DEMOCRACY FUTURES



DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

CARD DECK

ABOUT THE CARD DECK

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS CARD DECK

A version of this card deck was used by the YouthDecide 2040 research consortium to support the setup and facilitation of workshops on the future of democracy in Europe for the year 2040. It is part of the **DEMOCRACY FUTURES KIT.**

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With thanks to all participants
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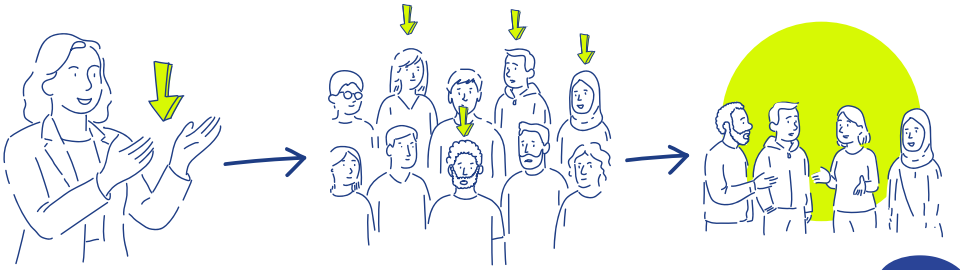
ASSEMBLY OF CITIZENS DISCUSSING A PUBLIC PROBLEM

Randomly selected citizens are brought together, often temporarily, by a government to discuss a specific topic or public problem and make some recommendations.



01

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A STRENGTH

Can be **relatively rapidly** convened to **dive deep** into issues and produce **practical recommendations**.

A RISK

Disbands after delivering recommendations, so people or organizations may not have **a long-term memory of the assembly.** Can sometimes be **used symbolically,** without any commitment to follow through on outcomes.

Sources

Example efforts include a 2004 Canadian British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform; the French Citizens' Convention on Climate; the French Citizens' Assembly on the End of Life.

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

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CIVIL SOCIETY SELF-ORGANIZED ASSEMBLY

Local NGOs or other civil society organizations randomly select citizens to form an assembly and discuss a specific social cause in order to create advocacy strategies and action plans.



02

DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



Citizens can set **their own agenda** and run the process **outside of governmental institutions.**

A RISK



Can be challenging to **fund and organize**, and **may not connect** to policy or politics.

Sources

Belgian “We Need to talk” citizens’ assembly (2023).

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PERMANENT CITIZENS ASSEMBLY



To make sure that policies are not disconnected from people's reality, governments create permanent assemblies of randomly selected citizens to allow them to have a say. Citizens can suggest topics and recommendations.

03

DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



With a **legal mandate** and **longer time-horizon**, these initiatives increase the likelihood that citizen recommendations are considered and implemented.

A RISK



Can be challenging to sustain citizen recruitment **over time and permanently staff and fund support** for such a body.

Sources

Examples: The Ostbelgien Citizens' Council in Belgium; the Permanent Climate Assembly in Brussels; the permanent citizens' assembly in Paris.

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MIXING CITIZENS AND POLITICIANS TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase the legitimacy and impact of policies, randomly selected citizens and elected representatives sit together, on equal footing, to propose common recommendations.



04

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

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A STRENGTH



Creates **greater understanding** between citizen and elected officials and **increases likelihood that recommendations are considered.**

A RISK



Requires **highly skilled moderation** to ensure all voices are heard, and politicians my use the process to **score political points** rather than to genuinely engage.

Sources

Examples: the Irish Constitutional Convention of 66 citizens and 33 parliamentarians; the permanent Brussels deliberative committees (since 2021) of 45 randomly selected citizens and 15 members of Parliament.

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PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Citizens usually don't have a say when it comes to public spending. Participatory budgeting is a way to involve citizens in proposing ideas for funding or prioritizing among multiple public investment options.



05

DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



May **improve citizen engagement** with and trust in government and better reflect the community's needs and priorities.

A RISK



May focus only on **immediate short-term problems**.

