

Empowering Change Through Participatory Democracy:

Reimagining the future of democratic engagement and collective decision-making



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Executive Summary



In 2022, in collaboration with The Good Lobby, Ashoka launched its first Ideas Lab with the aim of transforming the field of participatory democracy. After a rigorous mapping of existing stakeholders in the field, Ashoka organized a series of informal “Ideas Lab” sessions to bring these often siloed stakeholders around one table and create room for imagination about what ideal democratic practices might look like, and how we might achieve them.

The process involved a group of 22 changemakers in the field of participatory democracy who embarked on a collective thinking journey from March to June 2023. The main aims were to:

- ➔ identify and assess the root causes behind the lack of participatory democracy in Europe;
- ➔ tackle the systemic barriers that hinder the participation of citizens in political decision-making;
- ➔ co-design solutions to create an enabling ecosystem that gives individuals and communities a voice, and empowers them to shape the systems to better serve their needs.

Four major challenges were identified as barriers to inclusive participatory democracy:

1. **Lack of self-efficacy and agency of citizens:** when individuals lack confidence in their abilities to affect change, they become disengaged from civic activities and are less likely to solve problems or contribute to new solutions to societal issues. This can weaken the democratic process and reduce representation of diverse perspectives.
2. **Limits of the existing political culture:** the prevailing European political culture facilitates the concentration of power within the hands of a few individuals. Within the existing political framework, culture and mindset, there exists an implicit aversion to many forms of transformation. This resistance not only impedes the participation of citizens to exercise their rights and power across various domains, but also further encourages a reluctance among those in positions of authority to share this power. As a result, the prevailing system fails to harness the collective wisdom of our society, thus hampering our ability to effectively confront the challenges we collectively face.



3. **Political polarization:** political polarization affects all parts of our society. Polarization can lead to an uptick in political engagement from traditionally “apolitical” actors, while also further dividing narratives and policies of existing groups, exposing underlying fears, discontent, and a lack of trust in the current system. This problem impedes the ability to generate productive public conversation, particularly in the digital domain, and the development of shared narratives. Overall, polarization makes it harder to accept opposing ideas, encourages the spread of false information, and raises levels of mistrust.
4. **Underrepresentation and lack of inclusion:** the lack of citizen participation results in a major underrepresentation of marginalized groups, as their needs frequently go ignored or unmet. Without active citizen participation, decision-making becomes distorted and biased, prioritizing the interests of a small group of people rather than the diverse community as a whole. By not embracing diversity, minority communities are further marginalized and systemic injustices are maintained.

Upon identifying these core challenges, participants assumed a forward-thinking approach to create innovative solutions to address each of them. As the identified challenges are interlinked and often overlap, a collective vision emerged towards the creation of a democratic ecosystem which aims to empower individuals with the necessary tools and opportunities to actively engage and stimulate transformative progress. For this democratic ecosystem to emerge it is necessary to:

- ★ Cultivate a sense of self-efficacy and agency by unleashing individuals’ potential to make a difference and providing them with accessible pathways for participation across various spheres of society, including democracy, politics, schools, and families.
- ★ Transform the existing political culture by fostering a system that encourages widespread citizen participation and promotes the inclusive exercise of political power to harness the collective wisdom of society and effectively address shared challenges.
- ★ Mitigate political polarization by promoting constructive public discourse, encouraging trust-building measures, and facilitating the development of shared narratives. This entails fostering an environment that embraces diverse viewpoints, discourages the dissemination of misinformation, and addresses underlying insecurities and discontent.

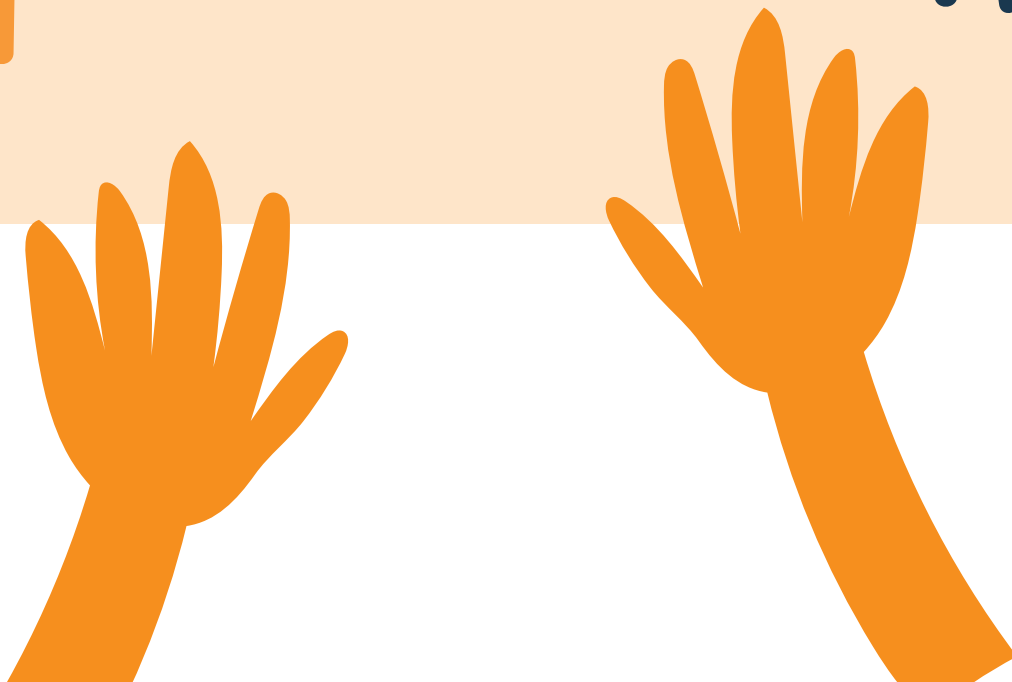




Promote representation and inclusion by leveraging unbiased decision-making processes and actively engaging marginalized groups, so that their specific needs will receive due attention and consideration.

Through a three-month-long Ideas Lab process, the participants developed four solutions aimed at transforming this vision into a reality. The solutions presented in this report aim to reimagine our democratic institutions and revolutionize the way citizenship is practiced by creating new pathways of empowerment that can level the playing field and invite everyone to actively participate.

This report seeks to generate fresh momentum towards achieving a genuinely participatory democracy, serving as a call to action for all like-minded changemakers to come together and contribute to this collective endeavor. We plan to pursue some of these ideas concretely through projects launched in the coming year, furthering our common goals.



Foreword

It's no longer audacious to declare that the practice of democracy requires more than just voting in elections. It's becoming well known, in fact, that what happens in between elections can play an even larger role in transforming policies and political systems. Yet, despite this growing demand from citizens to be not only heard but also actively involved in decision-making processes, there is little institutional response. Representative democracy appears unable and unwilling to adapt to such new expectations. No surprise that trust in democracy has been severely shaken in recent times, with citizens having become increasingly disillusioned with the political establishment and democratic processes.

Building on more than 40 years of experience in addressing pressing social issues, Ashoka decided to dive in and apply its changemaking lens to contribute to the growing democratic innovation space. Capitalizing on the momentum generated by the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) —the first transnational experiment of deliberative democracy— Ashoka, in collaboration with The Good Lobby, launched an Ideas Lab process to co-design a new type of framework as part of its Changemaker Europe initiative. This framework views citizens as changemakers who are both activated and invited to the policy and decision-making table, contributing to informed policy for the common good.

Across Europe, some Ashoka Fellows —individuals who have created and implemented innovative practical solutions to the world's most difficult problems— are experimenting with new approaches that deviate from traditional forms of democratic regeneration. Some of them are already revolutionizing the practice of democracy. They do so by rethinking the democratic space through the creation of the conditions that enable citizens to develop changemaking skills and contribute to positive social change. The Changemaker Europe initiative builds upon this work by broadening this network of democracy shapers beyond Ashoka Fellows to create a cohort of highly engaged practitioners from diverse disciplines ready to further explore what it means to be an active agent of change.

Ashoka aims to establish a citizen-centered democratic Europe that is created with and for its citizens by redefining citizens as active agents of change, or as citizen lobbyists as The Good Lobby likes to refer to them. This Changemaker vision of Europe demands a rethinking of our democratic infrastructures and fabric in order to pave the way for a more inclusive, citizen-led approach to policy and decision-making.



This initiative's timing is exceptional since the European Union and its governments are about to embark on a significant election season that will usher in a new political cycle between 2024 and 2029. The future of the continent will be significantly influenced by Europe's capacity to establish a pluralist, participatory democracy in which each person is able to tap into their intrinsic ability to affect social change and be a force for good. Imagine: What would European democracy look like if more people were able to express their ideas and effect change within the political and policy-making processes?

The ideas presented in this paper emerged from a collective thinking journey led by changemakers committed to making democracy more inclusive and participatory. These ideas represent the start, not the conclusion, of the path towards a Changemaker Europe, which is an ongoing process that necessitates inventive, adaptive, and forward-thinking approaches.



