

# EPIISODES' SCRIPTS



## EPISODE 1 - POLITICAL TRUST: A THING OF THE PAST?

### INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Our story actually starts... at the end. Which sounds strange, right? Because what we're really trying to figure out is how it all began.

The "end" I'm talking about is a democracy that's showing its cracks, a system that looks like it's struggling to hold itself together and where trust between citizens and institutions seems to be fading. But what does it really mean to trust, or not to trust, the system that governs our lives?

I'm Eva, a European Union policy professional working with TEPESA. That's the Trans European Policy Studies Association. We are a network of research institutes from across Europe. And in my work, I get to see up close how the loss of political trust can really shake the foundations of democracy.

Democracy Cracks is a six-part podcast produced as part of ActEU, a Horizon Europe research project looking at how trust and legitimacy shape democracy in Europe today.

In this series, we'll take a closer look at those cracks and tell the story of democracy itself. You'll hear from people who study these questions, live through them, and try to think of new ways to make democracy stronger. And we'll do it without jargon, just with honest conversations about what's happening, and what we could change.

In Part 1, we're setting the scene. We'll ask: what does political trust really mean? Why does it matter so much for the health of democracy? And how are changing levels of trust shaping the world we live in right now? So let's rewind. Let's go back to where it all began and start piecing together the bigger picture.

### WHAT IS POLITICAL TRUST?

**Eva:** All across Europe, and beyond, we're seeing democracies under pressure. Frequent changes in leadership, turn to populist parties, big-scale personal data breaches, corruption scandals that seem to never end... It's easy to look at all that and think, "Well, we just cannot trust politics anymore". But before jumping to that conclusion, it's worth asking: what do we actually mean by political trust? Can any of us really define it clearly? To help unpack that, I spoke with two researchers who study these questions from different angles. Let's start with Alexander Hoppe. He is a Lecturer and Chair of European Politics at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany.

**Alex Hoppe:** Well, I mean, political trust is very much related to trust as we know it. So if you say you trust someone, then in the end, you would kind of believe that this person acts in your interest or not against your interest with, let's say, benevolence towards you. And I would say political trust is exactly that towards political actors or political institutions.

So it very much is what we have on a personal level towards political institutions. I think you can say that. And why is it important? Because it grants legitimacy to the system, but also to people that govern us, who give power to people. And our trust gives them legitimacy, but also kind of political stability. Also compliance, right? So if we trust politicians and the institution and the system, we are more likely to comply with the rules they put up. Well, if we don't trust them, we are not very likely to comply.

**Eva:** Okay, what I find interesting here is also, and you said, it's at the personal level, right?

**Alex Hoppe:** First of all, yes, trust is something that we have on the personal level, right? You trust your friends or not. mean, if they are friends, trust them. Political trust can be directed both towards persons, towards actors. So you can trust, I don't know, the prime minister on a personal level, even though you don't likely don't know him or her in person. But it also is an institutional issue. So it's also about trusting the parliament, trusting, I don't know, the criminal court, whatever kind of political institution there is. So it has both dimensions directed towards people. But it's also directed towards institutions or the system as such. So it's both. But what I mean is the sentiment is not too different from the sentiment we have personally towards our direct personal environment.

**Eva:** So, for Alex, political trust is about believing: it's a belief that the system and the people who run it don't act against you. It's what keeps democracies stable and working even when we're not happy with every decision politicians make. But trust isn't just a belief. According to Daniela Braun, Professor at Saarland University in Germany and ActEU Scientific Lead, it's also a relationship: something that can grow or break, depending on how citizens and governments treat each other. Let's hear how she defines it.

**Daniela Braun:** From a theoretical point of view, trust might be even more important than political engagement, but from a personal perspective, it's always that when we think of democracy, we think of how can I best participate in a democracy? But at the same time, trust is the main concept behind democracy because we need a certain level of trust to make democracy work. What I try to also always bring as an example for trust, imagine for example a government who has a very difficult trust relationship with its citizenry because for example things did not really work because we have a lot of corruption in our country, then this government cannot take decisions only because there might be these issues of trust. So this government always has to justify the decisions that the government makes and this is completely the contrary if we have a situation of high trust. A government which is highly trusted by its citizenry does not need to justify every decision the government makes but really can built on this trust relationship. It reduces in a way the workload for both sides, so for the citizenry but also for the politicians and therefore trust as a relationship is just very, it's the most basic concept of democracy.

**Eva:** I really love that way of putting it. Trust makes democracy easier, more efficient, frictionless. When trust is high, decisions come faster, and no one needs constant reassurance. But when that trust starts to crumble, everything is more difficult. Every law, every promise, every statement turns into a battle for acceptance. So trust isn't just a "nice-to-have". It's the oxygen of democracy, it's what keeps it breathing and running, even when we disagree.

## CAN DEMOCRACY SURVIVE WITHOUT TRUST?

**Eva:** But if trust is really the oxygen of democracy, the question is: can democracy still survive when that oxygen runs low?

**Alex Hoppe:** No, no. So it could not function without it. Actually, not only democracy, think no political system could function without political trust by the, let's say, relevant people towards the governing elite. So also autocrats need a certain clear tale to trust them because otherwise they wouldn't keep them in power. The question is how much do we need? How much do we need by which people and how much distrust or mistrust can we accept? And in how far is, you might call it blind trust towards political actors and institutions actually good for democracy? Or do we need some kind of skepticism? Which I would say we do.

**Eva:** I find that really fascinating. Even authoritarian systems depend on some kind of trust. It might be trust in the idea that they'll keep things stable or provide security, for instance. But in a democracy, it's different. It's not just about following orders, it's about believing that the system actually works, that our voices count. And, as Alex said, democracy also needs a bit of mistrust. That feeling of doubt that makes us keep asking questions and holding people accountable. If we trust too much, we can get complacent. But if there isn't enough, everything starts to fall apart. So this might be a good moment to talk about the difference between mistrust and distrust. We tend to use them like they mean the same thing... but they don't really. Here is Alex's explanation.

**Alex Hoppe:** I think it's a critical difference for the functioning of our systems also currently. So mistrust or what we call mistrust is kind of a questioning attitude, a kind of critical attitude. Maybe you could say constructive skepticism in the sense that there's, you are open to trusting people, but you do not automatically trust, for example, political actors. So you might trust democracy, you might trust parliament as an institution, but the actors you might be critical about and what we believe or many believe this mistrust does is actually triggering participation. So you mistrust and that might lead to you informing yourself, watching what people do and participating where you can or where you want in order to kind of make sure that things are going the way you would want them to go and that people in power behave the way you would want them to behave. And that is totally different from distrust because distrust is the kind of very settled belief that the people in power or politicians in general or the political elite is untrustworthy. And always kind of acting against the best interest of you or the citizens or the nation or whatever, you know, entity. And that is a big problem because while mistrust can also be satisfied in the sense that you participate, you inform yourself and you see that things are going well and that political actors act the way they are supposed to be, you can turn mistrust into trust. Distrust is very difficult to fight because, as I said, it's a set of belief from the very beginning that political authorities act against your will. That is detrimental for democracy.

**Eva:** I know this might sound a bit abstract, but the main point is that we can still trust AND remain cautious. No one is saying that we should blindly trust anyone. That's exactly why this distinction matters: that a bit of mistrust is actually good for democracy. And we see it across Europe. In some places, institutions still enjoy high levels of confidence, and that doesn't mean they don't face problems, but in others, trust has almost completely broken down.

## TRUST IN EUROPE

**Eva:** Daniela has more interesting input on where we stand and what these differences tell us about the state of trust in Europe.

**Daniela Braun:** We really have different groups of countries. We have countries where we have even a slight increase over time and we have countries where we have a decrease over time and we cannot see that this will be resolved in the near future. And to give you just an idea on some of these countries, so there are countries like, for example, and this might be now surprising in particular for German audiences, there was no decline of trust in Germany during the last, I don't know, five years or so.

Germany, Belgium, Austria are actually countries which experience high and stable levels of trust when it comes to their national parliaments. There are then some countries which experience the decline of trust, like for example, Ireland and Portugal, and we would explain this because there was this severe economic crisis. But then, they recovered, so the levels of trust recovered over time. There are other countries who really show clearly decreasing levels of trust over time without a clear recovery, and this is in particular Cyprus, but also Greece, Italy, and Spain. So we have a differentiated set of countries all over Europe, and I guess the crisis situations and how political actors in these countries were able to deal with this particular crisis had also done an impact on political trust.

**Eva:** So there is clearly more to this story than the idea that political trust is collapsing everywhere at once. I know numbers can sound a bit dry, but here they really help us see the bigger picture. If we look at trust in the EU between 2004 and 2021, we see a decline of around 10 percentage points in the EU – from just under 60% to about 50%. This is a reality, but it's also only the first layer. When we dig deeper, we see something much more complex. After the financial and debt crises, and in other instances such as after the early measures against the Covid-19 pandemic, trust started to recover in many countries. And I insist on many! In Greece, Italy, Spain, Czechia, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia, trust partly bounced back. And in Austria, Germany Ireland, Portugal, it actually returned to where it was before! This leaves open a big question

**Daniela Braun:** So do we see actually such a decline in trust? You would say it's something that we have the feeling that we clearly see that there is such a decline of trust. But if you go back in time, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, everybody always had the feeling journalists had the feeling, but also political scientists had the feeling that there is such a decline of trust. And at the same time, it was never that clear. So there is a very important researcher, Pippa Norris, and she wrote different books about this relationship between the citizenry and the state. And her main insight was that there are trendless fluctuations over time which means there are up and downs, but there's no clear decline. And we can actually experience right now exactly the same. So all over Europe, if you look at the different European countries, EU member states in our case, then we do not see that all over Europe there is a decline of trust.

**Eva:** Ah! I feel like we just busted a myth! We are not looking at a story of universal decline, but one of unevenness. Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean that there hasn't been a steady decrease of political trust in several countries since the early 2000s, and that's something we absolutely need to take seriously. But the picture is more complex than a simple, downward line.

Every European country actually experiences trust differently. Because trust is shaped by history, culture, geography, crises, and also by how governments respond when things go wrong. In other words, there's no law of nature saying that trust has to keep falling. It's not doomed to disappear.

## WHO DO WE TRUST?

**Eva:** So we have talked about what trust really is, why it matters, and how the situation is much more nuanced than we might think. But now, I'd like to add one more layer of complexity. We have focused a lot on trust in the EU, but remember, we live in what is called a "multilevel governance system". That's a complicated word that means that authority is spread across different levels, from your local mayor, to your national government, parliament, courts, and then all the way up to the EU. For a long time, researchers thought people didn't really tell these levels apart, that trust in "the system" was basically the same everywhere. But that's not quite true, and that's what Alex explains.

**Alex Hoppe:** There is a difference across governance levels, right, that you refer to and what you refer to I think is in our multi-level political system in the European Union, where we have the EU level down to local levels, many kind of assumed that political trust is towards politicians or political institutions in general and people don't differentiate between the different levels and that again is a result of the ActEU research that we see differences. So whether or not citizens of one member state trust the national government is not a good determinant of whether they would also trust the European Parliament or the European Commission. We see again different trends, differences between countries.

