debating europe

Focus Group Report

Ten Ideas to Regenerate Democracy

Fondazione CARIPLO
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friends of europe

European Young Leaders

STATE OF EUROPE

Introduction

After the Cold War, scholars were quick to proclaim the "end of history" and the triumph of liberal democracy over its ideological rivals. A wave of democracy washed across the world and, by 2002, the number of democracies outnumbered the number of autocracies for the first time in history.

In 2022, however, the tide seems to have turned. Liberal democracies around the world are now struggling to respond to increasing levels of disinformation, polarisation, erosion of political norms, lack of media plurality, and even full-blown democratic backsliding (including the undermining of civil rights and rule of law).

Debating Europe is an initiative of the think-tank Friends of Europe, and supports its work on co-designing a renewed social contract with citizens and other stakeholders; re-defining the obligations and responsibilities played by different actors within society, including citizens, the private sector, and governments.

We recognise that regenerating European democracy must be at the heart of any project aimed at negotiating a renewed social contract. Therefore, since 2011, Debating Europe has been asking citizens to send in comments discussing the state of European democracy, and we have taken those comments to policymakers and experts from across the EU to respond.

One such citizen comment was sent in from Eleni, arguing that democracy urgently needs to be updated for the 21st Century so that it "takes into account current social and political needs, trends, changes, developments… Today's democracy cannot and should not be the same as yesterday's."

To get a response, we took this comment to David Runciman, Professor of Politics at Cambridge University. He agreed with Eleni that we need to embrace new, future varieties of democracy:

"I think where we do go wrong is we take this democracy we've had for about 100 years (and, in most places, it's much younger than that) and we think that's what democracy is, this particular kind of politics; representative, party-based, primarily happens at the national level, runs through elections as its primary means of changing things, presupposes a certain kind of information space (so, things like newspapers and national television and radio stations have been very important to it). It is a twentieth century phenomenon, and we think this is what democracy is. And it's what democracy has been for most of our lifetimes, and it's been fantastic and has worked incredibly well in the places where it's worked. But the idea that that's all it can be is ridiculous.

It's true that democracy is thousands of years old, and even if it's got another century of life left in it, it's not going to be this. And yet, at the moment, because we are the generations who have had the best of that system, we are so – relatively speaking – prosperous and peaceful in our lives, and so well-off, basically, we are very reluctant to tinker with it and change it. We feel like we have to hold on to this thing or it's all going to fall apart. I think what we need to do is be much more open to the idea that that form of democracy is coming to the end of its life, and that doesn't mean the alternative is no democracy, anti-democracy, or authoritarianism. The alternative should be other forms of democracy, and we should think that the idea is more varied than we currently think it is.

So, not that democracy has to change to some new definition, but that it's going to be lots of things; democracy is going to have lots of different aspects to it, some much more radical local democracy, some more direct democracy, some parts of our lives might have less democracy in them, questions of international democracy, different kinds of political movements replacing political parties. That version of democracy that worked really well in about 1995 is not done yet, but it's close to being done, and we should be open to the thought that what comes next is not anti-democracy, what comes next is more varied democracy."

At Debating Europe, we have taken Professor Runciman's comment to heart. This is why, in partnership with Fondazione Cariplo, we organised a series of online focus groups with 40 young Europeans to discuss ways to regenerate European democracy. We compiled the top ten ideas from citizens and then discussed and debated them with our European Young Leaders (EYL) network at a summit held in Lisbon in September 2022. The EYL Summit is an annual event gathering together Friends of Europe's network of promising young entrepreneurs, activists, politicians, artists and thought leaders in discussion about the future of Europe.

This report synthesises the citizen-generated ideas in our online focus groups with the comments and reactions from European Young Leaders. We hope the ideas presented will help support the ongoing dialogue about new varieties of democracy.

Ten ideas to regenerate European Democracy

1 **Strengthen EU political transparency and accountability**

Close the revolving door between politics and industry; strengthen democratically-accountable institutions (e.g. give the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation); stop making key decisions via backroom deals (e.g. during the abortive Spitzenkandidaten process).