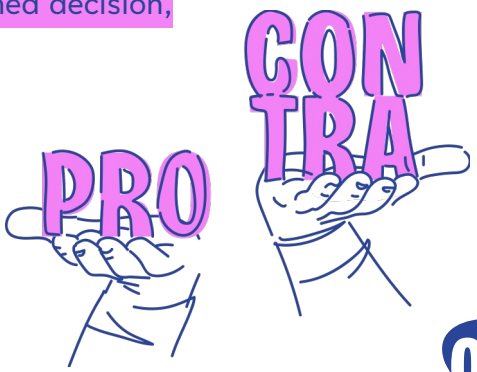
Sources

Experimented in Porto Allegre (Brazil) in the 1990s. According to the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas, thousands of public authorities, particularly in cities, have developed participatory budgeting processes.

DEMOCRACY FUTURES

PREPARING CITIZENS FOR REFERENDUMS

Referendums are often asking complex questions yet labelling them in very simplistic terms. To ensure that citizens make a better informed decision, randomly selected citizens take on the mission to weigh the pros and cons of the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers and share it prior to the vote.



DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



Provides voters with **clear, citizen-drafted** summaries tempering **emotional and partisan** campaigns.

A RISK



There is **no guarantee** that voters will **read the information or necessarily trust** the advisory work.

Sources

Oregon, Washington Citizens' Initiative Review (since 2010); Irish Referendum on abortion rights (2018); Sion, Switzerland (2022).

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CHILDREN AND YOUTH ASSEMBLIES

In order to give a voice to children and youth over policies, governments create dedicated assemblies, in which youngsters can express their views, concerns but also wishes. This helps their needs get accounted for by public authorities.



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A STRENGTH



Youth bring **a different perspective than adults**; early engagement **fosters democratic skills, political literacy, and long-term participation**.

A RISK



Without follow-up, youth input could be set aside **later in a process and their participation minimized, eroding trust.**

Sources

Scotland and Ireland (2021-2023), youth climate assemblies operated alongside adult versions. Additionally, permanent children and youth assemblies exist in many countries at city level.

ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

Policies are often short-term. To prevent that, public authorities set up forward-looking groups, with experts but also citizens. Their mission is to think long-term at 10, 15 or 20 years ahead, and make sure policies are going beyond the next election.



DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



May better equip policymakers to consider **multiple possible futures** and create policies that can better handle **changing situations**.

A RISK



Usually, these processes are **very expert driven**, so they may **dilute democratic influence** if not complemented with participatory public conversations.

Sources

The EU uses anticipatory governance approaches in its Better Regulation framework, and many national governments have permanent strategic foresight groups.

HAVING FUTURE GENERATIONS IN MIND

Public decisions taken today have direct implications for the present but also for generations to come. The 'future design' method invites groups of citizens to adopt the viewpoint of far future generations in order to imagine their needs & concerns.



DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



Participants are pushed to think **beyond immediate needs** and consider the legacy of today's decisions fostering **empathy and moral responsibility**.

A RISK



There's a risk that **focusing too much on the future** diverts attention away from **current marginalized voices and communities**, in favour of the current majority of political attitudes.

Sources

Japan's Future Design movement, developed by Tatsuyoshi Saijo, combats political short-termism by having citizens plan for their communities' futures.
Norway has launched a future assembly to explore long-term democratic governance.

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ITINERANT ASSEMBLIES

Instead of having people gather in one fixed central location, itinerant assemblies makes the same randomly selected individuals (or different members) convene meaningful places. This turns participation into a journey of democracy. Citizens carry their work from one local assembly to the next.



A STRENGTH



They can include a quota of local participants for each place that is visited, all the way to completely changing the groups. When citizens see that every part of the city or territory is **being listened to**, the final recommendations of the assembly are more likely to be viewed as **balanced and representative**. The model can be scaled – from regional to worldwide deliberation.

A RISK



A moving assembly can lose the initial momentum and the sense of collective interest if not carefully designed. Similarly, **consistent group learning** and knowledge transfer must be accounted for in planning.

Sources

The Bogota itinerant citizens assembly initiated in 2020, the Democratic Odyssey project in 2024/25.