About Ashoka

Ashoka builds and cultivates a community of change leaders who see that the world now requires everyone to be a changemaker. We are pioneering the Everyone a Changemaker world through our programs and networks in more than 90 countries, building and amplifying this global movement.



About The Good Lobby

The Good Lobby is a Brussels-based NGO committed to equalizing access to power by enhancing the advocacy capacity of European civil society, with offices in Milan, Madrid and Paris. It supports nonprofits, activists, progressive businesses, and philanthropies to give them a greater voice in the policy process through a combination of strategic advice, capacity building, and pro bono legal support.

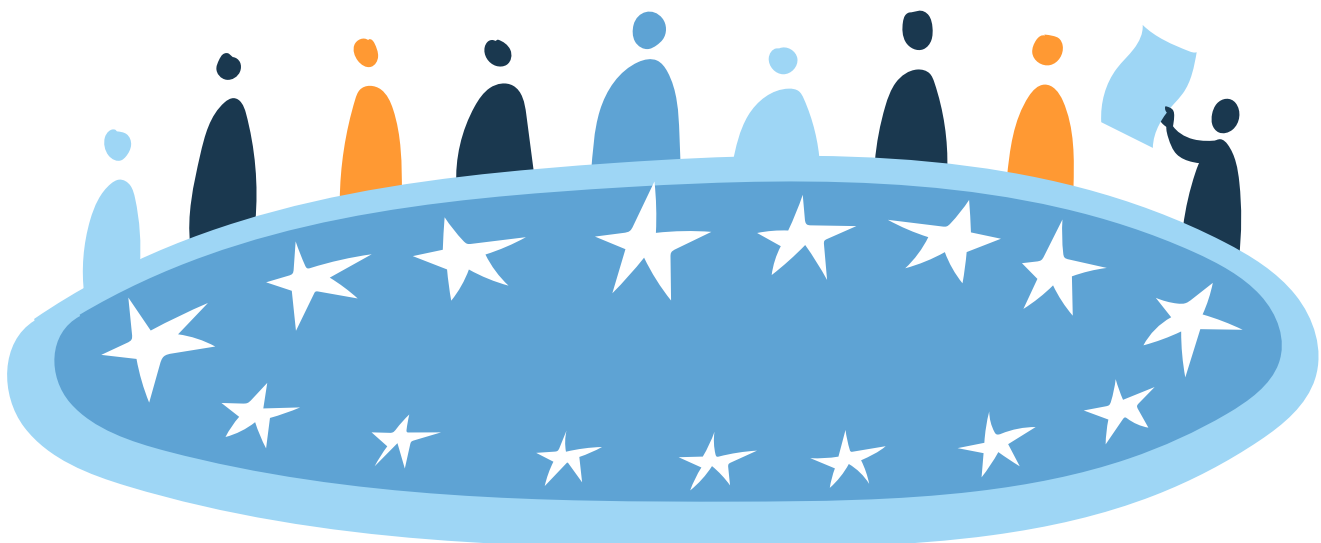
Bringing change leaders together

The major purpose of the Changemaker Europe initiative from the start was to build a vibrant network of practitioners from diverse disciplines who were all committed to fostering participatory democracy. We began mapping the participatory democracy ecosystem in Autumn 2022 with this goal in mind.

During this mapping phase, we identified approximately 100 influential figures across a spectrum of fields, including academia, social entrepreneurship, civil society, and policy-making in Europe. These individuals are actively involved in breaking down barriers that impede citizens' engagement in decision-making processes.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 40 selected individuals from this broad group, resulting in the establishment of a cohort of 22 participants for our Ideas Lab process. This cohort was characterized by both gender balance and diversity, encompassing a variety of perspectives from all over Europe. Each participant brought their own unique approaches to participation, such as forming Citizens' Assemblies, assisting citizens in developing political campaigns, integrating diverse political talents into leadership roles, utilizing technology to reach marginalized citizen groups and counter misinformation, addressing polarization through citizen dialogues, and ensuring the inclusion of refugees and other underrepresented communities in political processes. Through these participants, our aim was to reflect the wide array of citizen needs, viewpoints, and obstacles related to political engagement.

Following that, this cohort took part in a number of workshops, including one online meeting and two in-person gatherings conducted in Brussels from March to June 2023. These sessions promoted interaction and encouraged group brainstorming, which helped to cultivate new viewpoints on participatory democracy.

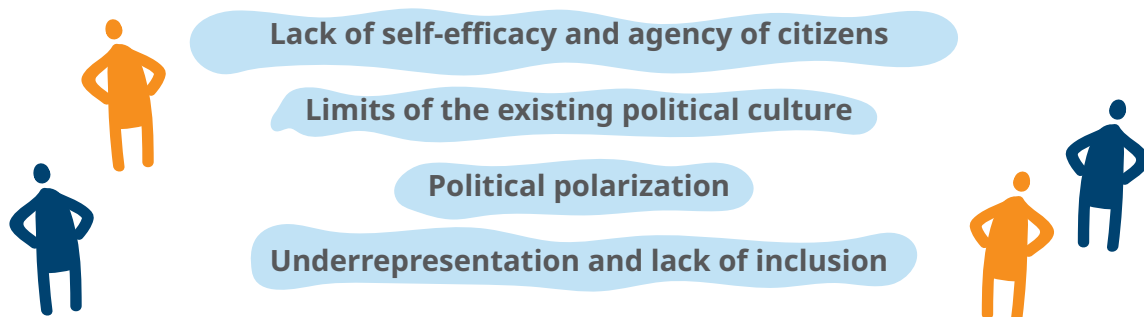


Methodology: From ideation to validation

A tailored methodology was developed to guide the Ideas Lab process within the Changemaker Europe initiative.² This process involved three core sessions and a validation session, combining in-person and online meetings.

The primary goal of the process was to create a set of actionable solutions that could effectively address the core challenge of increasing citizen engagement in European politics. To accomplish this, each session was structured to serve a function in the development from problem identification to solution generation.

The goal of the first in-person meeting was to identify the key issues that the cohort would tackle. Participants were given introductory questions to answer using reverse engineering in order to better understand the state of democracy in Europe: what would a perfect democracy look like? What do we need to do to accomplish it? Four groups were formed to address different problems as a result, helping to shape the process' direction:



To go deeper into these issues and comprehend their root causes and their repercussions, a “Tree of Root Causes” was used.

The second session focused on refining the selected issues and transforming identified core causes into concise problem statements. These statements were then translated into concrete “How might we” queries, moving from problem identification to solution exploration.

¹ For a comprehensive look at the methodology employed, please consult the Annex.

Groups transitioned from problem statements to developing specific solutions during the third and final stage. This required taking into account the amount of resources needed, both immediate and long-term objectives, and the stakeholders who needed to be involved. This approach enabled a more comprehensive grasp of the broader impact these solutions could have.

The entire process has been developed to provide a consistent foundation for developing solutions. Contextual awareness, practical implementation, and projected impacts have guided all solutions. A validation session with external stakeholders and the cohort participants was held to conclude the process. This session resulted in additional feedback on the suggested solutions, pointing out and addressing any potential flaws that might have gone unnoticed during the design process.

These solutions have been shaped into a workable form, demonstrating their potential effectiveness, with prototypes that will continue to be developed by the cohort in the coming months. Although they are not yet in their final state, they provide a strong basis for further improvements. These prototypes reflect the collaborative work and expertise that were put into the Ideas Lab process, embodying a commitment to innovative solutions for enhancing citizen engagement in European politics.



Breaking down the barriers to participatory democracy

During the first Ideas Lab session held in March, participants identified four key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of participatory democracy.

The first challenge revolves around citizens' lack of self-efficacy and agency. This multidimensional barrier includes factors such as the lack of civic education and the availability of tools that enable citizens to actively participate and have a tangible impact in decision-making processes.

The constraints of the current political culture are at the heart of the second issue that has been recognized. Genuine involvement is frequently hampered by the dynamics of power and politics, which instead encourage path dependency and perpetuate elitism.

The third major issue that poses a serious threat to participatory democracy is political polarization. The current inability of society to hold rational debates jeopardizes the core principles of a functioning democracy. The rise of polarization and the establishment of echo chambers on social media platforms have contributed to the breakdown of constructive conversation and the formation of contentious factions, worsening the problem.

The final challenge is one of underrepresentation and lack of inclusion. The question of who is represented and invited to the decision-making table, and who is not, is critical to developing true democratic and participatory procedures. Often, underprivileged populations, minority groups, and other underrepresented voices are excluded from these procedures, resulting in a lack of diverse perspectives and unfair outcomes.



The invisible constraints: Exploring citizens' limited self-efficacy and agency



The lack of self-efficacy and agency among citizens is a general problem that hinders active participation and engagement in various aspects of society. One of the primary issues contributing to this problem is the insufficient emphasis on discussing and promoting participation in different sectors of society. Whether it is within the context of schools, families, or other environments, the absence of pathways to participation leaves individuals feeling disempowered and disengaged.

