DEMOS

UPGRADING DEMOCRACY

A NEW DEAL TO REPAIR THE BROKEN RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZEN AND STATE

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper sets out the challenge of the new global democratic emergency and how this is threatening the political landscape in Britain. It makes the case to upgrade democracy by rebuilding the relationship between state and citizen, in order to win back trust and secure a better democratic future. Over the course of the coming year Demos will work with partners and collaborators to design practical ways to upgrade democracy, revamp the state and strengthen social capacity to achieve this. We will build the evidence base to prove how more participatory and deliberative ways of working can make government more effective. And we will build the story to underpin this political project to upgrade democracy.

Polly Curtis is the chief executive of the cross-party think tank Demos.

INTRODUCTION
THE 2025 DEMOCRATIC EMERGENCY

We are in a new era of democratic emergency. The global elections of 2024 revealed a world of democratic backsliding,[1] rising nationalist authoritarianism and, in a series of concerted[2] ejections of incumbents, there was a key message: voters are not just turning against political actors, but the democratic system they occupy.

The relatively stable heyday of liberal democracy is over. A mounting crisis, marked by new wars, ineffective responses to shared global challenges and economic inequality around the world, has become an all-out emergency. Only 45% of the global population live in a democracy; 39% in autocracies; and 15% in hybrid regimes.[3] We are backsliding and at a dangerous tipping point.

The politicians who are winning elections are those promising to disrupt the faltering democratic system. In America, Donald Trump appears to be delivering on this promise, dismantling a democracy that was once a model for the world.

> ***"My administration will reclaim power from this unaccountable bureaucracy, and we will restore true democracy to America again."***[4]

Trump's alternative to bureaucracy is not democratic. It's an autocracy that both feeds on and fuels a loss of faith in democracy. His aim is to exacerbate people's feelings of distrust and despair for his own political advantage. This creates a rot in the democratic system but it's built on one truth: democracy isn't trusted enough to guarantee its own future.

Authoritarianism now poses a multifaceted threat to the world. War is on the doorstep of Europe and could erupt in the South China Sea or Eastern Africa at any point and has now in the Middle East. The global consensus on the need to tackle climate change is collapsing. Trade wars threaten new economic instability. The combined potential of these things is to further impoverish and displace people, which will add to pressures on international relations. And in each of these examples it is us, as citizens, who will suffer the consequences.

The democratic emergency is laid bare in the ascendency of autocrats and extreme populists of all political persuasions around the world. But the cause of this emergency is the loss of faith in a democratic system that has failed people. People simply don't have a good reason to believe in democracy. It hasn't delivered on its end of the deal. We don't trust it. We could choose to fight the extremes of populism, or we could choose to fix the drivers of it.

1 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution_unit/files/backsliding_-_final_1.pdf
2 https://www.ft.com/content/e8ac09ea-c300-4249-af7d-109003afb893
3 https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/
4 https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/03/remarks-by-president-trump-in-joint-address-to-congress/

WE NEED TO PICK OUR FIGHT

In the UK, this democratic distrust is particularly sharp among a generation who grew up in the midst of a series of seismic economic and political shocks. Today's 20-somethings were toddlers around the 2008 financial crisis, grew up to the fall out of the expenses scandal, entered their teens as austerity was gutting the state and shutting down their youth clubs, came of age through Brexit, and tried to get their first jobs in a pandemic. They are now considering when they might buy a home and start a family in the long, slow burn of the cost of living crisis.

Today, life expectancy is declining, record numbers live with ill health in a (as yet not understood) mental health crisis, meaning more people are out of work. Public services can't keep up with demand and the response is covert rationing, which means you feel you have to fight for your fair share. Precarity is baked into the new models of employment, housing and public services. But not for everyone: inequality is rising. This also drives mistrust between people, a suspicion that someone else is getting what you deserve, that it's a zero sum game. Social cohesion is fracturing in what has been defined elsewhere as the rise of the "anti-social century".[5]

The cumulative effect is that the systems that people encounter everyday are not trusted - the pact people take for granted with the political, economic and social systems is not holding up. The social contract is broken.

UK politics is missing the scale of these challenges. In a time where ambitious policy designed for the long term is required, the agenda is becoming near term and transactional. The left is locked in a vexed battle about whether it should shift to the right on immigration and culture wars - and in doing so risk losing its traditional vote - or to go back to more socialist roots but risk ceding territory to Nigel Farage's populist Reform UK party. The right, meanwhile, is still coming to terms with the trauma of a landslide electoral defeat, with inevitable debate about whether it should abandon the centre altogether and form a coalition with Reform.

Reform UK, with its British twist on the global trend, is distancing itself from the autocracy and volatility of Trumpism. With it, the centre ground is shifting.

5 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/

All sides agree on one thing: voters have lost faith in the status quo and are looking for real change. The reason populists are popular is that they tap into public sentiment and articulate how the system isn't working for people. The three main parties have their fingerprints on the broken status quo, leaving them in a defensive position. There is an urgent need to disrupt and change how things are, but the nature of that disruption needs to go deeper than the political battle for the next election, it needs to disrupt democracy.

The fight for trust isn't about political positioning on the right or left or the scale or nature of the state. It isn't even just about what it delivers, because it won't deliver the change needed until it can do so with the strength that comes with legitimacy. We need to disrupt democracy itself. The way to secure our future for the common good is to upgrade democracy for the next era. To coin a phrase: It's the democracy, stupid.

