

The role of technology in democratic transformation

Democratic tension

Technology can enhance inclusivity and people's capacity to participate, for example by gathering and collating their inputs, while providing clear and transparent information. However, it could also replace this participation by filtering and assuming people's voices and choices.

- ⊕ AI can transform governance, making it more accessible and transparent.
- ⊕ Co-creating and using open-source AI tools, citizens can drive community-based initiatives.
- ⊖ Technology can create mental overload and cause citizens' detachment.
- ⊖ Overreliance on data can erode the public debate, replacing it by synthetic populations; technology can even be used by its owners to predict and control citizens.

This is not about embracing or rejecting technology. It's about tech supporting citizens in their choices vs. tech quietly replacing them and making choices for them.

Concentration of power and its implications

Democratic tension

Power can appear widely distributed through citizen participation, while remaining highly concentrated through control of infrastructure, data or procedures. This can weaken accountability and democratic norms.

- ➕ Self-governed communities offer opportunities for new forms of direct democratic governance.
- ➕ Open-source AI tools may broaden access to decision-making and, in principle, enable more equal citizen influence.
- ➖ Centralized technocratic governance can reduce pluralism, and weaken checks and balances, increasing the risk of authoritarian drift.
- ➖ Influence of Big Tech blurs public–private boundaries and challenges democratic accountability.

*Participation tells us how many people can speak.
Concentration of power tells us who controls the microphone,
the translation system and the final decision.*

Balancing efficiency with citizen agency

Democratic tension

How far efficiency can be pursued without hollowing out citizen agency, participation, and democratic legitimacy?

- + AI supported participation and data analysis can accelerate the decision-making.
- + Inclusive face-to-face deliberation can strengthen social cohesion and anticipate opposition and conflicts, ensuring more efficient implementation of policy solutions.
- Exclusive focus on efficiency can weaken checks & balances and distance the citizens.
- 'Tokenized' participation and lack of feedback may reduce citizens to consumers, offering only a democratic façade.

A government that provides excellent services can still be democratically poor. Even if the system delivers efficiently, people need agency to be able to shape, question and change the system itself.

Emergence of alternative governance models

Democratic tension

Alternatives to representative democracy can open space for more citizen involvement and for better policymaking, but can also raise questions about coordination, accountability and social cohesion.

- ⊕ Locally tailored and adaptable governance models can enable democratic renewal through stronger articulation of shared values and needs.
- ⊕ More direct democracy enabled by digital tools can allow citizens to input views and monitor implementation.
- ⊖ Excessive decentralization risks fragmentation and inefficiencies.
- ⊖ Technocratic governance may weaken electoral accountability, while corporate-dominated digital spaces fragment public debate.

New governance models can bring democratic experimentation, technocratic administration or corporate rule. The issue is not whether a model is new, but whether rights, accountability and solidarity survive within it.

Use of data in governance systems

Democratic tension

Data-driven governance presents opportunities for enhancing democratic processes, with AI able to aggregate large-scale citizen input. However, attention must be paid to the design and use of these systems.

- ⊕ AI-supported data analysis and synthesis can help institutions understand diverse populations
- ⊕ Co-creating AI systems with citizens could embed the respect of fundamental rights and values.
- ⊖ Synthetic populations could replace citizen participation altogether by reducing people to data.
- ⊖ Data could be used to support mechanisms of control and exclusion if not properly safeguarded.

The core question is whether citizens use data to govern collectively, or whether institutions use citizens as data in order to govern them.

Trust in information ecosystems

Democratic tension

Democracy is dependent on trust – within and between communities, and among different governing levels. Transparent, accountable and pluralistic information systems maintain public confidence in democratic processes.

- ⊕ Communities can aim to rebuild trust through localized governance and direct, participatory practices.
- ⊕ Politicians are key mediators between the policymaking and the citizens, translating the decisions and fostering citizen engagement.
- ⊖ Misinformation can lead to fragmented information spheres, undermining the ability to maintain dialogue and societal cohesion.
- ⊖ Algorithmic bias can undermine the validity of AI-optimized outputs and erode public confidence.

A society may have highly trusted local information sources and still lack the shared public reality needed for collective democratic decisions.

Perceived representation and authentic participation

Democratic tension

Visibly equal representation of citizens doesn't guarantee influence, just as invitations to participate in policymaking do not mean citizens' contributions will have much effect. Yet, ensuring authentic citizen involvement is crucial to maintain the democratic legitimacy.

- ⊕ Governments can directly involve citizens in policymaking by ensuring equal access to advanced, human-centred technologies.
- ⊕ Citizens can reclaim agency through self-governed communities based on inclusive participation.
- ⊖ Using synthetic population can help represent social diversity but could also lead to disengagement.
- ⊖ Participation without real substance or impact ends up being counter-productive and provokes disengagement.

Participation is authentic only when citizens' input can alter policy decisions, constrain those in power and generate a visible response. A consultation, public debate or vote alone proves very little.