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2	EDYN N.O.	EDYN N.O.
3	STRATEGIC DESIGN SCENARIOS SPRL	SDS
4	WEDO PROJECT INTELLIGENCE MADE EASYSL	WeDo
5	MISSIONS PUBLIQUES	MP
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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
AI Hungary	Amnesty International Hungary
BDCs	Brussels Deliberative Committees
CESE	Conseil Économique Social et Environnemental
CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe
CEE	Central-Eastern Europe
DIs	Democratic Innovations
DO	Democratic Odyssey
EC	European Commission
ECCs	European Citizen Consultations
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FCTC	France's Convention on the Time of the Child
FFF	Fridays for Future
FPÖ	Freedom Party Austria
IWTM	Tanítanék Mozgalom ("I Would Teach Movement", Hungary)
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
MSK	Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (Fridays for Future Poland)
MP	Member of Parliament
ÖVP	People's Party Austria
PS	Socialist Party Belgium
SPÖ	Social Democratic Party Austria
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy (Institute)
WP	Work Package
YAIS	Youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland

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Introduction

Democratic Innovations (DIs) have become a powerful lever for practical implementation and political impact. But how much difference do they make? To avoid DI's becoming an empty buzzword, it is important to assess how widespread they are and what difference they effectively make. Research itself can be biased and over-estimate their impact. Or on the contrary, it can under-estimate much of what is happening under the radar. The emergence of specific practices in determined geographical areas or democratic regimes, is to be understood as context dependent.

How do we navigate the ebbs and flows of democratic practices? Can we claim with a sufficient degree of precision which specific contextual factors have determined the success or failure of a given democratic innovation? How to isolate these factors and the related control variables? Should we aim for generalisability of a grand theory of democratic innovations or rather a grounded set of findings classified by socio-political, (g)localised ontologies? Which levels of governance resonate the most with which DI? Can we think about them as interconnected in transcalar fashion?

We consider this to be a conversation about the various 'sciences of democracies' (Gagnon et al, 2025), i.e. the historiography of successful models. This is about how to bust open the black box of democracy and, adjacently, democratic innovations. It allows not only for interdisciplinary thinking, but also for competing intergenerational methodologies to emerge. As this report focuses on emerging practices in democratic innovations with an eye to intergenerational dialogue and systems-thinking, we imbue this ethos in our scoping efforts. In this report, our modest aim is to contribute to a scanning of the field with an eye to the epistemological questions raised above.

Escobar and Elstub define democratic innovations as “processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role of level of governance and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities of participation, deliberation and influence” (Escobar and Elstub, 2019).

In other words, democratic innovations are not merely reforms to existing structures, but deliberate attempts to reconfigure the relationship between citizens and institutions in ways that expand opportunities for voice and influence. 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).

While Graham Smith's seminal work (2005) identified 57 distinct forms of DIs, the field has since grown and diversified considerably. As part of the YouthDecide2040 project, during an earlier phase of the process aimed at preparing for the workshops, we developed a graphical representation of the five families of democratic innovation seeds (see Annex I).

The purpose of this paper is to revisit these families and significantly expand upon them, further exploring their potential and implications. This exploration seeks to build on the initial conceptualization of the seeds, deepening the understanding of each family and refining their application in the context of democratic innovation. Through this development, we aim

to generate a more comprehensive framework. The five families identified, which will serve as the cornerstone of this paper, are as follows:

- **Electoral democracy**, encompassing innovations in voting systems and political parties simultaneously experimenting with multiple innovations, creating complex ecosystems of participation (Vandamme, 2024; Hendriks, 2019).
- **Deliberative democracy**, which includes citizens' assemblies and other formats founded on argumentative exchanges, reciprocal reasons giving, and on public debates which precede decisions (Floridia, 2014).
- **Digital democracy** is a horizontal issue that touches upon all baskets (Escobar and Elstub, 2019). The term refers to the use of digital tools and platforms to enhance accountability, facilitate democratic practices and translate them to the digital sphere (Berg and Hofmann, 2021).
- **Direct democracy**, and particularly direct voting (e.g. referenda or citizens' initiatives) trace back to as far as ancient Athens (Jäske and Setälä, 2019). Its uneven geographical distribution and development, along with a lack of a systematised lesson-drawing for the purpose of understanding best practices, still make it a critical area of DI research. This is particularly the case when liberal democracies struggle to address the structural limitations of electoral systems that voting processes have been organised around.
- **Activism**, which recognizes the role of bottom-up mobilizations, social movements, and grassroots innovations in redefining the scope and strengthening the normative foundation of democracy by empowering citizens, promote internal democratic practices, channeling social demands and defusing violence (Della Porta 2020; Della Porta and Felicetti, 2017).

This typology serves a double purpose. First, it allows us to capture the structural and conceptual differences that characterize each family of democratic innovations. Second, it provides a framework for examining their intersections and hybridisations—since democratic innovations are rarely bound within a single family and should not be conceptualised in silos. Indeed, practices at the frontier of these categories often generate the most novel democratic experiments.

Methodologically, this report draws on a hybrid approach that combines in-depth interviews with actors directly engaged in these innovations whether as initiators, practitioners, or researchers with a comprehensive review of the literature. This dual perspective provides both an empirical grounding and a theoretical lens through which to analyse the dynamics of democratic innovation.

The chapter introduces each of the five baskets in turn, tracing their genealogies, exploring their core features, and adopting a comparative approach focussing on key areas for this research, youth participation, barriers and challenges, political buy-in and transformative impacts, transcalar dimensions and evaluation and perspectives. In doing so, we aim not only to map the diversity of democratic innovations but also to highlight the ways in which they collectively shape the evolving landscape of democracy in the 21st century.

Chapter 1: Electoral Democracy

Contemporary European democracies are witnessing a significant evolution, as the traditional framework of representative electoral democracy is increasingly being complemented by a diverse range of democratic innovations. Rather than replacing electoral processes, these new mechanisms of participation and deliberation are being integrated to address challenges of declining citizen engagement and trust. This chapter explores this dynamic by focusing on how democratic innovations can enhance, rather than undermine, existing electoral systems. Through a comparative analysis of three distinct European cases - Austria's 2007 reform lowering the voting age, the Belgian Socialist Party's (PS) ongoing 'refondation', and the citizen-led Agora Brussels movement - this chapter examines the practical application of these innovations. It will analyse youth participation, the barriers and challenges to implementation, the role of political buy-in, and the overall impact of these initiatives on the landscape of electoral democracy. The study concludes by summarising its main findings and suggesting avenues for future research.

Literature Review

The literature on democratic innovations reveals two distinct scholarly perspectives on electoral democracy reform. One strand focuses on deliberative and participatory mechanisms, examining how citizen-centred innovations like deliberative mini-publics, citizens' assemblies, and participatory budgeting are being integrated into democratic systems (Smith, 2009; Farrell and Field, 2022). These innovations span constitutional changes, electoral reforms, and policy deliberation, with scholars analysing their theoretical foundations across participatory, agonistic, and transformative democratic paradigms (Asenbaum, 2022; O'Flynn, 2019; Geissel, 2009; Graf et al., 2024). These democratic tools offer immediate channels for popular input, although their integration with representative systems varies considerably (Bowler and Donovan, 2013; Junius et al., 2020; Vandamme, 2024).

A second strand examines the heart of traditional electoral politics: the role and functioning of political parties. Democratic innovation, in this vein, lie with party reform through innovations, including online platforms, digital primaries, and deliberative spaces aimed at increasing member engagement and addressing legitimacy crises (Biale and Ottonelli, 2019; Klein et al., 2023; Sánchez Medero and Sánchez Medero, 2025).

What makes this landscape particularly dynamic is the prevalence of hybrid models that combine elements from different approaches (Ettlinger and Michels, 2024). Indeed, many polities are simultaneously experimenting with multiple innovations, creating complex ecosystems of participation (Vandamme, 2024; Hendriks, 2019). Some jurisdictions are even exploring more radical alternatives like 'lottocracy', where representatives are selected randomly, or liquid democracy, which allows for delegated voting on specific issues (Vandamme, 2024). An emerging consensus suggests that, rather than replacing electoral mechanisms, most innovations serve a complementary role that can enhance democratic legitimacy when properly integrated with the existing electoral system.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, deliberative events and participatory budgeting, for instance, typically supplement representative decision-making by providing informed citizen input and broadening participation, especially among marginalised groups (Gherghina and Mitru, 2025; Warren, 2025). Similarly, citizens' assemblies often function as advisory bodies that improve the quality of democratic deliberation while preserving the ultimate authority of elected representatives (OECD, 2021; Gastil and Knobloch, 2020). However, the impact of these tools on legitimacy is not automatic but conditional. The literature consistently shows that legitimacy is enhanced when innovations are transparent, inclusive, and their recommendations are either acted upon or their rejection is credibly justified (Alemanno et al., 2022; Goovaerts et al., 2025).

Conversely, the instrumentalisation of these processes for purely symbolic purposes risks depoliticisation and can create a legitimacy deficit (Bailly, 2025; Escobar and Bua, 2025). Several critical conditions enabling the success of democratic innovations have been identified, alongside several persistent challenges. Effective institutional design is paramount; innovations must be clearly linked to formal decision-making processes to have a tangible impact (Alemanno et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). The support of political elites and parties is also crucial for both adoption and long-term sustainability (Farrell, 2025; Gherghina and Mitru, 2025; Junius et al., 2020). However, institutional resistance from these same actors, who may perceive innovations as a threat, remains a major obstacle (Sobczak-Szelc, 2022; Junius et al., 2020). Furthermore, while inclusive participation through methods like random selection enhances public trust (Warren, 2025), a lack of robust empirical evidence on the long-term effects of many innovations, coupled with their highly context-dependent nature, poses a central challenge to their broader implementation and transferability (Gherghina and Mitru, 2025; Kuo, 2020; Vandamme, 2024).

Methods and Case Selection

This research employs a comparative case study approach to analyse three distinct democratic innovations within electoral democracy. The comparative analysis involves examining:

- an electoral reform (lowering the voting age). In 2007, an electoral reform changed the voting age for national elections and referenda from 18 to 16 years in Austria. This electoral reform was part of a proposal by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), The Greens, and the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP). The parties additionally agreed to introduce absentee voting as well as extending the legislative period for the National Council from four to five years. Austria is now one of two EU countries which enfranchise voters aged 16+ in nationwide elections, next to Malta (2018). Changing the electoral law required an Austrian Federal Constitution amendment, a two-thirds majority in the National Council as well as the approval by the Federal Council. Only one party voted against, the Freedom Party (FPÖ). This reform was a top-down process accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns in 2008 and an enhancement in civic education in schools (Aicholzer and Kritzinger, 2020).

- a party renewal process (the Belgian Socialist Party's 'refondation'). The Belgian Socialist Party is undergoing a reform to include more participatory practices in its decision-making processes. This push towards more inclusiveness is driven by a series of disappointing electoral results. Currently, the party is seeking to include citizens' suggestions through citizens' consultations on which values, internal processes and concrete actions the party should prioritise.
- and a citizen-led parliamentary movement, Agora Brussels. This was a citizen movement and political initiative that emerged in Brussels in 2019 and ended in 2024 with the goal of bringing deliberative democracy into parliamentary politics. Rather than operating as a traditional party, Agora sought to create a permanent Citizens' Assembly whose recommendations would guide how its representative voted in the Brussels Parliament. From 2019 to 2024, Agora performed 246 parliamentary actions, including 189 ministerial questions and 57 ordinances, resolutions, or amendments, notably on housing, jobs, and enhancing democratic transparency. Upon ending its political activity in 2024, Agora published resources such as the "Do Agora Yourself" guide and a "Citizen Assembly toolkit" to inspire and support future democratic initiatives.

This study adopts the "most different case method" (Seawright and Gerring, 2014), which facilitates robust comparative analysis by selecting cases that are maximally different on key variables - such as their origin (state, party, or citizen-led), scale (national or regional), and primary mechanism (electoral, internal-organisational, or deliberative-parliamentary). Data collection relies primarily on semi-structured interviews with key informants who possess expert, insider perspectives on each case: a former Austrian government minister directly involved in the electoral reform, a political science researcher and member of the committee overseeing the PS renewal, and a co-organisator of the Agora Brussels Citizens' Assemblies.

Contrary to interviewing a random sample of the population, the selection of experts as interviewees for this research meant to identify actors placed within a specific democratic innovation in a European context to understand their interpretations and perspectives as regards to the topic of discussion. Interviewees were selected based on the analysis of the extant literature review on democratic innovations, as well as on personal contacts that allowed to target the most relevant people given the time constraints. The interviews, conducted in summer 2025 both online and in-person, ranged from forty minutes to one hour. To help with organising and analysing the findings, interviews were recorded and then transcribed using the Microsoft Word transcription option. Subsequently, a comprehensive revision of the final text was carried out to ensure accuracy. Notes taken during the interviews further enriched the text analysis. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the research uses triangulation, whereby data from the interviews is cross validated with academic literature and institutional reports (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p.176).

Comparative Analysis

The three cases under examination, while all aiming to revitalise democratic engagement, pursue this goal through fundamentally different strategies. By comparing each case and synthetically describing their different approaches to youth participation, the barriers they encounter, and their ultimate impact, we can discern critical lessons about the conditions under which democratic innovations succeed or fail to reconfigure elements of representative democracy.

(1) Youth Participation – from lowering the voting age to the risk of tokenism

The cases reveal a strategic divergence in engaging young people, highlighting a trade-off between achieving scale, depth, and symbolic inclusion.

Austria's electoral reform on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 years, adopted in 2007, represents a strategy of scale through universal enfranchisement. The motivation, as described by the former Austrian minister, was to combat "political tiredness" and ensure the participation of younger generations in an ageing society (Spindelegger, 2025). The primary tool was legal, that is granting the right to vote, supplemented by government information campaigns and enhanced civic education in schools. However, the interviewee acknowledged the limitations of this top-down approach, noting that "technical information" from the government is insufficient and that genuine engagement requires "personal contact" and peer-to-peer communication (Spindelegger, 2025). While effective at reaching all 16- and 17-year-olds, its impact on the quality of their engagement remains dependent on these softer, cultural factors.

In contrast, Agora Brussels prioritised depth over scale. Its objective was not to oversample youth but to ensure their proportional representation within its Citizens' Assemblies. Once selected, however, young participants received dedicated support, including informal meetups and youth-oriented spaces designed to build confidence and foster "strong feelings of group belonging" (Vanbelle, 2025). According to the organiser interviewed for this research, this community-building approach was highly effective at creating high-quality engagement, with some youth forming lasting friendships and remaining politically active beyond the assembly. However, this resource-heavy approach which was designed as an ad-hoc way for youth inclusion in the Agora Brussels movement may not be easily scalable to an entire population.

The PS renewal process might risk applying a strategy of symbolism. While youth participation was an explicit goal, with plans for a dedicated youth panel, the implementation has been limited. The expert observer expressed concern that such efforts could become tokenistic, serving mainly to allow the party to say "we had young people involved" rather than substantively engaging them (Rangoni, 2025). He further criticised the tendency to treat "youth" as a monolithic bloc, an oversimplification that undermines the value of their

involvement. This approach reflects the dilemma of an established, hierarchical organisation attempting to adopt participatory methods. While the party recognises the need to include youth for its legitimacy, it struggles to move beyond symbolic gestures, revealing a deep-seated tension between its traditional structure and its new participatory ambitions.

Based on the synthetically analysis of the three cases above, there are different ways to foster youth participation from the formal enfranchisement in Austria to the more informal and resource-intensive engagement in both the Agora Brussels and the PS party. The findings might also serve as a cautionary note for initiatives that could result in symbolic inclusion. When designing strategies for fostering youth engagement, organisations or political parties should consider the trade-off between achieving scale, depth, and substantive quality of youth political engagement.

(2) How institutional origins shape reform barriers

In terms of barriers, each innovation encountered different challenges based on their different institutional status. For instance, as a bottom-up challenger, Agora Brussels faced external political resistance. Positioned as an outsider attempting to "hack" the system from within, it was viewed with suspicion by other parties. Vanbelle (2025) described the movement as "the odd one out" in parliament, lacking the political weight to prevent its deliberative resolutions from being consistently blocked. This experience aligns with academic findings on institutional resistance to DIs that are perceived as a competitive threat to the authority of elected representatives (Junius et al., 2020).

Conversely, the top-down initiatives in Austria and the Belgian PS faced barriers that were primarily internal and related to implementation. The PS renewal, an attempt to reform from within, confronts the inertia of its own structures. Rangoni (2025) identified the principal risks as leadership "cherry-picking" citizen inputs that align with their pre-existing views, and the alienation of mid-level party elites who feel bypassed by new participatory mechanisms. This reflects a common dynamic in party reform where dominant coalitions may support procedural changes strategically to consolidate, rather than distribute, power (Gauja, 2017). The most significant barrier, he argued, is pervasive citizen distrust, namely the assumption that "their voice will not matter".

Similarly, Austria's electoral reform, while bypassing direct political opposition through a high-level deal between coalition partners, faced downstream implementation challenges. Spindelegger (2025) recalled "conflicts" between the party's youth and pensioner organisations over issues like pension costs, highlighting intergenerational friction. More broadly, the challenge shifted from changing the law to changing political culture - a far more difficult task of ensuring newly enfranchised voters are sufficiently informed and motivated, as apathy or a lack of knowledge could undermine the reform's democratic quality.

These cases demonstrate that overcoming the initial political hurdle to launch an innovation is often just the first step; the deeper challenge lies in its cultural and organisational integration. Moreover, based on this preliminary analysis of three cases, challenges to innovations appear to be contingent on their institutional origins. Bottom-up initiatives, such as Agora Brussels, seem to have encountered more external political resistance from

established actors. Whilst top-down reforms in Austria and the Belgian PS party suggest that primary challenges may be internal within the established institution and political party.

(3) Transformative Impact – the dual effects of democratic innovations

Central to the analysis of the three innovations under consideration is whether or not they produce transformative impacts on policy outcomes and outputs, institutions and civic engagement. We consider systemic impact the concrete transformation of institutions, political parties, and formal policies, while participant impact as the short and long-term changes to citizens' civic capacities and orientations (Michels, 2011).

These two dimensions of impact do not necessarily correlate; an innovation can have a profound effect on one while having little influence on the other. For instance, the 2007 Austrian electoral reform is a clear example of high systemic impact. Political buy-in was secured at the highest level through a political agreement between the governing parties, also pushed by their youth organisations. The result in lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 years, was a permanent legally binding change to the national electoral framework. While some research on its effects has documented a "first-time voting boost," with 16- and 17-year-olds often demonstrating higher turnout rates than their 18- to 20-year-old counterparts (Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014), the long-term impact on political habituation remains a subject of academic debate (Graf et al., 2024).

More recent studies, for instance, have challenged the idea of a lasting transformative effects in the short and longer term. In the literature, habituation theory (Plutzer, 2020) considers voting for younger citizens a transformative experience, in the sense that the likelihood to turn out to elections is higher compared to older citizens. In other words, younger citizens might have a habituation effect in the long term thanks to the eligibility effect obtained with their first election (Graf et al., 2024). However, correcting a coding error in a previous influential study, Graf et al. (2024) found no significant short- or long-term effects of eligibility to vote at 16 on subsequent turnout. This suggests that while the reform successfully lowered the barrier to entry, its capacity to cultivate a lasting habit of voting is not conclusively established.

Agora Brussels represents the inverse. With minimal buy-in from other parties, its policy impact was negligible. Yet, Vanbelle (2025) evaluates the movement as a "great success" precisely because of its transformative impact on participants. She states that it "politicised citizens," empowering them with the confidence and motivation to remain active in civic life. This aligns with scholarship that urges evaluations of DIs to look beyond policy wins to consider effects like fostering civic literacy and shifting political cultures (Elstub and Escobar, 2019).

The PS renewal process is caught between these two poles. Its success is contingent on securing continuous buy-in from both the party leadership and its grassroots members, a delicate balancing act. The ultimate measure of its systemic impact, as Rangoni (2025) pragmatically notes, will be electoral results - an external metric that may overshadow the internal goal of democratic renewal. Its impact is therefore yet to be determined, but the

case highlights the risk that for established parties, instrumental goals (winning elections) may ultimately supersede procedural ones (deepening internal democracy), potentially sacrificing participant-level transformation for political expediency.

In summary, the above analysis of the cases has attempted to provide some insights into the complex and multidimensional concept of transformative impact for democratic innovations. It seems therefore insufficient to rely on singular metrics like policy change to assess an innovation's success; a more nuanced appraisal is required, one that considers the short and long-term transformative effects on both the political framework and the citizens who engage with it.

(4) Transcalar Directions – the missing link in European democratic renewal

Despite the European Union's own high-profile experimentation with democratic innovations, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe amongst other examples that will be further discussed in chapter 2, the three cases examined here reveal that democratic renewal remains a remarkably national, or even sub-national, affair. A striking commonality across all three cases is their limited engagement with, or influence from, the European level. The former Austrian minister recalled some interest from France in the voting age reform coupled with deliberative/participatory practices but noted this did not lead to any systematic replication or transnational dialogue (Spindelegger 2025). The expert observer of the PS renewal was even more direct, stating that there is "very little transfer of knowledge between European-level democratic experiments and national or local ones" (Rangoni, 2025). Similarly, Agora's organiser described the movement as "largely siloed," with interactions with European initiatives being "very limited" and informal (Vanbelle, 2025).

These consistent testimonies points to a significant disconnect between the transnational discourse on democratic renewal and the practice of reform on the ground. The "democratic infrastructure" needed to facilitate transnational learning and the scaling of successful models appears to be weak or absent (Alemanno et al., 2022). Political actors, whether in government, parties, or civil society, seems to be more preoccupied with their immediate domestic contexts and constituencies. These finding may temper optimistic narratives of an emerging European "demoicracy" where citizens and polities learn from one another (Nicolaïdis, 2013).

(5) Evaluation and Perspective – towards a hybrid democratic ecosystem

The evaluation of each innovation by those interviewed seems to suggest that the most promising path forward is the hybridisation of different democratic tools. Each case, in its limitations, highlights the need for reinforcement from other models. For instance, the Austrian reform is evaluated as a "good decision" in principle by political actors, but its ultimate success is seen as conditional. The former minister stressed that enfranchisement must be coupled with better communication and engagement strategies to prevent uninformed voting and truly cultivate a habit of participation (Spindelegger, 2025). This perspective is reinforced by recent academic findings which question the reform's automatic

habit-forming effects. The latest evidence suggests that simply lowering the voting age, without deeper participatory components, may not be sufficient to guarantee quality engagement or foster long-term political participation (Graf et al., 2024). The electoral reform, in other words, provides the access, but its ability to transform that access into sustained engagement remains contested.

