

The Lucerne Declaration on Modern Democracy

We are more than 500 people from six continents and 67 countries. We are scholars, journalists, local officials, election administrators, lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs, farmers, and activists whose lives and work center on democracy.

We have met in Lucerne at the 10th Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy. We also traveled together for discussions in three other Swiss cities: Aarau, Uster, and Bern.

Over four days, we discussed direct, deliberative and participatory democracy at a forum that was free and open to anyone in the world who wished to attend.

This is our declaration.

Our conversations were shadowed—but also inspired—by the threat of autocracy and authoritarianism in many countries and communities; by declines in democracy that were accelerated during the pandemic; by misinformation and fake news, particularly on social media; and by the urgency of the climate crisis.

We have many disagreements—which is good because disagreement is central to democracy! But we also had a strong, shared sense that we need to change how the world thinks about democracy.

Put simply, democracy should always be thought of, evaluated, and developed from the bottom up.

To survive and grow, democracy and its friends must focus on empowering everyday people. And the powers of democratic citizens must involve much more than voting for representatives. We the people must have the right to make our laws, to develop our plans, and to change our constitutions.

In other words, the people of the world have the right to govern themselves, directly.

We recognize that we are in a very difficult struggle—a true fight, from Manila to Manaus to Mariupol—to protect and extend the democratic powers of everyday people. We also must make clear that ordinary citizens—not autocrats like Putin—must control, initiate and govern the processes of initiative and referendum.

We struggle with the polarization and divides in our societies. We struggle with how to include everyone in our democracy—especially those people who reject democratic values.

Most of all, we are struggling to find ways to better connect today's democratic decision-making to the future.

We have many ideas for improving existing direct democracy tools like initiative and referendum. And we are excited about the innovations we are achieving in deliberative bodies and tools—especially citizens’ assemblies that can have real impact, sometimes in combination with direct democracy—that give people the power to govern themselves and address difficult challenges.

We see a need to further develop democracy all levels of democracy: local, sub-national, national—and transnational. We also resolve to think anew about how to build democracies that can solve problems across all levels.

But we are still looking for better ways to give more democratic power both to young people, and to future generations, who will live with the consequences of today’s choices. We know we need more and better education in democracy for people of all ages.

We can’t clearly see this future. But in our conversations, we have identified the greatest possibilities in combining different forms of democracy—representative, deliberative, direct—into something new.

In past forums, and in previous declarations, we have pleaded for more time in our democratic processes, especially in our local democracies. Democracy does require us to slow down so that we can listen to our allies and our opponents—a process that works best when conducted in person, locally.

But in Lucerne, we have reminded ourselves that time may not be on democracy’s side. We conclude our forum with a fierce urgency to defend and extend democracy right now, in service of a greater future.

We adopt this declaration in love and solidarity with people in the whole territory of Ukraine—and all those fighting for democracy around the globe—on September 24, 2022 at the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy, at the University of Lucerne.

We see this declaration as a first draft summarizing our work here. We welcome the suggestions, corrections, and contributions of the world.