**Eva:** But is there a level where there is more trust than the others?

**Alex Hoppe:** Not generally. It depends again on different countries. In some countries we see that people trust their national institutions more than the EU institutions. In other countries this can be difficult. See, so, for example, we know from research on newer member states that the trust they do not have in the national elites they kind of give to the EU and European elites because they think this is the level that can actually help improving democracy at the national level. And it can be the other way around as well.

**Eva:** I feel like we need to dig a bit deeper here. You might remember the financial and debt crises, also mentioned by Daniela, and how some countries came under enormous pressure. Where austerity and unemployment hit the hardest, like in Greece, Spain, or Portugal, Brussels was often seen as responsible, and trust in the EU really dropped. But it wasn't just the EU that took the hit. National institutions suffered too. Take Greece, for example. Trust in the government fell to 20% in the years after the crisis. It later climbed back to around 30-35%. That was in 2021. But that's still far from the roughly 60% it had in 2004. What I mean is that it's never the same everywhere; trust rises and falls depending on the issues, and on how it's handled. Context really is everything when it comes to understanding why people trust one level of governance more than another.

But the positive fact that trust can recover shouldn't make us forget about some less positive trends. For example, national parliaments and governments represent a level where trust has been steadily deteriorating since 2004. That's a reality.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** That's where we'll leave it for now. Just like trust is the foundation of any meaningful relationship, political trust is fundamental to our relationship with the system that governs us - democracy. It is so present in our daily lives that it's easy to have an opinion about it. And in times as challenging as ours, it's also easy to think that trust is declining everywhere, maybe even dying.

But political trust is not fixed nor uniform. It has changed and will keep changing over time, space, and circumstances. We could see it as a story of constant negotiation, rather than one of constant decline. A negotiation between citizens and their representatives, between ideas and disappointments, between hopes and doubts.

Maybe that's why democracy is so fragile: because it's alive, and it relies on trust that has to be earned and given, again and again. Just like oxygen: invisible, often taken for granted, yet, clearly essential.

I know that saying "it's more complicated than we think" is not usually very helpful. But in this case, it's a sign of hope. Because when research shows that trust is not simply disappearing, that citizens differentiate between governance levels, and that context matters, we actually regain agency.

But more on this soon. For the time being, let's continue our explorations of Europe's democracy cracks. Variations and declines in trust are real. And I don't know about you, but when it happens, it makes me feel like everything is heavier. Like every promise needs proof, every decision leads to more fights... and somewhere along the way, I get... detached.

So what happens then? What are the roots of this disillusionment? And who, if anyone, is responsible? This is what we'll explore in the second episode of Democracy Cracks.

Before we close, a quick reminder: Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe ActEU project. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind this series. If you are curious about the data, studies, or research that inform what you've heard today, you will find all the references in the episode description. And if anything in this episode made you think, smile, question, or disagree, please reach out! I'm always happy to hear from you. See you next time!

## EPISODE 2 - ARE POLITICIANS LYING OR HAVE WE STOPPED LISTENING?

### INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Hi and welcome back to Democracy Cracks. In this mini-series, we examine the fractures in our democratic systems and what we need to do to heal them. In the first episode, we looked at what political trust actually is, why it matters so much, and we discovered that the picture is not as bad as we often think.

Today, we're moving one step further into the story to search for the moment where trust begins to slip. I bet you have already heard, or maybe you even said it yourself, that "politicians lie" or that they "don't listen anymore". Disillusionment grows, it accumulates, and before we know it, it shapes how entire societies relate to democracy.

But is this the whole story? In this episode, we're digging into the roots of disillusionment: where it starts, how it spreads, and who – if anyone – is to be blamed.

### THE FEELING OF DISILLUSIONMENT - WHY BOTHER?

**Eva:** When I think about political disillusionment, the first image that comes to my mind is a shared house. You live there, you get along with your flatmates, you pay your share of the rent, you follow the rules... so of course you get super frustrated when something goes wrong. Imagine, for instance, if the roof starts to leak. You ask for help, but no one really answers, or at best, you're asked to wait – so clearly, everything gets worse. Then it's only natural to start wondering "why am I even trying?".

The frustration is very real also outside the metaphor. Political disillusionment is not a buzzword; it's the slow accumulation of daily disappointments people feel about the way they're governed. So, disillusionment is personal long before it becomes a political problem. And we see it clearly in the data. A 2025 IPSOS survey shows extremely low satisfaction with democracy in the countries surveyed. In Italy and Spain only 26-27% of people say they're satisfied, and it's even worse in Croatia and France where it drops to 18-19%.

And this came up again and again in my conversations, like the one with Kelsey Beltz, Head of Global Partnerships at The Good Lobby.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I think there's a really dangerous perception that if you made a choice or if you voted, if you participated in something, people don't listen. People feel like they are asking for one thing and then they get the opposite. And that can very quickly disillusion people because then they either say, well, I don't care anymore. Why would I put in the effort to say what I think if nobody's going to listen. So I think the disillusionment comes from not seeing your decisions respected.

**Eva:** So yes, disillusionment is emotional, but it is not imaginary. It comes from somewhere very real and it's something we can measure. My voice doesn't matter, nothing changes anyway – overtime that feeling settles in. For example, 49% of French people, 76% of Polish people, and 60% of Spaniards see the lack of accountability among politicians as the top threat to democracy.

The impression that leaders are not on our side can progressively shift to the impression that they're not accountable for their mistakes at all. And that brings us to the next question: if so many people feel unheard or misled, is the real problem a lack of honesty and responsibility from those in power?

## THE ACCOUNTABILITY GAP

**Eva:** Let's go back to our shared house for a moment. How are we supposed to know who has to fix things when they break? No one is taking responsibility, but everybody is definitely angry.

We already talked about the fact that not everything can or should be perfect all the time. Democracy is the organisation of disagreement, after all. But when problems pile up, when promises are not delivered, and when answers stay vague, it's not only responsibility that's floating in the air. It's also the conviction that not everybody is accountable to the system.

And it's not just a few scandals. It's about the widespread belief that corruption is still everywhere. And by widespread, I mean 69% of Europeans in 2025. These are perceptions, yes, and we would need an entire other podcast to talk about the reality of corruption. Though let me just drop here that Transparency International recently estimated that corruption costs the 990 billion euros every year. The real issue is that this perception is tied to another one, that corruption cases are not pursued sufficiently, or that efforts to address corruption are not effective or applied impartially.

That's what the accountability gap feels like in politics. And apparently, we are not the only ones thinking that.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I think accountability is a huge problem. It's another reason that at The Good Lobby we work on transparency and accountability. We've seen so many snap elections. Like, how many snap elections have we seen? Too many. In the last 12 months, the more the politicians start to think short term. They were already thinking short term when it was even just five-year election cycles or two-year election cycles. So if there's this constant threat that every six months a government's going to collapse or you're going to have a no confidence vote, you're going to have to have a new prime minister, people are really kind of thinking only about themselves is how I would frame it.

**Eva:** This survival mode that Kelsey talks about has consequences. And it's not just about the headlines. ActEU asked people how they would react even to so-called “minor” dishonest acts, take for instance a public lie or a hidden favour, and the results were clear. Even these make people see a politician as less likable, less representative, less worthy of support. People do notice, and trust takes a hit.

I know many of you are probably thinking about a very famous US elected representative who doesn't shy away from blatantly lying or sharing fake news - and who still got elected and remains supported. This is because perceived trustworthiness does not automatically translate into electoral punishment, for reasons that would take far too long to unpack here.

But lack of accountability is only one part of the story. Ophélie Omnes, an independent specialist in public affairs and diversity, equity, and inclusion, has more to say.

**Ophélie Omnes:** When you have so many different steps of the process where there is this discrepancy between what the people is showing it wants and what people in power are deciding to implement, I think is where the gap grows bigger and bigger. And I think that there is this like political honesty that you should have as a decent politician, that we are lacking a little bit in the people who are stepping forward to have responsibilities.

**Eva:** What's interesting here is that the problem grows from this discrepancy between what people express through their participation and what political leaders, and even democracy, actually deliver. The accountability gap as such is not abstract; it's evident in our daily lives. It's when trust is expected, but doesn't feel reciprocated. I can't stop wondering, though, are we expecting too much? Where does frustration meet reality?

## IS ALL OF THIS JUSTIFIED?

**Eva:** Maybe I'm stretching this house metaphor, but bear with me. If your house needs repairs that take forever, or if the landlord keeps ignoring you, of course, the frustration is real. And yet, if we take a step back, not everything in the house is falling apart. Think, for instance, of the solar panels installed just a few years ago that quietly cut your energy bill.

Our democracies are a bit like that. Definitely not perfect, sometimes painfully slow, but not entirely dysfunctional either. So the question becomes: is all this disillusionment actually justified? According to Kelsey, part of it absolutely is.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I think a lot of disillusionment actually is justified. I mean, I myself tend to be fairly, shall we say, pessimistic in certain realms. I don't know if we've delivered on what we wanted. I think we've delivered on certain aspects, but then there's other things that are very emotional for people that don't feel like they've been delivered. I think that the EU is at a real crossroads at this moment in terms of can it, and it's not an enviable position, like I don't have the perfect advice, but you know, can you deliver on climate and also economic growth at the same time? I think it's hard to deliver on every policy aspect all the time, nobody has a perfect delivery, but I think we're living in a very polarized and fractured society, and that's making it harder because you can pretty much only deliver for like half of the people at any given moment, and then when you try to make a compromise, both halves hate you. So it's kind of a zero-sum game.

**Eva:** This is crucial, because for many people, disillusionment doesn't start with institutions but with their everyday life. For many people, it's rooted in material conditions. In ActEU, we have asked people across Europe how they react when they struggle financially. And the result? People who say they have trouble getting by are much less likely to trust institutions. And this is not only about the actual number in the bank account at the end of the month, it's also about the feeling of not making ends meet.

Everybody has felt it in recent years: housing prices almost doubled in the EU between 2015 and 2023, energy prices hit record levels in 2022 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, inflation is pushing up the general costs of living – and let's not forget general growing inequalities. Between 2006 and 2021, the share of people below the poverty threshold increased across most EU Member States.

All of this is just digging the hole of disillusionment deeper, showing that it can be structural, and not just about ethics or transparency. And my conversation with Ophélie went in the exact same direction.

**Ophélie Omnes:** I think there's a disconnection. But there's always been a disconnection. Like let's not fool ourselves into thinking that 50 years ago, politicians were closer to the people. I don't think that's true. But I do believe that the disconnection is more problematic now than it was 50 years ago because society is evolving so fast. And here we talk about how fast or not fast something evolves, and about what people's issues are. And I think that what we're lacking the most is, again, the honesty, but the honesty to be looking the people in the eye and tell them it's a lot more complicated than you think it is. Because I do think that the main difference between types of systems or governments we had 50 years ago and now is how incredibly more complex and more interconnected our economies have become. And in order to face that and to tackle that, it requires solutions at multiple levels, which means national, European, or even international. And I think that politicians do underestimate how much people can understand that these problems are complex.