This problem has broader societal implications, as it creates a sense of apathy and disconnection among citizens. When people do not believe they can have an active role in shaping their communities and influencing decisions, they are less likely to contribute their perspectives, ideas, and skills to the democratic process. As a result, the collective intelligence and potential for progress in society remain untapped.

To develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and agency, it is crucial to create a culture that values and promotes participation by all at all levels of society. Civic education structures play a pivotal role in this context. However, access is not uniform for everyone. Marginalized or hard-to-reach communities in civic education are particularly affected by a significant disparity in access and engagement. These disparities add to the difficulties already faced by these communities, which include a lack of resources, discrimination, and institutional injustices. As a result, their existing marginalized status becomes more entrenched, which hinders their active and significant participation in civic processes.

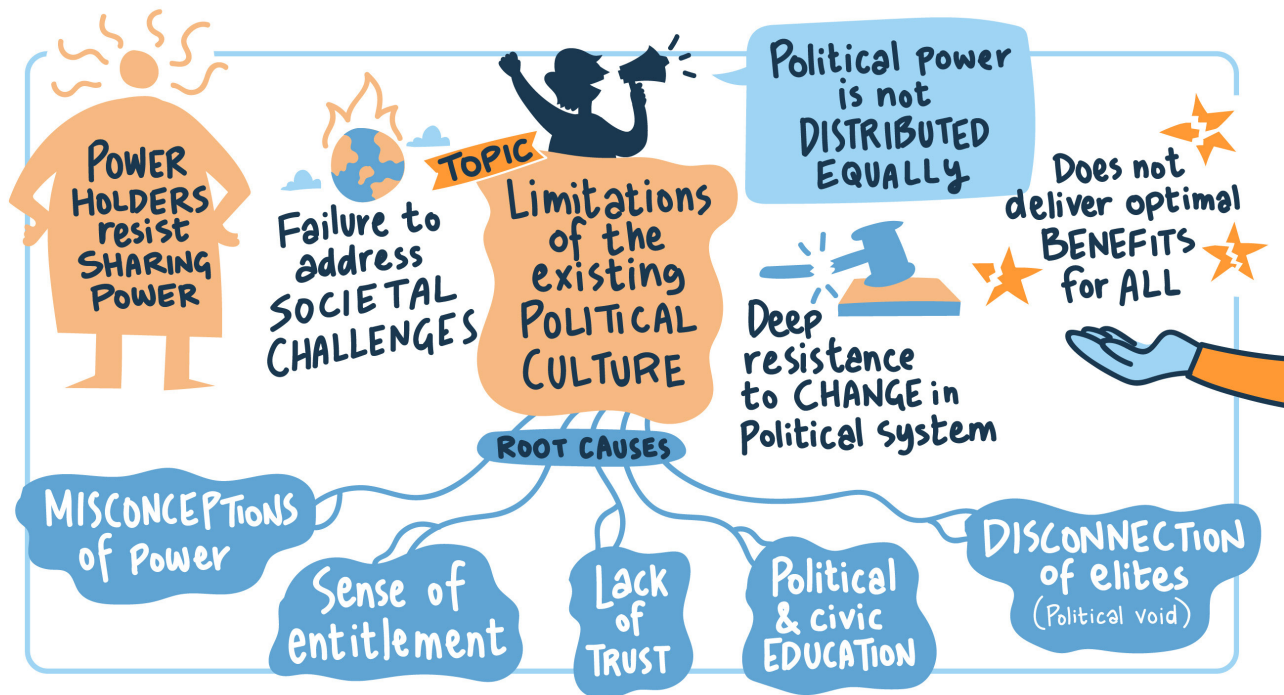
Effectively tackling the lack of self-efficacy and agency necessitates a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach. It involves reforming civic education structures to be inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities, adopting a whole society approach that emphasizes participation across all sectors, providing early childhood interventions to cultivate self-efficacy, and fostering political and institutional commitment to participatory processes with clear mechanisms for accountability. By addressing these underlying issues, societies can enable their citizens to become active change agents, creating democracies that are more vibrant and participatory.

THE CHALLENGE

Meaningful citizen participation is hampered by the absence of a holistic societal approach to participation, one that is defined by a transparent decision-making process, a culture of public involvement, and peoples' self-efficacy, competencies, and autonomy in the digital sphere. This difficulty is aggravated by the lack of a virtuous cycle that mutually supports self-efficacy and agency, which is fostered by both the educational and governmental systems. To enhance citizen engagement, facilitate their active role in policy-making, and ensure their contributions are taken into account, it is necessary to boost the self-efficacy and agency of citizens.



The visible constraints: Unveiling the limitations of the existing political culture



The current political culture has resulted in an undue concentration of power in the hands of a few people. This concentration of power hinders efforts to change the political system, culture, attitudes, and limits citizens' ability to use their authority for the good of society. As a result, the system is unable to use collective intelligence to solve urgent societal problems.

This condition results from various factors, including misconceptions about power, patriarchal influences, indifference to one's own power's externalities, a sense of entitlement, and belief in power concentration. These underlying factors are exacerbated by shortcomings in political and civic education, along with a lack of confidence in the media. Additionally, factors such as the disconnection between power and its effects, elitism, and imbalances in power delegation and exercise play significant roles.

These dynamics, intertwined with power and politics, hinder genuine participation while promoting path dependency and elitism. Fears and misunderstandings impede sincere efforts to transition from a 'vertical' government structure that fosters similarity among differences to a 'horizontal' one.

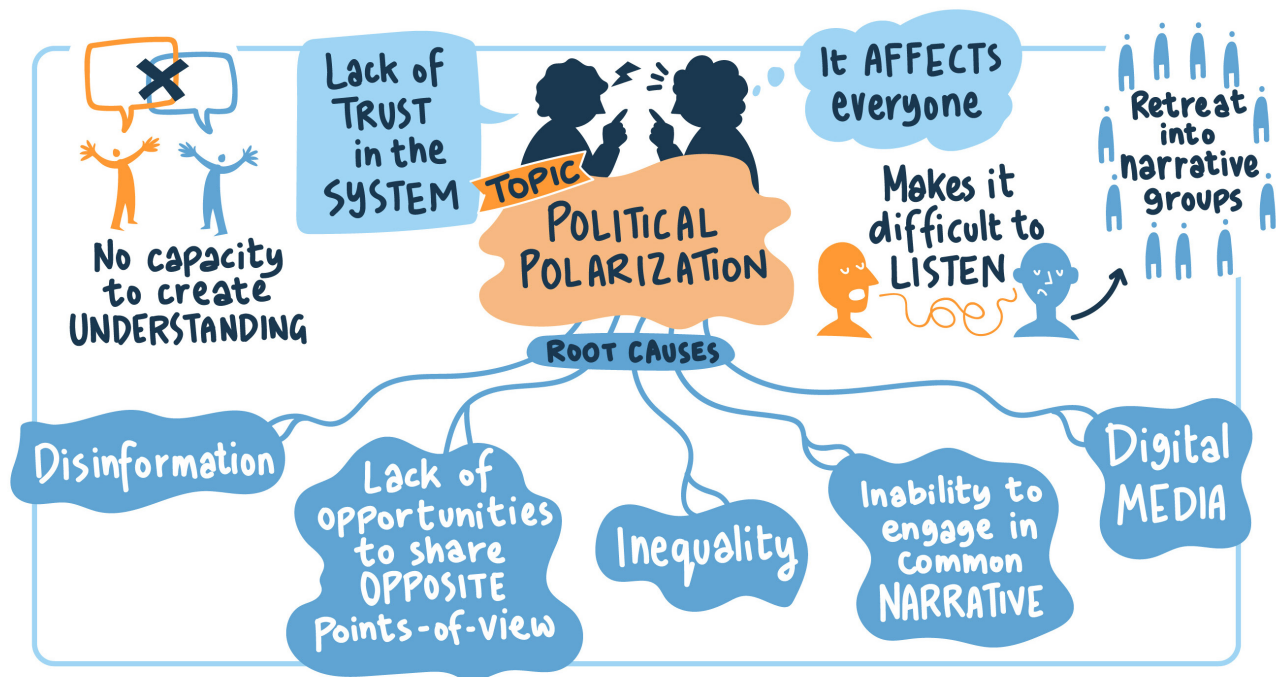
Thus, building a foundation of trust between institutions and citizens is crucial for effective collaboration and shared decision-making. Efforts must be made to ensure that everyone, particularly young people and disadvantaged groups, has equal opportunities to participate in the political process. By doing this, a political culture that is more responsive and egalitarian can be created—one that values its citizens' collective wisdom and finds effective solutions to the most pressing challenges of our time.