2 **Institutionalise and empower deliberative democracy**

Follow through on the promise to permanently embed citizens' assemblies into the EU policy-making process, and help support lesson-learning and good practices for the Europe-wide adoption of deliberative mini-publics by municipal, local, and national governments. Do not create "talking shops"; deliberative processes should give genuine decision-making, agenda-setting or even budgeting power to citizens.

3 **Ensure the Conference on the Future of Europe delivers**

Deliver on the promise made to European citizens by implementing the proposals and measures recommended by the Conference on the Future of Europe, even if it means treaty change.

4 **Improve and update European civic education**

Just as governments aim to strengthen ties between the education sector and business, they should also aim to strengthen ties between the education sector (beyond just higher education) and politics. Civic education for school children across Europe should be compulsory, with curricula updated for the 21st century, covering online media literacy, democracy education (including EU democracy), and offering practical pathways for engaged new citizens to get involved politically and participate.

5 **Embrace Europe's role as a big tech "regulatory superpower"**

As big tech platforms throw up new political challenges – such as hyper-polarisation, radicalisation, and disinformation - Europe should become a digital "regulatory superpower" to safeguard democracy. European legislation such as the GDPR, the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) all demonstrate how Europe can lead the world in sensible big tech regulation to support healthier democracies.

Ten ideas to regenerate European Democracy

6 **Promote new varieties of democracy across all areas of life**

A democratic mindset should be encouraged beyond the political sphere and across other areas of life, such as in housing cooperatives, workplace democracy and worker-owned co-operatives. These experiments can be promoted and facilitated by legal and policy support from governments and the European Union, and can co-exist alongside traditional structures rather than replacing them.

7 **Unlock greater diversity, equity and inclusion in politics**

Institutions and political parties should commit to binding and ambitious diversity targets and strategies, so that European politics more accurately reflects European society.

8 **Do not compromise on European values and rule of law**

EU Member States which continue to undermine civil and political rights should be sanctioned financially and have their EU voting rights suspended.

9 **Expand democratic suffrage and access**

Lower the voting age to 16 for all elections, and give European citizens the right to vote in national elections in any EU Member State where they are resident.

10 **Innovate and experiment with digital democracy**

Why is it we trust electronic banking yet we don't trust electronic voting? Democratic institutions should constantly be exploring new technologies such as e-voting, blockchain, and Artificial Intelligence (while refusing to compromise on ethical algorithms, accessibility, security, privacy, and data protection).