The PS renewal process was "positively surprised" by its iterative and adaptive nature, a rare quality in rigid party reforms. However, the expert observer emphasised that the "real test lies ahead": whether the party leadership will genuinely incorporate citizen input, especially when it challenges established positions (Rangoni 2025). His key takeaway is the need for a "toolbox" of interconnected democratic instruments, rather than relying on a single method.

Finally, Agora Brussels is judged a "great success" on a human and cultural level, despite failing to achieve its primary institutional goal. Vanbelle's (2025) primary suggestion for improvement is to "boost impact" by combining Citizens' Assemblies with other DIs, such as referendums, where the assembly could design the question to be put to a popular vote.

These findings might suggest that the future of effective democratic innovation lies not in choosing between electoral, participatory, or deliberative models, but in designing hybrid democratic ecosystems where these approaches are mutually reinforcing. This seems to be an important aspect for further investigation, which appears to be consistent with a growing body of academic literature advocating for hybrid models that sequence different democratic logics to achieve "crosscutting democratic goods" (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). A truly robust system might see a deliberative assembly (like Agora's) inform a party's platform renewal (like the PS's), which is then voted upon by a more inclusive electorate (like Austria's), creating a virtuous cycle of informed deliberation, responsive representation, and broad-based participation.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed three distinct approaches to democratic renewal in Europe - a state-led electoral reform, a party-led internal renewal, and a citizen-led parliamentary intervention. The comparative analysis demonstrates that these innovations represent different strategies for increasing civic and political engagement, as well as trust in democratic institutions and political parties by targeting the rules of the game (Austria), the primary actors (Belgian PS), or the system of representation itself (Agora). Each approach encounters a core tension between its participatory ideals and the institutional realities of electoral representative democracy. For bottom-up challengers like Agora, this manifests as external resistance from established powers. For top-down reformers like the Austrian government and the PS, it appears as internal friction and implementation deficits.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the success of these innovations must be evaluated multidimensionally, distinguishing between systemic impact on policies and rules, and participant-level impact on citizens' skills and attitudes. These dimensions are not always aligned, as an innovation can empower participants without achieving policy change, or vice

versa. Finally, the evidence suggests that the most promising path forward seems to lie not in perfecting a single model, but in creating hybrid democratic ecosystems that strategically combine deliberative, participatory, and direct democratic mechanisms.

The findings of this comparative analysis suggest several promising avenues for future research. Further longitudinal research is required to establish the long-term effects of lowering the voting age, as in the Austrian case. A comparative study of citizen-led movements like Agora could identify the institutional conditions necessary for them to achieve tangible policy impact. Finally, the challenges of party renewal, exemplified by the Belgian Socialist Party, highlight the need to better understand the organisational safeguards that distinguish genuine power-sharing from strategic co-optation.

Under EC Review

Chapter 2: Deliberative Democracy

The following chapter explores four distinct deliberative democratic innovations that have been implemented across the European Union (EU) and Scotland. By comparing their distinct youth participation, challenges, political buy-in, transformative impact and transcalar aspects, the paper seeks to examine approaches and barriers related to youth engagement within the current EU democratic model. The first section of this chapter provides a concise review of the current academic literature on European deliberative democratic innovations, addressing key theoretical concepts and recent scholarly findings. The subsequent section then reports on the main thematic findings derived from a comparative analysis of four specific case studies, drawing on interviews with individuals associated with the Brussels Deliberative Committees, the Youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland, the French Convention on the Time of the Child, and the Democratic Odyssey. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing further information on the key takeaways and offering directions for future research.

Literature Review

According to Elstub and Escobar (2019), deliberation is a key crosscutting dimension present to some extent across all democratic innovations (DIs). Depending on the analyst, deliberative democracy can be seen as a subset of participatory democracy or distinct from it (to the extent that deliberative processes are not necessarily participatory in the broad democratic sense of the term). In this chapter, we define deliberative democracy drawing on Florida's (2014, p.305) definition as "founded on argumentative exchanges, reciprocal reasons giving, and on public debates which precede decisions". Important elements of deliberative democracy encompass reciprocal reason-giving processes, public debate, rational consensus and mutual respect (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Veri, 2023). Since deliberative democracy overlaps with participatory democracy, despite theoretical differences and tensions (Elstub and Escobar, 2019, p.17), it seems important to also define participatory democracy as "founded on the direct action of citizens who exercise some power and decide issues affecting their lives" (Florida, 2014, p.305). For instance, the British Columbian Citizens' Assembly is often considered by the scholarship to show how mini-publics, public fora and referenda can be combined to realise both participatory and deliberative ideals as part of a hybrid democratic innovation (Elstub and Escobar, 2019). Note that the term of "mini-public" was initially put forth by Fishkin to designate a kind of deliberative focus group that would be a mirror of societal opinion overall. In our view, this is not per se a democratic instrument but rather part of a series of instruments that have to do with polling, somewhere on the spectrum between a consultation logic and a democratic logic.

To contextualise this chapter, it is important to explore the development of the various types of citizens' participation in the European Union (EU) through deliberative processes. The idea of mini-publics of randomly selecting citizens for EU-level deliberation has been a direct response to concerns about the EU's perceived "democratic deficit" (Majone, 1998). To overcome this disillusionment and a permanent status of "polycrisis", the EU has attempted to innovate its model through 'collaborative governance', utilising deliberative and

participative processes (Veri, 2023; Papandreou, 2021). This has led to a more direct relationship between EU institutions and EU citizens with numerous projects such as EuroPolis, Ideal-EU, Your Voice in Europe, the Agora, the citizen dialogues, the European Citizen Consultations (ECCs), and the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) (Kies and Nanz, 2013; Oleart, 2023; Nicolaïdis et al., 2023). Indeed, the EU has recently shifted its “participatory turn” (Saurugger, 2010) characteristic of the 1990s/2000s, towards what has been termed the “citizen turn” (Oleart, 2023).

What do these different labels cover? Saurugger (2010) documented how civil society participation became a norm in EU discourse through elite advocacy in the 2000s following in particular the Convention debates (2001-2003). The key here however is that this elite endorsement came in the back of advocacy from Civil Society Organisations which had long been campaigning to be heard and included more systematically in decision making. But arguably, this early trends towards inclusion have been carefully managed by the institutions to control its effects. This is in part what is meant by the term “citizen turn”, to point to the decoupling citizen participation from civil society intermediation. It is thus used in a critical vein to stress the consensus-oriented, technocratic orientation of these processes. This results in a depoliticised and unmediated political dynamics where the ‘ordinary’ citizens debate in a neutral space in which polarisation, politicisation and contestation, or more broadly conflict, are avoided (Oleart, 2023). In other words, this is a type of EU policy-making that has been described as “technocratic democratisation” (Nicolaïdis et al., 2023) or as “policy without politics” (Schmidt, 2013).

More specifically, some scholars have warned about the risk of adopting a hegemonic deliberative approach to democratic innovations, which can reduce the field to its “non-critical system-supporting strand”, causing a “participation without power and power without participation” (Smith, 2019; Escobar and Bua, 2025). By lacking power-sharing, political mediation (through trade unions, political parties and civil society organisations), an agonistic sphere, and integrating the outcomes of deliberative forums into official policy, some authors argue that deliberative DIs are becoming a temporary fashion, a façade unable to change the current system (Oleart, 2023; Smith, 2019; Escobar and Bua, 2025; Alemanno et al., 2021).

On the brighter side, other scholars have emphasised the possibility that the EU can become a laboratory for a “third democratic transformation” (Nicolaïdis, 2024). In this laboratory, “a union of people governs together but not as one” (see Nicolaïdis, 2013, on the concept of *demoicracy*) through “unprecedented transnational experiments”, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The innovative aspect of the CoFoE was indeed the opportunity of gathering in the same plenary room a transnational group of citizens with their parliamentary representatives (at multiple levels) to at least attempt connecting representative, participatory and deliberative dimensions of the EU multi-level democracy (Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinsk, 2025).

To summarise, it is possible to categorise current scholarship on EU deliberative processes into three main thematic areas. First, scholars study the normative aspect of what European democracy should be, for instance, following deliberative experiments (Alemanno et al., 2021; Nicolaïdis et al., 2023). The second area explores a more citizen-centred approach, formulating recommendations and assessing the democratic qualities of the deliberative

processes adopted by the EU (Smith, 2009; Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski, 2025; Hüller, 2010; Escobar and Bua, 2025; see also CEPS-SWP Nicolaïdis et al., 2023). The third area investigates the reasons why institutional actors support certain deliberative processes, highlighting the role of the elites of citizen deliberation and the intertwining of institutions, interests and ideas (Oleart, 2023; Wauters et al., 2025; Bailly, 2025). This chapter contributes to an under-researched area of studies concerning the comparative analysis of multiple deliberative experiments across the same polity (Bailly, 2025; Kies and Nanz, 2013).

Methods and Case Selection

This research employs a comparative case study approach with semi-structured interviews as explained in chapter 1. The comparative analysis involves examining four deliberative practices, notably the Brussels Deliberative Committees (BDCs), Youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland (YAIS), France's Convention on the Time of the Child (FCTC), and the Democratic Odyssey project (DO). Criteria for selecting these practices were as follows: their multi-level character (local, national, transnational), mandates (institutionalised or civil society led), compositions (children, youth, mixed age, parliamentarians), and impacts (symbolic, experimental, transformative). Adopting the "most different case method", facilitates comparative analysis and enhances insights (Seawright et al., 2014). Similarly to chapter 1, we carried out online and in-person semi-structured interviews of around one hour with practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to further enrich the analysis by providing nuanced perspectives on the functioning, challenges, and prospects of these innovations. This process of triangulation enables the reliability of the data and the cross-validation of overarching patterns and conclusions (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p.176).

- € The **Brussels Deliberative Committees**, pioneered in 2019, are a world-first in permanently embedding citizens and MPs into parliamentary rules of procedure. They bring together 45 randomly selected citizens and 15 MPs to deliberate jointly on legislative questions, with mandatory follow-up in parliament. This model institutionalises power-sharing and has already delivered concrete policy outcomes, such as breaking political deadlock on 5G or reforming crisis management procedures.
- € By contrast, the **Youth Assemblies of Ireland and Scotland** are temporary, state-supported deliberative spaces explicitly designed to foreground the voices of children and young people. **Scotland's Climate Assembly (2020-21)** was the first national assembly to include under-16s, while Ireland has since hosted recurring **Youth Assemblies on Climate and Biodiversity (2022 onwards)**. Both rely on creative engagement tools (art, scenario-building, role play, etc.) and are backed by governments that have committed to integrating outputs into policy.
- € The **French Convention on the Time of the Child (2025)** extends deliberation to everyday issues of childhood and adolescence, such as school schedules and well-being. Convened by the Conseil Économique Social et Environnemental (CESE), it brings together 130 citizens, including a dedicated youth panel (aged 12-17) and adapted workshops for children (aged 6-11). It is the first French citizens' assembly to formally integrate children into deliberation with the aim to mediate between sectoral interests (teachers, parents, institutions) and children's rights.
- € Finally, the **Democratic Odyssey (DO) (2024-2025)** is a transnational, civil society-led experiment, which piloted a "travelling" People's Assembly across Europe as a

prototype for a permanent Peoples Assembly for Europe. Sessions of the Assembly took place in Athens, Florence, and Vienna tested translocal models that connect local communities to EU-level debates. Unlike state-led processes, DO is grassroots and decentralised although benefitting from soft endorsement from political and institutional actors. The Assembly has been very experimental, with agenda-setting through an open “Constituent Network” and methodological experimentation via a “Modular Framework.” While DO faced challenges of funding, multilingualism, and political anchoring its innovative character was in keeping with its original intent as a “proof-of-concept” than an institutional reform.

Taken together, these different cases highlight the diversity of deliberative designs, going from state-led to grassroots, from national to transnational, and from adult-centred to child-inclusive. In the following section, this article focuses on five key dimensions of comparison: (1) youth participation, (2) barriers & challenges, (3) political buy-in & transformative impact, (4) transcalar aspects, and (5) evaluation and perspectives. Given that in this chapter more cases are considered, the following sub-sections are synthetically analysed based on similar content, rather than by case.

Comparative Analysis

(1) Safeguards to youth participation

Research on youth political engagement highlights a persistent contrast: while young people often express low trust in traditional institutions and are underrepresented in formal politics, they also show strong interest in participatory and issue-based forms of engagement (Sloam, 2016). Deliberative and participatory formats are frequently seen as promising practices to reduce this gap, as they can create safe, creative spaces where younger voices can take central stage while learning and practicing civic skills (Checkoway, 2011). However, the literature also warns of risks of tokenism and the tendency to attract already engaged youth rather than reaching the broader population (Bessant, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the cases considered here illustrate different ways of designing youth inclusion. Scotland and Ireland placed children at the heart of deliberation: “The real goal was creating a safe, engaging, youth-centred environment (...) not just outputs” (Reid, 2025). In Brussels, young people aged over 16 gained confidence and agency by deliberating with MPs. Most recently, France has taken a step further by deliberately designing inclusivity with “workshops for 6–11-year-olds, a youth panel for teenagers, and a full citizens’ panel” (Occansey, 2025), leading to the establishment of a multi-layered model that is unusual in deliberative design. DO’s youth participation was simply a product of its composition (16 onwards) yet transformative. Ross (2025) recalled that “a really big group of young asylum seekers (...) made a very generative and productive difference to have these voices and these experiences”.

Across models, however, youth participation tends to reproduce inequalities, with the most engaged young people often being those who are already somehow politically active (students, activists etc.). This matches findings in the literature that point out how youth deliberation fosters civic literacy but risks tokenism if not combined with structural support

(Checkoway, 2011). Across models, the most active youth tended to be those already politically mobilised.

Hence the importance of thinking about safeguards that ensure not only the presence but also the effective inclusion of diverse youth, and, by extension, of other marginalised groups. Such safeguards may include adapted recruitment, facilitation sensitive to age and background, and institutional follow-up mechanisms that prevent participation from remaining symbolic. Overall, one notices that youth involvement varies strongly in these different models of deliberation. While youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland directly foreground younger voices, DO integrated youth indirectly, notably through refugee and asylum seeker networks as well as the use of theatre and civic arts where younger people tend to feel more at ease. In contrast, the Child Convention in France aims to institutionalise child-specific rights to lower barriers for participation by design.

(2) Barriers to inclusive deliberation

The literature on deliberative democracy identifies recurring barriers that limit both inclusiveness and impact. Scholars often distinguish between access barriers (who gets to participate and under what conditions), design barriers (how processes are structured and facilitated), and resource barriers (funding, time, expertise) (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). Without careful attention to these factors, deliberative processes risk reproducing existing inequalities by privileging the most educated or already engaged and producing outputs that are easily ignored by decision-makers. In particular, outreach to underrepresented groups, high-quality facilitation, translation, and institutional follow-up are widely recognised as essential but resource-intensive safeguards. Without translation, facilitation, and social support, such assemblies risk reproducing inequalities rather than correcting them (Carson & Elstub, 2019).

In terms of access, ensuring broad and inclusive participation can be a significant hurdle. For instance, in the Brussels Committee, Plovie (2025) warned that “if you don’t invest in outreach, you will only reach the usual suspects” to emphasise the risks of elitism. Similarly, Ireland and Scotland faced practical barriers to access, as Reid (2025) noted the difficulties of sortition “without accessible demographic data for under-18s”. Moreover, safeguarding minors requires extra layers of protection, which can complicate the process of selecting and involving younger participants.

The second barrier concerns the design of the assemblies and the perception of their legitimacy. For instance, France confronted scepticism, especially from education actors, due to past failed attempts at school reforms. Occansey (2025) stressed that “the school timetable has been one of the most controversial reforms in France (...) legitimacy was hard to build”. It seemed hard to believe that a single assembly could crack that nut. Therefore, youth assemblies, while innovative, often struggle to define their role, hovering between consultation and co-decision. As Ross (2025) underlined when referring to the DO: “the challenge is to move from consultation to genuine co-decision”.

Finally, resources present a clear barrier to effective operation. DO, in particular, was significantly constrained and struggled with multilingualism, funding gaps and overall logistical costs given its ambition. This led to a “*patchworked*” feeling: “they relied on whisper

translators (...) which created a lot of problems” (Ross, 2025). However, this also forced creativity in using the members themselves to support translation in addition to the official translation in Greek, Italian and German. Moreover, limited funding made it impossible to pay recruiter which forced a shift in recruitment strategies, moving from a focus on a broad diversity in Athens (recruitment foundation) and Florence (student volunteers) to relying more on the civil society in Vienna. At the same time, the greater limitation in funding led to one of the most creative innovations of DO, namely its combination of local and transnational recruitment to represent multinational citizens (with locals also including European expats and non-European citizens).

(3) More than a seat at the table: political buy-in and transformative impact

A central question in the literature on democratic innovations is whether deliberative processes generate only symbolic outputs or whether they produce transformative impacts on policy and institutions. There are two ways of thinking about impacts, one dominant and the other emergent.

On the dominant side, and probably unsurprisingly government endorsement means a greater likelihood of government follow-through. Scholars emphasise that institutional embedding and political will are decisive. When elected bodies are mandated to follow up, mini-publics, panels or assemblies can shape concrete decisions, while when they are merely consultative, their recommendations risk remaining on the shelf (Setälä, 2021; Jacquet, 2019). In practice, the case studies display different degrees of anchoring and impact.

The Brussels deliberative committees stand out because the commissions were embedded in parliamentary rules through the coalition agreement and prioritised by the parliamentary presidency. But their effectiveness was highly conditioned by wider pressures, such as youth climate protests. Plovie (2025) summarised this dynamic by stating, “What you lose in power as an MP, you regain in legitimacy”. Therefore, the concrete outputs included reforms on 5G, noise regulation, and crisis management. The Brussels model has since attracted international curiosity, although recognition remains mostly symbolic. Furthermore, limited media visibility means awareness is still confined to already-engaged publics.

Youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland benefited from direct government sponsorship. For example, Reid (2025) recalled that Scotland’s Deputy First Minister even recorded a child-friendly video to communicate recommendations, which reflects both symbolic and practical recognition. In addition, Ireland created a standing Youth Biodiversity Forum to institutionalise youth voice.

Meanwhile, France carries the weight of the Conseil Economique Social et Environnemental (CESE), but national political uptake remains cautious. Occansey (2025) warned that “without strong political follow-up assemblies risk being beautiful reports that stay on a shelf”. Similarly, and given its lesser level of political sponsorship, but thanks to its procedural innovation, DO received symbolic endorsements, but little policy traction for the moment although we need to consider that the pilot assembly only finished in May 2025 and the

actual campaign on its conclusion has not started yet: “Endorsement [...] were more expressions of interest [...] no direct policy linkage” (Ross, 2025). The key its traction therefore will be linked to the popular endorsement of its message on the need to democratise the management of crisis in Europe. Which connects to the second, more emergent path to impact.

On the more emergent side, citizens assemblies and other deliberative practices are not only dependent on direct policy and legislative impact. If in the mainstream view, political buy-in is both a condition for legitimacy and a determinant of long-term impact, impact is not only measured in short term policy change. Deliberative processes can also have transformative effects by reinforcing legitimacy, fostering civic literacy, and shifting political cultures (Escobar & Elstub, 2017). They are therefore important levers of democratic change in other spaces than official state apparatus, prevalent as they are in local and transnational movements which organise deliberation and participation through regional and local groupings organising participation (see activism section below). Not all measure of participatory effectiveness goes through the state.

(4) Planting democratic seeds: grounding deliberation across borders

Recent research highlights the importance of linking deliberative democracy across multiple scales, going from the local to the national and transnational (Nicolaïdis, 2024, p.861). While most mini-publics remain bound within a single polity, scholars argue that democratic innovations gain transformative potential when they foster vertical connections (linking citizen deliberation to formal institutions at higher levels) and horizontal connections (linking different local or national processes to one another) (Dryzek et al., 2019; Font & Smith, 2019). Transcalar designs can help embed deliberation into broader governance systems, but they also face challenges of translation, representation, and political uptake across levels.

Among the different cases analysed, approaches diverge considerably. For instance, DO most clearly experimented with transcalar design. On this point, Ross (2025) emphasised the extent to which “the idea of bringing down deliberations to different cities [...] was potentially a good way to ground European politics into local realities”. Yet the initiative’s long-term local impact will depend on the extent to which both local citizens members of the assembly and their networks take on the idea of “planting democratic seeds” as is one of the DO aims.

Even more ambitiously, while being bound to the regional level, the Brussels model has managed to inspire replication in other parliaments. It was influenced by the Irish experience but adapted to the local context through slower pacing and stronger institutional embedding. Recommendations sometimes travel to other Belgian levels, and exchanges with European actors point to their potential relevance for EU-level deliberation. Interviewees even suggested a nested model linking local and national assemblies with Brussels-based deliberation to strengthen legitimacy across scales.

France’s Convention on the Time of the Child which is ongoing, has some potential transcalar resonance, given the CESE’s ties to the EU’s European Economic and Social

Committee (EESC), though these links remain modest so far. In the case of the Youth Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland, no EU scaffolding exists yet, as they operated primarily at the national level, with Reid (2025) observing that the primary concern is “the intergenerational piece”. This analysis highlights that an integrated, multi-level system of deliberation appears to be a complex undertaking, contingent on specific design choices, institutional opportunities, and the strategic priorities of the actors involved.

(5) Evaluation - from proof-of-concept to lasting legitimacy

Evaluation is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of deliberative democracy. The OECD (2020) highlights that systematic evaluation is essential both to ensure the quality of deliberative processes and to build trust in their outcomes. Evaluations serve multiple purposes by providing feedback to improve design, generating evidence of effectiveness for policymakers, and strengthening the legitimacy of deliberative institutions by demonstrating transparency and accountability. Scholars also note that evaluation should capture not only outputs (recommendations, policy uptake) but also process outcomes such as civic learning, empowerment, and cultural change (Escobar & Elstub, 2017; Curato et al., 2019; Escobar and Bua, 2025; Bailly, 2025). Without evaluation or citizen empowerment, even innovative processes risk being dismissed as isolated experiments.

