

# DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS – A CURE FOR DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS?



The trend of decline in representative forms of democratic governance is manifested in the decrease in voter turnout and distrust in political institutions. Recent statistics from the European Union and its member states indicate that only 34% of citizens trust their national governments or parliament<sup>1</sup>. These challenges of democracy have inspired a wide variety of democratic innovations, which enhance public engagement in political decision-making, increase dialogue among groups and individuals, and promote sustainable decision-making. Democratic innovations can enable countries to face global societal challenges, such as economic inequality and climate change, in a democratic, fair and just manner.

**This document aims to:**

- 1) Describe the current challenges facing democracy
- 2) Demonstrate how democratic innovations can help to meet these challenges



**R**ecent reports of the state of democracy indicate that there has been a decline even in many well-established democracies<sup>2</sup>. The threats to democracy come from various directions<sup>3</sup>. Economic transformations result in growing inequalities between winners and losers. Societal groups differ from each other not just in terms of their level of income or education, but also in terms of their political activity. The majority of citizens feel that they have no opportunities to influence decision-making through traditional channels, including electoral voting<sup>4</sup>.

The growing social divisions surface in the realm of politics. Citizens may become increasingly polarized in their political views<sup>5</sup>. The rise of social media further enhances polarization harassment, election interference and the spread of misinformation.

Future generations also have a stake in current policies, since they will bear their long-term consequences. Climate change poses real threats to the well-being of future generations. In order to acknowledge the needs of future generations, we should assess the long-term consequences of current decisions both for the environment and for those who come after us.

This document lists some solutions to answer the challenges currently facing democracy. The solutions are collected from the results of the *Changing Society and Active Citizenship* (CITIZEN, 2017–2022) research programme funded by the Strategic Research Council of Finland (SRC).



# What are democratic innovations?

Democracy and democratic governance practices have developed over time, but democratic renewal has not been sufficient in responding to the current global challenges and democratic deficits. Democratic innovations refer to new practices that aim to complement traditional electoral forms of governance. They allow citizens to engage directly in processes of agenda-setting, collective will-formation and decision-making. Within recent years, some innovations have increasingly gained ground and become internationally recognised. Some examples of democratic innovations are listed below:

## PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING



Participatory budgeting allows citizens to discuss and decide on the spending of a part of the city's budget. There is no single form of participatory budgeting, but varying practices are used in different countries and cities. A common practice is to have

citizens suggest ideas for developing the city, which are then refined by both professionals and fellow citizens into viable proposals. Finally, the proposals are voted on and the city implements the most popular ones.

## DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS



In deliberative mini-publics, a randomly selected group of citizens receives expert information, deliberates, and prepares statements or proposals for decision-makers. There are different forms of

deliberative mini-publics, such as Citizens' Juries, Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative Opinion Polls, and they may play different roles in policy-making.

## COLLABORATIVE METHODS



In collaborative processes, representatives of the government, non-governmental organisations, and businesses seek solutions to problems together. Collaborative methods ensure that those who are most affected by the decisions will be involved

in making them. The processes are structured as negotiations rather than a hearings, giving the stakeholders equal, active and responsible roles in finding solutions.

## CROWDSOURCING



Crowdsourcing refers to methods that aim to involve a large audience online. When used in public policy-making, crowdsourcing can enhance public engagement and knowledge discovery for policies.

Crowdsourcing is often used as part of a law-making process by giving ordinary citizens a chance to become part of the knowledge-based creation for law reform.

## CITIZENS' INITIATIVES



In citizens' initiatives, citizens can bring a new issue to the political agenda-setting by collecting a certain number of signatures in support of a policy proposal. The proposal is then either submitted to a popular

vote or dealt with in parliament (the so-called agenda initiative). For example, in Finland, Parliament is obliged to deal with an initiative supported by 50 000 citizens.

# CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

## Inequalities and gaps in civic participation

Inequalities in wealth and incomes have been on the increase in most countries<sup>6</sup>. Globalisation and economic restructuring increase societal divisions between winners and losers, socioeconomic groups, urban and rural areas and within cities<sup>7</sup>. Occupations are divided into high- and low-skilled jobs, and the middle classes face insecurity and risk of downward mobility. Many people are in precarious work situations or encounter racism. The growing inequalities are also reflected in the social influence of groups, as the strongest groups have a much better chance of getting their voices heard during decision-making. The well-to-do citizens who have benefited from globalisation are active voters and are also well connected with policy-makers, engaging actively in lobbying and law drafting<sup>8</sup>.



## Gaps in civic participation can be reduced with solutions that allow different groups and individuals to be heard in collective public decisions.

**Participatory budgeting** provides a concrete way for citizens to decide on collective funds and to influence the development of their neighbourhood. In Finland, many municipalities have experimented with participatory budgeting in recent years<sup>9</sup>. In Helsinki, participatory budgeting was applied in 2018-2020 for the first time on a large scale. Independent researchers evaluated the process and provided important insights after the first round<sup>10</sup>. The second round of the OmaStadi participatory budgeting is already underway.

**Deliberative mini-publics** can bring new viewpoints to decision-making by involving citizens that do not usually participate in collective decision-making. Stratified random sampling and specific quotas can be used to ensure the representation of marginalized groups. Mini-publics have been used at different levels of government; for example, in the preparation of Finland's medium-term climate change policy plan, the regional strategy of Satakunta, and the zoning master plan in the City of Turku.

**Crowdsourcing** is a highly accessible method for citizens to influence law drafting, and it increases the inclusivity and transparency of the process<sup>11</sup>. Although the group of participants may not represent the wider public in a statistical sense, it can still reflect a diverse array of opinions on relevant issues<sup>12</sup>.