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THE BREAKDOWN OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZEN AND STATE

I've spent my career trying to understand the sharp end of where the state meets citizens.

As a journalist, I reported on the failures of the education, health and social security systems to deliver for people; I was a political reporter in the aftermath of the expenses scandal, based in the Houses of Parliament as it came to terms with its most wretched failures. As a charity worker, I worked in the government's gold command that responded to the Grenfell fire, watching its pathetic, flailing response as the west London community self organised. As an editor, I navigated the shift to digital news, charting the dramatic change in the information environment and the rise of mis and disinformation. I investigated the broken children's social care model, documenting a system through the eyes of the people who work in it, govern it, use it or are subject to it. No one defended it. I spent months interviewing the medics, patients and families at the Tavistock gender clinic, understanding the depths of a public service caught in a culture war. Today I also sit on the board of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, watching the ebb and flow of citizens' complaints about the services they receive as they increase in number year by year.

What I have witnessed in all of these contexts often involves leadership failures, sometimes administrative failures and they nearly always involve systems failures. But what every single instance results from, in one way or another, is the breakdown of the relationships that sustain a shared system.

Those broken relationships are experienced in our day-to-day interactions with the state. It's in that familiar heart-sinking feeling of needing a doctor and knowing the process of trying to get that appointment will be a battle. It's in a family's fight to get the SEN support they need. It's in the gaslighting of a social security system that can punish you but won't talk to you. It's in the local WhatsApp groups that can shift in seconds from friendly offers of babysitting to a furious conflict over bin collections or low traffic neighbourhood schemes. It's in the weary response to the latest political scandal and it's most visible in the trust statistics: last year, 45% said they 'almost never' trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party. This was 22 points above the figure recorded in 2020 during the height of the pandemic.[6]

6 https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low

The relationship between state and citizen is further fractured by the unmoderated information ecosystems in private messaging groups that form ever condensing echo chambers - pitting people against one another and the authorities. Our truths are diverging. It's in the inequality of our economy, the increasingly suspicious experiences of our communities and the polarised nature of our politics.

Trust goes both ways: not only have citizens lost trust in the state, but the actors of the state are losing trust in citizens as users of public services. Public sector workers, faced with hostility, respond with distrust and an expectation that they are in a battle zone. The sign at the surgery reception that says "we will not tolerate abuse" sets that expectation. It says this is where abuse happens. Political actors operate in hostile environments with the highest levels of personal abuse ever. At the most extreme end, two MPs have been killed in recent years. There are good reasons for them to be fearful of the streets they walk and the people they meet.

The relationships that matter are not just those between state and citizen: but between us as citizens. Stronger communities are healthier communities, placing fewer demands on health and welfare systems. A stronger citizenry is one less likely to live in isolation, to fight, or to steal from one another. A stronger citizenry, as we have argued in The Preventative State[7], has less requirement of the state.

This degradation of our relational capital didn't happen in a moment, but wore away in every instance that the government failed, big and small, and in every moment people experienced injustice or unfairness. But it's also not a steady state - the breakdown of the relationship between state and citizen is a driver of our decline. It inhibits our ability to make things better. Governments can't make bold political arguments for change if the electorate doesn't trust what they have to say. Governments can't solve our collective challenges; it doesn't have the collective relational capital, or the legitimacy in decision making, to do so. The Overton Window, framed too tightly by distrust and a lack of legitimacy, is too small for the scale of the challenges we face. Government doesn't work if people don't play ball. Our systems won't improve if the government can't play ball. So it gets worse.

This chronic lack of trust is weakening the governing mandate, inhibiting policy making, closing the Overton Window and in turn degrading the effectiveness of governments to improve people's lives. It's leaving people isolated and angry that things don't feel fair. It leaves people to seek out alternative actors. Those filling the void are offering further polarisation, disruption and false solutions. This is the democratic doom loop.

In 2016, the former Brazilian president Fernando Enrique Cardoso said:

> ***"Our challenge is to bridge the gap between demos and res publica, between people and the institutions of public interest, reweaving the thread that may reconnect the political system with the demands of society."***

Trust is the thread that's needed to reconnect the political system with the demands of society and to strengthen our citizenry, the relationships our democracy is built on. Strengthening these would make people feel more secure, more in command, more heard and less frustrated with what they are met with when they turn to the state for help.

This is the relational oil that creates a functioning democracy. In the fight for democracy, we could focus on the mechanics - the voting systems, elections, the checks and balances and rights and the rule of law. Or we could focus on the relationships that sustain it in the fabric of our day to day lives. Those between citizen and state, and between citizens ourselves. **We need to repair these broken relationships.**

7 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/the-preventative-state.pdf

THE HOPE OF BRITISH DEMOCRACY

Things are bad in the UK, but we are not as polarised or distrustful as America. Our opportunity is different because of the country that we are.

On the morning of Thursday August 8, 2024, we decided what kind of country that is. The day before, it was reported that more than 100 riots were planned across the country, sparked originally by a brutal attack on children in Southport that then spiralled into ugly, racist, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant riots across the country. The news was full of shocking images: windows smashed, mosques attacked and rioters setting fire to hotels housing asylum seekers. The country felt dangerous and out of control, and the result was tangible: people of colour across the country were afraid to leave their homes.

