Democracy Forward

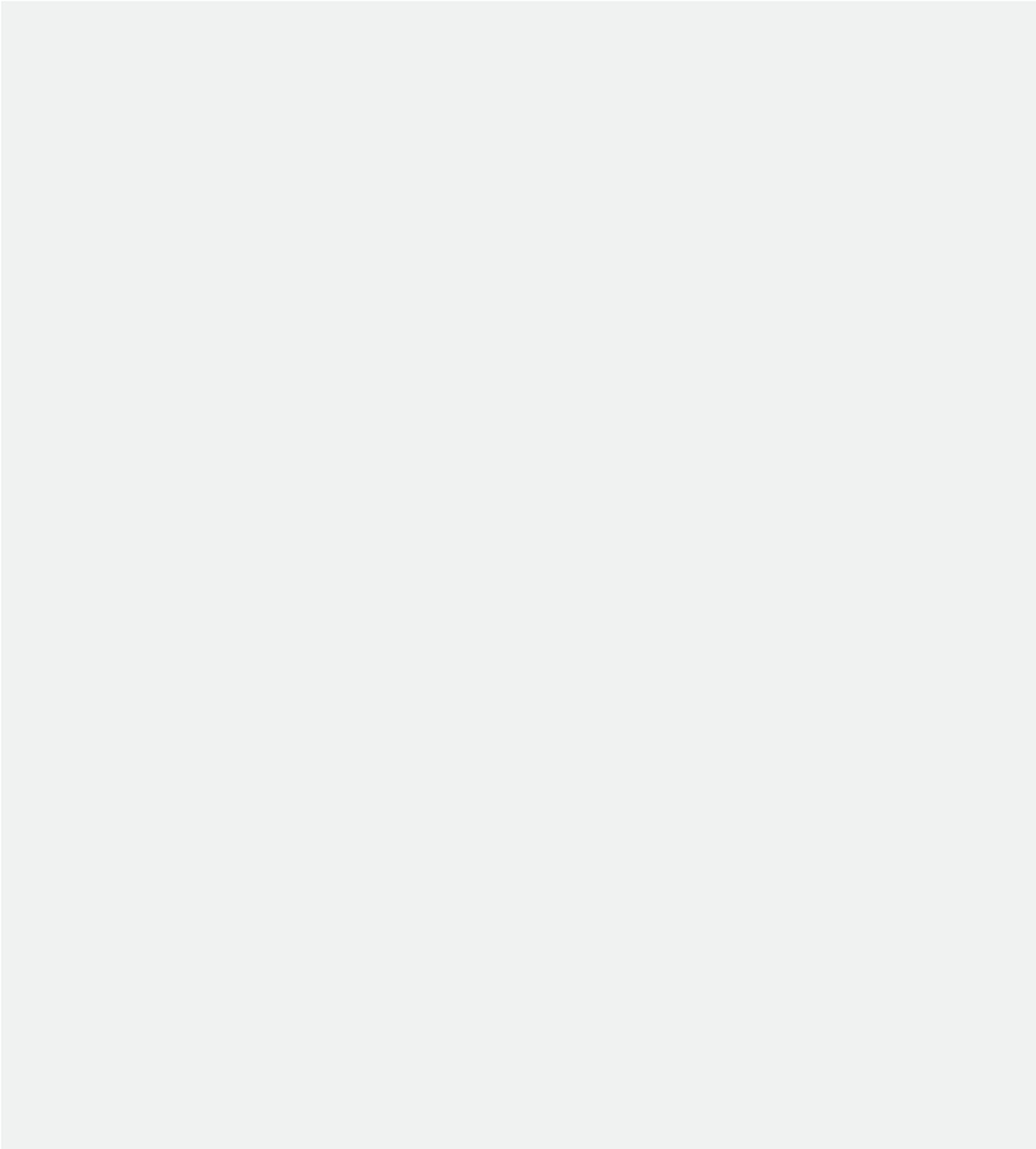*Innovation Is Needed—and Possible*

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IDEAS LEADERSHIP HOPE

Democracy Forward: Innovation Is Needed—and Possible

Democratic backsliding in old, new, rich, and poor democracies has accelerated, as [International IDEA](#), [Freedom House](#), the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), and [Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM)](#) have all studied. Yet they have been slow to respond to the threat by innovating and evolving. Established democracies, such as the United States, are often even more painfully wedded to centuries-old practices that are not fit for purpose today. It is time for a new wave of democracy, rethinking orthodoxy and experimenting with new approaches, innovating, and taking risks, which, fortunately, is already happening in some places that can serve as examples to inspire others.