**Eva:** So clearly the overall context doesn't help, and it doesn't take much to see that globalisation, multipolarity and interconnections make governance so much more complex. Problems today are huge, cross-cutting, transnational, and they require multi-level solutions that don't work in silos. Take the example of climate: yes, it's an environmental issue, but it is also a major international security challenge, affecting our stability, resources, and thus increasing the risks of conflicts. And none of this can be solved at one political level alone due to these precise interconnections.

But instead of acknowledging this complexity and adapting the messaging, it feels like politics often get reduced to oversimplified slogans or impossible promises. Maybe I'm only talking about myself, but it doesn't seem so far-fetched to think that disillusionment doesn't only come from mediocre politics or tougher living conditions. It might also come from being treated as if we couldn't understand why things are complicated. So here we are, in this messy, complicated house we call democracy. Echoes of frustration are resonating through the stairwell, but some voices are clearly louder than others. Not wiser, just louder. And loud enough to start shaping the whole conversation.

## THE LOUDEST VOICES

**Eva:** Now would be a good moment to ask what happens to democracy when the loudest voices drown out the reasonable ones. What I mean is that the perception of a democratic crisis is magnified by who speaks the loudest. And here, we need to talk about the far-right parties and movements. But let's first take a look at the definition.

In ActEU, we have three points. First, they are populist. Populists argue that society is divided between two

groups, the so-called “corrupted elites” and “the people”. Of course, they claim to stand on the side of the people.

Second, they are nativist. This means that they support anti- or restrictive immigration measures because they claim to prioritise the rights of people born in the country. Clearly forgetting that these don't all look like them, but that's another topic.

Third, they are authoritarian. They favour order and so-called “strong leadership”.

And as the 2024 European elections showed, these parties are making significant gains across the continent. They won the election or arrived second in many countries, like Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia or the Netherlands...

And this has been brewing for decades: we are talking about an increase of 20 percentage points in the share of voters choosing an anti-establishment party between the early 1990s and today, from around 12% to 32%.

And what is even more striking is that half of what we call “anti-establishment” voters support far-right parties. And what do we mean by anti-establishment voters, you might ask? Well, usually people who express their disillusionment with traditional politics, often because they've lost trust in traditional parties or institutions. See how everything ties back to one another!

And when I spoke with Heather Grabbe, Senior Fellow at Bruegel, she highlighted that the rise of these voices is not happening in a vacuum.

**Heather Grabbe:** There are a lot of reasons for the rise of particularly radical right populism. A lot of that is about the breakdown of the traditional left-right divide, particularly after the Cold War, but also with globalisation and changes in the economic policy consensus. There's the way that mainstream parties have withdrawn from certain issues. They've just stopped talking about them. And that allows the radical right to take them on as a core agenda. And there's also the way that mainstream parties have moved towards the position of the radical right on some hot-button issues like immigration, rather than defending their former policies and, and explaining them. So there are quite a lot of reasons for that. On the whole, radical right populism flourishes, in fact, all kinds of populism, also extreme left populism, they all flourish, when mainstream parties withdraw from issues and when they create more room on the political spectrum. And I think that's happened more because of the way that the grounds of contestation of political issues have changed.

**Eva:** What Heather is describing here is not just the rise of one political family but a deeper shift in how political disagreement is structured in our societies. It's a slow fracturing of the traditional ways we have organised political conflict, especially around certain issues. She had more to say about why identity has become so central to politics today.

**Heather Grabbe:** In the past, the left-right divide that was there from after the Second World War until globalisation, a lot of that was about economic policy choices. The left said we need more state intervention, we need more welfare state, we need to have the private sector more regulated. Whereas the right said we want to have less state in the economy and we want to have not only the voices of workers, but also those of other sections of society. So, you had a divide which was a lot about economic policy that's broken down with globalisation with a much more of a move to the center and towards a neoliberal consensus on economics. And what's happened is that the radical right have come up with issues of identity to replace issues of policy choices. So that elections are far more about “do I feel like I belong to a particular group or not?” “Do I feel like my society and my government are serving the interests of my group in society” rather than “will this policy deliver for me and for the whole of society?” So it's more of a divisive political agenda, but it's also one which is far more about cultural identity and far less about policies.

**Eva:** But another question follows: is polarisation itself always a problem? Or is some degree of disagreement not only inevitable, but necessary for democracy to function? That's exactly where Daniela helps us sharpen the picture.

**Daniela Braun:** Yeah, so if I come back to this first question, so I would say yes, of course we need a bit of polarization. And the question is of course how high or how much polarisation do we need? So we need different positions because this is how political life is always structured and how our societies are structured. we have...We always had debates over time. So in the past, we always had this debate between left and right. So we know that there are some leftist positions, there are more rightist positions, and there are center positions. So this is the classical cleavage structure, actually, but societies and politics has become much more complicated, at least during the last 20 years, I would say. So we do not only have this left and right scale, but we also have, for example, party competition on a more cultural scale. When we think of polarisation, we do not need to only see it with regard to left right, but also with regard to this more cultural axis of political competition.

**Eva:** This is very interesting because what they are both explaining is a massive shift in how our politics work. When mainstream, moderate parties leave certain topics to be occupied by the loudest extremes, or worse, copy their rhetoric for electoral gain, the space gets filled by the most oversimplified, emotional messages, pointing the finger at easy targets – like immigrants.

And when trust is weak, something shifts inside us. We become much more receptive to simple, angry alternatives. It's not because people suddenly become extremists. It's because extremes offer something mainstream politics often fails to provide: clarity. Someone to blame. The emotional certainty that "the problem is there, and that's how we will easily fix it". And in uncertain times, emotional clarity is incredibly powerful.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** Okay, I think that's enough for now. I don't know about you, but I really need to digest all this.

If we had to summarise this episode, let's say that it was about the moment when frustration becomes loud enough to shake the walls. And while a lot of disillusionment is justified, and there is definitely a lot of work to do, maybe the entire place is not collapsing.

The moment feels very fragile, with the foundations shaking. This is because the system we operate in encourages short-term political survival, and also because some really vocal people hate our house. And all this can easily be exploited.

So political disillusionment is not just a random word, it's something that people can experience directly in their lives. And just like trust, it's not uniform. If you are part of the quiet majority, caring but not shouting, believe me, acknowledging the complexity does give us agency. As with trust, it helps us understand that disillusionment is not fate – it's a process that can be slowed down, even reversed. But for that, we need to understand the next part of the story.

We've focused a lot on the root causes of things: explaining what political trust or disillusionment are. But what happens when no one believes in democracy anymore? What do the real consequences of distrust look like across Europe? That's what we will talk about in the next episode.

Before we close, a quick reminder: Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe project ActEU. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind this series. If you are curious about the data, studies, or research that inform what you've heard today, you will find all the references in the episode description. And if anything in this episode made you think, smile, question, or disagree, please reach out! I'm always happy to hear from you. See you next time!

# EPISODE 3 - WHAT HAPPENS WHEN NO ONE BELIEVES IN DEMOCRACY ANYMORE?

## INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Hi and welcome back to Democracy Cracks. In this mini-series, we examine the fractures in our democratic systems and what we need to do to heal them. In the past two episodes, we explored the foundations of political trust and how disillusionment has become such a powerful force in a lot of people's lives.

But today, we're going somewhere deeper. How does life after trust look like? This is particularly important to me, and I'm sure to others, because I've seen firsthand how distrust can pull people we love toward polarisation, extremism, and conspiracies.

But as we've already discussed, varying levels of trust can be destructive, but they can also disrupt, sometimes in surprising, creative ways. So in this episode, we'll look at what really happens, concretely, when trust weakens: how citizens react, and what risks, but also opportunities, can emerge from that void.

## ARE CITIZENS WALKING AWAY?

**Eva:** Let's start with an obvious symptom of a democracy in trouble: people walking away. Imagine empty polling stations and falling turnout: it seems like the whole infrastructure of democracy is being left behind. And yes, for sure, this is part of the picture. In many European democracies, turnout has fallen by 10 to 20 percentage points since the 1990s.

But I guess you know the drill by now – reality is never that neat. Remember Daniela? When I talked to her, she argued that disengagement doesn't follow a simple equation, that low trust doesn't automatically translate into low turnout.

**Daniela Braun:** What I can say from our ActEU data, low levels of trust happen in particular when there is already going something wrong in a society. So for example, if we live in a period where we have a lot of crisis, citizens also feel that they do not want to engage in the same, or they do not want to put as much effort as they did previously into their political participation for example.

Political participation is a difficult concept. So political participation can be participating in elections, but it can be also be participating or attending a demonstration. It can be raise their hand or like something on Twitter, X, Facebook, Instagram, whatever. What we can see is that if there are low levels of trust, people are less motivated to generally engage with politics.

**Eva:** So there is evidence. Electoral disengagement is rising across Europe. Take the European Parliament's 2024 elections: the institutions proudly announced the highest voter turnout in 30 years, almost 51%. But the picture is actually grimmer. Compared to the previous EP elections, a majority of countries experienced a drop in participation, sometimes by more than 10 points like in Greece, Spain, Slovenia or Slovakia. Participation even dropped by 28% in Lithuania!

So this disengagement is not happening everywhere in the same way, and certainly not for the same reasons. Electoral participation is becoming more unequal. ActEU has shown persistent gaps between social groups, for instance, between younger and older voters, between citizens with higher or lower education levels, and people in precarious socio-economic conditions, who are consistently among those least likely to vote.

So when trust erodes, walking away from the ballot box doesn't happen randomly - it happens first and hardest among those who already feel unheard or excluded. And that is in itself a democracy problem, because when the same groups keep voting, and the same groups keep staying home, democracy slowly bends toward the voices that remain.

But as Daniela hinted, stepping back from voting does not automatically mean political silence. Before diving into this apparent paradox, let's first continue exploring what policy without trust looks like.

## POLICY WITHOUT TRUST

**Eva:** If citizens stop trusting the system meant to represent them, what happens inside the machinery of democracy? Well... things can get messy. Governing without trust is like trying to steer a ship without a compass: every wave feels bigger, every decision riskier, and every compromise suspicious.

We see this across Europe: declining trust is strongly correlated with rising support for parties that promise so-called "radical change". Political scientists call this "elite-challenging behaviour", which means a shift away from "elite-directed participation" like voting for mainstream parties. That's exactly what Daniela described: Daniela Braun: Of course it can happen that you can participate in an election, vote for a party, maybe for example, a so-called challenger party. So not the mainstream parties but the extremes. And then you would, guess your motivation would be to vote for such an extreme party because you want to change your country, your society and politics in your country.

**Eva:** And this goes beyond electoral choices. Low trust changes the whole dynamic of policy-making. In countries like France and Germany, when mainstream parties get discredited, it almost always coincides with legislative deadlock, meaning laws are harder to pass or coalitions more challenging to create – and all this because consensus is so much more difficult to find. This is not universal of course: institutional design – such as electoral rules, parliamentary practices, or coalition mechanisms – can protect some systems from paralysis.

But another thing is clear: public acceptance of policies collapses when trust is low. So it's not a "nice to have" feeling, it's the fertile soil that allows policies to land, be debated, and be adjusted. When that soil dries up, people can turn toward parties or movements that promise to break the system entirely. And we still need to explore another layer: what happens socially when distrust becomes the norm?

