

Democratic Infrastructure: Turning One-Off Deliberations into Resilient Democracies

By Hanne Bastiaensen and max stearns, Democratic Society

[Democratic Society](#) leads experiments to strengthen and reimagine democracy. Over the past ten years, this includes the coordination of numerous deliberative and participatory processes and events at the European local, regional, and international levels. These have taken many forms; most specifically, the planning and delivery of citizens' conventions, tables of discussion, citizens' assemblies, people's panels, follow-up committees, governance reviews, policy developments, amongst others. Each of these serve as a useful and important democratic contribution to our partners' ambitions; however, without consideration for how these processes and events fit into broader, longer-term visions of democracy, they become one-off deliberations.

And, unfortunately, we have learned that one-off deliberations cannot sustain resilient democracies.

In order to address this issue, we are developing a new approach to our work with an intention to build and maintain more and better "Democratic Infrastructures".

Democratic Infrastructure Defined

We define "[Democratic Infrastructure](#)" as *persistent, generally available sets of elements that enable the continuous development, reinforcement and reimagination of democracy in a defined context*. In practice, this means Democratic Infrastructure exists when a mix of elements - including but not limited to (1) a contextualised plan for democracy, (2) capabilities, (3) networks, and (4) governance systems - operate in a given context with (A) flexibility, (B) consideration of the longer-term, and (C) the capacity to enable democratic self-improvement. This is infrastructure that enables efforts, now and in the future, to strengthen and reimagine Democracy.

To illustrate the idea a bit more, a metaphor might be useful:

Let's say, we want to help a friend prepare a meal, but they don't have a kitchen.

One approach could be to compensate by making the meal in our own kitchen and bringing it over to their house to serve. This way, the meal is produced and we don't worry about the missing kitchen.

A different approach could be to consider the longer-term and the value of cooking with tools that offer flexibility and opportunity in the future. In this scenario, we could be thoughtful about how to

build parts of our friend's kitchen that could be used in one way to make that first meal and, again, in similar and different ways for future meals. In this scenario, that first effort is not just an opportunity to make one good meal. Instead, it is a chance to prepare the starting points of meals that can exist even when we aren't there to help cook them. The kitchen is there for the long term. It can grow as our friend gets more confident and takes on new recipes. This approach creates the possibilities for our friend to prepare all kinds of meals.

Just like a kitchen, Democratic Infrastructure isn't flexible in and of itself; Yet, it can be used in flexible ways. Democratic Infrastructure doesn't create possibilities for just one challenge or ambition. It creates longer-term possibilities to address different challenges and achieve different goals in stronger, more imaginative, democratic ways.

By proposing the concept of Democratic Infrastructure our main objective is to ensure inclusive democratic processes that embrace the longer-term. This is both in the sense of allowing democracy to be enacted beyond eventful moments of deliberative or participatory processes, and of enabling the vision and capabilities for democracies to thrive.

In our definition we do not see Democratic Infrastructure as a final output or something to achieve, but a *medium* that allows movement and relations within democracy to happen and to grow. We use the verb *infrastructuring* to highlight the need for democratic participation to move beyond one-off deliberations and towards more open-ended and long-term processes where diverse actors have the capacity, the tools, and the opportunity to experiment together.

This more organic approach to infrastructure allows for unplanned possibilities to emerge and evolve through a continuous process. Democratic Infrastructures allow different actors to collaborate on a longer-term basis, which is essential to foster trust between these actors. This, in turn, allows for a conducive environment for continuous experimentation. Importantly, Democratic Infrastructures also afford the interplay between bottom-up and top-down, as well as different scales of democratic innovation. As such, unlike technological and economical understandings of infrastructure, which primarily focuses on standardisation and reproduction, our definition of democratic Infrastructures seeks diversity and variation; it is generative at its core. In such ways, Democratic Infrastructure affords resilient Democracies.