Analysts offer many explanations for democracy's decline. It has [failed to deliver equitable economic growth](#), represent citizens' needs adequately, and provide equal justice. Publics in democratic nations worldwide increasingly believe that their governing systems favor elites with financial power through overt [corruption](#) or legal influence avenues (e.g., lobbying and political action committees). These publics consequently exhibit rising [distrust](#) of government and [perceive](#) politicians and political parties, gatekeepers to power, as self-interested and unrepresentative. That most party officials and candidates are old, male, rich, and from a dominant ethnic and religious group compounds the problem. In many countries, candidate selection is determined purely by an individual's donations to a party, not by a competitive contest of ideas and policy on a level playing field. It is not surprising that citizens are unhappy with their representatives and [democracy](#).

Cultural divisions and polarization on [traditional-values](#) issues, such as those relevant to women's rights, immigration, the LGBTQ+ community, and the role of religion, also challenge democracy. Many see cultural changes as threats to hierarchies of power and gravitate toward the transgressive political leader. Tapping into these cleavages, malign forces internally and externally propose alternative governance models. [Right-wing authoritarianism](#) is increasing in many countries, with citizens embracing the view that having a strong leader willing to "fight" is more important than protecting individual rights and democratic principles. [Fear](#)—of others, change, and difference—makes the simple solutions that illiberal populists promise alluring. Rising domestic authoritarians also have external support, forming alliances and receiving [financing](#) from foreign actors aiming to degrade democracy worldwide.

This trajectory has taken easy root in many [third-wave democracies](#), which were often established on a model of governance emphasizing majoritarianism and electoral democracy over liberalism and constitutional protection of freedoms and rights. Leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán have embraced so-called "illiberal democracy" to maintain power. But this term is an oxymoron as illiberalism has allowed Orbán, and leaders like him, to chip away at the very fundamentals of democracy such as checks and balances and constitutional protections for free speech, minorities, and the media.

Fueling these challenges, false narratives and lies, that divide democratic societies, erode trust in their institutions, and prop up autocrats, pollute information spaces, pushing people into tribal information bubbles. Online disinformation has exploded as independent media shrinks, particularly at the local level. While an old phenomenon, information disorder is lubricated by cheap, fast, and universal online access.

To make democracy work and build back public trust, it is time for innovation—rethinking rigid adherence to political party representation, challenging elite decision-making, and puncturing polarization and information

disorder. Majorities support reform and believe significant social change is needed. Some communities are already experimenting with alternative models of governance, and groups such as DemocracyNext, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have developed guidelines, tools, and resources to enhance citizen participation. The European Observatory of Online Hate is conducting a two-year study on the dynamics of online hate, disinformation, and the connections among perpetrators and their influence. Spotlight: Polarization | EU RAN conducts research on polarization and provides an overview of EU member-state efforts to combat it. GMF Cities highlights efforts of communities worldwide to strengthen democracy.

This paper showcases several case studies of innovation in representation, public participation, citizen oversight, preemptive information operations, and depolarization that can help bolster democratic fundamentals.

Representation

Political parties have become a fiercely calcified aspect of democracy. Even discussing alternatives can be seen as almost sacrilegious. Yet these old and often backward institutions are not inviting or open to active citizens, many of whom turn to civil society organizations or other outlets for political participation. Women, youth, and minority representatives report the most difficulty in breaking into parties, and it is no coincidence that young women run civil society organizations in many countries. While NGOs and advocacy organizations can make a political difference through advocacy and cooperation, they do not hold the power of purse, law, or policy.

From sixth century B.C.E. Athens, sortition involves randomly selecting citizens to serve in legislative bodies. While experiments in sortition have not been tried at a national level, there have been local attempts to break away from traditional pathways to representation by cutting out intermediaries (political parties) and removing the influence of monied interests or other elite pressures. The OECD has a database that tracks such initiatives, from citizen's juries to planning cells.

