

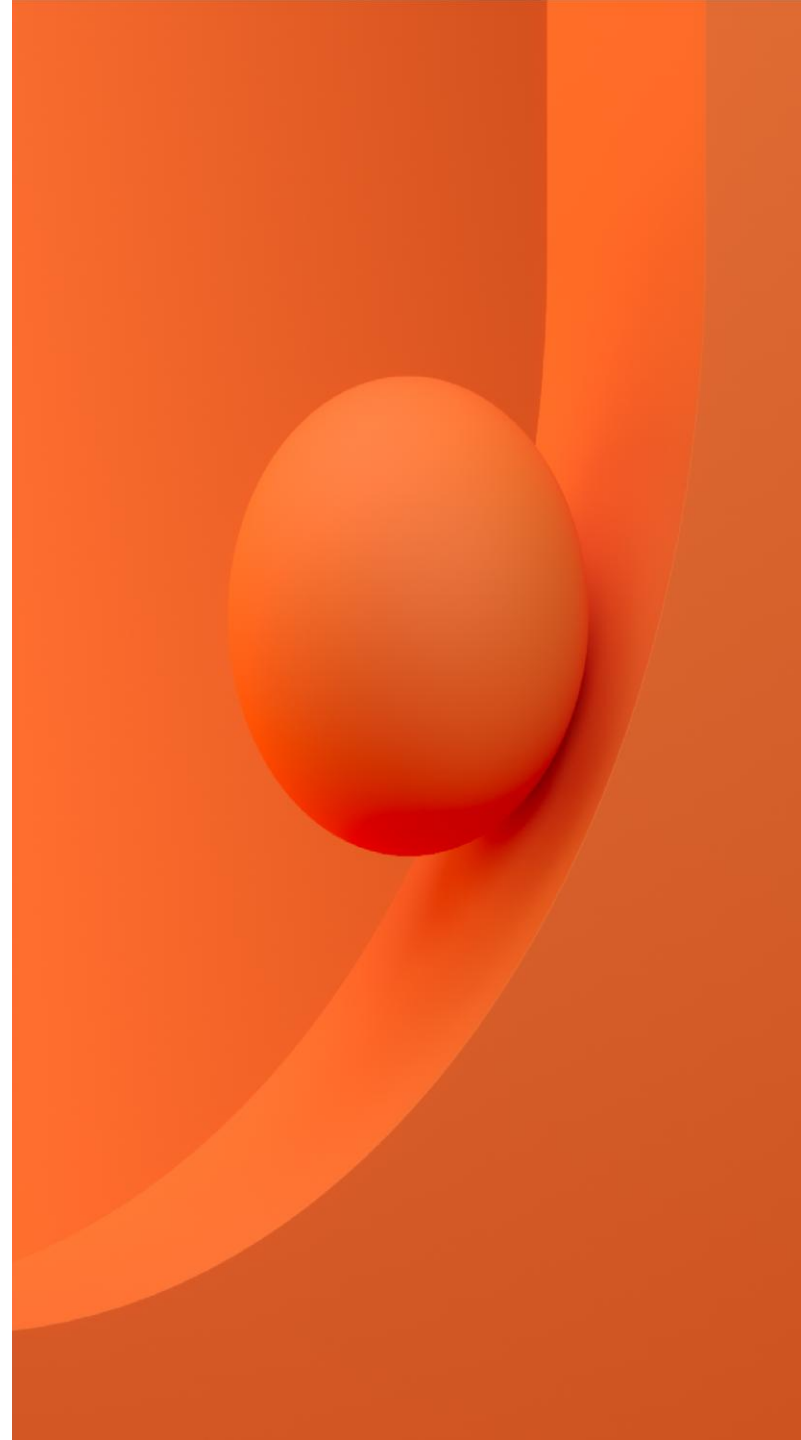


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# When Democracy Is Ailing: Declining Trust, Participation, and Resilience

The 4-th ERUA Science Cafe  
Democracy & Human Rights: Protecting Freedom  
and Dignity in Everyday Life  
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# Instead of intro

- When we talk about democracy today, we cannot be optimistic, but must be cautious.
- We live in times of local and global turbulence. As social researchers, we must, or at least try to, ***understand*** the causes of this turbulence. Or what and why is all this happening?
- Recently, *Journal of Democracy* cofounder Larry Diamond asked: “How can we restore support for democracy in the world?”  
„Democracies today remain in a potent and protracted recession, and they have retreated from the ideological struggle against autocracy. We can renew the world’s democratic momentum through *power, performance, and legitimacy*.“

