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The weakening of representative democracy



An anti-government protester warms himself at a fire drum in Kiev, Ukraine © REUTERS/Thomas Peter



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Since the global economy crashed in 2008, there has been an erosion of trust in political institutions and processes. Citizens now place more faith in companies than in their own leaders, and even then they don't particularly trust the private sector, with the latest Edelman Trust Barometer showing global trust in business at 58% while trust in government has sunk to 44%. As a Global Shaper of the World Economic Forum, this is an issue that resonates with those of my demographic: the world's youth.

In the last two years, citizen protest has dominated the headlines in many countries around the globe. Greece and Spain have seen unrest in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Ukrainians occupied central Kiev. Few nations from North Africa to the Middle East

remain unaffected by the fallout from the Arab Spring, as citizens of the digital

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age grow ever more confident to mobilize in the face of a democratic deficit. Hong Kong is the latest place to experience large-scale protest. Indeed, the Survey on the Global Agenda showed that in Latin America, the region I'm from, this trend has a much greater significance than in any other

region. This was exemplified in Brazil, which in summer 2014 saw upheaval as people protested against income disparity and public spending on the World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games.

The mechanisms are in place for systems to be more democratic than they have ever been, yet there is a fundamental disconnect between citizens around the world and the elected officials that supposedly represent them. Thanks to the internet, the public can identify people with the same values and fears, exchange ideas, and build relationships faster than ever before. Our governments are simply not part of that conversation: we have 19th century institutions with 20th century mindsets, attempting to communicate with 21st century citizens. Our governments are elected, dissolved and re-elected only to pursue short-term agendas, yet the cycles that innovate and build trust with voters require long-term investment. It's little wonder that people see the system as broken.

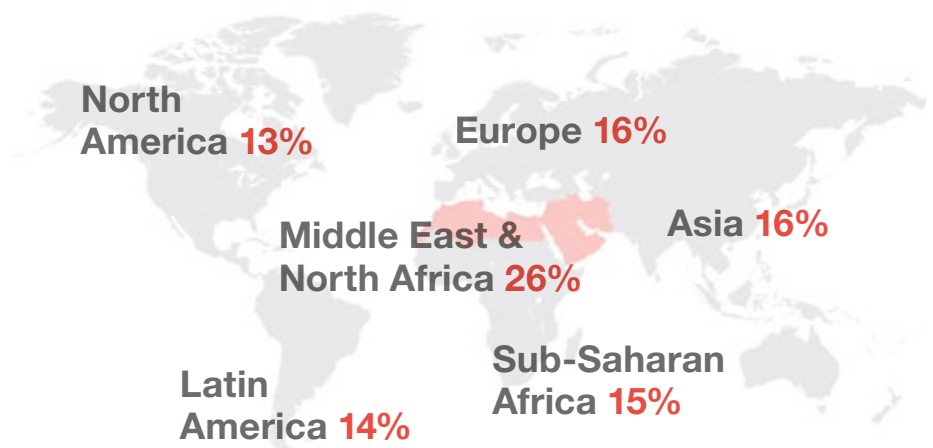
I think it's clear that the old way of doing politics will definitely change, yet representative democracy itself will not – nor should it. As powerful as the online world may be, a social media-like structure for democracy, where everybody shares and discusses their opinions at once, would simply lead to anarchy.

Instead, representative democracy needs to modernise itself and actively involve citizens in decision-making processes. Rather than seeing themselves as 'pure' problem solvers, governments should position themselves as the bodies that articulate the issues faced by society, and then strive to create the right environment for private enterprise and academia to find the solutions, providing the necessary data, policies and funding to support these stakeholders. If our elected representatives were to do this, they would restore the public trust and challenge the sense that little of consequence has actually changed in that time.

As a starting point, our governments must treat people as individuals and communicate with them through the most appropriate means. Social media is not a panacea for this and, when used by traditional institutions such as the state, there tends to be

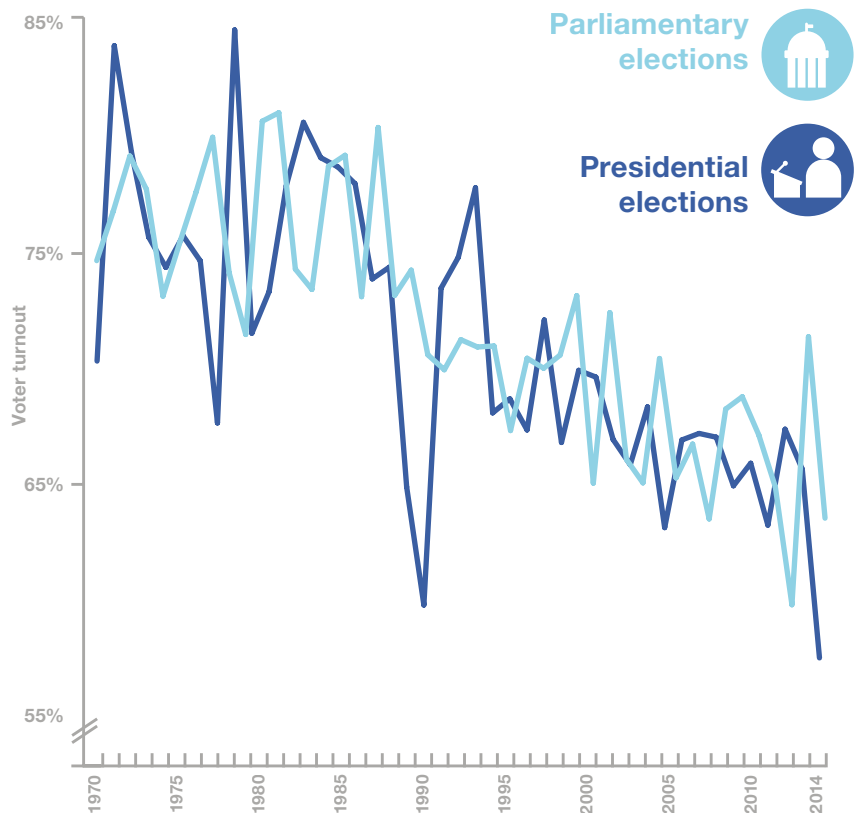
Weakening of representative democracy: Inside the data

Which region will be most affected by the **weakening of representative democracy** in the next 12-18 months?



Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2014

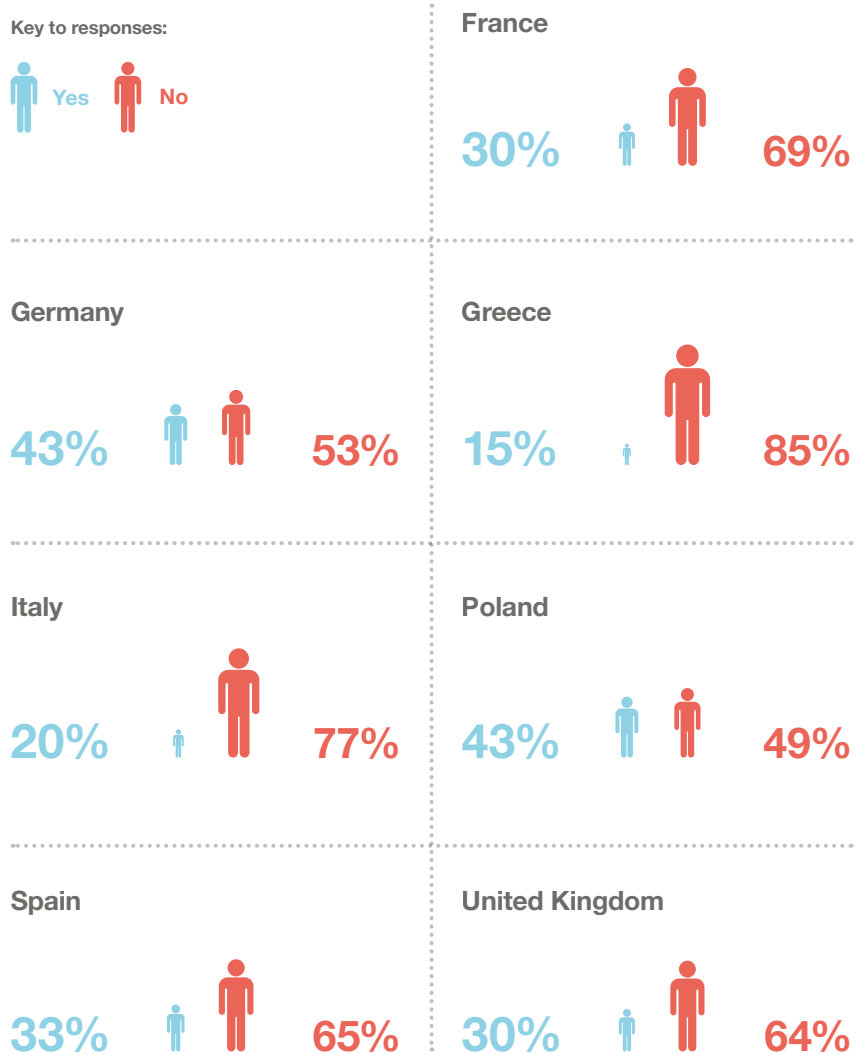
How has worldwide voter turnout changed over time?



Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Voter Turnout Database, 2014. Graph shows average voter turnout for countries in which data is available.

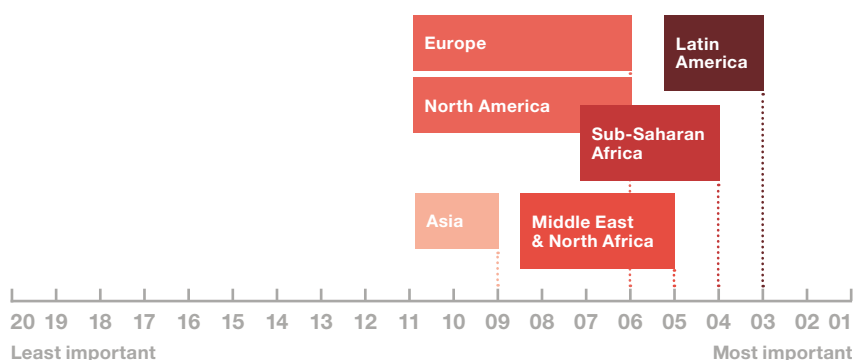
Do member states believe that the European Union understands the needs of its citizens?

Key to responses:



Source: Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Project, 2014

How did different regions rank **weakening of representative democracy** among the list of 20 trends in the Survey on the Global Agenda?



Source: Survey on the Global Agenda 2014

a disparity between the messages that are circulated and events that are actually occurring at a local level. Even so, technology has the potential to ensure people feel truly represented. All sorts of democratic processes can be enhanced with technology: voting online, e-petitions, and surveys via smartphones are just three examples.

Above all else, our leaders must use technology – and their broader expertise – to really understand their citizens’ incentives, fears and motivations, and then communicate clearly how considered policies will address these factors. When governments stop being the centre of everything, and the people perceive that they have become the problem solvers, that is when things will change. What we are seeing is not the death of democracy; rather, representative democracy must adapt to our times ■