



LESSONS FOR EUROPE FROM GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

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Democratic politics has changed in some important ways over the last century, from expanding the vote to embracing more transparent political discussions. But by and large, democracy remains wedded to a political model that has evolved very little at its core. Voting remains the most common way for citizens to have their say on the decisions that affect their day-to-day lives.

At the same time, democratic governments' failures to deliver on their promises and meet citizens' expectations have resulted in growing dissatisfaction with traditional representative institutions.¹ The 2024 Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that 44% of people in OECD countries had low or no trust in their national government.²

However, when citizens feel that they are involved in decisions and their views are taken into account, trust in institutions can be restored.³ That is why it is so important for democracies to innovate and give citizens the means with which to engage meaningfully with politics beyond the ballot box. While increased participation is crucial, it is not a solution to all challenges of democratic malaise. To achieve renewal, democracies need to diversify their approaches and go beyond increasing citizen participation.

Since 2021, the European Democracy Hub's Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations project has been examining innovative initiatives across the globe.⁴ Within the project, we analysed over 35 examples of innovations, which we compiled into 13 case studies. These case studies provide a basis for understanding how innovations that have developed outside Europe can serve as a source of inspiration to create, adapt, and use such ideas within Europe. Our research covered citizen assemblies, civic tech initiatives, govtech initiatives, and projects that base their ethos on traditional, indigenous practices. The initiatives are

either run by civil society organisations (CSOs) or piloted and implemented by national or local governments, with both benefits and pitfalls in each approach.

This final reflection paper draws on this work and the stakeholder dialogues carried out under the project. The paper explores some of the shortcomings of Europe's current democratic innovation model and puts forward a set of lessons from innovations outside Europe that can inspire democratic renewal in a European context.

Democratic innovations and democratic renewal

Democratic innovations have been defined by political scientists Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar as "processes or institutions developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence".⁵ Such innovations are part of a wider trend of fostering democratic renewal, which focuses on creating spaces for citizens to engage with complex policy issues, deliberate, and find common ground.⁶ Broadly speaking, the innovations that we explored in the framework of the project can be described as: first, efforts to extend democratic participation within existing consultative processes; second, more open forms of participation that involve relatively large numbers of citizens; and, third, attempts to connect citizens to other political actors.⁷

¹ Adam Przeworski, "Who Decides What Is Democratic?", *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2014): 5–16, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/930423/pdf>.

² "OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results", Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 10 July 2024, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/07/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results_eeb36452.html.

³ "OECD Survey", OECD.

⁴ "Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations", European Democracy Hub, 2022, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/projects/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations/>.

⁵ Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar (eds.), *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019).

⁶ Claudia Chwalisz, "A Movement That's Quietly Reshaping Democracy For The Better", *Noema*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.noemamag.com/a-movement-thats-quietly-reshaping-democracy-for-the-better/>.

⁷ Richard Youngs and Ken Godfrey, "Democratic Innovations From Around the World: Lessons for the West", *Carnegie Europe*, 3 November 2022, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/11/03/democratic-innovations-from-around-world-lessons-for-west-pub-88248>.

Since 2010, democratic innovations have been particularly popular with local and national governments as a means to increase deliberation and involve citizens in decision-making processes.⁸ More and more European governments have started to use such innovations in the last few years. Our case studies show that there has been similar experimentation in other parts of the world, particularly Latin America and Asia, where these innovations work at local, regional, and national levels, with varying degrees of success. The project was an opportunity to reflect on innovations both outside the West and in Europe, draw comparisons, and focus on possible learnings across the different innovation ecosystems.