# Larry Diamond on legitimacy and performance

- There is still a broad aspiration for democracy around the world. This belief in democracy remains sufficiently widespread to support the claim that democracy is a universal value, in the sense that people from diverse cultural traditions regard it as important to their lives.
- In Asia, support for democracy remains strong in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, and at least nominally so in Thailand and Indonesia.
- In Latin America, support for democracy has declined to 48 per cent from 65 per cent in 2010.
- Two-thirds of Africans across 36 countries continue to believe that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.
- According to S.M. Lipset, belief in the legitimacy of democracy may be shaped by culture and history, but it is also driven by economic development and the performance of present versus past regimes.
- A major reason why democracy has been eroding in this century is its poor economic and political performance.

# Larry Diamond on power

- Another reason for the retreat of freedom and democracy has been the shifting balance of global power and prestige.
- The retreat from democracy promotion — stemming from unsuccessful U.S. state-building efforts in Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, the polarizing effects of social media, and various stresses of globalization — reflects a broader erosion of national self-confidence and resolve in established democracies.
- The power of the Western democracies has been fading. The G7 countries' share of global GDP has declined since 2002 from 42 to 30 percent, while the share of the global economy accounted for by the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa plus others) has risen from 19 to 32 percent.
- See: Diamond, L. (2024). Power, Performance, and Legitimacy. *Journal of Democracy* 35(2), 5-22. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a922830>.

# Democracy and human rights

- Democracy and human rights fail to play a vital role in shaping contemporary societies, often based on the idea that these principles have become largely formal or superficial—enshrined in laws and rhetoric, but ineffective in terms of genuine civic participation, the rule of law, inclusion, or social justice.
- This disconnect contributes to declining trust, eroding resilience in communities, and a failure to foster truly inclusive and respectful societies.

# A threat to democracy: from outside or inside

- J.D. Vance, in his high-profile February 2025 speech at the Munich Security Conference, focusing on Europe but with implications for broader Western democratic systems, argued that the greatest threat to democracy comes not from external forces like Russia or China, but "from within" – a retreat from fundamental values such as free speech and genuine popular sovereignty.
- Vance highlighted examples where European governments and institutions allegedly suppress dissent: censoring social media, raiding citizens for online comments, convicting individuals for religious expressions (e.g., Quran burnings or silent prayer near clinics), and even annulling elections (e.g., in Romania) under pretexts like misinformation or foreign interference.
- He accused leaders of fearing their own voters, using "democracy" as a label to justify censorship and exclusion of populist or dissenting voices, while ignoring public concerns on issues like migration.

# Listening to citizens' voices

- In Vance's view, true democracy requires listening to citizens' voices without "firewalls" or suppression and failing to do so undermines legitimacy.
- He argued that democratic values become meaningless when leaders prioritise elite control over the will of the people, making society fragile rather than resilient.
- This is consistent with the argument that official commitments to human rights (e.g., freedom of expression, freedom of conscience) are not upheld in practice, which undermines inclusion and respect.

# Trends from the European Social Survey (ESS)

- The European Social Survey, a high-quality, cross-national study tracking attitudes since 2002, provides empirical backing for perceptions of decline in key democratic elements.
- While overall support for democracy as an ideal remains high (e.g., mean scores above 8/10 for living in a democratically governed country, and strong endorsement of core liberal elements like free/fair elections and equal treatment by courts), evaluations of how democracy functions in practice reveal significant gaps.

# Democratic deficit

- ESS Round 10 (2020-22, with comparisons to Round 6 around 2012-13) shows a persistent mismatch between aspirations and reality.
- Citizens rate elements like rule of law (courts treating everyone equally) highly in importance (~9/10), but in evaluations swing around 5-6/10 in many countries, with notable drop in rule of law perceptions, especially in Eastern Europe.
- Broader elements – such as government reducing income differences, protecting against poverty, or enabling direct citizen input (e.g., referendums) – show even larger gaps, with lower importance but critically low evaluations.

# Trust in institutions and social trust

- Institutional trust has eroded due to crises (economic, pandemic, cost-of-living), fuelling polarisation and populism.
- Related surveys (often cross-referenced with ESS) indicate declining trust in national governments and parliaments in many countries, with generational shifts – younger Europeans increasingly sceptical.
- Social trust (interpersonal) also ties into this, as lower trust correlates with reduced civic engagement.