Elements and Essential Characteristics of Democratic Infrastructure

As we said, in practice, we propose that Democratic Infrastructure exists when a mix of elements - including but not limited to (1) *a contextualised plan for Democracy*, (2) *capabilities*, (3) *networks*, and (4) *governance systems* - operate in a given context with (A) *flexibility*, (B) *consideration of the longer-term*, and (C) *the capacity to enable democratic self-improvement*. We have distilled these elements and essential characteristics from a reflexive review of our prior projects. They are the critical components of

Democratic Infrastructure, which have manifested to support partners' ongoing efforts to strengthen and reimagine their democracies.

Essential Characteristics of Democratic Infrastructure

A. Flexibility

Flexibility is a fundamental feature of Democratic Infrastructure. Flexibility enables the elements to be applied in different ways, as part of different configurations over time, and to different ends as the democracy in the defined context transforms over time.

B. Longer-Term Considerations

Democratic Infrastructure cannot exist without consideration of the longer-term. This consideration must extend, at least, beyond any single deliberation, and can go as far out in time as imaginable. Nevertheless, the key is that any deliberation that is planned, is planned with consideration of the futures it will, or might, lead to.

C. Capacity to Enable Democratic Self-Improvement

A mix of the elements described above only constitutes Democratic Infrastructure if, cumulatively, they have the capacity to enable ongoing democratic self-improvement. What "democratic improvement" specifically means in the defined context – and the efficacy with which it can be achieved – will reflect the level of intention and depth of consideration given to determining what it means to strengthen and reimagine democracy.

Elements of Democratic Infrastructure

1. Vision(s) for Democracy

Common, complementary, and/or competing visions exist of what democracy can or should look like in the future in the defined context. Whether these are held by a government entity, across a network, or by the general public, these are visions of what Democratic Infrastructure ought to enable/build toward.

2. Capabilities

Certain capabilities are intentionally developed by key actors in the defined context. There are many useful capabilities, but three that are especially important to serve the adaptive, purposeful intent of Democratic Infrastructure are:

- a. Learning How to Learn: Rather than focus on learning one skill or gaining one piece of knowledge, build the capability to learn and adapt skills and knowledge, ongoingly.

- b. Using/Fighting Power: Democracy needs power, but healthy democracies also need to build the capability to understand, use, share, and challenge that power.
- c. Democratic Design Build the capability to intentionally create, organise, and maintain affordances for the emergence of Democratic Infrastructure.

3. Networks

Intentional networks, based in long-term relationships, are formed across - and even beyond - the defined context. These build trust between various actors, which is crucial for long-term democratic collaboration and experimentation. If these networks are stable over a longer period of time, generally available in the sense that they are not project or topic exclusive, and are composed in ways that enables the development of democracy, they play an important role as part of Democratic infrastructure.

4. Governance Systems

New ways of working, structures for resolving challenges, and systems for meeting needs are established by the government of the defined context. These are governance systems which enable the activation, maintenance, and adaptation of previously improbably democratic practices.

Towards More and Better Democratic Infrastructure

As stated before, by putting forward our idea of better democratic infrastructure, our main objective is to facilitate more resilient democracies over the longer-term. Whilst one-off deliberations still have a place, as they help demonstrate the value and impact participation can have, we - at Democratic Society - will focus on ensuring our efforts build toward infrastructures for longer-term democracy; democracy that is more equitable, inclusive, impactful and fit for the long run. This means enabling governments, organisations, networks and other contexts in which we work to be able to address major challenges in democratic ways, now and in the future.

To achieve this we see ourselves in the roles of innovators, connectors, and practitioners of Democratic Design - the practice of design focused on intentional creation, organisation, and maintenance of affordances for the emergence of Democratic Infrastructure.

Like the metaphor of the kitchen, we focus our efforts on meeting our “friend’s” current needs. Not by manufacturing a single “meal”, but, rather, by designing and building elements of Democratic Infrastructure with the essential characteristics to help them make that first “meal” and many more in the future. We design and implement new democratic methods and governance and connect citizens and democratic spaces at different scales to create networked democratic infrastructure.



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If this explanation still feels abstract, please join us for our workshop to explore tangible examples of Democratic Infrastructure: September 30, 11:15-12:30 CEST at the Democracy R&D Annual Conference 2022.