But over the course of 24 hours the story changed. On the morning of Thursday August 8, instead of pictures of rioters, the country woke up to front pages and social media posts all telling the same story: anti-racist protests, community-led clean ups, damaged buildings being rebuilt by local tradespeople for free in acts of solidarity. The police, the government, civil society groups and communities were in lockstep, and the media got behind them.

At the time, much was made of the Prime Minister's leadership in ending the crisis. Sir Keir Starmer's experience as Director of Public Prosecutions during the 2011 Tottenham riots - when he had instituted immediate tough sentencing to deter further violence - shaped the policy response, which saw rapid justice and significant sentences for those taking part in the riots. Within days, rioters were being sent to prison, sending the strong message that violent, anti-social actions had serious consequences. It was a powerful policy intervention.

But that was just part of the story. Dal Babu, a former chief superintendent of the Met, said something very telling in an interview with the BBC's Today programme that morning: "We have a Home Secretary working closely with police chiefs and who respects the police chiefs - a much better coordinated approach." The institutions of the state were operating with mutual respect and in partnership. During the course of the riots and their aftermath, ministers were also holding talks with community and faith leaders about what could be done. There was a concerted strategy at the centre.

Then there was citizen action. Across the country, communities had come out to clean up after the riots, civil society had coordinated anti-racist protests, police had policed them as peaceful protests, and the media had reported that honestly and faithfully.

What brought about the end of the summer riots was a movement that spanned communities, civil society, religious and law enforcement institutions, the media and the state. It involved effective policy making, operational rigour, social capital and powerful storytelling to enact.

Together, this impromptu coalition formed a counter-movement far stronger than the rioters. This coalition represented the country we really are. A strong democracy has the ingredients and the confidence to respond to crises in this way, and through multiple actors working not in any organised or controlled way, but in acts of unity. When we needed it, we showed what kind of democracy we are.

We have other protective factors against some of the global forces of authoritarianism. In the BBC and other public service broadcasters we still have some space for shared narratives that counter divisive echo chambers. We have shared schooling, a fundamentally egalitarian health system we are deeply proud of and a tradition of civic culture that is dormant, but not so distant that it can't be revived.

There is also huge cause for hope around the country, something we don't talk about enough: The "energy at the edges"[8] in communities that are starting to self-organise to unite against the national declinism and in local leadership that is forging different ways forward.

In communities around the country, there is a strength that is not recognised in our polarised national political discourse, something others have called "ordinary hope".[9] The battleground that populism fuels should not be the battleground for mainstream British politics, because it is not the country that we are. If the mainstream parties fight on this battleground they will legitimise it further; our democratic decline will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We should be disrupting democracy for the common good by fuelling the good that already exists in the country, rather than choosing to legitimise division, polarisation and mistrust. This approach could disrupt and alter the democratic doom loop. **It could even create a new self sustaining hope loop.**

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8 https://endstate.substack.com/p/the-energy-at-the-edges
9 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/ordinary-hope/ordinary-hope-building-better-future-working-together

THE ALTERNATIVE: A DEMOCRATIC UPGRADE

My proposition is that you can't fight populism with populism. We need to fight the threat of autocracy with democracy, but not the same democracy that has failed. We need to seize this moment of democratic emergency to upgrade our democracy for this different era. We need to rewire the state to meet our needs as citizens' in a much deeper and more relational way.

We need more democracy, not less. This is disruption for democrats.

20 years ago, my predecessor at Demos Tom Bentley wrote *Everyday Democracy*,[10] describing the crisis that even then was brewing:

> ***Without renewing democracy at every level, our capacity to succeed as societies, and then as individuals within them, will drain away. Without new forms of democratic sovereignty, innovative and creative changes to our current model of political economy will not emerge. Without the mass exercise of citizenship many of our public traditions and institutions will atrophy. Without a new level of direct citizen participation the legitimacy of our political institutions will continue to decline. Without new cultures of dialogue, exchange and learning, our social differences will overwhelm us. That is why democratising the relationships between people, institutions and public authority is the central challenge of our age."***

In 2021, my immediate predecessor at Demos Polly Mackenzie wrote in her series *Making Democracy Work*:[11]

> ***We need to usher in a new era of collaborative democracy, in which our problems are solved in ways which develop citizens' and society's ability to handle them. After all, democracy cannot be relied upon to defend itself. Its champions must adapt to an age of transformation. Only a gravitational state can bring us back together."***

10 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/everydaydemocracy.pdf
11 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Making-Democracy-Work_full.pdf

These are the ideas that brought me to work at Demos and that we build on everyday. But the coming crisis we identified in 2005, and that we despaired of by 2021, is now a full-blown democratic emergency. We are more polarised and divided than ever.

We could choose to decide that this means we have failed in our pursuit of a more collaborative democracy. That our ideas have been rejected. Or we could choose to use this moment to be more radical about what this new collaborative democracy is and to build our case more urgently. A moment of crisis is also a moment of opportunity, where we can demonstrate a clear alternative to declinism and division.

We must disrupt and upgrade democracy in order to convince people of its merits. We must invent a radical, brave and optimistic democracy as an alternative to the lazy and divisive forces currently at play. This is democratic disruption - not the slide to authoritarianism and populism.

THE DEMOCRATIC UPGRADE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND CITIZEN

We need to embark on an era of democratic innovation to enable people to be stronger democrats and active participants in their destinies and empower politicians to tackle the challenges ahead. It's about strengthening all partners in the relationship: citizens and state, and the relationships between citizens ourselves.

