

September 2024

# Democracy is dead, long live democracy! Can citizen deliberation help us overcome affective polarisation?

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Crisis, deficit, death – you name it: democracy has been declared dead many times, and yet it is still alive and kicking. On the one hand, global challenges and rapidly changing socio-technological conditions represent a huge opportunity for liberal democracies to keep reinventing themselves. At the same time, they are imposing a heavy burden on the conditions needed for them to thrive. Governing in political systems that primarily base political trust on elections is becoming more cumbersome in a more fragmented and rapidly shifting political landscape. In many countries, citizens feel that they have no impact on politics, which is leading to growing public discontent and high abstention rates. The latest European elections and legislative elections in France are a painful reminder of the rise of affective polarisation, with negative emotions playing a key role in debates, challenging our ability to deliberate with one another. In Germany, regional elections in three eastern *Länder* will challenge the traditional parties in their bid to form a stable government given the rise of extreme right- and left-wing parties.

Can we depolarise and bring deliberation back? This is wishful thinking for some, but not for deliberative democrats. Over the last decade, a “deliberative wave” has explored innovative methods of taking collective decisions together with citizens. Denoted as citizens’ panels, conventions or assemblies, these innovations feature a group of randomly selected citizens, representing a snapshot of the population, who come together to deliberate on specific issues. Engaging participants in informed discussions and

decision-making processes, they all share a similar objective: overcoming partisan positions and polarised attitudes, channelling emotions and reaching consensus. In so doing, they help to overcome political gridlocks and complement traditional forms of democratic governance, providing an avenue for citizen deliberation to inform policymaking. In France, deliberative mini publics have gained notoriety ever since the Grand Débat National and the Climate Convention, while the German Bundestag recently concluded its first Citizens’ Assembly on Nutrition in Transition after many successful examples at Land level. At the European level, the Conference on the Future of Europe established a precedent, with five European Citizens’ Panels conducted since the conference ended.

Expectations are high. Deliberative mini publics are said to strengthen liberal democracies, foster trust in public institutions, lead to better quality policies, and promote ownership and social acceptance of policy outcomes. However, the widespread feeling among citizens that participatory democracy overpromises and underdelivers raises the following question: if negative emotions and affective polarisation threaten democracy, can these deliberative mini publics save it?

## The come-back of affective polarisation

Emotions play an important role in politics: anxiety, resentment and hostility towards some groups often correlate with socio-demographic and political factors, and are known to influence patterns of political engagement as well as partisanship identities.

In recent years, global crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and wars have elicited strong emotional responses, with tangible effects in the public sphere. Social movements such as the Last Generation in Germany and the Yellow Vests Movement in France illustrate a shift towards direct forms of political contestation, reflecting growing disenchantment with traditional political parties. In Germany and in France alike, election campaigns have witnessed hate attacks against politicians, reflecting broader social divisions that permeate everyday life. Our societies are increasingly polarised along lines of values, cosmopolitan versus communitarian, urban versus rural, new middle class versus old middle classes, and socio-economic cleavages between winners and losers. People are divided into groups that live, feel and experience life differently.

The rise of affective polarisation in recent years is a serious cause for concern. History reminds us that affective polarisation characterised most of our European societies in the inter-war period – such as Germany and Spain – leading to ideologically driven civil conflicts. Affective polarisation captures the emotional distance between the sympathy that individuals hold for those who they believe belong to their group and the animosity they feel towards those who do not.

Widening this emotional distance has systemic consequences for liberal democracies, threatening democratic quality and stability. Affective polarisation notably correlates with democratic backsliding, as partisan identities and out-party hostility can lead voters to normalise the undemocratic behaviours espoused by politicians they support. Additionally, high levels of affective polarisation correspond with decreased trust in social and political institutions, as illustrated by the general lack of confidence expressed by citizens across the EU. This polarisation also exacerbates winner-loser gaps and supports the norm-breaking escalation of political conflict, with heightened aggression and an increase in hate speech towards both political elites and minorities. This makes it all the more challenging, if not impossible, to foster constructive political discussions and compromise between groups.

### **The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: should we be afraid of emotions?**

With affective polarisation, emotions become central to the formation of our political attitudes. More than ever, how we feel towards one another, a political party or a political situation seem to define us. In a poll conducted by the Jean Jaurès Foundation in the aftermath of President Macron's surprise decision to call snap elections in the spring of 2024, the top four emotions expressed by respondents were fatigue (40%), anger (32%), sadness (29%) and fear (29%). On the opposite side of this grim spectrum, supporters of the radical right expressed feeling mostly hopeful and joyful. How can we reconcile our collective emotions when some citizens feel anger and others hope?

A first step is to acknowledge that emotions are not intrinsically bad. Contrary to the usual assumption, it is not necessarily negative emotions that drive extreme political preferences. For example, the growing support for Sahra Wagenknecht in eastern Germany is notably driven by hope for a societal shift. Similarly, it is often hope and enthusiasm that fuel people's participation in collective actions and social movements. In their seminal piece, researchers George Marcus and Russell Neumann show that anxiety increases the likelihood that citizens will seek information and engage in political deliberation, while anger decreases it. The role of empathy should also not be overlooked: empathy allows us to access the perspectives of others, which plays a crucial role in enabling respectful and constructive deliberation.