In 2015, residents of the Spanish capital formed a movement, Ahora Madrid, to participate in municipal elections. To draft a platform, these residents, not political parties, organized working groups and roundtable discussions on issues of concern. They developed solutions and proposals, which were incorporated into an online platform that other residents could revise. Thousands participated, and the most popular proposals were adopted. To avoid monied interests, the movement relied on crowdsourced loans, which would be paid off with post-election public campaign financing. Almost 1,000 people contributed. The movement's branding was also outsourced in a contest among artists, dubbed "artivists". Candidates were selected through open primaries using ranked-choice voting.

Ahora Madrid won 20 seats in the city council, leading the government in coalition with a traditional left-leaning party, and immediately implemented a citizen assembly model. The group's "Decide Madrid" platform allowed citizens to propose and debate projects, provided transparent planning processes, and made data public. The "Decide Budget" set aside €100 million for projects that residents decided they wanted, though only two

proposals met the threshold for implementation. Ahora Madrid also created a committee comprising 1,000 randomly selected residents to review the city budget. Other selected residents formed a "city observatory (OC)" to solicit public feedback and deliberate the Decide Madrid platform, implement proposals, and provide oversight.

Ahora Madrid was defeated in the next election, and a conservative party, Partido Popular, assumed municipal power and eliminated these initiatives. However, the Decide Madrid platform has inspired other cities. Barcelona created Decidim, a free, open-source platform for organizations and institutions to manage deliberative, collaborative, and participatory decision-making processes such as petitions, surveys, sortition, assemblies, and debates. Decidim is a secure, encrypted system that more than 300 cities and organizations worldwide now use. They include the European Commission, France's National Assembly, the government of Catalonia, the canton of Geneva, and the cities of Helsinki, Mexico City, and New York.

Sortition alone can have multiple, innovative uses, such as gathering residents in an advisory capacity to a legislative body to provide oversight or deliberate a high-stakes issue. In Ireland, a citizens' assembly of 99 randomly selected people provided recommendations to the national legislature on abortion. The assembly gathered materials, interviewed experts, and recommended in a final report the repeal of the country's eighth constitutional amendment, which greatly restricted abortion. A 2018 referendum led to that repeal, allowing the assembly to claim credit for quickly and peacefully resolving a third-rail issue rails for politicians who had long refused to engage with it. A similar process may be underway in France, where 184 randomly selected citizens have endorsed some euthanasia measures in a report sent to President Emmanuel Macron for his consideration.

A gathering of a citizens' assembly in Ireland (Photo: Open Democracy)

Public Participation

In many democracies, citizens feel powerless and, unless voting, without voice in governance. They repeatedly say that their political representatives do not care about them and that law and policy consequently do not reflect their needs or benefit them. Though majorities want changes in their political system to provide the public a greater voice, they also do not believe that such change is possible. Nihilism is rising.

A few countries have experimented with creating channels for greater public participation in legislative and executive branches of government to ensure more responsive outcomes. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is an EU mechanism that enables citizens to shape the bloc's policies by launching initiatives for new legislation. Recent initiatives include the phasing out of animal testing.

Much like the ECI, Estonia has pioneered its own e-governance platform, the Citizen Initiative Portal Rahvaalgatus.ee, which enables citizens to submit proposals and write to the Riigikogu (Estonia's parliament). In the seven years since the portal's inception, 500,000 citizens, representing more than a third of the Estonian population, have used it. The platform is behind 119 initiatives that have been sent to parliament. Municipalities have received 60.

Hailed as highly successful, Rahvaalgatus.ee has helped increase political participation and turn several citizen-led initiatives, including one to ban fur farms, into laws. Another, a 2020 petition from the Green party supporting same-sex marriage, attracted the most signatures, more than 30,000, since the platform's launch. The petition led to a parliamentary vote in June that legalized same-sex marriage. Such an outcome is not always the case, but the platform succeeds in highlighting many important social issues.

Nantes' "great debate" mobile unit
(Photo: City of Nantes)

The region around Nantes, France, is also innovating. Mayors from the metropolitan area launched a "great debate" to include residents in deliberations on adopting a regional energy roadmap. The elected leaders set aside a budget for a citizen-led commission to hold discussions with stakeholders and solicit ideas to address energy challenges and climate change. The city itself organized a mobile booth to travel regionally, providing opportunities for residents to meet organizers. An online platform also allowed them to weigh in. The result was a report outlining a plan for energy transition, which the city council adopted.