## THE SOCIAL FALLOUT

**Eva:** I don't know about you, but I've lived most of my life with the deep conviction that even we disagree, there are some basic truths that unite us. But in recent years, it has started to feel like everyone lives in different realities, like we are not even speaking the same language anymore.

And once different parts of society stop sharing the same basic reality, the social fabric begins to disintegrate. As we have seen in the previous episode, polarization rises. But not just over political ideas or policy choices, but in how we relate to the people who hold them. It seeps into everyday life, shaping how we look at neighbours, colleagues, and even family members who think differently.

When I spoke with Daniela, she perfectly described this narrowing of our social and political worlds, this trend of talking, arguing, and even listening mostly to people who already think like us.

**Daniela Braun:** This happens when polarization of societies happen that we do not trust others or only particular groups of people, so we might trust then in particular people of our ideology. So if I would say, okay, I'm the more green left person, I have a higher probability to trust other green left persons, but I would not trust right or center right people. And this is something that is actually really not good for democracy.

**Eva:** And once again, this is more than just a feeling. It's not like I want to take us back to the nightmare of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is a perfect example: belief in conspiracy theories around vaccines or governmental intentions was consistently higher among groups with low institutional trust.

And conspiracy theories don't appear out of nowhere, they fill the vacuum left by settling distrust. They are attractive for a reason: they question the very basis of how we understand science, institutions, and even reality itself. Their simplicity is seductive. If you've lost faith in the institutions meant to guide and protect you, then the wildest explanation can start sounding more logical than the official one.

And the consequences can be dramatic. A world in which personal belief outweighs evidence has a special name, one that Kelsey told me more about.

**Kelsey Beltz:** We're also living in a post-truth world, in a world where experts are actually hated. It used to be that even if you didn't have the same opinion, most people would kind of listen to an expert. And now we're seeing the rise of the anti-expert. So you kind of have two separate issues there, which is people aren't getting the same information and they're clicking on things that are making them like reinforce what they think is true. But then you also have this rise of doing your own research, which really kind of came to a peak during COVID, but it stayed. So people that even if they read or hear opinion that's empirically true, they won't believe it. And so that has a huge issue for, as I said, democracy represents citizens. So if half of your citizens are in a basically a fog of disinformation, and the policymakers are reinforcing that, then how do you get out of that?

**Eva:** And this is very dangerous. Some studies show that those who believe in conspiracy theories are also more likely to be in favour of authoritarian alternatives, which means that distrust can sometimes be a driving force for political radicalisation. So it's no longer just about disagreement; it's about fragmentation. But there is another layer to this, because we also live in a digital environment. 60% of the world population uses social media. This represents over 5 billion people! On top of this, 42% of young people in the EU use social media as their primary news source for political issues. This means that the perception of a crisis can vary a lot depending how platforms amplify certain voices. And on that, Kelsey shared something very powerful.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I was kind of checking in on some things just out of curiosity, shall we say. And immediately my entire algorithm has changed. I'm seeing insane things. And it's just being reinforced and reinforced. I was personally alarmed at all of these echo chambers and I've deleted X, I've never really used it. I don't go on Facebook for that reason. I checked it just out of curiosity and I was astonished. And that's where the echo chamber issue comes in. I actually think the echo chamber and polarization, it's two sides of the same coin. Seeing it develop in real time and realizing all of the AI and all of the sort of, you know, the speed with which this can accelerate is, I think it is the greatest threat to democracy.

**Eva:** I so much agree with Kelsey that this is where the problem becomes even more tangible. We've all experienced how quickly our algorithms can shift. One day, you click on a trending angry video, and suddenly, everything you see is hatred, conspiracies, and anti-democratic voices. And because the loudest, simplest, most provocative voices travel the fastest, it is so easy to start believing that they represent the public opinion, when in reality, they only are a small though extremely visible part of the picture.

Yet, while this social fragmentation pushes us toward darker places, there is another side to the story. Mistrust doesn't always lead to apathy or extremism. It can also become a spark: a call for renewal from below. When the old system no longer inspires confidence, people start rethinking what democracy could look like. And that's where hope can grow.

## DO WE NEED DISTRUST FOR RENEWAL?

**Eva:** After everything we've just talked about, the low trust, the polarisation, the conspiracies, it can easily feel like we're rolling downhill. But sometimes, loving is caring, and struggling with trust can make you want to show up in entirely new ways. And repairing something is sometimes easier from the outside. Believe me, there are signs that people still care, even if not in the ways traditional politics would expect.

By 2021, the OECD had collected more than 500 examples of deliberative processes around the world, with Europe leading the way. And the trend is rising, because more than 100 were organised only in 2019. But when I talked to Alex, he made a distinction I think is important: these innovations can help, but they are not magic fixes.

**Alex Hoppe:** If you put a group of people together with very different opinions and you give them the right environment and the right information and everything to talk it out, this has a very good effect on these people. I think it cannot kind of fight societal polarization that is triggered by social media. It can help in some ways by, for example, kind of if they... these citizens assemblies propose policy solutions that a lot more people can live with than maybe if they were, I don't know, proposed by a parliamentary chamber or whatever, then it can help alleviate the pressure a bit. But I don't think they are the solution to our problems simply because they are so, if you want to do them correctly, they are so pricey. I mean, in terms of money and hours and kind of... participation, they cost so much that I don't think they are a viable way of kind of changing how we in society communicate with each other.

**Eva:** Alex is right, citizens' assemblies won't magically cure polarisation or declining trust. But they do show

something precious: that people don't necessarily shut down when trust collapses. They search for new channels, new ways of being heard, new systems that feel fairer, more transparent.

And this desire to keep power in check is exactly what can fuel engagement. Some scholars call this "monitorial citizenship": people stepping into the role of watchdogs, constantly scanning for abuses, not because they hate democracy, but because they want it to work better.

You can see this in the work of ActEU as well. Younger people expressed low trust in institutions but very high engagement in local activism, volunteering, and issue-based campaigns. Disillusionment didn't make them hide, it redirected their energy toward causes they trust more than political institutions.

And then there's the deeper point Kelsey made: democracy doesn't need agreement to survive, it needs the right habits of disagreement.

**Kelsey Beltz:** All healthy democracies have disagreements because they represent citizens. If you're in a country where every single citizen has the same opinion, you're probably not in a democracy. You're probably in a major autocracy. So it's fine to have disagreements. It's more about the way that people disagree.

Eva: I love this point. Disagreement is not the enemy. What becomes dangerous is when we stop believing that disagreement can lead anywhere productive.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** Let's pause here for now.

Today, we went to some difficult places, and it was necessary to understand what really happens in a society when people no longer trust. The walking away, the anger that grows, the fractures when we stop sharing the same basic reality, the temptation of easy answers and easy way-outs.

But we also saw that decreasing trust can shake people awake, revealing exactly where the repairs are needed. If there's one thing I'm taking from this episode, it's that a democracy without trust is fragile, but a democracy without people is simply impossible. And people, despite everything, keep showing up. Maybe not where we expect, or how we expect, but they do. And that, to me, remains a quiet source of hope.

But this was only a first step in that direction. There is too much to say about how political participation is changing to stop there. Is the ballot box gathering dust? Or is there more to the picture? That's the story we'll explore in the next episode.

Before we close, a quick reminder: Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe ActEU project. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind this series. If you are curious about the data, studies, or research that inform what you've heard today, you will find all the references in the episode description. And if anything in this episode made you think, smile, question, or disagree, please reach out! I'm always happy to hear from you. See you next time!

# EPISODE 4 - WHY VOTE IF NOTHING EVER CHANGES?

## INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Hi and welcome back to Democracy Cracks. In this mini-series, we examine the fractures in our democratic systems and what we need to do to heal them. In the last episode, we talked about what happens when trust collapses: how people walk away, how polarisation grows, and how new forms of engagement can appear.

So today, we're zooming in on a very specific moment of democratic life: election day. That ritual where you step into a booth, mark a choice, and hope it changes something. And yet... how many of us have done this thinking that, anyway, it doesn't matter, or even skipped an election for the exact same reasons?

This is where a problem appears. In representative democracies, we elect people to act on our behalf. That means that democracy depends on participation. So, if people are not participating, are democracies doomed? By now, you know me: I'm not here to drown you in pessimism. So, I can anticipate that there is a twist. In this episode, we'll look at what the ballot box still means today, and at other forms of participation that are quietly gaining ground. Because what if we're not seeing the end of participation, but actually a diversification of how people take part in politics?

## WHO IS WALKING AWAY (AND WHO ISN'T)

**Eva:** When it comes to elections, we often tell ourselves a very simple story: if people care, they vote. If they don't, they stay home. And sure, turnout has been declining in many places. You might remember the striking number we talked about in the previous episode: globally, the average turnout has dropped by around 10 percentage points since the 1990s. But as always, when you look a little closer, the reality becomes much more complicated. And let's be honest, also much more interesting.

Because people don't vote, or do vote, for very different reasons. And not voting does not automatically mean not caring; this is an important point we already made. And as Daniela reminded me, trust is part of the picture, but not the whole story.

**Daniela Braun:** In some cases, you can see that high levels of trust translate also in high levels of political participation. But it's definitely not the only reason why citizens participate in an election. It's not because, I have high levels of trust, and then I vote. or I turn out in an election because there are so many different other reasons why you would turn out in an election or not. So it's one of the determinants, but not the main determinant.

**Eva:** And this is backed up by ActEU research. One of the points that really stuck with me is that abstention doesn't come with a note explaining why. People can stay home out of frustration, protest, practical constraints, or simply because they think their vote won't count - all of these can coexist.

Voter turnout isn't falling in the same way everywhere, or for everyone. Across Europe, it's younger people, those with lower incomes, and people with less formal education who are much more likely to stay home on election day, while older and wealthier citizens keep voting. One study by Matthew Polacko puts some clear numbers on this: in countries with high inequality, nearly 9 out of 10 high-income voters turn out, compared to fewer than 8 out of 10 among the lowest-income groups. But this isn't true everywhere. In places like Belgium and Australia, where voting is compulsory, the gap is tiny, while in countries like the United States or Poland it's much wider. And crucially, when political parties offer clearly different economic policies, people on lower incomes are more likely to feel that voting is worth it, and they show up.

But here is where it gets even more interesting. High turnout doesn't necessarily mean people are happy with democracy. Quite often, people vote because they're angry, worried, or trying to stop something they fear. In countries like Hungary, Greece, Italy, Spain, or Cyprus, low trust in politics often goes hand in hand with high turnout.

All of this points to something important: people don't vote for just one reason. Turnout numbers alone can't tell us which emotion is driving participation. That's why understanding all these participation gaps is so important. Let's look more closely at some of them.

**Heather Grabbe:** Climate is the political issue currently on the agenda, where there's the starkest generational divide. People under the age of 30 are so much more aware and so much more desirous of radical action to tackle it than people over the age of 45. So the question is how to bring that intergenerational perspective into politics when a lot of young people are becoming really disaffected with politics. So at Bruegel, we worked with some polling and focus groups which looked more deeply into the attitudes of Europeans. And it's really striking how it's not socioeconomic status that determines how much you want to see climate action or even to take action yourself. Whether you're rich or poor, whatever is your income, people across Europe are really concerned about climate change and the vast majority of them want more rapid action. But the big difference is between people who feel that politics can deliver a fair and effective transition and people who feel really disillusioned with politics and who feel that governments can't really get a grip on the situation and can't deliver effective climate action. And that disillusionment is what I think is driving a lot of the vote for extremist parties, especially those that criticize green measures and even deny that climate change is happening.

