

What future for democracy?

Perspectives from the 2020 ESPAS Conference

Summary

The future of democracy and government after the coronavirus pandemic was discussed in one of the panels of the recent 2020 ESPAS Conference. Greater tax equity, participatory democracy, laws against misinformation and more sub-national decision-making were all seen as relevant to overcoming current stresses in democratic systems.

Background

The latest [ESPAS annual conference](#) was held on 18-19 November 2020, with the event taking place online for the first time. The panellists on the future of democracy were **Shada Islam** of the New Horizons Project (Chair), **Brigid Laffan** of the European University Institute (EUI), Florence, **Stephan Lewandowsky** of Bristol University, **Mathew Burrows** of the Atlantic Council, Washington, and **Antonella Mei-Pochtler** of ThinkAustria. The online audience was comprised of about 250 foresight experts. The following synthesis highlights some of the themes that arose and points that were made during the session.

Democracy: Challenges and responses

Whilst public opinion within the EU continued to support multi-party democracy as the best way of organising political systems, the question 'does democracy work for you?' received fewer positive responses, notably in the east and the south. Differences in performance and in delivery for citizens were causes for concern. So was the decline of some of the traditional pillars of democratic systems, from political parties to trade unions.

Economic, social and cultural issues were seen to be undermining democracy, with problems such as inequality and polarisation gradually building up over decades. Empirical studies suggested an association between increased inequality and support for populism.

In responding to current challenges, state capacity and public power would have a very important role. This was a trend change – a departure from the liberalising assumptions in relation to the role of the state that had prevailed since the 1980s. In response, European welfare states would need to become more agile, 'social investment' states.

Governance and digitalisation

The EU needed to reclaim 'regulatory space' from major corporations in the digital sphere. This did not necessarily mean control over content; views differed on the need for laws to regulate misinformation, which could be seen as a step towards censorship. In the digital sector, the relationship between public authorities and private corporations was complex, effective cooperation between the two sides was extremely important.

Digitalisation was being used (or misused) to promote polarisation. A powerful example was the Brexit experience - back in 2013, the EU was not even among the top ten concerns of UK voters. This changed in part because of a massive disinformation campaign accompanying the push for a referendum. The chain of events was not inevitable. Digital literacy, especially in schools, would be important in tackling

disinformation. Digitalisation also offers ways to enhance democracy, for example through digital participation.

Citizens' assemblies – An antidote to polarisation?

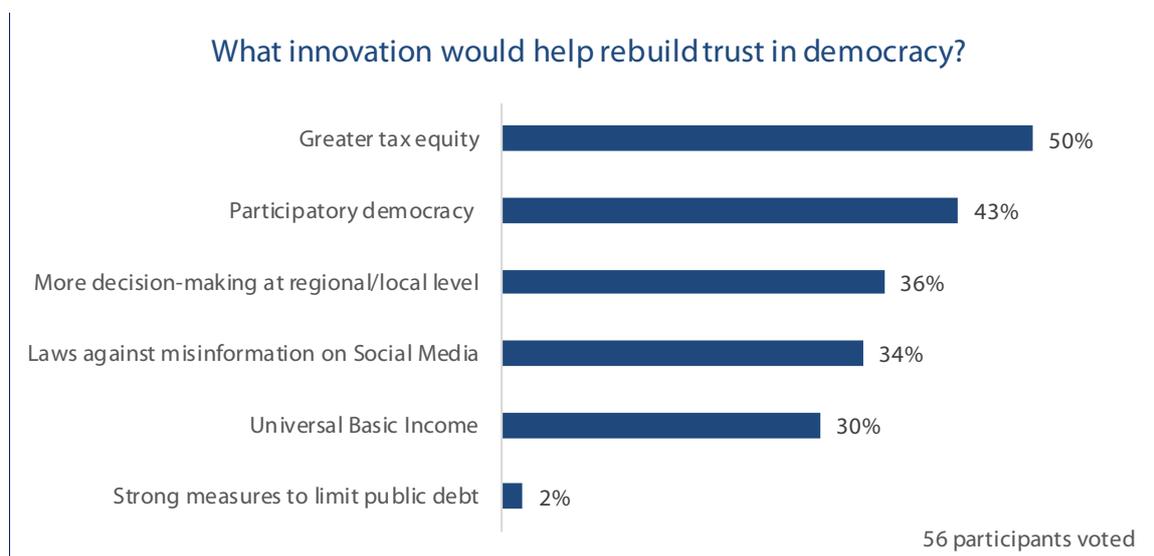
Mis-information was a significant challenge to democracy, with populist forces gathering adherents by offering simplistic solutions. There was a need for a more honest discussion of trade-offs: for example, you cannot have both low taxation and a universal basic income. Deliberative fora could help to make these complexities clearer. Citizens' assemblies on the issues of abortion and gay marriage had proved notably successful in Ireland.

The importance of sub-national levels of governance was also emphasised, especially in the US at a time of polarisation and deadlock in Washington. At the same time, the pandemic and the prospect of widespread teleworking on a sustained basis could lead to the decline of some cities.

Tax equity

Online participants were invited to identify innovations that could help rebuild trust in democracy. Fifty-six attendees took part in the survey. Interestingly, almost half identified greater tax equity as their preferred option, with greater use of participatory democracy, laws against misinformation, and more sub-national decision-making the next most popular potential initiatives.

The choice of tax equity is surprising in some ways – in the public debate, dis-information seems to take up far more space than taxation. One panellist suggested that the health of our democracies depended greatly on an inclusive and equitable recovery from the coronavirus crisis – in contrast to the recovery that followed the financial crisis of 2008.



Further reading

- ESPAS, [Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and choices for Europe](#), 2019.
- European Commission, [2020 Strategic Foresight Report: Charting the course towards a more resilient Europe](#), October 2020.
- Réchard, D., and Ojanen, A.O. 'European Democracy 4.0: Towards deliberative anticipatory governance', in EPRS, [Global Trendometer 2019: Essays on medium- and long-term global trends](#).
- EPRS, [Foresight within the EU institutions: The ESPAS process to date](#), May 2020.