This is a response to the fact that people feel completely disconnected from the current political system. They don't feel like Westminster recognises the reality of their life. Jason Stockwood, the businessman and owner of Grimsby Town Football Club who recently stood to be mayor of Greater Lincolnshire for the Labour Party, losing out to Reform's Andrea Jenkyns, has written powerfully about what he saw on the doorstep:

> ***"When people say Labour has abandoned the working class, they don't mean it in a Westminster think tank sense. They mean they don't feel seen or heard. It's not just about the content of policy, it's about the tone of our actions, the sense that decisions are being made at a distance, without understanding or respect for what life feels like on the ground. We like to think of ourselves as driven by logic, but more often we are governed by fear and moral intuition."***[12]

He makes the case for "grassroots listening structures" that don't disappear between elections. The democratic upgrade must principally be about improving the democratic connection between local communities and government. This is the fabric of the relationship between state and citizen that needs to change.

But this is not just about satisfying people's need to be heard. People do need to be heard, but they also need to see that it results in a better system that supports their lives. Upgrading democracy is about designing and building a more effective system that can deliver what we collectively need as a country. This is how we disrupt the doom loop. Listening will create better policy because it will respond better to people's needs, and it will also build legitimacy for difficult decisions along the way, which will support policy to move forward.

It will be more efficient than DOGE-style strong man approaches because it will bring people together and remove grit from the system, not add to it. It will be more effective because it is more legitimate, more able to make hard choices well, to navigate compromises and trade-offs and not just deal in false promises. It will de-risk policy making and could, if done well, even

12 https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2025/05/labours-broken-faith

speed up progress because it will remove the objections and barriers that often arise. It will build the democratic and social resilience to navigate the huge challenges that lie ahead. This is how we get to hope.

It is about being confident about the country we are: a country that came together and rejected the rioting in Southport and beyond, that organised the clear-up afterwards, and that united for common good when faced with the opposite. It is a country that is hungry for change, but where it once came together to create national institutions that have sustained - the NHS, and the BBC - it is now doing that in pockets despite the centre, rather than enabled by the centre.

Democratic disruption doesn't have to mean more polarisation and destruction. It could mean common good and rebuilding. But we need to make the case for it. Democrats, whatever their political persuasion, have to set out their stall.

GETTING ORGANISED FOR DEMOCRATIC DISRUPTION

How do we approach the challenge of upgrading democracy? How do we segment the opportunity for democratic renewal?

The first principle is that this is not predominantly about the hardwiring of democracy: elections, voting systems, the rules that prevent corruption, the rule of law and the structural checks and balances that keep power constrained. Our electoral process is actually the one point of the democratic process that is trusted.[13] Democratic disruption is needed at the interface of citizens and the state, repairing the relationships and building the culture as well as the systems for resilience. Rather than thinking first of technocratic reforms to our democratic systems, this begs a different response to deepen and enrich our day-to-day interactions with the state and each other through the services it provides, through the decisions it makes and through the powers it enacts over our lives.

We could choose to follow the current **institutions of the state**: looking at ways to involve the public in national policy making, in local decision making, as active participants in public services and as contributors to their local communities. In this model you would look to design citizen activation into each institutional redesign, institution by institution. Each change would meet the resistance of the established status quo.

Or we could choose to examine the problems in **citizens' experiences of the state**. In a project examining people's experience of distrust in politics last year,[14] Demos identified six drivers of mistrust: that the political system is not trusted to deliver for people; that political actors aren't trusted to act with integrity; that they do not listen to people; that they aren't present in peoples' lives and communities; that they aren't relatable to ordinary people; and that the media is not trusted to scrutinise and reform the system properly. You could choose to take each of these problems, starting from scratch and designing a systems approach to improving those sentiments. But this would require going back to first principles on everything.

13 https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/public-attitudes/public-attitudes-2024
14 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Trustwatch-2024_Report_October.pdf

Or we could choose to examine where this reform is already happening. The policy maker and author (and Demos trustee) James Plunkett has called this **"the energy at the edges"**, arguing that the system is dying at the centre, and that the innovation is happening around the country in pockets of vitality led by a variety of actors responding to the atrophying doom loop at the centre. This is the experimental ground of democratic disruption, the hope for the future.

Plunkett identifies ten pockets of vitality, a "messy, vibrant, and diverse world of thinking and practice out there" that cover much of the terrain that Demos has been in in recent years: the contemporary civic approach to create a thicker form of democracy, community agency to devolve power in a truer sense, more deliberative democracy to create more consensus building forums, relational ways of delivering public services, a new role for the centre in reforms such as mission driven government, the cross cutting potential for digital innovation in all of this.

I am most convinced by Plunkett's analysis of this, and it sharpens the task for think tanks that sit at the intersection of state and society; democracy and politics. It begs the question of how the centre might change to liberate and help spread the energy at the edges so that it becomes truly transformative.

In fact the energy won't simply stay at the edges. Because the vacuum at the centre needs something to fill it. Autocrats understand this. They have successfully harnessed the disruptive energy at the fraying and frustrated edges of society. They find the pockets of resentment and pour fuel on them by promising false solutions. That's how they get to the centre. Autocrats around the world are pushing fringe views into the mainstream, to adopt them and seize power. They are winning the battle for the vacuum at the centre. Their method is polarisation and division.

Democrats can do the same, to seize the frustration with the current system but offer an alternative response, one that reflects the innovation and self organisation around the country and unites those who hope for a different future. Our method should be consensus building and finding common ground.