Methodology
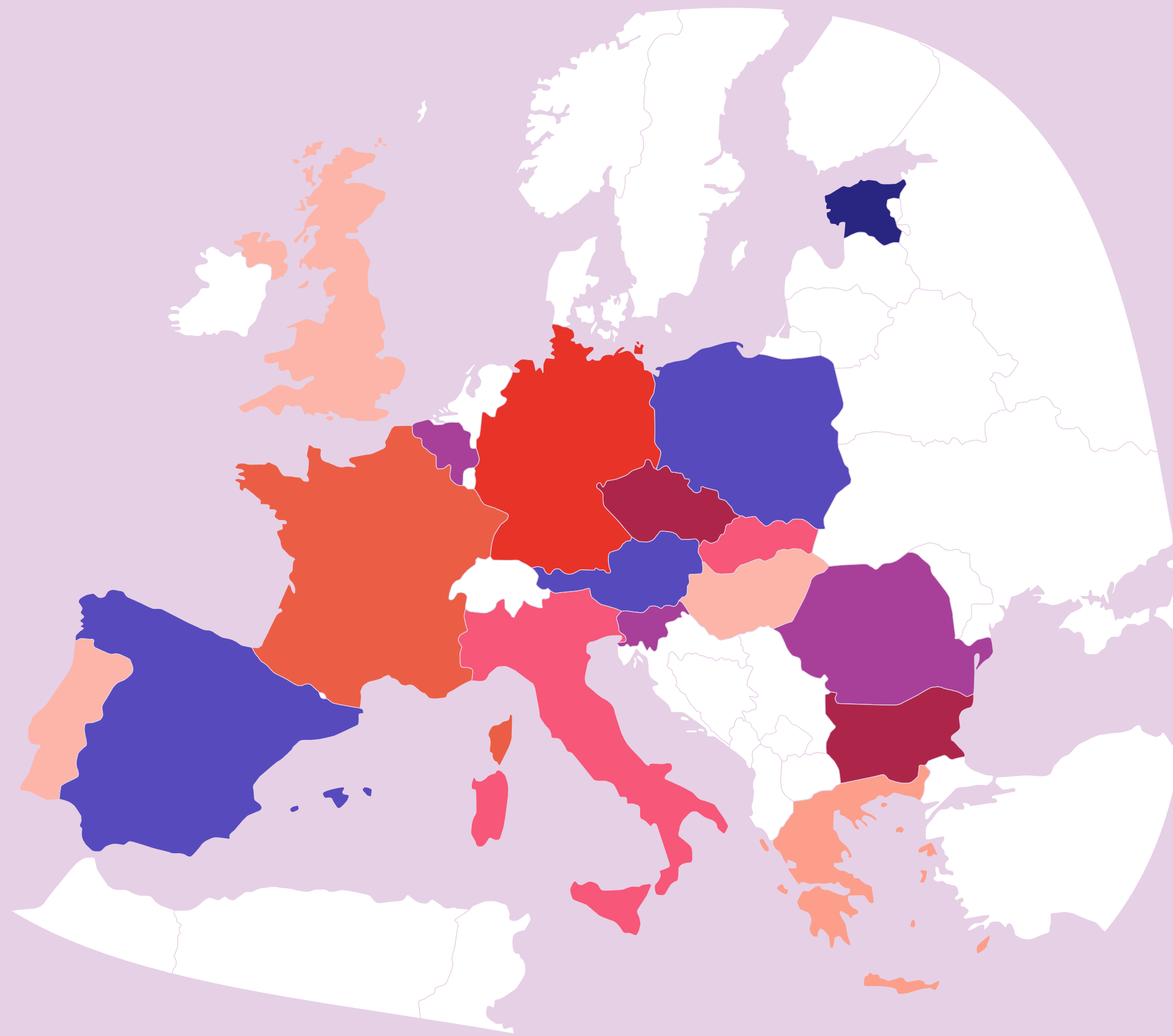
Conducted from May to June 2022, with 40 young participants from across Europe, the focus group study explored ways to regenerate democracy.

The study involved participants recruited from Debating Europe's community of citizens, from 17 different countries (Germany, France, Poland, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, Belgium, Slovenia, Czechia, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Austria, The United Kingdom and Estonia).

The focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted for one hour. All focus groups were conducted in English. Participants were incentivised to participate via gift vouchers. Focus groups were led by an experienced moderator and ranged from 4 to 10 participants each. We aimed for a high level of homogeneity in terms of focus group composition so participants felt more comfortable sharing and expressing themselves. Therefore, we tended to group participants in focus groups according to gender and geographic region (Central & Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Southern Europe, and Western Europe). However,

we did not aim for complete homogeneity within focus groups as different perspectives can also help provoke discussion and unexpected contributions.

In September 2022, Friends of Europe held its annual European Young Leaders (EYL40) seminar in Lisbon. This event gathered together promising young entrepreneurs, activists, politicians, artists and thought leaders in discussion about the future of Europe. As part of our work to ensure that the output from our focus group project contributes to an ongoing dialogue between stakeholders about the future of democracy, we presented a preliminary copy of this report at the (bi-)annual EYL 40 summit in Lisbon. We asked them to react to the idea they found most engaging, and their discussion is summarised below alongside the citizen output. During their discussion, EYLs engaged with some ideas more than others (particularly the ideas they felt most engaging and politically feasible, such as embedding deliberative and participatory processes into traditional policymaking).

Report

1. Strengthen EU political transparency and accountability

This was, by far, the most popular suggestion from citizens participating in our focus groups. Issues related to lobbying, transparency, and accountability in EU politics were among the top concern of almost all focus group participants. In contrast, European Young Leaders did not spend nearly as much time discussing this idea as citizens.

Popular suggestions from focus group participants included taking further steps to close the "revolving door" between politics and industry, whereby senior policymakers are recruited into private sector lobbying positions after leaving office, potentially creating a conflict of interest.

