



DEMOCRACY BITES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

AS DEMOCRACY FACES MOUNTING PRESSURE WORLDWIDE, DESPAIR ABOUT ITS FUTURE IS UNDERSTANDABLE. WE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE INNOVATIONS EMERGING ACROSS THE GLOBE THAT ARE BRINGING CITIZENS CLOSER TO A DEMOCRACY THAT TRULY REPRESENTS THEM. **WE CALL THESE STORIES “DEMOCRACY BITES.” DIG IN!**

IRELAND'S CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, public trust in the Irish government fell to 10 percent. In response, Ireland pioneered an experiment in deliberative democracy: the Citizens' Assembly. The assembly convenes a randomly selected group of citizens, demographically representative of Ireland, to deliberate on a specific issue. The group receives unbiased information and access to a panel of experts. They deliberate at length before issuing formal recommendations to parliament.

Many complex issues remain in deadlock because elected officials, constrained by special interests and re-election rationale, are unwilling to confront them. This model overcomes that barrier by giving ordinary citizens a meaningful role in addressing them. The model proved decisive on abortion, an issue Irish politicians have long avoided. A Citizens' Assembly recommendation to revise the Eighth Amendment led to a 2018 referendum that legalized abortion.

The institutional benefits have been considerable. Although it's difficult to attribute these outcomes directly to Citizens' Assemblies, a 2022 national survey found that 83 percent of Irish citizens were satisfied with the functioning of their democracy, compared to an EU average of roughly 55 percent. Ireland's experience offers a lesson for polarized democracies like the United States: democratic health grows when citizens are given a real deliberative role in the political process.

DEMOCRACY BITES CONTINUED

TAIWAN'S GOV MOVEMENT

Taiwan's g0v ("gov zero") is a civic tech movement that builds tools to make the government more transparent and responsive to its citizens. What began as an adversarial relationship with the government has grown into a genuine partnership, and today g0v's platforms give Taiwanese citizens real influence over policy. The platform vTaiwan lets the public deliberate on complex issues and has helped resolve disputes over topics like ride-sharing regulations and online alcohol sales. JOIN lets citizens create and sign petitions, obligating the government to formally respond to petitions that receive more than 5,000 endorsements. These platforms keep the government closely attuned to the issues that matter most to Taiwanese citizens.

INDIA'S GRAM SABHAS

With origins dating back to 5BC, Gram Sabhas are village-level assemblies that include the entire adult voting population of a community. Gram Sabhas are vested with the authority to approve local development plans, audit council budgets, and determine the allocation of government benefits. With more than 3 million elected representatives nationwide, the system represents one of the world's largest experiments in participatory governance. While in many states Gram Sabhas meet infrequently and are dismissed as a place to merely "talk shop," the state of Kerala illustrates the model's potential. Kerala devolves 40 percent of its development budget to its Gram Sabhas and entrusts them to run local health, education, and sanitation services. Their effectiveness stems from the state's 96.2 percent literacy rate and history of progressive politics, both of which make the state more willing to devolve political power. Gram Sabhas demonstrate how local participation can transform democracy into a process citizens actively shape instead of mostly observe.

GHANA'S PARTICIPATORY PARTY POLITICS

Amid widespread democratic backsliding across Africa, Ghana stands out as one of only ten countries on the continent rated fully "free" by Freedom House. Ghana's success can be attributed to its two dominant political parties, the NDC and NPP, which have built decentralized grassroots organizations that reach virtually every voter. Both parties reserve leadership positions for women and youth and run outreach wings — the NPP's NASARA and the NDC's Zongo Caucus — that bring migrant and minority communities into their coalitions. Informal gathering spots painted in party colors, known as "party sheds," give Ghanaian citizens accessible spaces to debate politics and connect with one another.