



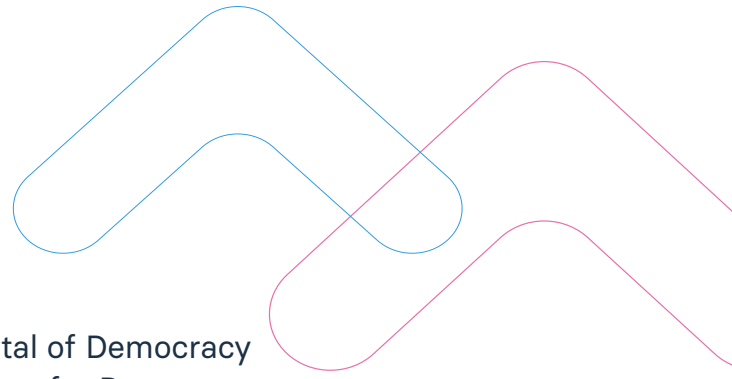
**European Capital
of Democracy**

Improving Democracy through Citizens' Participation

**Results of the ECoD Citizens' Jury
"State of Democracy" pilot survey**

December 2022

Foreword



This pilot survey was carried out by European Capital of Democracy (ECoD NPO), for the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy 2022 in addition to the focus groups organised by Debating Europe and Debating Africa. The survey includes nearly 800 responses from participants across the Council of Europe member states. Both the focus groups and pilot survey were presented and discussed at the "Youth to the Rescue" session during the CoE World Forum for Democracy in November 2022.

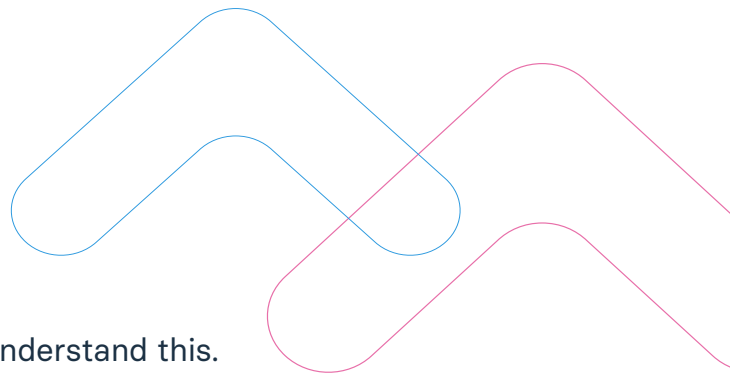
The pilot survey was conducted among Citizen Jurors for the European Capital of Democracy, a Europe-wide initiative to innovate and strengthen democracy. Each year, the jury's members will select a European city to carry the title, based on an Experts' Jury's shortlist. While holding this honorary title, the European Capital of Democracy will curate, organise and host a variety of events. Visitors from all over Europe – politicians, experts, civil society actors, artists, citizens and media representatives – are invited to participate and make the city a stage for democratic innovation.

Social innovation is the answer to burning issues of our time: a lack of participation and exchange, eroding social cohesion, and even an armed conflict in the heart of Europe. The Citizens' Jury aims to foster open dialogue and to support municipalities, cities, states and European institutions in finding practical solutions to involve citizens. Complex decisions, the crowdsourcing of tasks and qualitative feedback on multi-layered topics require a completely new approach.

Besides selecting a European Capital of Democracy every year, the Citizens' Jury will serve as a unique sounding board and network of social innovators and democracy defenders, creating new opportunities for citizen participation and social research.

We want to thank all the respondents for having shared their visions, views and opinions with us, and the political experts who consulted us in the development process of the Citizens' Jury and this pilot survey, first and foremost Dr. Eva Zeglovits from the Institute for Empirical Social Studies (IFES) in Vienna and Dr. Tobias Spöri, political scientist at djpart, Think Tank for political participation in Berlin.

Introduction



“Democracy is a state of mind, we need to understand this. It is not only voting, it is in our everyday life!”¹

Democracy is in crisis, as numerous studies such as the latest V-Dem Democracy Report of the University of Gothenburg show. 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 tendencies and insights regarding the current state of Democracy in Europe.

“A democracy is the only political system which needs an active democratically minded citizenry in order to survive. [...] Democratically minded citizens have to stand up!”