**Eva:** What Heather is describing is now well-established. It's not socioeconomic status or age that predicts whether someone cares about climate change or not, it's whether they believe politics can deliver a fair transition. And when young people feel politics can't, many don't walk away from participation altogether... but they can walk away from elections.

So yes, some citizens are withdrawing from traditional participation. But other forms of participation are stepping up. And that's where I want to take you next: if voting is only one part of political participation, where do people go if they abandon the ballot box but not their political voice?

## NEW MODES OF PARTICIPATION

**Eva:** Maybe the centre of gravity of political participation is shifting, but let's be honest, it makes sense. Elections happen only a couple of years apart, and in parallel, our lives move at the speed of a push notification.

For many people, especially younger generations, political engagement now happens in between elections: with petitions, in comment sections, through online campaigns, in the streets...

Or in completely new formats that didn't exist a decade ago. According to the 2024 Eurobarometer survey, 48% of young Europeans report having taken action to change society in the last year. In Romania, for example, it goes up to 57%! Moreover, engaging on social media was for young people the second most effective action to make their voice heard.

Online spaces let people react in real time. Faster than electoral cycles. Faster than institutions can keep up. And sometimes... faster than democracy can absorb. But this doesn't mean young people are apathetic. Quite the opposite. When Alex told me about ActEU's youth democracy labs, I could feel his cautious optimism.

**Alex Hoppe:** And I can maybe refer to the youth democracy labs. So we kind of brought together in small interactive workshops, high school students or also university students to discuss exactly these issues. Head trust, polarization. And what can we do against it? And first of all, I saw that these people were highly interested in politics and in being heard and in participating. And at the same time, very frustrated about how we approach the young generation and specifically political education.

**Eva:** So young people care, deeply, and especially about issues like cost of living, climate, jobs, health... but they often feel a disconnect between calls emphasising the importance of their voices, and the actual limited influence they can have on decision-making. So it's only natural that when the system can't keep up, new forms of participation emerge. Some governments are trying to respond by creating new democratic institutions built for long-term thinking. Heather mentioned one of my favourite examples:

**Heather Grabbe:** It's not so much that there's a problem with democracy per se as what the representatives of the people actually represent is the problem. Now there are ways around this. For example, there are countries that have appointed a commissioner for the future or a commissioner for future generations who represents the interests of people who haven't been born yet and who brings a longer term perspective into policymaking. A good example of this is Wales, which is part of the United Kingdom, which has such a commissioner. So it's possible to create institutions which fill this gap, but of course they need to have appropriate powers and decision-making authority for that function to be effective. Another way of trying to deal with this is the way that some of the courts have tried to do this. So for example, the German Constitutional Court a few years ago issued a ruling on the German climate law, which said that German governments have to take into account the impact of their climate action on people elsewhere in the world. They also said that the German government has to think about the interests of future German voters and not allow the interests of current German voters to be traded off against those future voters.

**Eva:** I love this idea: democracy with a longer horizon. Not just reacting to today's voters, but to tomorrow's citizens too. And then there's the most talked-about democratic innovation right now: citizens' assemblies. A way for ordinary people to directly shape policy, after learning, debating and weighing trade-offs, basically the opposite of what happens on X. Heather had more to say about that.

**Heather Grabbe:** But fundamentally, we need to have reforms to the way that we engage in democracy, like citizens' assemblies. These have been used rather effectively in some European countries, for example, Ireland, France, Poland, but also outside Europe in Canada and New Zealand, where citizens' assemblies have allowed citizens to take part directly in deliberative processes to decide on issues like whether to have a new runway at an airport, whether to build a dam or whether to change the constitution. It allows a really deliberative process where people can learn from experts and hear a wide range of opinions on the topic. They can deliberate among themselves and they can come out with solutions. And those exercises are really interesting because on climate in particular, we see that ordinary voters, citizens in these assemblies, often come out with much more forward-thinking and intergenerational solutions for climate action than governments do.

**Eva:** So no, these new forms of participation don't replace elections. And they certainly don't replace electoral legitimacy. But they do expand the democratic space. They show that participation is not dying; it's diversifying.

But there's another side to all of this that we need to look at. Because disengagement isn't only about personal choice or generational habits, it's also deeply social. The people who walk away from elections are often the ones who were already least represented to begin with. That's also where disengagement becomes dangerous, because it creates a representation gap. So before looking at new solutions, we need to understand this social fallout.

## SOCIAL ASPECTS

**Eva:** Let's start with something the data shows very clearly: exclusion breeds disengagement. And to understand what that means in real life, it helps to look at one very simple example.

In the 2019 European elections, about 400,000 people with disabilities in 14 countries weren't allowed to vote because they were under guardianship. And even when people do have the right to vote, the way voting is organised can still push them out. Maybe the booth isn't wide enough for someone in a wheelchair to cast a secret ballot. Maybe there's no easy-to-read information for blind or low-vision voters. Or maybe you can't fill out the ballot because you need to write with a pen. Each of those can quietly close the door to someone's participation in politics.

And this logic goes well beyond election day. Participation also depends on the wider environment we call “civic space” – that’s the environment that allows citizens and civil society organisations to take part freely in public life. And here too, when civic space shrinks, disengagement grows.

Most civil society organisations in the EU depend heavily on public funding, so it’s sadly no surprise that when democracy comes under pressure, they’re often the first to see their budgets cut. Over the past decade, national public funding has dropped significantly in at least 10 EU Member States - Hungary, Poland, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia... And these cuts rarely fall evenly. They often hit advocacy groups, media watchdogs, and organisations working on rights and inclusion, the ones that help keep participation open and pluralistic. And in places where these cuts have gone hand in hand with democratic backsliding, Hungary being a well-documented example, funding hasn’t only been reduced, it’s been redirected toward organisations that are politically friendly to the government. So that further weakens the independent voices that keep civic space alive.

This is why I find Daniela’s point so important: participation needs nourishment. It does not survive on its own.

**Daniela Braun:** All political actors and societies in Europe should always have in mind that some kind of civic engagement is very necessary and useful, also for our democracy in general. So we should not cut the money when it comes to civic engagement, but to really provide more money to sustain the level of civic engagement that is out there.

**Eva:** She’s absolutely right. When you cut support for civic engagement, groups who already feel left out can drift even further away. And that has real consequences for democratic resilience.

Take Hungary again: in 2018, the National Democratic Institute published a report showing that political disinterest among young people is now at its highest level since 2000, with only 1 in 10 saying they’re interested in political topics. And this doesn’t come out of nowhere. It’s tied to a lack of meaningful public dialogue, to widespread mistrust of institutions, and to an education system that avoids sensitive political issues altogether, sometimes just to avoid trouble or funding cuts.

So, no, low engagement doesn’t automatically cause democratic backsliding. But it certainly makes it easier. And sometimes, the distance between what people believe and how they vote becomes enormous. This gap between social engagement and electoral behaviour shows up in many areas, but climate politics is one of the clearest examples. When I spoke with Heather, she explained it in very concrete terms:

**Heather Grabbe:** You can see that local level initiatives which bring direct benefits to the local community really can have an impact and people enjoy getting involved in those kinds of things. You can also see the way that youth mobilization when it’s widely reported on in the media invites more mobilization. Where we get back to the difficulty with representative democracy is that if this doesn’t translate into votes for particular parties, it’s quite hard to get elected representatives to take it seriously. So for example, our research found that around 80 % of Europeans want more climate action. And yet we also see in some of the largest economies in Europe, Germany, France, Italy, also the UK, parties which are against green measures have between 25 and 30% support in the polls. So that’s a real contrast. You have a consensus in favour of climate action, but people vote on other issues. For many of them, climate is in their top three or top four issues, but they’re going to vote for parties that are offering to deal with maybe their number one issue, which could be the cost of living, inflation, or it could be around jobs, or it might be around migration. And there’s I think a just diminishing trust in mainstream parties to deliver a transition to a climate-neutral economy.

**Eva:** Heather’s example points to something that goes way beyond climate politics. When people really care about an issue but don’t see it show up in what parties are offering, a gap opens up.

Across Europe, it’s pretty clear that most people want stronger action on climate change. In 2025, and that’s according to a Eurobarometer survey, 85% of Europeans think tackling climate change should be a priority, and almost 9 in 10 want the EU to do more on renewable energy and energy efficiency. That support is real, but as usual, it’s not the same everywhere. In places like Malta and Sweden, support for the goal of becoming climate-neutral by 2050 reaches more than 90%. But in countries such as Czechia and Estonia, it drops to around half of the population, or even less.

But politicians often focus on the issues voters rank as their number one priority, not those where there is broader but quieter agreement. Over time, not seeing their concerns reflected in the political debate can make some people feel that politics is not really responding to them, and especially for already underrepresented groups. So the real question is: how do we bridge that gap? How do we make sure people’s engagement actually carries weight?

## RECLAIMING MEANING IN PARTICIPATION

**Eva:** So if people care, and they act, and they show up in all kinds of ways... what would it actually take for participation to feel meaningful again? Well, the evidence here is actually pretty encouraging.

Petition-signing has basically become part of everyday politics in a lot of countries. Boycotting products or brands is now pretty common too, around 20%.

Demonstrations go up and down depending on the context, but there's no big long-term decline. And even though fewer people contact politicians directly, that number has stayed surprisingly stable for about 20 years.

So the issue isn't that people are not participating. It's that they're choosing ways of doing it that give them more agency, more clarity, and frankly, more voice than a ballot alone.

And that's exactly where Ophélie brings in something essential. Before we get into institutions or processes, she goes back to one essential point: people don't expect democracy to be fast, they expect it to be responsive.

**Ophélie Omnes:** If you want to consult anybody, that is always going to take a lot more time than if you had to decide on anything yourself. That applies at even individual level, but that also applies at collective level. So it is bound to be slow. Then the question is, do we have the space for these potentially needed changes. Because I don't think that the main problem with democracy is that it's low. Like we need to discuss and voice that we're not agreeing and so on. I think it's more about how effective they are more than how fast they are. How much it delivers on making people feel that there is space for their voice to be heard.

**Eva:** So if you believe your contribution is taken seriously, even if it takes a while to see any result, you stay engaged. But if you get the feeling that nothing you say makes a difference, you drift away. And that brings us to empowerment, which Heather explained in a very concrete way.

**Heather Grabbe:** When people feel empowered that their action can make a difference, they're willing to do a lot of action and even to make sacrifices in their own lives. And I think one of the key things that could really help with democratic participation for the climate action to be a collective effort, which is linked up with democratic participation, is for those in authority, so governments, but people in authority also in schools and so on, to give opportunities for action and to create empowerment. What's really frustrating for everyone is when you hear worse and worse news about the climate and more and more impacts that affect your life and affect your economy and affect your job and affect your community and affect your children. And you feel like there's nothing I can do. Nobody is taking action.

**Eva:** Her point is really simple: people are ready to act, even to change their habits, when they feel their actions are part of something bigger. And that feeling almost never starts at the national level. It comes from what they see right around them: in their neighbourhoods, in their workplaces, in their schools, where they can actually see the impact.

