



Netherlands Institute for
**Multiparty
Democracy**



**WESTMINSTER
FOUNDATION FOR
DEMOCRACY**

THE RENEWAL OF REPRESENTATION

A PROPOSED GLOBAL AGENDA



CONTEXT

Populism—broadly understood as a claim to represent the unified will of a ‘pure’ people who are contrasted with a ‘corrupt’ elite—is increasingly being presented as both a global phenomenon and an existential threat to representative democracy. More recently, however, some have argued that populism also represents a potential opportunity for the renewal of representative institutions.

In June 2018, leaders from a variety of backgrounds and regions attended a conference in Brussels to discuss how democratic institutions can respond to the threats and opportunities created by populism in a way that ensures the sustainability of democracy in the long term. The participants were drawn from politics, academia, civil society, business and international organizations, and approached populism not just as a threat to democracy, but also as a potential opportunity. During the discussions, a consensus emerged that the best response to populism is not to attack it. Instead, efforts should be made to improve the quality, transparency and functioning of democratic institutions, which would, in turn, address the underlying drivers of populism. This should include investments in the renewal of representative mechanisms and institutions.

To this end, the conference organizers—International IDEA, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), the Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) and the Research Centre for the Study of Parties and Democracy (REPRESENT)—have distilled a Proposed Global Agenda for the Renewal of Representation, based on the conference discussions. This Global Agenda is designed to focus attention on the constructive and concrete steps that different actors can take to respond to populism by strengthening democracy, in both established democracies and countries where democracy is less deeply entrenched.

The conference organizers invite actors at the global, regional, national and sub-national levels to respond to the Agenda by taking necessary actions to invest in the renewal of representation and the strengthening of democracy.

PROPOSED GLOBAL AGENDA

1. DARE TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY

The appeal of democracy can no longer be assumed or taken for granted. Its benefits must be clearly demonstrated in order to ensure continued support. At the same time, populism is identified as the culprit for putting democracy under stress. However, populism is a contested and unclear concept, and one that has been increasingly stretched to apply to a range of different phenomena, which range from anti-establishment parties to broad social movements that explicitly reject the ‘party’ label. Populism is also manifest in a variety of ways depending on the context. While typically linked to right wing extremism in the European context, in some African and Latin American countries populism has tended to take on a more left wing, ‘pro-poor’ slant. Greater precision in describing the problems that democratic institutions are currently confronting will make it easier to develop effective responses to these challenges.

ACTION POINTS:

- Governments, civil society, political institutions (including parliaments and political parties) and democracy assistance providers (as well as the donors which support their work) need to make the case for democracy in clear and compelling terms. In defending democracy, these actors should be both honest and specific about the flaws in existing systems and show greater precision in describing the problems that democratic institutions currently confront, rather than subsuming everything under the label of populism.
- Democracy assistance providers and the academic community need to collaborate more effectively on disseminating and showcasing the ‘evidence for the defence’ on how democracy benefits people.

2. GET CREATIVE—AND GET SERIOUS—ABOUT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

One of the drivers of populism is the reality that existing political systems concentrate a disproportionate share of power in the hands of a wealthy or well-connected few. It is therefore pertinent to support more open and participatory forms of government in order to address this.

For this strategy to work, new channels of political participation must both enlarge the space for citizen engagement in politics and expand the influence of citizens on policy development

and decision-making.

ACTION POINTS:

- Governments and parliaments should make use of a wider range of participatory mechanisms—such as consultation processes, sortition, citizen assemblies and other forms of direct democracy—to ensure that political participation goes beyond elections and democracy unfolds daily.
- Political parties should develop mechanisms for participation that reach beyond their membership base, recognizing that an increasing number of citizens want to engage with political parties and decision-making processes in a less permanent manner.
- Civil society should generate new ideas about how participation can take place and building coalitions and partnerships that bridge the gap between formal and informal institutions.
- Democracy assistance providers, civil society and academic researchers need to generate and disseminate new knowledge about how different forms of participation work and the impacts they have in different contexts.

3. INVEST IN CIVIC EDUCATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

Every democracy needs democrats. All citizens should be aware of and involved in democratic processes focused on their rights and duties. Education, whether embedded in existing schools or provided in dedicated democracy and civic education programmes, is an essential investment for a democratic society.

ACTION POINTS:

- Governments and democracy assistance providers should invest in civic education to promote democratic values, equipping citizens of all ages with the skills required to engage with information in a critical manner while remaining respectful of different ideas.
- Civil society or civic educators should provide the public with opportunities for direct exposure to real-life participation, emphasize the value of community service and increase digital media literacy.
- Governments and democracy assistance providers should collaborate with the media to ensure that civic education is effective and reaches a broad audience.

- Political parties and parliaments should invest in the skills of their own staff and members to ensure that political institutions use new communication channels, such as social media, in a way that strengthens and enriches democratic practice.
- Academic researchers should expand understanding of how new channels of communication affect democratic practice.

4. ENSURE INCLUSIVE REPRESENTATIVE MECHANISMS

No democracy is complete if it does not create and implement the necessary mechanisms to make it truly inclusive. This is especially true of mechanisms that address those who have been, and continue to be, marginalized from decision-making. In all cases the inclusion of these groups should go beyond ‘mere numbers’ to affording them real space and opportunities to make meaningful contribution and influence on policy-development and decision-making. Although much has been done, decisive steps are needed to secure inclusive democracies.

ACTION POINTS:

- Governments and political institutions, with the support of democracy assistance providers, should work to make representative mechanisms more inclusive. They should continue to invest in the inclusion of women and youth while expanding efforts to include other marginalized groups, such as indigenous communities and people with disabilities.
- Concrete steps in this direction should include reducing the financial and administrative barriers to political participation, such as the costs of running for political office. Political parties have a critical role to play in nominating, and supporting the campaigns of, a broader range of candidates across all levels of politics.
- Governments should consider options such as subsidizing the costs of election campaigns to increase diversity and competitiveness and creating formal mechanisms through which marginalized groups can contribute to the development of policies that affect them.

5. IMPROVE THE INTEGRITY AND TRANSPARENCY OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Corruption erodes public faith in representative institutions, and so fighting corruption plays an important role in addressing the underlying causes of populism. In addition, integrity and transparency are fundamental aspects of healthy democratic systems, and as such must always be on the agenda.

ACTION POINTS:

- Governments, civil society and democracy assistance providers should improve the integrity of political institutions by tackling corruption and increasing transparency.
- To this end, governments should design and implement enforceable frameworks to regulate the role of money in politics, making use of digital technology to ensure disclosure systems are visible to, and accessible by, the public. Where necessary, this should be paired with reforms that increase the probity of public procurement, reduce the influence of organized crime on politics, improve transparency in the banking system and empower oversight agencies to conduct their work in an effective manner.
- Political institutions, including parliaments and political parties, should establish and adhere to clear codes of ethics and be more proactive in disclosing information about how political decisions are made.
- The academic community should support this work through research that examines the causes and consequences of people's trust in or mistrust of political institutions.



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