmentation of the public such that engagement was lacking with some communities or demographic sections.

Factor Clusters:

- Civic Engagement
- Youth Engagement
- Youth Involvement and Empowerment
- Public Awareness and Education

Group 3: Public Participation Mechanisms

A portion of the projects was organised around the development of new modes of public participation, for instance, the development of the OSALE platform as a centralised tool for citizen access to draft policies and provide feedback or the development of an E-signature portal for use in referenda. These types of digital tool development were complemented by new institutions to ensure consideration of citizens' voices, like the People's Assembly initiative (Estonia) or the Sopot Participatory budgeting project.

Factor Clusters:

- Legislative and Policy Frameworks
- Mechanisms of Public Participation

Group 4: Historical Context and Legacy Issues

The past shapes the present and was specifically linked to the problem set some projects were started to address. For example, Latvia's Sustainable Development Strategy was driven by a legacy of limited public involvement in strategic planning, which resulted in plans that did not reflect citizens' needs, exacerbating discontent. Similarly, the Independent Civil Monitoring of Police Detention (Bulgaria) was spurred by a historical backdrop of human rights violations and public distrust in police, highlighting the demand for accountability and oversight in law enforcement. Lastly, perceived crisis response was listed as a motivating factor, but there were marked differences in how the term 'crisis' was applied, ranging from long-term urban decay to 'crisis of democracy' or the climate crisis.

Factor Clusters:

- Historical Context and Legacy Issues
- Crisis Response and Recovery
- Challenges of Implementation

Group 5: Economic Challenges and Governance

A few of the projects were prompted by economic hardships that demanded a more inclusive approach to governance and strategic planning, reflecting citizens' desires for active involvement in addressing economic challenges. A number of participatory budgeting projects cited similar conditions as motivating factors in organising explicit ways to help communities collectively decide how to manage city investments. Previously cited corruption and its economic implications often played a part in these projects as well.

Factor Clusters:

- Economic Challenges and Budgeting
- Community and Local Governance

Group 6: Environmental and Urban Planning Issues

In many cases, the natural environment served as a key motivational factor for the development of a participatory project. For instance, three citizen assemblies in Poland focused on different concerns: The Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly focused on rainwater management challenges, the Poznań Assembly was motivated by persistent air pollution issues, and the Kraków Citizens' Assembly focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, each necessitating community involvement to develop effective solutions.

Factor Clusters:

- Infrastructure and Urban Planning
- Environmental Concerns

Group 7: Democratic Participation and Discourse

Many projects aimed to foster new types of discourse, often through digital tools or platforms. The Romanian Constitutional Forum platform was established due to a lack of comprehensive discussion regarding the Romanian Constitution and the desire to allow more citizens to contribute to a constitutional revision process. Two deliberative polls in Bulgaria – one concerning crime and another concerning issues with Roma - created platforms for dialogue to address two very different topics on which broad and inclusive civil discourse could increase transparency and ensure that public concerns were recorded for policy considerations.

Factor Clusters:

- Democratic Participation and Discourse
- Democratic Innovations

Group 8: Social Justice and Inclusion

Many projects demonstrate a commitment to ensuring that traditionally marginalised voices are heard and considered in the democratic process. For example, the Youth Participation Initiative in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) aimed to foster a sense of agency and ownership within political processes among historically marginalised young people. More generally, participatory budgeting projects and online platforms are both approaches to broadening the base of opinion that can inform policy. The Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma is more specifically focused on a long-standing social justice topic.

Factor Clusters:

- Social and Cultural Barriers
- Social Justice and Inclusion

Group 9: Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches

Most of the projects include some form of collaboration and utilise approaches that could be termed multi-stakeholder, as both of these are close relatives to the idea of democratic participation. That said, the participatory budgeting initiative in Lithuanian schools served to both include student opinion in the budgeting process, while also fostering financial and political literacy among students. Knowledge sharing is also a key component of dialogue or discourse-focused approaches to broadening participation.

Factor Clusters:

- Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches
- Educational Initiatives and Knowledge Sharing

Group 10: Systemic Challenges and Reform

There are many types of systemic challenges outlined in the projects, including addressing a lack of oversight mechanisms, previously ineffective measures (e.g. anti-corruption in Croatia), and systemic discounting of opinions outside of decision-making bodies (e.g. OSALE platform in Estonia). These projects offer some ideas regarding potential avenues for reform insofar as they are all experiments in different approaches to creating new modes or institutions for governance, each with respect to their specific conditions.

Factor Clusters:

- Systemic Challenges
- Governance Innovation and Reform

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Table 4 – Analysis Results: Central Eastern Europe Factors, Clusters, Groups

European Region		Group	Factor Cluster	Sample Factors
European Region: (Central Eastern Europe)		Group 1: Trust and Accountability	Trust in Governance	Public Discontent with Government Inaction (Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma Issues)
				Historical Lack of Civic Engagement (Public Participation Enhancement Initiative in Latvia)
			Public Trust and Accountability	Need for Accountability in Law Enforcement (Independent Civil Monitoring of Police Detention)
				Desire for Inclusivity in Governance (OSALE Public Consultation Platform)
			Corruption and Accountability	Previous Ineffectiveness of Anti-Corruption Measures (Croatian Anti-Corruption Strategy Development)
				Need for Transparency in Governance (Croatian Anti-Corruption Strategy Development)
			Civic Responsibility and Ownership	Public Engagement in Local Governance (8290 Poznań Deliberative Polling for Stadium Management)
				Commitment to Municipal Self-Governance (12918 Érd Citizens' Assembly)
		Group 2: Civic Engagement and Participation	Civic Engagement	Desire for Enhanced Civic Participation (Latvian E-Signature Portal Initiative)
				Historical Exclusion from Decision-Making (Sopot Participatory Budgeting Initiative)
			Youth Engagement	Lack of Informal Participation Channels (Youth Participation Initiative in Cluj-Napoca)
				Desire for Student Ownership (12508 Participatory Budgeting Initiative in Lithuanian Schools)
			Public Awareness and Education	Limited Understanding of Public Finances (12508 Participatory Budgeting Initiative in Lithuanian Schools)



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			Need for Expert Knowledge on Climate Transformation (8236 Kraków Citizens' Assembly)
Group 3: Public Participation Mechanisms	Public Participation Mechanisms		Major Infrastructure Investment (8290 Poznań Deliberative Polling for Stadium Management)
			Need for Transparent Budget Processes (Participatory Budgeting in Tartu)
	Legislative and Policy Frameworks		Need for Comprehensive National Vision (Latvia's Sustainable Development Strategy)
			Regulatory Gaps in Participation (OSALE Public Consultation Platform)
Group 4: Historical Context and Legacy Issues	Historical Context and Legacy Issues		Historical Marginalisation of Roma (7391 Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma Issues)
			Historical Exclusion from Decision-Making (Sopot Participatory Budgeting Initiative)
	Crisis Response and Recovery		Response to Economic Challenges (Latvia's Sustainable Development Strategy)
			Need for Improved Infrastructure (5583 Maribor Participatory Budgeting Initiative)
	Challenges of Implementation		Initial Resistance and Resource Constraints (7815 Warsaw Participatory Budgeting)
			Previous Platform Limitations (OSALE Public Consultation Platform)
Group 5: Economic Challenges and Governance	Economic Challenges and Budgeting		Economic Context of Austerity (Sopot Participatory Budgeting Initiative)
			High Unemployment Rates (8289 Kaposvár Deliberative Polling)
	Community and Local Governance		Community Concerns over Costs (8290 Poznań Deliberative Polling for Stadium Management)
			Desire for Sustainable Development (12918 Érd Citizens' Assembly)

Group 6: Environmental and Urban Planning Issues	Infrastructure and Urban Planning	Need for Modernisation of Public Transport (8239 Lublin Citizens' Assembly)
		Rainwater Management Challenges (8238 Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly)
	Environmental Concerns	Persistent Air Pollution Issues (8239 Lublin Citizens' Assembly)
		Impact on Local Ecosystems (8238 Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly)
Group 7: Democratic Participation and Discourse	Democratic Participation and Discourse	Scepticism Towards Democratic Participation (People's Assembly Initiative in Estonia)
		Polarised Societies (12790 International Initiative on Deliberative Participatory Processes)
	Democratic Innovations	Challenges of Diversity (12790 International Initiative on Deliberative Participatory Processes)
		EU Mandate for Citizen Panels (12790 International Initiative on Deliberative Participatory Processes)
Group 8: Social Justice and Inclusion	Social and Cultural Barriers	Social Stigma Against Bicycles (Bucharest Bicycle Movement)
		Lack of Trust in Official Data (7391 Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma Issues)
	Social Justice and Inclusion	Need for Informed Policy Solutions (7391 Bulgarian Deliberative Poll on Roma Issues)
		Diminished Trust in Government (Public Participation Enhancement Initiative in Latvia)
Group 9: Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches	Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches	Lack of Expert Consensus (8238 Gdańsk Citizens' Assembly)
		Demand for Collaborative Solutions (8236 Kraków Citizens' Assembly)
	Educational Initiatives and Knowledge Sharing	Limited Understanding of Public Finances (12508 Participatory Budgeting Initiative in Lithuanian Schools)
		Growing Public Interest (8239 Lublin Citizens' Assembly)

	Group 10: Systemic Challenges and Reform	Systemic Challenges	Previous Ineffectiveness of Anti-Corruption Measures (Croatian Anti-Corruption Strategy Development)
			Historical Disconnect Between Government and Citizens (OSALE Public Consultation Platform)
		Governance Innovation and Reform	Previous Attempts at Reform Lacking Effectiveness (Romanian Constitutional Forum)
			Need for Systematic Solutions (Public Participation Enhancement Initiative in Latvia)

Northern Europe

The Northern Europe region, as defined for the horizon scanning research purposes of the YouthDecide 2040 project, followed the original classification as was used in the project proposal. Thus, this region includes the following countries: Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and it was decided to include Participedia entries from Iceland and Norway in the analysis, given these countries' integration with the European Economic Area. The Participedia 'cases' database contained 54 narrative entries of projects from these countries that were used in the regional analysis (see table 6).

Table 5 - Participedia Cases for Region Northern Europe

Participedia Cases for Region Northern Europe	
Denmark	34
Sweden	4
Finland	9
Iceland	6
Norway	1

The textual analysis identified 9 top-level Groups, each containing 2-3 related clusters of localised context factors identified in the Participedia entries for the projects.