So reclaiming meaning in participation isn't about telling people to "get more involved". They already are. It's about building the conditions where what they do genuinely matters: real civic space, steady support for civil society, and institutions that treat participation as an ongoing conversation, not a box-ticking exercise every few years.

So the real question isn't "how do we get people to participate?". It's "how do we reshape participation so people can recognise themselves in it again?". Because that's when democracy starts feeling like something you're part of, not something that just happens around you.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** And that's where we'll wrap up this fourth episode. When you put all of this together, it becomes pretty clear: people haven't stopped trying to participate, not at all. What's fading is the belief that participation actually leads somewhere. And that's the real challenge for democracies today: this gap between what people do and what they see reflected back.

And, as surprising as it might sound, there's no simple link between participation and trust. For some, taking action builds trust. For others, it's a way of showing frustration. So it is all about how participation plays out. At the end of the day, it really comes down to something simple: people want to feel heard. Maybe the real upgrade we need is in how our democracies listen and how they respond.

Which leads to the next big question: if participation is changing, can our institutions change with it? In the next episode, we'll dive into whether democracy itself needs an upgrade, and how it can become more responsive without losing the stability that keeps it standing.

Before we close, a quick reminder: Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe ActEU project. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind this series. If you are curious about the data, studies, or research that inform what you've heard today, you will find all the references in the episode description. And if anything in this episode made you think, smile, question, or disagree, please reach out! I'm always happy to hear from you. See you next time.

# EPISODE 5 - DOES DEMOCRACY NEED AN UPGRADE?

## INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Hi and welcome back to Democracy Cracks. In this mini-series, we examine the fractures in our democratic systems and what we need to do to heal them.

If you've been with me so far, you know we've been slowly peeling back the layers of what makes a democracy stand, and what undermines it. We talked about trust, about when disillusionment sinks in, about people walking away, and about all the new forms of participation bubbling up outside traditional politics.

And after all that... one question keeps coming back to me.

Not just why democracy is cracking, but whether the model itself is still the right size for the world we live in today. Because let's be honest: our democracies were designed for another era. A slower era. A world without social media storms, global crises, climate deadlines, or political decisions that ripple across borders in seconds.

So if institutions are struggling, if citizens feel unheard, if participation is shifting into new spaces... maybe the real question isn't "what's wrong with democracy?" but "is it simply overdue for an upgrade?"

That's where we're headed today. We're going to look at what still works, what's clearly showing its age, and why updating doesn't mean throwing everything away. Even if democracies face pressures from outside as well as within. We will also explore some participatory initiatives, not as miracle cures, but as ideas that can help us understand how democracy might adapt.

Alright. Let's jump in.

## THE DIAGNOSIS

**Eva:** When some people say that democracy feels "out of sync" with the times, they're not imagining it. A lot of our institutions were indeed built for a world far less interconnected than today.

And why does that matter? Because these cracks in the system aren't just abstract concerns of political scientists. They shape how people feel about democracy itself.

Think of this: in Spain, 21% of people today describe Franco's dictatorship as "good" or even "very good". And among young people, 14% say today's democracy is worse than the dictatorship. 35% of young Luxembourgers say they're unsure, or simply don't believe, that democracy is the best form of government. When you hear numbers like these, you start to realise that the "everything is broken" narrative isn't just background noise, it's actually shaping how whole generations see democracy.

That's exactly what Ophélie explained when we talked. She wasn't longing for the past, and she wasn't fantasising about some shiny tech-driven future either. She simply pointed out that democracies were never meant to be frozen in time. They've always evolved. They've always adapted. And they can do it again.

**Ophélie Omnes:** Some of the systems we came up with some decades, sometimes centuries ago, are not crafted for the type of challenges that we're facing at the moment. For the challenges that we are likely to be facing in the future as well. That being said, I think it's very difficult to analyse democratic systems from a general point of view and say this we can keep, this we can't keep. And I think what is actually required is more of a general consideration for what is it we need, instead of relying on, but we've done it this way for this amount of time.

**Eva:** And she's right. If you look at the pace of change around us: the speed of information, global markets, climate disruptions, technologies that rewrite entire sectors overnight, it becomes obvious that a system designed for simpler times is under enormous pressure. Because it was built with different assumptions about how society works, how citizens participate, and how fast decisions need to be made. And yet, as Ophélie highlighted, none of this means we're stuck.

**Ophélie Omnes:** When you look at France as a country, it changed the systems more than 10 times over the past 300 years. And so whenever we hear in the common general debate that there's nothing that we can change that much because then it would mean that we would put all of the system back into question. We've done that. We've been doing that for 300 years, for the last three centuries, at least in France. And when you look at the European institutions and you put them in perspective with other democratic systems, they're actually not that old. So I think it's very important to realise that we can change all of that.

**Eva:** I love this point because it flips the usual narrative. Instead of seeing democracy as fragile glass that might shatter if we touch it, Ophélie sees it as something alive, something that's been redesigned, rewritten, and reimagined over and over again. And maybe that's exactly what we need right now: not panic, not nostalgia, but the confidence that updating democracy isn't a problem.

But this is not only about institutions. The other part of the diagnosis is deeper. Because even the best-designed institutions struggle when the environment around them becomes unstable. This is why diagnosing democracy is complicated: some issues might come from outdated structures, but many come from the pressures we place on those structures. And not all of those pressures are internal.

## EXTERNAL THREATS

**Eva:** When we talk about external threats to democracy, it's tempting to think it's abstract, involving only distant actors in a faraway big geopolitical game. But foreign interference is not a background issue anymore. It's right there, pressing on democratic systems every day, and it's one of the most persistent pressures they face.

According to the European External Action Service, these foreign manipulation campaigns now reach every EU member state systematically. In 2024 alone, over 500 coordinated incidents were reported, involving tens of thousands of online channels and more than 60,000 individual pieces of content.

Elections are an obvious focus. During the 2024 European Parliament elections, investigators flagged dozens of interference cases. The same playbook showed up around the US presidential election, in Moldova, for both the presidential race and the EU accession referendum, in Georgia's parliamentary elections, and in national elections in France and Romania.

And it's important to be clear about this: the vast majority of these operations are traced back to pro-Kremlin networks.

What's also important to understand is that these campaigns aren't really about selling people one big lie. Their goal is worse. They amplify distrust and deepen polarisation. They push the idea that nothing is reliable, that everyone lies, that democratic institutions are either incompetent or corrupt. In other words, they don't create cracks in democracy. They widen the ones that already exist.

That's why external threats aren't just a matter of security or foreign policy. They strike at the very conditions that allow democracy to function and to evolve.

This is where Kelsey's point comes in.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I think that when you have a democratic project that's as large as the EU, you are just working with people with very different idea points, and then it makes it easier to sort of exploit said fractures. But now is the moment where the EU is actually probably since the Second World War, the most important, because it is also unifying these member states. It can provide this type of structure. It can provide this type of support if it has the ability to do so and the ability to be a strong EU against these counter forces. So I actually still think that in some ways this might strengthen both positive opinions from citizens, but also like the role that the EU plays in the world. Why not make this moment of greatness and not turn it into yet another continent dissolving, basically? That would be my rallying call.

**Eva:** And the EU is a particularly revealing case. On the one hand, it is often criticised for being slow, complex, and distant. On the other hand, external pressure can sometimes have an unexpected effect.

During moments of crisis, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for instance, the most recent Eurobarometer survey shows increases in support for EU-level cooperation, including more than 80% of citizens being in favour of a common defence and security policy. In other words, external threats can also remind citizens why collective democratic structures matter.

But this effect doesn't last automatically. As Kelsey warned, resilience isn't guaranteed. It has to be actively built, through credible leadership, coordination, and institutions that live up to their democratic promises.

**Kelsey Beltz:** I think that the EU really, really needs to play a strong role at this moment. There's been a complete reshifting of power balances, as we're all aware, globally. And I'm not sure that the EU necessarily came out on top of that. I think that actually the EU has an incredibly important role to be a leader, to unify member states, which are very fractured at this moment, also within the EU, and to really prove that it can live up to its ideals. I think this is the moment to do it now. There's really no other option.

**Eva:** I appreciate that we are being clear on the diagnosis. Some countries, especially Russia, are working hard to undermine democratic ideals. This is not only about profiting from political disillusionment; it is also about destroying the fundamental rights and values our societies are built upon - with Ukraine being a prime example. And clearly, it does not help that the US under Trump 2.0 is aligning with this, with support from some EU Member States themselves, such as Hungary.

How can our democracies adapt without tearing themselves apart? How can they bend without breaking?

## EXPERIMENTS

**Eva:** So once we accept that democracy isn't carved in stone and that external pressures create and exacerbate problems the next question is pretty simple: what do we actually do about it?

Over the past few years, there's been a real wave of experimentation. Citizen assemblies, participatory budgets, digital consultations... All of them are presented as ways to reconnect people to decision-making, to make politics feel closer and more responsive.

But experimenting also brings some uncomfortable questions with it. Does adding new participatory tools make democracy stronger... or messier? More inclusive... or harder to govern?

That tension came up very clearly in my conversation with Ophélie.

**Ophélie Omnes:** I think the way tools have been used changed for sure. If you look at the use of referendums at the beginning of the Fifth Republic in France, they were used a lot more than they were ever used in the last 25 years. And I think, I'll keep France as a good example at the moment of this like discrepancy between what the people want and what the people in power are deciding to do. For example, there was this poll that I heard of 86 % of the people who think that ultra-rich should be taxed more. The current government is non-existent, but the government that just fell kept on thinking that we shouldn't. And so here is when the tension that we were discussing earlier becomes wider and wider is you have been elected and then there's a question of like how much legitimacy do you have based on how you were elected, which is like very much the issue when it comes to the French situation at the moment. But also how, what is your legitimacy in trying to pass agendas that are far from what the people who elected you wanted, let alone the people who didn't elect you. I'm not saying that we should use referendum every now and then, because of course it's a tool that needs to be used quite carefully.

**Eva:** What she's pointing to is something we see across many democracies today, and something we've already touched on in earlier episodes. Elections still take place. Governments are legitimate on paper. But between one vote and the next, a gap opens up between what people say they want and what politics actually delivers.

That's where participatory experiments enter the picture. They bring together randomly selected citizens, give them time, information, and space to deliberate - and ask them to grapple with trade-offs, not just express opinions. This is especially important as in 2023, only about 3 in 10 people across OECD countries felt their political system really gave them a say. Among young people, the disconnect is even stronger. In the 2021 European Parliament's Youth Survey, around 70% said they felt they had very little influence over decisions affecting the EU, and that decision-makers weren't really listening to them. We heard the same thing during the ActEU Youth Labs, which brought together more than 300 young people across 10 European countries. Again and again, participants said the same thing: they want a greater say in politics, and more opportunities to be directly involved.

The OECD's work on trust and public decision-making shows that decisions shaped by ordinary citizens tend to feel more legitimate than those taken behind closed doors. Trust also works both ways. For governments to build trust, they also have to show a bit of trust themselves to let citizens in. And for people who take part, that experience often changes things. It makes the complexity of collective decisions more visible, and it can create a stronger feeling that democracy is something we all share.