WHAT NEXT?
LINES OF INQUIRY FOR UPGRADING DEMOCRACY

We are in a democratic emergency fuelled by the failure of liberal democracy to deliver a fair deal, but exacerbated by autocratic and populist actors seizing the opportunity to capitalise on it. We need to upgrade democracy to win people back. We've got to convince citizens that it's worth playing ball. Our mission is to upgrade democracy with a new deal to mend the broken relationship between citizen and state, citizen and public services, citizen and the economy, and between citizens.

To upgrade democracy we are considering six lines of inquiry, six strands to the new deal, leaning into where the energy currently exists

1. EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

In the 20 years since Demos published Everyday Democracy, there have been many experiments in participatory and deliberative democracy.

Participatory and deliberative policy making covers a range of methods that go beyond typical public consultation and engagement to convene groups of people to bring collective public judgement to policy decisions. By asking people to consider evidence together, to understand the trade-offs, you start to engage people in the compromises that policy making demands. The methods are shown to improve policy making by testing them on the people who will be subject to them, avoiding costly failure further down the line; unlock toxic or stuck policy questions by leveling with the public on the choices involved; and they can build legitimacy, and trust in the system, if done well.[15]

15 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Citizens-White-Paper-July-2024_final.pdf

Our vision is not that every policy decision is delegated to the public, but that the state shifts its relationship with us as citizens by strategically engaging on matters that need the de-risking and added legitimacy of these processes. Not everyone needs to participate in policy making, but they need to feel that the government is operating in this different way and becoming more effective as a result. There is potential to embed these practices selectively and strategically across the democratic landscape: in how MPs work in their constituencies, how government creates policy at every level, and how parliament legislates and scrutinises.

Successive governments have dabbled in people-powered policy making, inspired by the citizens assembly in Ireland, which helped move an intractable debate forward. Indeed there is participatory work happening across government as we speak. But too many exercises have been done without proper political backing, meaning they have not proved their value and the whole discipline has under-delivered. The failure of this agenda to achieve transformational change is that it's been at the margins and not joined up into a governing project, a new operating model for policy making. Politicians need to show they are listening.

The movement around these methods has also not properly evaluated with rigor the efficacy of the models, or made a compelling political case for mainstreaming this activity. Proponents need to make their case better.

At Demos, our future work agenda will be about showing the value of listening by deepening the evidence base for a democratic upgrade through participation and deliberation, and proving its value in vexed policy issues to help build the political case. These include planning, immigration and tax policy, in the first instance.

One of the big criticisms of participatory and deliberative processes is that they are hard to scale, and can be costly to do at depth. Some countries have overcome this challenge through technology; Taiwan[16] is hailed as a trailblazer in digital democracy. We have recently launched Waves, a large-scale trial of digital democracy[17] working with councils in the UK, inspired by the Taiwanese example. There is an opportunity to use AI and technology to power democratic disruption for good.

2. PUBLIC SERVICES FOR PEOPLE

Each and every interaction with the state impacts on the relationship between state and citizen, the trust and confidence they have in its ability to deliver. At the moment, people feel friction when they need it most - that familiar battle to get a GP appointment, the referral you feel you need, or the help doing your taxes or claiming benefits. Our research shows soaring complaints about public services across the board.[18] We have documented the frustration people feel in accessing the NHS[19] caused by the labyrinthine referral and communications systems. At sharpest end, we helped in the early phases of the development of Martha's Rule,[20] a new patient safety initiative in the NHS to rebalance power between clinicians and patients and

16 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/22/taiwan-bucked-global-trend-trust-politics-hired-protesters
17 https://demos.co.uk/waves-tech-powered-democracy/
18 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/02/public-services-complaints-in-england-soar-by-more-than-a-third-since-2016-study
19 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Preventing-needless-harms-caused-by-poor-comms-in-the-NHS-1.pdf
20 https://www.england.nhs.uk/patient-safety/marthas-rule/

their families, giving the latter a chance to trigger a clinical review if they feel they are not being heard.

We have set out a vision for "Liberated Public Services",[21] a new approach to reform that shifts the structures and incentives in public service provision to value frontline innovation and more relational ways of working between frontline workers and citizens. It builds on many years of making the case for more relational public services,[22] and my own work in the children's social care system.[23] There is inspiring work around the country and in specific sectors building relational practices, from family group conferencing in social work, which puts families in charge of their support structures; to whole council approaches in Camden, Wigan and Gateshead. This is public services for people.

The field is a marked departure from the last Labour government's "new public management" approach, which set targets from the centre, and led to prescriptive services that have proved inefficient to deal with the complexity in people's lives. The "relational" approach is seen in conflict with these "command and control" instincts of the centre.

Our case is that not developing relational public services is leading to waste and inefficiency, because it's failing to prevent long term problems or make best use of resources. This is the reform dividend.[24] A clear example is in children's social care, where austerity stripped away support services for families, leading to mushrooming costs of children being removed into the more costly and ultimately damaging children's social care system. There is a new form of more empowered public service, that keys into public servants' intrinsic motivations and works in partnership with people in more innovative ways. This doesn't mean less accountability - indeed the role of data and digital to liberated relational capital in the system, track effectiveness and help spread best practice, is part of the solution. AI and technology can also be deployed in service to this agenda, improving the communication systems and resource allocation in a way that can address the day to day frustrations with our outdated public services.