Group 1: Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy

There are many ways to recognise and address a gap or reduction in public trust: participatory budgeting (Haninge, Sweden), Crowdsourcing Legislative process as attempted in Finland, and citizen assemblies (e.g. Iceland's constitutional assembly) or citizen juries. Some projects aimed at more systemic change, like the constitutional reform effort of the Icelandic Constitutional assembly, while others were more topic-specific, like crowd-sourcing specific areas of traffic law. Common causes of these initiatives are noted citizen *dis*engagement, a policy process that is slow, unresponsive, or unable to act, or the recognition of disconnection between public officials and citizen opinion.

Factor Clusters:

- Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy
- Democratic Innovation and Citizen Empowerment

Group 2: Participation and Civic Engagement

It is unsurprising to find a lack of participation and engagement listed as reasons for participatory projects. At the same time, looking at the topics in which citizen engagement was pursued provides some insights into the scales of participation that are at stake. For instance, the Danish Citizens Climate Assembly was aimed at citizens to actively help with the formulation of actionable recommendations for national climate change policy. However, in examining the Metsähallitus Feedback Platform for Hikers, we find participation fostered by members of an interest group (hikers) to build a community of responsibility with regard to very specific interests (the care and condition of a shared commons).

Factor Clusters:

- Participation and Citizen Engagement



- Civic Engagement and Community Involvement

Group 3: Legislative and Policy Challenges

Legislative deadlock was one challenging condition that motivated attempts to crowdsource the crafting of laws and policies. At the same time, legislative ambiguity or inconsistency, particularly with regard to the interpretation and adherence to intranational policy within a national or local context, was also a condition that motivated participatory projects like the Consensus Conference on Electronic Surveillance.

Factor Clusters:

- Legislative and Policy Challenges

Group 4: Technological Integration and Innovation

Taking a participatory approach to the consideration of innovative technologies was the focus of a couple of projects, with the Consensus Conference on Gene Therapy (Norway) being an excellent example. Using the consensus conference model, policy makers can learn about different possible models for the integration of innovative technologies or methods, and approach recommendations through informed citizen dialogue.

Factor Clusters:

- Environmental Awareness and Policy
- Environmental Awareness and Social Responsibility

Group 5: Public Discourse and Media Dynamics

There are a number of Northern European projects that illustrate how media influences and trends in new media systems motivated the need for more direct citizen engagement and informed public discourse. For example, two of the deliberative polls conducted focused on correcting widespread misunderstandings of the EU's role and the EU relationship attributed to superficial or inadequate media representations of these issues (e.g. the Danish Deliberative Poll on Joining the Euro). Additionally, concerns regarding expert-led decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic were in focus during citizen assemblies (e.g. Citizens Assembly on restrictions and recommendations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Finland)).

Factor Clusters:

- Feedback Mechanisms and Responsiveness
- Public Discourse and Media Influence

Group 6: Historical Context and Political Dynamics

As two of the countries in the Northern European data set are not in the EU, the historical relationship between those countries and the EU is one of the key factors that has motivated some of these projects. Particularly, in Denmark, past and current experiences with EU policy and its interpretation have caused some divisions and changed the political landscape with respect to issues like joining the eurozone (e.g. Deliberative Poll on Joining the Euro). For many Icelandic projects (e.g. Icelandic National Assembly), the Financial Crisis of 2008 had an impact that motivated citizen assemblies and constitutional reform.

Factor Clusters:

- Historical Context and Political Dynamics
- Emergence of New Participatory Approaches

Group 7: Frameworks for Decision-Making

A number of projects included elements of reforming how decisions are made, by whom and on whose behalf. The Citizens' Jury on Referendum Options in Korsholm provides a good example of this, as the project recognised preexisting political polarisation conditions and instigated the Citizens Jury as a way to hold structured dialogues between the groups. The Consensus Conference model is also an approach that springs from the need to reformulate who is able to discuss and debate policy-relevant topics and provide a structure to remedy previous decision processes.

Factor Clusters:

- Frameworks for Decision-Making
- Decision Frameworks
- Policy Development and Recommendations

Group 8: Social Issues and Inclusivity

There are a number of social and economic challenges that have prompted the Northern European projects. Marginalisation of population (e.g. Participatory Budgeting in Haninge) , public scepticism and social trust issues (e.g. Crowd Sourcing Off-Road Traffic Law (Finland), and prevalent sentiment towards the impact and utility of various kinds of resources (e.g. Skånepanelen Citizen Panel (Sweden)) mark just some of those social challenges that led to experiments to broaden democratic inclusivity.

Factor Clusters:

- Social Issues and Community Concerns
- Societal Challenges and Inclusivity

Table 6 - Analysis Results: Northern Europe Factors, Factor Clusters, and Groups

European Region	Group	Factor Cluster	Sample Factors
European Region: (Northern Europe)	Group 1: Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy	Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy	Legitimacy of Citizen Voices (Icelandic National Assembly)
			Growing Distrust in Political Elites (4243)
		Democratic Innovation and Citizen Empowerment	Grassroots Movement for Democracy (Better Reykjavik Platform)
	Group 2: Participation and Civic Engagement		Need for Inclusivity and Accountability (Icelandic Constitutional Assembly)
		Participation and Citizen Engagement	Engagement of Marginalised Populations (4243)
			Need for Balanced Information (6437)
		Civic Engagement and Community Involvement	Need for Public Feedback on Services (7353)
	Group 3: Legislative and Policy Challenges		Commitment to Carbon Neutrality Goals (13255)
		Legislative and Policy Challenges	Need for Resource Prioritisation (4243)
	Group 4: Technological Integration and Innovation		Unclear Laws Surrounding EU Migrants (5923)
		Technological Integration in Governance	Increased Use of ICT (1445)
	Group 5: Environmental Awareness and Social Responsibility		Online Platforms for Public Consultation (Icelandic Constitutional Reform Through Crowdsourcing)
		Environmental Awareness and Policy	Growing Concern About Noise Pollution (6942)
			Urgent Need for Climate Action (8007)
		Environmental Awareness and Social Responsibility	Need for Clarity on EU Relations (7315)
	Group 6: Public Discourse and Media Dynamics		Testing the Consensus Conference Model (6942)
		Feedback Mechanisms and Responsiveness	Need for Real-Time Feedback (6853)
			Insufficient Information (7310)
			Polarised Public Debate (6942)



Group 7: Historical Context and Political Dynamics	Public Discourse and Media Influence	Widespread Misunderstanding of EU Roles (7313)
	Historical Context and Political Dynamics	Political Polarisation (7314)
	Emergence of New Participatory Approaches	Response to Economic Collapse (Icelandic National Assembly)
		Innovative Use of Technology (Icelandic Constitutional Reform)
Group 8: Frameworks for Decision-Making		Historical Context of Political Protests (Better Reykjavik Platform)
	Frameworks for Decision-Making	Research-Driven Approach (6437)
		Importance of Expert Consultation (13255)
		Framework Development for Environmental Policies (6943)
Group 9: Social Issues and Inclusivity		Call for Citizen-Led Constitutional Revision (Icelandic Constitutional Reform Through Crowdsourcing)
	Policy Development and Recommendations	Public Knowledge Gaps on Climate Issues (8007)
		Testing the CIR Model (6437)
	Social Issues and Community Concerns	Limited Awareness of Services (7353)
		Poverty as a Root Cause (5923)
	Societal Challenges and Inclusivity	Historical Exclusion of Marginalised Groups (8007)
		Growing Issue of Street Begging (5923)

Southern Europe

The Southern Europe region, as defined for the horizon scanning research purposes of the YouthDecide 2040 project, followed the original classification as was used in the project proposal. Thus, this region includes the following countries: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Malta. The Participedia 'cases' database contained 202 narrative entries of projects from these countries that were used in the regional analysis (see table X.X).

Table 7 - Participedia Cases for Region Southern Europe

Participedia Cases for Region Southern Europe	
Cyprus	1
Greece	6
Italy	146
Portugal	9
Malta	0
Spain	40

The textual analysis identified 10 top-level Groups, each containing 2-3 related clusters of context factors identified in the Participedia entries for the projects.

Group 1: Civic Society and Education

Across many projects in the Southern Europe region, differences in knowledge, skills and civic awareness are cited as reasons for social problems like a trust deficit, exclusionary practices, or low participation. In some projects then, formal and informal education is framed as a civic tool to empower marginalised or inexperienced groups (often youth) to act collectively (i.e. *Participatory Budgeting in Arezzo*); to supply factual knowledge so citizens can deliberate on sensitive or technical matters (*IntegrAzione*); or to transmit local history/identity, strengthening social bonds and motivation to engage (i.e. *Community Mapping Project*); and helping foster technical or administrative literacy (i.e. *the Multiyear Plan for Apennine Park*).

Factor Clusters:

- Civic Responsibility and Education
- Youth and Educational Initiatives

Group 2: Environment and Sustainability

While environmental sustainability is a shared motive among many project in the Southern Europe region, these projects often differ sharply in how they balance protection and justice for natural systems and ecologies with the desire and need for economic development. Some projects position themselves as solutions to the 'Green vs. Growth' conundrum (e.g. *The Wetland We Want*). Similarly, other projects position themselves as using sustainability and environmental care as vehicles for economic renewal (e.g. *Circularicity*). Increasing the liveability of metropolitan areas and city centres is another aspect of this cluster with lots of



project reference points, such as the *ECOCITY* project and the *PUMS Sustainable Mobility Plan*, among others.

Factor Clusters:

- Environmental Justice and Community
- Environmental Sustainability and Protection
- Economic Development and Sustainability

Group 3: Cultural Heritage and Identity

Some projects draw an important relationship between heritage and identity as learning vehicles for communities. This can include projects that use the historical or natural environment to establish a shared and plural sense of 'place' and often utilise shared stories as a strong source of civic engagement. Memory Mapping and storytelling projects (i.e. project *Esta Es Una Plaza* or the *Ventaglieri Social Park*) can help address prior social fragmentation and renew a shared sense of community identity. Finally, the adaptive reuse of iconic sites within a community is another mode of leveraging a community heritage place towards building civic pride and a new cultural or commercial activity centre (i.e. project *Airport: Let's Talk About It*).