In a May 2022 report, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly set out how the rules could be further tightened to close the "revolving door", and these suggestions should be adopted in full by the EU Commission. However, following the "Uber Files" lobbying scandal in July 2022, the Ombudsman went further and suggested a European-wide directive to tighten rules at both Member State and EU level: "Because, as you see with the Uber issue, it wasn't just the EU administration that was being lobbied, it was member states. Different member states were being, shall we say, picked off… It's not enough to make sure that lobbying is managed within the Commission. It also has to be managed at [European] Council level, and Member-State level."

Participants in our focus group series also wanted to strengthen democratically-accountable institutions within the European Union, in particular the directly-elected European Parliament vis-à-vis the Commission (e.g. to give the European Parliament the right to initiate legislation). This would require treaty change, but it is also a suggestion of the Conference on the Future of Europe

There was also much confusion among focus group participants around the abortive Spitzenkandidaten process, which was seen by some as a betrayed promise. Backroom horse-trading between governments does not strengthen citizens' sense of accountability and transparency.

> " I think we should reform the election system of Europe. There's a lack of transparency. If we see Ursula von der Leyen as the Commission President, nobody voted for her. I remember Manfred Weber campaigning, and… and I don't remember the other guy. Anybody, nobody voted for her.
>
> — Niels, Germany, 35

> " Political leaders don't really take the decisions, in fact big corporations and lobby agencies do.
>
> — Karan, Spain, 25

> " It feels like the people that I'm voting for are not necessarily the people that will be leading me. That transition is not really that transparent. I know the people that I'm electing from my Member State, but I don't know the people at a higher role, in terms of governing the European Union or the European Parliament.
>
> — Mariana, Portugal, 21

> " Certainly, there is a democratic deficit on a European level. It's quite cynical that the European Parliament is the only institution where members of the EU can vote and send representetives, yet they are restricted in the impact of their decision making.
>
> — Mark, Hungary, 26

2. Institutionalise and empower deliberative democracy

This was, by far, the most interesting idea for our European Young Leaders at the summit in Lisbon. There was a widespread feeling among young leaders that citizen involvement in policymaking was now inevitable (whether , and the question was how to formalise and institutionalise that involvement. If policymaking is not seriously opened up to participative and deliberative processes, then EYLs pointed out that citizens will "come in through the window anyway" (as the gilet jaune protests in France made clear).

Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that the European Commission follows through on the promise to permanently embed citizens' assemblies into the EU policy-making process, and help support lesson-learning and good practices for the Europe-wide adoption of deliberative mini-publics by municipal, local, and national governments. This should not create "talking shops"; deliberative processes should give genuine decision-making, agenda-setting or even budgeting power to citizens.

In December 2021, the OECD published a policy paper on "Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy". These recommendations should be supported and promoted at all levels of European democracy, from local to EU-wide, building deliberative and participatory spaces into decision-making processes and normalising them as part of European citizenship.

European Young Leaders generally welcomed the idea of consultative assemblies, where citizens selected at random can feed into policy-making. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly and local consultative bodies in Belgium's German-speaking region were held up as examples, but the EU's Conference on the Future of Europe was criticised as not truly empowering citizens representatives and civil-society bodies.

Yves Dejaeghere, Executive Director of the Federation for Innovation in Democracy (FIDE), speaking as a guest at the European Young Leader seminar, argued that democracies need more direct methods to engage citizens beyond the holding of elections every few years. "You cannot make policy anymore without citizens," he contended. "Our current system, with purely electoral politics, is too fragile. It is politics hopping on one leg. We should upgrade our capacity on how to engage citizens."

> **We should promote deliberative democracy as a solution, where people get together and they deliberate about complex issues and propose solutions jointly.**
>
> **— Noémie, France, 27**

> **I would like to see initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe on a local or regional level.**
>
> **— Vasili, Greece, 40**

3. Ensure the Conference on the Future of Europe delivers

The Conference on the Future of Europe was an ambition, pan-European exercise in deliberative democracy. Now it's time to deliver on the promise made to European citizens by implementing the proposals and measures recommended by the Conference, even if it means treaty change.

How can citizens have trust in European democracy is the EU doesn't deliver on this promise? Many participants expressed scepticism that the Conference would amount to anything substantial, but would be happy to be proved wrong.