EU countries are not alone in adopting stakeholder engagement practices. A 2023 OECD report shows that 27 of the organization's 38 members have a government-wide online consultation portal.

Elsewhere, Brazil's e-Cidadania, a transparency initiative, provides data and information about the work of parliament and permits constituent input, interactive events, and public consultations. Ideia Legislativa, another Brazilian initiative, gives constituents an opportunity to suggest initiatives and review draft legislation. More than 40 million users, or 20% of the population, accessed the portal between 2015 and 2020.

Such online tools can also help governments generate public input in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish government hosted an online public discussion about lockdown procedures. In Finland, Lockdown Dialogues, an online offering, attracted nationwide participation.

In the United States, Civic Genius combines education with deliberative democracy. The organization offers a toolkit for citizens on engagement with government, holds advocacy workshops, and provides training on tactics for participating in government decision-making. The "It's Your America" program gathers people from across the political spectrum to discuss social challenges and propose solutions. The program then organizes citizen panels to provide an opportunity for constituents to engage with members of Congress on a policy issue. Panel members learn about the issue, brainstorm solutions, and participate in a policymaking simulation before presenting their ideas directly to their representatives.

Citizen Oversight

The capture of political representation by elites and monied interests, if not outright corruption, is a leading cause of declining trust in democracy. Political finance regimes to regulate money's influence in politics and governance are a popular remedy. In many contexts, however, these regimes are filled with loopholes, have limited enforcement capabilities, and fail to address the roots of corruption.

Citizens in some countries have taken matters into their own hands to hold officials to account and ensure that their taxes are properly spent. A South Korean initiative brought together more than 400 civic organizations to form the Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 Elections (CAGE). The group initially aimed to work with politicians to promote clean campaigns. After this effort proved unsuccessful, the alliance turned to preventing the nomination or renomination of candidates deemed "unfit to hold public office". Its criteria included absences from

parliamentary sessions, opposition to democratic reforms, allegations of corruption, and irregularities in financial declarations. The campaign, funded by citizens, organized rallies nationwide to raise awareness. Of 86 blacklisted candidates, 59, including many incumbents, lost.

Such activities can be crucial since the weakest link in transparent, efficient, and effective budgetary practices is citizen participation. Programs such as the Global Initiative for Financial Transparency (GIFT) have demonstrated that the public's involvement in all stages of the budget process results in better outcomes and higher trust, elevating the need for more partnership agreements with parliaments and other independent civil society efforts that have included soliciting citizen input during budget formulation, open budget workshops in the legislature, thematic budgets, referendums, and civic efforts to monitor and track legislators.

One example of a hands-on, innovative initiative in this area is the Concerned Citizens of Abra for Good Governance (CCAGG) in the Philippines. CCAGG was an early adapter of citizen audits in 1987. In the rural province of Abra, residents with a wide range of expertise (e.g., construction workers, accountants, engineers) came together to track the implementation of infrastructure projects. They compared budget allocations to actual costs, tested the quality of building materials, and determined if contractor regulations were followed. They exposed enormous discrepancies in allocations and the value of completed projects, revealing large-scale corruption. CCAGG also discovered projects classified as "completed" that were never started. Numerous government officials were subsequently found guilty of corruption and convicted.

Preemptive Information Operations

Bad information, which has undermined faith in democracy and elections, thwarted informed choice at the polls, endangered health through lies about COVID-19 and vaccines, and amplified hate and polarization, is another challenge to be confronted. A defensive posture, one that only responds to mis- and disinformation or is limited to fact checking, is insufficient and may even backfire. Studies on cults have demonstrated that when a leader's prophecy fails to occur, followers cling even more fervently to the group, whether for sunken costs or tribalism.

Preemptive or offensive measures that provide truthful information and alternative national narratives can boost trust in democracy and break down social divisions. Kremlin information operations in Georgia are designed to erode trust in the EU, NATO, and the United States, while presenting Russia as a kindred spirit on economic and cultural issues. Conducting social science research using control and treatment groups, however, demonstrated that providing factually correct information about quality of life and religion in Europe, Russia, and the United States significantly shifted attitudes toward foreign policy. Other civic efforts involved proactively (and creatively) sharing, through public campaigns and service announcements, an optimistic narrative of Georgia as a historically tolerant, open, and democratic country to counter the fear-based nativist, closed, and illiberal picture painted by the Kremlin. It is unsurprising that Ukrainians have become particularly skilled at creating a national narrative of a historic and unique nation, and have tapped into emotions effectively, using imagery, such as the "ghost of Kyiv", and humor, such as memes mocking Russian President Vladimir Putin's long conference table.