The first online Pilot Survey was conducted by ECoD NPO this year from 8 October to 1 November 2022, involving nearly 800 respondents from the ECoD Citizens' Jury. Most 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.

The findings of the “Youth to the Rescue” report on qualitative focus groups by Debating Europe and Debating Africa conducted with 150 young people, aged from 18 to 35, in Europe, Africa and Asia, goes in the same direction. While all three focus groups agreed that democracy is in decline, pessimistic scenarios regarding future developments prevailed in the African and Asian ones.

“Democracy can only function if people are willing to protect it, engage in discussions, hold leaders accountable and try to participate in discourse to make their voices heard.”

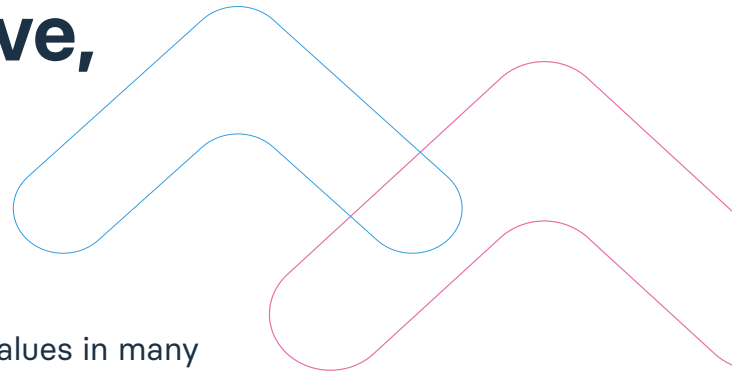
In contrast to that, the European focus group's discussions were characterised by cautious optimism - a qualitative finding which corresponds with the ECoD pilot survey results. The survey respondents are residents from all CoE member states, while the participants' nationalities went beyond the CoE region to 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.

¹ All quotes are selected statements of ECoD Citizen Jurors from the pilot study

² Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature? In: <https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>

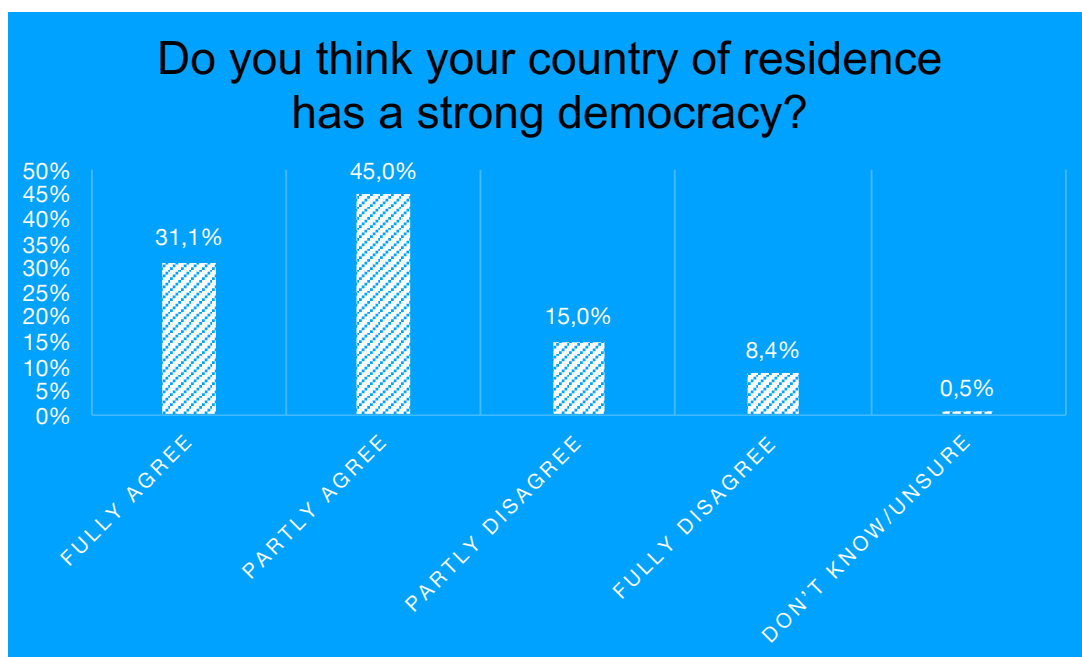
³ Debating Europe (2022): Youth to the Rescue - What Kind of Democracy Do Young People in Africa, Asia and Europe Want? In: <https://www.debatingeurope.eu/focus/future-of-democracy/>

Democracies are alive, but weakening



"I am afraid of the backlash of democratic values in many countries."