# Civic participation and inclusion

- While direct long-term declines in participation aren't uniform, low satisfaction correlates with apathy, lower voter turnout in some contexts, and disillusionment.
- Evaluations are particularly critical for social justice aspects (reducing inequalities) and direct/populist elements (people's will prevailing), suggesting formal democracy fails to deliver inclusion or justice, leading to less resilient communities.

# Insights from the International Social Survey Programme

- The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) "Role of Government" module provides a valuable global perspective (covering dozens of countries across continents in each wave) on public attitudes toward government responsibilities, spending priorities, state intervention in the economy, civil liberties, political trust, efficacy, corruption, and related themes.
- Unlike the European Social Survey (ESS), which is Europe-focused and often highlights democratic deficits in satisfaction with how democracy works, the ISSP Role of Government series (waves in 1985, 1990, 1996, 2006, and 2016, with a new wave in development for 2026) offers longer-term cross-national trends, including non-European countries like the US, Australia, Japan, Israel, China, India and several in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

# Government responsibilities and social justice/inclusion

- Publics in many countries continue to endorse strong government roles in reducing income differences, providing health care, education, unemployment benefits, and old-age pensions. In repeated countries (e.g., Australia, Germany, UK, US), preferences for government spending on these areas have often been stable or increased slightly over time, particularly post-2008 financial crisis and into 2016.
- In some analyses covering 1985–2016, preferences align with welfare regime types (e.g., higher expectations in social-democratic vs. liberal regimes) and show little erosion – sometimes slight upticks post-2008 crisis due to economic insecurity.
- This contrasts with perceptions of actual performance – many respondents view governments as failing to deliver on reducing inequalities or protecting against poverty, contributing to a sense that formal commitments to social justice are not translating into resilient, inclusive outcomes.

# Political trust, efficacy, and responsiveness

- Trends show a clear decline from earlier waves to 2016. Political trust (in politicians, parliament, civil servants) and external efficacy (e.g., "people like me have no say in what government does") trended downward in many long-running countries from the 1990s/2000s into 2016.
- Items on government responsiveness (whether it pays attention to ordinary people vs. elites/big business) often register low or deteriorating scores by 2016. Internal efficacy (belief in personal influence on politics) and political interest show mixed but frequently declining patterns in Western democracies. Corruption perceptions and views on institutional fairness (e.g., courts treating everyone equally) same negative trends. In the 2016 wave, conducted amid rising populism, data showed heightened scepticism about elite responsiveness, with many feeling "people like me" have little say compared to big business, parties, or wealthy interests.
- This echoes ESS findings on institutional trust erosion and the "democratic deficit" (high **importance** placed on elements like rule of law/equal treatment, but middling-to-low **evaluations of reality**). Overall, ISSP data lend cross-national, longitudinal support to the argument: **while ideals endure, practical mechanisms of democracy and rights increasingly fall short in sustaining vibrant, inclusive communities.**

# Civil liberties and rule of law

- Support for civil liberties (free speech, protest rights) remains broadly high, but questions on balancing security/privacy or rule of law vs. conscience show tensions.
- Some analyses note stable or context-dependent support, but in post-2016 interpretations (linked to global events), there's evidence of publics perceiving threats to freedoms or uneven application of law, aligning with arguments that the rule of law has become more formal than substantive in practice.
- Perceptions of rule of law application (e.g., equal treatment, corruption in public service) vary by country but often indicate uneven or declining confidence compared to earlier waves in certain regions (e.g., post-communist or crisis-affected countries).

# Broader democratic elements

- Items on *political interest, efficacy, corruption perceptions, and protest legitimacy* indicate growing disillusionment in many societies.
- For instance, perceptions of corruption in public service and low expectations of fair/honest elections or government correction of mistakes persist or worsen in trend data.
- This supports the view that democratic values (participation, inclusion) feel performative—enshrined but not fostering genuine community resilience or respect.

# Comparison to ESS trends and broader argument

- Similar to ESS data (persistent gaps between *ideal democratic elements* and *evaluations*, declining trust, especially post-crises), ISSP Role of Government trends show:
- High abstract support for democratic principles and government roles in justice/inclusion.
- Declining satisfaction with delivery, trust, and efficacy – contributing to polarisation, populism, and the sense that formal democracy/human rights frameworks fail to build inclusive, resilient societies.
- Global coverage adds nuance: Declines are not uniform (stronger in some Western/Eastern European and Anglo-Saxon countries; more mixed elsewhere), but the pattern of "hollowed-out" institutions resonates widely.
- In the 2016 wave (latest fully available as of early 2026), these dynamics were already evident amid economic insecurity and political upheaval, reinforcing critiques that democratic/human rights commitments have become largely rhetorical without addressing core failures in participation, equitable law application, and social justice.