Moreover, evaluation is political, as Plovie (2025) commenting on the Brussels model stated:

»If.MPs.don't.feel.their.legitimacy.is.reinforced?they.will.not.continue.the.
experiment;

The considered cases illustrate different approaches. For instance:

- **Brussels** institutionalised ongoing independent evaluation after each committee fed improvements back into parliamentary rules.
- **Ireland & Scotland** relied instead on mixed methods, with Reid (2025) stressing the importance of measuring empowerment and civic literacy, not just outputs.
- The evaluation process of **France's Convention** is still in progress, but based on our interview, there seems to be a potential for substantial skill development among youth.
- Finally, **DO** relied on informal evaluation by “critical friends.” Ross (2025) explained: “we can't really ask that much of these very small processes (...) but they show that civil society can innovate in ways institutions cannot.”

However, all evaluations emphasise empowerment, skill-building, and cultural change. In Brussels, young people gained deliberative competence and confidence, while in Ireland and Scotland, Reid (2025) stresses long-term democratic literacy and the need to avoid siloed “youth-only” processes. France's Convention Citoyenne is still underway but already demonstrates the rapid civic skill development of youth participants. DO is evaluated as a “proof-of-concept”, which can be considered successful in experimentation but still limited in systemic impact: “DO succeeded as an experimental space testing bold concept, but not as

a replicable reform” (Ross, 2025) -- at least not yet, as the lessons learned and assessment have not yet started for this initiative.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the case studies in this chapter highlights the diversity and the fragility of democratic innovations that seek to foreground youth participation. A few key lessons emerge.

First, youth participation, despite being increasingly experimented with, remains uneven and often limited to already engaged young people. Considering that not all young people and other age cohorts are interested in democracy or democratic engagement, it is essential to design safeguards for inclusion through adapted recruitment, facilitation, and institutional follow-up. Especially to avoid self-selection bias and tokenism.

Second, challenges lie in constrained institutional and financial investment, which hinder sustainable deliberation processes. Furthermore, our analysis found that political buy-in is decisive for a deliberative assembly’s impact. When deliberative assemblies are embedded in institutional mandates, as was the case in Brussels, Ireland, Scotland, and France, their recommendations have the power to shape policy. And yet this runs the risk of circular reasoning.

One question we are left with is whether, if political or administrative anchoring is weak, for instance in the case of the DO, the outputs risk can only remain symbolic. In the case of DO where the campaign has only just started, the jury is still out. In addition, transcalar dimensions remain underdeveloped; the DO’s fragile attempt at European-scale deliberation demonstrates both the promise and the limits of connecting local voices to supranational politics. Finally, evaluation is vital for legitimacy, learning, and adaptation, yet it remains unevenly applied, ranging from Brussels’ systematic feedback loops to DO’s more informal “proof-of-concept” assessments.

New developments in the field of democratic innovation continue to emerge, constantly expanding the scope of what is possible in terms of citizen participation and institutional experimentation. In this regard, it will be particularly interesting to follow the launch of the European Commission’s new panel on pollinators, which represents the first youth assembly explicitly designed with an institutionalisation perspective. This initiative, starting in the weekend of 26 to 28 September 2025 precisely as this report is published, illustrates how democratic innovation remains a dynamic and evolving field, where novel formats and institutional commitments are progressively tested.

Taken together, these insights again suggest that the future of deliberative democracy with and for young people perhaps lies in hybridisation. This involves embedding promising grassroots innovations into institutional frameworks, while also ensuring that institutionalised models remain adaptive, inclusive, and youth friendly. This idea was echoed by interviewees who evaluated the Brussels model, suggesting hybridisation could involve combining commissions with tools such as citizen monitoring panels, participatory budgeting, or referendums on debated questions. Digital complements could also be tested, though with caution given the risks of exclusion.

This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. For instance, with regards to mechanisms of inclusion, further research might explore which types of recruitment and facilitation strategies most effectively lower barriers for underrepresented groups, including those outside formal education or civic networks. Another issue worth investigating is transcalar linkages: how can local and national (youth) assemblies connect meaningfully to European and global governance without losing local legitimacy? Finally, a further study could assess the long-term impacts of democratic innovations on intergenerational trust, democratic literacy and political socialisation beyond immediate recommendations.

Under EC Review

Chapter 3: Digital Democracy

The advent of AI was initially met with great euphoria by many, leading the American investor Marc Andreessen to claim that 'AI will save the world' (2023). Since then, a 2024 survey of 2,778 AI researchers predicted, "AI to pose at least a 5% chance of causing human extinction or similarly permanent and severe disempowerment of the human species" (Grace et al.), marking a gradual shift in the way technological change may or may not bring about positive change. Comparative scholarship suggests a correlation between accelerated AI development and lower levels of democratic engagement, which adds another layer to already existing digital gaps (Chehoudi, 2025). Contrasting with techno-optimism, Yuval Noah Harari cautions "never summon powers you cannot control", invoking European cautionary tales such as the myth of Phaethon or Goethe's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (2024). Democratic societies in Europe are thus faced with the question: can we handle what we have created?

Against this backdrop, rather than dwelling on dystopia, this chapter investigates how digital tools can future-proof democracy in Europe. Four exemplary European initiatives will be reviewed through semi-structured interviews. A comparative analysis will focus on youth participation, the associated barriers and challenges, and trans-scalar impact. The aim is to create a typology of democratic innovation in the digital sphere, showcasing ways to bolster democratic practices in Europe.

Literature Review

In this chapter, digital democracy is considered a horizontal issue that touches upon all other democratic families. In this regard, Elstub and Escobar state that "it is hard to make the case that this is a distinguishable family of democratic innovation. Rather, it is one of the main sources of hybridisation within the other families" (2019, p. 27).

However, digital democracy is undergoing radical evolution and remains a fuzzy term, forming part of an ongoing scholarly debate. Berg and Hofmann (2021) define it as "a concept that links practices and institutions of collective political self-determination with its mediating digital infrastructures". Pioneers of digital democracy such as the former Taiwanese digital minister, Audrey Tang, speak of a set of digital tools that complement democratic techniques in the twenty-first century. In her book "Plurality" (2023), Tang argues that digital tools can be used to transform democratic culture itself, not merely to streamline governance.

In this chapter, I will adopt the definition of Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas, who characterised digital democratic innovations as "initiatives or institutions that are designed with the goal of deepening citizens' participation and influence on political decisions through the use of digital tools and platforms" (see Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas, 2025). The concept is broader than earlier ideas of e-democracy or e-government as it emphasises accessibility and inclusiveness as well as efficiency (Hennen, Leonhard et al., 2020). As Mikhaylovskaya (2024) notes, digital democracy links practices of collective self-government with the infrastructures that mediate them.

E-democracy is referred to the use of information technology to digitise existing democratic processes, such as publishing information online or enabling online consultations (Schaal, 2016). E-voting, on the other hand, is a more specific sub-field involving the use of electronic systems or the internet for taking part in elections or referenda (Gibson, 2016). While e-voting can increase accessibility and efficiency, it is also controversial due to concerns about trust, security, and exclusion (Troitiño, 2023). However, digital democracy goes beyond these functional dimensions. It aims to reconfigure how citizens and institutions navigate controversy and seek consensus, often through open-source platforms, deliberative infrastructures and new forms of collective intelligence (Bernholz, Landemore & Reich, 2021). It is this contribution to hybridisation which makes digital democracy so valuable to other democratic innovations (Elstub and Escobar, 2019). In the digital world, the development of interoperable platforms is a prerequisite for 'technocratic democratisation' (Nicolaidis et al., 2023) or 'policy without politics' (Schmidt, 2013), as mentioned in the previous chapter. These platforms are emerging as prototypes for non-siloed socio-political spaces. However, this raises another debate on 'civic tech', which will be touched upon in the following chapter (Barandiaran et al., 2024; Gaiba and Giovanardi, 2024).

Within the scholarly debate, there are a few core tensions which dominate the field (Hendriks, 2023). Firstly, there is the contradiction of broadening access while deepening exclusion. While digital tools can increase participation, those without access or digital literacy skills are left behind if digital divides persist (cf. Sgueo, 2023). The second clash concerns the tension between quantity and quality. Digital platforms enable mass engagement and require a critical mass to gain legitimacy in the digital realm. However, ensuring deliberative quality and meaningful uptake remains challenging, as confirmed by all participants in this study. Then, there is an ambiguity between transparency and information overload. Open data does indeed promote accountability in the digital space. Nevertheless, without translation into civic literacy, citizens may be overwhelmed rather than empowered.

Considering the increasing cyberattacks on European digital infrastructure, not only since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but there is also fundamental ambiguity of vulnerability/cybersecurity. Foreign interference has also gone digital and continuously tries to disrupt the democratic consensus-building process through misinformation and deepfakes (Iosifidis and Nicoli, 2020). As Audrey Tang advocates, digital democracy could help to make democracy more resilient in the face of these new threats.

Methods and Case Selection

This research uses a comparative case study approach involving semi-structured interviews. Four digital democracy initiatives were selected for analysis: HowTheVote.eu, Make.org, Open Source Politics and Treecompany. The case selection was based on snowball sampling (Barglowski, 2018). The criteria used to select the cases included the initiatives' operation at different levels of governance, their organisational form, and their function within the democratic innovation ecosystem (accountability, facilitation, or translation). By adopting

a "most different case" method (Seawright and Gerring, 2014), the study brings together diverse organisational models and functions to enhance comparative insights.

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and founders, conducted in summer 2025, provide first-hand insights into the initiatives and organisation's objectives, youth participation, barriers and transcalar dimensions. The four cases represent different strands of digital democracy in Europe and were chosen to illustrate the range from grassroots activism to civic tech companies.

- [howtheyvote.eu](#) — a Berlin-based, volunteer-driven civic tech initiative run by two people. It structures and publishes roll-call votes in an accessible and reusable format, enabling citizens, journalists and researchers to track MEP positions. The emphasis lies on transparency, accountability, and open data.
- [Make.org](#) is a civic tech company that designs mass participation platforms with an emphasis on user experience and large-scale outreach.
- Open Source Politics (OSP): a social enterprise deploying open-source tools such as the [Decidim](#) platform for participatory budgeting, petitions, and consultations at municipal, national, and European levels of governance.
- [Treecompany](#): a Belgian SME employing political scientists, developers, and designers. It tailors participation ecosystems by combining tools such as voting advice applications (VAAs), AI-moderated comment spaces and phygital installations in public spaces.

This qualitative material was triangulated with desk research and secondary literature on democratic innovations, allowing for the cross-validation of findings and supporting the reliability of conclusions (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 176). The following section presents a comparative analysis of the four cases along key dimensions.

Comparative Analysis

(1) Engaging young people with democracy online

To increase youth participation, it is not enough to simply provide access; designs must also cater to the digital habits of younger generations. In this regard, Make.org emphasizes participation from the first click to adapt to evolving online behaviors (van den Berg, 2021; Hill & Shaw, 2021). Treecompany has already noticed an upcoming generational shift in online behavior: chat-like or visual interactions outperform older text-based interfaces with teenagers. An example therefore are VAAs, which offer personalized outputs that motivate continued engagement (cf. Albertsen, 2020).

Digital democratic tools can elevate democratic debates to a more substantive level. For instance, by providing structured voting data of the European Parliament, Howtheyvote.eu enables young people to discover and contextualize concrete MEP positions and put them into the political context. This shifts the discourse from 'the EU did X' to 'who voted how and why' and may ultimately counter the perceived democratic deficit of the EU.

Assisting younger cohorts in participating remains important to bridge the social digital divide. Open Source Politics highlights the value of in-person workshops at schools to support participation and enable contributions into digital processes. Younger cohorts report difficulties in text-heavy platforms and may benefit from such assistance.

All four organizations report greater youth engagement when projects involve partnerships with schools, youth councils, festivals or local media. Treecompany's phygital installations meet young people in squares or events and convert on-site attention into digital contributions (see Charlton et al., 2023).

To summarize, youth engagement emerges when easy-access design is supported by outreach and political relevance. 'Digital native' does not necessarily mean digitally literate, so facilitation and co-creation remain important. As one of the interviewees put it: "In general, improvements made 'for youth' tend to enhance usability for everyone".

(2) Barriers to participation in the digital space

Although digital democracy is an impactful tool for enhancing democracy in the digital space, it faces its own challenges. "Outreach is decisive", and this seems especially true for digital initiatives, as all four cases indicate. Small civic projects such as Howtheyvote.eu struggle to grow their user base outside the algorithms of big platforms, and even EU-sponsored portals can underperform without media amplification and events. Attention is a scarce commodity online and, as the interviewees stated, it is very difficult to stand out in the digital world: "It is a challenge but not only with young people. It's just the reality of the digital space right now."

In contrast to other democratic initiatives digital democracy is even more dependent on the numbers of participants to gain legitimacy in the digital space. This dilemma is a central concern for practitioners: “One of the challenges of digital democracy is to aim for quality, obviously, but also for quantity”. Indeed, quality and quantity do not have to be mutually exclusive, but quantity can be a precondition for quality. How can the need to reach large numbers of participants be reconciled with scarce attention online? Looking ahead one of the participants stated: “I think that in future it's important to make these low-threshold, easy, fun interactions”. In terms of quality, these interactions might not always meet the high standards organizers would hope for. However, once the outreach has been established, it is possible to hold more in-depth deliberative discussions within these groups as a second step.

(3) What is the impact?

To what extent do political institutions adopt, incorporate and act upon the results of digital democratic innovations?

Visible impact clearly increases when participation is tied to decision-making processes. However, the impact varies widely between the different initiatives and organizations. Open Source Politics deploys open-source platforms which support participatory budgeting or public consultations. Make.org uses its engagement platforms to break bubbles and enable discourse that would not have been possible before, by identifying areas of consensus and controversy among citizens. Regardless of how small the team is, HowTheyVote.eu's structured data supports individual research, which indirectly shapes policy debates and fosters a culture of political accountability. Depending on the organisation's size, transformative impact may be measured differently. In the case of HowTheyVote.eu, it is not public institutions that measure positive impact, but rather feedback from think tanks and other research organizations. As mentioned in the interviews, there are also other unexpected proofs of impact in the digital realm. For example, the founders of HowTheyVote were pleasantly surprised by the Reddit discussions sparked by their data, which included multiple links to their website.

Another form of transformative impact is created through digital interfaces that motivate citizens to engage with politics. Treecompany's VAAs increase political knowledge and motivation to vote. The impact of VAAs on democratic engagement has been most famously measured in the case of Germany's Wahl-o-Mat (Israel, 2017).

Ultimately, policy uptake always depends on institutional will. EU-level efforts (e.g. the Conference on the Future of Europe and citizen panels) show promising results but often suffer from comparatively weak outreach.

(4) Digital democracy at scale

In what ways can the digital space be connected to the various levels and spaces of governance? Are the tools of digital democracy confined to a single level of governance, or can they connect across multiple levels, from the local to the supranational? This perspective is relevant to current debates on planetary politics. As Nicolaïdis (2024) argues, democracy is undergoing a “third transformation” from the European to the planetary level. This requires practices that can bridge governance scales and enable civic voices to resonate across borders. Indeed, the cases in question exemplify the fact that digital democracy actors operate across different scales. Some, such as [howtheyvote.eu](#), are anchored at one level, in this case the European Parliament, while others, such as [Treecompany](#), are anchored at the level of national elections. Then there are those, such as [Open Source Politics with Decidim](#) or [Make.org](#) with large-scale consultations, that deliberately span multiple levels. While digital democracy may serve as a tool for horizontal integration, as argued previously, vertical integration remains uneven.

By linking back to European debates, [Open Source Politics](#), [Make.org](#) and [Treecompany](#) demonstrate the connection between local and national engagement and EU decision-making. On the other hand, [HowTheyVote.eu](#) indirectly strengthens European cross-border debates by providing data, which may counteract the typical EU blame game. It should be noted that the scale of initiatives and organizations depends not only on their goals, but also on their resources. [Make.org](#) demonstrates scalability in contexts where a critical mass of at least 100,000 people can be reached. In contrast, [HowTheyVote.eu](#) is limited by its volunteer-based model, which is legitimate in its own right.

[Treecompany](#) and the European VAA partnership provide a promising example of the transcalar effect. While many EU-level participatory projects arguably follow a top-down approach, [Treecompany](#) is part of a partnership of local organisations that all know their local context very well. These bottom-up partnerships of local actors could have a transscalar impact by combining their local contexts and thus serve as a European model.

What does Digital Democracy do well in Europe?

So far, this chapter has emphasized the importance of digital democracy as a horizontal issue that enables the hybridization of other democratic innovations. [Elstub](#) and [Escobar](#) highlight the potential for hybridization as a strength: “Clearly there are other elements of democratic innovation that contribute to hybridization, but digital participation elements of specific cases of democratic innovations are a key contributor.” (2019, p. 27).

Although the interviewees emphasized that digital democracy is currently at the heart of debates about democratic innovation, it is neither a box-ticking exercise nor a one-size-fits-all solution. As one of the participants stated: “I see it as an important piece of the puzzle, [...] but I am also very aware that we cannot just say that, because we have so many problems in our societies these days, we will solve them all by using digital democracy.”

To open up the debate on future pathways for digital democracy in Europe, we suggest three functions of digital democracy that arose from the interviews: increasing accountability, facilitation, and translation. It should be noted that these findings cannot be generalised due to the small number of cases in the study.

The identified functions are not mutually exclusive since initiatives and organizations often incorporate elements of all three. Nevertheless, distinguishing between these functions helps to clarify the contribution to the future-proofing of democracy.

1. Accountability

Projects such as howtheyvote.eu demonstrate the accountability function. By structuring and publishing roll-call votes in the European Parliament, they transform opaque legislative records into transparent and legible data. In this sense, accountability means enabling citizens, especially young people, to analyse the decision-making process in the European Parliament beyond member states and political affiliation. As one of the founders stated: “You actually see online debates being started around these specific votes and [...] that kind of takes a discussion on a more substantive level”. Increasing political accountability can alter conventional narratives in debates about EU politics. The founders observed that the discussion evolved from ‘the EU did this’ to a focus on the people who voted on the subject and the context in which it emerged. Raising accountability through data provision might thus, in the best case, strengthen democratic culture itself.

2. Facilitation

All of the described initiatives and organizations innovate digital tools to facilitate democratic discussion. Furthermore, Open Source Politics, Treecompany and Make.org design and implement platforms that reduce barriers to participation and organize large amounts of input. As with in-person facilitation, digital democracy tools can create spaces where diverse voices can co-produce agendas and strive for consensus during public deliberations (cf. Nicolaïdis, 2025). A prerequisite for digital facilitation is a design that is easily accessible and has a low threshold, enabling participation from the first click. However, in-person assistance like school workshops, remains important. Scalable open-source infrastructure, such as Decidim, brings together a large number of individual contributions to create a collective output that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. Digital democracy is certainly not a suitable replacement for in-person facilitation in public deliberations, but it is an interesting add-on, nonetheless.

3. Translation

When asked about their involvement in other democratic projects, one participant described their organisation as facilitators, innovators, and designers. As they put it: “It’s not only about the technological development, but also [about] the question of how we think the methods on how people engage [...] the translation between the tech side of things and the democracy side of things”.

On the one hand civic tech organisations are middlemen or translators between the bubble that rethinks democracy and the bubble that develops technology. On the other hand, this translation also happens between citizens and institutions. These actors convert citizens' input into outputs that can be used by local administrations and larger institutions, such as the EU. Conversely, they translate institutional processes into forms that citizens can understand and engage with, thereby making EU content more accessible.

A snapshot of three current functions of digital democracy may help to illustrate how hybridization through digital democracy can complement the wider democratic ecosystem.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how digital democracy, as a horizontal issue, can complement the democratic innovations described in other chapters. The four initiatives and organisations that were interviewed exemplify how and for what purposes digital democracy can be used to future-proof democracy in Europe.

While it may generally be easier to reach youth in the digital space, attention remains a scarce commodity. To effectively engage with young people, it is crucial to adapt to their evolving digital habits and also engage with them in the physical world. However, we should not overestimate the differences between other age groups in the digital space. In fact, what seems to work best with young people also seems to work best with others. The founder of Treecompany sums this up perfectly: "To be honest, young people are not that different from other people". The main challenge lies in gaining attention in the crowded digital space through appropriate outreach. More so than other democratic innovations described in other chapters, digital democracy needs a certain number of participants to gain legitimacy and have a political impact. In the European context, bottom-up partnerships between local organisations appear to be a promising way to achieve transscalar impact at the European level.

Returning to the introduction, the four cases demonstrate how digital technology and democratic innovation can be developed in tandem. This offers hope for the future of European democracy.

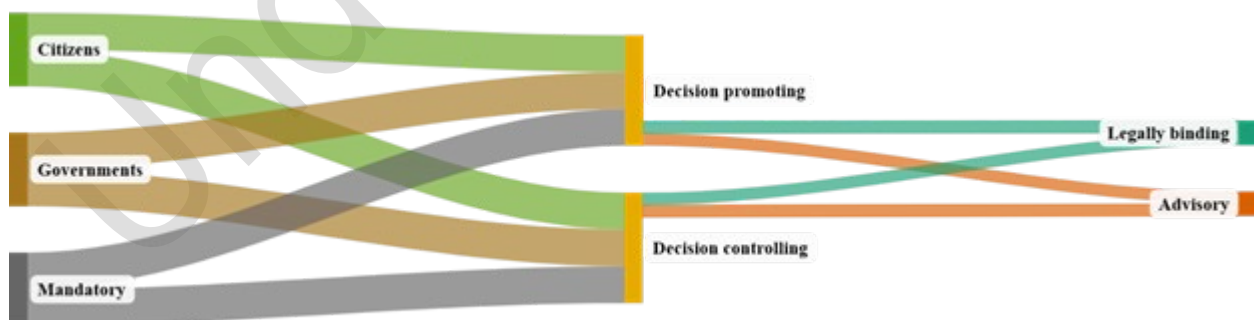
Chapter 4: Direct democracy

The emergence of Democratic Innovations (DIs) across the globe has reached many innovative forms of citizen participation. In this report, we map them with a particular focus on the emerging practices. While it is clear that some among these speak to completely new forms of involvement in the political life of a polity, others fall more coherently under a distinct category that is distributed and scaled unevenly across time. Such is the case for the direct democracy family, which includes a wide range of instruments that are not so new in many political contexts (e.g. referenda) and others that pertain to the sudden technological advancements brought about in the last decade (e.g. blockchain voting).