DEMOCRACY IN THE WORKPLACE

Democracy is not only a government system, but also an everyday culture of debate and making decisions in pluralist ways. Some organizations, including private ones, try to move away from top-down hierarchies and single decision maker to more horizontal governance and collaborative ways of working.



A STRENGTH



Increases creative problem solving, and job satisfaction, promoting a positive environment where employees feel valued and heard, resulting in **higher productivity and a better company reputation**.

A RISK



Decision-making processes can become **time-consuming**, as involving many stakeholders to reach consensus or gather input can take longer.

Sources

Sociocracy 3.0 (S3) Common Sense Framework is one practical guide to help organizations evolve more democratic practices.

"MORE-THAN-HUMAN" REPRESENTATION

Rivers or forests don't have a say when policies are made, yet some policies may impact them. Specially appointed people act as representatives' and speak on Behalf of nature, through art, costumes or performances to defend nature's rights.



A STRENGTH



Acknowledges **our dependence on the natural world** and invites thinking about **environmental needs** and **long-term human futures**.

A RISK



Including nature in deliberations requires a **cultural shift**. **Social inequalities and barriers** to resources must not be overlooked.

Sources

Constitutional recognitions bring nature into democracies in Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2010), with additional examples in the Boardman River Dams Project (US, 2017) and KNOCA's workshop on unheard voices in Climate Assemblies.

LIQUID DEMOCRACY

Citizens may want to vote directly on some issues, while on others they may prefer to let someone they trust decide for them. This can be because that person knows more about the topic or has good judgement. This idea, called 'liquid democracy', makes decision-making more flexible.



A STRENGTH



Allows for **stronger monitoring** of delegates and for **clearer voter accountability**.

A RISK



In addition, the process of delegation needs to have clear rules and would benefit from clear rules on how much a single issue can be delegated from one person to the next. This can reiterate majoritarian results if not accounted for.

Sources

An experimental form of liquid democracy called Civicracy was tested at the Vienna University of Technology in 2012. Various digital platforms have been developed to enable Liquid Democracy or similar delegate voting systems.

PARTICIPATORY POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are not always participatory in the way they function. Some are very top-down and hierarchical while some parties try to develop more horizontal and deliberative processes of co-decision with their members, partisans or ordinary citizens in shaping policy ideas.



A STRENGTH



More transparency, connection, and experience with a party and its representatives may **build trust** and **improve the quality of decision making**.

A RISK



May do little to **protect minority voices** within parties, and may not address **polarisation** between parties.

Sources

The Pirate Party in Germany, the Socialist Party of Belgium, the Two-Tailed Dog Party in Hungary, Podemos in Spain and the 5 Star Movement in Italy, have all mobilised their constituencies through deliberative processes across the electoral cycle.

RE-THINKING VOTING RIGHTS

In a democracy, voting often occupies a central place. Ensuring that everyone has a say is the core principle. To ensure greater representativity, some countries are changing the rules such as lowering voting age at 16. Others give foreigners the right to vote for The municipal elections of the city they live in.



DEMOCRACY FUTURES

A STRENGTH



Youth, minorities and youth members of minorities may **feel more welcome to join political life earlier**, impacting their interest and ability to do so long-term.

A RISK



Lowering voting age or giving foreigners the right to vote does not ensure they will **indeed use their right**. It does not solve the bigger issue of **abstention**.

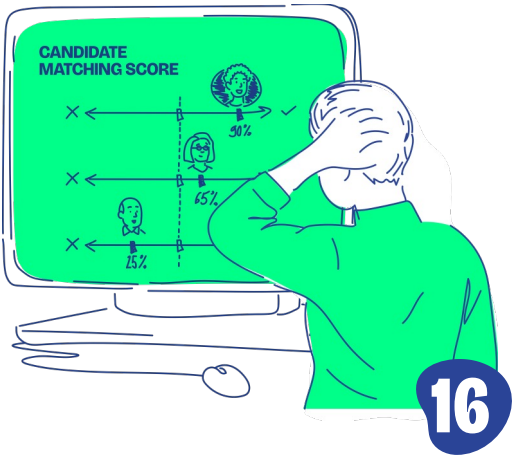
Sources

Women's suffrage movement. Lowering the voting age below 18, as seen in Germany and Austria. Voting rights to foreigners for local elections as seen in Belgium.