Factor Clusters:

- Cultural and Historical Preservation
- Cultural Heritage and Identity Preservation

Group 4: Health and Society

The topics related to Health and its role in society are considered quite important across a number of projects, but can be framed quite differently, thus resulting in very different projects emerging. By looking at quality-of-life deficits as public health risks, communities might take up the participatory redesign of public spaces or collectively addressing urban pollution (i.e. project *ECOCITY*) with new green areas (i.e. *Ospizio District Planning*). Closely related, protecting the health of ecosystems and related 'services' is tied directly to human health by other projects (i.e. community stewardship of the *La Bufalina* reserve). These are quite different framings when compared to more direct approaches to human health maintenance through social services to tackle health-impacting issues like isolation, youth distress (i.e. *Montemurlo Designs Its Future*) or migrant marginalisation (i.e. project *IntegrAzione*).

Factor Clusters:

- Health and Social Services Integration
- Health and Well-Being Initiatives

Group 5: Digital Governance

In southern Europe, projects that are driven by forces of digitalization as used in governance and socio-political participation can vary quite widely across their approaches. In some cases, digitalisation or digital tools are being developed and deployed to facilitate deliberation and co-creation activities (i.e. *Turnómetro* or the *Digidem* guide). In other cases, digital platforms and tools (e.g. data dashboards, or online voting) are being used for more technical and operational governance, like participatory budgeting actions. Also, utilising digital tools as a mode of hybrid (online ⇌ offline) engagement and linking new groups together for collaboration towards common goals.

Factor Clusters:

- Digital Participation and E-Governance

Group 6: Urban Development

Urban development and revitalisation projects are a distinct thematic factor driving participatory approaches to governance in Southern Europe. Across many cases, the starting-point is a visible “urban malaise”: abandoned buildings, run-down squares, traffic-choked districts or socially empty spaces that may be indicative of other social ills like social fragmentation, a flagging economy, or obsolete infrastructure. Participatory approaches are viewed as a source of highly localised knowledge and awareness of micro-needs (i.e. *Ospizio District Green Plan*) while also being an opportunity to rebuild or repair social trust and legitimacy (i.e. project *Porto le Mie Idee*). Some projects also noted that legal requirements for participatory citizen engagement played a role in the project's inception (i.e. *Fontivegge Redevelopment*), or that a change in political conditions (i.e. a new mayor or funding source).

Factor Clusters:

- Urban Planning and Revitalisation

Group 7: Public Participation and Transparency

Across the data from the Southern Europe region, many initiatives arose because communities felt decision-making processes affecting them were opaque, that budgets were unintelligible, or that access was being denied to the public to review critical information (i.e. *KME Pyrogasifier*). Participation in some cases was adopted less to “add voices” than to rebuild credibility: making data public (i.e. *Termoli Historic-Centre Project*), obliging officials to answer questions in real time (i.e. *TAP pipeline – Italy*), and tying final decisions to records that everyone can inspect (i.e. *Opengov.gr* platform). A mix of participatory approaches was deployed, including formal ‘public debate’ procedures, digital transparency platforms, citizen committees or assemblies, and citizen juries to provide balanced briefings at town meetings.

Factor Clusters:

- Public Participation and Democracy
- Public Accountability and Transparency
- Communication and Information Accessibility

Group 8: Community and Social Justice

Many projects in the Southern European regional countries share a diagnosis that conventional institutions have reproduced or ignored economic and social inequalities. Historical shocks such as financial crises, factory shutdowns (i.e. *manufacturing closure in Rivalta*), and austerity budgets (i.e. *participatory budgeting in Cascais*), combined with issues like chronic exclusions (i.e. Roma populations, small farmers, or residents from polluted districts) create legitimacy gaps that participatory governance approaches aim to address. These participatory experiments range from advisory citizen assemblies to full worker-owned enterprises (i.e. *Mondragón Cooperative Model*) but generally seek to redistribute political agency and material resources; build collective capacities to strengthen communities, and recentre problem solving on the voices and knowledge of

those who are most affected.

Factor Clusters:

- Community Resilience and Empowerment
- Inequality and Social Justice
- Social and Economic Disparities

Group 9: Political Legitimacy

Many projects cite a problem or 'crisis' of legitimacy as an impetus for attempting a new participatory governance project. These problems are linked to various signals like falling electoral turnout or youth disengagement (i.e. *eDialogos*, or *PASOK Polling* projects), new political movements or street protests (i.e. *Decidim/Barcelona en Comú* or the *Deliberatorium* after the success of Italy's Five-Star party), scandals or opaque behaviour (i.e. *OpenParlamento*), or structural under-representation of certain groups (i.e. *Children's Council in Móstoles*). Participatory approaches are viewed as potentially making decision pathways more open to inputs and transparent while reducing top-down governance models, testing support, and fostering information and procedural 'neutrality' through randomised assemblies (i.e. Town Meeting on Tuscany's Landscape Plan).

Factor Clusters:

- Crisis of Political Legitimacy
- Participatory Governance and Engagement

Table 8 - Analysis Results: Northern Europe Factors, Factor Clusters, and Groups

European Region	Group	Factor Cluster	Sample Factors
European Region: (Southern Europe)	Group 1	Civic Responsibility and Education	Desire for Direct Citizen Involvement (126) Lack of Awareness of Local Governance (101)
		Youth and Educational Initiatives	Focus on Intergenerational Connectivity (136) Youth Climate Assembly (7345)
	Group 2	Environmental Justice and Community	Public Health and Environmental Concerns (6101) Access to Green Spaces (6795)
		Environmental Sustainability and Protection	Need for Comprehensive Landscape Management (4788) Climate Change Vulnerability (5222)
		Economic Development and Sustainability	Underutilisation of Historical Buildings (468) Need for Socio-Economic Development (102)
	Group 3	Cultural and Historical Preservation	Desire for Cultural Identity (6795) Historical Context of Cultural Heritage (40)
		Cultural Heritage and Identity Preservation	Lack of Awareness of Local Heritage (101) Inclusion of Marginalised Voices (6199)
	Group 4	Health and Social Services Integration	Quality of Life Concerns (101) Declining Public Health Resources (644)
		Health and Well-Being Initiatives	Recognition of Mental Health Needs (6101) Need for Comprehensive Health Strategies (6101)
	Group 5	Digital Participation and E-Governance	Disconnect Between Online and Offline Participation (1153) Need for Technological Modernisation (5174)
	Group 6	Urban Planning and Revitalisation	Lack of Citizen Input in Urban Planning (101) Desire for Enhanced Liveability (112)



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Group 7	Public Participation and Democracy	Need for Inclusive Decision-Making (98)
		Lack of Public Consultation (87)
		Lack of Trust in Authorities (6257)
		Limited Opportunities for Participation (466)
		Ineffective Communication Channels (6260)
Group 8	Public Accountability and Transparency Communication and Information Accessibility	Digital Participation Deficiencies (1153)
		Desire for Intergenerational Exchange (558)
		Historical Context of Disconnection (6301)
		Worker Exploitation (82)
		Underrepresentation of Marginalised Groups (104)
Group 9	Community Resilience and Empowerment Social and Economic Disparities Inequality and Social Justice	Rising Xenophobia (89)
		Limited Citizen Control Over Local Budgets (422)
		Crisis of Political Legitimacy
		Weakness of Mass Primaries (40)
		Lack of Trust in Authorities (6257)
	Participatory Governance and Engagement	Desire for Local Governance (94)
		Absence of Governance (4909)

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Western Europe

The Western Europe region, as defined for the horizon scanning research purposes of the YouthDecide 2040 project, followed the original classification as was used in the project proposal. Thus, this region includes the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The Participedia ‘cases’ database contained 319 narrative entries of projects from these countries that were used in the regional analysis (see table X.X).

Table 9 - Participedia Cases for Region Western Europe

Participedia Cases for Region Western Europe	
Austria	30
Belgium	60
France	57
Germany	132
Ireland	14
Luxembourg	2
Netherlands	24

The textual analysis identified 8 top-level Groups, each containing 1-5 related clusters of context factors identified in the Participedia entries for the projects.

Group 1: Societal Discontent and Political Engagement

Societal discontent, political dynamics, and challenges in engagement and representation may be driving public demand for new forms of involvement and trust-building to strengthen democracy and participatory processes. For example, G1000 (Belgium) was initiated in response to a severe political crisis by introducing large-scale citizen deliberation to supplement representative democracy and rebuild legitimacy. High School Participatory Budget (France) is another initiative that addresses low trust and youth disengagement by giving students and school communities real power over budget decisions, boosting transparency and inclusion. Similarly, Ireland’s Participatory Democracy Pilot “We the Citizens” followed the 2008 financial crisis, testing whether deliberative assemblies could restore confidence in political institutions. These initiatives show that even as challenges of influence and representation remain, meaningful political responses to discontent can strengthen democratic resilience and public trust.

Factor Clusters:

- Societal Discontent and Demand for Engagement
- Government and Political Dynamics
- Political Engagement and Representation Challenges
- Political and Governance Challenges

Group 2: Community Engagement and Support Systems

Strong civic engagement in the community and among diverse stakeholders, together with a strong policy support system, plays a crucial role in shaping democratic participation and governance, as well as closing public awareness and education gaps. In Citizens’ Forum

Europe (Germany), far-reaching online and in-person deliberation not only allowed citizens to set priorities for Europe's future but also revealed persistent barriers for less-educated or less-connected groups to meaningfully shape outcomes. Neighbourhood Aid during COVID-19 in Zurich (Switzerland) showed how local solidarity and mutual support networks can fill gaps left by the actions of formal institutions, so that vulnerable and isolated populations are not left on the sidelines of democratic processes. Similarly, the Leefbaarheidsbudget Participatory Budgeting in Utrecht (Netherlands) is an example of citizens' empowerment to directly allocate resources for their neighbourhood that led to an increase in participation and sense of ownership. However, ongoing tracing is needed to ensure that all voices — including those of marginalised populations — are heard and that the intended benefits reach the entire community.

Factor Clusters:

- Community and Civic Engagement
- Diverse Stakeholder Representation
- Public Awareness and Education Gaps
- Community Resilience and Support Systems

Group 3: Environmental and Sustainability Concerns

Environmental awareness and sustainability concerns have prompted more participatory approaches to policy creation, making collaboration a vital part of democratic processes. In Sustainable Development through Dialogue (Switzerland), public discussions around land management and sustainability led to more balanced and adaptive decision-making with greater perceived legitimacy for environmental policies, as community members contributed to shaping local land use strategies. Similarly, the Climate-Neutral Switzerland 2040 initiative used broad public engagement to set future climate goals, creating a sense of shared responsibility and trust in government action.

