



The future of democracy: are we witnessing the beginning of the end for democracy?

Professor Joseph Nye
Distinguished Service Professor at Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and Chair of the Global Agenda Council on the Future of Government

No, I think that's too pessimistic. But new challenges in the information age, the long-term decline of trust in elected governments and the increase in citizen involvement all mean that democracy must adjust.

Democracy has its problems, but then it always has, even in ancient Greece. And of course, there was a period in the 1930s when there was a widespread belief that democracy was finished as a form of government and that fascism and communism would prevail, so I think it's premature to see the end of democracy at this moment in time.

Respondents to the Survey on the Global Agenda signalled a change in the expectations they have of governments. The data links the failures of democracy to a broader failure of the institutions that govern political, economic and social life. And interestingly, the Survey also points to an increase in citizen involvement as a risk factor for democracy.

We're seeing a long-term decline in trust in many institutions, including corporations, governments and religious institutions, but one of the greatest trends of the 21st century is the diffusion

of power from state to non-state actors. The internet has given a significant proportion of the population access to more information at lower costs than ever before. This means that governments and traditional hierarchies will have increasing difficulty in getting things done, unless they adapt to more networked procedures and more horizontal structures.

But we have to remember that we're not talking about machines here – political and social institutions can't keep pace with Moore's Law and the increase in computing power, so there's a dialectic between those new empowered actors and traditional institutions. That's why we can see protesters gather in Tahrir Square using social media to demand change, and just months later a military coup overthrows a democratically elected leader.

But then we have to take a long-term view on all this and even the term 'Arab Spring' suggests seasonality. We should really be talking about an 'Arab Revolution' and revolutions take decades to work themselves out – just look at the French Revolution, which started in 1789 and didn't come to an end until the Congress in Vienna in 1815. Even then the result was a reassertion of traditional authority, so while the French Revolution unleashed an enormous tower of ideas that spread throughout Europe, you have to take the century-long perspective to say that it prevailed ■

Furloughed AmeriCorps employee Jeffrey Wismer sits alone on the Washington Mall, as he calls for an end to the government shutdown
© Reuters / Jason Reed



From the Survey

“Governments need to address the frustrations and growing discontent of large segments of their populations, especially young people who are particularly affected by a significant rise in unemployment, in some developed regions – such as the EU – as well as in many emerging economies.”

Anne Miroux
Director, Division on Technology and Logistics, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and a Member of the Global Agenda Council on Logistics & Supply Chain Systems

“The world has yet to develop a model of democracy that limits the short-termism of leaders at the expense of doing what is right for society in the long term. In area after area, we are avoiding the fundamental issues although there are solutions, e.g. the EU crisis, global warming, the war in Syria.”

Per-Ola Karlsson
Senior Vice-President, Booz & Company and Chair of the Global Agenda Council on the Arctic

Which stakeholders need to be most aware of increased citizen expectations of government?

Stakeholder	Increased citizen expectations of government
Governments	93%
Business	67%
IOs	60%
NGOs	60%
Academia	53%

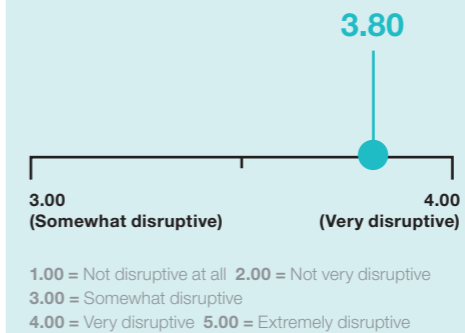
Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013

Which regions will be most affected by increased citizen expectations of government?

Affected region	Increased citizen expectations of government
Asia	93%
Latin America	93%
MENA	93%
Sub-Saharan Africa	87%
North America	67%
Europe	67%

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013

How disruptive do you feel increased citizen expectations of government will be during the next 18 months?



Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013

Increased expectations of government become more visible

60% of respondents predict that increased expectations of government will become more widely perceived in the next year

Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2013