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I'm totally on board for initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe, but I'm doubtful as to whether politicians will implement suggestions by the people.

— Karan, Spain, 25

Maybe the Conference on the Future of Europe should become permanent?

— Yordan, Bulgaria, 30

It's important to improve the connection between citizens of all different social backgrounds and policy-makers, like it has happened with the Conference on the Future of Europe – but it's important to use local languages and be transparent.

— Luca, Italy, 30

4. Improve and update European civic education

Just as education systems need to strengthen connections with businesses in order to prepare workers with skills and experience relevant for the labour market, education systems also need to strengthen connections with political systems in order to prepare citizens with the skills they need to engage with democracy.

As well as encouraging critical thinking, media literacy, and civic education regarding local, national, and European political systems; schools should promote opportunities and pathways into participation, leadership, and decision-making both within schools themselves as well as broader local government and communities.

The EU has limited competence in education policy. Nevertheless, the EU can play a role in holding European governments to their existing commitments (such as the 2010 Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education), as well as encouraging benchmarking and the sharing of "best practices", and promotion of pilot schemes. Furthermore, the EU could prioritise and promote citizenship education within the framework of the European Education Area the Commission is committed to building by 2025.

"

We should start in schools with teaching democracy, voting opportunities, and even beyond voting, being politically active and promoting media literacy. For example, a teacher I know shared with me that the kids she teaches know how to use TikTok and Instagram, but they don't know how to Google basic information.

— Muriel, Germany, 28

We need more programmes like Erasmus, already in primary and secondary schools.

— Jules, France, 31

European countries should be educating people regarding politics, and also empowering them to be participative.

— Mariana, Portugal, 21

5. Embrace Europe's role as a big tech "regulatory superpower"

As big tech platforms throw up new political challenges – such as hyper-polarisation, radicalisation, and disinformation - Europe should become a digital "regulatory superpower" to safeguard democracy. European legislation such as the GDPR, the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) all demonstrate how Europe can lead the world in sensible big tech regulation to support healthier democracies.
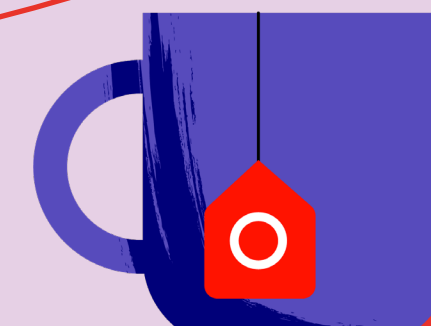
Participants felt generally very positive about the role Europe has played in regulating big tech so far. In fact, several participants said they felt the EU is a world leader when it comes to regulating social media platforms, protecting online privacy and preventing unethical use of data, and that where Europe lead many regulatory regimes would inevitably follow.

> I think social media companies should really do better in filtering and preventing disinformation.
>
> — Cristina, Spain, 24

> We have to fight against fake news. I think this is one of the most important challenges for the next generation.
>
> — Niels, Germany, 35

> People live in information bubbles that are untangled from reality. They can't access other types of information. So, algorithms and social media are also responsible for threats to democracy.
>
> — Muriel, Germany, 28

> Fake news, algorithms, etc., lead people to simple populist solutions. And that's how populist parties get into power.
>
> — Marta, Poland, 38

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6. Promote new varieties of democracy across all areas of life

A democratic mindset should be encouraged beyond the political sphere and across other areas of life, such as in housing cooperatives, workplace democracy and worker-owned co-operatives. These experiments can be promoted and facilitated by legal and policy support from governments and the European Union, and can co-exist alongside traditional structures rather than replacing them.

This does not necessarily need to take the form of radical economic democracy. Instead, it could be achieved by promoting and supporting the growth of alternatives allowing for greater democratisation of traditionally non-democratic spaces. Promoting through policy, for example, different ownership models for companies, or offering right of first refusal to workers to buy their company if it is being closed down or put up for sale.