We talk about direct democracy and clarify what we are specifically referring to: the aggregation of collective preferences in a form that is generally limited to a voting procedure, but does not relate directly to the election of representatives. The level of governance is predominantly national and in this chapter, we will endeavor to explore where these imaginative boundaries are usually stretched, and what that tells us about where there is still space for experimentation.

Direct democracy can be mandated by different actors, have different goals and activate different procedures. Jäske and Setälä (2019) classify these processes as (i) initiated by citizens; (ii) called upon by governments or (iii) triggered by specific legislative procedures. All three can have a decision-promoting or decision-controlling nature. While decision-promoting instruments codify the initiator as also being the agenda-setter, decision-controlling ones are to be understood as a range of actions that enable an operationalization of vetoes (Jäske and Setälä, 2019). Both categories can in principle be set up as processes that mandate a legislative follow-up ('legally binding') or be consultative-advisory.

Figure 1 Typology of direct voting procedures



Source: Authors' elaboration, building on (Jäske and Setälä, 2019)

This visualization suggests a rather intuitive and broader-reaching approach is necessary, in order to tap into the full array of direct voting options and draw from its most successful,

or indeed most needed solutions. From the post-World War II constitutional referenda taking place across Europe, to the more recent Chilean constitutional referendum, voting is always deeply connected to the socio-political reality of a given political system. Certainly, with mainstream direct democracy, scholars underline its embeddedness with the socio-legal tradition of liberal democracies. In view of this, the most traditional forms (referenda) contrast starkly with the bottom-up agenda setting of citizens' initiatives. Similarly, different innovations have more or less intrinsic capacity to span across a wide range of policy issues, also depending on how institutional they become.

Literature review and case selection on traditional trends

Interestingly, the Democracy Index Score, an index developed by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) covering 60 indicators and 167 countries, does not seem to be impacted positively by the presence of legislative instruments of direct democracy. In fact, the exclusive presence of constitutional rights to initiate referenda actually seems to impact the Democracy Index Score more negatively than not having them. This of course is to be taken into context as the Democracy Index Score has a given degree of precision, since it applies a 0-10 scale for its qualitative assessment and the number of indicators is quite necessarily established arbitrarily. The counterfactual analysis by But, Jongkind and Voermans (2022) however flags a possible insight: where both constitutional rights to initiate referenda *and* legislation are present, this shows *no* bearing on the Index. This is to be understood positively, when compared to the findings regarding the presence of the right to initiate referenda alone.

Many scholars specifically look at direct democracy as inherently majoritarian. It does not facilitate instances where constructive, pluralistic deliberation leads to a clear, consensual solution. Instead, direct democracy is argued to become crucial for addressing tensions or political negotiations that cannot be addressed otherwise and require the legitimacy provided by a majority (Magni-Berton, 2024). Uruguay's case is argued to validate this thesis, as the lack of some elements that many democracies in the Northern hemisphere would consider commonly present - e.g. low government approval rates, high degrees of lobbying, and the concomitant vote on other issues (such as elections) to galvanise electorate – are found to be conducive to higher chances that direct democracy attempts do not fail (Antía and Vairo 2023). In other words, the more contested or polarising, the better, even if this may be due to a layered polarisation that does not exclusively speak to the specific topic being voted on.

However, before dismissing direct democracy as inherently majoritarian and heavily rooted in political agonism, thus making it one of the DIs most linked with traditional electoral systems and their pathologies (e.g. demagoguery), we want to take a better look at the foundational claims of this implies. We present a constructivist argument that direct

democracy should be understood as a tool for deepening democracy. Whether it manages to do so depends entirely on the context it is deployed in.

Much toward this goal, we do not seek to map holistically the full range of case studies available across Europe, like various other well-funded research studies have sought to do. We focus instead on getting a sense of the trends in the deployment of direct democracy and look at case studies that exemplify this. On this, we resonate with Qvortrup's statement formulated in the review of a wide publication mapping direct democracy worldwide, that "at a time when we sometimes have too much information, and too little wisdom, the question is if this volume contributes to our scholarly and social science knowledge of the theory and practice of direct democracy" (2021, pp. 843).

Simultaneously, it is important to identify the object of study. We present here an overview of direct democracy instruments, building on Cheneval (2020):

- (vii) **Agenda setting initiatives** are legislative proposals validated by the collection of a given threshold of signatures
- (vii) **Popular initiatives** provide an opportunity for a group of citizens to directly advance a legislative proposal and request it to be voted on by all citizens through a referendum
- (vii) **Mandatory referenda** occur when there is a constitutional obligation to set up a referendum for a specific range of constitutional or legislative proposals
- (vii) **Facultative abrogative referenda** enables citizens to put to popular vote a given piece of legislation that has already entered into force
- (vii) **Facultative negative referenda** validate the implementation of a given a piece of legislation before it enters into force
- (vii) **Plebiscites** can be both consultative or binding and can be exclusively called upon by parliaments or governments
- (vii) **Recall referenda**, albeit not commonly added to this list, are strictly bound to electoral democracy and empower bottom-up accountability of elected officials, who can be removed from office before the end of the term

Among the Council of Europe members, only 21 of 47 member states have developed the constitutional ability to provide instruments of direct democracy to complement more traditional electoral democracy processes. When comparing 2006 and 2016, there was an increase from 18 to 58 referenda (Qvortrup, 2021). The data paints a clear picture: even if the horizontal diffusion is starkly asymmetrical across Europe, the vertical one accelerates.

Brexit and the pathologies of consultative plebiscites

The first issue that can be encountered in direct democracy is that of problem tractability. The European Union Referendum Act 2015 remains a quite exemplary case study of the tradition of consultative plebiscites in Europe. To be clear, we do not approach this question from the standpoint of analysing whether the collective choice expressed by the referendum outputs stood the test of time, when compared to the original promises appearing in the political discourse of the time. For the purpose of drawing lessons for the future of direct

democracy, we steer away from a substantive analysis of the pros and cons of the decision itself, thus avoiding the heavily normative claims that have circulated in subsequent scholarship. Rather, we acknowledge that these analyses occasionally deny a deeper democratic principle of self-determination, one that is itself to be understood as a complicated web of political attitudes and contextual factors.

Nicolaidis (2020) underlines the constraints of binary thinking often applied to direct democracy instruments and the way the decision-making process is formulated to be. An important lesson from the Brexit process would be that both the political lead-up to the referendum itself (Glencross, 2016), as well as the following political negotiations, paid very little attention to the inherent ambivalence that is nested in each of our individual positional ambiguities. In doing so, we risk skipping a key 'eureka' moment for DI embeddedness and integration, which we will further expand later in this chapter.

In such ad-hoc direct voting procedures (e.g. Brexit), elite cues often overlap with political cues and brew a dangerous concoction (Jäske and Setälä, 2019). Since this process is so closely tied to elections and party politics, the overall debate often creates an environment that's harmful to the original goal of consulting people that kicked off the idea. This shows that direct voting like referendums isn't a precise way to get more people involved in democracy; it was probably the best tool we had until newer ideas and technologies for democratic innovation came into the picture.

The constraints to the degree of precision do not only apply to the ontology of democracy, but also to its epistemological realm. For instance, as opposed to deliberative processes, where it is possible to infer the evolution of discourse around a given policy topic in a controlled deliberative environment, the same is much more complex and nuanced for polity-wide direct voting. All the concomitant factors converge towards the binary choice at the ballot. This makes it incredibly more difficult to identify cluster of voters ranked by the political priorities that informed their choices, let alone trace which specific socio-political prioritization is made by individuals within these. The jury is out as to whether direct democracy still manages to provide sufficient outputs as to claim generalisability of findings, as well as a clear way forward in terms of how to improve the models.

Risks of democratic capture

All sub-types of direct democracy previously presented harbor an inherent risk of capture, which manifests itself in various instances we probe below. The linearity of the previous inferences regarding the state of public discourse around direct voting when this is implemented alone, leads us to further analyse the deliberative quality of participation *ex ante*. Public debates often bring along, and sometimes accelerates, the tensions and affects that pertain to wider, adjacent political issues. This is particularly the case when the electoral democratic system supposed to be the political background of a nation-wide choice, becomes specifically entrenched in pre-existing structures of political inequality.

The Brexit referendum undoubtedly raised deontological questions as to whether it is coherent with democratic principles, to have differentiated spending ceilings for parties' campaign funds, based on the previous Westminster General Election results, i.e. the national political elections. On the one hand, this only reinforced scholarship on the issue, which dates back to the 1975 referendum (Butler and Kitinger, 1996). Winner-take-all approaches to elections and particularly referenda, do not bode well with the political science of agonism, or with that of freedom of speech. On the other hand, research findings indicate how the ceilings currently set by UK law were very high and, in the case where they were ever reached, they did not prevent political parties from circumventing them (Paulissen and Maddens, 2023). All this suggests that the instrumental use of direct democracy by political parties can effectively represent the complexity of thoughts a whole population may have on a given issue.

Precisely due to the connection between direct democracy and electoral politics, it is also not uncommon to see nation-wide misinformation or disinformation campaigns, also interwoven with foreign interference. In a report on 'contextual factors impacting futures of democracy', Rosa et al (2025, pp.41-42) flag that while on the one hand, electoral interference does affect directly the end-results of an election (inter alia the Brexit referendum), on the other it does not foreclose the evidence of it having "influenced election discourse, amplified harmful narratives, and entrenched political polarisation".

Institutionalisation and routinisation in Switzerland

Having plunged deep into what are perhaps the most historically entrenched issues with direct democracy, it is however important to note this DI is not going anywhere and as specified previously, its intrinsic democratic influence cannot be dismissed. We have set out to identify lesson-drawing potential and the case of Switzerland certainly provides more fine-grained scenarios of prosocial embeddedness.

In the context of Switzerland, there has been a linear increase in the accrued number of the three voting mechanisms since 1848 over three separate periods, presented by Kübler (2024) as (i) 1848-1900; (ii) 1901-1960; (iii) 1961-2020. Over the same period, Switzerland has also seen a stark increase in the success rate of direct democratic instruments.

Figure 2 Use of direct democracy in Switzerland: number of objects voted and government success rate (1848-2020)

Number of votes and government success rate (in %)	1848–1900	1901–1960	1961–2020	Total
Optional referendums	26 (30%)	39 (44%)	128 (68%)	193 (58%)
Mandatory referendums	27 (48%)	61 (75%)	152 (75%)	240 (73%)
Popular initiatives	5 (80%)	41 (87%)	174 (91%)§	220 (90%)
Total	58 (43%)	141 (69%)	454 (78%)	653 (74%)

Source: Kübler (2024, pp.188).

Ground research indicates that the constant interactions between elected officials and citizens through direct voting reduce the distance between the two groups. Not only do citizens feel closer to institutions and are encouraged to develop a culture of participation, but also public officials internalise the voting outputs as constant, powerful indicators of citizen attitudes (Helfer, Wäspi, and Varone, 2021). Elected representatives adapt their *modus operandi* to ensure that there is a healthy dialogue with other democratic stakeholders who have clear institutional leverage that can be mobilised over dissent.

The triangulation of findings from the Swiss case and broader research on the different weight that institutions, context and attitudes may have on the level of satisfaction with democracy (at individual level), arguably provides us with a more general picture. Cutler, Nuesser, and Nyblade (2023) were able to show the empirical evidence behind a foundational piece of knowledge: that citizens are generally more interested in the actual on-the-ground results of policies, rather than the institutional or political stability that generates it. This turns the attention to the possible confirmation of a functionalist approach to politics of the citizenry at large, which focuses on demand and supply of services. Empowering DIs that give broader direct decision-promoting, or indeed simply decision-controlling power – adds a layer of incentives to elected representatives and requires overall transparency in how they may routinely exercise their legitimacy. A salient finding, particularly in systems which are transitioning from purely electoral models to the integration of other DIs. It compels us to raise the question of the role of direct democracy much more prominently.

Of course, whether if in the UK or in Switzerland, it is clear that political power and financial influence will always play an important role in determining the outcome. The prior findings do not mean having completely addressed the imbalances that do not only pertain to the proximity to electoral democracy, but rather to the way socio-economic paradigms unfold as a whole. For instance Switzerland, like in the Brexit case previously observed, is subject to lobbying and well-crafted political campaigns potentially swinging voting results (Kinderman, 2024). Certainly, it may mean having approximated a theory of how routinised direct democracy can be part of the jigsaw puzzle of rebuilding mutual trust between institutions and the general public.

However, a warning is in order and we present it through a cautionary tale. We disagree here with Helfer, Wäspi and Varone (2021) who make the case that direct democracy can act as 'checks and balances' for a given democratic system. It can certainly provide decentralised oversight and create an ecosystem of increased transparency. This does not forcibly mean more constitutional guarantees. The 2009 Swiss case of a popular initiative banning the building of minarets, which ignored institutional responses by the government and the parliament, sheds a light on a socio-legal setting where direct democracy is routinised but does not fully integrate a system of checks and balances by interlocution with the other jurisdictional bodies. Hyper-autonomy of a popular initiative bindingly requesting the amendment of a Constitutional article, determined that the approval of the ban could not be overruled by the Federal Supreme Court (Cherti, 2010). This specific case in Switzerland

also sheds a light on the other side of the coin. What happens if popular initiatives are mandated to amend the constitution or a given piece of legislation, but do not need to play by the same rules that apply to other institutions?

Comparative analysis

(1) Achieving a long-term vision for youth participation

In the previous sections of this chapter, we have analysed the orthodox understandings of direct democracy, its general purposes and its applications in contemporary nation-states. Simultaneously, we have also raised a series of points regarding pitfalls and limitations of deployment of direct democracy innovations in the current socio-legal settings they are deployed in.

Building on the previous considerations concerning the issue of problem tractability (e.g. Brexit), we develop here an exploratory case for scaling democratic innovations in a way that enables sufficiently ambitious political themes and certainty in follow-through. The triangulation of estimates concerning young voters' attitudes on the 2016 Brexit referendum, for instance, produces an estimated increase in turnout between 10% and 14% higher than the 2015 General Election (Curtice and Simpson, 2018). For highly polarised topics bearing outstanding intergenerational trade-offs, youth mobilise quite significantly. Also, in view of this, and as discussed more structurally in previous chapters, lowering the voting age can bear significant impact on (i) the deliberation-voting engagement; and (ii) the long-term fostering of a pedagogy of participation. And which political themes interest youth the most? At which level of governance? Data insights from the Eurobarometer survey reveal that:

1. European youth's attitudes toward the EU show a higher belief that the role of the EU will become more important. This is 48% of the respondents, compared to much lower percentages in older surveyed participants (European Parliament, 2025, pp. 30)
2. Education and research, climate action and emissions reductions, technological innovation and AI; all feature among the most salient priorities for Europe (pp. 34)

Here we turn to the question of which scale of governance is best fit to tackle the planetary challenges that sit atop of youth's list of priorities. There is no doubt that multilateral institutions and in the case of Europe, the European Union, would provide appropriate legal infrastructures to tackle transformative, global challenges.

Interestingly, many of these challenges are already well present in the minds of young citizens, from hyperlocal engagement to transnational protest movements. An ambitious plan for combining DIs can become a catalyst for mobilising members of youth who are disenfranchised from electoral democracy but remain very passionate about specific issues. Albeit with a degree of caution, we can summarise this in the words of Fernández Guzmán Grassi, Portos and Felicetti (2024, p.585): youth are generally satisfied with democracy but seek "forms of engagement – strongly associated with self-expressive values – [that] go

beyond formal, institutional and routinized electoral politics ('duty-based citizenship')." Youth engage with politics in polymorphous fashion, and this requires rethinking a more liquid approach to how they could mobilise autonomously in times of high-stakes decisions.

The proliferation of DIs also enables additional debates concerning the concept of 'Europeanisation from below' in the way Della Porta (2020) describes. These are new waves of *solidarisation* which layer political, grassroots participation with topic-based political mobilisation towards institutional responses. As multiple waves of intersectional protests currently make their way through Europe (more in the following chapter of this Report), we can imagine DIs as the potential network of democratic solidarity that reclaims the centrality of citizen voices across the continent. In doing so, it establishes new participatory norms.

The analysis of past attempts at mixing and matching DIs becomes ultimately central to our research agenda. As it pertains to this chapter's focus, the literature review conducted by Jäske and Setälä (2019) maps how recent scholarship has been debating the need for direct democracy to be complemented by deliberative processes (e.g. a 'deliberation day' before the referendum day) since the 1980s. Way before then, we also have the increasingly detailed accounts of ancient Athenian democracy, and the operationalisation of this hybridity in the *ekklesia*, the *boule* and the *dikasteria*.

A systematic literature review conducted by Witting, Wagenaar and Hendriks (2025) reveals the conceptual complementarity of deliberative and direct democratic innovations. Inter alia, full popular control does not come at the expense of epistemic quality, as the deliberative process that predates the vote is better able to unlock collective intelligence and subsequently, creative solutions.

(2) Barriers and challenges to institutionalisation and political buy-in from Chile to Iceland

The Chilean and the Icelandic Constitutional processes provide salient insights into the research findings outlined. They both constitute processes that were designed since the outset to conclude in a nation-wide referendum, but also to include an assembly process where the draft legislative text would be first formulated in collaborative fashion.

Interestingly and in reference to the previous work of this chapter, the final voting turnout to the Chilean Constitutional Convention's draft, exceeded 85% of the electorate, an all-time high (Ginsburg and Álvarez, 2024). The Chilean Constitutional Convention process provides an ambitious case study, one rooted in history as it would have done away with the Pinochet legacy. Nevertheless, the process proved to have some intrinsic issues of design which prevented the Assembly to maximise its power to propose Constitutional change and mobilise the public in the process. Inter alia, the issue of circular workflows between the thematic sub-groups and the evaluation commissions, which also included supermajority voting functioned as entry barrier for many draft recommendations. Additionally, as members of the Chilean Congress partaking in the Convention could conveniently choose whether to join as members of a political party or as independent, this disrupted the potential that the

Convention had of being a fully representative body with clear overall legitimacy (Ginsburg and Álvarez, 2024). The general public rejected the proposed Constitution through a mechanism of direct voting. We argue the failure to reach a two-thirds supermajority needed for its entry into force, provided a security mechanism against a process that had demonstrated will to innovate but had failed to produce a text that represented the majority of the population.

Not too dissimilarly, the Icelandic constitutional assembly tested as early as in 2012, an even broader combination of institutions and processes to test hybrid and highly participatory process to redrafting the constitution (Landemore, 2020). Deliberative mini-publics, e-deliberations and a final, consultative direct vote (non-binding referendum) all combined to produce a widely innovative process. Effectively, even as the non-binding referendum charted the way for political and legislative change, there was ultimately follow-up, and the Constitutional revision was never completed. While both the Chilean constitutional assembly and the Icelandic constitutional process did not reach a stage of process maturity that would allow for ultimate follow-through, they both leave us with very important highlights of what hybrid DI designs could build on and improve. Albeit both case studies are specific to constitutional processes, we extract generalisable lessons in how ambitious such processes can be, assuming optimal design.

(3) The ECI mechanism – sowing transnationalism as transformative practice

In this section, we resume the debate regarding the potential for direct democracy to scale up towards the transnational level of governance. We do so after having explored the imaginative capacity of how can direct democracy be mainstreamed in politically sensitive areas such as those of constitution-making.

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is without a doubt one of the most prominent participatory mechanisms in the EU. Its functioning is set by Regulation (EU) No. 211/2011, following the initial laying out of its cardinal principles in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon. For an ECI to be successful, the European Commission requires a minimum of 1 million valid signatures and 7 countries reaching the established threshold (Schuurbiers, 2024). To get a sense of the scale of magnitude this instrument is gradually reaching, the accrued 10 successful ECIs have reached 12,975,370 signatures. Since then, there have been two new successful ECIs.

The history of the ECI, since 2012 onwards, has been one of gradual, incremental buy-in. The instrument of direct democracy is well known for requiring extensive mobilisation and financial resources, which range between tens of thousands and millions of Euros. Therefore, albeit it is clearly designed to provide a mobilization from below, it requires specific technical competences that may generate barriers and reduce the overall inclusiveness of the exercise. Of course, this is not any different from citizens' initiatives at the national or local level. Nevertheless, the scale makes it more complicated in terms of

language barriers, identifying the right testimonials and developing context-sensitive campaigns across borders.

However, while the most successful ECI in “One of Us” reached nearly 1.7 million signatures, innovations happen at the margins. This is the case for the “Ending the Aviation Fuel Tax Exemption in Europe” ECI, nicknamed “Fairosene” (European Commission, 2021). The ECI was unsuccessful as it failed to reach the 1 million signatures by a margin. Nevertheless, the proposal was later picked up by the European Commission and it was inserted in the ‘Fit for 55’ legislative package was formally adopted in April 2023 and includes a plan for phasing out the free emissions allowances by 2030. Even if this case is a hopeful manifestation of the potential dialogue that such a transnational instrument could provide, it is unclear how likely it is that institutions would pay lip service to successful or unsuccessful ECIs, either claiming there was appropriate follow-up against pre-existing draft policies, or dismissing the results altogether. Berg (2022), member of the board of the ECI campaign, signals the intrinsic limitations in the adoption of the successful ECIs.

As part of the research set out for this chapter, we have endeavoured to search for valid data indicating the possible rate of change in youth participation in ECIs across the years. As we could not find any, this could mark important further research on this front, particularly in view of the previous research findings shared on the ways in which youth engage in politics following the ‘duty-based citizenship’ principles.

(4) Toward a transcalar approach to liquid democracy

In this last part of the chapter, we focus on the question of scaling but with an eye to bridging the DI hybridity lessons identified in our case studies (and previous chapters), together with the contemporary emergence of new and more holistic technological infrastructures of participation, i.e. hybridity in a less technical sense. Our previously laid out conceptual-practical approach as to why it would be important to imagine a cross-fertilisation of lessons drawn from different DIs, helps us trace complementary combinations that enable better input, throughput and output legitimacy. As we have observed, unless one designs specifically to map the political attitudes of a given (set of) minority group(s), direct democracy remains a predominantly majoritarian praxis. It trumps the nuanced arguments that can be construed within, for instance, a well-designed deliberative process. In essence, they demand attention so as to ensure that our alternative democratic participation models can effectively integrate an inclusive ethos.