Factor Clusters:

- Environmental Awareness and Sustainability

Group 4: Historical Context and Cultural Identity

Historical context, legacy issues, and cultural identity have a noticeable influence on democracy by shaping how communities address past traumas, represent diverse interests, and negotiate development. In the Region of Consciousness (Austria), the legacy of the Nazi regime required tactful, multi-stakeholder engagement to determine the future of concentration camp sites, illustrating how historical injustices demand inclusive dialogue and careful memorialization to avoid future tensions and resentment. As opposed to this, the Radioactive Waste Management Plan (Belgium) was an example of how closed-door historical decision-making on controversial issues led to distrust and controversy, which nevertheless prompted a shift toward public and expert consultation to ensure transparency and social acceptance for high-stakes policy in the future. The example of "Dresdner Debatte" on the Neumarkt Redesign (Germany) demonstrated that implementing this approach in urban planning, especially where cultural heritage is contested, can open new channels for communication, strengthen public engagement, and enhance the democratic capacity of local institutions.

Factor Clusters:

- Historical Context and Legacy Issues
- Cultural Heritage and Historical Context
- Diverse Stakeholder Representation

Group 5: Ethical Considerations and Transparency

In Western Europe, ethical and privacy concerns, cultural shifts, and demands for transparency and accountability have had a profound effect on democratic and participatory processes. In the *National Consultation on Handling Genetic Data* (Switzerland), robust public dialogue about privacy, consent, and data protection created a more informed and accepted policy, demonstrating how open engagement can build legitimacy and trust in governance. By contrast, as exemplified in the *Referendum on the "Lange Wapper" Viaduct* in Antwerp (Belgium), a lack of transparency and poor communication in urban planning can erode public trust, resulting in contested decisions and ongoing dissatisfaction even after direct citizen input. Similarly, the *Online Consultation on Higher Education in North Rhine-Westphalia* (Germany) leveraged open digital platforms to make legislative processes more transparent and inclusive, but still faced challenges in ensuring broad, representative participation. Together, these examples highlight that addressing ethical and societal concerns with genuine transparency and inclusive dialogue can strengthen democratic legitimacy, trust, participation, but not without support from other governance activities.

Factor Clusters:

- Ethical Considerations and Societal Impact
- Cultural and Societal Shifts
- Demands for Transparency and Accountability
- Public Trust and Transparency
- Ethical and Privacy Concerns

Group 6: Economic Pressures and Social Issues

Economic pressures on citizens and related social issues (education, health, food, etc.) have driven some communities in Western Europe to launch more participatory approaches to social governance issues. In *Participating Budget, Freiburg* (Germany), fiscal constraints prompted direct citizen involvement in budget decisions, fostering transparency but also revealing persistent gaps in representation. *The Citizens' Dialogue on Political Disenchantment* (France) addressed rising living costs and community development challenges by engaging citizens in seeking practical solutions. This approach helped rebuild some public trust in government, but that result was limited as economic anxieties remained high. The *Leefbaarheidsbudget Participatory Budgeting* (Netherlands), on the other hand, empowered residents to allocate resources for neighbourhood improvement, boosting ownership and participation while highlighting the ongoing need to ensure marginalised voices are heard. Together, these cases show that participatory responses to economic and social pressures can strengthen democratic legitimacy and responsiveness, but their impact relies on ongoing efforts to ensure equity, transparency, and broad inclusion.

Factor Clusters:

- Economic Pressures and Financial Constraints
- Social Issues and Community Welfare

Group 7: Crises and crisis management

Cases analysed in the Western Europe region presented a number of community concerns over the preparations and responses to different types of 'crises', including natural disasters, service disruptions, rapid shifts in local demographics, and ongoing inequities in political representation and inclusion. For instance, in the *Refugee Summit* (Germany), structured dialogue and community engagement were used to address public anxiety and misinformation during a growing influx of refugees (labelled a 'crisis' by some), demonstrating that inclusive processes can produce more balanced and accepted integration policies. In response to the popular perception of an urgent need for climate action the *Climate-Neutral Switzerland 2040 initiative* (Switzerland) mobilised diverse stakeholders in participatory policymaking, fostering political legitimacy and shared responsibility for ambitious national goals. Meanwhile, amidst EU scepticism and a perceived crisis of representation, the *Citizens' Forum Europe* (Germany) was launched using large-scale online deliberation to reconnect citizens with decision-making. However, it was noted that *Citizen Forum Europe* also revealed the persistent challenge of ensuring that public input leads to real political impact.

Factor Clusters:

- Crisis Management and Response Needs
- Health and Safety Concerns
- Challenges and Crises
- Crisis of Political Representation
- Integration and Inclusion Challenges

Group 8: Technology

This group is composed of two different aspects of technology – the use of technology for participatory governance and the use of participatory methods to address technologies. The public discussion and deliberation regarding technological advancements and innovations have also been a focal area for new forms of democratic participation. On one hand, the *GAMBA Patient and Citizen Panels* (Germany) used digital forums alongside in-person meetings to include citizens and patients in evaluating health research and innovations. This was done, in part, to improve public trust and create transparency in scientific decision-making for research with health benefits but with additional uncertainties and risks. Furthermore, by using a hybrid online and in-person approach to citizen engagement, the initiative aimed to make the proceedings more accessible, transparent, and responsive. On the other side of this group, the *Digital Civic Participation in Urban Planning* (Switzerland) project used digital platforms to enable broader and more diverse resident involvement in shaping local urban development. Their stated purpose was to streamline feedback and allow real-time collaboration between citizens and city planners. The use of digital platforms and new media is not unique to the Western Europe region, but it is noteworthy that digital access and affordability are factor in weighing participatory options.

Factor Clusters:

- Technological Advancements and Innovations

Table 10 - Analysis Results: Northern Europe Factors, Factor Clusters, and Groups

European Region	Group	Factor Cluster	Sample Factors
European Region: (Western Europe)	Group 1: Societal Discontent and Political Engagement	Societal Discontent and Demand for Engagement	Growing refugee crisis (5383): An increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum raised public concerns and required a structured governmental response.
			Public disconnection from agricultural policies (7257): Citizens felt alienated from decisions affecting agriculture, prompting the need for inclusive discussion.
			Desire for direct democracy (7286): Growing demand for implementing direct democratic features at the community level to enhance citizen participation.
		Political Engagement and Representation Challenges	Response to radicalisation concerns (4970): The initiative was launched to address youth radicalisation and promote community reconciliation.
			Federal-local tensions (4297): Disagreements between federal authorities and local residents regarding memorial protection created a need for mediation and public engagement.
		Government and Political Dynamics	Desire for political transparency (12): Citizens sought more transparency in the decision-making processes affecting their lives within the EU.
			Political disillusionment (7251): The rejection of the European Constitution highlighted the need to restore public trust in the EU through participatory initiatives.
		Political and Governance Challenges	Historical context of limited citizen engagement (4162): Previous governance models often excluded



Group Community Engagement and Support Systems	2:	Community and Civic Engagement	citizens from meaningful participation in local decision-making, leading to demands for change.
			Focus on quality of life issues (7264): There was a pressing need to address concerns related to children, education, and civic participation in the region.
		Community Resilience and Support Systems	Community involvement in urban planning (13044): The project sought to include local residents and stakeholders in discussions about the future of their neighbourhood.
			Vulnerability during COVID-19 (6432): The pandemic forced vulnerable individuals, especially the elderly, into isolation, increasing their need for community support.
		Diverse Stakeholder Representation	Importance of family involvement (7289): The role of family in education was highlighted as crucial for fostering a supportive learning environment.
			Need for balanced development (6863): Recognition of the importance of balancing development needs with environmental sustainability created momentum for the initiative.
		Public Awareness and Education Gaps	Importance of integrating expert knowledge (972): The project aimed to combine citizen opinions with expert insights to develop balanced urban planning proposals.
			Need for civic education (5383): The government aimed to enhance public understanding and empathy for refugees through citizen involvement in policy discussions.
			Desire for knowledge sharing (4538): Gathering practitioners and experts aimed to exchange best

Group 3: Environmental and Sustainability Concerns	Environmental Sustainability Awareness and	practices and inspire new methods for public participation. Increasing awareness of land management (6863): Growing public interest in sustainable land use practices prompted the need for community discussions on this topic.
Group 4: Historical Context and Cultural Identity	Historical Context and Legacy Issues	Need for innovative transport solutions (6864): The complexity of mobility issues necessitated diverse perspectives to develop effective and sustainable transportation strategies.
		Legacy of Nazi regime (4297): The historical presence of Nazi concentration camps necessitated a thoughtful approach to their future use and memorialisation.
		Historical closed-door discussions (1110): Previous decisions were made without public involvement, resulting in distrust and contention among stakeholders.
	Cultural Heritage and Historical Context	Historical context of cultural identity (972): The legacy of WWII destruction shaped discussions about cultural heritage and urban identity in Dresden. Impact of metro construction on local life (13044): Ongoing construction work for a new metro line significantly affected local traders and residents, prompting the need for community input.
5. Diverse Stakeholder Representation		Demand for consumer involvement (7257): There was a growing recognition that consumers should have a say in shaping agricultural practices and policies. Importance of integrating expert knowledge (972): The project aimed to combine citizen opinions with expert insights to develop balanced urban planning proposals.

Group 5: Ethical Considerations and Transparency	Ethical Considerations and Societal Impact	Need for public input on policy (6874): The government recognised the importance of including citizen perspectives in discussions about genetic data handling.
		Focus on ethical considerations (973): The conference aimed to explore ethical dimensions of healthcare access and prioritisation in public policy.
	Public Trust and Transparency	Need for transparency in higher education policy (4161): The initiative aimed to involve stakeholders in discussions about the amendment to the Higher Education Act in Germany.
		Growing distrust in voting (8016): Increasing scepticism about the voting process and democratic institutions prompted the need for a deeper understanding of voting's significance.
	Cultural and Societal Shifts	Generational conflict (4297): Different views on the significance of the history between older and younger generations highlighted the need for inclusive dialogue.
		Focus on children and youth (7271): Proposals from local juries targeted improvements for children and youth, reflecting community priorities.
	Ethical and Privacy Concerns	Lack of clear guidelines (6874): The absence of established protocols for genetic data collection and analysis necessitated a formal deliberative process.
		Need for informed citizenry (617): The project sought to educate citizens about health care options and encourage their input on important medical issues.
	Demands for Transparency and Accountability	Public demand for participatory governance (7255): Citizens expected to be involved in shaping policies that affect their environmental and energy futures.

