

The Governance Report 2017

In Focus: Democratic Innovations

Democracies around the world seem to be under threat. However, with democracy challenged, analysts have disproportionately pointed to familiar sets of shortcomings and challenges, such as declining confidence in representative institutions, lack of citizen engagement, and the rise of illiberalism and populism. Far less attention has been paid to the promising initiatives taking place worldwide that seek to counteract backsliding and subversion at the local, national, and international levels. *The Governance Report 2017* shifts the focus onto democratic innovations: attempts to address the causes of the democratic malaise, to foster democratic resilience, and to stimulate reconsolidation and development of democratic regimes.

The Governance Report 2017, prepared by a team of experts assembled by the Hertie School of Governance, is the fifth in a series highlighting particular approaches to governance challenges.

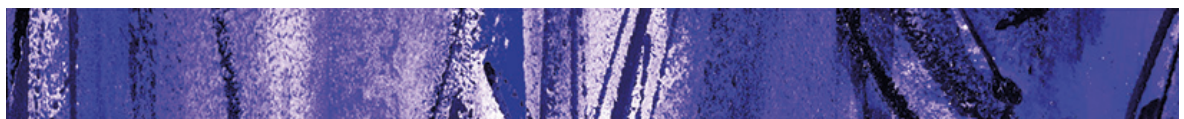
Tensions and Imbalances. Democracies are living systems and, like societies and economies, are rarely stable and subject to both gradual and unforeseen changes, even jolts. Liberal democracies owe much of their resilience to an ongoing balancing of two leading sources of internal opposition: popular sovereignty and diverse minority preferences. Both are inherently in tension with each other, and to different degrees over time. To some extent, they may cancel each other out, neutralising potentially negative outcomes that might arise, but sometimes one becomes more dominant, triggering in turn reactions by the other.

These and other imbalances are highlighted throughout the Report, with innovations arising out of such tensions and frictions. However, the tension-ridden nature of today's democracies should not be mistaken for breakdown and disintegration. Rather, a search for resilience in the face of fundamental dilemmas requires recalibration, and hence innovative solutions. Moreover, the application of more established democratic models in new contexts also requires innovation: an important reason why Latin America and Eastern Europe—more so than consolidated democracies—appear to be innovation hubs of sorts.

Democratic Innovations. The democratic innovations identified in the Report aim to achieve at least one of the following goals:

- **Increasing active involvement in the democratic project** in places where citizens are dissatisfied or disillusioned, and disinclined to participate by voting, taking part in political parties or associations, or running for elected office.
- **Enhancing the voice of citizens** beyond elections with additional opportunities for dialogue and involvement in decision-making.

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- **Bolstering legitimacy and trust in the democratic process** where scepticism of traditional democratic institutions and mechanisms is on the rise, accountability and authority are in question, or political leadership seems to disregard citizens.
- **Safeguarding institutions and ensuring the rule of law** to maintain balance between security and liberty, majority and minority rule, and other tensions while preventing or at least limiting backsliding and hollowing out of democratic principles.

The main types of intervention addressed in the Report are:

- **Government-initiated direct democratic innovations**, often as attempts to gain or consolidate power as well as respond to ideas generated by social movements or civil society.
- **Citizen engagement approaches**, usually emerging from civil society or social movement efforts to develop new ways for citizens to make their voices heard.
- **Electoral reforms** that seek to expand or improve opportunities to vote in elections and for those votes to have impact.
- **Institutional provisions** that strengthen capacities to monitor and manage democratic processes, or create openings for new actors.

Democracy Challenged—Democracy Innovating. The innovations covered in the Report seek to address at least one symptom or cause of the perceived democratic malaise in consolidated democracies or contribute to the resilience of new democracies. No one innovation by itself, however, is the answer to rising illiberalism, populism, or citizen distrust, disinterest, and disengagement. Such innovations rarely involve fundamental reversal and profound discontinuities, either. Instead, as examples from Eastern Europe and the US show, democratic innovations are typically of a more incremental and gradual nature, trying to fix and improve rather than displace.

This is not to say that marginal innovations can have no significant consequences. At first glance, for example, automatic voter registration in the US may seem a rather insignificant change, but it could have a strong impact on political inclusion and hence participation. As a higher number of registered voters is likely to result in increased voter turnout, it could well influence election outcomes. Other seemingly marginal changes such as absentee voting and early voting, which increase the potential pool of voters, might well impact the outcome of elections.

Most democratic innovations are unlike more radical reforms of democracy itself. Fundamental changes, such as substitution of elections with lotteries or maximisation of citizen access to power through shorter term limits for and increased numbers of offices, would have to be implemented with proper regard to parliaments and the balance of power in national and supranational policy-making.

Regardless of their design, not all innovations can be considered best practices in terms of replicability over time and portability to other democracies. The Report's cross-national analysis reveals that innovations depend on the context in which they are applied and that finding remedies to the contemporary malaise of democracy is a process of trial and error that requires experimentation and adaptation.