THE CHALLENGE

The current political culture allows for an excessive concentration of power in the hands of a few people, resulting in opposition to change and a lack of efficient governance. While those in positions of authority work to protect their monopoly of power, this resistance makes it difficult for citizens to collaborate and participate. As a result, the system fails to leverage collective intelligence to address societal concerns, impeding progress for the common good.



Navigating the divide: Untangling the complexities of political polarization



Democracy's ability to function effectively is seriously threatened by political polarization. It goes beyond simple political differences and expresses deeper problems rooted in fears, discontent, and a lack of trust in the democratic system. This division hinders the chances of finding common ground and developing cooperative solutions by erecting barriers to productive dialogues and encouraging the spread of misinformation.

Various factors contribute to political polarization, including unsettling rhetoric and actions from extreme factions from both the right and the left. Divergent worldviews, societal ideas, and a propensity to dehumanize opposing groups through existential othering all contribute to this widening division. To overcome polarization, we must recognize our interconnections and actively seek opportunities for collaboration and shared understanding.

Genuine societal issues, such as growing inequities, which feed people's frustrations and a sense of unfairness, are one of the root causes of political polarization. The digital media environment, which has a propensity to amplify extreme opinions and produce echo chambers that support preexisting beliefs, eventually widens the breach and exacerbates these underlying problems.

The disproportionate influence held by a small number of those in positions of power is another aspect. Unfair control by specific groups or interests exacerbates structural inequality and weakens social cohesiveness. This absence of underrepresented voices fosters the idea that democracy only looks out for the interests of a privileged few, weakening public confidence in democracy's capacity to advance the prosperity of everyone.

Recognizing that polarization affects groups in the middle of society as well, making it difficult for them to have productive conversations, is vital. Polarization is not just a problem for extremist factions. The pursuit of political representation heightens tensions, and language plays an important role in defining political discourse. Understanding that political polarization goes beyond just democratic concerns and is intricately linked to the historical background of our society is essential. Additionally, it is affected by universal issues like climate change and the rise of new actors like financial institutions and artificial intelligence, which have a significant impact on how political narratives are shaped and frequently exacerbate polarization.

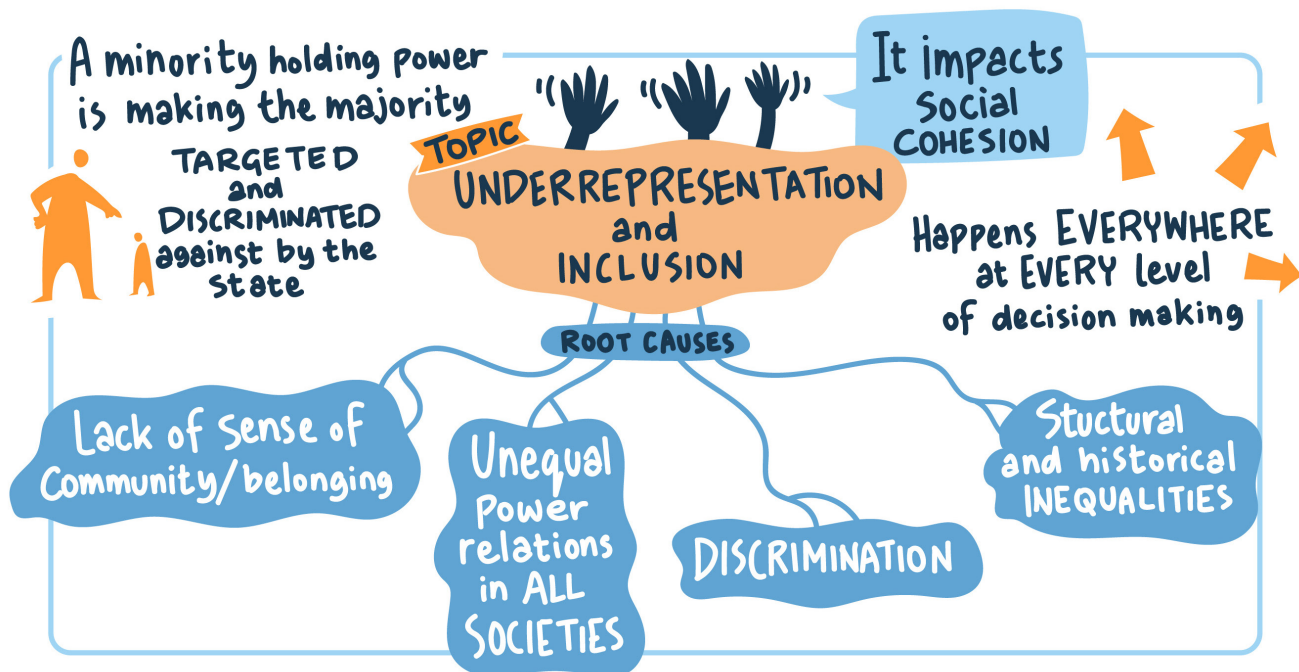
The current inability of society to hold thoughtful debates and reconcile opposing points of view runs counter to the core tenets of a healthy democracy. The root causes of inequality, exclusion, and historical injustices must be addressed, as well as the impact of new actors and the difficulties posed by the digital era, in order to effectively solve political polarization. Only by concerted efforts will societies be able to build a more inclusive, emphatic, and productive political dialogue that respects the plurality of viewpoints and actively works for the collective well-being of everyone.

THE CHALLENGE

Everyone is affected by political polarization, which serves as a sign of political engagement while also exposing underlying fears, discontent, and a lack of trust in the existing system. This issue prevents the growth of shared narratives and makes it difficult to promote healthy public conversation, especially online. Overall, polarization makes it harder to accept opposing ideas, encourages the spread of false information, and raises levels of mistrust.



Beyond barriers: Exploring the barriers of underrepresentation and lack of inclusion



True democracy can only be realized when people are both represented and included in democratic and participatory procedures. Adopting a variety of viewpoints is essential for effective policy-making because it enables a thorough comprehension of the complicated issues at hand. Exclusion and prejudice, on the other hand, harm political representation by silencing voices and perpetuating inequities.

Exclusion and underrepresentation, along with a lack of belonging, are widespread issues in democracies. Due to the restrictions imposed by exclusionary political systems, those who are most impacted by policies frequently find themselves sidelined and their views unheard. Their ability to actively participate in political processes is significantly hampered by these structures, and they are given less possibilities to pursue fulfilling political careers.

Furthermore, current political leadership models fall short of accurately reflecting the variety of viewpoints and interests prevalent in society. The problem is made worse by the lack of diverse role models, which makes it difficult for aspirants to picture themselves in high-ranking positions and perpetuates the underrepresentation of some groups. As a result, a strong minority is overrepresented, which reinforces current structural disparities and marginalizes the majority. People see a mismatch between their lived experiences and the decision-making processes that impact their lives, which erodes their faith in the democratic system. Their confidence in the democratic system

is damaged by the notion that their demands and concerns are not effectively met or taken into account.

Underrepresentation is a problem that impacts all levels of decision-making and transcends particular fields. This emphasizes the critical necessity for inclusive democratic systems that actively remove obstacles to political participation and promote diversity. In order for various people to participate in political discourse, express their opinions, and hold positions of power, it is crucial to foster an atmosphere that gives them equal opportunity. By doing this, a democracy that accurately reflects the demands and aspirations of everyone in society can be achieved.

Restoring trust in the democratic system can be facilitated by the adoption of such inclusive measures. People's confidence in the political system's capacity to effectively advance their interests is increased when they recognize themselves reflected in it and see their concerns heard and addressed. By promoting inclusivity and diverse representation, societies may establish a democratic landscape that is truly representative, robust, and responsive to the interests of all citizens.

THE CHALLENGE

Overrepresentation of a minority in positions of power fosters structural inequities, resulting in underrepresentation of the majority and targeted discrimination. This problem affects all levels of decision-making, harming societal cohesiveness and weakening faith in democracy's ability to meet the needs of every person. The ongoing disparity in representation undercuts the values of justice and equity and impedes the development of a society that is more inclusive and just.



The interconnected barriers to participatory democracy



These four challenges —the lack of self-efficacy and agency among citizens, the constraints of the current political culture, political polarization, and underrepresentation and lack of inclusion— are intricately intertwined, creating a complex web of barriers that prevent the realization of a more genuine and inclusive participatory democracy. The lack of self-efficacy and agency among citizens, which serves as the basis for the other issues, is at the center of this web. People stop participating in public life when they don't believe they can make a difference, which weakens democracy and reduces the representation of different viewpoints.

The limitations of the current political culture worsen this issue by consolidating power among a small number of people and blocking any kind of change. This resistance to change not only hinders citizen engagement but also prevents those in positions of authority from sharing their influence. As a result, our capacity to effectively address problems is constrained by the current political structure, which does not take advantage of society's collective expertise.

Political polarization promotes a climate of discontent, mistrust, and the spread of false information, obstructing productive public conversation and the creation of common narratives. Polarization exacerbates the challenges of embracing multiple perspectives, making it even more difficult to satisfy the interests and concerns of all citizens.