At the European level, innovations have been recognised for their ability to help reinvigorate democracy. The European Union (EU) pioneered initiatives such as the Conference on the Future of Europe and subsequent citizens' panels. The European Commission acknowledged the importance of these innovations in its 2023 recommendations on the participation of citizens and CSOs in public policymaking.⁹ However, despite growing recognition of the added benefits of democratic innovations, these initiatives are sometimes slow to get going, clunky, and unable to meet the expectations of citizens and policymakers alike.¹⁰

Moving beyond the current model

In Europe, democratic innovations have often taken the shape of initiatives in which citizens play a consultative role. Governments have pushed for sortition-based deliberative participative initiatives, particularly citizen assemblies, juries, and panels.¹¹ Innovations can have transformative power by bringing together government representatives, citizens, and CSOs through creative exercises that help design and co-create policies. However, these initiatives are still not widespread, and only in a few places have they managed to become

a regular democratic practice. Institutionalised innovations, such as multi-level policymaking in Brazil and Uruguay, show that a multi-stakeholder approach is possible, although it is not devoid of its own challenges and difficulties.¹²

Citizen assemblies have been used in several European countries, such as France and the United Kingdom (UK), among others, to help design policy responses on issues including climate change, healthcare, and social inequality. These are often one-off exercises, in which there is no back-and-forth exchange between politicians and citizens. There is always a risk that if governments fail to follow up on the recommendations issued by these initiatives with concrete legislative or policy actions, the result will be an erosion of trust.¹³ Instead of meaningful exercises, these initiatives can then appear as tokenistic attempts to appease public demands for a say. For example, in France's 2019–2020 Citizens' Convention for Climate, the French government watered down or rejected most of the citizens' proposals.¹⁴

To remedy this situation, it is important to have clearly defined questions or goals and follow-up procedures as well as realistic expectations. Mechanisms such as rapporteurs can provide citizens who have engaged in the innovation process or are interested in finding out more about it with an easy access point for information requests. To maintain trust in such initiatives, governments must explain the motivations behind their decisions, particularly when they go against the outcomes of a deliberative process.¹⁵ Innovations should be bolder in embracing experimentation, without fixating on a specific format, and should allow more creative exercises to take place.¹⁶ In a sense, citizen assemblies have become the go-to model, but this approach limits the space for innovation.

⁸ OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.

⁹ "Commission Recommendation of 12.12.2023 on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes", European Commission, 12 December 2023, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=PI_COM:C\(2023\)8627](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=PI_COM:C(2023)8627).

¹⁰ Sonia Bussu et al., "Introduction: Embedding participatory governance", *Critical Policy Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 133–145, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19460171.2022.2053179>.

¹¹ Richard Youngs, "Closing the Gap Between Citizen Participation and Mainstream Politics", Carnegie Europe, 8 December 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/12/closing-the-gap-between-citizen-participation-and-mainstream-politics?lang=en¢er=europe>.

¹² Thamy Pogrebinschi, "Latin America – Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations", European Democracy Hub, 1 September 2022, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations-latin-america/>.

¹³ Claudia Chwalisz and Ieva Česnulaitytė, "What is a 'successful' representative deliberative process for public decision making? Assessing the evidence", in *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.

¹⁴ David Courant, "The promises and disappointments of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate", *newDemocracy*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/the-promises-and-disappointments-of-the-french-citizens-convention-for-climate/>.

¹⁵ Jinkyung Baek, "Exploring Democratic Innovations Outside the West: Lessons from Asia", European Democracy Hub, 18 October 2023, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Exploring-Worldwide-Democratic-Innovations-Lessons-from-Asia-1.pdf>.

¹⁶ Platoniq, "Inspiring Democratic Innovation: A Conversation with Sonia Bussu on Reclaiming Participatory Governance", *WilderJournal*, 26 May 2024, <https://journal.platoniq.net/en/wilder-journal-2/interviews/reclaiming-participatory-governance/>.

Making a success of democratic innovations

Many context-specific factors can influence the success of a democratic innovation. These range from the buy-in of stakeholders to the available financial resources that can be dedicated to an initiative. Our case studies uncovered some key features of successful initiatives, such as Taiwan's g0v (pronounced "gov zero") or India's Gram Sabha (little parliaments), that can inspire promoters of innovations in Europe. Many of these initiatives seek to put citizens in the driving seat by giving them space to take the initiative in proposing solutions to everyday problems.