VOTING ADVICE TOOLS

Knowing for which party to vote for or finding which political programme best matches your views and concerns is not always easy.

Interactive online tests ask voters series of questions so as to guide them towards the candidates or parties who are the closest to their opinions or ideas.



A STRENGTH



Challenges propaganda by promoting **a focus on policy preferences** instead of identity-driven, protest voting or emotional choice.

A RISK



Not all people may have **equal access** to these digital resources, particularly those who may be most in need of benefiting from them.

Sources

Vokskabin (developed in Hungary) familiarizes users with current political issues straightforwardly and playfully. The Belgian Electoral Test of news media Le Soir - RTBF and the Université Libre de Brussels is helping voters to 'Find out which party or parties you're closest. For younger voters, a variant called PolitiqueSwipe is available, offering a more interactive experience tailored to their preferences.

REFERENDUM (DIRECT VOTING)

To make sure citizens can take part in certain public decisions, they are sometimes given the opportunity to vote directly on an issue. These votes, called 'referenda', can be started by the government or by citizens. The outcome can either be legally binding or simply advisory.



A STRENGTH



Greatly increase **democratic legitimacy** in decision-making when such votes are **transparently and effectively managed.**

A RISK



May be **expensive** to initiate to ensure **sufficient information** about what is at stake (pros and cons).

Sources

The European Citizens' Initiative. Switzerland has a robust referenda program, with 6.42 popular votes conducted each year, between 1984 and 2009. The Chilean Constitutional Assembly proposed a deliberative, elected body to initiate the drafting of a new constitution, to be voted on through a mandatory referendum.

ONLINE VOTING

To go to the voting booth can be a constraint. Online voting lets citizens vote directly from home using their phone or computer with an internet connection.

It uses security measures to verify their identity, keep their vote private, and make sure their vote is recorded.



A STRENGTH



A lower cost and **easier access** to vote for people.
May potentially **harmonize European-wide voting system.**

A RISK

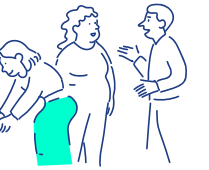


Concerns about **security and universal access** to digital systems (the "digital divide"). Further, **it is unclear** if electronic voting increases participation by everyone or only those who already vote anyway.

Sources

Canada, Switzerland, and Estonia—the first country to use online voting in national parliamentary elections, in 2007—led the way in adopting electronic voting.

TOLERANCE AND EMPATHY CAMPAIGNS



To counter persistent inequalities, a number of practical approaches are in use by social movements and civic actors promoting popular education, awareness campaigns, and training to foster empathy and tolerance toward those facing discrimination.



A STRENGTH



Raises social awareness, counters misinformation and propaganda, and **promotes tolerance and inclusion.**

A RISK



May face **political resistance**, and if campaigns are not connected to voting, may have **limited broader political impact**.

Sources

In collaboration with other local NGOs, Amnesty International Hungary gives e-learning materials for students and employees and organizes educational sessions and workshops for stakeholders.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

In a healthy democracy, it is important for citizens to express disagreement with government decisions. Unauthorised, nonviolent protest or refusing to follow certain laws can be used to show that an issue is urgent or that a decision is unfair — for example, in matters related to war, labour rights, environmental protection, or press freedom.



A STRENGTH



May draw significant attention to threats to human rights, **sparking public debate** and **delay or block unjust policies or decisions.**

A RISK



Solidarity for mass action is difficult to achieve. Smaller actions may by **unfairly portrayed by dominant interests in power** to minimize their impact.

Sources

Time-tested tactic of the civil rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights movements. The intergenerational movement "I would teach" in Hungary organized road blockades and school strikes to protest the unjust firing of teachers speaking out against the repression of educators' rights and free speech.

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH STRIKES

When adults don't seem to care for the future or young generations enough, the youth organize themselves and build their own movement.

