

# Executive summary

Democratic governance has proven to be the best institutional system for protecting and promoting individual rights and freedoms while allowing long-term sustainable gains in well-being. Yet, low voter turnout, greater political polarisation and larger groups of citizens dissociating themselves from traditional democratic processes represent challenges for policy makers in many OECD countries today. Even in the most well-established democracies, these trends are testing institutions and hindering governments' ability to address pressing social and economic challenges. At the same time, major global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and climate change, have underscored the importance of strengthening the governance of democracies – and citizens' trust in them.

The inaugural [OECD Survey on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in OECD countries](#) has provided insights into how citizens perceive the quality of, and how they associate with, government institutions in democratic countries where citizens are free to report low levels of trust. Overall, democratic public institutions in many OECD countries perform relatively well on several measures of citizens' trust, such as government reliability and public service provision. Yet, public confidence is evenly split between those who trust their national government and those who do not. Many citizens perceive governments as falling short on responsiveness to their needs, representation and participation. There is also widespread scepticism surrounding the integrity of policy makers. Suspicion towards the news media suggests that a key component of democracy – access to information – is also today a factor of distrust.

These results suggest that, to meet citizens' evolving expectations, governments must do better, both in giving all people a voice and in responding to those voices. They must also improve integrity and fight undue influence, credibly address long-term challenges such as climate change, evaluate and communicate the effects of reforms on different socioeconomic groups, and develop better governance models for information ecosystems.

Building on the results of the survey and further analytical work, the OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative addresses three common governance challenges found in advanced and mature democracies i) combating mis- and disinformation, ii) ensuring representation, participation and openness in public life and iii) embracing global responsibilities and building resilience to foreign influence. It also covers two cross-cutting themes, “governing green”, or the capacity to respond to climate and other environmental challenges; and transforming public governance for digital democracy.

## Tackling mis- and disinformation

The fast and massive spread of mis- and disinformation poses a fundamental threat to the free and fact-based exchange of information underpinning democracy and trust in public institutions. They polarise public debate, undermine the public's willingness to engage in democratic life, and hamper consensus building in society. While mis- and disinformation are not new, digitalisation, in particular, has fundamentally changed how information is shared and understood. The existing checks and balances that helped limit the spread of mis and dis information in the past are no longer effective enough.

New governance models with a whole of society approach to build the resilience of democracies to mis- and dis-information are needed. Governments must work with traditional and social media organisations, academics and civil society to reshape information ecosystems, ensuring both freedom of speech and information integrity. Some governments have moved in that direction, highlighting the scale of the threat and the need for an internationally co-ordinated and whole-of-society approach.

A resilient information ecosystem includes a role for civil society and traditional news media in pre- and de-bunking misinformation; a better, more citizen-centred government communications function; and long-term efforts to improve media and information literacy. Governments can encourage access to and sharing of data, and consider ways – ranging from guidance to regulation – to make online platforms more transparent in terms of content moderation, algorithm parameters, and sponsorship. Finally, the integrity of information requires addressing the economic and structural drivers of mis- and disinformation, such as anti-competitive conduct, and encouraging diversity, editorial independence, and high-quality news provision in the media.

## **Representation, participation, openness, and citizen-focused services**

Giving citizens a greater voice has become a priority in many settings. To promote more inclusive citizens' participation, many countries are adopting and institutionalising new deliberative processes (e.g. civic lotteries, citizens' assemblies and juries) in policy making as well as inclusive participation mechanisms to improve service design and performance.

There is also increasing recognition of the need to strengthen democratic representation of historically underrepresented groups (e.g. youth, women and minorities) in elected bodies, and to ensure that the civil service itself is diverse, representative and responsive. Collecting more disaggregated data and identifying barriers to inclusion can help enhance representation.

At the same time, preventing undue influence and striving for greater integrity in public-decision making must be a top priority. This includes implementing basic standards around integrity, conflict of interest and lobbying, and upgrading frameworks to safeguard the public interest in the increasingly complex landscape of lobbying and influential actors and practices.