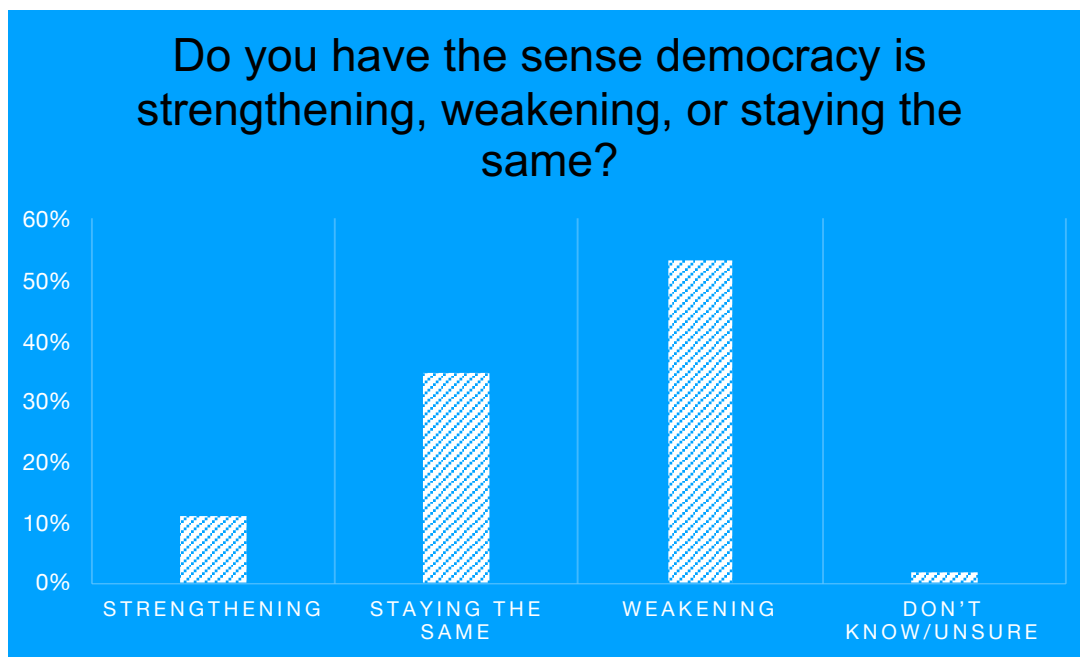
When assessing the democratic situation in their countries of residence, most of the respondents share a critical point of view: Only 31.1 % fully agree with the assertion that their respective country is a strong democracy. Most of the respondents, 45.0 %, across all gender and age groups, partly agree with this assessment. The share of those who even fully disagree is 8.4 %. Significantly, among the age group of the 18 to 25 year old respondents, 51.5 % partly and only 22.2 % fully agree with that statement. In that sense, this age group appeared to be more sceptical overall, but less clearly negative than the other older age groups; 3.0 % of them fully disagree, while on the average it is 8.4 %.





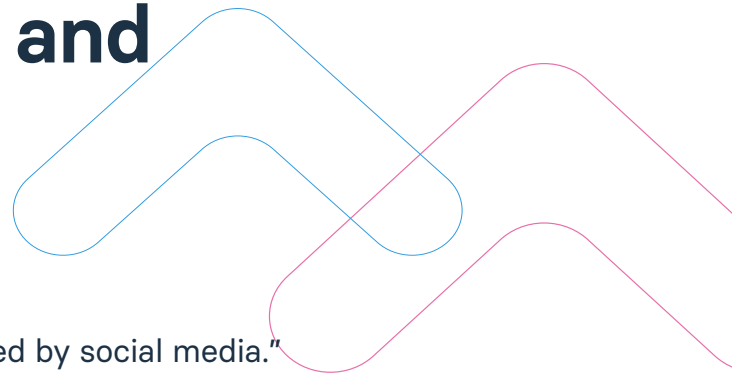
Being asked about the future developments of democracy in their countries of residence, the Citizen Jurors were mostly unanimous in their pessimism across all age and gender groups. Most of them, 53.1 %, see democracy weakening, while 34.4 % see democracy staying the same, and 11.0 % see democracy strengthening. Male respondents showed more scepticism than women, as 55.8 % of men and 50.8 % of women see democracy weakening.