In Ireland, for example, surveys after citizen assemblies showed something striking: people were more willing to accept political decisions taken in participatory settings, even decisions they didn't personally like. This was particularly the case for those who were the most sceptical about democracy to begin with.

But, and this is very important, everything depends on what happens next.

But when recommendations are ignored, or simply fade away without explanation, the effect can be the opposite. Instead of rebuilding trust, it leaves people feeling even more disillusioned. The Conference on the Future of Europe is often mentioned in this context. For an entire year, the EU organised citizen-led debates and discussions to come up with proposals on how to shape the future. Thousands of citizens took part, shared ideas, invested time, and yet, what happened to their contributions, or whether they made any real difference to EU policies is still not clear.

So can they be considered as a miracle solution? That's usually where skepticism sets in.

**Alex Hoppe:** To be honest, I'm a bit skeptical if this kind of assemblies is the right way for the European Union to go. I believe also the conference of Europe was not really a success. But at the local level, I think that makes a lot of sense because at the local level you can get the most people. It's also the least costly.

**Eva:** What Alex is really pointing to is something we see quite often. These democratic experiments tend to work best when they're close enough for people to see a clear link between taking part and what actually changes. At the local level, schools, transport, housing, public space, participation can feel real and concrete. At the EU level, that link is much harder to grasp.

There's another tension we can't ignore. Participatory tools are often presented as a fix for representative democracy. But they can't replace it. Assemblies don't govern. Referendums don't negotiate. And when new tools are added without clear rules, about who decides what and how, things can get messy. More voices don't automatically mean better decisions. Without coordination, responsiveness turns into noise. Without follow-up, participation turns into frustration.

So the challenge isn't choosing between representative democracy and participatory democracy. It's working out how the two can actually support each other without throwing the whole system off balance.

## ADAPTABILITY

**Eva:** As we already discussed, democracy has always evolved and adapted. But what feels different today is the pressure. That's why we need to think about resilience, or adaptability, not only in technical terms, but also as a cultural shift. It's about whether democracies can think beyond the next vote, the next crisis, or the next headline.

Kelsey talked about this when she mentioned intergenerational fairness: the idea that democracy should also speak for people who aren't voting yet, or who aren't even born.

**Kelsey Beltz:** So we're working on future generations and in some ways we've seen some progress. We see a commissioner now, Metcalfe for intergenerational fairness. We know that there are actually permanent bodies in countries like Wales. I think it will probably rely on civil society and researchers. don't necessarily think the politicians themselves will be coming in making a 45 year policy. It would be amazing to have. That's essentially the goal. But, not even 45 years, we're thinking really long term, know, 100 years, what does the world look like?

**Eva:** I don't know about you, but this is something I had never really considered. Clearly, we don't have all the answers, and the evidence is still emerging. But what we do know is this: declining democracy is not the only existential risk our societies face in the long run. There is also the interlinked challenge of climate change and biodiversity loss, and that's without even getting into pervasive digital transformations or the demographic pressures of an ageing population.

So maybe we need to think about adaptability in the long term, and take action today to secure the future for everyone. Maybe it's about slowing things down to make room for deliberation, and opening up participation without pretending that it can replace responsibility on its own.

That balance is fragile. A democracy that reacts to everything risks instability. A democracy that refuses to evolve risks becoming irrelevant. So yes, democracy does need an update, understood as careful, open, and constant adjustment. The key is to hold on to its core promises, not only to survive the future, but to help shape it.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** Let's pause here for today.

We've seen that some of today's problems come from outdated rules. Others come from the weight we place on democratic systems: inequality, polarisation, disinformation, geopolitical tension. And we've seen that reforms and experiments can help, but only if they're taken seriously, followed through, and embedded into the system instead of floating around it.

What this episode really leaves me with is a tension. A very real tension. We want democracies to be more responsive, more inclusive, more open. But at the same time, we also expect them to provide stability, legitimacy, and a sense of responsibility. And unfortunately, those things don't always pull in the same direction.

And maybe that's the real challenge. Not finding the perfect model, but learning how to live with that tension, without giving up on the democratic project itself.

And importantly, this is not where the story ends. Because once you start pulling on these threads, another set of questions inevitably follows. If democracy is under pressure from the inside and from the outside, what can still be done? Where is there room to act, to protect, to strengthen what already exists? And what, realistically, gives us reasons not for naïve optimism but for cautious hope?

That's what we'll explore in the final episode of Democracy Cracks.

Before we close, a quick reminder: Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe ActEU project. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind this series. If you are curious about the data, studies, or research that inform what you've heard today, you will find all the references in the episode description. And if anything in this episode made you think, smile, question, or disagree, please reach out! I'm always happy to hear from you. See you next time!

# EPISODE 6 - IS IT TOO LATE TO SAVE DEMOCRACY?

## INTRODUCTION

**Eva:** Hi and welcome back to Democracy Cracks. In this mini-series, we examine the fractures in our democratic systems and what we need to do to heal them.

If you have been with me since the beginning, you know that we talked about trust, and what happens when it fades. About disillusionment, polarisation, and political participation changing shape. And we framed all of this around a key point: that democracy doesn't need to be thrown away, but maybe rather carefully recalibrated.

But let's be honest, even if there are some signs of hope, democracy is under real pressure. From within and from the outside. And with it, the EU's values, security, independence, freedom and prosperity.

If this is really a crossroads moment, then our final question is clear: what needs fixing now? And not in 10 years or after the next crisis. But now.

In the final episode of this mini-series, we'll look at some urgent measures that could help repair the cracks in our democratic systems.

Let's dig in, this time with rebuilding in mind.

## URGENT REPAIRS

**Eva:** From the research, and from everything we've discussed so far, three levels of change really stand out. First, checks and balances need to be protected, actively, and not symbolically.

Checks and balances are the basic safety system of democracy. They're what prevent power from concentrating in one place. In its 2025 rule of law review, Liberties, together with more than 40 other civil society organisations showed that many EU Member States have either failed to protect or have actively undermined these accountability mechanisms. And this isn't confined to one or two "problem countries", it happens all across Europe.

What I am referring to is fast-track legislative procedures that are increasingly overused and which limit parliamentary scrutiny, reduce debate, and make decisions harder to contest. But there are also weak or purely formal public consultations, where citizens and civil society are often invited in only after decisions have already been made. Executive decrees and emergency procedures have also become a normalised way of governing in several countries, bypassing ordinary legislative processes. Lastly, independent authorities are another pressure point. Some Member States still lack fully established National Human Rights Institutions. In others, these bodies exist on paper but face chronic underfunding, weak mandates, or political interference.

So the repair here is not to invent new institutions. It's to use, defend, and enforce the ones we already have, and to stop treating institutional safeguards as optional when they become inconvenient.

And the EU is not powerless. It should use the tools it already has. Since 2022, freezing over 30 billion euros in funds to Hungary over systemic rule-of-law breaches has shown that enforcement is possible. It doesn't replace political will, but it does raise the cost of dismantling democratic safeguards.

Second: make accountability visible and not just functional.

Some basics really are non-negotiable. Democracies don't just need accountability to exist somewhere in the background. They need to see it working.

Across many Member States, the problems look surprisingly similar. Anti-corruption rules exist, but they're weakly enforced. Transparency is patchy. Whistleblowers are still left exposed. And again, the issue isn't a lack of principles. It's enforcement. Clear conflict-of-interest rules. Lobbying registers that actually mean something. Protection for people who speak up. Prosecutors who have the independence, and the resources, to do their job.

Take Romania. For a while, its independent anti-corruption prosecutor went after some very high-level cases, like MPs or mayors. That changed behaviour, and it showed that enforcement doesn't have to be symbolic. But unfortunately, there were later government attempts to water down these anti-corruption laws.

Third: stop overloading democracy without maintaining it.

Over the past decades, we've asked democratic systems to do more and more, but at the same time, we have neglected the basic maintenance work: civic education and media literacy.

Take Finland. Media literacy is built into education at all levels, helping citizens better recognise misinformation. From early childhood education, students learn how media works, how to analyse content, how to interpret messages critically, and how to create media of their own. As a result, Finland consistently ranks among the least vulnerable to disinformation in Europe.

But there's something else we need to acknowledge. Even if we fixed all of this tomorrow, democracy wouldn't suddenly become smooth or conflict-free. And that's exactly the point Ophélie makes.

**Ophélie Omnes:** I think that we need to accept that we're going through a process that by definition is going to be imperfect. I think...we, especially in the West, we like to believe our systems to be the best possible things we could do with what we had. And it might have been true for a while, but the thing with human organization, that is, democracy included, makes it imperfect by nature. And the question is, how much are we willing to try and take into account at a certain moment with what we know, with what we've identified, with how ready society is on some topics? Understanding at the same time that this means that maybe in 20, 50, 70 years time, we need to make the system evolve again because we actually realized that what we built was not great when it came to this part.

**Eva:** What I find important in what Ophélie is saying is that it forces us to drop a tempting illusion: the idea that there's a final version of democracy we just haven't reached yet. So the question is more about how to make democracies resilient. How can they live through crises, shocks, and disagreement without sliding into paralysis, or taking authoritarian shortcuts.

## BUILDING RESILIENT DEMOCRACIES

**Eva:** Economic shocks, pandemics, wars, climate change... clearly, we can't avoid all of this. But democracies can absorb pressure better. They can adapt and keep going, without turning against their own principles.

This brings me to a more fundamental question, one I might have been circling around throughout the last five episodes: are our democracies producing too many losers? People who feel they never win, never benefit and never get heard?

And how much of this is actually rooted in deeper inequalities? We've already talked about the links between inequality and participation. But there's also a persistent gap between laws or policy intentions and what people experience in their daily lives. And resilience becomes impossible if large parts of society consistently feel left behind.

That's where the image of "losers" matters. Not in the sense that everyone can win all the time, but in the sense that some people feel they never win at all. And this is exactly where Ophélie pushes the conversation beyond technical fixes.

**Ophélie Omnes:** The problem with the reforms is what I call like reforms at the margins. That is, we could be changing that and we could be improving this and then we could be like changing this element for this other element. But for me, it's a little bit like trying to put a bandage on a wooden leg because what we really need to do is to address big issues, interconnected issues, political honesty, political trust, relationship between citizens and the people who run them, run countries in which they live. All of that needs to be re-questioned. Because part of those tensions come from the fact of having categories of the population who keep on being unheard.

**Eva:** What Ophélie is getting at is that resilience can't be built on cosmetic change. If democratic systems keep producing the same results, the same inequalities, then on-paper stability won't be enough in practice. So when we talk about resilience, we also have to talk about equality, as a basic condition for democracy to work. The European Institute for Gender Equality puts it very clearly: equality means that people's rights and opportunities shouldn't depend on who they are or where they come from.

Democracies are not automatically more equal, but they are, arguably, better positioned than other systems to address inequality. By design, they require broader social and political coalitions, negotiation, and compromise.

And two things matter here.

First, equality and non-discrimination can't be add-ons. They have to be built into policies from the start, what is often called mainstreaming. When equality is considered early on, policies tend to work better, and for more people.