Embedding innovations into democratic practice ultimately requires a change of mindset among all those with power in the relevant processes. For governments and politicians, this means moving away from a bureaucratic or technocratic approach and becoming more accountable to citizens by giving power back to them. CSOs, particularly those with a campaigning role, need to make a similar shift. While civic groups often act as intermediaries in the public discourse, they also need to engage with their respective stakeholders. CSOs should act not as gatekeepers to these innovations but as custodians of knowledge and expertise, and be actively involved in these processes. At the same time, citizens need to allow time for such exercises to show real success, and all parties should take on board the idea that each initiative – and each iteration of it – is a learning exercise.

From the 10 country case studies and three regional case studies developed, as well as the stakeholder dialogues conducted under the project, six lessons emerge for Europe.

1. Encourage experimentation

Often, experimentation with citizens can be messy and lead to unexpected results. It is important to encourage these creative exercises and support their repeated use. Repeating these initiatives provides learning opportunities for citizens, government representatives, politicians, and democratic innovators. There has been

a lot of emphasis on best practices when it comes to innovations, but there has been less drive to experiment with a large variety of them.

In many cases, a reluctance to discuss and embrace failure hurts the practice of innovation. There is a feeling of restraint about what initiatives can be taken, either for fear of failure or because of a lack of funding for more out-of-the-box ideas. Stakeholders should make active use of best practices and apply them more consciously, with a focus on building alliances between democratic innovators and policymakers. Looking at policymakers and, to a certain extent, politicians more generally as possible enablers of innovation can lead to successful long-term initiatives. For example, the success achieved by Gwanghwamoon 1st Street, an initiative that collected citizens' suggestions for South Korea's new government through a variety of platforms, as described in our case study, was in part due to the country's president championing the innovation.¹⁷

2. Embed democratic innovations into mainstream politics

There is still a disconnect between citizens, CSOs, and governments when it comes to using democratic innovations and embedding them into mainstream democratic practice.¹⁸ Making democratic innovations an integral part of modern democracies requires cooperation between the organisations and civic activists who champion these innovations, on the one hand, and governments, on the other.

While there are some notable examples of this approach in countries such as Belgium,¹⁹ Estonia, France,²⁰ and the UK, there is still much that can be done to bring democratic innovations and traditional policymaking together. Two of the biggest challenges to using and scaling up innovations are bureaucracy and sporadic funding.²¹ Pioneering innovations locally before gradually scaling them up could be a way to test innovations and progressively embed them into mainstream politics. Getting buy-in from politicians and authorities also remains a challenge, and the democracy community needs to work on how to change the way these groups perceive innovations.

¹⁷ "Gwanghwamoon 1st Street (People's Transition Office)", Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 22 May 2017,

<https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/gwanghwamoon-1st-street-peoples-transition-office-2/>; Jinkyung Baek, "Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations: A case study of South Korea", European Democracy Hub, 17 June 2022, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations-south-korea/>.

¹⁸ OECD, Innovative Citizen Participation.

¹⁹ "The Ostbelgien Model: a long-term Citizens' Council combined with short-term Citizens' Assemblies", International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, 16 September 2019, <https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1237>.

²⁰ Chwalisz, "A Movement".

²¹ Christopher Edgar and Peter Baeck, "Making democratic innovations stick", Nesta, November 2023, https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Making_democratic_innovations_stick_QROMJNp.pdf.

Meanwhile, local authorities that use democratic innovations can improve the accessibility, quality, and delivery of their services. This has perhaps been the most successful area for innovations to gain momentum, as the local level is where advocates of innovations can find the most willing partners to experiment with new forms of citizen participation and deliberative democracy.²² Many initiatives are being implemented at the local level in Europe with great success, but examples from Asia and Latin America show that innovations can take place at the national level as well. Scaling up innovations should also include considerations of design and implementation, as simply repeating such exercises does not equate to embedding them into political processes.²³ At the same time, where such innovative practices exist, the focus should be on consolidating and perfecting these exercises, which can allow citizens, governments, and elected officials to build trust in the processes.