Interestingly, a comparatively higher share (18.0 %) of the 18-25 year olds think democracy is strengthening, showing at the same time the smallest percentage of those who think democracy is weakening (44.9 % in contrast to the average result of 53.13 %). However, most of the respondents overall see democracy weakening, which corresponds with the findings of the Debating Europe's focus groups.



According to the "Youth to the Rescue" report, 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 achieved after the Fall of the Iron Curtain will never be reached again.

Respect for dissent and citizens' concerns

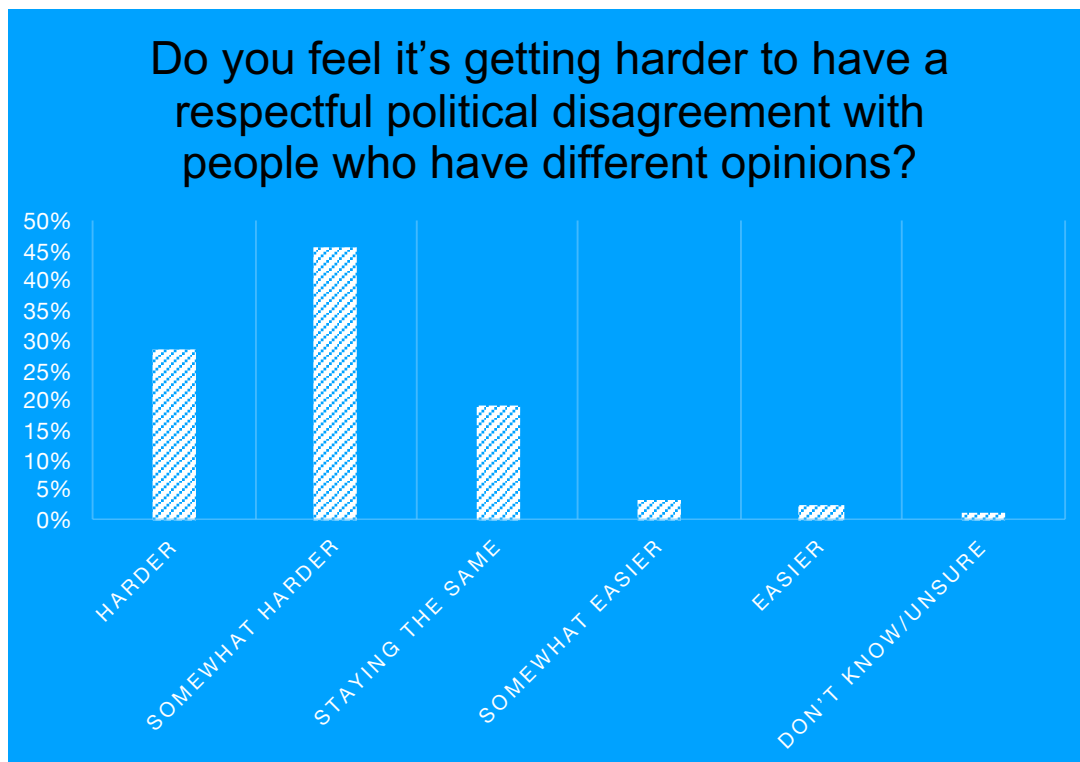


“Democracy is in danger of being undermined by social media.”

Looking at the political culture, the situation has also worsened. 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 (3.1 %) or easier (2.6 %).

Male Citizen Jurors appear to be more pessimistic than the female ones, as 32.0 % of men and 25.7 % of women have answered to see it getting harder, while 41.7 % of men and 48.3 % of women see it getting somewhat harder.