But that's not enough. Treating everyone the same often just reproduces existing gaps. That's why positive action also matters: targeted measures that correct structural disadvantages and make equal rights translate into equal opportunities.

And this connects directly to economic inequality. Proposals like minimum income schemes or universal access to healthcare and education aren't just social policies - they're democratic repairs.

So adaptation has to happen over time, by addressing the structural conditions that fuel exclusion and resentment in the first place. That longer-term perspective is something Heather talked about, from a place of cautious hope.

**Heather Grabbe:** There's also another hope I have which could perhaps help with this, which is institutions. It's actually really well designed, independent, credible institutions that maintain not only democracy, you know, that's why Donald Trump and others attack courts and central banks, independent central banks and so on, because they know how important those institutions are to maintaining a check on their power and maintaining separation of powers and checks and balances and so on. So having institutions that are able to prevent dictatorship and prevent a slide into authoritarianism, they're really important. But also institutions can take a longer term view than individual politicians or individual political parties. And also institutions at local level. The way that civil society can maintain vibrant links between people across different parts of society, allowing people to meet and to find common cause and how much they have in common with their neighbors and with other parts of society, rather than being atomized and thinking the only people I agree with and the only people I trust are the ones on my explosive Twitter feed.

**Eva:** What really comes through, for me, is just how important institutions still are. And when I say institutions, I don't mean governments or elected politicians. I mean the rules, bodies, and organisations that are meant to outlast electoral cycles and to put limits on power.

When they're well designed and genuinely independent, these institutions can do something that day-to-day politics often can't: they can take a longer view. They can hold steady through shocks. Courts, central banks, scientific bodies - all of these help keep democracy on its feet when everything else feels unstable.

But it's not only about big national institutions. Closer to home, it's often local institutions, civil society organisations, or even community spaces that matter most because they're the places where people actually meet.

In the end, resilience is about whether people still feel democracy is meant for them.

And institutions matter, but they can't do it alone.

## SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

**Eva:** So institutions alone cannot keep democracy resilient. And there's a temptation, especially in moments of crisis, to look for a single lever, better leaders, better structures, better communication. Don't get me wrong, all of that matters, but the evidence tells us something more complex.

Political trust is not built in one direction. And it can't be fixed from the top down either. It's earned, reinforced, and sometimes repaired, from both sides. This is something Daniela explains very clearly.

**Daniela Braun:** So how can we increase of what are the determinants of political trust? So there is a bottom up and top down. So bottom up would mean that it is for example important that the citizens or people in general do not only trust institutions but also trust each other. For example there is a lot of evidence that if people trust their fellow citizens then they have also higher levels of trust into political parties, into politicians, political institutions. That is this bottom-up approach that if, for example, also the citizens share common norms and values, if they share the same ideas, then they have higher levels of trust. And then on the other hand, of course, you have this top-down. If the system works, if I'm happy with how the system works, if I see that the performance of the system is very good politically but also economically, then I trust the system.

**Eva:** What she's describing is really a two-way relationship. And here, many small but concrete reforms can help repair trust from the top down. OECD data shows, for example, that improving daily interactions with public institutions can make a real difference. Things like how easy it is to find information or how responsibly personal data is used. On more complex policy issues, trust also could be improved if decisions are clearly evidence-based, and if governments balance the needs of different generations.

But how do we repair the trust we have in one another? Decades of research on social capital tell us something very interesting: trust doesn't grow out of slogans or participation exercises alone. It grows when people actually meet. This matters because people trust each other more when the system feels fair in real life, not just in how it's designed.

Which brings us back to the importance of a healthy civic space. Funding matters, of course, we talked about it. But so do the conditions for safe and free expression, without fear of repression.

So this is where leadership comes in, right? Political leaders have a central role to play by being honest about trade-offs, by thinking beyond the next election, and by defending democratic norms even when it's costly. But at the same time, responsibility doesn't stop at the top.

Democracy also relies on citizens' civic responsibility. Yes, that means continuing to vote, participate, and organise. But how we do it is also key: respecting the rights and freedoms of others, engaging in open and honest dialogue with the aim of solving common problems, and defending democratic norms, even when that, too, comes at a cost.

That's why framing democracy as a shared responsibility matters so much. Not everything can be fixed by institutions. And not everything can be carried by citizens alone. Resilience lives in the interaction between the two. Between systems that perform and people who stay invested. Between leaders who act with integrity and societies that refuse indifference.

## ISLANDS OF HOPE

**Eva:** After everything we've talked about, it might sound strange to end on hope. Especially after spending so much time looking at democracy's cracks. But this isn't about optimism as denial. Or hope as something forced. What I have in mind is something more grounded than that.

Because one thing that comes through very clearly, both from the research and from the people I spoke to, is that democracy rarely repairs all its cracks at once. It doesn't suddenly snap back into place everywhere, at the same time. What we tend to see instead are pockets of resilience. Small spaces where the cracks don't widen.

Political scientists often talk about democratic renewal as something that starts close to the ground. Through institutions becoming more trustworthy. Participation becoming more meaningful. Inequalities being taken seriously. And there is evidence behind this: strong local participation, active civil society, and cooperation across communities are consistently linked to higher trust and engagement, even when national politics feel polarised or stuck.

And this is where I think it's important to be clear: the local and the European aren't opposites here. They're connected. What happens locally, in cities, communities, associations, can scale up. And the EU, at its best, is one of the few political spaces where those local connections can cross borders, rather than stop at them. That's why Kelsey's perspective really resonated with me.

**Kelsey Beltz:** What gives me hope is actually being in the EU. Like I believe in the European project. And I think despite the negativity in the rest of the world, it might actually be kind of like when your mom yells at you, so you start to do your tasks. I think that Europe really has the opportunity to be great and to be a leader and to be a leader, not just in elections. But, in terms of also leading in protecting the human rights and becoming a peace project. and I think we can do it. I really do. So genuinely. It just takes a little bit of willpower but I believe in the citizens, I believe in the project. We just have to make it happen.

**Eva:** What she's pointing to is the idea that cooperation still exists, across borders, languages, histories, even when the global context is increasingly hostile. The European project is often criticised, and not without reason. But it's also one of the few political spaces where democratic standards, human rights, and peace are foundations. Yes, better enforcement and coherence are needed, but in a world where those principles are under pressure, that matters. If cracks don't disappear, where does hope actually come from? Is it something we expect from institutions and big political projects, or is it something people build, quietly, through what they do every day?

**Ophélie Omnes:** It's very funny that you're asking me this question because I was thinking at lunch today that I didn't feel hopeless in a world that seems to be going into flames. And I was wondering why that is. And I think that when you are working for something that you think is deeply needed, whether that's more representation for underrepresented groups, whether that's making sure that systems and institutions are more known to citizens so that they can decide accordingly, whether that's making people understand that the law is also something that they can change. So all of that being what I do on an everyday basis, I think that I've realised that there's a need for finding joy in small things that you're doing because it sounds very heavy and very, you know, heroic, but it's not. It's really just like you doing your very tiny little bit to make sure that this is going into the right direction. And I think that, doing it in a way that gives you joy personally at the individual level, I think is very important, especially when at the global and like more collective level, it's not doing that great. But more importantly is the deep belief that you're not doing that on your own. No one's doing that on their own.

**Eva:** There is something really important in what Ophélie is saying. A lot of democratic work is not heroic. It doesn't make headlines. But research on civic engagement keeps pointing to the same thing: people stay committed when they feel part of something larger than themselves. And that might be one of the most realistic forms of hope we have right now. Not the idea that democracy will magically fix itself. But the knowledge that it's being held together, every day, in many places at once. In classrooms, local councils, courts, civil society organisations, cross-border conversations that all keep going. So maybe hope for democracy doesn't come from grand breakthroughs. Maybe it comes from these islands where people keep showing up, keep caring, and maybe most importantly, keep refusing indifference.

## OUTRO

**Eva:** And that's the end of Democracy Cracks. When we started this journey, we talked about political trust as the oxygen of democracy. Something you don't really notice when it's there. Something you assume will always be there. And something that becomes dangerous very quickly when it starts to run out.

Over the episodes, we've peeled back quite a few layers. We've talked about disillusionment, polarisation, participation, representation. About pressure. About cracks. And about what happens when a democratic system starts to feel less like a shared house, and more like a place people no longer feel they belong to.

But if there's one thing I really hope comes through, it's this: it's not too late. Not because democracy magically fixes itself. It doesn't. But because I really think it can still be repaired. Democracy was never meant to be easy, as Alex put it very clearly:

**Alex Hoppe:** My main and most important point that we need to understand that democracy is hard work and that it is demanding and that it is not natural.

**Eva:** But "hard work" doesn't mean giving up. And it shouldn't be confused with slowness or inefficiency as some kind of democratic virtue. Democracies survive when they're able to act, decisively, without giving up on accountability, rights, or inclusion. And that's the real challenge today. Illiberal regimes are organising themselves with alarming speed and confidence. If democracies respond only with patience and procedure, they will lose. Agency matters here. Democracy isn't something that just happens to us. It's something we do. It depends on institutions that are willing to hold the line. And it depends on citizens who refuse indifference. People who care enough to name problems clearly, to face structural failures honestly, and to push for change instead of drifting along.

Some of you might hear that and think it sounds idealistic. Maybe it does. But I don't see idealism as naïve. I see it as care. And caring is often where renewal actually starts.

Before I close, I want to say thank you. This mini-series wouldn't exist without the people who helped bring it to life: Barbara Vanotti, Mariam Khotenashvili, Ilaria Giustacchini, Florence Ferrando, and Nicolas Gadrat. Thank you for your expertise, your generosity, and for pushing me to do better.

And to all my ActEU colleagues and interviewees - Daniela Braun, Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos, Alex Hoppe, Alex Hartland, Michael Kaeding, Kelsey Beltz, Ophélie Omnes, and Heather Grabbe - thank you for your time, your ideas, and your trust.

And before we close for the last time... Democracy Cracks is produced by TEPSA as part of the Horizon Europe ActEU project. I'm Eva Ribera, Programme Manager at TEPSA, and I'm the one behind these episodes. As usual, you'll find all the references used in this episode in the description.

And mostly, thank you. Thank you for listening, and for taking the time to engage with this mini-series. Let's finish on this: democracy survives because enough people decide, again and again, that it's worth the effort.

## ABOUT ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question “How much trust do you have in the parliament?”? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU level? ActEU aimed at findings answers to these questions and more by pursuing two overarching goals: First, in phase 1, we mapped and investigated persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU’s multi-level structure. Knowledge gained from phase 1 flowed directly into the development of a toolbox of remedial actions characterizing phase 2, which crafted tailor-made toolkits for political and civil society actors, school teachers and university lecturers to deal with issues of declining political trust in representative democracies in flux and counteract a further decrease. We developed context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and type of polarizing policy field (migration, environment, gender).

## ABOUT TEPSA

The Trans-European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) was established in 1974 as the first transnational research network in the field of EU affairs. It comprises leading research institutes throughout Europe, with an office in Brussels. Its aim is to provide high-quality research on European integration to stimulate discussion on policies and political options for Europe. This is achieved by the interaction between the European and national institutions as well as the academic and research community. TEPSA is active on a wide range of research topics, focusing on differentiated integration, the EU's external relations, democratic participation and citizens' engagement.