"One's own narrative should be strong enough to make it impossible to believe the hostile one. Its power is in being factual, consistent, coherent, and frequently restated. In order for it to spread, it has to be sincerely shared by a significant amount of people. For them to believe it, it has to be real for them. Seeing how a narrative brings about [an] emotional interpretation of events, [I know that] it is worth ensuring it is heard in different areas of life and is represented in politics, culture, the economy, and other fields." - Liubov Tsybulska, Ukraine Crisis Media Center

Proactive information campaigns have also been used to preempt distrust in elections. At MIT, researchers provided American voters with videos from election officials on the election process to "prebunk" false claims about election manipulation and fraud. The researchers found that watching just one message from an official had a positive, statistically significant effect, and increased viewers' level of trust in elections in other US states. The videos also increased the likelihood that viewers would say that fraud by election officials "rarely" or "never" occurs, and the impact was significant even for those who initially had lower levels of trust. Opinions of elections in a viewer's own state, however, did not change.

This tactic was nevertheless embraced during Utah's 2022 governor's race, when the Republican and Democratic candidates released a joint ad to build trust in the election process. Both pledged to accept the results of the vote. Research by Stanford University showed that those who watched the ad were less likely to support "undemocratic practices"—gerrymandering, disenfranchisement, or overthrowing election results—and partisan violence.

Countries have proactively experimented with a variety of efforts to promote informed choice in elections. In the run-up to its 2019 national elections, Finland launched a television, radio, and social media campaign to direct the public toward sources of reliable information and to boost voters' ability to recognize election interference "by increasing awareness of the changes that have taken place in the information environment, and, more generally, of information operations." The Dutch government launched in February of the same year a public awareness campaign ahead of EU parliamentary elections that informed people about the spread of misinformation online.

Estonia has gone on the offense against Russian disinformation by offering an alternative to Russian-language television channels by creating its own. The government also engages with its Russian-speaking population by offering cultural courses and teaching Estonian, giving them an opportunity to be less susceptible to Russian state narratives.

Other initiatives have focused on democratizing the conveyors of information. In India, frustrated by partisan and misleading media outlets, People Like Us has built a trusted information source by outsourcing storytelling to the general public. The organization offers training on storytelling and citizen journalism that uses Snapchat or Instagram on mobile phones. More than 30,000 storytellers now exist nationwide, reaching more than 1 million people.

Civic education initiatives are another increasingly popular tactic to inoculate citizens from bad information. Sweden's Committee on National Investment in Media and Information Literacy offers programs to increase

people's resistance to propaganda and online hate. Italian lawmakers launched an [experimental project](#) in October 2017 to make media literacy—including how to recognize online falsehoods and conspiracy theories—part of the country's high-school education curriculum. The French-Finnish School of Helsinki partnered with Finnish fact-checking agency Faktabaari (FactBar) to develop a [digital literacy toolkit](#) for students to help them identify disinformation. Barcelona's [anti-rumor campaign](#) is designed to combat toxic narratives and stereotypes, and build social cohesion through community outreach. Rather than fact check bad information, the campaign aims to build critical thinking skills, tap into empathy and self-awareness, and provide resources to keep residents informed. The program offers training for "anti-rumor agents" to conduct outreach and develops media guides that help residents discern accurate information from misleading. Other cities have adopted the model.

Groups are also experimenting with online games and apps to raise awareness. [Dr. Fake](#) is an action game created by Georgians that "incorporates information and tools about fake news, cybersecurity, deepfakes, and fake accounts". Players fight Dr. Fake, who challenges them with questions about threats. Germany launched in February 2021 a [Digital Education Initiative](#) that includes a new learning app to raise student awareness of information sharing and tactics to categorize and prioritize information. [Tilt studios](#) in the Netherlands has produced for schools online games, such as "Radicalize", that challenge players to serve as agents for an extremist group, thereby exposing them to the ways nefarious actors manipulate information and its consumers. Similarly, Tilt's "Bad News" game allows players to be purveyors of fake information who aim to increase its dissemination. The programs are based on the theory of "active inoculation": Exposure to disinformation strategies through reenactment builds cognitive resistance.