Group 6: Economic Pressures and Social Issues	6:	Economic Pressures and Financial Constraints	Desire for political transparency (12): Citizens sought more transparency in the decision-making processes affecting their lives within the EU.
			Need for citizen understanding of budgeting (5801): Aimed to enhance public knowledge about municipal budgeting processes due to financial challenges.
			Rising living costs (7283): Citizens sought solutions for affordable housing and community development amid increasing living expenses.
			Challenges facing youth (7292): Increasing concerns about youth opportunities and support prompted discussions on creating favourable conditions for young people.
Group 7: (ME) Crises and crisis management	7:	Crisis Management and Response Needs	Urgent renovation need (4169): The facility required immediate renovations to maintain safety and functionality for the public, highlighting community welfare concerns.
			Growing refugee crisis (5383): An increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum raised public concerns and required a structured governmental response.
			Urgent need for climate action (8365): Growing concerns about climate change prompted calls for a participatory approach to develop effective climate policies.
			Growing demand for participatory governance (7264): Citizens increasingly expected involvement in shaping policies that affect their lives and communities.
Group 8: (ME) Crisis of Political Representation	8:	Crisis of Political Representation	Desire for educational improvements (7283): Concerns about education quality and access spurred discussions on how to enhance educational policies.

Group Technology	8:	Technological Innovations	Advancements	and	Health and Safety Concerns	<p>Need for improved public safety (13042): Concerns about traffic safety prompted a re-evaluation of road design and usage in redevelopment projects.</p> <p>Health impact assessment necessity (5121): The initiative sought to include voices of marginalised populations in assessing potential health impacts of planned infrastructure projects.</p>
					Integration and Inclusion Challenges	<p>Public demand for a structured integration approach (7295): Citizens sought a systematic way to address integration through community discussions and recommendations.</p> <p>Recognition of diverse perspectives (7295): The initiative aimed to include various viewpoints, including those of asylum seekers, to inform integration policies.</p>
					Challenges and Crises	<p>Public health concerns (4972): Residents feared health and environmental risks from increased vehicular traffic through the tunnel, prompting demands for consultations.</p> <p>Vulnerability during COVID-19 (6432): The pandemic forced vulnerable individuals, especially the elderly, into isolation, increasing their need for community support.</p>
						<p>Role of social media (6432): The use of social media to spread the initiative helped mobilise community members and encourage participation in supporting others.</p>
						<p>Integration of innovative solutions (12963): Participants expressed a desire for forward-thinking strategies, including digitalisation and better resource utilisation.</p>

Future Europe

The 'Future' Europe region, as defined for the horizon scanning research purposes of the YouthDecide 2040 project, followed the original classification as was used in the project proposal. Thus, this region includes the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The Participedia 'cases' database contained only 16 narrative entries of projects from these countries that could be used in the regional analysis (see table X.X). The low sample size draws the following results into question, and thus the Future Europe analysis should be flagged as inconclusive. The same process as described for the other European regions was applied, and the results are as follows.

Table 11 - Participedia Cases for Region 'Future' Europe

Participedia Cases for Region 'Future' Europe	
Albania	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
Georgia	1
Moldova	1
North Macedonia	1
Serbia	1
Türkiye	8
Ukraine	2

The textual analysis identified 3 top-level Groups, each containing 3-4 related clusters of context factors identified in the Participedia entries for the projects.

Group 1: Civic Engagement and Governance

Openness to civic engagement and participation, as well as accountability towards citizens, are cornerstones of democratic governance. Lack of transparency and accountability can have serious implications for trust, effectiveness, and legitimacy, especially where more vulnerable population groups are concerned. This can be seen as the reason for the introduction of such initiatives as the 2015-2019 Strategic Plan of Kadiköy (Turkey) and the Budget Monitor Portal for Public Engagement (Georgia) that reflect a public desire to scrutinise decisions and ensure authorities act in the public interest. Ineffective communication and local political conflicts may hinder engagement and cause barriers for inclusivity, further reinforcing existing historical distrust, with Participatory Capital Investment Program (Albania) serving as an example. Another vital issue is insufficient political representation of youth, female citizens and victims of war, gender-related violence and previous government mismanagement (e.g. Sarajevo's True Stories Market, Women's Forum and Local Workshop for Gender Equality in Kadiköy, Turkey). Lack of knowledge and resources to participate meaningfully results in disengagement and discontent among these groups. Initiatives for community empowerment like the Moldovan Network of Rural Volunteering Centres for Water, show that increased participation and oversight can drive



more equitable and effective governance, while failure to allocate resources transparently or equitably can deepen inequalities and prolong crises.

Factor Clusters:

- Citizen Engagement and Participation
- Civic Education and Awareness
- Governance and Accountability

Group 2: Global Concerns and Constraints

Global concerns that impact citizens' health and economic power, as well as the constraints on urban development and environmental safety, can profoundly shape the state of democracy and public participation. When limited local budgets or resource shortages adversely affect communities, as seen in initiatives like *Otpor! Student Non-violent Mobilisation for Democracy* (Serbia), citizens may feel the need to mobilise for political change, but continuous engagement can be challenging without institutional support. Environmental and health concerns, such as insufficient infrastructure and safety issues highlighted in *Promoting Utility Cycling in Urban Transportation* (Turkey) and Improving Women's Access to Public Transport through *TOPUK Project* (Turkey), can lead to the exclusion of certain groups from public participation if inclusivity is lacking. Furthermore, urban growth and unplanned development, as highlighted by the *Sarıyer Development Action Plan* (Turkey), can create social tensions and erode trust in democratic governance if residents are not actively included in decision-making.

Factor Clusters:

- Health and Safety Concerns
- Environmental and Health Initiatives
- Economic and Resource Constraints
- Urban Planning and Development

Group 3: Cultural, Social and Political Dialogue

Measures aimed at youth empowerment, civic education, collaborative planning, and dialogue in local governance tend to achieve more responsive, inclusive, and accountable democratic outcomes. For example, the *Macedonia Deliberative Poll* (North Macedonia) demonstrates how structured public discussion and education can bridge political divides and increase informed citizen participation, ultimately paving the way towards government reform. Similarly, the case of a *Participatory Urban Planning Workshop for Kadife Street* in Kadikoy (Turkey) shows that nurturing dialogue and mutual understanding among stakeholders during urbanisation and space usage conflicts results in collaborative solutions and higher public trust. The *Promoting Utility Cycling in Urban Transportation initiative* (Turkey) highlights how integrating diverse community actors, especially in response to ecological and health concerns, can enable innovative, widely supported urban policies. Whenever civic engagement and cultural context are thoughtfully addressed in governance, democracy is strengthened at the local level.

Factor Clusters:

- Youth Engagement and Empowerment
- Conflict Resolution and Dialogue
- Cultural and Historical Context

Table 12 - Analysis Results: Northern Europe Factors, Factor Clusters, and Groups

European Region	Group	Factor Cluster	Sample Factors
European Region: 'Future' Europe	Group 1: Civic Engagement and Governance	Citizen Engagement and Participation Civic Education and Awareness Governance and Accountability	Lack of Female and Youth Participation (137)
			Ineffective Communication Channels (9997)
			Lack of Representation of Victims (6039)
			Community Awareness Gaps (9998)
			Lack of Transparency in Budget Processes (9997)
	Group 2: Global Concerns and Constraints	Health and Safety Concerns	Insufficient Implementation of Gender Equality Legislation (9993)
			Trauma and Healing Needs (6039)
		Environmental and Health Initiatives	Increase in Gender-Based Violence (9993)
			Insufficient Clean Water Access (1172)
		Economic and Resource Constraints	Commitment to Collaborative Urban Planning (9995)
			Limited Local Budgets (1172)
		Urban Planning and Development	Insufficient Resource Allocation (137)
			Inadequate Long-Term Planning (9994)
			Growth of Entertainment Venues (9995)
	Group 3: Youth Cultural, Social and Political Dialogue	Youth Engagement and Empowerment	Desire for Government Reform (8390)
			Need for Creative Protest (8200)
		Conflict Resolution and Dialogue	Need for Empathy and Understanding Among Stakeholders (9994)
			Divergent Views on Urban Space (9995)
		Cultural and Historical Context	Ethno-National Tensions (6039)
			Facilitating Dialogue (6039)



Discussion of Participedia Analysis Results

While the research team recognises some important caveats that must be considered when interpreting the analysis results, the results themselves remain worthy of consideration with respect to the goal of the horizon scanning: identifying conditions that motivate democratic experimentation. In this respect, the research provides an overview of motivating factors that have driven past or ongoing real practices in democratic participation. The research allows one to examine these factors at the regional scale and as trans-European phenomena, and as such, we think it provides a useful directing assessment and monitoring activities and a knowledge base of recognisable societal conditions for examining possible futures for democracy.

There are a few caveats that must be taken into account when considering the results of the Participedia analysis. Two of these caveats concern recognised errors that automated systems like FhGenie are prone to make, and the imperfect way the research team deployed to address these potential errors. Finally, the research team also noted the overrepresentation from some countries within regions, and an uneven number of cases reported between regions.

First, generative AI systems such as FhGenie are prone to several failures. Large Language Models are trained on huge corpora of textual data, drawing statistical relationships between words and ideas during the training process to build extremely complex models for the generation of responses. As such, the training data and processes can lead to 'hallucinations' - wherein the model creates fictitious results in response to the given query. In this analysis, some of the project-specific factors generated may be reflective of the automated system's efforts to respond to the original prompt query, as opposed to aligning more accurately with the project narrative. However, the research team has provided meticulous oversight to ensure that these occurrences are minimal and do not bear a decisive influence on the results.

As such, the research team was able to spot-check some of the localised context factors identified by FhGenie against the original project narrative description that was included in the Participedia database. In those cases that were checked, the identification of factors aligned relatively well with the factors identified through human analysis, even though the assessment of the automated factor identification with respect to human analysis was limited by the resources available for this task. Since this assessment did not follow a strict rubric, and the subjective, qualitative comparison hinged on the human analysts' judgment. This means that the subjective quality assessment of the automated analysis results may also be the source of inconsistencies between the real conditions that underlie each of the Participedia projects and the identified factors in the analysis.

Secondly, there is a large discrepancy between the different regions in terms of how many projects have been submitted and described on the Participedia platform. We believe that this discrepancy may be reflective of current realities regarding active experimentation with participatory forms of governance. At the same time, we would hedge this belief with speculation that a) not all experiments of this nature in Future Europe countries are being



recorded (on Participedia or elsewhere, and that b) there may be some status involved with certain countries having larger numbers of entries. It is difficult to know how widespread is knowledge of the Participedia platform, or if there are informal status markers attached to having entries there. That said, after organising and cleaning the data was completed, Western Europe had 320 entries, Southern Europe had 190 entries, Central and Eastern Europe had 28 entries, Northern Europe had 32 entries, and 'Future' European had 16 entries. As the Large Language Model is constructed on a much larger corpus of unrelated data, and the prompting and action chain for each region remained consistent, the research team decided to run the analysis on all available data within each region. This could be an explanation for the larger number of factor clusters and groups within Western and Southern Europe and the smaller number of each in 'Future' Europe.

