



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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143rd IPU Assembly

Madrid, Spain
26-30 November 2021



Assembly
Item 3

A/143/3-DR
23 November 2021

Draft Madrid Declaration

Contemporary challenges to democracy: Overcoming division and building community

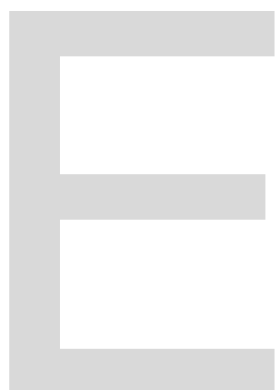
As members of parliaments and representatives of the people, we have an overriding responsibility to serve our communities through a system of democratic governance where every voice counts. The world is striving to overcome a wide array of challenges created by social, political, economic and health-related upheavals. Societal divides and the deterioration of social peace are having an impact on the state of democracy, and in particular on the institutions that put democratic values into practice.

In the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the world's governments committed to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels. As parliaments, we share the commitment to achieving those objectives.

In doing so, we will strengthen democracy at the national and global levels. We are convinced that overcoming social divisions, uniting instead of dividing, fostering hope not hate, joining forces and seeking common ground are vital to addressing the contemporary challenges to democracy.

These challenges are numerous. A growing perception that the political establishment is losing touch with the population has fuelled the rise of populism and deepened societal divides. Decreasing trust in political systems, rising economic gaps, structural inequalities, growing disengagement and increasing polarization are being experienced around the world. Young people under 30 make up about half of the world's population but are disproportionately absent from the decision-making process. As today's young people become tomorrow's adults, failure to engage with them meaningfully will further undermine the cohesion of our societies.

Technological advancements such as social media have made incredible contributions to public access to information and new forms of exchange. However, the same tools have also facilitated the flow of disinformation, spreading anger and frustration and impacting the very fabric of society. In the context of the global pandemic, they have in some instances been used to undermine scientific evidence and national vaccination campaigns, with a negative impact on public health. They are all too easily harnessed as tools to intentionally sow mistrust and spread hate. Sexist hate speech and online harassment affect women in particular, as a means of questioning their legitimacy and their right to take part in the democratic process.



#IPU143

Polarization and populism are not new concepts, but the current context provides the conditions for them to flourish. The level of polarization has reached new heights. Partisan competition is normal and healthy, but intense polarization carries significant risks. It penetrates society as a whole, affecting everyday interactions. It has the potential to damage the culture of tolerance, increase conflict and widen distrust. It can also severely undermine the effectiveness of our democratic institutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated existing challenges, affecting democratic processes, leading to questioning of evidence-based decision-making, and ultimately challenging the ability of the democratic model to cope with and recover from emergencies.

Towards new approaches to politics

Politics that is founded on confrontation and division undermines the legitimacy of the system as a whole. We are concerned that increased polarization reduces the opportunities to build broad coalitions in society and implement bold public policies to address urgent issues such as climate change.

Addressing the contemporary challenges to democracy requires a concerted effort by us all. Political leadership and solidarity are vital as we seek new approaches to politics. Our response must be based on a renewed commitment to our core democratic values, inclusiveness and problem-solving through dialogue and an evidence-based approach.

Countering disinformation and hate speech

Legislative and policy measures are needed in order to strengthen democratic resilience and create a vibrant information ecosystem, which contributes to democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. In our parliaments, we must be vigilant to threats to civic space and resolute in our defence of freedom of expression and the diversity of views, while at the same time countering disinformation and combatting online harm.

Democracies need informed citizens with a solid understanding of how democracy works and the skills to participate in it. Just as we vaccinate our citizens against the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to build immunity against disinformation and attempts to manipulate public opinion. We need to invest in media literacy and civic education at all ages and for all sectors of society, in order to ensure that our populations are well-informed and equipped with critical thinking skills.

We recognize the important role of the media and journalists as sources of information and an essential part of free and open societies. Underlying economic shifts threaten the sustainability of independent journalism at local and national levels. We must explore new models that protect the diversity of views and critical perspectives in the media.

Both traditional media and social media outlets bear responsibility for ensuring differing views can be expressed without fear of reprisals or harassment. Respect for diversity must be fostered by those who inform and facilitate public debate. As parliamentarians, we must create the conditions for free speech while protecting those who take part in public debate from any form of violence, sexism and harassment, including online.