> **I think multinational companies should be democratised in order to achieve actual change.**
>
> **— Arek, Poland, 31**
>
> **I feel we should talk more about the benefits of democracy in the public sphere. For example, adopting democratic systems, procedures, and structures in private companies too. And to get people more involved.**
>
> **— Felix, Germany, 29**

7. Unlock greater diversity, equity and inclusion in politics

Institutions and political parties should commit to binding and ambitious diversity targets and strategies, so that European politics more accurately reflects European society, All-women shortlists or dual leadership of political parties (with male and female "co-leaders") have been shown to effective in guaranteeing gender parity, and similar approaches could be used to promote greater ethnic minority and LGBT+ diversity, equity and inclusion as well.

Many participants also argued that economic inequalities are a barrier to political engagement, and a healthy democracy should not have a growing gap between the richest and poorest in society.

> **Questions of age and identity – race, ethnicity, religion – should not be forgotten. If governments manage to bring down these invisible walls, we will be a step ahead.**
>
> **— Ana, Romania, 27**

> **The system is failing to fulfil people's needs. We measure wealth with GDP but we don't look at Gini index, for example. You need to have a system that works for everyone, with justice and equality of opportunities to fix democracy.**
>
> **— Luca, Italy, 30**
>
> **Over the years people have seen cuts to the resources available to them, and they're finding it hard to fully participate in political activities.**
>
> **— Jules, France, 31**
>
> **My personal perspective is that, for a woman, and especially a young woman, it's very hard to be listened to. I have a little story to tell – when I was doing my internship here in Milano, I was working in a school and I was in charge of going into high-school classes to present some topics, such as human rights, establishment of democracy pillars, and so on. And every time I wanted to set a topic it was set by a committee that was made only by men, and they had to approve my topics, and if they didn't approve them they never told me why my topic was not suitable for a class. It irritated me a lot, and I think it's very sad.**
>
> **— Mariavittoria, Italy, 23**

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8. Do not compromise on European values and rule of law

EU Member States which continue to undermine civil and political rights should be sanctioned financially and have their EU voting rights suspended. The latter is possible under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which can be triggered in response to a country seriously and persistently breaching the principles on which the EU is founded.

The European Parliament has repeatedly called for Article 7 proceedings against Hungary to be advanced, but EU member states have been reluctant to move forwards (likely because of the absence of unanimity in the European Council). Yet young participants from Hungary and Poland felt particularly frustrated with the perceived impotence of the EU in this area.

In particular, participants mentioned the EU's pandemic recovery funds and the economic stimulus in response to the Ukraine war, and they hoped that both would be tied strongly to rule-of-law conditionality.

> **I think there is an issue with EU funds being given to countries like Hungary that are anti-democratic.**
>
> **— András, Hungary, 29**

> **The problem of rule of law in Poland and Hungary is not exclusively an issue in Poland and Hungary; dismantling checks and balances can happen everywhere – the US is an example.**
>
> **— Vasili, Greece, 40**

RULES

9. Expand democratic suffrage and access

Lower the voting age to 16 for all elections, and give European citizens the right to vote in national elections in any EU Member State where they are resident. As Europe's population ages, the relative political power of young people decreases, locking them out of decision-making that will impact their futures. Expanding democratic suffrage to 16-year-olds is a (modest) way to counterbalance that trend and keep young people engaged with democracy. Austria's experience of lowering the voting age to 16 at all political levels could be a model for other EU countries (and for European Parliament elections).

> **Maybe voting should be possible from an earlier age, 16 perhaps.**
>
> **— Yordan, Bulgaria, 30**
>
> **I would like to have more participation across borders and transnational political parties.**
>
> **— Paolo, Italy, 36**

10. Innovate and experiment with digital democracy

This was a moderately popular suggestion among participants in our focus group series, but was received much more coolly by European Young Leaders in Lisbon.

The argument in favour asks: Why is it we trust electronic banking yet we don't trust electronic voting? Democratic institutions should constantly be exploring new technologies such as e-voting, blockchain, and Artificial Intelligence (while refusing to compromise on ethical algorithms, accessibility, security, privacy, and data protection).

Nevertheless, Friends of Europe's European Young Leaders (EYLs) sounded a note of caution in response to this idea from citizens. The role of digital instruments in engaging the public in politics has many limitations, EYLs agreed. "Digital is a tool, it has limitations, and we have to be aware that it is not a panacea," said Yves Dejaeghere, Executive Director of the Federation for Innovation in Democracy (FIDE). "Standing on its own, it can actually create more inequalities."