The convergence of case studies and concepts analysed, points us in the direction of exploring (i) transnationalism; and (i) hybrid technological infrastructures. Among theoreticians and practitioners alike, there is a tendency to imagine prosocial technologies as a spectrum spanning from hacktivism to institutional e-consultations. In this chapter, as a reflection of the institutional interconnectedness between direct democracy and decision-making processes, we will focus on the latter end of the spectrum. It is therefore important to address the question of how to embed direct democracy methodologies in the digital sphere, with an eye to scaling out citizen engagement and creating generative spaces for new democratic solutions.

Embeddedness and assemblage in the digital era

In order to engage fruitfully with the concepts emerging from recent scholarship, we need to clearly distinguish between institutionalisation and *embeddedness*. Here, we posit that to imagine the convergence of e-participation and e-voting, a clarification is needed. While institutionalisation speaks to the ontological-descriptive dimension, embeddedness refers to the epistemological-normative (Bussu, Bua, Dean and Smith, 2022). When imagining the direct democracy tech stack, we should not simply imagine what is fit for purpose, but also what fits within the context of a polity, or group thereof. Embeddedness is not only about a single process, but rather about spatiality and temporality of change. Ultimately, about the congruent buy-in at the individual level as much as the systemic one.

Simultaneously, we also tap into the theoretical framework of democratic assemblage, which is understood both as complementary progression and as *ex ante* consideration in design. Assemblage means observing, deconstructing and re-construing a democratic ecosystem – of humans and non-humans, of processes, organisations, ideas, power relations and much more (Bussu, Wojciechowska, Forde and Santos Dias, 2025). Identifying the ideal-type democratic assemblage of a polity means not only recognising which institutional and non-institutional actors and processes cooperate efficiently in generating well-functioning democratic ecosystems. It also means rejecting value monism as we shift toward the transnational, digital dimension. It is a way of charting the flow of power relations and accounting for it when reimagining democratic praxis. Principles such as non-linearity and the constant interchangeability of actors are much better able to describe the ontological life in a democratic system.

(5) General evaluation and new perspectives for direct democracy in the digital age

This chapter seeks to report on emerging trends. Albeit tentatively and based on the preliminary sources, a specific process that will merit additional research has to do with youth movements in Nepal. The facts reported are occurring at the time when this report is being finalised. The Gen-Z of Nepal have risen in copious and violent protests, after a social media ban attempting to shut down free circulation of information. While the use of the Internet for organising protest is nothing new, it is very significant that the *interim* individual to guide the possible re-democratisation transition, a former Chief Justice, was reportedly appointed through the social media platform Discord (Mogul and Pokharel 2025).

While we are certain this will be analysed by scholars in the coming years, we consider it an important input in the conversation around youth engagement in emerging DIs, which this report covers. The process set up on Discord opens up to a range of foundational questions regarding what are safe, forward-looking and decision-promoting digital platforms. The protests were fully led by young generations, who mobilised and stood against illiberal control on the means of communications. Youth were also in need of a swiftly approachable, and easily manageable digital space. As Discord is widely diffused, it provided the most accessible way toward self-organisation. Hence the questions: what if we already operated

regularly on platforms that are fit-for-democratic-purpose? Would our instincts change when it comes to choosing which platform to use in times of democratic distress? And again, what would it take for these platforms to be perceived as sufficiently independent from governments, while shielding the discursive space from commercial logics that are too often detrimental to e-deliberation? In an interview Davide Grossi (2025), full professor of Collective Decision Making and Computation at the University of Groningen, paints the picture very clearly.

»I realised there was a lack of scientific foundations for technology that could support democratic deliberations at scale; Not according to the drives of social media which are essentially commercial but according to the principles and the values of a democratic society«

We tentatively provide two possible answers, building on a consolidated selection of case studies that are currently running specific and successful experimentation. Grossi (2025) agrees that the first intuition when thinking about the tech stack of DIs, is to look at digital platforms as the most advanced processes. Yet, he challenges the vision of this horizontal proliferation of platforms without a clear definition not only of how they operate in the engine room, but also how they interact with citizens.

As it pertains to the issue of ownership, i.e. the question of diffused and transcalar embeddedness, the open-source digital platform Decidim offers a critical insight. This is not only due to the way in which Decidim was built through public investments in creating an independent entity, who would manage the development of different digital services, while retaining the freedom to fundraise for private funds on the open-source softwares.

Barandiaran, Calleja-López, Monterde and Romero (2024) refer to the specific choice of Decidim not to have users, but participants. This shines through in the way the spaces are designed, the code is structured and the functionalities are developed. Additionally, the open-source nature of the platform, paired with the modular approach with which it is built, enables the development of a given feature by a member of the community can be made available to everyone else in the same community. We understand this to be a highly effective way of operationalising digital democracy as a way of safeguarding democracy as a public good.

Barandiaran, Calleja-López, Monterde and Romero (2024) remind us that encoding a digital platform that is fit for purpose necessitates an incredible effort of rethinking how to design every single line of code. An effort that goes beyond what is generally useful for a traditional legal code, for instance. Inter alia, this means tracing every single interaction, accounting for all unintended consequences, foreseeing potential tensions in equal outcome. In sum, a very detailed practical translation of a theoretical infrastructure needs to be organised in

clear and replicable sequences, so as to ensure overall explainability and, wherever it is made possible by algorithms, transparency. In turn, the legal infrastructure is required to adapt the way in which it operationalises its system of rights and values. Legal language is likely to constantly evolve and so are the specificities interwoven within (Rattanasevee, Akarapattananukul and Chirawut, 2024).

Additionally, one of the authors of this report has conducted participant observation during the 2023 Decidim Fest, a gathering of its Metadecidim community. “The meta.decidim.org platform is the basic digital infrastructure for the community. As of 15 June 2023, it has approximately 5000 registered participants; it hosts minutes of 292 public meetings, details of 13 assemblies or working groups and 4 stable participation spaces (welcome process, bug reporting, feature proposals and translations)” (Barandiaran, Calleja-López, Monterde and Romero, 2024, pp.90).

Our observations on the ground confirm this statement. Decidim virtuously manages a community of hundreds of professional e-facilitators, developers, participatory process designers, who all gather physically and online to co-define the priorities in terms of debugging, building new features and discussing long-term strategies. For all the reasons fleshed out above, Decidim provides an interesting case study as to possible pathways to mainstream participatory platforms. The concern here is highly practical and extremely noticeable on the field. In the interview, Grossi (2025) suggests that many digital platforms have been experimenting for decades by now and have expanded horizontally, but the adoption of these by governments and local administrations is lagging behind. We attribute this to (i) lack of in-house competence by administrations, to assess opportunities and pitfalls; (ii) the platforms remaining in a testing, exploratory phase and there not being final certainty algorithms will behave to scale. “Policy decision-makers may be very acquainted with the abysmal effects and phenomena that you see on social media, so you may want to think twice before putting a platform [...] of the likes of X or Facebook”, as Grossi (2025) told us. Simultaneously, Grossi (2025) also reminded that there’s also skepticism from citizens about new, public platforms “why should I interact with this? What do I get out? Is there real decision-making or just some sort of window dressing?”. This circular reasoning on both sides, dampens evidence-based progress, which would require additional research to consolidate findings and simultaneously, a willingness by public administrations to deploy these technologies, take on the associated risks and believe that they “can be a vehicle to enhance trust” (Grossi, 2025).

Another key aspect to consider when imagining the transition of deliberative and direct democracy to the digital arena, is the practical configuration of democratic assemblage. As Grossi (2025) says “any deployment of these technologies should not be thought as a replacement to the standard, layered democratic institutions, rather [...] as ways of building bridges across these layers”. The Liquid Feedback platform carries a lot of weight on this front, also as a result of its historical emergence from the German Pirate Parties, all the way to its contemporary and ambitious infrastructure. The interview with Davide Grossi (2025), who has worked on the Liquid Feedback platform design, confirms this intuition. He clarifies

that Liquid Feedback is the conceptual interface with the theory of liquid democracy, as well as its practical interpretation.

Liquid democracy operates on the principle of voluntary delegation, which draws from the very standards of electoral democracy in recognising the value of representation for issues where the individual citizen may feel less interested in, or less knowledgeable about. Simultaneously, it allows to scale the opportunities for citizens to engage in the political topics they feel most passionate about (Valsangiacomo, 2022). Additionally, the degree of voluntary delegation is generally correlated with lack of competence on a specific issue, or indeed unwillingness to enter the *agon*. A tech infrastructure where fellow citizens are encouraged to participate and be responsible for political decisions that belong to the collectivity, could further improve the pedagogy of participation.

Liquid democracy theory then offers a conceptual approach to the question of how to avoid the spiralling down of political disagreements into over-simplified, dichotomic choices. These being the ones generally addressed through a referendum or a recall process. It defies the binary that one could either abstain or vote, and if they do the latter they have the choice whether to be in favour or against. Liquid democracy operates *a priori*, to prevent outcomes that would lack legitimacy, by proposing a procedural interface between a deliberative phase and a direct one, all powered by online tools. Nevertheless, some concerns tackled by recent scholarship include which security guarantees can be designed to account for the risks of excessive delegation chains, i.e. the delegation option being overused and becoming untrue to the original political attitude of the individual delegator (Berinsky, Halpern, Halpern, Jadbabaie, Mossel, Procaccia, Revel, 2025).

Future questions on this front include also call for increased interdisciplinarity, particularly as to how technology could feature more prominently inclusive design studies, as well as gamification expertise and the role of arts in decision-making. Last but certainly not least, as this Report specifically homes in on the potential for intergenerational dialogue, additional research on how to structurally embed futures' thinking would be most insightful.

From no 'how' to know-how: the case for e-voting

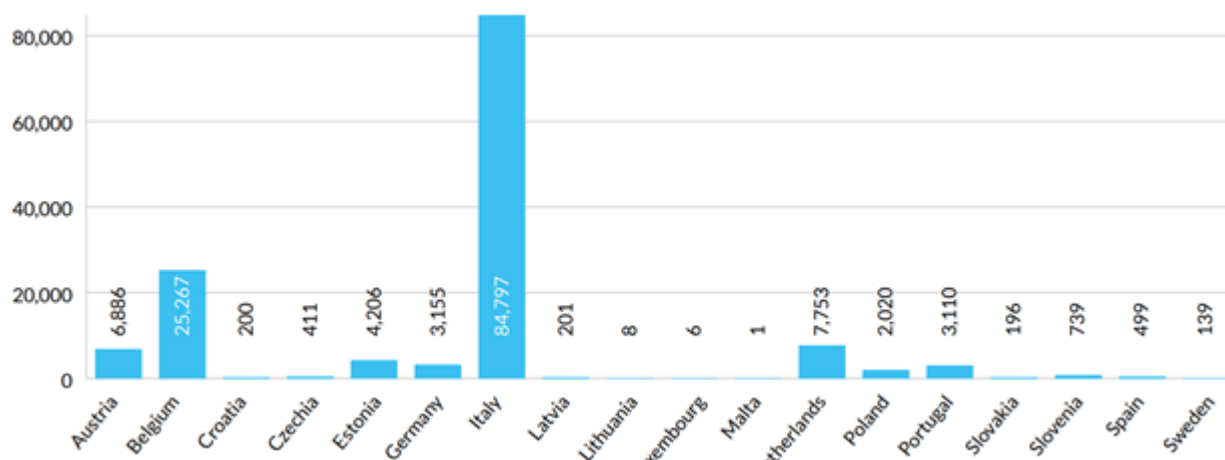
The case of Estonia is particularly relevant, as it further exemplifies how the relevance of the digital-democratic transition and a civic tech stack may not be a question of 'why' but rather 'how'. Studies indicate how e-voting in a country that is systematically transitioning towards digitised procedures may lead to more security, not less (Vakarjuk, Snetkov, and Willemson, 2025). Simultaneously, this progression also marks a salient finding – while in Europe, the voting turnout is generally decreasing, Estonia has remained relatively stable (Zahra and Shan Shah, 2025).

While further studies will be able to define what are foundational causal mechanisms, evidence already demonstrates how differentiated levels of trust in e-voting for different age groups, as well as rural-urban cleavages, do not impact voter turnout as long as hybridity is maintained (Zahra and Shan Shah, 2025). In other words, enabling all to select their preferred voting method marks a key element of a democratic system that is fit for the future.

A linear transition towards the digital, marked in Estonia by the increase from 5.5% i-voters in 2007 to 51.6% in 2023, will also raise questions of how to scale direct voting further.

At EU level, the ECI mechanism has enabled voting through e-IDs in 18 countries. The current results are very asymmetrical and further research on this front may indicate the precise splits between youth and non-youth voters, as well as infer what causal mechanism may exist between the triangulation of (i) the number of eID votes; (ii) the geographical area they are in; and (iii) the recency in the adoption of e-ID voting, which is uneven across the board.

Figure 3 Total signatures collected using electronic proof of identity (eID) (2020-2024)



Source: Schuurbijs (2024)

Lastly, there is growing literature on the promises and perils of blockchain voting. This will not be explored systematically in this report, as it relates more to the research on democratic cybersecurity and the 'how' more than the 'what'. It is still mentioned here, as discursive practices on voting across Europe's continent already feature quite prominently criticisms about process legitimacy. While civic tech's use grows exponentially, we imagine this debate to become increasingly more prominent in the way we think-and-do direct democracy in the 21st century. Ensuring fair and technologically advanced solutions to the problem would convince both members of youth and other age groups just as equally.

Conclusion

This chapter on the pathways to transnational direct democracy offers a descriptive overview of the current theoretical approaches to its challenges and opportunities. The second part sheds light on the potential spaces, instruments and processes that could enable this transformation, also by presenting an empirically grounded vision as to what the role of civic tech will be.

Our exemplary case studies show the potential for this transformation to be driven by public institutions through embeddedness, simultaneously ensuring decentralisation and transcalarity through democratic assemblage. E-participation and e-voting offer new, scalable ways of imagining evidence-based decision-making. To tackle the question of intergenerational dialogue and how this could shape the future of democratic ecosystems, direct democracy will certainly continue to be a key part of the roadmap to get there.

Under EC Review

Chapter 5: Social Movements and Informal Activism

This chapter analyzes three distinct informal activism and social movement initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and their contributions to democratic innovations (DIs). By comparing their youth participation, challenges, political buy-in, transformative impact, and transcalar aspects, the analysis examines how grassroots efforts address democratic deficits and various inequalities via innovations. The chapter is structured as follows: the first section reviews the academic literature on social movements, informal activism, and their links to DIs. It is followed by empirical findings from a comparative study of three cases: Amnesty International Hungary (AI Hungary), the I Would Teach Movement (IWTM, Hungary), and Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (MSK, Fridays for Future Poland), drawing on interviews and document analysis. The study concludes with key takeaways and looks into future research trajectories.

Social movements and activism in CEE

Social movements and informal activism have gained substantial scholarly attention as drivers of democratic renewal, particularly where institutionalized processes are co-opted by elites (Smith, 2008). These bottom-up initiatives are not only central actors in democracy, but also contribute to processes of democratization (Tilly and Wood 2012). It is also argued that transformative power today is more strongly associated with social movement and informal activism that seem more capable of reclaiming democratic spaces and driving change than formal, state-led participatory mechanisms. They “strengthen the normative foundation of democracy by empowering citizens, promote internal democratic practices, channeling social demands and defusing violence” (Della Porta 2020, Della Porta and Felicetti, 2017). Despite the growing body of literature on social movements' positive democratic impacts (Della Porta 2020, Fominaya 2022), we have a scant knowledge about youth-focused social movements and their contribution to DIs. This relationship is specifically understudied in the CEE region where grassroots initiatives and civic society are under an increased political pressure amid democratic backsliding (Alizada et al. 2021).

Varieties for Democracy report (Lührmann et. al 2021) differentiates between two forms of pro-democracy activism based on their political and institutional conditions: one that resists the dismantling of democracy in democratic countries, and another that seeks to establish democratic institutions in autocratic countries. As Fominaya (2022) eloquently argues, this binary approach misses the opportunity to reflect on pro-democracy movements in democratic or hybrid regimes. The distinguished features of these movements is that they work for a better quality of “real democracy” or a strengthening of existing democratic institutions rather than rejecting autocracy only. Furthermore, focusing on the procedural aspects of innovation only misses the deeper influence of imaginaries on democratic innovation (Fominaya, 2022). These prefigurative practices can be transformative in shaping democratic repertoires, even if not immediately codified in policy. This chapter contributes by comparing social movements and informal activism in Hungary and Poland, focusing on procedural models, youth roles and their imaginaries in a political context that could be best described by democratic and rule of law backsliding.

In order to contextualize this chapter, a conceptual clarification needs to be made. Although social movements and activism are often used interchangeably, they are analytically distinct concepts. Social movements are best understood as “loose networks of informal interactions among a plurality of individuals, groups, and organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict, on the basis of shared collective identities” (Diani 1992, 2000). They provide an overarching mobilizational field beyond individual organizations or specific actions. By contrast, activism means direct engagement in political action, often through protests, strikes, boycotts, or other forms of non-conventional participation (Ekman and Amnå 2015). Activism does not presuppose membership in a movement: it can be fostered both individually or collectively.

Over the past decades, new social movements identified with post-material identities have gained significant scholarly attention. Increased empirical evidence triggered the reconsideration of the conventional concept of civil society towards localised, self-organised informal networks (Wieviorka, 2010). The literature emphasizes informal, everyday activism - as responsible consumption or micro-resistance - that blurs the lines between lifestyle and political engagement (Mansbridge, 2022). Unlike formal NGOs, informal civil society exhibits horizontality, fluidity, and publicness, defending public goods like education or environment (Youngs, Milanese and Nicolaïdis, 2022). They often mobilize marginalized parts of the society who are excluded from institutionalized participation. Drawing on “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985) and “quiet encroachment” (Bayat, 2013) concepts, informal activism often results in “slow, cumulative institutional changes” that are less visible than particular “policy wins.” At the same time, without deliberate institutional design and safeguards, such initiatives frequently lack the structural supports to convert mobilisation into institutional leverage (Youngs, Milanese and Nicolaïdis, 2022).

Methods and Case Selection

The chapter compares Amnesty International Hungary (AI Hungary), Tanítanék Mozgalom (“I Would Teach Movement”, IWTM) and Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (MSK), the Polish chapter of the global Fridays for Future (FFF) movement. Studying these cases is warranted on multiple grounds: their diversity in mandates (NGO-led, grassroots, youth-focused), compositions (mixed-age, intergenerational, youth-centric), levels of operation (national, regional-international) and impacts (symbolic, discursive, cultural). These movements are also operating in a challenging environment with a high level of political polarization and democratic and rule of law backsliding. In Hungary, various legislative acts are targeting civil society independent of the Orban government by projecting them as “foreign agents”, funded from abroad and threatening national sovereignty. In Poland, while civil society operates unconstrained, social movements have often complain about being unheard by the Tusk government regarding minority right (refugees, LGBTQI+) protection (Iwaniuk, 2024). Conducting semi-structured interviews on Zoom with members of these organizations provided insights into processes while triangulation ensured data reliability (Halperin and Heath, 2020). The three cases highlight social movements and informal activism's role in democratic innovations from youth empowerment to prefigurative democracy.

- AI Hungary is a non-governmental organization, part of the global Amnesty International movement; it is dedicated to defending civic freedoms while locally adapting human rights advocacy and bridging global frameworks with civic action via activist training and campaigns. Its financial model is hybrid with core fundings

primarily coming from membership fees and individual civic donations, as well as transfers and solidarity support from the global movement. AI Hungary has five key thematic areas: LGBTQI rights, gender equality (with a focus on reducing gender pay gap), freedom of expression and assembly, judicial independence, and international solidarity.

- IWTM (Hungary): A grassroots, more informal response to education repression, mobilizing teachers, parents, and students through civil disobedience and alliances in a semi-authoritarian context. According to the co-founder of the movement, Katalin Törley (2025), the movement's objectives evolved over time. "The overarching goal was to unite teachers, parents, and students into a civic front, recognizing that change in education is inseparable from broader societal transformation, strengthened democratic norms and intersectoral solidarity within different interest and age groups." Their financial model is based on project funding rather than stable membership fees or state support.
- MSK is the Polish chapter of the global Fridays for Future (FFF) movement. Emerging in 2018 and inspired by Greta Thunberg's school strikes, FFF is a decentralized youth climate movement showing how transnational discourses on climate justice are embedded in the intersection of inequalities and democratic vulnerabilities. It is linking transnational climate justice to social and economic inequalities on a local level via strikes, awareness raising workshops, education and horizontal practices. MSK is without legal personality; it embodies a student-led civic initiative rather than a formal NGO. Its funding comes primarily from member contributions and grants as well as crowdfunding campaigns.

Comparative Analysis

(1) Varieties for youth engagement – non-conventional ways of participation

Although youth is often seen as apathetic and disengaged, increased empirical evidence shows that young people are rather selective about how they engage and consider more carefully what specific actions they take. They prefer to 1) engage in action that does not require long-term commitment and 2) make sense in terms of cost-benefit calculation (Phelps, 2004). Therefore, non-institutional forms of democratic engagement (such as online engagement, protests, volunteering) are more popular among youth than institutional participation (including voting, party involvement). Youth are twice as likely to protest or engage online compared to older citizens, which indicates a shift from the ballot box to the digital square and the street (Markowski and Zagórski, 2025). Youth engagement in social movements also addresses low levels of trust in democratic institutions while fostering issue-based participation (Sloam, 2016). However, there is a significant risk of tokenism and attracting only already-engaged youth throughout these processes (Bessant, 2004). Our cases vary in terms of engagement:

MSK explicitly aims to empower youth with middle/high school and university students as the backbone of the movement. It uses strikes, protests, and workshops for civic skill-building, ensuring inclusivity and horizontality. Recruitment and retention occurs primarily through peer-to-peer networks and school-based outreach through posters and social media campaigns. Local groups are typically small (5–10 members per bigger cities) and often galvanized through pre-existing friendships (its membership dropped post-COVID from 700

to 80–100). Local chapters are semi-autonomous, deciding their strategies (collectively) while coordinating on national campaigns when necessary. Coordination across Poland occurs via Facebook Messenger and Slack, with monthly national calls to maintain a feedback loop on cohesion and prevent activism burnout.