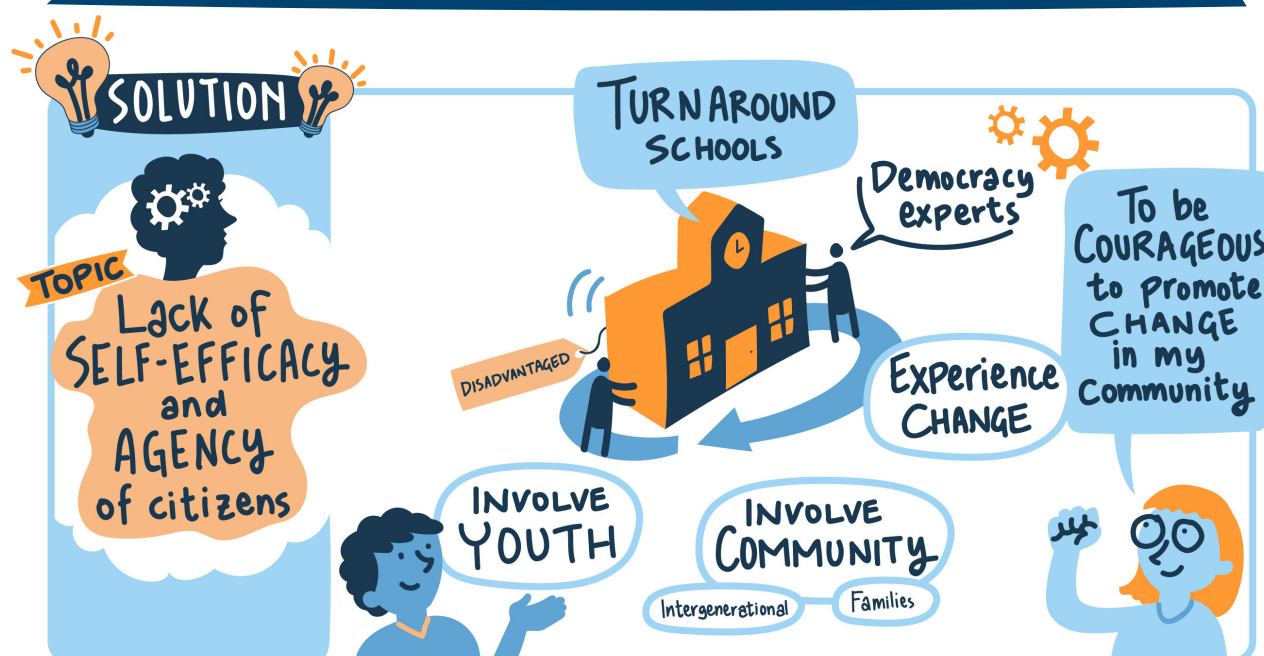
As decision-making procedures fail to take marginalized groups' voices and viewpoints into account, underrepresentation and a lack of inclusion also reinforce systemic inequalities. Without active citizen involvement, the particular needs of these groups frequently go undetected or unmet, resulting in biased outcomes that favor the interests of a small number of people. As a result, underrepresented communities are increasingly marginalized, and the values of democracy and equal representation are compromised.

In conclusion, the interconnectedness of these issues constitutes a substantial roadblock to a more genuine and inclusive participatory democracy. To overcome these barriers, it is critical to address the fundamental causes and build mechanisms that encourage citizen self-efficacy and agency, reform the existing political culture, bridge political divides, and assure meaningful representation and inclusion for all. We can only pave the path for a more vibrant, responsive, and equitable democratic system that encourages all citizens to fully engage in defining their collective future by coordinated efforts to address these interconnected concerns.

Redefining participatory democracy: Harnessing the power of innovative solutions

In response to previously identified challenges, the cohort generated a series of innovative solutions during the Ideas Lab process, outlined below. These solutions aim to establish a thriving democratic ecosystem that provides people with the opportunities and resources they need to actively participate and drive positive change.

Enhancing self-efficacy through transformative education



The proposed solution aims to address the issue of severely underperforming schools, known in some countries as turnaround schools, and leverage them as catalysts for community transformation. By combining a focus on academic transformation with participation of the entire community, the solution aims to rebuild democracy and positive experiences of participation through a bottom-up process. This solution envisions the collaboration of experts in community organizing and democratic decision-making practices to promote knowledge sharing and collective learning.

Underperforming schools are often located in disadvantaged areas, which highlights a larger failure of democracy and community participation. These schools can be instrumental in pinpointing where democratic systems are lacking and provide opportunities to rebuild democracy and engagement.

The solution proposes a comprehensive approach that centers on individual schools and their surrounding communities. The key elements of the approach are as follows:



Academic transformation:

A team of experts specializing in education and school administration is deployed to the identified turnaround school. This team focuses on improving academic performance, enhancing teaching methodologies, curriculum development, and implementing targeted interventions to address the specific needs of the school and its students.



Inter-generational and inter-class participation:

The entire community is invited to take part in the turnaround process in order to promote community engagement and democratic process. This includes individuals from different social groups, age ranges, and backgrounds. By creating a space for inter-generational and inter-class participation, the solution aims to facilitate dialogue, collaboration, and collective decision-making.



Democratic decision-making:

One of the core activities within the turnaround process is practicing democratic decision-making. Through workshops, community forums, and participatory initiatives, community members learn about democratic principles, engage in discussions, and collectively make decisions regarding various aspects of the school's transformation. This practice serves to empower community members, instill a sense of ownership, and foster a culture of active participation.



The proposed solution aims to achieve the following impacts:



Academic improvement:

By putting a strong emphasis on academic transformation, the solution seeks to significantly improve the performance of turnaround schools. This improvement can lead to better educational outcomes for students and contribute to breaking the cycle of underperformance in disadvantaged areas.



Community empowerment:

Through active community participation, the solution aims to empower individuals and communities, demonstrating that they have the capacity to create a positive change. By involving diverse groups and promoting democratic decision-making, the solution fosters a sense of unity, cooperation, and shared responsibility.



Rebuilding democracy:

The solution tries to restore democracy from the ground up by addressing the democratic deficit in underserved communities. The solution aims to revitalize the democratic processes and promote civic involvement by offering specific examples of how communities may make a difference.

The community-centered turnaround model for underperforming schools presents a comprehensive strategy that seeks to rebuild democracy and community involvement in addition to academic excellence. This model empowers individuals, inspires change, and offers specific examples of how communities may make a difference by involving the entire community.

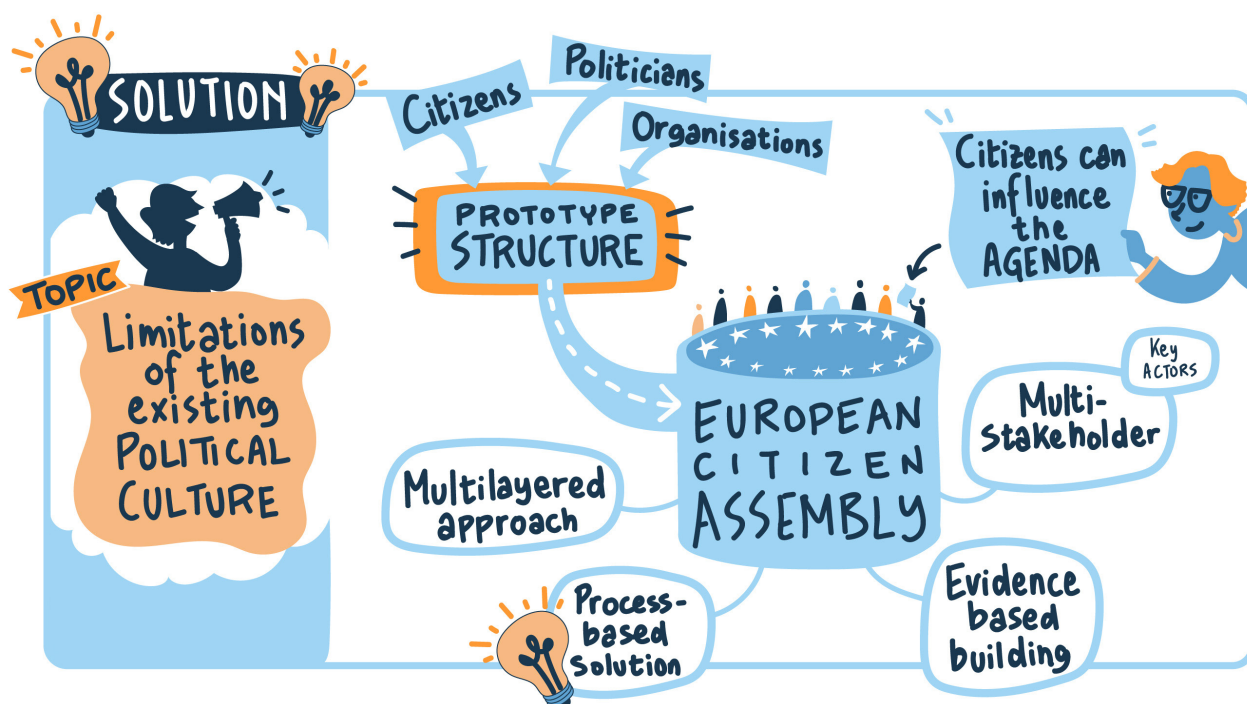


Recommendations to address lack of self-efficacy and agency of citizens:

1.  Implement inclusive civic education reform: Adopt proactive initiatives to transform civic education structures to be inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. Integrate diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences into the curriculum to foster a sense of belonging and representation for all citizens. Develop targeted educational programs that address the specific challenges faced by marginalized or hard-to-reach communities, enabling them to take an active role in society.
2.  Promote a holistic approach to civic participation: Schools, families, community organizations, businesses, and government institutions should all be responsible, and collaborate to create a culture that values and encourages active citizen engagement. Together they should nurture a feeling of shared sense of responsibility and shared ownership in promoting an active vibrant and inclusive democracy.
3.  Implement early childhood interventions: Implement early childhood interventions that aim to foster at cultivating self-efficacy and agency as early as possible from a young age. Introduce age-appropriate activities that encourage children to voice their opinions, make decisions, and engage in meaningful dialogue. Early on, these interventions can foster a sense of empowerment and engage citizens, laying the groundwork for later life.
4.  Foster political and institutional commitment: Promote political and institutional support for participatory processes by putting in place clear transparent procedures for accountability. Encourage the implementation of measures that support public participation, such as community decision-making and participatory budgeting initiatives. Building trust and confidence in the democratic process will need making sure that citizens' opinions are taken into account in policy formulation.
5.  Launch media and awareness campaigns: Launch media and awareness initiatives to emphasize the significance of citizen participation and engagement in shaping society. Make use of a variety of media platforms to promote success stories of active citizen engagement and showcase the positive impact of collective action. This will encourage more citizens to participate actively in community affairs.



Strengthening democracy: A permanent European Citizens' Assembly



A thorough participatory democracy strategy is required to address the challenge that the existing political culture limits citizen power and stifles collective problem-solving. By establishing a permanent European Citizens' Assembly, the aim is to increase citizen participation and provide a more democratic and deliberative approach to decision-making in the EU.

In practice, a standing European Citizens' Assembly would be made up of a rotating group of randomly selected citizens, with membership changing every six, eight, or twelve months. They would meet with each other as well as with politicians and intermediary bodies. The assembly would be given agenda-setting functions, ensuring that its influence goes beyond mere consultation. The assembly would function with minimal rules of procedure to encourage openness and transparency, enabling a truly inclusive and democratic process.

The expected result of creating a permanent European Citizens' Assembly is the increasing integration of society actors into governmental power structures. Citizens that prefer the status quo and the economic and political elites that dominate the political culture are examples of traditional actors who may at first be resistant to change, but who may subsequently turn out to be allies in this transformative process once synergies are proven to exist. To develop a better sense of ownership and participation for everybody, the objective is to transform the political culture of our society.



The campaign

A proactive strategy is required to implement this solution. A campaign will be developed and conducted in advance of the next change of leadership in the European elections in 2024 to advocate for a more participatory EU. The ambition is for the incoming EU leadership to implement a comprehensive participatory democracy plan, including the establishment of a permanent European Citizens' Assembly based on the prototype established and promoted by the Democratic Odyssey.² A multi-stakeholder network will be established to assist with the assembly's design, implementation, and institutionalization.

The journey towards a permanent European Citizens' Assembly draws inspiration from different sectors, combining elements of top-down institutions and bottom-up civil society. It envisions a collective effort to crowdsource the assembly's design, thereby engaging various stakeholders in its development. Prototypical transnational assemblies will be held in different configurations over time, supported by a constituent network.

The goals of this campaign are to create a strong coalition of civil society organizations, collaboratively develop a set of campaign proposals, and finally push for change through focused outreach and group advocacy, including engaging with political parties. The campaign will involve a wide spectrum of civil society actors and concentrate on involving relevant European political parties, EU institutions, and member state governments in order to accomplish these goals. The campaign's guiding principles will be a series of recommendations that the civil society coalition will formulate and adopt. These suggestions will be included in a policy brief and distributed via various networks, coalition meetings, and op-ed pieces.

The creation of a permanent European Citizens' Assembly has the potential to radically alter EU politics. By providing citizens a stronger voice and institutionalizing their participation, the EU can build a political culture that emphasizes collective problem-solving and empowers all members of society.

² For an overview of The Democratic Odyssey project, please refer to: <https://democraticodyssey.eui.eu/home>



Recommendations to address limits of the existing political culture:

1.  Foster trust between institutions and citizens: Prioritize transparency, accountability, and open communication between government institutions and the general public. Establish mechanisms for regular feedback and consultation with the public on policy issues. Demonstrating responsiveness to citizens' concerns will build trust and encourage greater participation in the political process.
2.  Embrace collective intelligence: Adopt a "horizontal" political culture, one that values collective intelligence and diversity of viewpoints in place of the current "vertical" one. Encourage dialogue and collaboration among citizens, stakeholders, and policymakers to find innovative and inclusive solutions to societal challenges.
3.  Counter patriarchal influences: Work towards dismantling patriarchal influences that reinforce power imbalances. Promote gender equality and representation of women in positions of political leadership and decision-making roles. Encourage diverse voices and perspectives to challenge traditional power structures.
4.  Build trust in media: Support independent and credible media sources to foster trust in media institutions. Invest in media literacy programs to equip citizens with critical thinking skills to discern reliable information from misinformation or propaganda.
5.  Emphasize long-term vision: Encourage a long-term vision for societal and political change. Overcome fears and misunderstandings by emphasizing the benefits of an inclusive and forward-thinking approach to governance that addresses the needs of present and future generations.
6.  Monitor progress and accountability: Establish systems to keep track of projects promoting inclusive citizen engagement and collective decision-making to ensure accountability. Hold institutions accountable for delivering on their commitments to build a more equitable and responsive political culture.



Overcoming the fear barrier: Empowering citizens through constructive dialogue



The proposed solution recognizes fear as the main cause of political polarization. Recognizing the part fear plays in polarization, the “Let’s Talk About It” initiative seeks to move beyond fear as a way of gathering information and actively confront it in a positive and inclusive way. This effort aims to offer a forum where people can actively participate in productive discussions, encouraging communication and understanding among those with different points of view.

How would it work?

This solution’s central idea is to establish panels with representatives from various sectors, including companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, and EU officials. Each panel would have six to ten people from these many fields as well as three people chosen at random from the general public, guaranteeing the participation of both ordinary citizens and well-known figures.

The panels would meet on a regular basis, ideally once a month, to discuss and debate major policy issues. These conversations would be planned to be fruitful and provide participants a chance to voice their opinions on the suggested reforms. The sessions would be open to all citizens, emphasizing inclusivity and democratic participation.

The conversations would be broadcast on television to increase their impact, reach a wider audience, and provide more people the opportunity to witness healthy debates. The goal would be to motivate viewers and promote an atmosphere of respectful dialogue by displaying many points of view.

The format

To create a constructive and respectful environment, “Let’s Talk About It” would be structured thoughtfully. Each debate would have a moderator, ideally a skilled mediator or psychologist, who would switch roles frequently to bring in new ideas and maintain objectivity. The discussion would need to be facilitated, a code of behavior would need to be followed, and non-violent dialogue would need to be encouraged.

Although the initiative wouldn’t act as an institutional body (i.e., it wouldn’t make laws), recommendations might be put into action at multiple levels, such as local, regional, and national, allowing for adaptability to varied settings and promoting citizen participation. The structure would encourage candid conversations based on current events and important societal issues.

The methodology

“Let’s Talk About It” would offer guidelines and a code of behavior to create a welcoming and respectful environment for discussion in order to increase involvement and inclusivity. This would promote positive responses and a climate of acceptance, modesty, openness, and diversity.

In order to reach a larger audience and provide accessibility, the initiative will think about employing internet platforms like YouTube and social media outlets in addition to television. Online surveys and polls would be used as feedback techniques to collect public opinion and include viewers in the decision-making process.

The “Let’s Talk About It” approach would go beyond televised debates. The initiative would acknowledge the significance of incorporating this format into classrooms, inspiring children to take part in similar debates, and building a habit of constructive dialogue from a young age, creating a more inclusive and informed society.

The proposed method provides a practical, inclusive, and multifaceted strategy to overcoming political polarization. The initiative intends to inspire citizens, encourage open dialogues, and solve the major concerns that society is now experiencing by acknowledging concerns, encouraging constructive conversation, and cultivating interaction through numerous platforms.