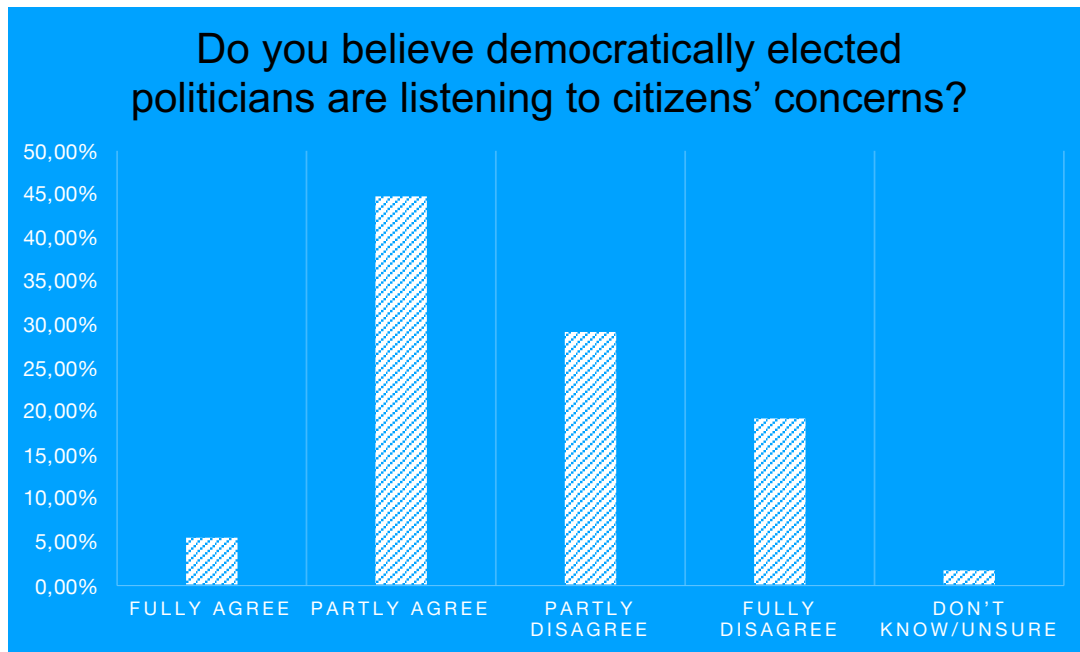
Within the youngest age group, 49.7 %, agree that it is getting somewhat harder, which is the highest percentage in comparison to the other age groups. Parallely, 23.1 % of the youngest age group believe that it is getting harder, which is the lowest share in comparison to other age groups. Apart from such differences, most of the Citizen Jurors share the pessimistic view on currently difficult developments.





In 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.

“Social media is a democratic problem - the expansion of feeling-based designed-to-be-addictive platforms into opinion-forming information channels is a loss for informed democracies.”

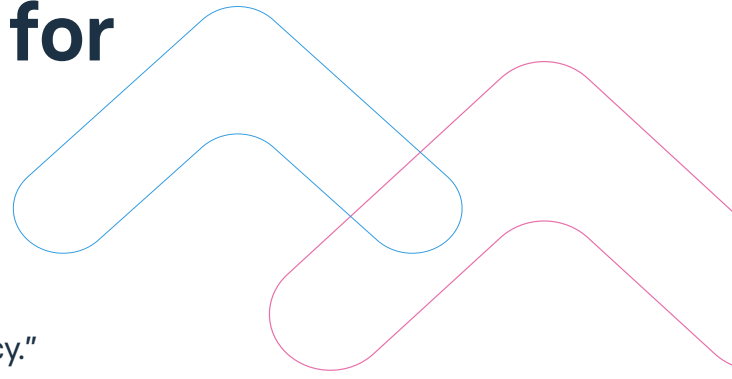


Similar to the European focus group findings, the survey shows that people do not feel being taken seriously by decision-makers in their needs and expectations. The survey respondents' judgement of whether politicians care for the concerns of citizens is thus sobering: 44.8 % partly agree that elected politicians care about citizens' concerns. Only 5.5 % of them fully agree that citizens' voices are heard, while 29.1 % partly disagree, and even 19.1 % of them fully disagree with that, pointing to a distrust of elected politicians.

“Citizens and politicians should work together to improve societies and protect democracy and its procedures.”

With regard to gender, the results slightly differ so that women appear to be more sceptical about politicians than men: Among men it is 46.1 %, among women 43.2 % who partly agree that politicians care about citizens' concerns, while 27.6 % of men and 30.6 % of women partly disagree with that.

Factors and wishes for a well-functioning democracy



“Education is the base of a strong democracy.”

In the selection of the most important factors of a well-functioning democracy, the three highest ranked factors are:

1. Freedom of speech and human rights,
2. Stable democratic institutions, and
3. Fair legal system,

Those factors 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 than 48.4 %, the percentage of those who prefer the existing democratic system. However, in the additional comments many respondents raised the crucial importance of education and especially civic education for democracy.