IWTM's youth involvement is organic, intergenerational but very much ad-hoc: high school/university students participated in protests and non-violent social disobedience together with their teachers and parents. They not only engaged but brought their own issues (e.g., learning conditions, autonomy) into the public discourse. Many of the most dedicated activists were high school or university students who later moved abroad, creating challenges of sustainability within IWTM. The core team mixes members in their 20s with veteran educators (50s), with youth providing vitality and legitimacy. However, emigration and burnout limit sustainability which also negatively impacts their parent's engagement to IWTM.

Although AI Hungary does not define itself as a youth movement, young people under 30 dominate its activist base. This is partly due to flexibility in time and interest in issues important for the youth like LGBTQI rights. Recruiting strategies include; online and offline campaigns; social media outreach (especially via Instagram ads and storytelling content); tiered participation from flyers to event co-design (like the Budapest Pride, where volunteers can join low-barrier activities and gradually move into more demanding roles); and internship programs linked to campaigns (like wage transparency) that attract students and young professionals.

The most important role of these bottom-up initiatives is individual transformation. According to Anna Horváth (2025), the head of activism division at AI Hungary, "It's like a crash course in civic competences. Youth activists develop public speaking skills, confidence and democratic habits which are usually not fostered in authoritarian educational and political environments. They gain experience in organizing events, engaging with strangers on politically polarizing topics, and moving beyond their personal comfort zones, which is by and large a transformative experience".

(2) Barriers and challenges: intimidation, frustration and burnout

Common barriers include access issues (to marginalized groups, especially youth), design (sustaining horizontality), resource gaps (lack of funding, burnout) and a volatile political, legal and institutional context.

MSK faces plummeting membership (as a continuous struggle since COVID lockdown), sense of inefficacy linked to political unresponsiveness and competition from radical, more visible groups like Last Generation. "The Polish government does not take us seriously, there is barely any political follow-up of what we do. That drives frustration within the movement and further disentanglement of our (youth) base from mainstream politics". (Youth activist, 2025). ¹Magoga, 2025). Weak institutional recognition limits long-term impact; while monthly check-ins are supposed to strengthen internal resilience within the movement, more support from supranational institutions (EU) and awareness-raising for marginalized youth would be needed.

¹ Interview with an activist from MSF/FFF Poland on July 16, 2025 on Zoom.

As Törley (2025) put it, “IWTM is challenged by Hungary's weak collective action traditions and solidarity deficits where education is seen as “someone else's problem. This is topped by a legislative environment fosters a climate of uncertainty, intimidation and chilling effect leading to self-censorship. It discourage citizens critical of the ruling elite from any kind of public engagement wary of potential repercussion”. Burnout and emigration of youth activists also hinders network-building. In other words, its fluid structures via lack of legal personality represents both resilience (against legalistic governmental repression) and vulnerability (limits institutional anchoring and leverage) at the same time.

AI Hungary struggles with uneven turnover due to seasonality (exam periods, winter), and the legal-political environment targeting civil society. According to Anna Horváth, “Restrictive laws are a huge setback; they prevent Amnesty from working directly in public schools, limiting our outreach to youth in state institutions. Socio-economic pressure often impacts prioritizing work over volunteering among the youth”.² Legal and financial challenges, operational hurdles, and repressive political environment reinforce stress factors likely contributing to staff burnout. While embedded, and institutionalized movements like AI Hungary are more sustainable throughout the civil donation model, MSK and IWTM need additional funding to focus on team well-being via personalized mental health support, in the form of personal coaching or subsidized therapy to its employees.

(3) Prefiguring democracy and “trampoline effect” as transformative impacts

Political buy-in varies across these cases according to the structural and political constraints they face. Political follow-up and support is extremely low in Hungary where the Orban government accelerated attacks on civil society independent of the ruling elite over time. Therefore, their transformative impact can be best described as prefigurative (Fominaya, 2024), quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2013) that are shaping repertoires against authoritarian elite resistance. Grassroot initiatives are having a more favourable environment in Poland where the government is fostering plurality and civil movements are not constrained by law or the current political situation. While MSK is introducing climate justice to youth discourse, intersecting with struggles of various marginalized groups, it has a very limited policy uptake with minimal left-leaning support. According to an interviewee from the movement, “MSK serves the role of a “trampoline” for civic engagement; it is fostering public speaking and networking skills in the third sector from where youth activists can triangulate to other organizations” (Youth activist, 2025).

IWTM achieves discursive success by embedding “freedom of education” into public debate via everyday, accessible language. Its impacts include agenda-setting on democracy erosion, inclusivity (Roma speakers), and civic experiments (surveys with 6,000 respondents, workshops). Policy concessions are minimal, but it renews civic language and prefigures democratic participation.

AI Hungary builds civic agency through its training programs that foster confidence and the feeling of efficacy as “capable political actors.” Its impact prevails through individual transformation (enhancing new skills and fostering democratic norms), public discourse shifts and civic renewal for marginalized voices. While its policy-influence remains limited,

² Interview with Anna Horváth on July 7, 2025 on Zoom.

Amnesty models inclusive practices that channels marginalized voices into the public space. Its campaigns like “One Voice Is Not Enough” introduced new formats of civic dialogue, a street forum with direct citizen–lawyer interactions to challenge the dominance of authoritarian state-controlled narratives. In the words of Horváth, “In response to the Orbán-government attempts to restrict freedom of assembly, AI Hungary also organized training sessions in cities like Pécs and Debrecen, with participation exceeding usual levels” (Horváth, 2025). Additionally, local thematic groups (LGBTQI rights, wage transparency, etc.) create “communities of action” that continue beyond single campaigns, providing continuity for activist engagement and community-building.

(4) Transcalar Dimensions (or lack thereof)

Transcalar aspects are strongest in AI Hungary and MSK (via transnational inspiration and embeddedness) and weakest in IWTM. These powerful cases demonstrate similar yet distinguished pathways through which grassroot initiatives share local struggles with broader arenas of governance.

For AI Hungary, international solidarity is a priority, but focus remains national. It operates within a globally networked NGO framework, translating international human rights discourses into local campaigns and the other way around. This way it bridges global Amnesty frameworks with local action and projecting national advocacy back into European and transnational debates. Its transcalar reach is therefore institutionalised but often limited by Hungary’s restrictive civic space, where the government undercut direct policy impact in an authoritarian way.

Although MSK does not have formal institutional ties with EU-led initiatives, its members engage individually on multiple grounds. Some of its activists have taken part in the European Youth Event, while the movement as a whole collaborates with other youth-led civil society initiatives, such as ReGeneration 2030. A recent collaboration was a joint workshop to mobilize young people across the Nordic, Baltic Sea and CEE regions regarding sustainable transition and local energy security. It illustrates an explicit transnational activism that channels Polish youth into a global climate justice discourse and experimenting with regional collaborations. Yet, unequal access to European platforms and resource disparities mean that its transnational connections remain uneven and vulnerable, reinforcing the periphery-core gap within European civil society. “The EU is engaging those who are already engaged in Germany and France, not those who need to be pulled in. Europe should focus more on youth in the Post-Communist bloc that is neglected while Russia is posing an existential threat on multiple grounds, especially with disinformation” (Youth activist, 2025).

In contrast to that, IWTM remains embedded in national politics with modest connections to European advocacy networks. The movement’s contacts have been limited to invitations from EU institutions, with a very limited systematic engagement in structured participatory initiatives. Yet Törley (2025) emphasized the utmost importance of ensuring that youth-led demands resonate at EU level: “The EU institutions should reach young people - especially in CEE - through alternative communication channels beyond schools. This is important because our public sphere is dominated by state-led propaganda and anti-EU, pro-Russian propaganda. They should also provide direct, flexible support to civil society actors that are trying to mitigate this anti-democratic phenomena if they can not fully eliminate them”.

(5) Ad-hoc and discursive evaluations are the names of the game

By studying grassroots cases, evaluation should serve the role of strengthening legitimacy and demonstrate how informal activism/social movements can contribute to democratic innovations. In contrast to institutionalized DIs, measuring process outcomes such as developing skills, empowering citizens and enforcing a democratic culture are more important than concrete outputs (ie. policy impact of campaigns, protest, etc.). When it comes to evaluation of these processes and self-reflection, this comparative study underlines striking asymmetries between (un)structured assessment. In contrast to institutionalized feedback-loops (in case of participatory and deliberative DIs), civil society activism rarely employs formal evaluation frameworks. AI Hungary's method is the closest to this by integrating community-building exercises and training follow-up calls that helps internal learning, though these remain inward-oriented rather than publicly accountable. In contrast to that, IWTM relies primarily on discursive evaluation while more systematic approaches like workshops are ad hoc and resource-dependent. MSK uses the most informal evaluation process by maintaining peer support, group calls, and participant testimonies to prevent burnout, but with little systematic measurement. To conclude, while evaluation is recognized as essential for legitimacy, sustainability and reinforcement, it often remains ad-hoc, uneven in the context of grassroots activism.

Comparative conclusions about renewing democracy from below

Social movements and informal activism have the potential to enact individual and social transformation through engagement with others sharing common goals and intentions for a more just society (Müllernmeister et al, 2022). They enhance DIs by “promoting internal practices of democracy” and by “introducing democratic innovation into existing institutions.” This study underlines different pathways through which activism contributes to DIs in CEE with the involvement of the youth, reflecting distinguished features between informal, fluid movements (IWTM, MSK) and a more embedded, formalised actor (AI Hungary).

IWTM and MSK embody experimental, fluid, and prefigurative qualities of informal civic activism. Their strength lies in mobilising communities through horizontal practices, discursive agenda-setting, and the cultivation of new civic languages around education and climate justice. Despite limited policy impact, IWTM and MSK transform civic culture by renewing democratic imaginaries and fostering intergenerational solidarity (IWTM) or youth-led global-local linkages (MSK). Yet their operational mood makes them highly vulnerable to governmental repression, activist burnout, and discontinuity.

By contrast, AI Hungary operates within the more stable infrastructure within a global NGO network. Its embeddedness allows AI Hungary to sustain training and a compelling internship program, more structured evaluation, and the creation of civic communities that extend beyond episodic mobilisations. Yet its domestic donor base is constrained by governmental intimidation and chilling effect, which expose them to political narratives portraying them as “foreign-financed hostile agents” rather than genuinely civic. While its policy leverage is also constrained by a repressive political environment, AI Hungary demonstrates how formalised activism can institutionalise democratic practice and foster mutual toleration even in hostile political contexts.

Transformative differences between these cases should not be overlooked. The comparison highlights different trajectories: 1) Informal activism (IWTM/MSK) generates cultural innovation and civic vitality but struggles with long-term sustainability and lack of institutional reinforcement. 2) More embedded social movements like AI Hungary can foster continuity, (financial) resources, and transcalar projection but risks limiting transformative imaginaries and reclaiming democratic spaces (in schools, etc). Both pathways contribute differently to democratic resilience: one by renewing democratic repertoires from below, the other by embedding civic capacities within stable organisational frameworks.

The transformative role of these movements is less of an institutional reform or policy change than renewing democracy from below: empowering the youth, creating an accessible, inclusive civic language and modeling horizontal cooperation. While vulnerability, intimidation/chilling effect, solidarity deficits and institutional limitations remain major obstacles, these cases demonstrate that even under hostile political conditions, social movements and informal activism can uphold democratic norms. Often being limited in achieving a particular political goal, these movements maintain prefiguring inclusivity, mutual toleration and experimental learning through which they help marginalized groups.

This study also demonstrated that absence of political follow-up and structured, transparent evaluation mechanisms like EU-feedback loops are prominent pressure points. It risks that such innovations may be dismissed as ephemeral or symbolic. While informal and youth activism are democratic laboratories under hostile political conditions, they require recognition and resourcing to avoid burnout and symbolic tokenism as well as formal evaluation for legitimacy. Across these cases, youth foster innovation and legitimacy but without facilitation and support they risk reproducing inequalities (Carson and Elstub 2019) by engaging mobilized individuals only. These cases teach us that hybridisation between informal activism and embedded social movements may be essential to strengthen bottom-up democratic resilience in CEE. In other words, combining NGO infrastructure (Amnesty) with informal networks (IWTM, MSK) might yield more sustainable democratic innovation over time.

While the findings of this chapter are important, it is also subject to limitations. Future research should explore how informal activism transforms into more embedded democratic innovations. This is particularly relevant to the interface between community-based sustainability initiatives and democratic engagement that is understudied in the literature. The case selection also needs to be extended to a cross-regional comparison within the EU to map and identify how political contexts (ie. democratic backsliding vs. stable democracies) influence movement trajectories, youth roles, and hybridisation of formal/informal DIs.

Conclusion

In conclusion we seek to bring some of disparate findings together through two final threads of enquiry. First, we know of course that most often democratic innovations occur where several types or families of innovation are explored together. We thus provide some further thoughts on the overlaps between our five families of DIs. Second, we attempt to generate an analytical way to ask about the barriers and challenges around youth participation. To support this goal, we suggest a simple way of grouping DIs that are relevant to youth engagement.

Overlaps across our five families of democratic innovations

We have provided an overview of the field around families of democratic innovations which stand out in contemporary scholarship and practice: electoral democracy, deliberative democracy, digital democracy, direct democracy, as well as social movements and activism. While each has its own genealogy and institutional repertoire, we find that in practice they are increasingly interconnected. Indeed, their overlaps and hybridisation are now central to understanding how democracies adapt and evolve. The growing complexity of democratic ecosystems demands a shift from studying isolated mechanisms to examining the ways they interact and reinforce one another. We provide a few pointers here but hope to explore these overlaps further in the next phase of YouthDecide2040.

Electoral Democracy and the extension of the franchise

Because electoral democracy remains the core of contemporary representative systems, it is not surprising that it had to adapt to new challenges that preoccupies us here. There are many other innovations in voting systems in addition to the question of the voting age that we analysed. Examples include open primaries, ranked choice voting, and proportionality-enhancing formulas. These in turn are increasingly coupled with reforms of main actors in the system (e.g. political parties) or their main arena of operations (e.g. parliaments). As we have seen, this has meant in practice the greater use of participatory platforms, our second family, both for topic and candidate selection or program development. One way to characterise the progress of democracy throughout the 19th and 20th century is to stress the enlargement the continued extension of the franchise, on the basis of wealth, age, gender, geography and the likes. The development, or democratisation of the electoral system in the last 200 years has depended on the overcoming the resistance by established interests to such expansion. So, we can ask how today, the continued expansion of the franchise in electoral democracy can be enabled by other modes of democracy, including direct and deliberative.

Moreover, electoral reforms overlap with digital democracy, as parties use online consultation tools, and with deliberative democracy, when citizen assemblies inform legislative agendas that feed into electoral debates. Electoral innovation is also frequently driven by activism, as movements demand expanded suffrage, fairer representation, or reduced influence of money in politics (Della Porta, 2020). Agora Brussels features the combination of three families (electoral, participatory and activist) or even four if we add

digital democracy. We could imagine their connection with direct democracy if the process carried inputs from citizens initiatives. Electoral democracy therefore operates less as a self-contained system than as a dynamic hub linking other forms of innovation.

Deliberative Democracy as driver of multi-faceted hybridity of ecosystems

In the story above, the driver from the past 2007 Austrian electoral reform described above (extending the reach of the franchise of electoral democracy) is combined with a much more recent driver, namely that of deliberative democracy, centred on argumentative exchange because the latter acts a corrective to the aggregative logic of elections which tends to deny the capacity of citizens' opinions and even beliefs - change over time through interaction and debate. Corrective it may be but as a supplement not as replacement. Moreover, in practice, deliberative formats such as citizens' juries and assemblies rarely operate in isolation but are combined with direct democracy, where assemblies respond to direct democracy and/or prepare the ground for referenda, ensuring that public votes are preceded by informed deliberation and followed by collective ratification (Gardels, 2024; Berg and Nicolaidis, 2025).

Deliberative processes, albeit not formalised through facilitation, are also at the centre of electoral and parliamentary systems. And they also overlap with digital democracy, as online platforms extend deliberation beyond face-to-face physical meetings, enabling the introduction of generative AI to aggregate the breath of debate operating during assemblies on and offline. At the same time, as we saw, assemblies are often the product of activist mobilization, especially in areas such as climate policy or constitutional reform and they can be an integral part of autonomous community set up to provide local public goods among self-governed groups. This hybridity illustrates how, at its best, deliberative democracy is embedded in broader ecosystems of democratic innovation rather than functioning as various detached "mini-public." This is why, in contrast, citizens' assemblies or panels or juries organised in isolation including the ECPs organised by EU institutions do not offer their full democratic potential.

Digital Democracy as enabler across families

Digital democracy is perhaps the most cross-cutting of the five types, functioning as a distinct domain and as an enabler of all other innovations. Digital platforms transform and extend deliberation, facilitate the extension of electoral participation, and magnify the reach of activism. While direct democracy does not require digital support, the latter does lower the barriers to initiating referenda or citizens' initiatives through online signature collection and information campaigns. Activist movements rely heavily on digital infrastructures for coordination, visibility, and transnational solidarity (Nina Hall, 2023). Yet these overlaps are a double-edged sword as digital tools can democratize access and enhance transparency but also risk amplifying inequalities, polarization, and disinformation. The overlap between digital democracy and other innovations thus reveals both the promises and the perils of technological mediation in democratic life.

Direct Democracy as promise and risk

Direct democracy can play well in the hands of elites who see instruments such as referenda and citizens' initiatives as dangerously unpredictable and may seek to control the narratives around them. Sometimes, this takes place in quite egregious fashion, where the debate is spectacularised and misinformation is widespread. Simultaneously, direct democracy is also a potential tool for popular decision-promoting and decision-controlling functions becoming mainstreamed. For the reasons laid out in this report, the history of struggle around the function and weight of direct democracy is traceable in the uneven distribution of its tools across the globe.

The report finds that direct democracy can be made less polarising when combined with deliberative assemblies, and that digital tools can facilitate equal access in electoral democracy through signature gathering or online mobilisations. Mobilisation in the activist sphere can coalesce around either elections or referenda to channel demands into formal political arenas. Whether or not these options reduce recourse to extra-institutional action depends on various context. Certainly, a promising path is charted by the conceptual framework of liquid democracy, where the majoritarian logic is counterbalanced by a carefully designed ecosystem of hybridity in deliberation and voting, from direct engagement to delegation.

Activism as transformative engine

Activism is the most transformative category of all although its staying power is often wanting. Movements for social or climate justice, racial or gender equality, anti-corruption or anti-nepotism all generate new kind of demands not easily accommodated by traditional electoral democracy. Activists are probably the most prone to experimenting with democratic practices (Dahl, 1989). They can hold grassroot assemblies, use digital coordination and affect electoral agendas (Della Porta, 2020). Activism overlaps with electoral democracy when movements evolve into increasingly intersectional organisations or new kinds of parties.

At a minimum activists can reshape the agendas of political parties, as the case of the Belgian Socialist Party discussed above has shown, as well pressure governments to establish citizens' assemblies, which admittedly opens up logics in competition with traditional electoral politics. Digital tools are central to activist strategies, enabling decentralized mobilization and global networking (Nina Hall, 2022). Social and activist movements tend to use direct-democratic instruments more than traditional politics. In Europe they are much more prone to support citizens' initiatives than the actors connected to electoral democracy (see case). In general, they seek to institutionalize claims that might otherwise remain oppositional – but such institutionalisation does not necessarily need to happen within structure. In this sense, activism functions as both a transformative engine of innovation across the board and as a corrective, ensuring that institutional reforms remain anchored in citizen lived experience and social mobilization.

Mapping the landscape of democratic innovations

We have covered the question of the overlaps between our democratic families as spaces of innovation. Having added to the complexity of the overall landscape of such emergent democratic innovations, we bring our picture back into focus. Our analytical matrix presented

below helps visualize these innovations by positioning them along two key dimensions: institutional status, which distinguishes between formal and informal modes of participation, and temporal durability, which differentiates between ad-hoc and permanent forms of democratic innovation:

- Institutional status refers to the contrast between formal and informal participation. The former refers to participation that is sponsored by and involves access to formal institutions of the state or public institutions at the local, national or continental level.
- Temporal durability refers to the contrast between ad-hoc and permanent innovations, or the question as to whether a given innovation is temporary, or spontaneous, or institutionalised and therefore durable

By combining institutional status with temporal durability, our framework highlights not only the diversity of innovations but also the clustering and overlaps between the five main families we have worked through—electoral democracy, deliberative democracy, digital democracy, direct democracy, and activism. Together, the quadrants make visible how democratic innovations vary not only in type (electoral, deliberative, digital, direct, activist) but also in institutionalization and temporality, creating a dynamic ecosystem of participation.

Moreover, we find it important to indicate at what level this innovation happens, especially when we find promising multi-level initiatives, from the local to the european level, through regional or national levels. We also signal the innovations that have engaged in long-term forecasting which we find in every quadrant.