Recommendations to address political polarization:

1.  Encourage constructive dialogue and civil discourse: Political leaders, media figures, and influencers should actively promote civil discourse and constructive dialogue. Political debates and discussions should be conducted in a respectful manner, focusing on the issues rather than resorting to personal attacks. By setting a positive example, leaders can inspire citizens to engage in more productive conversations.
2.  Expand political representation and inclusion: Efforts should be made to increase political representation and inclusivity. Implementing measures to ensure diverse voices are heard in decision-making processes can help address the perception that democracy only serves the interests of a privileged few. This might involve electoral reforms, support for underrepresented communities, and addressing barriers to political participation.
3.  Limit the influence of powerful interest groups: To counteract the disproportionate influence of interest groups, transparency and campaign finance reforms are essential. A level playing field can be created by stricter regulations that can prevent certain groups from unduly influencing the political process. Implementing measures that curb lobbying efforts and promote transparency in political funding can also reduce corruption and enhance public trust in democratic institutions.
4.  Promote media literacy and critical thinking: Efforts should be made to enhance media literacy among citizens. Educational institutions and media organizations can collaborate to develop programs that teach critical thinking skills, fact-checking, and media evaluation. Citizens must be empowered to identify and avoid disinformation and echo chambers, helping them make well-informed decisions based on credible sources.
5.  Integrate global challenges into the political discourse: Global issues like climate change, technological advancements, and economic globalization have an impact on societies all around the world. Political leaders should integrate discussions about these issues into their platforms, highlighting the need of international cooperation and collaboration in tackling shared challenges. This approach can foster a sense of interdependence and shared responsibility.



Democratizing representation: Elevating underrepresented communities for inclusive policy change









To enhance political engagement and representation, the proposed solution, ‘Everyone a Politician,’ combines both individual and collective approaches. The individual approach challenges the dominance of party politics in the current landscape by identifying and empowering emerging community leaders. This involves encouraging them to run for government, providing necessary resources, and supporting nonpartisan activities outside traditional political spheres. Ensuring dedicated community-based leaders receive the support they need is crucial for effecting meaningful change.

To boost community influence in deliberative instances, the collective approach emphasizes community organizing and the utilization of tools such as ‘parliament watch’ and deliberative devices. These tools provide citizens with direct channels to question politicians, leading to increased transparency on traditionally concealed topics. Ultimately, this heightened transparency would contribute to greater accountability, exerting significant pressure on party politics, institutions, and politicians.



These two strategies can be synergistically combined to create a more informed and engaged public, as they are not mutually exclusive. Various approaches are proposed for structuring and implementing these dual streams:

-  School for political activists: establishing training programs to develop the knowledge and skills of political activists.
-  Funding for petitioners, activists, and incubators: providing financial support to individuals and organizations that are involved in political activism and change-advocacy.
-  Civic pays for citizens' engagement: recognizing and rewarding citizens who actively participate in civic life.
-  Parliament watch for all of Europe: establishing systems for monitoring parliamentary proceedings activities and decisions to improve transparency and accountability.
-  Lobbying vouchers: giving out vouchers for lobbying so that people can support causes and advocate for their interests.
-  Civic time off: providing citizens with the freedom to take unpaid time off from work to participate in civic duties.

This approach aims to enhance accountability and provide substantial incentives for widespread civic engagement by improving access to political involvement through these channels. The solution also recognizes the importance of engaging the corporate community and holding it accountable in the process of promoting public participation.

In conclusion, the 'Everyone a Politician' proposal aims to enhance the political landscape by empowering underrepresented individuals, promoting public participation, and fostering accountability and transparency in decision-making. The solution seeks to democratize political engagement and cultivate a more responsive and accountable political system for all citizens by combining individual and collective methods and employing a variety of tools.



Recommendations to address underrepresentation and lack of inclusion:

1.  Remove barriers to political participation: Identify and eliminate systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups from participating in politics. This could include addressing voter suppression tactics, ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities, and creating language adjustments non-native speakers. By removing these barriers, more people will be able to engage in democratic processes.
2.  Promote the recruitment of diverse candidates: Political parties and organizations should actively seek out and encourage diverse candidates to run for office. Implement measures to support aspiring individuals from underrepresented communities, such as mentorship programs, training workshops, and financial assistance. By cultivating a diverse pool of candidates, parties can better represent the interests and experiences of the population.
3.  Enhance political leaders' diversity training: Provide public officials, policymakers, and political leaders with diversity and inclusion training. By making them more aware of the problems experienced by underrepresented people, this training can encourage a more inclusive style of decision-making.
4.  Establish quotas or affirmative action guidelines: Consider implementing quotas or affirmative action policies in the political sphere to increase representation for underrepresented groups. While controversial, these measures have proven effective in some cases by providing a temporary boost to historically marginalized communities, ultimately leading to greater inclusivity over time.
5.  Foster media representation and diversity: Encourage media outlets to embrace diverse representation in their reporting and programming. Diverse voices and perspectives should be reflected in the media to counter stereotypes and provide a more accurate portrayal of the population's realities.
6.  Conduct regular diversity audits: Regularly assess the diversity of representation across different levels of government and public institutions. Diversity audits can help identify areas of improvement and guide focused actions to effectively address underrepresentation.



A new beginning for participatory democracy

Throughout our journey, we have seen the power of inclusivity and collaboration. The exchanges and conversations within the cohort have cultivated a better understanding of the challenges that citizens face when participating in democracy as well as the creative solutions that can pave the path forward.

The recommendations and insights produced by these debates are designed to be adopted, put into practice, and improved through action. We want these ideas to become part of public conversation, impacting policymakers, civil society organizations, and citizens alike.

It is essential that we broaden the community of experts and practitioners involved in democratic renewal in order to maintain this momentum. This community will be an invaluable tool for creating and improving a fresh understanding of participatory democracy, allowing us to find creative solutions for tackling future challenges.

However, our goal goes farther than just creating a community. We must also acknowledge that participatory democracy requires continuous examination, adaptation, and improvement. Democracy's ability to adapt to the changing demands and aspirations of the people it serves is at its very core. As a result, we must constantly improve our strategies and have an open mind to fresh ideas and viewpoints.

By means of participatory democracy, we can create a more open, just, and equal society as we move forward. Implementing the concepts and analysis developed through the Ideas Lab process, we can lay the foundation for a democratic society that genuinely empowers its citizens. Therefore, instead of marking the end, this signifies the beginning of a transformational process. Let's embark together on this journey toward a Changemaker Europe.



Recommendations

The paper concludes with a set of recommendations that address all of the interconnected issues presented throughout the process, as well as the need for a coordinated strategy in terms of citizen participation. The various stakeholders involved in actively promoting and supporting citizen engagement are the target audience for these recommendations.



Promote inclusive citizen participation: Implement policies and initiatives that encourage and enable all citizens, regardless of their financial means, to participate in politics. Create accessible platforms for citizens to voice their opinions, propose ideas, and participate in decision-making processes. Actively seek feedback from marginalized and disadvantaged groups to make sure their perspectives are taken into account when formulating policy.



Provide capacity building and civic education initiatives: Conduct capacity-building workshops and training sessions to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for active civic engagement. Provide resources and tools that empower citizens to participate effectively in decision-making processes and community initiatives. Equipping citizens with the necessary skills will enable them to play an active role in shaping their communities.



Engage young people in political affairs: Develop activities and programs that actively involve young people in political affairs. Encourage the inclusion of young people in the decision-making and policy-making processes. Empower young citizens to take on leadership roles and participate in shaping the future of their communities and the country.



Promote inclusive public discourse: Create platforms (online and in-person) for open and inclusive public discourse that allow citizens from different backgrounds to voice their perspectives on critical issues. Public debates, town-hall meetings, and online forums can facilitate constructive discussions and highlight the diversity of viewpoints within the population.



Develop community outreach and empowerment programs: Develop community outreach programs that target marginalized communities and provide tailored support to address their specific challenges. These programs should empower community members to become active agents of change, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment in shaping their communities' future.



Strengthen collaboration with civil society organizations: Collaborate with civil society organizations to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and advocate for their inclusion in civic processes. Strengthen partnerships with NGOs and community-based groups that work directly with underrepresented populations, ensuring their concerns are addressed and integrated into policy discussions. By collaborating with civil society organizations, policymakers can gain valuable insights and expertise to inform inclusive policy decisions.



Address socioeconomic inequalities: recognize and acknowledge the inequalities that hinder citizen participation. Provide support and resources to disadvantaged communities to ensure they have equal opportunities to engage in civic and political activities. Implement programs to bridge the digital divide and ensure access to information and communication tools for all citizens. Effective measures to reduce poverty, improve education, and enhance social mobility can alleviate frustrations and perceptions of injustice in democratic systems.



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Partner



Porticus is a philanthropic organization focused on creating a just and sustainable future where human dignity flourishes. Ashoka and Porticus are long-term partners, collaborating on joint projects that have focused on empowering and connecting individuals and societies.

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Annexes

The methodology and sessions

The tailored methodology developed to guide the Ideas Lab process comprises three core sessions and a validation session. The objective of this process is to generate solutions that address the lack of citizen participation in democracy.