Lastly, as can be seen in the results presented above, within each of the regions, there is a single country whose reported number of Participedia cases is substantially more than the rest of the region's countries. In Table 14, we present each of the regions' highest contributing countries, and the average number of cases within the regions excluding these countries. As shown, these outlier countries are self-reporting on average more than seven times the regional average.

Table 13 - Participedia Cases - Highest Contributor per region

Region	Highest Contributor, No.	Regional Avg. without top contributor
Central-Eastern Europe	Poland, 13	3
Northern Europe	Denmark, 34	5
Western Europe	Germany, 132	31
Southern Europe	Italy, 146	11
'Future' Europe	Türkiye, 8	1

The overrepresentation of a handful of countries in each region can distort the generation of clusters and groups. There is also the possibility that, owing to the prompts used in the generation of identified localised context factors from the text analysis, some projects may have falsely identified context factors attributed to them. While some quality assurance checks were made, comparing the identified factors with the texts within the Participedia database, it was not possible to validate every set of results and the associated project. The quality checks that were made, were on a case by case basis, ensuring that the factors identified were aligned with the project conditions as described. Rerunning analysis of regions without the highest contributor or attempting to control for these contributor discrepancies were not within the scope of this research. Future analysis of the results, particularly for countries with a small number of reporting cases, can determine the integrity of the factors, and to what degree factor clusters and regional groups remain representative of the region.

Recognising the above caveats, there remain potential useful insights offered by analysis of the results. Through a trans-European analysis of the results – comparing the research data across the five regions - the research team identified groups of factor clusters that resonate across the 5 regions (referred to below as 'common groups'), groups of factor clusters that are shared between some but not all regions (referred to below as 'shared groups'), and

some groups of factor clusters that seem unique to specific regions (referred to below as 'unique groups').

Table 14 - Trans-regional Analysis of the Participedia Analysis Results

Trans-Regional Analysis					
	Central-Eastern Europe	Northern Europe	Southern Europe	Western Europe	'Future' Europe
COMMON GROUPS					
Common group: A recognised need for increased civic engagement and participation	Group 2: Civic Engagement and Participation	Group 2: Participation and Civic Engagement	Group 1: Civic Society and Education Group 7: Public Participation and Transparency	Group 2: Community Engagement and Support Systems	Group 1: Civic Engagement and Governance
Common group: A weak sense of public trust, need for greater transparency to increase legitimacy of decisions	Group 1: Public Trust and Accountability	Group 1: Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy	Group 7: Public Participation and Transparency	Group 5: Ethical Considerations and Transparency	Group 1: Civic Engagement and Governance
Common group: Problems or issues that emerge from unique historical circumstances within a community	Group 4: Historical Context and Legacy Issues	Group 6: Historical Context and Political Dynamics	Group 3: Cultural Heritage and Identity	Group 4: Historical Context and Cultural Identity	Group 3: Cultural, Social and Political Dialogue
Common group: Need for greater discursive participation to increase perceived legitimacy	Group 7: Democratic Participation and Discourse	Group 1: Public Trust and Democratic Legitimacy	Group 9: Political Legitimacy	Group 1: Societal Discontent and Political Engagement	Group 3: Cultural, Social and Political Dialogue
SHARED GROUPS					
Shared Group: Issues concerning the built and/or natural environment,	Group 6: Environmental and Urban Planning Issues	Group 4: Technological Integration and Innovation	Group 2: Environmental and Sustainability Group 6: Urban Development	Group 3: Environmental and Sustainability Concerns	N/A

particularly within municipalities					
Shared Group: A need to inclusively address social justice issues	Group 8: Social Justice and Inclusion	Group 8: Social Issues and Inclusivity	Group 8: Community and Social Justice	N/A	N/A
Shared Group: Economic conditions tied to governing social issues	Group 5: Economic Challenges and Governance	N/A	Group 8: Community and Social Justice	Group 6: Economic Pressures and Social Issues	N/A
Shared Group: Technological advances within governing systems	N/A	Group 4: Technological Integration and Innovation	Group 5: Digital Governance	Group 8: Technology	N/A
Shared Group: Non-participatory governing instruments	Group 3: Public Participation Mechanisms	Group 3: Legislative and Policy Challenges	N/A	N/A	N/A
REGION SPECIFIC GROUPS					
Region Specific	Group 9: Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	Group 10: Systemic Challenges and Reform	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	N/A	Group 7: Frameworks for Decision-Making	N/A	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	N/A	Group 5: Public Discourse and Media Dynamics	N/A	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	N/A	N/A	Group 4: Health and Society	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Region Specific	N/A	N/A	N/A	Group 7: Crises and	N/A

				crisis management	
Region Specific	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Group 2: Global Concerns and Constraints 'Future' Europe
	Central-Eastern Europe	Northern Europe	Southern Europe	Western Europe	

In the transregional analysis, the research team looked at conditions for democratic experimentation that could be observed across the regional data sets. The analysis results were classified into three different types: Groups of conditions that appeared across ALL regions, Groups of conditions that were shared by some (but not all) regions, and conditions that appeared to be uniquely identifiable in only one region.

For conditions that appear across all regional datasets, we created a unique title called a 'thread' that would summarise the contents of the grouped conditions. There were four threads observed linking conditions across all of the regions:

- Thread: A recognised **need for increased civic engagement and participation** (*removed as tautological*).
- Thread: **A weak sense of public trust**, need for **greater transparency to increase legitimacy of decisions**
- Thread: **Problems or issues that emerge from unique historical circumstances** within a community.
- Thread: **Need for greater discursive participation to increase perceived legitimacy**.

Upon review, we would suggest removing the thread that identifies the 'need for increased civic engagement and participation' from consideration as a condition. In our view, given the source of the datasets for this research stream (Participedia), motivating condition citing a need for participation appears across all regions which is likely to be indicative of circular or tautological logic. However, the remaining 'threads' that appear across all regions are notable, and two of them are reflected in the STEEPLE factors identified in the literature review research.

The issue of **declining public trust** has also been noted in the STEEPLE research (see section P4), and remains a topic of intense research. While there is a diversity of reasons for eroding social trust (e.g. perceptions of corruption, elite rule, or opaque decision making), our research suggests that it becomes a key societal condition around which experimental democratic activities can be organised to address. As eroding social trust can cut across numerous social divides, it seems that projects are able to find enough support to be realised. However, it has also been noted that decreasing trust may lead to an overall decrease in general participation, a trend tangentially supported by the findings in Deliverable 1.2. Given the premise of the Youth Decides project – the perceived need to reinvigorate democracy and shape its future through intergenerational co-creation and innovation – the role of public trust in governing systems is a, if not *the*, central component of the social contract that makes democracy viable. If tracking decreasing public trust can

also be viewed as increasing potential for democratic experimentation, then continued monitoring the health of public trust might be central to strategizing when, where, how, and with whom such democratic innovations might be launched.

A second common factor, the **historical circumstances** of communities also seem to be a key motivating condition, though these historical experiences across the European region are quite diverse. We view this condition as reflected in the 'Legacy Governing Systems' factor identified in the STEEPLE research (L4), though not an exact match. While old governing institutions may be part of the historical conditions that motivate participatory projects, there are additional types of historical circumstances (for example, pre-existing actor-networks, economic disparities, skewed representation or exclusivity) that could be contributing to creating conditions for democratic experimentation. These historical circumstances, diverse as they are, underscore the need for future-oriented processes (like scenario co-creation) should be cognizant of histories and the cosmologies they shape.

While the third common condition of needing more discursive participation also seems close to a tautological result (similar reasons given above), the research team decided that the core issue was **establishing legitimacy of governing institutions and actions**. Inclusion in governing processes, particularly beyond tokenism, reveals itself to be an acceptable approach to building and maintaining legitimacy of governing systems. While legitimacy and trust are certainly similar, the perception of a system or process as legitimate - despite the possibility that results may not align with an individual's opinion or preferences - is a critical perception in establishing trust. If one, seemingly trans-European, mode of creating legitimacy is through inclusive discourse, then we may have identified a common starting point for some types of democratic innovation. While this is not a contextual factor, it is perhaps noteworthy for other components of the Youth Decide 2040 project (ex. WP1 and WP3) and can help inform the design of the workflow.

There are also five 'partial threads' that were observed in the project datasets of some, but not all, European regions. These include:

- Shared Group: Issues concerning the built and/or natural environment, particularly within municipalities
- Shared Group: A need to inclusively address social justice issues
- Shared Group: Economic conditions tied to governing social issues
- Shared Group: Technological advances within governing systems
- Shared Group: Non-participatory governing instruments

Issues concerning **the built and natural environment** were noted in all regions except for 'Future' Europe, which might be indicative of a prioritisation of democracy's relevance to certain issues, or simply a result of a limited data set from the 'Future' Europe region. Those environmental concerns – for both natural ecologies and urban structures – were noted as an important condition around which socio-political experimentation could find a critical mass of participants, which seems like a useful finding. Particularly so in the age of climate change effects, extraction and exploitation of natural systems, and the goals of systemic transformation. Given that these issues serve as rallying points for political experimentation within all current member states, we suggested a deeper examination of STEEPLE factors like EN4, EC3, and P2, for monitoring points that can indicate potential for democratic innovation.

The need for greater **inclusivity in addressing social justice** might also be considered as tautological, depending on how we understand the concept of participation in relationship to the concept of inclusivity. However, in focusing this need within the scope of social justice, we find the shared perception across Europe that there are social injustices that are better addressed with a greater diversity of voices and opinions. Associated STEEPLE factors could include gender and democracy (S1), Inter-generational justice (S4), broadening participation (L1), and fundamental rights (L2).

It was somewhat surprising that **economic conditions** were only identified as significant motivators for democratic experimentation in three of the five regions, and it is noteworthy as well that Northern Europe and 'Future' Europe regions did not see this identified as a strong factor. More research should be conducted on this topic, given the different circumstances of these two regions, and noting that D1.2 of the Youth Decide project has indicated that cost of living issues are among the top concerns of today's European youth. Such differences would be particularly interesting when analysed through the lens of **governing local issues**, which may be an important aspect of the condition. If there are already strong local governing mechanisms in place, whether official or ad hoc, the sense of agency that local governance provides may negate the need for participatory governance projects. If further research supported this speculation, a stronger argument could be made for developing stronger local governance powers.