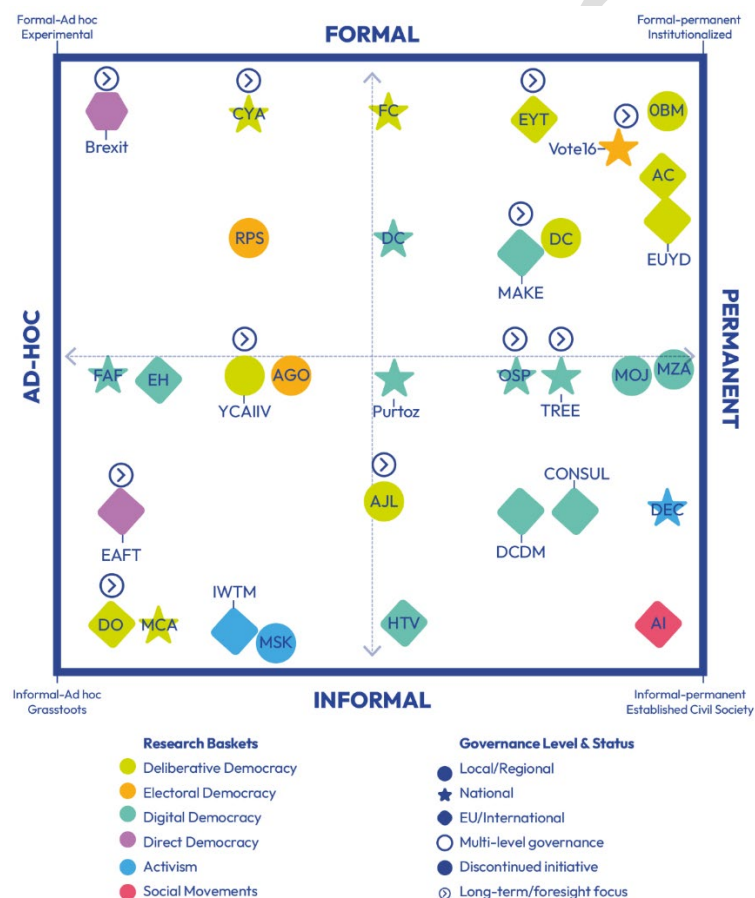
Figure 4 A list of exemplary DI case studies

Deliberative Committees in Brussels	DC
Democratic Odyssey	DO
French Convention (temps de l'enfant)	FC
Refondation du Parti Socialiste	RPS
Children and Youth Assembly in Scotland and Ireland	CYA
Lowering the voting age	Vote16
EU Youth Dialogue	EUJD
EU Youth Test	EYT
Advisory Council on Youth	AC
Brexit referendum	Brexit
"Ending the Aviation Fuel Tax Exemption in Europe" ECI	EAFT-ECI
Amnesty International	AI
I would teach movement	IWTM
Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny	MSK
Assemblée libre des jeunes	AJL
Moldova Citizens Assembly	MCA
Agora Brussels	AGO

Burgerdialog Ostbelgien	OBM
DECIDIM	DCDM
Purpoz	Purpoz
Consul Democracy	CONSUL
Forum against Fakes	FAF
Fridays for Future	FFF
EurHope	EH
Democratic Commons	DC (yellow)
Europa, jetzt wird's konkret!	EJWSK
Youth Climate Assembly in Ida-Viru	YCAIIV
Declic	DEC
mZaednica	MZA
Moj Grad	MOJ
Howtheyvote.eu	HTV
Make.org	MAKE
Open Source Politics	OSP
Treecompany.be	TREE

Source: Authors' elaboration

Figure 5 The DI grid



Source: Authors' elaboration

We raise here a few points first by quadrant and then by family. To start with, the four quadrants tell different stories.

The graph starts by offering 4 quadrants with different characteristics and democratic potential, barriers and challenges around youth participation:

1. Informal Ad-hoc (e.g. grassroots spontaneous mobilization)

In this quadrant, democratic practices are non-institutionalized, short-lived, and often protest-driven such as *I would teach movement* or the “*Ending the Aviation Fuel Tax Exemption in Europe*” ECI or the *Democratic Odyssey*. Generalizing from our cases, examples would also include spontaneous demonstrations, digital campaigns, or grassroots assemblies reacting to specific crises. This is the typical terrain of activism and social movements, often powered by digital democracy tools for coordination and visibility.

These practices amplify citizen voice and can catalyse formal initiatives in their wake, but they tend to dissolve once the immediate demands, grievances or symbolic actions subside. Their democratic value lies in mobilisation, responsiveness, experimentation, and norm creation, rather than formal durability. On the other hand, when repeated over time they can create commitment from those mobilised and lingering impressions in the broader public raising the question of what “permanence” or “durability” actually means.

2. Formal Ad-hoc (e.g. institutionalized but temporary)

This quadrant captures innovations that are structured and visible yet initiated for short-term use. Examples include one-off referenda (e.g. Brexit), experimental youth parliaments, or temporary citizens’ assemblies convened by governments. They are anchored in institutional frameworks but dissolve once the issue at hand is resolved. Such innovations often emerge under activist pressure or as experimental complements to existing electoral or deliberative systems. Their strength lies in visibility and legitimacy, but their fragility comes from their temporary nature.

We have made the point that the very notion of durability or permanence needs to be interrogated. For the moment however and staying with our classification, presumably we are especially interested in the process whereby cases and initiatives move from left to right towards the permanent quadrants.

3. Informal-Permanent (e.g. established civil society and movements)

This quadrant contains non-institutionalized practices that nevertheless endure and persist outside formal political structures. Examples from our cases include Howdotheyvote.eu initiative and Amnesty International. More broadly we can think of include long-standing NGOs, advocacy networks, local communities of solidarity organised democratically or grassroots organizations that sustain engagement over time. Activism consolidates here into more permanent forms, sometimes overlapping with deliberative or digital innovations when movements institutionalize online platforms or deliberative practices internally. While less visible than formal mechanisms, these actors are often more legitimate in the eyes of the broader public and likely to be supported over time. They provide stability, continuity, and normative depth (see scaling deep in ScaleDem our sister research project), acting as watchdogs and reservoirs of democratic innovation beyond state structures.

4. Formal Permanent: (e.g.: institutionalised and permanent)

This quadrant represents the most consolidated form of democratic innovation: mechanisms that are institutionalized, recurrent, and embedded within the political system. Examples include standing citizens' assemblies such as Ostbelgien's Permanent Citizens' Council or Brussels Deliberative Committees and EU Youth Dialogue. These innovations benefit from clear mandates, stable funding, and formalized rules of procedure, which allow them to accumulate legitimacy, expertise, and public recognition over time. Their durability enables continuity, learning, and broader policy impact, but also raises questions of routinization, bureaucratization, and potential loss of civic energy. They represent the rightmost destination of our classification, where sustainability is not only about survival but also about integration into the democratic architecture.

Coming back to our five families, where do we find them in the matrix?

We assumed at the outset that electoral democracy innovations would typically cluster on the formal–permanent side since they affect the core of the traditional democratic system, reflecting their embedding in institutions such as parliaments or party systems. Innovations like lowering the voting age or experimenting with new electoral systems tend to be hard to reverse and highly visible. But the matrix also reminds us that some electoral innovations emerge in ad-hoc contexts, often under activist pressure and that their permanence can remain in doubt.

Deliberative democracy spans the spectrum too. When complementary with electoral logics such as citizens' assemblies or councils, they will tend to be institutionalized (by parliaments) and thus appear in the formal–permanent quadrant. But there are at least as many experimental or one-off mini-publics sitting in the ad-hoc–formal space. This distribution illustrates how deliberation functions as a temporary corrective and as a durable complement to representative politics. Further investigation is needed into the dynamics by which such innovations cease to be ad-hoc once they move up to the formal realm.

Digital democracy cases of informal platforms for crowdsourcing ideas, online activism, or campaign mobilization tend to cluster in the informal-ad hoc quadrants, reflecting a role as a temporary mobilization tool. More rarely (to this day) digital democracy takes on a role as permanent participatory infrastructure such as through institutionalized e-consultation platforms and EU-level participatory portals the formal–permanent side. This scattering underscores the enabling role of digital tools across all other forms of innovation as discussed above.

Direct democracy can often be formalised given that referenda and citizens' initiatives are institutionalized in many systems. Yet the matrix also captures their ad-hoc use, when single-issue campaigns activate these mechanisms temporarily rather than as a permanent feature of a system. This illustrates both the enduring nature of direct democracy as a *potential* and its flexibility as a mobilization tool.

Finally, we have separated here **activism** per se from **social movements**. Both are most visible in the informal quadrants – unsurprisingly as movements and grassroots

mobilizations usually begin as informal–ad-hoc occurrences, reacting to immediate crises and not easily sustainable over time. Nevertheless, some consolidate into informal yet permanent forms of action, creating enduring organizations or networks. Importantly, activism also overlaps with and spills into formal spaces when movements push for electoral reforms, trigger assemblies, or demand referenda.

Overall, the matrix makes clear again that our five types of innovations can occupy several spaces (quadrants) and cannot be understood in isolation. Their intersections across are precisely where much of the democratic energy lies: activism feeds into electoral reform, deliberation shapes direct-democratic processes, and digital tools weave across all categories. By classifying our cases while echoing these overlaps, the matrix framework helps us see democratic innovations less as discrete boxes than as components of a complex ecosystem of participation.

Toward a complex ecosystem of participation

Taken together, our five families of democratic innovation create an increasingly dense web of interactions through their overlapping dynamics. Electoral reforms can open space for deliberation. Deliberation can legitimize informed referenda. Digital platforms bridge activism and formal institutions. Activism sustains the pressure that keeps innovations across other democratic families alive.

The future of democratic transformation by 2040 lies not in privileging one mode over another but in designing “hybrid democracy” where multiple innovations co-exist and reinforce one another. This requires attention to social cleavages, institutional design, normative tensions, and the risks of reproducing inequalities. Ultimately, the overlaps between electoral, deliberative, digital, direct, and activist forms of democracy illustrate a central lesson: the strength of democratic innovation lies less in discrete tools than in their capacity to interconnect and form adaptive ecosystems of participation.

Key Takeaways

- Securing adequate funding for these processes proves extremely challenging, as they are rarely treated as core components of democratic systems.
- Support activism as a “connective tissue” across the different baskets of innovations. Since movements sustain informal practices of deliberation and engagement when formal innovations are curtailed, donors and policymakers should view activism as a resilience layer and invest in its capacity to reinforce different baskets of innovations.
- Connections across local, national, and European levels are largely absent, with democratic innovations tending to remain confined to the level of government in which they emerge.
- There is an urgent need to combine diverse democratic tools, moving away from the promotion of one model over another, and instead applying the most appropriate instrument depending on the context.
- Foster flexible youth activism; as young people often engage through fluid, non-committal forms of action, (local) governments and donors should provide safeguards (resources, mentorship, protection from intimidation) to channel these energies into sustainable democratic practices.

- A major challenge remains to ensure inclusiveness: participatory processes must not only attract the most politicized citizens but also engage those who are most distant from political participation.
- Recognition of participation as a civic right is fundamental; this includes creating enabling measures such as “citizenship leave,” comparable to jury duty, that frees participants from professional obligations.
- Democratic innovations, even when institutionalized, remain highly contingent on political will and contextual factors.
- Without robust political follow-up mechanisms, there is a serious risk that innovations will be stripped of their political relevance and that the broader democratic wave will eventually lose momentum.

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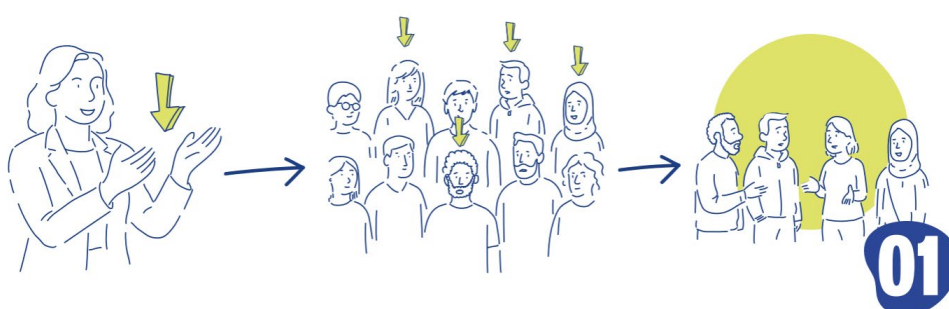
Annex 1

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

PROBLEM-BASED AD-HOC CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY



A temporary group of randomly selected citizens brought together by a government to deliberate about a **specific challenge**



A STRENGTH:



Can be relatively rapidly convened to dive deep into issues and **produce practical recommendations**



A RISK:



1. Disbands after delivering recommendations, so people or organizations may not have a long-term memory of the assembly



2. Can sometimes be used symbolically, **without any commitment to follow through on outcomes**

Sources

Example efforts include a 2004 Canadian British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform; the French Citizens' Convention on Climate; the French Citizens' Assembly on the End of Life.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

GRASSROOTS CITIZENS ASSEMBLIES



A temporary or long-standing group of concerned citizens self-organize to deliberate about societal issues



A STRENGTH:



Citizens can set their own agenda and run the process outside of governmental institutions

A RISK:



Can be challenging to fund and organize, and may not connect to policy or politics

Sources

Belgian "We Need to talk" citizens' assembly (2023).

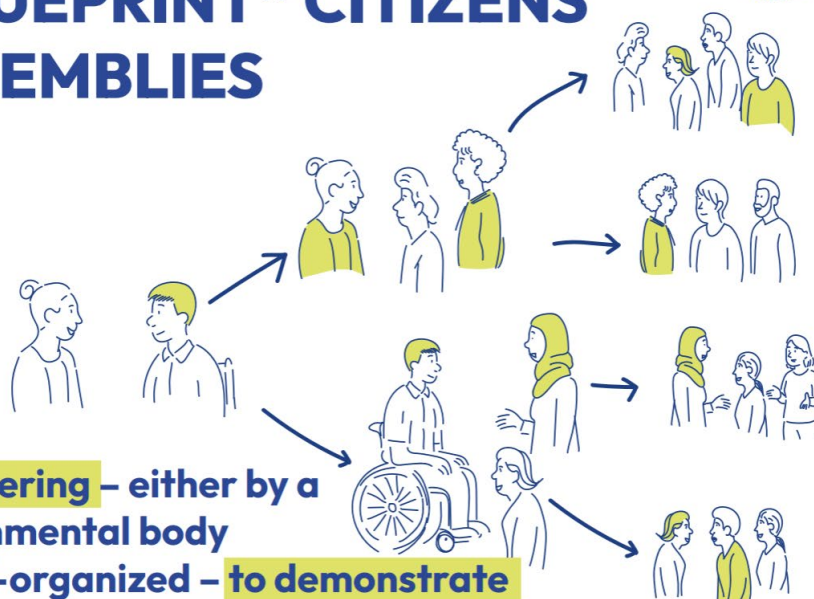


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

“BLUEPRINT” CITIZENS ASSEMBLIES



A gathering – either by a governmental body or self-organized – to demonstrate the value of the citizen assembly



03

A STRENGTH:



1. Shows the public how **deliberative democracy** can work in concrete and practical ways



2. Can **support experimentation** with methods and processes for future assemblies

A RISK:



May not **connect to concrete or relevant policy areas**

Sources

Example efforts: The G1000 initiative in Belgium (2011), which entered public memory as a breakthrough in participatory democracy; the Democratic Odyssey seeking to do the same at a European scale for transnational issues.

03

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

INSTITUTIONAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY



A long-standing group of randomly selected citizens brought together by a government to sustain ongoing citizen consultation

04

A STRENGTH:



With a legal mandate and longer time-horizon, these groups **increase the likelihood** citizen recommendations are considered and implemented



A RISK:



Can be **challenging to sustain citizen recruitment** over time and permanently staff and fund support for such a body

Sources

Example efforts: The Ostbelgien Citizens' Council in Germany; the Climate Assembly in Brussels; the permanent citizens' assembly in Paris.

04

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

MIXED CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES



A temporary or long-standing group of citizens and elected representatives are brought together to deliberate side-by-side



A STRENGTH:



Creates greater understanding between citizen and elected officials and increases likelihood that recommendations are considered

A RISK:



Requires highly skilled moderation, and politicians may use the process to score political points rather than to genuinely engage

Sources

Example efforts: the Irish Constitutional Convention of 66 citizens and 33 parliamentarians; the permanent Brussels deliberative committees (since 2021) of 45 randomly selected citizens and 15 members of Parliament.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING



Citizens directly propose ideas, discuss, and shape public spending in facilitated discussion – may also occur with the assistance of digital technologies.



A STRENGTH:



May improve citizen engagement with and **trust in government** and **better reflect the community's needs and priorities.**

A RISK:



May focus only on immediate **short-term problems.**

Sources

Experimented in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in the 1990s. According to the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas thousands of public authorities, particularly in cities, have developed participatory budgeting processes.

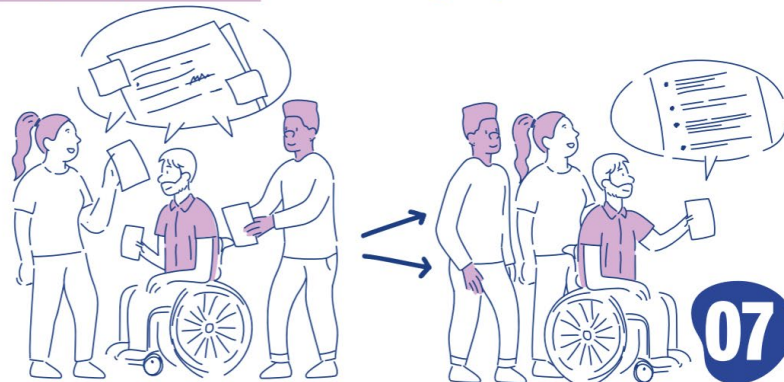


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

CITIZEN GUIDANCE PANELS



A group of randomly selected citizens deliberates in depth on a question and drafts an accessible, balanced statement summarizing key arguments that then get put to voters.



A STRENGTH:



Provides voters with **clear, citizen-drafted summaries** tempering emotional and partisan campaigns.

A RISK:



There is no guarantee voters will read the information or necessarily trust the advisory work.

Sources

Oregon, Washington Citizens' Initiative Review (since 2010); Sion, Switzerland (2022).



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

CHILDREN AND YOUTH ASSEMBLIES



Alongside any temporary, permanent, or topic-based adult assembly, children and youth come together to discuss the same topics.

The results are shared into the adult assembly process.



A STRENGTH:



Youth bring fresh and bold ideas; **early engagement** fosters democratic skills, political literacy, and long-term participation.

A RISK:



Without follow-up, **youth input** could be **set aside** later in a process and their participation minimized, eroding trust.

Sources

Scotland and Ireland (2021-2023), youth climate assemblies operated alongside adult versions. Additionally, permanent children and youth assemblies exist in many countries at city level.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE



Collecting information and holding participatory discussions to better understand how policies might play out or how future challenges might look to help make better decisions today.



09



A STRENGTH:



My better equip policymakers to consider multiple possible futures and create policies that can better handle changing situations.

A RISK:



Usually, these processes are very expert driven, so they may dilute democratic influence if not complemented with participatory public conversations

Sources

The EU uses anticipatory governance approaches in its Better Regulation framework, and many national governments have permanent strategic foresight groups.

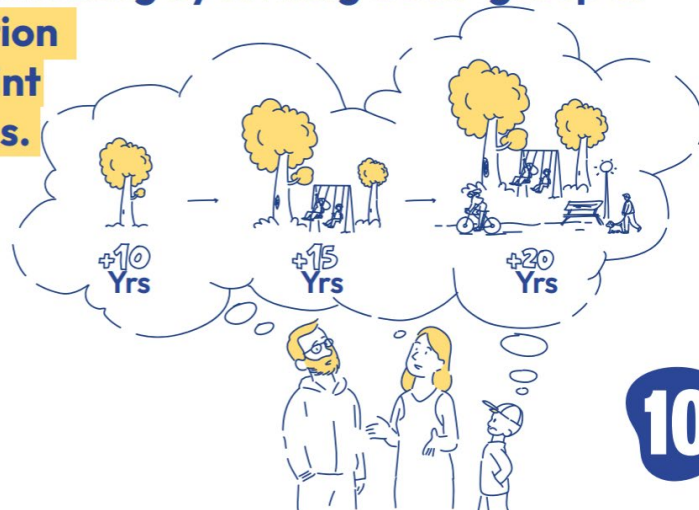
09

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION



FUTURE DESIGN FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

A method that helps people think about themselves and the future in decision making by inviting a sub-group of people in a deliberation to adopt the viewpoint of future generations.



A STRENGTH:



Participants are pushed to think beyond immediate needs and consider the legacy of today's decisions fostering empathy and moral responsibility.

A RISK:



There's a risk that focusing too much on the future diverts attention away from current marginalized voices and communities.

Sources

Japan's Future Design movement, developed by Tatsuyoshi Saijo, combats political short-termism by having citizens plan for their communities' futures. Norway has launched a future assembly to explore long-term democratic governance.

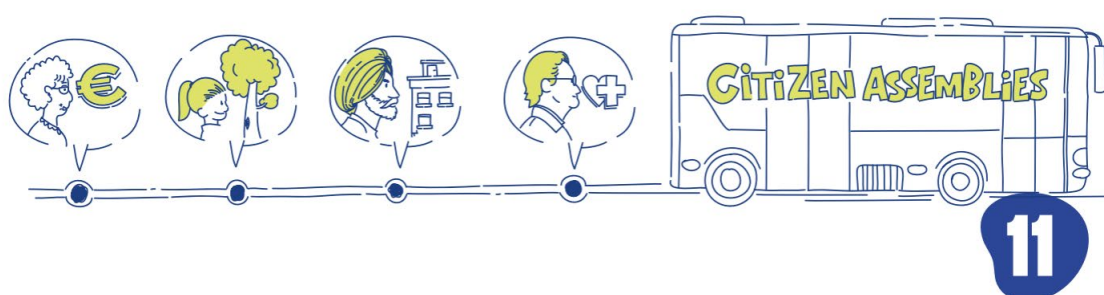


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

DEMOCRATIC WORKPLACE - SOCIOCRACY



An assembly that moves from neighborhood to neighborhood, changing places and randomly selecting people but keeping the same topical focus as it travels.



A STRENGTH:



When citizens see that every part of the city or territory is being listened to, the final recommendations of the assembly are more likely to be **viewed as balanced and representative**.

A RISK:



A moving assembly **can suffer from a lack of shared momentum** or consistent group learning if not carefully designed.

Sources

The Bogota itinerant citizens assembly initiated in 2020 is the model for this innovation.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

DEMOCRACY IN THE WORKPLACE



An effort to **expand people's everyday experience with democracy by reducing top-down hierarchies at work and increasing organized, bottom-up experiences with discussing and resolving differences, decision making, and getting things done.**



A STRENGTH:



Increases creative problem solving, and job satisfaction, promoting a **positive environment where employees feel valued and heard**, resulting in higher productivity and a better company reputation.



A RISK:



Decision-making processes can become time-consuming, as involving many stakeholders to reach consensus or gather input can take longer

Sources

Sociocracy 3.0 (S3) Common Sense Framework is one practical guide to help organizations evolve more democratic practices.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

“MORE-THAN-HUMAN” REPRESENTATION



Specially appointed people or “guardians” are invited to speak on behalf of nature, in deliberations.

Art or other symbols and items may be used to bring the essence of natural systems into the room.



13

A STRENGTH:



Acknowledges our dependence on the natural world and invites thinking about **environmental needs** and **long-term human futures**.

A RISK:



Including nature in deliberations requires a cultural shift, and social inequalities and barriers to resources must not be overlooked.

Sources

Constitutional recognitions bring nature into democracies in Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2010), with additional examples in the Boardman River Dams Project (US, 2017) and KNOCA's workshop on unheard voices in Climate Assemblies.

13

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

LIQUID DEMOCRACY



A system letting individuals **decide whether to vote directly on a public issue, or give their vote to a trusted third party to vote on their behalf.** Instead of one representative for all issues, presents the possibility for people to select different representatives to vote on different issues, depending on who they trust for different issues.