We are cognizant of the key role of the private sector in driving innovation and technological change. At the same time, we cannot stand by while power accumulates in the hands of a small number of online platforms. We must engage in a constructive multi-stakeholder dialogue and find appropriate regulatory responses. The underlying business model of social media platforms is based on engagement and popularity, and tends to reward polemic and emotion. An open and inclusive dialogue could accelerate the reassessment of the current approach in favour of a more human-centred model, which furthermore would protect private data.

Reducing polarization

The underlying factors of polarization, such as growing economic gaps and inequalities, the exclusion of some societal groups from political discourse and the disruption of the media industry through technological advancement, can only be overcome if there is a strong political will.

A core function of the parliamentary ecosystem is to promote trust in democracy and reinforce the relevance of representative institutions. Effective political systems and parliamentarians promote a culture of cooperation and dialogue to surmount divisions, build inclusive societies and promote trust.

Political leaders and elected officials bear responsibility for demonstrating respect for democratic values in their words and actions. Wider societal coherence can be built by avoiding poisonous rhetoric, demonstrating a willingness to cooperate across party lines and promoting evidence-based decision-making. Parliamentarians, both men and women, must play their part in countering polarization by creating spaces in parliament for cross-party dialogue. Women's caucuses often set a positive example of how party divides can be bridged and how legislative work can be less hostile and more evidence-based. There is a need for similar approaches throughout parliaments.

Political parties must also play their part in winning back public trust in democratic systems and building strong institutions, by being more socially representative and responsive, and delivering on their electoral promises.

We reaffirm that political compromise is a core of the democratic process and believe that the ability to reach agreements, cooperate across political divides and prioritize public interests over party politics contributes to de-polarization and sustainable social peace.

Parliaments must create the conditions for all voices to be heard within the institution, including all political views, whether majority or opposition. Internal policies must ensure balanced participation, bearing in mind diversity – whether based on political affiliation, gender, age or otherwise – as well as zero tolerance towards disrespectful, discriminatory and sexist speech or behaviour within parliament.

Parliaments must support or lead efforts to promote the use of evidence in policy-making, for example by reinforcing national statistical capacities, encouraging independent sources of research and analysis, and developing methodologies for public consultation so that the views of the people most directly concerned by legislation and policy can be taken into account. In their own work, parliaments must develop close links with academic institutions in order to improve access to the best available scientific information, for example on climate change. Parliaments must also invest in the capacity of their own parliamentary research services to provide non-partisan research and support to all parliamentarians.

Connecting people with their democratic institutions

For democratic systems to work, people must have the opportunities and the will to participate in them. Maintaining trust in parliamentary democracy requires regular interaction between governing bodies and the public. We must foster meaningful public engagement in the work of parliament that builds confidence and helps people see their interests reflected in policy. We are convinced of the need to embed a culture of engagement across our parliaments for a united and concerted effort towards broader and deeper public participation.

Public engagement also contributes to inclusive decision-making. We must work towards a more inclusive form of politics, making strong connections between parliaments and a diverse range of communities, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. Parliaments have a responsibility to be more representative, including of women, youth, indigenous peoples, minorities and other underrepresented groups in society. Greater intergenerational collaboration not only builds solidarity among political actors of all ages, but also encourages the inclusion of youth perspectives in policy solutions.

Leading in times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid reminder that crises often arise when least expected. The pandemic has challenged our governance systems and our ability to handle emergencies. We need to learn from that experience and be better prepared for the next crisis.

Parliaments have a critical role to play in enhancing the quality of emergency preparedness and their own ability to manage crises whenever they occur. Parliaments must also ensure that democratic processes are not undermined in such situations.

Crisis management plans must be an integral part of our governance system. Rules and procedures and the roles and responsibilities of political actors need to be clearly set out in legal frameworks or policies. The balance of power must be preserved even during times of crisis. Parliaments need to be able to continue to fulfil their oversight mandate and supervise the actions of the executive at all times.

Above all, responsiveness and inclusiveness must be an integral part of every crisis management strategy. Parliaments need to communicate with people to demonstrate that they are listening to what people have to say and are addressing issues of public concern.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many parliaments managed to adjust to the new realities and use innovative approaches in their operations. Still, we need to prepare ourselves even more thoroughly. We must further embed the use of digital technologies in parliamentary operations to ensure continuity of work in times of emergency, and explore new mechanisms of public participation and ways to connect society and the authorities.

We recognize that the contemporary challenges to democracy have deep roots. We nevertheless accept our role and responsibility as actors in addressing these challenges, conscious of the need to protect democracy for the common good. We acknowledge the need to show effective leadership, to pursue bold and innovative initiatives, and to learn from each other's successes and failures.

As such, we pledge to do our utmost, individually and collectively, to overcome these challenges, build community, and protect and promote our democratic values and institutions.