Some online efforts connect with people and groups that consume false or violent content by offering them compelling alternatives. [#ShePersisted](#), for example, creates videos to redirect users engaging with violent misogynistic content on social media.

Depolarization

Polarization is not a new phenomenon, It has ebbed and flowed throughout the last century, with most episodes of depolarization arising from systemic shocks, such as entry into war, regime or leadership change, such as that from autocracy to democracy. In some places, a brokered reconciliation of parties has resulted in de-escalating social divisions.

Efforts to depolarize without a seismic change have had mixed results. Exclusion measures, such as banning or regulating certain extremist groups or political movements (such as the Swedish Democrats or France's National Front), have [proved](#) ineffective. Inclusion measures that bring fringe parties into government, as has been done in Austria or Italy, have also failed. "Regenerative" or contact depolarization measures that bring together citizens from opposing sides have had more success.

Academics from Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley tested the hypothesis that "getting Democrats and Republicans to talk face-to-face would reduce affective polarization". In one experiment, they gathered people from both parties to discuss their "perfect day" and then asked them about their attitudes toward those who back the other party. The short, apolitical interaction significantly reduced polarization. The results were not replicated, however, when subjects were asked to discuss a topic of disagreement. Nevertheless, the study suggests that some connection between opposing groups could help reduce hostility between them.

Following this engagement model, More Perfect's bridging programs look to break the "loop of toxic polarization" by holding conversations and events with citizens who represent the full political spectrum. And groups such as Living Room Conversations (LRC) organize discussions across political, economic, and racial divides on topics ranging from "the American Dream" to the environment, foreign policy, and education. Trained hosts invite guests for structured debates that follow predetermined guidelines. LRC has reached with this setup more than 100,000 people and formed 250 communities of practice, including universities and interfaith networks. Braver Angels also operates on the contact model of depolarization through exposure to opposing groups. It hosts college debates and networking opportunities on campuses, organizes town hall meetings and community initiatives that bring together citizens from across the political spectrum, and sponsors events such as song-writing contests. The organization is currently planning a 2024 US national convention at which it will unveil a bipartisan civic renewal platform. Finally, Dare to be Grey, founded in 2016 by students from Utrecht University, works to add nuance to debates about Europe's refugee crisis.

Bringing together diverse groups to work toward a common goal has proved to build tolerance. A University of Toronto study compared Korean War veterans who served in segregated and desegregated units, finding that the latter held more tolerant attitudes years afterwards. In the Netherlands, Grensverleggers uses the common-goal approach to bring together a diverse group of young people to cooperate on neighborhood improvement projects. Participants receive training in leadership, dialogue, and collaboration, and are subsequently tasked with establishing new initiatives.

There are also international efforts. The DARE - Depolarisation Activism for Resilient Europe project, a strategic partnership among five civil society organizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Sweden, exists to inspire youth-led and action-oriented dialogue on contemporary challenges such as polarization, radicalization, mental health, and human rights.

Conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies have also been used to address polarization in exposure settings. In this method, a skilled mediator guides opposing groups to mutually accept a problem, replace "us-versus-them" framing with a "we" approach, and agree on shared facts and sources of information for discussion. As in peace negotiations, moderators explore conflict off-ramps, build a sense of agency, and organize joint fact-finding missions.

Studies have also shown that countries with more public broadcasting have lower polarization. In Germany, such programming has allowed citizens to coalesce around a common set of facts. Public broadcasters are subject to minimal government control, decentralized into regional networks, and attract audiences across the political

spectrum. The daily news program Tagesschau, one of the country's most popular, is funded through a flat fee per household, removing the need for government support and, potentially, interference. Independent broadcasting councils, comprised of a broad section of society (e.g., union, political party, and religious group representatives), provide oversight.

It's Not Easy

The crisis of democracy today demands new thinking. Autocrats will win if our mindset is stubbornly stuck in the status quo and blind to the failures of our current practices. Large-scale reforms are needed. These include changes to political party financing laws, election procedures, independent oversight and anti-corruption bodies, judicial systems, and media, social media, and broadcast regulation. In many countries, such monumental reforms are daunting since they require support from political leadership, face legal obstacles, are politically fraught, and need time. Nevertheless, innovation is still possible. Small, local interventions, as noted in this paper, can test new ideas, inspire, and help democracy meet 21st-century challenges.

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