> **I'd like to have more referendums across Europe, and done in a digital way online.**
>
> **— Tristan, France, 24**
>
> **Maybe AI could be used to help people to participate in democracy? Like, it could quickly sort through opinions and ideas from an entire population?**
>
> **— Jose, Spain, 28**
>
> **There are some tools that you can find to check if the party you are voting for is the correct one, based on their policies. There should be information spread about that.**
>
> **— Julio, Spain, 39**

Conclusions

Citizens, overwhelmingly, were concerned with trans-parency and accountability. Meanwhile, Friends of Europe's European Young Leader (EYL) network were very excited by the idea of institutionalising new methods of deliberative and participatory democracy within tradition-al policymaking processes. Bringing these two priorities together could be mutually-supportive; by giving citizens greater deliberative and participatory input into the formal policymaking process, it may also boost legitimacy and make politics seem less opaque and "out of touch".

However, there were clear differences between EYLs (who included young politicians, civil society organisers, and activists) and focus group participants when it came to the role of digital technologies in democracy. Several young citizens (particularly the most tech-literate of our participants) were gushing about the possibility of apply-ing "Artificial Intelligence" or "blockchain" to democratic processes to give greater control to citizens. EYLs were much more cautious, concerned about what the reality might look like behind the hype (particularly in terms of social exclusion and a growing digital divide).

In general, focus group participants were much more relaxed about experimenting with democracy, whereas EYLs were more likely to be cautious. EYLs seemed to want to apply some of the existing good practices (particularly in local deliberative and participatory democracy) at national and EU level first, before entertaining digital solutions (even with more established technology, such as e-voting).

Citizens brought up a range of ideas (such as lowering the voting age to 16) that EYLs didn't engage with at all. Many citizen suggestions, during discussions, were framed more as challenges or demands than solutions. For example, many participants articulated demands for greater diversity, equity and inclusion in politics. EYLs, in contrast, went into much greater policy detail and focused on what they thought were the most "politically achievable" suggestions. This perhaps speaks to a broader divide, between pragmatism and detail on the one hand, and idealism and vision on the other. It is important to always remain pragmatic, but citizens expressed frustration at an abundance of caution (arguing that it had led us to a situation nobody was happy with) and encouraged a much more experimental attitude from policymakers when it comes to the challenges facing democracy.

The 21st century is being marked by a growing rivalry between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, yet challenges such as climate change require an international solution. Complex problems will require complex solutions, yet complexity itself can be opaque and make citizens feel ignored or distant. New varieties of democracy are needed to bring citizens in to help meet these challenges. We trust that this report engages with these issues, and will be the launchpad for further dialogue about the future of European democracy.

About Debating Europe

The platform that lets you discuss YOUR ideas with Europe's leaders.

Debating Europe is an initiative of Friends of Europe, the Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking Europe.

We want to encourage a genuine conversation between European politicians and the citizens they serve – and that means taking YOUR questions, comments and ideas directly to policymakers for them to respond.

Debating Europe was launched in 2011, and has taken a bottom-up approach from the beginning, with citizens very much in the driving seat of the debate, asking the questions they want answered and putting forward their opinions for politicians and thought-leaders from across the EU to react to.

Since launch, we've interviewed more than 3,000 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the 200,000 comments sent in to us from citizens online, including from over 271,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter.

In 2021, we launched **Debating Africa**, adopting the same approach and encouraging a pan-African debate on shared challenges such as climate change, security, trade and development. We believe international challenges require international dialogue, which is why both Debating Europe and Debating Africa frequently co-operate on joint projects to bring voices from both continents to the table with politicians and experts.

STATE OF EUROPE

This Focus Group report will be formally presented at the 2022 State of Europe Festival of Politics and Ideas. This high-level event annually gathers 200+ influential figures from more than 40 countries to brainstorm on the future of Europe, identify out-of-the-box approaches to rising challenges, and collectively produce new recommendations for overcoming them. The State of Europe roundtable involves its highlevel network, including European Young Leaders, in an interactive and inclusive brainstorm – a new way of working to generate new ideas for a new era.