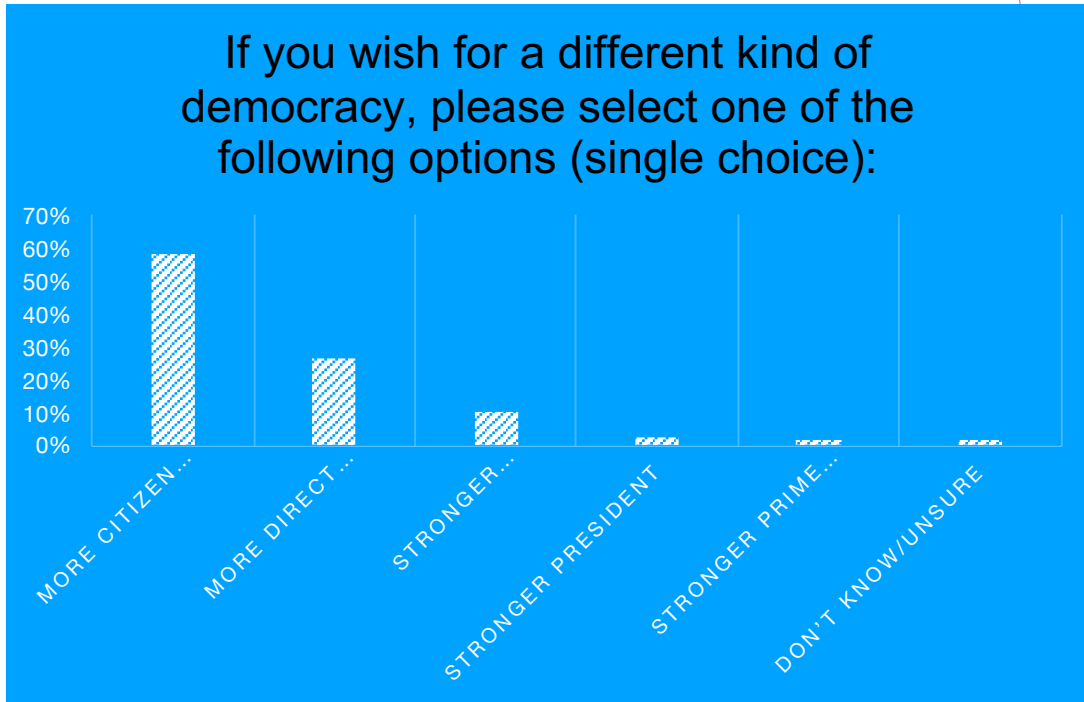
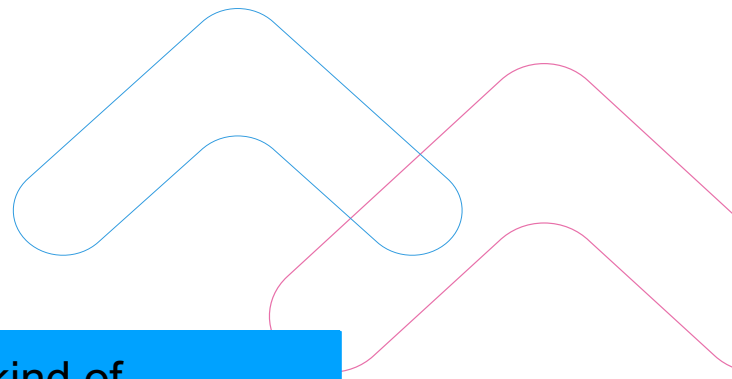
“More deliberate practices are needed.”

The discussants of the European focus group 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. This corresponds with the findings of the survey, as some participants also called for more inclusion of marginalised groups.

“We should take the voices of minority communities’ and vulnerable people’s situations more into account to make them feel they (still) belong with our society and participate in strengthening democracy.”

Consequently, against the background of all in all stable and consolidated democratic systems in Europe, focus group participants brought up innovative approaches to foster democracy, calling for more citizens’ involvement and participatory approaches for improvement.