**Collaborative methods** increase direct interaction between government and stakeholders. Shared problem-solving may break the business-as-usual routines of planning and decision-making. In Finland, collaborative methods have been used at both local and national level, in the City of Jyväskylä Strategic Forest Programme and the preparation of the Money Collection Act, for example.

**Citizen's initiatives** allow citizens to influence the shaping of political agenda. In Finland, the collection of signatures takes place mainly on the online platform Kansalaisaloite.fi, provided by the government, which lowers the threshold of making an initiative. Moreover, the possibility of online participation has activated otherwise politically passive groups, such as young people<sup>13</sup>.

## Polarisation

Across the world, there has recently been public concern about polarisation, which means that people's opinions are becoming increasingly divided and extreme<sup>14</sup>. Polarisation may also be affective in character, which means negative attitudes and lack of trust in those on “the other side”<sup>15</sup>. Polarisation is related to the tendency to discuss politics in social “bubbles”, in which outsiders' views are disregarded and more radical voices become louder.

The various social media aggravate polarisation, since they provide platforms where people can easily find others who share their political views. Although the social media provide platforms for public engagement, they can also function as a source of hate speech and targeted harassment, for example during elections. The goals of election interference are to make it difficult for candidates to run their campaigns and to reduce citizens' willingness to vote.

**Polarisation can be alleviated by bringing different people and groups together in order to hear out others in a constructive and respectful environment.**

**Deliberative mini-publics** can reduce mistrust towards public actors and those on “the other side”. More importantly, when used as trusted sources of information for the wider public, they can alleviate the polarisation. For example, a Citizens' Jury was organized in the municipality of Korsholm in 2019 to produce trustworthy information for voters in a polarising referendum on a municipal merger. The jury statement included arguments for and against the merger and was mailed to all voters. A study suggests that reading the statement increased voters' trust in all public actors, including those who were regarded to be on “the other side” on the merger issue<sup>15</sup>.

**Collaborative methods** can serve as tools for addressing conflicts early in planning and decision-making processes. Methods such as engaging stakeholders in process design and neutral facilitation increase trust and produce more acceptable results. For example, these methods have been utilised to update the wolf population management plan. In a situation in which the views had become polarised, collaborative methods provided a way to create a dialogue between the different groups and to reconcile conflicting interests<sup>16</sup>.

**Constructive journalism** encourages constructive dialogue and creates a public space that is safe for participants for sharing different perspectives. Constructive journalism removes unnecessary confrontation, introduces different voices, and builds interaction with the public<sup>17</sup>. It can create a dialogue between the groups and make them more tolerant of other people's opposing views.



## Short-sighted decision-making

Political decisions are often made for the short term, without consideration of their long-term effects. Relatively short election cycles and uncertain information regarding long-term effects contribute to the problem of political short-termism<sup>18</sup>. The economic impacts of decisions are often more tangible, whereas social and ecological impacts become evident much later, often only in the lives of future generations. Pressure from a hectic media environment also results in short-sighted decision-making.

**The short-sightedness of decision-making can be reduced by increased consideration of the long-term effects of decisions. Information-based decision-making can help consider the consequences of current decisions for future generations. For example, in the field of environmental policy, expert knowledge on policy choices can enhance and support long-term policy strategies<sup>19</sup>. However, the democratic legitimacy of expert-driven decision-making can be challenged. This calls for methods that attach more importance to public deliberation and collaboration.**

**Collaborative methods** allow different stakeholders to produce solutions together, laying the groundwork for long-term cooperation and improving joint monitoring of long-term consequences. For example, collaborative methods can advance agreement-based collaboration in water management and community development. They can help stakeholders to understand the needs of others and to identify shared interests.

**Deliberative mini-publics** can focus attention on the long-term effects of decisions. For example, the Citizens' Jury on Climate Actions reviewed the effectiveness and fairness of the policy actions proposed in the Government's Medium-Term Climate Change Policy Plan and submitted its proposals to policy-makers<sup>20</sup>. The Citizens' Panel in the City of Turku<sup>21</sup> and the Citizens' Assembly in the Satakunta region in Finland engaged citizens in long-term planning. A study of the latter shows that deliberation can increase participants' readiness to consider future generations' viewpoints and to contribute to their well-being<sup>22</sup>.

**Cooperative bodies**, such as parliamentary working groups and committees, that act across electoral terms, partisan interests and governmental branches, can bring together different political interests and enable shared agreement and commitment to decisions beyond a single electoral term<sup>19</sup>. The Finnish Committee for the Future is a unique parliamentary institution generating dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. Since its establishment in 1993, it has made an effort to increase far-sightedness in parliamentary work and to look beyond electoral intervals<sup>23</sup>.



## CONCLUSION

**This document introduces some possible solutions to the challenges facing liberal democracy. The ability of liberal democracies to apply new processes and practices for participation is crucial for mitigating the democratic deficit. Democratic innovations are not, however, a fix for solutions to all the many ongoing social, economic and environmental challenges. With the right choice of tools and application processes, they can make decision-making more inclusive and just. The next step is to institutionalize democratic innovations as a part of the existing forms of representative democracy. This calls for cooperation between research and policy-making communities, along with open democratic debate with citizens.**

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<sup>a</sup>Participation in Long-Term Decision-Making (PALO)

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<sup>c</sup>Collaborative remedies for fragmented societies – facilitating the collaborative turn in environmental decision-making (CORE)

<sup>d</sup> PROGRAMME: Changing Society and Active Citizenship (CITIZEN)

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