Politicians are often less enthusiastic about the potential of democratic innovations than about classic politics.²⁴ Existing democratic innovators need to make the case that politicians can and should be innovators as well, by shifting the narrative and challenging the perception that innovations are not effective. Cooperation between innovators and governments would not only embed innovation into decision-making but also allow innovations to continue their financing and reduce the start-stop costs of standalone initiatives.²⁵ There are examples of initiatives that have achieved success by doing so, such as Taiwan's g0v, which has successfully transitioned from a grass-roots project into an institutionalised practice and is now championed by Taiwan's minister of digital affairs.²⁶

There should also be a clear distinction between CSOs and their representative role, on the one hand, and citizens, on the other. Both have an added value and should have a place in democratic spaces to influence policy and decision-making. CSOs, in particular, have a dual role: they can act as intermediaries that run these innovations, but they also have a representative function in advocating for their stakeholders. The same

applies to political parties. Our case study on Georgia shows how political parties can use these innovations to shape their manifestos and democratise internally, such as through an innovative approach to the process for party nominations.²⁷

3. Involve citizens throughout the policy cycle

While many stakeholders see the added value of democratic innovations and of involving citizens in such initiatives, they are not being used in truly innovative ways. One of the main objections to reforming classic democratic processes through the use of innovations is a belief that citizens lack expertise when it comes to making complex policy decisions.²⁸ Practitioners note that the success of democratic innovations relies on the readiness of both implementing bodies and participating citizens.²⁹

Moreover, public institutions still seem reluctant to use democratic innovations creatively. This is often a result of a lack of expertise and resources in these institutions. Predominantly, citizens are invited to take part in initiatives at a preliminary phase of the policy cycle, where they often play a consultative role. While there is indeed an added value in these exercises, as they are important for increasing citizens' ownership of the policy decisions that affect their lives, this is not the only role citizens can fulfil. In our case studies, we found that initiatives in Latin America have experimented with involving citizens beyond this role, giving them a more active part in the implementation of policies. There is space for such innovations to take root in a European context to democratise public governance.

²² Aisha Dabo and Raphael Pouyé, "Assessing Civic Tech That Works to Build #TheAfricaWeWant", European Democracy Hub, 24 May 2023, <https://european-democracyhub.epd.eu/assessing-civic-tech-that-works-to-build-theafricanwewant-citizen-led-tech-for-impact-that-can-help-african-governments-deliver-better-services/>.

²³ Youngs, "Closing the Gap".

²⁴ "Leaders or Latecomers? Exploring the role of politicians in democratic innovation", Apolitical Foundation, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JvKGrv3hsXpdGC_58NjhwW5ZX09KF-M/view.

²⁵ Dabo and Pouyé, "Assessing Civic Tech".

²⁶ Ming-sho Ho, "Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of Taiwan", European Democracy Hub, 2022, <https://epd.eu/content/uploads/2023/07/Case-Study-Taiwan.pdf>.

²⁷ Levan Kashiavili, "Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of Georgia", European Democracy Hub, 17 June 2022, <https://european-democracyhub.epd.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Case-Study-Georgia.pdf>.

²⁸ Chwalisz, "A Movement".

²⁹ Edgar and Baek, "Making democratic innovations stick".

4. Make better use of digital solutions

Investing in building new innovations can be costly, so using existing infrastructure when possible is preferable. Focusing on solutions that have been tried and tested is a good entry point for those who are interested in using such tools, particularly when it comes to civic tech. These initiatives can complement democratic innovations. Governments and donors should therefore invest in tech innovations beyond their creation stage by supporting their use and maintenance costs.

Democratic innovations, particularly in the tech sphere, often fall victim to being one-off exercises. There should be an emphasis on developing solutions and know-how that can be used by other administrations, be they local, regional, or national. In this regard, it is important to differentiate between civic tech innovations and commercially viable innovations and to recognise initiatives that bring about a public benefit.