Finally, to ensure democratically stable outcomes, electoral processes must uphold the highest levels of integrity and transparency, including in political finance, and be able to withstand new challenges raised by digital technologies and foreign influence in elections.

## **Global responsibilities and resilience to undue foreign influence**

Democracies have long been at the forefront of international co-operation. Nevertheless, a growing number of global challenges, such as those related to climate change and global supply chains, have underscored the need to do more. Bringing citizens on board is crucial, and starts with setting out a long-term strategic vision with a clear roadmap, and involving them in the policy cycle on global matters. Institutional capability to address global challenges and exert international influence must also be nurtured beyond foreign affairs ministries, including by investing in the public workforce. Countries are harnessing both classic governance tools such as budgeting, procurement and regulation, and new tools such as mission-oriented innovation, to promote strategic global objectives.

One of today's most complex challenges is protecting open societies from foreign non-democratic influence through disinformation, political finance, social media, various intermediaries and opaque corporate, academic or NGO structures. Governments should fortify their public institutions against such influences, by training public officials; assigning responsibilities for identifying, responding to, and building resilience against foreign interference; and closing regulatory loopholes on lobbying and undue influence, beneficial ownership and political finance.

## Governing green

The future of democratic governance and of environmental action are intertwined. Democratic governments are expected to show that they are the best placed to handle complex, interconnected and long-term policy problems, and to manage the difficult trade-offs required in the best interest of all. At the same time, the success of climate and environmental policies will depend on effective and efficient public governance. Setting the overall direction and long-term priorities, ensuring coherence of - and trust in - those decisions, and establishing co-ordinated approaches across sectors, levels and branches of government are difficult tasks facing governments across the board.

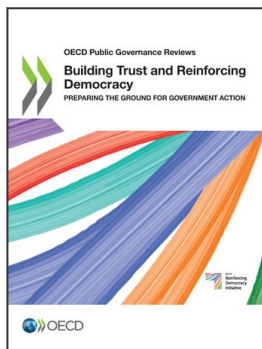
A genuine transformation of governance is required to successfully respond to environmental pressures, particularly the existential climate threat. While addressing environmental challenges requires efforts from the whole of society, some critical tasks can only be carried out or led by governments. These include ensuring stakeholder participation, citizen dialogue, and integrity and transparency to secure trust and buy-in for green policies. Governments are ramping up public governance tools such as regulation, public procurement, budgeting, and infrastructure planning and decisions to achieve environmental goals. Some countries are applying more novel approaches such as anticipatory governance and behavioural insights to design, implement and promote green policies. Greater efforts are needed in all these areas, as well as in leading by example in “greening” the public sector and accounting for results in government operations.

## Digital democracy

The rapid digitalisation of societies, economies and governments is challenging the traditional democratic institutions. Digital innovations have expanded civic space, promoted the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups, and made citizen participation and oversight easier. But they have also introduced new threats to human rights, fundamental freedoms, minorities and vulnerable groups; increased opportunities for undue influence in policy making (national or foreign); and destabilised information ecosystems and democratic intermediation, further exacerbating the polarisation of societies.

Developed for the analogue world, the institutions of OECD countries are adjusting and adapting to the digital age. Governments are increasingly taking steps to ensure that the same human rights and democratic principles that people have offline are protected online, via regulations, declarations, charters or international standards. Digital tools are increasingly used to increase participation in public life (e.g., e-voting, consultation platforms, open source digital democracy tools) and government openness and accountability (e.g., open data, live streaming of parliamentary debate, opening up of fiscal, budget, procurement and justice data). In recent years, civic organisations and oversight agencies have teamed up with civitech and govtech start-ups to mine a wealth of data to uncover trends and raise red flags. New public institutions are also emerging to address the risks of both the public sector and the wider digital economy, including new types of regulatory bodies to tackle digital issues holistically.

The OECD has developed action plans on three of these areas to help member countries and others strengthen their governance systems, bolster trust and ensure the resilience of their democracies. Further Action Plans will follow.



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