There were many projects across European regions that were partly motivated by **advances in technologies that might be applied to governance problems**. Many of these technologies focused on creating options for digital dialogue or other forms of discussion or input into an already established process. This aligns with the STEEPLE factor T3 (Political technologies), and tangentially to factors T2 (New Media) and L2 (Legacy Governing Systems). At the same time, it is worth noting that technological change, even if it is not explicitly mentioned or used in a Participedia project, may still be an important aspect of the conditions that inspire or enable democratic innovations.

The research team debated whether to exclude the final 'shared group' of **Governing Mechanisms (Non-participatory)**, given the aforementioned tendency to use non-participation as a condition for participatory projects. Within this shared group, we focus on two differentiators across the regions: 1) the **existence of pre-existing mechanisms** that might impede participation (see again legacy governing systems), and 2) the only explicit mention of policy challenges. In this case, these refer to **standing policies that create their own challenges** and must be addressed, however, there is no participatory mode in which to re-evaluate policy. Undoing current policy may also be implicit in many projects, and so we include this to recall this aspect of experimental conditions.

Finally, the transregional analysis allows us to identify groups of conditions that were only identified in one of the regions and might focus regional-specific research approaches (such as the co-creation workflow modules, workshop prompting, or application of democratic innovations). However, we would recommend further research and analysis of these results using methods such as surveys and interviews. We would not assert that these conditions are not present in the other regions, nor that they have not previously been the focus of governance action in the past. Furthermore, we would not want to draw any deeper

conclusions about these conditions with respect to future democratic developments without further research. We simply acknowledge that, given the state of the Participedia data and the limitations of this research method, these conditions only surfaced in one region. 'Unique' conditions included:

Northern Europe:

Group: Frameworks for Decision-Making

Group: Public Discourse and Media Dynamics

Southern Europe:

Group: Health and Society

Central and Eastern Europe:

Group: Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Approaches

Group: Systemic Challenges and Reform

Western Europe:

Group: Crises and crisis management

Future Europe:

Group: Global Concerns and Constraints

Conclusions for Discussing Democratic Futures with Young Adults

This deliverable has presented the approach and findings of horizon scanning research for contextual factors shaping the future of democracy. To allow for an extensive and comprehensive scanning, the research team organised two complementary, yet methodologically diverse, strands of research.

The first method for horizon scanning followed an open desk research approach. In this regard, the research team conducted desk research individually and then met regularly to discuss and relate identified relevant publications. These included academic literature, grey literature and podcasts. Based on these meetings, factors were identified, described and further elaborated upon using concrete and compelling example cases. In total, 26 factors were selected and described in this deliverable.

The second method for horizon scanning followed a semi-automated approach for identifying contextual factors presented within a large data repository of participatory initiatives, the Participedia repository. Data entries were structured to focus on the collection of descriptions about what types of social, political, economic, and legal issues set the stage for the democratic experiments featured in the data set. The project-context analysis of the Participedia repository revealed eight factor groups outlining localised societal conditions across European regions that may encourage participatory initiatives and democratic experiments to take root. Results were clustered according to the five European regions used for organising activities and focusing resources in the YouthDecide 2040 project.

Together, the results provide an extensive overview of the various contextual factors shaping the future of democracy in many possible ways. In this section, we offer inroads for making sense of these results. Firstly, we synthesise the results by identifying context factors that are related between the results of the desk research and Participedia analysis and present a short-listed as well as unified collection of context factors affecting futures of European democracy. Secondly, we identify possible future trajectories that could imply potential disruptions to the conditions for democracy, yet remain weak signals – currently existing phenomena that might help us anticipate larger changes. Thirdly, we will outline possible future trajectories that could be classified as wildcards – low-probability, high-impact events that could develop over a short time span. Lastly, we discuss how the results of the horizon scanning feed into the YouthDecide 2040 workshops with young adults that aim for co-creating desirable scenarios of democracy.

Cross-examining the Desk Research and Participedia Analysis

In order to compare findings from both strands of horizon scanning, the research team compared the context factors from the desk research with the themes found in the transregional table of the Participedia analysis. By bringing together the e the STEEPLE

research 'context factors' - understood as dynamic conditions and parameters of the system's operating environment - with the groups of noted dynamics in highly localised context hosting recent democratic initiatives, the cross-examination aims to highlight central factors. The comparison followed a qualitative approach, focusing on identifying similarities and overlaps between factors and themes. Additionally, the comparison seeks to uncover if localised 'context' factors that emerged from Participedia projects could provide evidence for at least some of the STEEPLE factors. In light of the very different scales that the two sets of 'context factors' describe – the STEEPLE factors being more pervasive and capable of effecting change across Europe, while the Participedia results being largely situational and reflective of the subjective reporting of localised conditions around a singular project, our guiding research question for the comparative analysis was, what similarities, if any, do the two sets of results share? The results of our limited comparative study identified the following similarities between the two sets of results: :

- Issues concerning **trust and accountability** were shown to be one of the major localised contextual factors associated with democratic experiments in the analysis of Participedia. Also, during the desk research, trust and accountability were identified as a pivotal contextual factor (P4) shaping the future of democracy. More specifically, public trust in government and public institutions has been a recurring theme throughout both strands of research, though this may be an indirect causal relationship.
- The **historical context** plays a central role in both strands of research. Culture (S2) and legacy governing systems (L4) came to the fore as factors that have strong stabilising effects on democracy, but which also lead to path dependencies for the future of democracy.
- Many of the results portray the need for increased **discursive participation**. While debates may be articulated very differently (S2), they can be considered as important context factor shaping democratic futures.
- Issues concerning the **built and natural environment** provide the background for many democratic experiments. This resonates with the importance of infrastructures (EN1) and many other factors in the environmental dimension.
- Another central factor that comes to the fore when comparing both strands of research is **social justice**. This is clearly articulated in the identified clusters as well as in gender and democracy (S1), Inter-gen justice (S4), broadening participation (L1) and fundamental rights (L2).
- **Economic factors** appear in both strands of research as important contexts that influence democracy. More concretely, work conditions (EC1) and economic inequality (EC2) were identified recurrently throughout the horizon scanning.
- The cluster of **technologies** for governance overlaps with the factors in the technological dimension, especially artificial intelligence (T1) and political technologies (T3). Thereby, technology is not only embedded into existing governance structures but also an important context for the broader development of democracy through public discourse and media (T2).
- One cluster that appeared in the Participedia analysis hinted at **health-related issues**, which is echoed by the factor mental health issues (ET1).
- Often, the context of democratic innovation and experimentation is characterised by **crisis-response**. For instance, defence and security (P2), shifting global powers (EC3) and effects of climate change (EN4), all show how crises may shape the future of democracy.

While the Participedia dataset should be considered a type of historical view of social conditions that inspire democratic experimentation, common characteristics of the Participedia analysis that are reflected in the STEEPLE research results should be called into attention. Many of the consolidated results of the Participedia analysis are held across European regions (transregional localised context factor groups and resonate with results from the STEEPLE framework indicating a potential to effect future change. This indicates that the topics as relatively stable influencers of the futures of European Democracy. As such, we would recommend that the YouthDecide project to consider utilising these context factors serve as keystones in the scenario co-creation workflow and toolkit, as described below.

Implications for Workshops

In many foresight development processes, initial phases are defined by the exploration of topics of future concern. Horizon scanning is one process by which these topics can be discovered and brought to the attention of the group engaging foresight, but there are many others that could be considered (e.g. crowdsourcing or expert surveys). Importantly, the identification and discussion of factors that are effecting future change is critical to the development of scenarios because:

- A) Identifying factors, or learning about factors that have already been identified, helps scenario creators to consider the larger environment in which their future narrative will exist, which in turn
- B) Deepens the scenario narrative's account of how complex relationships between dynamic context factors are creating new conditions and options to act for organisations, communities, and other actors,
- C) Discussing factors in sense-making activities helps a scenario co-creation team understand that they collectively hold multiple perspectives on any given issue. These differences in future-oriented thinking and anticipation are valuable to creating scenarios that reflect the plurality of perspectives within an organisation or a community.
- D) Exploring the variety of possible future trajectories along which context factors may develop can be useful in facilitating the creation of more differentiated alternative future scenarios that then serve as the basis for robust strategy creation.

For these reasons, scenario development processes include some sort of collection, reflection and discussion on the factors driving change in the larger system context. Anticipated YouthDecide 2040 scenario co-creation workshop participants are not expected to be experts in any of the fields of study from which these (or other) context factors have been drawn. Therefore, it is important for the context factors to be presented in an accessible language and form that prioritizes a coherent overview without overwhelmingly deep exposition. Consequently, distribution of a Horizon scanning report (such as this one) was deemed inappropriate for introducing context factors to participants. Instead, the current iteration of the co-creation workflow of YouthDecide 2040 therefore incorporates context factors into two distinct activities and through different media.

First, the context factors in this report have been condensed into a short podcast created by a generative large language model. The collective listening to the podcast ensures that all participants obtain an introduction to all of the context factors. The podcast format allows particular aspects of the factors to be highlighted, both individually and in relation to one another. Second, the collective listening exercise, the participants are asked to engage in individual reflection and, subsequently, group discussion of the context factors presented in a single figure (context factor map). The context factor map provides an overview of the STEEPLE results in a tangible, malleable medium and is complemented by physical card decks each containing a single factor.