There is also space to improve the ways in which digital technologies are used. Often, citizens are passive users of such innovations, which goes against the idea of using innovations to promote deliberation and, ultimately, reinvigorate democracy. Democratic innovators and governments should design initiatives that break down barriers to participation and encourage people to take part. However, digital democratic innovations cannot be the only avenue for citizen deliberation, as they can exclude those without access to the internet or with lower digital skills.³⁰

5. Ensure that processes are inclusive

A key lesson that emerges from the innovations in the project is that inclusivity and representation are critical for deliberative practices, and initiatives should be paired with alternatives that can capture the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders when needed.³¹ For example, in Osun State, Nigeria, an in-person citizen consultation was combined with a radio programme to increase its reach.³² This initiative

showcases how stakeholders thought of ways to overcome accessibility challenges, and while this might not be an issue in all innovations, it is the thinking behind it that is important. In short, it is essential to design ways for innovations to be inclusive. Participative and deliberative processes should therefore be accompanied by training and support.³³ Special consideration should also be given to those who lack the confidence to involve themselves in such processes.

6. Enhance stakeholders' capacity

The future of democratic innovations depends on the ability of public institutions to adapt and respond to citizens' demands to be included in decision-making. Governments' and public institutions' reluctance to use such initiatives stems in part from a lack of expertise and practice, and in part from a fear of increasing red tape and prolonging already complex bureaucratic practices. Elected officials also fear losing power by ceding their monopoly on deliberation; changing this mindset is bound to take time and will require training to help officials understand the value of engaging with citizens better.

Governments should invest in training and capacity building for staff to develop the necessary knowledge to devise strategies for citizen engagement and make the best use of them. At the same time, public institutions need to engage in awareness-raising campaigns and communicate more proactively about the deliberative and participatory initiatives that they implement. Special attention should be given to communicating the outcomes of such initiatives and potential follow-up.³⁴

³⁰ Sonia Bussu, Yaron Golan, and Anna Hargreaves, "Understanding developments in Participatory Governance", Manchester Metropolitan University, August 2022, p. 45. https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/630247/2/UNDERS_2.pdf.

³¹ Anna Mikhaylovskaya, "Enhancing Deliberation with Digital Democratic Innovations", *Philosophy & Technology* 37, no. 3 (2024), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13347-023-00692-x#citeas>.

³² Lanre Ikutejijo, "Nigeria - Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations", *European Democracy Hub*, 29 July 2022, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/exploring-worldwide-democratic-innovations-nigeria/>.

³³ Edgar and Baeck, "Making democratic innovations stick".

³⁴ Dominik Hierlemann et al., "Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union", Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Demokratie_und_Partizipation_in_Europa/_Studie_Under_construction/ZD_Studie_Under_construction.pdf.

Conclusion

The pressing challenges faced by modern democracies underscore the need for innovative approaches to public governance. Democratic innovations present a promising path forward that offers opportunities to rebuild trust, enhance citizen participation, and create more inclusive decision-making processes.

Our Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations project highlights not only the diverse ways in which innovations can be successfully implemented but also the challenges that these innovations encounter. The journey towards embedding these innovations into mainstream political practice continues.

In the design and implementation of future initiatives, it is essential to emphasise deliberation, co-creation, and collaboration among governments, CSOs, and citizens. By setting clear goals, fostering trust, and making better use of digital technologies, democratic innovations can become an integral part of the policymaking process. There is a real opportunity to reshape democratic spaces so that innovations become not just experiments but foundational elements of democracies.

In a way, today's democratic innovations are a continuation of the expansion of the voting franchise in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in that responses to democratic malaise have continued to focus on getting more people involved in politics. The history of democratic renewal seems to have concentrated so narrowly on this expansion of suffrage that it has somehow limited the horizon of potential change. For democratic politics to be truly reinvigorated in the 21st century, innovation can and needs to be bolder.



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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations. The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.