These findings strongly correspond with our survey results: When asked if they would prefer a different kind of democracy, 51.6 % of our Citizen Jurors answered yes, 48.4 % no. Gender and age breaks revealed slight differences: While 54.1 % of the male respondents wished for a different kind of democracy, it was 49.4 % among the female respondents. The highest percentage with the wish for a new kind of democracy has been found among the 18-25 year olds with 55.1 %, the lowest among the 46-55 year olds with 47.0 %. So, we can conclude that it is mostly the younger generations who wish for such change.



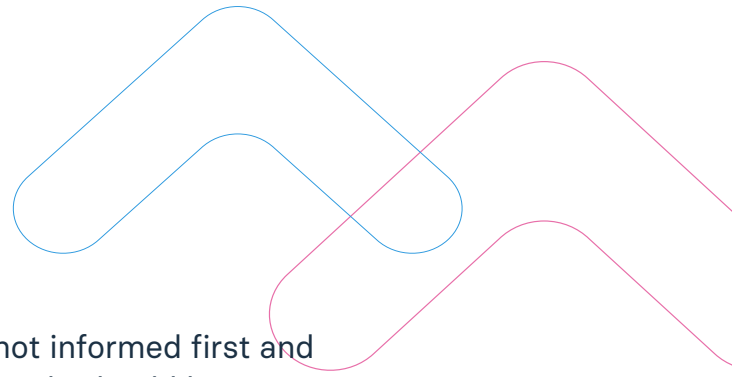
Moreover, a significant majority of respondents (58.2 %) wishes for more citizen participation. This wish shows a much higher percentage than the wish for more direct democracy with 26.2 %, or for a stronger parliament with only 9.8 %. Taking into account gender and age, the following differences have emerged: Among women, a significantly higher percentage, 12.1 %, expressed the wish for a stronger parliament, than among men, 7.3 %.

"I would like improvement in citizens' participation and politics in parliament."

As the comparison of the age groups shows, the general strong wish for more citizen participation increases further with age. So, it is with 47.1 % the lowest among the 18-25 year olds, and with 67.1 % the highest among the 56-81 year old Citizen Jurors. A stronger parliament is generally not ranked highly, but mostly preferred among the group of 28-25 years, 17.2 %, which is the highest percentage in comparison to the other age groups.

"Democracy needs more participation. Democracy needs engaged citizens."

Conclusion



“Democracy cannot work if the citizens are not informed first and involved then. In a word: empowered. More funds should be spent on civic education at school and [...] deliberative democracy (e.g. citizens’ assemblies).”

The ECoD pilot survey on the current state of democracy in Europe shows that most participants have a critical point of view when assessing the democratic situation in their country of residence. The majority sees democracy weakening, not strengthening. Significantly, male respondents show more scepticism than women herein, while women appear more critical not about democracy as such, but about elected politicians. In the ranking of the most important factors of a well-functioning democracy, our respondents have preferred the following three:

1. Freedom of speech and human rights,
2. Stable democratic institutions, and
3. Fair legal system.

A different kind of democracy was mostly wished for by the 18-25 year olds, and least among the 46-55 year olds. When it comes to concrete changes, a clear majority stands for more civic participation, a third for more direct democracy, while it is mostly the younger, not the older generations who prefer a stronger parliament. However, most of the respondents wish for more citizen participation and present a wide range of ideas and concrete suggestions. To sum up, the ECoD Citizen Jurors have a clear interest in turning the tide on democracy decline and being engaged in more participatory forms of democracy.

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.

Authors

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Helfried Carl is a Founder and Chief Political Strategist at the Innovation in Politics Institute in Vienna and the Founder of the European Capital of Democracy Initiative. In his diplomatic career, he served as Austria's Ambassador to Slovakia, Chief of Cabinet of the President of the Austrian Parliament, Political Councillor at the Austrian Mission to the UN in New York and as Deputy Head of Cabinet to the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. He received an M.A. in Political Science at the University of Salzburg, Austria and an M.A. in International Relations and International Politics at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. He is currently on leave from the Austrian foreign service.

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After his studies of media technology and design, Stefan Sindelar started his professional career in Journalism, communication, and IT. Entering politics in 2013 with a successful campaign for the Austrian and European Parliament, he served as Managing Director for the Austrian Liberal's Parliamentary Club and Party. His work experience spans the non-profit, start-up, business and political field. He has leadership skills in managing mixed and networked teams with a focus on developing disruptive products and growing innovative organisations.