Like Fridays For Future (school strikes on Fridays), they form local chapters, mobilize through social media, hold open assemblies, and operate by consensus.



A STRENGTH



Activates and engages youth in **direct action campaigns** while also **strengthening a culture of democratic politics.**

A RISK



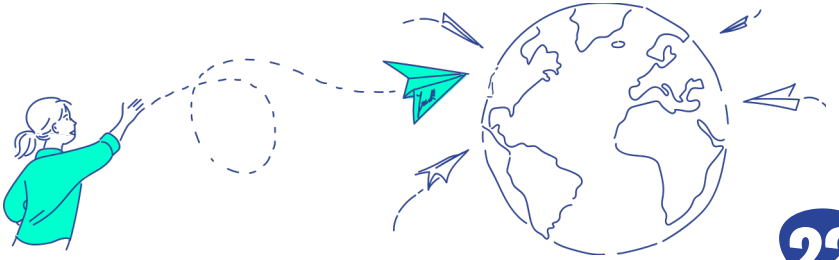
Young participants may be emotionally or physically overwhelmed by **political opposition or online bullying**, or by **balancing advocacy** at the same time as everything else in their lives.

Sources

The Fridays for Future movement has to date pushed 25 cities, the European Commission, and the German Constitutional Court to change policies and rulings and introduce more ambitious climate actions.

ONLINE PETITION

Traditionally, signatures for petitions were collected on paper. Today, petitions are mostly created online, and when a campaign is well-run, it can attract millions of supporters. Petitions can be launched by NGOs or individual citizens, and in some cases even supported by public institutions to propose or change laws.



A STRENGTH



Low barrier to civic participation, providing **fast opportunities** to collect **large amounts of feedback.**

A RISK



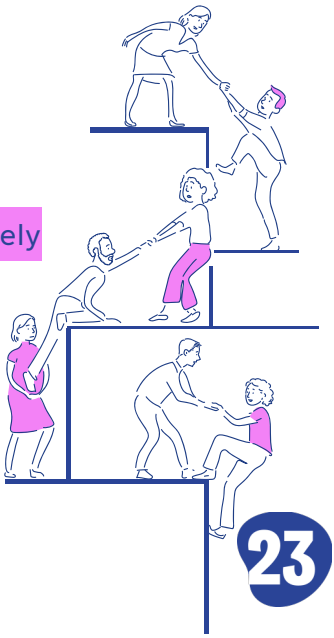
Can create **an illusion of impact** if signatures don't **translate to votes.** Does not involve **dialogue.**

Sources

Paper petitions are an old democratic tool -- online petitions have gained rapid growth thanks to platforms like change.org. The EU Parliament but also the French National Assembly, the UK Parliament, and other bodies have set up their own online petition platforms.

QUOTAS IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP

When underrepresentation persists, sometimes imposing quotas is the only solution. Unfortunately, in many cases, without quotas, women would still be largely left out of key political positions dominated by men. Besides women, possible quotas can be developed to ensure greater representation and diversity (youth voices, lower educated, minorities, etc.) in politics, boards, committees, etc.



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A STRENGTH



May ensure **a minimum number** of **women** or **minorities** in leadership and politics, often through **reserved seats.**

A RISK



Adoption may not be **sustained**; seats may be captured by **entrenched political positions**, reducing **diversity of voices.**

Sources

Adopted by over 130 countries globally, catalyzed by the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995.

COMPULSORY VOTING

In some countries, people often complain about high voter abstention and the impact on the legitimacy of election results. To address this, certain countries have made voting compulsory. Citizens are legally required to vote and may face fines or other measures if they do not.



A STRENGTH



Significantly increases the direct impact of minorities in countries where this is adopted, and could potentially bolster **civic responsibility.**

A RISK



For some, conflicts with ideas of **freedom in democracies**; it may also be **difficult to enforce**.

Sources

Belgium, Argentina, and Australia were among the earliest nations to implement mandatory voting laws, doing so in 1892, 1914, and 1924 respectively. Additionally, countries like Venezuela and the Netherlands once had compulsory voting systems but have discontinued them.