At Demos, the next phase of our work will focus on what the centre can do differently to enable these ways of working: the culture needed to lead this innovation in service delivery and at the centre; the funding structures to support it; and the data and digital solutions that can work in aid of it.

3. EMPOWERED COMMUNITIES

Not everything is about government, nor should it be. My predecessor Tom Bentley talked about developing public services and local governance as "platforms of self-governing communities".[25] More recently, we have set out proposals for communities to "take back control"[26] through ceding power from the state to communities. And

21 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Taskforce-Vision-Paper_May.pdf
22 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/The-Social-State-Report.pdf
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26 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Taking-Back-Control_Paper.pdf

we've looked at how citizens, civil society, business and government can better collaborate on mission delivery.[27] We've made the case for The Preventative State, underpinned by community empowerment. Empowering communities is about the role of civil society, social infrastructure and community organising at a local level. But it also demands the question: what does the centre do differently to enable it, but not control it? If the energy is at the edges, what is the role for the centre?

It's in communities where the work of citizens, civil society, local business and authorities can align. And this has been tried before. The coalition government's experiment in The Big Society failed because it involved the state retrenching from its role at a local level, rather than shifting to become a more humble partner, enabling communities to become more self-governing.

Instead of abdicating its responsibilities and expecting communities to pick up the slack like what happened in the Big Society era, government should lean in to supporting community-led initiatives, identifying the support and infrastructure that can release the power of communities to self organise. There is huge capacity in communities to do this. There is huge value to release if the government can find a different role in helping this to happen. The government has established a new Partnerships Unit in Number 10 to lead on this and will shortly publish its new Civil Society Covenant setting out how it will collaborate with civil society.

At Demos, the next phase of our work in this area will be to collaborate with a network of community-led organisations to help create a national narrative around this civil society and community empowerment agenda. We're also interested in experiments in social infrastructure and community organising from the UK and around the world, and redesigning the role of the centre to empower communities.

4. INFORMATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The relationship between state and citizen has been undoubtedly disrupted by changes in our information environments. There are significant threats to the UK's information supply chain that drive a wedge of dissatisfaction and deeper discord, making it all the more difficult to facilitate the kind of democratically enriching discourse needed to underpin well functioning democracy. The threats come from outside, with foreign interference; from the economic disruption to the business models for journalism that have changed the quality and availability of information; and from within, in the way that people are empowered to share information, can see more information than ever before, but are not necessarily seeing a fair, balanced or nuanced portrayal of the world.

Concerns about mis and disinformation have dominated, but there is less debate about how to shape the information environment to ensure that democratically enriching information is available when it's needed and in the right forms - that supports the state and citizen to work well together, and that helps finds common ground instead of polarising communities.

27 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Mission-ready-nation_2025.pdf

At Demos, the next phase of our work is to look at ways to protect what we've called our collective "Epistemic Security"[28] - that's the security of the information supply chains that are essential for a healthy and well functioning democracy. We will drive this agenda forward and deepen and expand on the recommendations for media policy, regulation, government actions and societal responsibilities to improve the information environment while protecting freedom of speech and journalistic independence.

5. OPTIMISING TO DEPOLARISE

Cutting across these lines of inquiry is a theme that is worth drawing out and expanding on in its own right: how to build bridges and find the common ground in our democratic processes. At the moment, the political debate is driven by extremes, a result of the ascendency of populist actors, the nature of the information environment and the need to "cut through" with ideas, given the scale of dissatisfaction. The system is optimised for polarisation and division, rather than the careful bridge-building and nuanced analysis needed to navigate the policy challenges ahead. We need to detoxify our political landscape.

Our work on participatory policy making in planning processes has hit on the concept of empowering the "MIMBY Majority" - the majority of people who say "maybe" to building in their areas. This is the majority that is currently not being heard from in planning processes but those who are more likely to benefit from housebuilding, or be motivated to weigh up the public benefit with the private costs. This MIMBY concept is something that can apply in lots of scenarios at the moment, where the extremes of the debate are dictating the terms and drowning out the voice of those who are less certain, more open to changing their mind, or thinking through the options.

How can we optimise our democratic debates, systems and policy making processes to allow for MIMBYs to come through, to build consensus and bridges across society rather than be driven by extremes?

This matters in our national policy making, but also in our local communities. Research on social capital shows that the one area where trust is actually increasing is in small community groups - family, neighbours and close friends.[29] This is a glimmer of hope but also not risk-free. This is an deepening of bonding capital between people, which supports us individually but doesn't amount to the bridging capital needed between social groups to create a strong society and thriving democracy. We need to work at a community level to make it normal for us all to step outside of our comfort zones. It's in these small powerful community networks that distrust ferments, and it's where our extremes harden against one another. We need to develop a social practice of engaging beyond our political comfort zones. This is plurality.

At Demos, the next phase of our work is looking at different ways to optimise the political system to focus on areas of consensus, bridge-building and away from the extremes. This includes trialling methods for MPs to engage representative groups

28 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Epistemic-Security-2029_accessible.pdf
29 https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Social-Capital-2025_The-Hidden-Wealth-of-Nations.pdf

of citizens, so they aren't just hearing the views of the loudest and angriest voices; we're interested in the role of citizenship education to create the practice of people "disagreeing well" and engaging beyond their political comfort zones.

We are currently, through our Waves programme, using AI to identify areas of consensus in diverse groups of voters through scaled deliberative processes. It is inspired by Taiwan where the AI used in Taiwan's participatory policy making platform is optimised to identify areas that disparate groups of voters agree on - the "uncommon ground" as Audrey Tang, Taiwan's celebrated democratic innovator, describes it. In a system which is currently optimised for the loudest voice, it is subtly but powerfully radical.

