

What would have to change about ‘democracy’ in order to restore faith in democracy among young people?

The fight for democracy, regardless of the flag it has been fought under, has been written in all history books. It seems as though there should be a shared gratefulness, if not merely a strong and defined preference for something which absence is known to cast a dark shadow over whole societies. But in recent years, there has been a dip in the satisfaction with democracy amongst young people. And from satisfaction to faith there is a long gap that requires a bridge to be built. In an attempt to propose a way to do that, we should determine how to restore faith in democracy among young people by first asking ourselves: how and why was it lost?

Let us start at the beginning. Democracy is defined as a system of government in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves¹. Its history is rooted in ancient Greece, where the first democracy was established in Athens in the 5th century BC. In ancient greek language, demos means people and kratos means strength². The extent to which democracy’s popularity has been weakened amongst Millenials is shown by a study published by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk denominated “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect” and by a report from the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge, whose findings come from the largest global dataset of democratic legitimacy. The first one shows that there has been a systematic decline in the percentage of people who think that living in a democracy is essential; according to the study, people born in the 1980s believe much less in democracy than those born in the 1930s. For example, 72% of those born in the 1930s in America think democracy is absolutely essential, as do around 70% of the same cohort in Britain, and 55% in the Netherlands. The millennial wave has brought much

¹ Cambridge Dictionary.

² Aditya.Yadav, “History Of Democracy”.

smaller percentages: around 30% of American millennials agree that democracy is essential, as do one third of Dutch millennials and around 27% of British ones.

On a more alarming note, “young people were also more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives; 43% of older Americans vs 19% of younger people do not think that the military should be allowed to take over when the government is incompetent”³. In Europe there is also a clear difference: 53% of older Europeans vs 36% of millennials opposed military rule.

When looking for a reason for the loss of faith in democracy among the youth, we must evidently point a finger at social problems, or at the governments’ inaction to resolve them.

According to the study by the University of Cambridge, opportunity, wealth and income inequality remains the principal cause of the youth’s disillusion with democracy⁴. For instance, global satisfaction with democracy amongst the first millennials fell significantly after 2008 financial crisis. Other pressing issues in which the government has failed young people include climate change, and in the case of the US and the UK predominantly, the burden of student debt. Additionally, as a World Economic Forum survey showed, more than half of 18 to 35 year olds are frustrated with their government leaders due to the abuse of power and corruption. On the other hand, in emerging democracies of Latin America, southern Europe and Africa, “transition fatigue” plays an important role where satisfaction with democracy is brought by generations “who lack the memory of previous dictatorships and fights for political freedom.”⁵

³ Gray. Alex, “The troubling charts that show young people losing faith in democracy”, World Economic Forum (2016).

⁴ In nations with a more even wealth distribution like Iceland or Austria, there are minor generation gaps in attitudes towards democracy, while countries such as the US where there is higher wealth inequality have large and growing differences.

⁵ Lewsey. Fred, “Faith in democracy: millennials are the most disillusioned generation ‘in living memory’”, University of Cambridge.

Something worth mentioning is the fact that, as researchers pointed out, young people are most positive about democracy under populist leaders. The Cambridge University study therefore suggested that democratic engagement could be improved by the populist challenge to mainstream politics, which is likely to incentivise moderate parties and leaders to change.

Indeed, the most logical thing to restore the youth's faith in democracy would be for democratic governments to be fully efficient, transparent and responsive to their population's needs and wants. But beyond government functionality, it may be worth considering what needs to change in regards to the way we learn about, perceive, and interact with democracy. This will inevitably involve more institutions such as education and the media.

1. Whoever controls the media, controls the mind. — Jim Morrison

To restore faith in democracy, we should first comprehend that we may be impeding ourselves from taking full advantage of our democratic rights. The media is partly responsible for this: across the world, and very much in Mexico and Latin America, politics can become a spectacle fed by us, whereby political leaders, instead of fulfilling their duties, carry out short term projects and frivolous actions in order to appeal to the masses. The author Giovanni Sartori suggested elections become personalised as the campaign becomes the candidate, or rather the image of the candidate, rather than programs of the party and meaningful debate. This can result in the media and the news distorting events that are relevant in the political, national discussion, or even replacing them with events that will generate more views. In this media frenzy, the bias and the lack of truth clouds our understanding of national and international circumstances and warps our ability to make political decisions that are reflective of our wants and needs.

This is why the demand for professionalism and competence on behalf of our politicians should also be done through the change in the content we consume and the culture we cultivate. This is possible when we acknowledge that the cameras and the stories go where *we* incentivise them.

2. Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered. — José Saramago

In my country, there is little to no access to justice: some are kept by resentment; the majority through fear. We tend to generalise the blame and are reluctant to investigate further. We detach and distance ourselves. But a fatalist mindset and alienation from politics is not the answer; yes, there is an evident rise in dissatisfaction among young people with political institutions and democracy, but it's that dissatisfaction that we need to channel and use as fuel. We have to perceive ourselves as the moulders of our sociopolitical context and see that, just as the mind uses itself to understand itself, and just as there is order to be found within chaos, democracy is the way to improve democratic processes and democratic institutions.

3. Only the educated are free. — Epictetus

There should be an increase in a political education centred in the pursuit of truth, congruence (acting with total adherence to our values) and discussion. The debate aspect is essential for the cultivation of independent thought and the enrichment of opinions. It is also essential for reflecting the changes and collaboration we want to see in our government. Furthermore, discussion as a counterforce for polarisation might also combat the increasing disinterest in politics on behalf of new younger generations; if one's political standpoint can be fluid, rather than the source of conflict or potential exclusion, young people will be encouraged to join the conversations and learn without the fear of not being initially and fully politically correct. Just as through changing one's perspective, faith in democracy can be restored with more involvement from the youth, because it will be understood as a tool for us to shape and transform not only our communities, but also a political world with which we will also be familiarised. But for this, political education must be heavily tied to the understanding of social

issues so that there is a co-responsibility and desire to combat them with our competences and our democratic rights.

That said, the load of responsibility still weighs heavily upon elected government officials, and it is only through seeing them undertake change that we can start believing in them again. For me, this due change must come as a two sided coin where for one there are outcomes delivered (including more broader issues such as justice), and for the other, impenetrable and bureaucratic barriers are torn down for governmental institutions to become more open and available to the youth's voice. But irrespectively of that changing rapidly or not, faith in democracy can and must be restored among young people. Only then can we ensure that what needs to be changed, will.

This bridge to a stronger belief in democracy must also be built using the education system, the media, a national identity, and the households. If we have the motivation to be the instigators of change in our communities, why not believe in the very tool that can allow us to cause this change: democracy. After all, just as for most things, there is more to democracy than merely how it's used in the present. Faith can also be implanted on the basis of its potential and of our ability to use democracy's strengths to conquer its weaknesses. Frankly, we owe that much to those who have sacrificed their lives and fear to obtain political freedom, those who risk their lives to document, capture and write stories of what is happening for the world to see. We owe it to those who lived and live under totalitarianism, those who still are unable to change or escape the circumstances they and their families are in.

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