Each session reflects a phase, from identifying the problem through proposing a solution. The sessions themselves are designed to test the central theory of change (ToC) that underpins the process, forming the core of the approach. All sessions followed three fundamental principles where problems and solutions must:



Be plausible: is there evidence suggesting that the chosen solutions, if implemented, will lead to the anticipated outcomes?

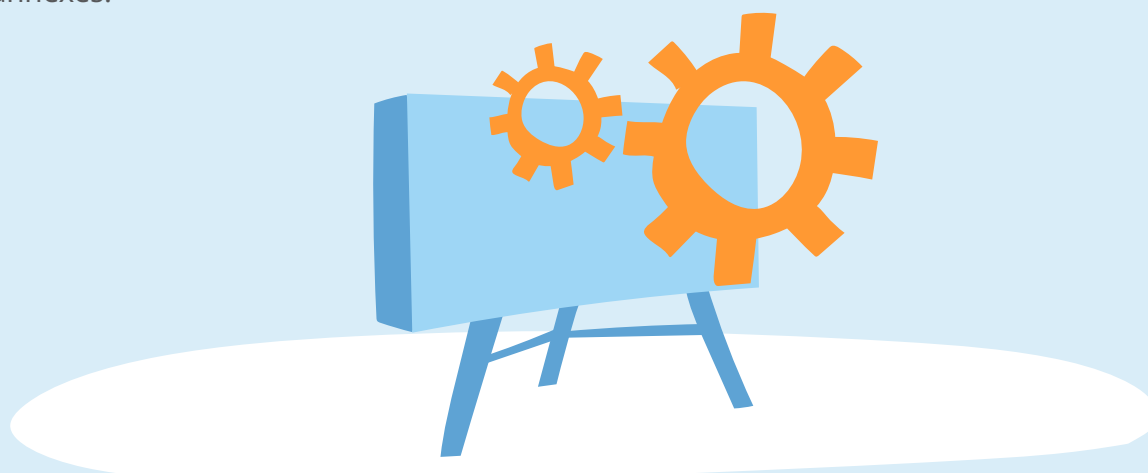


Be feasible: can the available economic, technical, political, institutional, and human resources realistically bring the solution to fruition?



Be testable: is the theory of change specific and comprehensive enough for an evaluator to track progress in an informed manner?

The Theory of Change employed in this process helps connect problems and solutions, resulting in improved outcomes supported by evidence. These three-principles matrices, along with other core methodology matrices, are grounded in significant academic research. You can find the sources that informed this methodology at the end of the annexes.



Session 1: Identifying root causes

The first in-person session focused on identifying the problems that the cohort worked on during the lab. Members of the cohort were divided into groups to answer a series of preliminary questions. These questions seek to provide a clearer knowledge of the current situation of citizen participation in Europe, thereby suggesting prospective pathways for change. The questions are as follows:

1. What are the most compelling reasons for greater citizens' involvement in political processes beyond voting?
2. What are the most effective means of encouraging such an involvement?
3. How can citizen input be meaningfully incorporated into the political process?

The methodology's first phase entails analyzing challenges, addressing them, and visualizing viable solutions. Working groups are formed as a result of the participants choosing the challenges they want to work on. Four different groups, each targeting a particular topic, were formed as a result of this first discussion:

1. Lack of self-efficacy and agency of citizens
2. Limits of the existing political culture
3. Political polarization
4. Underrepresentation and lack of inclusion

To develop these working streams, the Changemaker Europe team made use of a Tree of Root Causes. This tool assists participants in identifying the problem, its core causes, and potential implications. The participants begin by identifying the underlying causes of their chosen problems before developing a problem statement (trunk), which serves as the focus of session 2. The four challenges are discussed in groups, providing the framework for creating problem statements in session 2.



Session 2: Defining the problem

Each group turns the identified root causes into a problem statement during the second session. In this stage, challenges are further refined to ensure thorough assessment. Then, each group creates a problem statement using a matrix of four questions:

1. Who has the problem?
2. What is the problem?
3. When/Where does the problem occur? Define the context, situation, or process in which the problem exists.
4. Why is it important to address the problem?

With the help of these four questions, which mirror the three formulation principles of plausibility, feasibility, and testability, groups can track the interconnected elements of the challenge they have chosen while also ensuring that the process as a whole is consistent. From these statements, the groups move on to formulating an affirmative statement or “How might we” statement. This shifts the problem statements from negative descriptions of obstacles to affirmative questions that require action.

Example

Original problem statement: “The over-representation of a minority of people in power reinforces structural inequalities and impacts social cohesion and belief in democracy’s ability to deliver for everyone”

1. What-Who: Over-representation of a minority holding power reinforcing structural inequalities making the majority being underrepresented and some groups specifically targeted and discriminated against by the state.
2. When: it happens everywhere, at every level of decision making.
3. Why: Under-representation has an impact on social cohesion and the belief that democracy can deliver for everyone.

Positive “How Might We” Statement: “How might we ensure just representation for all groups of people, reducing the over-representation of a minority in power and thereby addressing structural inequalities?”

With the challenges identified, its components explained, and potential intervention points developed during session 2 via the positive problem statement formulation, session 3 begins to generate feasible solutions for each of the four problems.

Session 3: Transforming problems into solutions

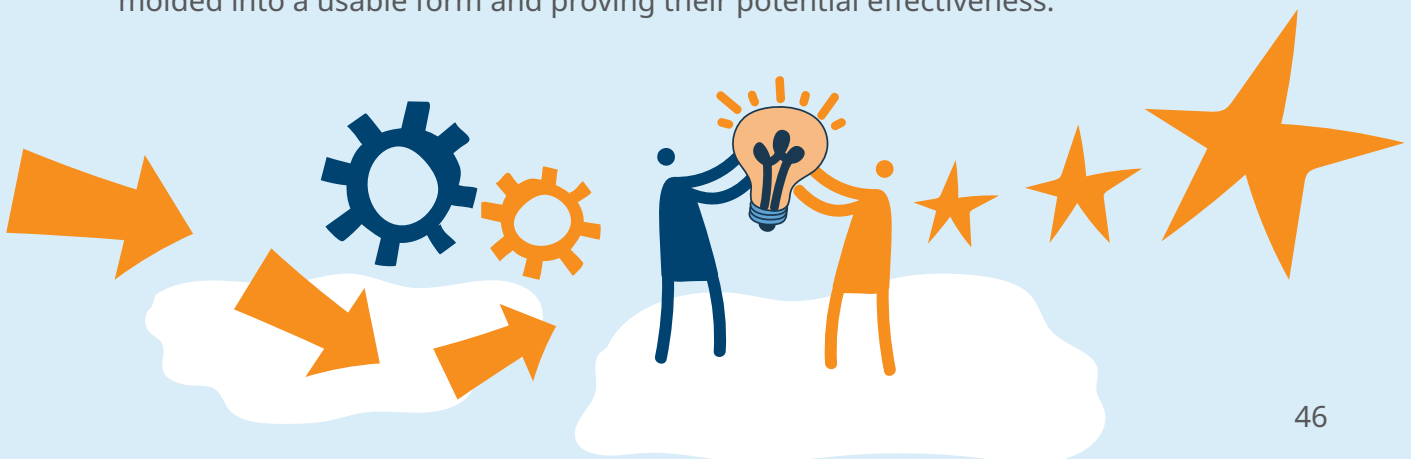
The four groups go on to the last phase of the design process during the third session, offering specific answers to the issue statements created in session 2. The Changemaker Europe team added a three-step matrix to the current methodological framework for this stage. Along with plausibility, practicality, and testability, the cohort takes into account the following when proposing solutions:

1. Assumptions: How is the proposed solution expected to yield results? What conditions must be met before a causal link may be established? The intervention is predicated on the idea that if X is done, Y will follow.
2. Pre-conditions: These are the contextual conditions required to achieve the eventual outcome: what conditions are required to produce the intended long-term results?
3. Relationships: Interventions must take into account all key stakeholders; who should be involved for a process to be inclusive and effective at all levels?

These three components guarantee that participants take into account factors like the time and money needed to implement the suggested solution. Participants are also prompted by this framework to critically evaluate the presumptions underlying their proposed solutions, looking at both immediate and long-term outcomes. Finally, this framework makes it easier to draft the impact, or the predicted systemic changes that should happen after the solution is put into practice.

The entire procedure is meant to ensure that the solutions developed during the program adhere to a consistent set of elements. All solutions can be deconstructed into three essential layers: context, practical implementation, and anticipated impact.

The Changemaker Europe team concluded the process with a validation session with the cohort participants and external stakeholders. This session included additional feedback on the suggested solutions, pointing out and addressing any potential flaws that might have gone unnoticed during the design process. The cohort will continue to construct prototypes of these solutions in the upcoming months, showing how they have been molded into a usable form and proving their potential effectiveness.



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