# Insights from the World Values Survey (WVS)

- The World Values Survey (WVS), running since 1981 with seven completed waves (Wave 1: 1981–1984; Wave 2: 1990–1994; Wave 3: 1995–1998; Wave 4: 1999–2004; Wave 5: 2005–2009; Wave 6: 2010–2014; Wave 7: 2017–2022), offers the broadest global coverage among major value surveys – over 100 countries/territories across waves, representing most of the world's population.
- It tracks long-term shifts in values, beliefs, and attitudes toward democracy, government, trust, participation, and related themes via repeated items, enabling trend analysis similar to the ISSP Role of Government module.
- WVS data (including the trend file 1981–2022) reveals patterns that align with – and often amplify – the concerns from ESS and ISSP about declining civic participation, rule of law effectiveness, inclusion, social justice, and the "hollowing out" of democratic/human rights commitments into formal rather than substantive roles.

# Support for democracy as an ideal vs. satisfaction with how it works

- Abstract support for democracy remains high and relatively stable globally – majorities in most waves view it as a "good" or "very good" way to govern, with preferences for democratic systems over alternatives (e.g., strong leader, military rule, technocracy) often enduring or even rising in some contexts.
- However, satisfaction with democracy in practice shows a clear decline. From the mid-1990s (when satisfaction was higher, around the post-Cold War peak) to recent years, dissatisfaction has risen significantly – reaching all-time highs in many analyses by the late 2010s/early 2020s.
- Global dissatisfaction increased by about 10 percentage points (from ~48% to ~57–58% in population-weighted samples of democracies), with sharper rises post-2005 amid economic crises, populism, and events like the 2008 financial crash.
- In developed democracies (Europe, North America, etc.), satisfaction fell from majorities (~two-thirds) in the 1990s to minorities today. Large populous democracies (e.g., US, Brazil, Mexico, UK) show some of the sharpest drops, with US dissatisfaction rising over a third in one generation. This mirrors the ESS/ ISSP "democratic deficit".

# Government responsibilities, welfare, and social justice

- Items on government vs. individual responsibility (e.g., for welfare, reducing inequalities, health/education provision) show persistent or high expectations for state roles in many societies, often stable across waves. In Wave 7 (2017–2022), publics in diverse contexts still favour government intervention for social protection and equity.
- However, gaps between desired responsibilities and perceived performance widen – similar to ISSP/ESS – fuelling views that commitments to social justice/inclusion are formal rhetoric rather than effective outcomes.
- Economic insecurity and crises increase disillusionment with delivery.

# Political trust, confidence in institutions, and efficacy

- Confidence in core institutions (government, parliament, civil service, justice system) has trended downward in many countries over waves, particularly from the 1990s/2000s onward. Political trust and efficacy (belief that ordinary people can influence politics) show erosion, especially in Western and some transitional societies.
- Interpersonal/social trust has also declined in places like the US (halving since the 1970s in related data). Recent studies link lower trust/happiness to rising populism and polarisation.
- This supports arguments that formal rule of law and participation mechanisms feel unresponsive – governments seen as captured by elites, big business, or corruption – undermining community respect and inclusion.

# Civic participation and broader democratic elements

- While direct participation (e.g., protest legitimacy, political interest) varies, overall trends indicate growing disillusionment.
- Support for emancipative values (self-expression, tolerance, gender equality) has risen long-term, underpinning democracy's appeal, but this coexists with declining trust/efficacy and rising preferences in some waves for "strong leaders" who bypass parliaments/elections (up notably in recent data).
- Global democratic quality perceptions have declined since the mid-2000s (concentrated in populous cases), though stable when weighted equally across countries.

# Comparison of WVS to ISSP Role of Government trends

- **Similarities:** Both show stable/high abstract support for welfare/social justice roles and democratic ideals, but declining trust, efficacy, responsiveness, and satisfaction with practice.
- Gaps between ideals and reality persist/widen, contributing to perceptions of hollowed-out institutions that fail to foster resilient, inclusive communities.
- **Differences/Nuances:** WVS's longer span (four decades) and near-global coverage highlight broader, more persistent declines in trust/satisfaction than ISSP's focus on role-of-government specifics.
- WVS emphasises value shifts (e.g., toward emancipative values) as potential democratic foundations, yet practical erosion dominates recent waves.
- Declines are not uniform- stronger in developed/Western contexts and populous democracies; some "islands of contentment" (e.g., Nordic countries) keep the trend with high satisfaction.