A second step is to acknowledge the current imbalance between negative and positive emotions. The two have always co-existed and are an inherent part of democratic life. The issue is not that our emotions are political but is a question of the relationship between democracy and emotions. Historically, liberal democracy has been associated with peace, prosperity and security, with hope, optimism and fear of totalitarianism fuelling the re-construction of Europe in the post-war period.

Following a decade of crisis, anger, nostalgia and resentment about not being heard, liberal democracies are no longer associated with a strong set of positive emotions to balance negative emotions. Such an imbalance is very similar to the experience of the interwar period in Europe, during which liberal democracies were associated with feelings of decay. So how can we associate liberal democracy with positive emotions once again?

### **Bringing back deliberation in democratic practices**

Overcoming affective polarisation and biases to reconcile a plurality of opinions, emotions and lived experiences is precisely the promise of deliberation. Deliberation is a demanding communication process in which equal participants justify their positions in a respectful, reciprocal manner, always willing to accept the force of the better argument. From this perspective, deliberation could easily be seen as a form of rational discourse via argumentation, leaving no room for emotions. Yet emotions are part of human reality and cannot be excluded from deliberation. First, because emotions always include some form of appraisal and evaluation (i.e. they are not “irrational”). Second, because compassion and empathy are an essential element of good deliberation.

As demonstrated with regard to the differences between France and Germany, the diffusion or absence of a deliberative culture within political institutions shapes elite cooperation, and how elites interact also impacts affective polarisation. There is evidence that coalitions between parties can reduce the extent to which partisans dislike each other. This highlights how institutional arrangements influence affective polarisation and urges us to reform our political institutions to bring back greater deliberation within representative democracy. After all, is it not the case that parliaments are supposed to be deliberative chambers?

### **Reclaiming joy: the challenge of citizen deliberation**

Bringing back deliberation within political parties or parliamentary chambers does not solely meet citizens' expectations for a more inclusive democracy. Strengthening liberal democracy also means deconfining democracy and providing a forum for citizens to deliberate amongst themselves.

While they are not new, the popularity of deliberative mini publics is as exponential as expectations of them are high. Most often referred to as “citizen assemblies”, they consist of randomly selected groups of citizens that engage in deliberation on issues of public relevance. They aim to enhance the democratic process by providing a representative microcosm of the population to reflect diverse perspectives and overcome blockages. These mini publics are often designed to ensure inclusivity and facilitate balanced, critical discussions through moderated sessions, ultimately contributing to informed and legitimate decision-making in democratic systems.

For the citizens participating in them, citizen assemblies are an intense journey. They foster friendships and networks of solidarity and reinvest in spaces for dialogue and exchange that leave room for both negative and positive emotions to express themselves. They are intended to foster joy, demonstrating that democracy can be something else other than the fear or anger of losing an election.

### **Conclusion: Moving from emotional band-aid to democratic well-being**

Scaling up such spaces of democratic joy in which more and more citizens are given the opportunity to deliberate with one another, in cities, regions, countries, across Europe and the globe, is perhaps the key to linking back liberal democracy to positive emotions.

In order for it to meet this expectation, citizen deliberation still faces several challenges, notably regarding its capacity to include the less educated, the most fearful and less confident among us, its profile in reaching out to all citizens, and its capacity to exert a genuine influence over policymaking. One fatal caveat would indeed be the proliferation of spaces for citizen deliberation and yet the persistent negative feeling, shared by millions of citizens, of not being heard.

Citizen deliberation also needs to move away from ad hoc experiments. Too often, citizen assemblies are convened by political elites to manage, if not get around, strong political emotions, as was the case in France with the *Grand Débat National* and the French Climate Convention.

Instead, citizen deliberation needs to take place within a broader political debate about the democratic nature of our political systems. For citizen deliberation to allow liberal democracy to claim back positive emotions requires (i) acknowledging all political emotions, without judgment, (ii) a more diffuse deliberative political culture, spreading to representative institutions, and (iii) a more inclusive form of democracy, granting greater political agency to citizens, beyond elections.

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**Genshagen Forum 2024**

This paper resulted from a workshop at the 12th Genshagen Forum for Franco-German Dialogue (June 27 and 28, 2024) with the topic "Disintegrated Societies? The Future of Cohesion in Europe". The Genshagen Forum for French-German Dialogue has been organized since 2010. Considering the numerous challenges that Europe is facing, Germany and France must take responsibility regarding the future of the EU and join forces for the development of shared strategies. The Genshagen Forum actively encourages this process by promoting a result-oriented dialogue between mid-career leaders from both countries.



**Publisher**

Stiftung Genshagen  
Am Schloss 1  
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**Editors**

Guillaume Ohleyer, Jeanette Süß and Pauline Zapke

**Proofreading**

Oliver Gascoigne

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