A STRENGTH:



Allows for stronger monitoring of delegates and for clearer voter accountability



A RISK:



As an experimental concept, it is not yet clear whether it helps prevent the concentration of power in a small group. In addition, the process of delegation is highly sensitive and may be difficult to trace at scale.

Sources

An experimental form of liquid democracy called Civocracy was tested at the Vienna University of Technology in 2012. Various digital platforms have been developed to enable Liquid Democracy or similar delegate voting systems.

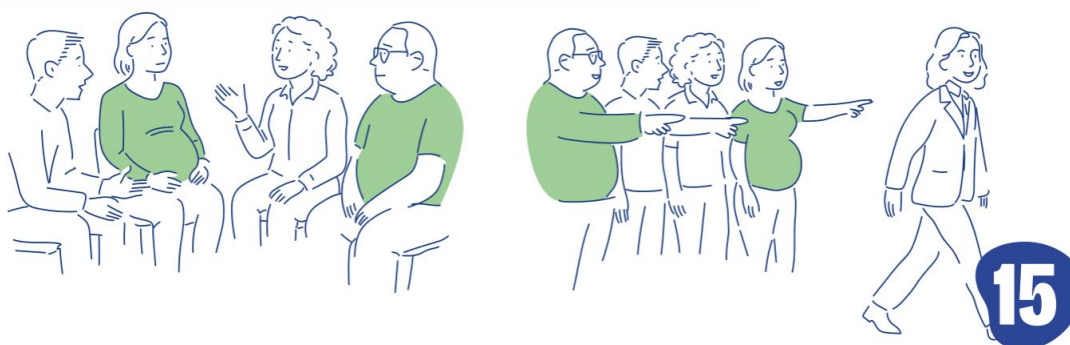


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

PARTICIPATORY POLITICAL PARTIES



Political parties adopt deliberative processes for making decisions within the party. More party constituents may be given a voice in shaping agendas, voting for party positions, and even co-drafting statutes.



A STRENGTH:



More transparency, connection, and experience with a party and its representatives may build trust and improve the quality of decision making.



A RISK:



May do little to protect minority voices within parties, and may not address polarisation between parties.

Sources

Parties like Agora (Belgium), the Two-Tailed Dog Party (Hungary), and Podemos (Spain) have mobilised their constituencies through deliberative processes across the electoral cycle.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

RE-THINKING VOTING RIGHTS



Changes to who is given the right to vote in a democratic political system, for example, the historic extension of voting rights to women. Lowering the voting age?

Allowing non-citizen residents to vote?

Proposals such as giving nature a vote are also considered here.



A STRENGTH:



Youth, minorities and youth members of minorities may feel more welcome to **join political life earlier, impacting their interest and ability to do so long-term**



A RISK:



May **exacerbate existing inequalities** related to (for example) socioeconomic status, even if voting rights are extended in some way.

Sources

Women's suffrage movement. Lowering the voting age below 18, as seen in Germany and Austria

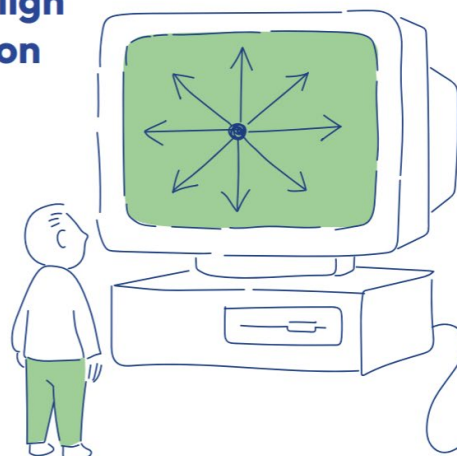


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

VOTING ADVICE TOOLS



Interactive digital (online) surveys ask voters questions to better understand their values and priorities and, in turn, point them toward candidates or political parties that align with their political views on specific issues.



17

A STRENGTH:



Challenges propaganda by promoting a focus on policy preferences instead of identity-driven or protest voting.



A RISK:



Not all people may have equal access to these digital resources, particularly those who may be most in need of benefiting from them.

Sources

Vokskabin (developed in Hungary) familiarizes users with current political issues straightforwardly and playfully. The Belgian Electoral Test of news media Le Soir - RTBF and the Université Libre de Brussels is helping voters to 'Find out which party or parties you're closest. For younger voters, a variant called PolitiqueSwipe is available, offering a more interactive experience tailored to their preferences.

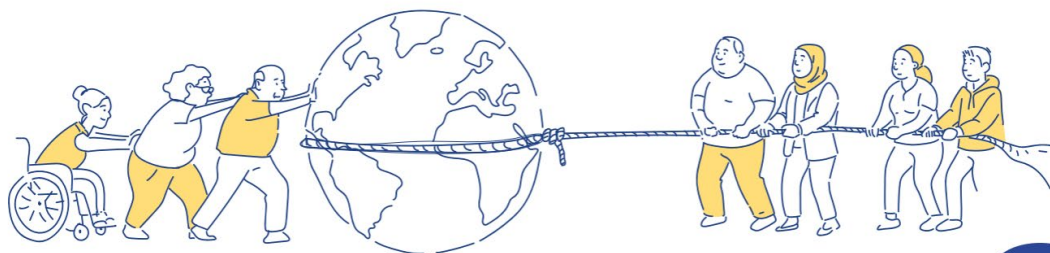
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DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

DIRECT VOTING ON TOPICS



Voters are given the opportunity to cast a vote directly in decisions being taken. Called “referenda,” direct voting initiatives may be proposed by a government or initiated by citizens; results may be binding or advisory; the timing may be before or after a government decision.



18

A STRENGTH:



Greatly increase democratic legitimacy in decision-making when such votes are transparently and effectively managed.



A RISK:



May be **expensive to initiate and sufficiently inform the voting public on issues**; may be vulnerable to majority capture without sufficient consideration of more diverse, minority interests.

Sources

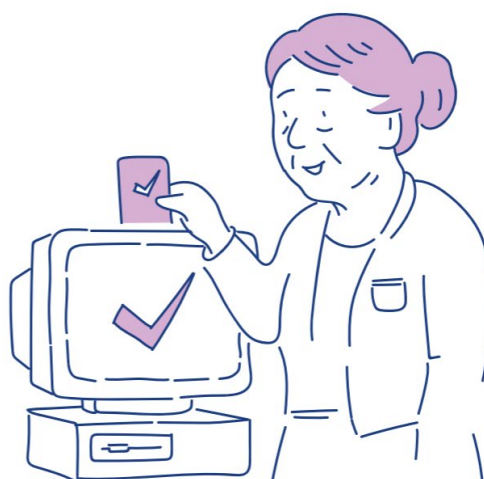
The European Citizens' Initiative. Switzerland has a robust referenda program, with 6.42 popular votes conducted each year, between 1984 and 2009. The Chilean Constitutional Assembly proposed a deliberative, elected body to initiate the drafting of a new constitution, to be voted on through a mandatory referendum.

18

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

ELECTRONIC VOTING

Citizens use **secure online portals** and **digital devices** to cast their vote.



19

A STRENGTH:



A lower cost, easier to access method for people to vote.
May potentially harmonize European-wide voting system.



A RISK:



Concerns about **security and universal access to digital systems**. Further, it is unclear if electronic voting increases participation by everyone or only those who already vote anyway.

Sources

Canada, Switzerland, and Estonia—the first country to use online voting in national parliamentary elections, in 2007—led the way in adopting electronic voting

19

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

CAMPAIGNING FOR MORE INCLUSIVE CULTURES IN DEMOCRACIES

Active training and education about and campaigning for increased tolerance of people and groups actively being discriminated against, for example, people in the LGBTQIA+ community.



A STRENGTH:



Raises social awareness, counters misinformation and propaganda, and promotes tolerance and inclusion.



A RISK:



May face political resistance and if campaigns are not connected to voting, may have limited broader political impact.

Sources

In collaboration with other local NGOs, Amnesty International Hungary gives e-learning materials for students and employees and organizes educational sessions and workshops for stakeholders.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE



Engaging in nonviolent protest and direct actions to demonstrate the urgency and importance of a topic – for example peace, labour rights, environmental rights, freedom of the press, etc.



A STRENGTH:



May draw significant attention to threats to human rights, sparking public debate and delay or block unjust policies or decisions.



A RISK:



Solidarity for mass action is difficult to achieve. Smaller actions may be unfairly portrayed by dominant interests in power to minimize their impact.

Sources

Time-tested tactic of the civil rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights movements. The intergenerational movement "I would teach" in Hungary organized road blockades and school strikes to protest the unjust firing of teachers speaking out against the repression of educators' rights and free speech.

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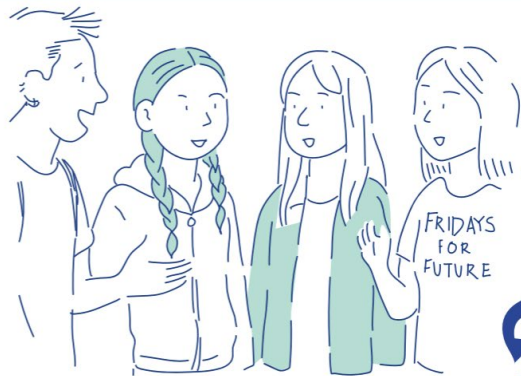
DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

FRIDAY FOR FUTURE MOVEMENT



A global youth movement, organized through local chapters, seeking to accelerate action on issues of environmental and climate collapse.

Local chapters run open assemblies and operate by consensus, seeking to change the culture of political debate, as well.



22

A STRENGTH:



Activates and engages youth in direct action campaigns while also strengthening a culture of democratic politics



A RISK:



Young participants may be emotionally or physically overwhelmed by political opposition or online bullying, or by balancing advocacy at the same time as everything else in their lives.

Sources

The Fridays for Future movement has to date pushed 25 cities, the European Commission, and the German Constitutional Court to change policies and rulings and introduce more ambitious climate actions.

22

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

CLIMATE CONSTITUTIONALISM



Through online outreach, people initiate and collect signatures to demonstrate political opinions or will about specific topics or issues.



23

A STRENGTH:



Low barrier to civic participation, providing fast opportunities to collect large amounts of feedback.



A RISK:



Can create an **illusion of impact** if signatures don't translate to votes. Does not involve dialogue.

Sources

Paper petitions are an old democratic tool -- online petitions have gained rapid growth thanks to platforms like change.org. The EU Parliament but also the French National Assembly, the UK Parliament, and other bodies have set up their own online petition platforms.

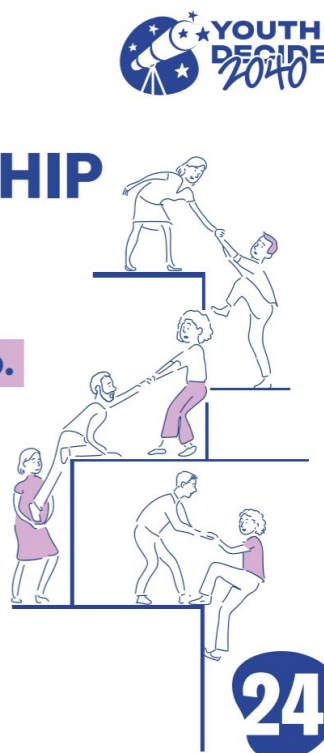
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DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

GENDER QUOTAS IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP

A range of possible requirements for increasing the presence women or other minorities in politics and leadership.

May involve quotas for political parties; representation in legislative bodies; in public administration and public committees; on corporate boards.



A STRENGTH:



May ensure a minimum number of women in leadership and politics, often through reserved seats.

A RISK:



Adoption may not be sustained; seats may be captured by entrenched political positions, reducing diversity of voices.

Sources

Adopted by over 130 countries globally, catalyzed by the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995.

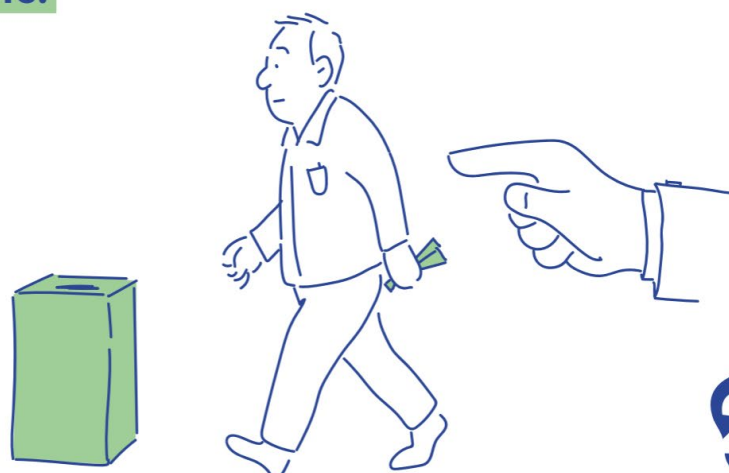


DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

COMPULSORY VOTING



A system where **citizens are legally required to vote in elections, and face fines or other measures if they do not vote.**



25



A STRENGTH:



Significantly increases voter participation in countries where this is adopted; sends a strong message about civic responsibility.

A RISK:



For some, **conflicts with ideas of freedom in democracies**; it may also be difficult to enforce.

Sources

Belgium, Argentina, and Australia were among the earliest nations to implement mandatory voting laws, doing so in 1892, 1914, and 1924 respectively. Additionally, countries like Venezuela and the Netherlands once had compulsory voting systems but have discontinued them.

25

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

ONLINE CITIZEN CONSULTATIONS



Processes carried out online designed to get public input on topics of debate.

These online methods allow governments, municipalities, or organizations to hear from a wider range of people beyond traditional in-person meetings.



A STRENGTH:



Allows many more people to share their views anytime, anywhere, and uses digital tools to handle large amounts of information.



A RISK:



May exclude individuals without internet access or digital literacy and may be difficult to ensure respectful, detailed, and constructive discussion online.

Sources

Online citizens consultations gained traction in the 1990s and early 2000s. Platforms include Decidim which offers tools for proposals and discussions; government websites with feedback forms or forums on specific topics; and innovative platforms like Polis, which uses computational methods to identify areas of consensus and disagreement within large-scale public input, providing a structured overview of collective sentiment on an issue.



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS



Also known as **community councils**, **district councils**, or **parish councils** these are local-level spaces for people to gather and deliberate on issues related to local affairs – often at the scale of a neighborhood.



A STRENGTH:



Builds local connections and civic capacity, improves response to community issues.



A RISK:



May lack diverse representation or lead to “not-in-my-back-yard” attitudes, particularly in larger cities with many interacting and connected neighborhoods

Sources

Parish/Town Councils in UK, Conseils de quartier in France, Ortsbeiräte in Germany, Lokalfåd in Denmark, and more. Neighborhood or district level citizen committees are serving as a guarantee of a local representation of citizens



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

MAJORITY JUDGEMENT VOTING



Citizens vote on the quality of all candidates in a race, for example “excellent, very good, good, acceptable, poor or unacceptable,” to provide a more comprehensive understanding of voter preference.

28

A STRENGTH:



All candidates have a chance; providing more informative results on all candidates.



A RISK:



Makes voting more time-consuming and complicated.

Sources

Developed in 2007 in France by CNRS researchers, Michel Balinski and Rida Laraki, the majority judgment voting method has been experimented in different non-governmental elections in several countries, but not yet in major elections.

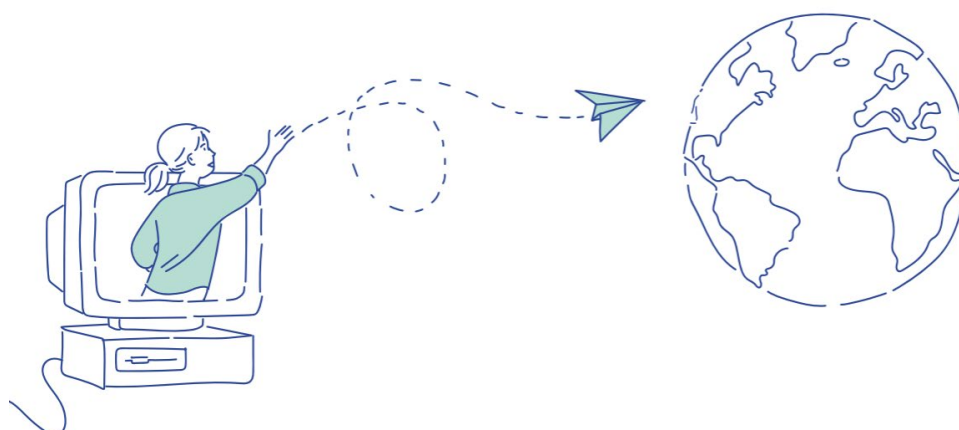
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DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

ONLINE PETITIONS



Through online outreach, people initiate and collect signatures to demonstrate political opinions or will about specific topics or issues.



29



A STRENGTH:



Low barrier to civic participation, providing fast opportunities to collect large amounts of feedback.

A RISK:



Can create an **illusion of impact** if signatures don't translate to votes. Does not involve dialogue.

Sources

Paper petitions are an old democratic tool -- online petitions have gained rapid growth thanks to platforms like change.org. The EU Parliament but also the French National Assembly, the UK Parliament, and other bodies have set up their own online petition platforms.

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Annex 2

Electoral Democracy - Comparative Analysis of Three Democratic Innovations by case

Democratic Innovation	Electoral Reform (Austria)	Party Renewal (Belgian PS)	Citizen-Led Movement (Agora)
Type of Innovation	Top-down, state-led electoral rule change	Internally driven, party-led organisational reform	Bottom-up, citizen-led parliamentary intervention
Primary Motivation	Combat "political tiredness"; engage youth in an ageing society	Reverse electoral decline; restore party legitimacy and identity	Overcome political disillusionment; embed deliberation in parliament
Youth Participation Strategy	<i>Scale:</i> Universal enfranchisement of 16/17-year-olds	<i>Symbolism:</i> Intention to include youth via panels, but risks tokenism	<i>Depth:</i> Proportional inclusion with intensive community-building
Key Barriers	Intergenerational tensions; implementation deficits (ensuring informed participation)	Internal resistance (elite cherry-picking, alienating cadres); citizen distrust	External political isolation and resistance; internal organisational fragility
Main Transformative Impact	<i>Systemic:</i> Permanent change to electoral law	<i>To be determined:</i> Aims for both internal cultural change and external electoral success	<i>Participant:</i> Politicisation and empowerment of citizens; cultural shift in Brussels politics

Annex 3

Deliberative Democracy - Comparative Analysis of Three Democratic Innovations by feature

Model	Youth Participation	Barriers/ Challenges	Political Buy-in & Impact	Transcalar Aspect	Evaluation & Perspectives
Brussels Deliberative Committees	16+ involved, but not youth-specific; equal footing with MPs	Risk of elitism if outreach weak; need support (honoraria, childcare)	Strong: embedded in parliamentary rules; concrete outcomes (5G, noise, crisis plan etc.)	Regional, but inspiring replication in other parliaments +sending recommendations to other polity levels concerned; exchanges with EU actors; potential nested model for EU scaling	Formal evaluation after each process; adaptive improvements; positive feedback from MPs & citizens
Youth Assemblies (Ireland & Scotland)	Children & youth explicitly central; creative formats; Ireland institutionalized Youth Biodiversity Forum	Sortition difficult for under-18s; safeguarding minors; risk of tokenism	High: government-sponsored; visibility; policy uptake (Biodiversity Forum, climate plans)	National focus; no EU-level scaffolding; potential for intergenerational linkages	Focus on empowerment & democratic literacy; need to avoid siloed “youth-only” processes
Convention on the Time of the Child (France)	Multi-layered (children 6-11, youth 12-17, adults); first French CA with child integration	Scepticism from education sector; logistical challenges integrating children & adults	Medium: CESE backing but cautious national uptake; risk of “reports on shelf”	National; some CESE-EESC linkage; potential bridge to EU	Still underway; shows rapid civic skill-building among youth
Democratic Odyssey (DO)	Indirect; notable inclusion of asylum-seeker youth in Athens	Limited funding, different ways of recruitment; reliance on English speakers	Symbolic endorsements, little direct policy uptake despite Council of Europe links	Explicitly transnational; assemblies in multiple cities; fragile local anchoring	Evaluated as proof-of-concept; “critical friends” feedback

Annex 4

Digital Democracy - Comparative Analysis of four Democratic Innovations

Feature	HowTheyVote.eu	Make.org	Open Source Politics	Treecompany
Type of Innovation	volunteer-driven data initiative	civic tech company	social enterprise deploying open-source tools	Belgian SME tailoring participation ecosystems
Primary Motivation	Collect voting information from the European Parliament and make it easily accessible.	Building user-friendly participation platforms by design; allowing people to take part in the positive transformation of society	Promote and use digital tools to expand both digital democracy and access to open data	Engaging and informing citizens on societal topics using digital means
Youth Participation Strategy	supporting civic literacy by making vote results of the European Parliament transparent	Adapt the user journey and experience to reflect more recent online habits	Adapt the user experience for young people and also try to reach them physically.	Providing tools for an educational context in which young people participate
Key Barriers	Reaching visibility outside of the algorithms of big platforms	Outreach is a key factor	Reaching a committed participation is challenging in the digital space	Attention online is scarce; certain types of digital interaction are less popular with young people
Main Transformative Impact	Indirect leverage via journalism and research; informs a political culture of accountability	Large N-inputs to inform agendas; design processes that are less paternalistic and feel natural for people to participate in	citizen engagement for public decisions; from participatory budgeting at the local level to adapting cities to climate change	Enable low-threshold interactions, such as referenda or VAAs

Annex 5

Informal Activism Models and Youth Participation

Model	Youth Participation	Barriers/Challenges	Political impact and buy-in	Transcalar aspect	Evaluation and perspectives
AI Hungary	Under-30s dominate based on tiered roles, internships	Turnover, seasonality, school restrictions	Medium: civic skills, discourse shifts; limited policy	Global-local bridging; national focus	Feedback loops; flexible empowerment
IWTM	Organic, intergenerational but ad-hoc; students bring in issues	Repression, burnout, solidarity deficits	Low: discursive success; civic experiments	National alliances; no scaling	Random, non-formalized
MSK	Under-30s central; peer recruitment	Decline post-COVID, inefficacy, competition	Low: cultural/educational; skill-building	Transnational FFF; regional collaborations	Check-ins; support youth base