6. OUR ROLE AS CITIZENS

The role of leaders is to lead. Repairing the relationship between state and citizens needs those in power to make the first move to win back trust. They have to show they are listening first. But it also demands that we as citizens play our active part in democracy too, taking responsibility for our knowledge and actions as citizens. This is an emerging theme for us and at Demos we have expertise in citizenship education and media literacy, and are developing ideas around what would incentivise more active participation in society.

These are the six lines of inquiry we'll be pursuing to design the new deal to upgrade democracy.

It's worth pausing on the role of technology in the democratic upgrade. Technology has undoubtedly had a role in the breakdown of the relationship between state and citizen, particularly in how it has disrupted the power dynamics and our shared narratives. Not all of that has been bad. Patients are now more empowered to understand their own health through internet research and self-help forums, so doctors are no longer the only source of a diagnosis. The disruption this has caused to our trust in authorities of all kinds, and in politics in particular, is immense. But in each of our lines of inquiry above technology will undoubtedly be part of the solution as well,[30] helping to share information, target resources, find efficiencies and strengthen communications. It will be central to our economic growth agenda, but needs safeguards to ensure it doesn't further entrench power and wealth. The work of Demos Digital is to shape technology for the public good, instead of it being an inevitable part of decline and the concentration of power. There is huge potential to reshape our technological future together not just for economic growth but for common good.

The cumulative effect of this democratic upgrade is not simply to supplement the existing operating model with the odd citizens' assembly. It's to change the operating model so that policy makers are empowered to create the bold, ambitious and sometimes difficult decisions that lie ahead. One process - one tweak in the system - won't be enough. We need to upgrade our democratic system.

With the right elements, upgrading democracy could result in a new deal between state and citizen, setting out what each will do to build back trust to secure a future together. A state that listens, responds and delivers much more effectively as a result; citizens that trust it to do so, give our consent and play our part in renewal.

30 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/28/artificial-intelligence-powering-politics-reboot-democracy

THE NEW DEAL BETWEEN STATE AND CITIZEN

The challenge for the agenda outlined above is that it does not represent the quick levers that government's crave to change their courses. That's largely because such levers don't really exist in the current context of very little money and very large scale problems. But taken together there is a story to tell about a new deal between state and citizen. One in which the state promises a different engagement with citizens, that starts with listening, that levels with them about the challenges, that improves communication flows and steadily builds a different offer to address our collective needs. It takes a new level of honesty about the need for compromise in order to find the workable solutions to tackle our shared challenges. Honesty is the first step towards a more trusting relationship.

In the new deal politicians, policy makers and institutions would work in ways outlined above to deepen democracy, to listen and engage with people. It is not about ceding power to people, it's about being empowered to represent with renewed trust and legitimacy to break the doom loop and create space for more ambitious policy making. It's about strengthening policy-making and making it more responsive and agile to the scale of the challenges ahead. It's about harnessing the power of state and citizen to move forward together, instead of against one another.

But it also needs a recommitment from us as citizens to the society we exist in. This is where we're considering one big policy lever to shift the dynamic between state and citizen: the introduction of mandatory voting. The long slow job of building back trust does not suit the urgency of our policy imperatives right now. The new deal could be one where citizens' consent is mandated in the first instance to give it a head start. If everyone of a legal voting age is required to vote it will force the political classes to listen differently, to consider everyone's vote - not be dragged towards those most likely to vote, or those who are most volatile. There is cross-national evidence showing that in addition to higher turnout, compulsory voting can produce increased political participation outside of elections, lower inequalities of wealth, and greater trust in democracy.[31]

31 https://consoc.org.uk/compulsory-voting-uk/

In peacetime we might not be considering such a radical intervention. But right now we need to be thinking of ways to inject the democracy we need with urgency. We should be thinking more radically and even taking more risks. In Australia compulsory voting has created a norm of civic participation and shared sense of democratic responsibility. This has led to higher turnout and helped curb polarisation by anchoring political legitimacy in broad-based engagement.

Mandatory voting could give voice to those who are disaffected, and force politicians to listen differently: to everyone, and to find a way through that bonds rather than divides people. It could force the country into the sensible centreground that we really are, and out of the polarised fringes. This is to optimise for de-polarisation.

The new deal starts with politicians committing to listening differently to the very broad range of citizens, and demands that citizens engage in a radical reset of our democracy. This new deal between society and democracy, between citizen and state, is the reset it needs. It is the defibrillator to restart our democratic culture.

THE CASE FOR THIS DEMOCRATIC UPGRADE

The case for upgrading democracy to mend the broken relationship between state and citizen is not just in hope of a vague feel-good effect. This is not a naïve agenda. It's about building a more effective centre that is capable of solving big problems because it is more legitimate. This in turn will make a more resilient system that can face the crises of tomorrow.

It's about ending the democratic doom loop where the loss of trust is undermining the ability to deliver, and creating an upward spiral of effectiveness, legitimacy, resilience and hope.

Paul Kissack, Group Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and a former permanent secretary in the government, has talked about the tyranny of "TINA"[32] - There Is No Alternative - that is limiting the ambitions and imaginations of the centre. He describes a centre paralysed by pessimism bias and a loss of belief in itself to do anything differently.