# Democracy in Crisis: The Great Deficit

Contrast the high global support for democratic ideals with the sharp decline in practical satisfaction and trust.

## HIGH ABSTRACT IDEALS



Global support for democratic governance remains strong (8/10)

**Rule of Law Importance Ratings: 9/10**

## THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

**GLOBAL DISSATISFACTION IS RISING SHARPLY**

+10% since 2005, reaching all-time highs in the early 2020s.



## FAILING REALITY



**Satisfaction Scores in Practice: 5/10**

Satisfaction with its actual performance is plummeting.

### TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IS ERODING

Economic and pandemic crises have fueled skepticism toward parliaments, courts, and civil servants, especially among younger generations.



### ADDRESS THE INTERNAL THREAT TO FREEDOM



True resilience requires protecting free speech and popular sovereignty against elite control and the suppression of dissent.



### FORMAL RHETORIC VS. SUBSTANTIVE JUSTICE



PERFORMATIVE

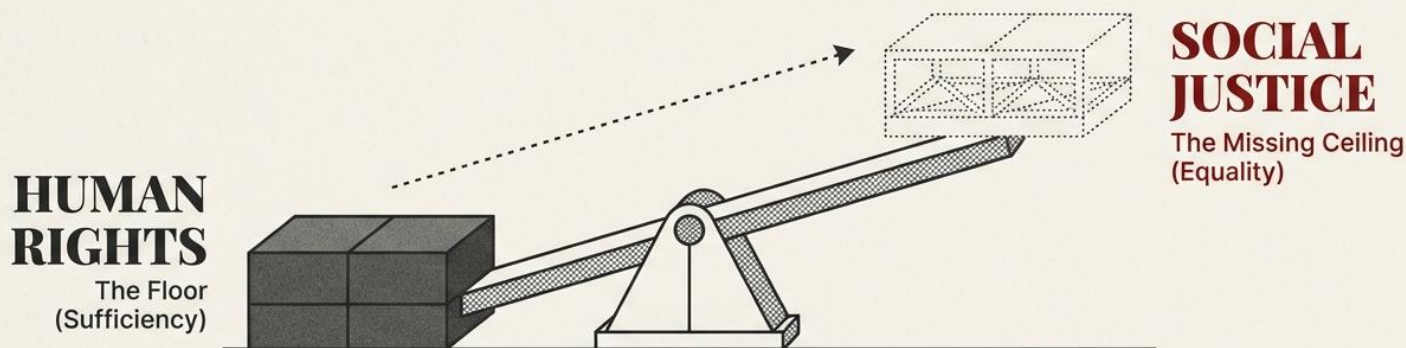
Democracy feels "performative" when governments fail to deliver on high public expectations for welfare, healthcare, and equality.



SUBSTANTIVE

# Essential, But Not Enough

Restoring the ambition of equality to save democratic solidarity.



**We have stigmatized state repression.  
We must now stigmatize material hierarchy.**

Source: Moyn, Not Enough (2018)  
NotebookLM

## A few words on human rights

*Samuel Moyn (2018) Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World (2018):* Human rights, focused on securing enough or everyone, are essential - but they are not enough.

Human rights rose to global prominence in the 1970s, as neoliberalism began dismantling the welfare state. Moyn suggests that human rights are not the cause of economic inequality, but they have been its "*powerless companion*," providing a moral language that focuses on individual abuses while remaining silent about the structural economic shifts that concentrated wealth at the top.

# Few ideas for future studies

- **Generational effects:** Do younger cohorts (Gen Z/Millennials) show sharper disillusionment with formal democracy, and does this vary by welfare regime or crisis exposure?
- **Digital divides:** Link declining trust/efficacy to media/internet use (ESS items), misinformation exposure, or online censorship perceptions, testing if social media amplifies the "internal threats" narrative (à la J.D. Vance).
- **“Islands of resilience“:** Nordic high-trust cases and analyse what institutional or cultural factors buffer against democratic decline, e.g., strong welfare delivery, direct participation mechanisms, or high social trust.
- Larry Diamond once again:
- *If we want to restore global democratic momentum, we need to prove something. We must prove that democracy, with freedom and law-based rule to set against autocracy’s repression and arbitrariness, is a morally and practically superior form of government, and indeed the only form of government that has assured or can assure human dignity, peace, and prosperity.*
- See: Diamond, L. (2024). Power, Performance, and Legitimacy. *Journal of Democracy* 35(2), 5-22. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a922830>.