ONLINE CITIZEN CONSULTATIONS

With today's technological advancements, consulting the public on political proposals is much easier than before. Using online platforms, governments or organizations can propose topics to be debated and collect views and suggestions from citizens. This way, they can hear from a wider range of people compared to traditional in-person meetings.



A STRENGTH



Allows many more people to share their views **anytime, anywhere**, and uses **digital tools** to handle **large amounts of information.**

A RISK



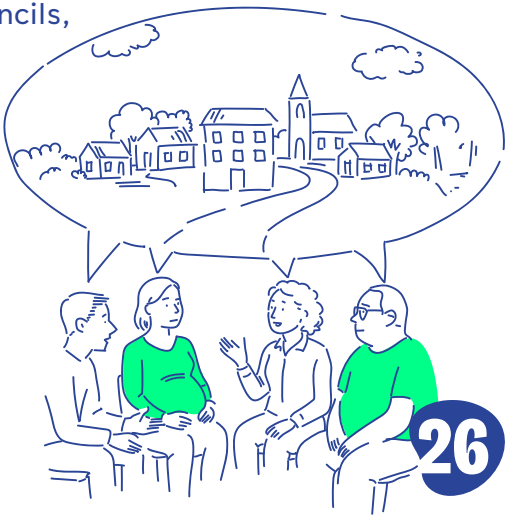
May exclude individuals without **internet access** or **digital literacy** and may be difficult to ensure **respectful, detailed, and constructive discussion online.**

Sources

Online citizens consultations gained traction in the 1990s and early 2000s. Platforms include Decidim which offers tools for proposals and discussions; government websites with feedback forms or forums on specific topics; and innovative platforms like Polis, which uses computational methods to identify areas of consensus and disagreement within large-scale public input, providing a structured overview of collective sentiment on an issue.

NEIGHBOURHOOD COUNCILS

Also known as community councils, district councils, or parish councils these are super local-level spaces for people to gather and deliberate on issues related to local matters – often at the scale of a neighborhood. They discuss mobility, waste, shops, local services, etc.



A STRENGTH



Builds local connections and **civic capacity**, improves **response to community issues.**

A RISK



May lack diverse representation or lead to **“not-in-my-back-yard” attitudes, particularly in larger cities** with many interacting and connected neighbourhoods.

Sources

Parish/Town Councils in UK, Conseils de quartier in France, Ortsbeiräte in Germany, Lokalråd in Denmark, and more. Neighborhood or district level citizen committees are serving as a guarantee of a local representation of citizens.

VOTING BY RANKING ALL CANDIDATES

In many elections, voters only indicate the candidate or party they prefer, without expressing any opinion about the others. With an alternative method, citizens evaluate every candidate by ranking them as 'excellent, very good, good, acceptable, poor, or unacceptable.' This provides a fuller picture of voter preferences.



A STRENGTH



All candidates have a chance; providing **more informative results** on all candidates.

A RISK



Makes voting **more time-consuming** and **complicated.**

Sources

Developed in 2007 in France by CNRS researchers, Michel Balinski and Rida Laraki, the majority judgment voting method has been experimented in different non-governmental elections in several countries, but not yet in major elections.

CLIMATE PROTECTION AS A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT

‘Climate constitutionalism’ means making climate protection a fundamental constitutional right - like freedom of speech. This strengthens democracy by giving citizens the power to hold governments accountable through the courts and prevent from anti-climate policies. It also forces governments to think of future generations and not just todays’ voters.



A STRENGTH



One of the strongest and most structural ways to protect global public goods (such as the planet's resources) and more widely, the ecosystems that live within.

A RISK



A constitution can always be **modified** or **re-written** if the power in place has broad support in doing so.

Sources

Climate constitutionalism involves countries embedding climate action, environmental rights, and sustainability into their national constitutions, with nations like Bolivia, Ecuador, South Africa, Vietnam, or Chile.

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

WHAT'S MISSING?

DEMOCRACY FUTURES

Do you know of any other democratic practices that can help build a better society?

Make your own card and tell others about it!

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A RISK



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