Key Lessons. In general, two major lessons are drawn from the Report:

- First, democracies can choose from a range of options to address the challenges confronting them. More innovations will undoubtedly result from the current malaise, but in many circumstances, making policy-makers aware of available alternatives may well be a first step. Being resilient requires not only awareness of the options but also an understanding of the problems. It is wrong to assume that democracies are without ways and means at their disposal to react to the current malaise.
- Second, and more fundamental, managing and caring for democracy is a matter of constant questioning and monitoring. This requires a kind of general stewardship to maintain political checks and balances, ensure responsibility and accountability, pay attention to issues such as equity and equality, and create awareness that sovereignty is limited. With very few exceptions, such stewardship has been and continues to be, in short supply, while the illusion that democracy needs no care or maintenance seems all too widespread. But from this dual neglect, and the challenges and frictions thus created, come the search for innovations and the reminder that the work of democracy is never done.

A sample of innovations covered in the Report

Category	Tool/Strategy	Challenge to be addressed	Basic proposition
Government-initiated direct democratic innovations	Referendums	Distrust in representatives; perceived lack of legitimacy of political decision-making	Include citizens in decision-making processes on specific issue areas in direct ways
	Deliberative citizens' assemblies	Many less dominant voices not heard in government decision-making	Decisions should be made based on the better argument in broad consensus and without manipulation or domination of interests
	Co-governance	Gaining legitimacy for policy decisions	Structured and institutionalised decision-making on policy with citizen participation
Bottom-up citizen engagement	Repurposing of mass protest	Corrupt practices, authoritarian tendencies, and self-entrenchment of majoritarian governments lead to erosion of democracy	Mass protests not only as last resort in existential crises, but to show dissatisfaction with government, certain parties, and elites
	New ways of organising protests	Protests organised hierarchically leaving little room for an individual's meaningful participation and impact	Long-term occupation of significant public spaces with direct individual involvement Assemblies, debates, and processes to be open to all
	New forms of advocacy organisation through online platforms	Fast-paced public sphere and global influences challenge conventional advocacy	Ad hoc, issue-specific mobilisation via online platforms, opening a new dimension of political participation through lower transaction costs of political information, communication, and action
Electoral reform	Automatic voter registration	Registering to vote creates a hurdle to participate in an election	Create automatic voter register based on other public records (e.g. drivers licenses, social security rolls)
	Non-partisan blanket primaries (top-two primaries) and ranked choice voting	Low turnout in primary elections often produces candidates who are more ideologically extreme than the average voter, thereby leading to partisan polarisation	Open primaries, with a large number of candidates and the top two candidates moving forward to the general election regardless of their party affiliation
	Voter ID laws	Perceived or potential voter fraud	Require specific forms of identification—some easier to acquire than others—before validating a person's vote
	Non-partisan commissions to draw voting district boundaries	Gerrymandering: drawing of district boundaries to favour a specific political party or candidate and to ensure specific electoral outcomes	Non-partisan redistricting commissions are tasked with drawing constituency boundaries
	Lowering voting age	Young people are tuned out of politics; political learning sets in too late	Lowering voting age on national or subnational level
	Quotas	Certain groups in society are underrepresented in legislative bodies	Increase participation of disadvantaged groups by guaranteeing representation
	New/other forms of voting	Voters who are unable to vote in person on election day de facto surrender their voting right	Allow citizens who are not able to cast their vote in person on election day to participate in elections by other means, such as mail-in ballot, online voting, voting from abroad, or voting prior to election day
Institutional provisions	Safeguard institutions for governing emergencies	In times of emergency, governments may expand their power in far-reaching terms, endangering civil rights and liberties	Install institutions, laws, and procedures to review or limit power extension Assess rightfulness of government action after the fact
	Party-media hybrid	Distrust in elected representatives and the state	Politicians/media personalities make use of their media exposure as political capital Political parties emerge out of media programmes
	Unelected, independent expert bodies	Need for independent supervision of government, especially where traditional institutions are distrusted	Provide channels of oversight and representation beyond elections and parliament Often recommended or mandated by law or by external institutions such as the EU or donor agencies



The Governance Report 2017 includes chapters by:

- **Claus Offe** (Hertie School of Governance), offering conceptual reflections in the context of current challenges
- **Daniel Smilov** (Centre for Liberal Strategies), providing an assessment of lessons from Eastern Europe
- **Didi Kuo** (Stanford University), reviewing the tensions between states and the federal level in the US
- **Thamy Pogrebinschi** (Berlin Social Science Centre), looking at Latin American innovations
- **Matthias Haber** (Hertie School of Governance), analysing patterns and trends around the world
- **Ewa Atanassow** (Bard College Berlin) and **Ira Katznelson** (Columbia University), examining the governance of exigencies
- **Wolfgang Merkel** (Berlin Social Science Centre), exploring the limits of innovations in established democracies
- **Donatella Della Porta** and **Andrea Felicetti** (both of the Scuola Normale Superiore), offering a look at the role of social movements
- **Nina Hall** (Hertie School of Governance), addressing the impact of new digital advocacy organisations.

The Report also provides brief looks at innovations in selected fields by **Anke Hassel** and **Nicole Helmerich**, **Olga Kononykhina**, **Alina Mungiu-Pippidi**, **Jean Pisani-Ferry**, and **Andrea Römmele**, all of the Hertie School.

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