

## Improving Democracy through Citizens' Participation

### Results of the ECoD Pilot Democracy Survey and CoE Focus Groups

**Democracy is in crisis, as numerous studies such as the latest V-Dem Democracy Reports of the University of Gothenburg prove. But what about the individual citizen's perspective and ideas for improvements in this respect? Both the ECoD online pilot Survey and Debating Europe's Focus Groups for the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy 2022 explored citizens' views and attitudes and revealed similar trends and insights.**

According to the online pilot survey, conducted by European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) from 28 Oct to 1 Nov 2022, most of the 794 responding Citizens' Jury members observe a decline of the democratic system in their respective country of residence - and at the same time wish for a more participatory democracy.

Interestingly, the findings of the "Youth to the Rescue" report on qualitative focus groups, go in the same direction. In cooperation with the Council of Europe, Debating Europe and Debating Africa conducted 150 focus groups with young people, aged from 18 to 35, in Europe, Africa and Asia. While all focus groups within the three continents agreed that democracy is in decline, pessimistic scenarios regarding future developments prevailed in the African and Asian ones. In contrast to that, the European focus groups discussions were characterised by cautious optimism - a qualitative finding which corresponds with the ECoD survey results.

#### Worrying scenarios vs. cautious optimism

This becomes more evident, when taking into account the focus groups findings in Asia and Africa. While citizens in Asia seemed to be more product oriented and in general sceptic about their political system, in Africa interviewees showed deep worries and fear, in case the actual politicians might fail. In that sense, even democracy as such was questioned within the focus groups. The discussants argued that democracy in their countries of residence is much more based on politicians, than on stable institutions which could not guarantee any democratic sustainability,

On the contrary, the European situation gives hope according to the European focus groups and ECoD survey findings. Respondents of the ECoD survey were residents from all CoE member states, while the participants' nationalities went beyond the CoE region and reached the Middle East, South America and Canada. In terms of gender (55 % women) and age (from 18 to 82, average age 41), the group was well balanced.

#### Democracies are alive, but weakening

When assessing the democratic situation in their countries of residence, most of the respondents showed a critical point of view: Only 31.1 % fully agreed with the assertion that their respective country shows a strong democracy. Most of them, 45.0 %, partly agree with this assessment, while 8.4 % of them even fully disagree. Being asked about the future developments of democracy in their countries of residence, the Citizen Jurors showed more pessimism. Most of them, 53.1 %, see democracy weakening, while 34.4% expect democracy to stay the same, and only 11.0 % share an optimistic view of democracy, expecting its future strengthening.

In the European focus groups, not a single participant questioned democracy as the best political system. However, clear concerns were expressed by discussants in Eastern Europe about the democratic backsliding in their countries of residence. They even articulated deep worries that the level democracy had reached after the Fall of the Iron Curtain will never be reached again.

## Respect for dissent and citizens' concerns

Looking at the political culture, the situation has also worsened according to the survey results. The majority of respondents finds that it is getting somewhat harder (45.4 %), or harder (28.6 %) to have a respectful political disagreement with people of different opinions. Only 18.9 % perceive the situation staying the same. Even fewer think it is getting somewhat easier (4.1 %) or easier (2.6 %).

In reference to the focus groups findings, social media, disinformation and fake news are seen as major contributors to such a deterioration. As some participants highlighted, insults spread by social media would hardly appear in personal conversation.

Similar to the European focus groups findings, the ECoD survey showed that people do not feel they are being fully taken seriously in their needs and expectations. The survey respondents' judgement of whether politicians care for the concerns of citizens is thus sobering. In comparison to the share of interviewees who partly agree with having a strong democracy in their respective country, 44.8 % partly believe that elected politicians care about citizens' concerns. Only 5.5 % of them fully agree that citizens' voices are heard, while a significant share of them, 29.1 % partly disagree, and even 19.1 % of them fully disagree with that, pointing to a distrust of elected politicians.

## Most important factors and wishes for a well-functioning democracy

In the ranking of the most important factors of a well-functioning democracy, the three highest ranked factors were: 1) Freedom of speech and human rights, 2) Stable democratic institutions, and 3) Fair legal system, which in general embody crucial elements of consolidated democracies. Interestingly, the share of those who prefer a different kind of democracy is 51.6 %, and slightly higher of 48.4 % those who prefer the existing democratic system.

The discussants of the European focus groups called for a better balance of power and emphasised education to be the crucial basis for democracy in Europe. Some of them highlighted the necessity to include marginalised groups much more in political decision-making, especially those who, due to their citizenship, do not have the right to vote.

And here the European focus groups, against the background of all in all stable and consolidated democratic systems, brought up innovative approaches to foster democracy. Especially those participants who expressed their beliefs in democracy shared their ideas of imaginative solutions to strengthen democracy. From that point of view, they called for more citizens' involvement and participatory approaches for improvement.

As the ECoD survey shows, a significant majority of respondents (58.2 %) wishes for more citizen participation, a much higher percentage than the wish for more direct democracy, 26.2 %, or for a stronger parliament, 9.8 %. We thus conclude that the worrying state of democracy today may open a window of opportunity for more citizen participation to strengthen deliberative democracy in the future. ECoD aims to meet these citizens' needs and to contribute to bridging the gap between politicians, political professionals and citizens.

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