I feel that sometimes working in a think tank. A sense that there is an acceptability line of ambition and if you step over it you are considered not politically savvy to the challenges, or the realities of the situation. There Is No Alternative to the status quo, and you make yourself irrelevant by raising different levels of ambition. It's like we've internalised limits on our ambition and imagination.

It's the same that I hear in focus groups in our work around the country. A fatalism, and a disbelief that anything will change. I see a mass institutional capture between the state and citizens, where the actors and institutions of state are facing a despondent citizenry, and responding with despondency and lack of ambition. Citizen and state are mirroring one another's hopelessness. If we offer to serve people's needs at a time when they are rightly frustrated and disbelieving, that's where we end up feeling like there is no alternative. Nobody believes it can be different.

But everyone would like to hope that it could be different. People are desperate for change and for things to get better, it might be that things have got so bad we are all willing to try some different ways forward.

We need to be brave and imaginative, to take inspiration from the innovation happening around the country, in order to have the ambition and belief that we can reverse the doom cycle. We need to build the trust in one another in order to start the hope loop.

32 https://medium.com/@paul.kissack/policymakers-need-to-be-less-tina-and-more-rich-394b6cdd1294

CONCLUSION
HOW CHANGE HAPPENS...

Our theory of change to upgrade democracy and secure its future is that we need to build the political case for all democrats - across the political spectrum - to take on this project. Politics is our method; democracy is our cause.

In his book the Upswing, Robert Putnam charts the rise of social capital in the US and how it tracks against rising equality, economic growth and social cohesion through the 20th century. He examines this upswing in America's fortunes, then asks what prompted it and concludes that it took two things: a moment of crisis (the aftermath of civil war in the US) and then the leadership to seize the moment. Audrey Tang, Taiwan's celebrated democratic innovator, told me the same: that the two ingredients to the democratic movement she led as digital minister in the Taiwanese government was "urgency" from a political threat and political "air cover" - the political leadership and commitment from those in power to the people to listen and act.

For true progress, we need the energy at the edges *and* political leadership, as happened in the riots response.

There is certainly urgency now. The global democratic emergency and the threat this poses to the UK amounts to a moment that requires people to act differently, with bravery and urgency that matches the times. In our post two-party system this is beyond traditional left and right. This is about democrats versus autocrats.

But right now we lack the leadership, the "air cover", that this agenda needs at the centre. It is at the edges, in individual communities, public services, in some local leadership, and in innovation in democratic and information sharing systems. But we need central leadership that grasps this agenda and makes it the central operating system.

The true disruption that should emerge out of this democratic emergency should be a collaborative, consensus building one. In an age of polarisation, to build bridges, to bring people together and to collaborate is to disrupt. Who will be brave enough to truly disrupt the political status quo?

There is something I hear when discussing these issues with people in political circles: I'm told that no one is talking about democracy on the doorstep. That they just want more pay in their pocket, to be able to get a GP appointment, to get the help when they need it. I think this is wrong. When they talk about those failures, everyone is really describing the results of a failing democracy. People are talking about the current inability to fix our broken public services, our distrust in politicians, about a disbelief that these things can change. People might not use the word democracy - we might roll their eyes at the thought of another election - but we feel and name the effects of the wider broken democratic system constantly.

It is also wrong because it fails to recognise that the weakness of democratic mandate and trust between state and citizen is inhibiting policy making. You can't deliver better public services,

keep us safe, and prepare for the future without upgrading democracy. This is to empower the government to deliver better, in partnership with the public, with civil society, business and others. The promise is to de-risk policy making, speed up progress and build resilience for the long term.

And finally, it's wrong because it's ceding the fight for democracy to autocrats and extreme populists who are using the language of democracy to win elections right now, proudly but perversely. We need to upgrade democracy to match the speed and velocity of today's emergency.

Trump and the autocrats and extreme populists, in this moment of their ascendency around the world, get the value of democracy as a political battleground. They use the language of democracy but subvert it for their gains. They assert a claim for "true democracy". Theirs isn't. It is autocracy and extreme populism that seeks to deceive, divide and control.

True democracy is about compromise, consensus building and striving for the common good. It's not a transaction between a vote at an election. It's about the pact we form together thereafter. That's how to deliver for people and win back trust. We need a new deal to upgrade democracy to mend the broken relationship between citizen and state, the demos and res publica, and to optimise for that consensus and common good, rather than division and pessimism. It is the only battle worth having right now.

In the UK we have this opportunity to upgrade democracy for the common good. That's who we are. We are a nation that rejected those ugly scenes in Southport. We are a nation still innovating at the edges. Stop and look, hope is out there. We need our leadership to step outside of the institutional capture of the doom loop and start to lead towards a better future.

In the UK we have this opportunity to **upgrade democracy for the common good.**

We need our leadership to step outside of the institutional capture of the doom loop and start to **lead towards a better future.**

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DEMOS

Demos is a champion of people, ideas and democracy. We bring people together. We bridge divides. We listen and we understand. We are practical about the problems we face, but endlessly optimistic and ambitious about our capacity, together, to overcome them.

At a crossroads in Britain's history, we need ideas for renewal, reconnection and the restoration of hope. Challenges from populism to climate change remain unsolved, and a technological revolution dawns, but the centre of politics has been intellectually paralysed. Demos will change that. We can counter the impossible promises of the political extremes, and challenge despair – by bringing to life an aspirational narrative about the future of Britain that is rooted in the hopes and ambitions of people from across our country.

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