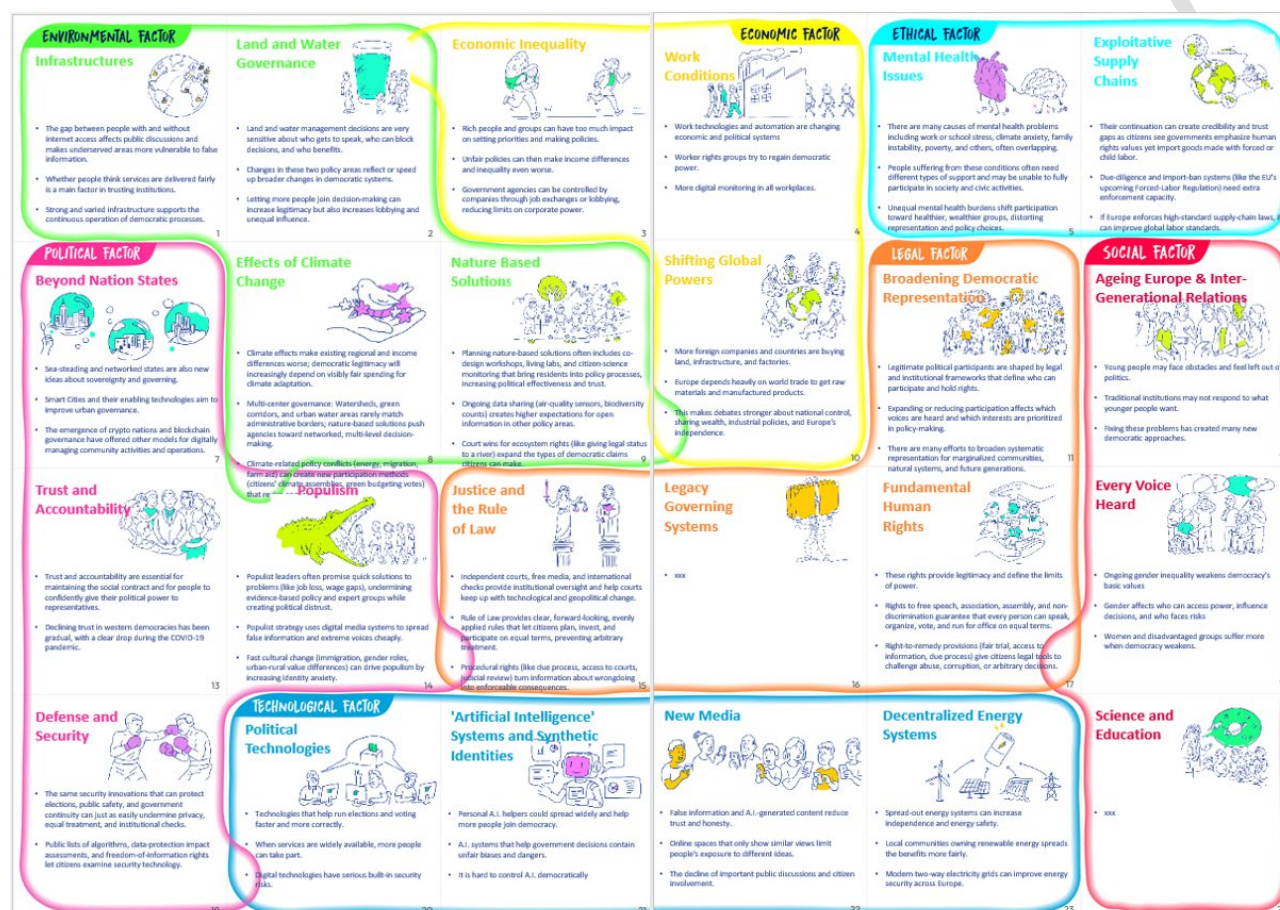


Figure 30 - Context Factor Map composed of cards. On other side of cards are associated policy situations to help make context factors more concrete possibilities. (Credit: SeoJeong Moon, SDS)

Using either format (podcast or factor map), participants are able to physically encounter and manipulate the media as they examine more closely the context factors, while the activity prompts them to select a number of factors based on their personal opinions on which factors play the most important role in shaping the future. The wording of these prompts is critical to ensuring that the activity aligns with the preferred scenario creation process as well as providing important results for later analysis. (To better understand how younger generations perceive the context factors' impact on the future, the research team is attempting to collect data points from participants regarding the context factor selection across all national assemblies. this is done by including condensed versions of the context factors in a playing card format. These cards are central to activities that ask participants to

select context factor cards). We suggest prompts that focus on participants' hopes (desirable futures) and concerns (strategic considerations in achieving preferred futures).

Finally, the context factors have played an important role in shaping the more specific policy situations that participants are asked to address during the lead-up and creation of the scenarios. These "policy situations" are intended to provoke consideration of possible future developments within one or more context factors by grounding them in narratives that relay a societal issue that calls for governance solutions. For example, in prototype tests, the 'policy situation' of a Digital Citizen Twin – an AI agent that has learned an individuals preferences and behaviours – that may be granted the right to participate politically on the individuals behalf. While this is not a contemporary policy situation, it may yet become one, and would be a more concrete event wherein the development of a context factor is manifesting in a more realistic governance situation.

Factor Map Card



Figure 31 - Example of a Context Factor Map card with the associated Policy Situation inscribed on the back side of the card.

These situations enable the context factors to be specific enough to form the basis for creative design and solution finding activities. This is a novel mode of bringing the context factors into the scenario creation process that respects the given time constraints, relationships between co-creators, and differentiated knowledge bases.

As the policy situations are derived from the context factors, this creates an important link between datasets being gathered in the co-creation workflow – context factors selected on the basis of individual assessments, in combination with democratic innovations, serve as the basis for the scenario creation activity. As the foundational workflow of the national assemblies, this data capture will enable the project to analyse how context factors are

perceived across Europe. When paired with other datasets, this enables a rich analysis of how possible futures are utilised to construct preferred futures in different countries.

The final role that the context factors can play in the overall project is during the creation of pathways towards preferred futures for democracy. This report outlines a number of possible trajectories for each of the context factors – some of which may be undesirable for some participants, but which must still be considered as possibilities for strategic policy purposes. The pathways towards preferred futures can and should be tested for resilience against less than desirable developments within these (and other) context factors. Such activities are typically known as *wind-tunnelling* or *stress-testing* of strategies, and the factors can play an important role here by challenging implicit assumptions within strategies and increasing pliability of the pathways. By testing innovative governance ideas (developed in pursuit of, or realisation of preferred democratic futures) against challenging STEEPLE conditions, those ideas can be strengthened and augmented to be more adaptive and robust. Additionally, wind-tunnelling exercises can help identify critical contingencies that should be accounted for in plans that acknowledge that radical deviations from preferred futures are possible.

Identifying Potential Disruptions (Wildcards)

Throughout the horizon scanning, the research team outlined potential trajectories indicating how changes in context factors may impact futures of democracy. In addition, we provide an overview of *wildcards*, defined as **high-impact, low-probability events or rapid developments**, that can plausibly affect the development of democracy. These wildcards are presented as brief descriptions of fictional events (one per STEEPLE category). They aim to provide starting points for thought experiments that help distancing oneself from current dominant discourses and conceptions regarding democracy and support imagining the future of democracy as something radically different. As such, they may be of added value in the robustness and resilience testing that is included in WP5.

Wildcards:

The factors identified in the **social dimension** indicate how culture, gender, and age can impact democracy. In this regard, potential disruptions appear as dynamics of fragmentation and polarisation in societies, that is, for instance, gendered voting preferences, intergenerational gaps in democratic representation or antagonistic debates. By accentuating this observation, we can speculate on a fictional high-impact wild-card events that depict the establishment and electoral success of political parties that deviate from the prevailing social contract between generations, genders, and social classes. Such parties, emphasising specific divisions, may argue for restricted voting age, parliamentary quotas, or radical reforms concerning pension schemes.

The factors identified in the **technological dimension** show how technology, media and energy systems shape the larger context of democracies. Potential disruptions appear as the restructuring of socio-technical systems in times of energy transitions and the diffusion of AI and blockchain applications. By accentuating this observation, we can speculate on a fictional high-impact wild-card that portrays the democratic process converging into one singular software application, where opinion formation and voting replace representative modes of democracy.

The factors identified in the **economic dimension** indicate how working conditions, wealth and income distributions and new economic powers frame and influence democracies. The ways in which decision-making in the context of value creation is organised, has effects for both democratic principles within economies and the influence of economic justice on democracies. By accentuating this observation, we can speculate on a fictional high-impact wild-card that outlines the democratisation of firms in specific sectors.

Environmental dimension factors outline some of the direct impacts of climate change that could be observed as we move towards 2040, changes to the built and lived environment through infrastructural developments, and ways by which democratic governance might be called upon to for the management of natural systems and distribution of natural resources and services. Governing systems may need to respond to both climate events like floods, fires, droughts (increasing in both severity and frequency) and longer-term climate changes like aridification, deforestation, soil health, fishery depletion, and other environmental shifts that are less immediate but increasingly consequential.

The changing **political dimensions** of society highlight some potentialities that should remain within the scope of consideration for both European democratic systems and Europe as a whole. In particular, the spectre of war hangs over the continent once more, bolstering calls for increased defence and security capacities, arms, and infrastructures. Social governance during war times can weaken or strengthen democratic institutions, and speculating on the possible ramifications of such a development could prepare European democracies in advance.

At the same time, the **legal dimension** of possible futures presents us with some potential wildcard events that could fundamentally reshape the role of law in governing not just between humans and human institutions, but also as the premier governance apparatus by which environmental conservation and rehabilitation might be mediated. If the legal status of personhood is extended more robustly to natural systems, ecosystems, and non-human species more frequently or universally across the EU, the legal standing for such cases can radically shift all types of governance systems.

Lastly, while the **ethical dimension** of societal futures may be less prone to wildcard events, it is worth noting that some events worsen ethical issues that have already been noted in this report. Speculation about the effect of wildcards like war, a resurgent pandemic, or mass climate migration might impact ethical areas like mental health and moral judgment.

Final Remarks

For organisations or groups using strategic foresight, Horizon scanning should be considered a continuous process. The results presented in this report should be considered a snapshot of the changing context shaping democratic systems and their development. Like a picture, or even a series of pictures, it is incomplete, representing only a partial perspective of the world. Still, pictures render and transmit potential narratives of what may have immediately preceded and followed a moment of capture – and gesture to the wider world beyond the frame. Similarly, our intention for this horizon

scan is for the factors provided to help create scenario snapshots of future European democracy. In co-creating these scenarios, we hope to enable participants in the Youth Decide 2040 project to see beyond the present frame of democracy in Europe, with all of its attendant benefits and challenges, to envision brighter futures.

Under EC Review

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Annex Area

01 – Participedia Regional Factor Cluster Results

Central-Eastern Europe

[CE final clusters.xlsx](#)

Northern Europe

[NE final clusters.xlsx](#)

Southern Europe

[SE final clusters.xlsx](#)

Western Europe

[WE final clusters.xlsx](#)

Future Europe

[FE final clusters.xlsx](#)

Additional Datasheets will be made [available on Zenodo](#)

02 – Context Factor Card Deck(s)

The finalised version of the Context Factor Map Card Deck will be [available on Zenodo](#) upon finalisation of co-creation workflow.