



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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143rd IPU Assembly

Madrid, Spain

26-30 November 2021



Assembly
Item 3

A/143/3-Inf.1
2 November 2021

Concept note for the General Debate on *Contemporary challenges to democracy: Overcoming division and building community*

The contemporary challenges to the functioning of democracy are numerous and require urgent political attention. While each country has its own specificities, increasing economic and structural inequalities, decreasing trust in political systems and growing disengagement are widely discussed among politicians, scholars and civil society around the world. A growing perception that the political establishment is losing touch with the population has fuelled the rise of populism and deepened societal divides.

In parallel, increased political polarization is being observed in many societies. While partisan competition is important for a healthy democracy, intense polarization entails several risks. It penetrates society as a whole, affecting everyday interactions and relationships, and may severely damage an established culture of tolerance, increase conflict and widen distrust. It can also undermine the effectiveness and credibility of parliaments, rendering them dysfunctional in some situations.

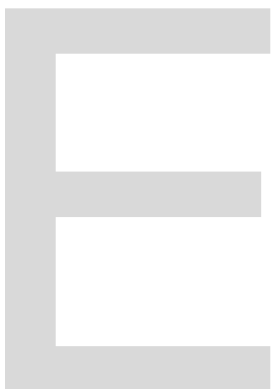
Technological advances have contributed to improved public access to information. However, the wide use of and reliance on social media have also facilitated the flow of disinformation, often eroding democratic values, spreading anger and frustration, and diminishing people's trust in political institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated existing challenges, affecting democratic processes, causing people to question evidence-based decision-making, and ultimately weakening the ability of the democratic model to cope with emergencies and to build back better.

Addressing the contemporary challenges facing democracy requires a concerted effort at both the national and international level. Political leadership and solidarity are needed to find new approaches in order to renew and safeguard democracy.

The General Debate will provide an opportunity for delegates to bring forward proposals as to how political systems and parliamentarians can promote a culture of cooperation and political dialogue to overcome divides and build inclusive societies.

Such proposals need to address several interrelated factors. Broad and meaningful public engagement, inclusive decision-making and the safeguarding of civic space may be seen as key elements in addressing polarization. Inclusive politics require a strong connection with a diverse range of communities, with particular focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. Civic education is another long-term but vital building block for democracy.



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The General Debate may also delve into how the parliamentary ecosystem needs to evolve in order to promote trust in democracy and reinforce the relevance of representative institutions. Building constructive cross-party cooperation and prioritizing evidence-based and participatory decision-making that leads to effective policy-making are possible responses to the contemporary challenges facing democracy.

Questions:

- What are the reasons for the increase in polarization? How can the root causes be addressed?
- How can politics evolve to overcome division and reinforce dialogue? How does political discourse have to change to bring hope, not hate?
- Are existing institutions, and in particular parliaments, capable of addressing the contemporary challenges facing democracies? What is needed to improve their response?
- What role should parliaments play in protecting freedom of expression online and promoting a diversity of views while also countering disinformation and hate speech?
- To what extent can parliaments that are more representative, including of women, youth and other underrepresented groups in society, enhance trust among the population and bring the institution and the people closer together?