

THE NEW DEAL

DEMOS

# EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

A NEW DEMOCRATIC OPERATING  
MODEL TO REBUILD TRUST  
BETWEEN STATE AND CITIZEN

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# DEMOS

Demos is Britain's leading cross-party think tank. Our mission is an upgraded democracy, with a new deal to mend the broken relationships between the state, institutions, and citizens.

This paper sets out the need for a new operating model for democracy - for Everyday Democracy - to renew governance, deliver better and rebuild trust. It is part of the Demos "New Deal" series, setting out our strategy to tackle the democratic emergency across our four pillars: **Everyday Democracy**, **Public Service Reform**, the **Citizen Economy** and **Resilient Information Ecosystems**.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE DEMOCRATIC EMERGENCY WE'RE IN

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Almost every statistic about the state of our democracy is depressing. Three quarters of people don't trust that politicians make decisions in the best interest of the country.<sup>1</sup> Trust in national government leaders has dropped eighteen points in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The whole edifice of liberal democracy feels shaky in a way that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago. We are angry, atomised, and increasingly convinced that the system is not designed for us.

Politicians feel this lack of trust acutely and are left paralysed by this climate of illegitimacy. This results in a democratic doom loop: people feel unheard and they disengage from politics. Politicians, facing an alienated and distrusting public, retreat into tried-and-tested paternalistic top-down delivery or swerve difficult decisions making, which weakens delivery. Poor delivery further degrades trust. Reversing this doom loop, creating a hope loop, is the focus for Demos's work.<sup>3</sup>



1 [Citizens' White Paper](#). Levin, M. et al. Demos. July 2024.

2 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) 2026.

3 [How to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen](#). Curtis, P. Demos. June 2026

The distrust has never been greater, the stakes never higher. Democracies around the world are failing. The government and all political parties are searching for more radical solutions to the current crisis, and the cabinet secretary is setting out a bold new reform agenda.<sup>4</sup> It's clear that reaching for the ordinary responses - to the technocratic rule book of policy making or the simple political deliverables - aren't enough any more. Any government needs to change in fundamental and real ways. The status quo isn't an option.

20 years ago the then Demos director Tom Bentley wrote in his seminal paper, Everyday Democracy:



*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."*

This is Everyday Democracy and the ideas have only become more relevant and urgent today. The cycles of government failure are getting faster and faster. The current strategy is to prove the worth of government to people by delivering more and faster. But this strategy isn't working. The biggest risk is to fail to recognise that to correct this failure democratic systems need to actively rebuild trust and, with it, the relationship between state and citizen.

**This essay sets out how.**

4 <https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2026/05/29/40890/> 2026



# WHAT EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY IS...

Our conception of Everyday Democracy today is not a single method or process. It is to upgrade democracy with a new operating model for the relationship between state and citizen. This operating model makes citizen participation, deliberation, public governance and deep partnership between communities and public services not just bolt-ons to government but strategically woven into the tissue of how important decisions are made, at every level.

A new operating model means opening up spaces for citizens to share power throughout our public life. It means the government tackling the thorniest ethical questions, like on assisted dying or the future of social care funding, with citizens. It means bringing the people affected by policy into policy decisions early to stress test and build support. It means the institutions that scrutinise, regulate and oversee on our behalf, from the Electoral Commission to the Charity Commission, building in public governance mechanisms to strengthen accountability and legitimacy. It means new models of neighbourhood governance where decision-making powers are devolved from the local authority to the hyper-local. It means new engagement methods between MPs and their constituents, based on deep two-way communication across the whole community with more local accountability and participation.

Everyday Democracy is about giving people a voice in the conversation, a stake in the game and building the civic ties that bond. It is about those in power demonstrating respect for, and trust in, the people who put them there. It's about investing in the relationships that fuel democracy. It's about building a new operating system and terms for engaging in it. This is to democratise the relationships between people, institutions and public authority

This is the ambition. People need to feel that they are actively participating in democracy in the days, months and years between elections. Like jury service, Everyday Democracy needs to become normal enough that everyone knows someone who has taken part. Then the question stops being "what is citizens' deliberation?" and becomes "when do I get my turn?"

# ...AND WHAT EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY ISN'T

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Everyday Democracy is not about involving citizens in every decision - that isn't necessary or required. Everyday Democracy demands curation - knowing when and how to open up, choosing the right processes for the right decisions, and designing them well.

Everyday Democracy is not more performative consultation. The current consultation system has created the mirage of engagement and openness but it is often hijacked by special interest groups, and excludes the majority. The government has promised to "rip it up".<sup>5</sup> Everyday Democracy offers an alternative to the current system that doesn't result in a neutering of public involvement.

Everyday Democracy is not about undermining representative democracy or the sovereignty of parliament. These processes can be decision making, but they can more often be used to inform decision-making by representative MPs, ministers and parliament. Sharing power will enable them to enact it more effectively.

We are also not arguing that citizens' assemblies or other deliberative processes are a magic bullet. Deliberative methods have been around for decades. Done well, they can build consensus in contested policy areas, create more durable policies, and restore sorely needed trust in institutions. But they have not delivered on their promise to the extent they should have, and it is worth being honest about why.

First, politicians and policy makers have been reluctant to truly listen to the outcome of these processes and show that they are listening and responding properly. Second, even where they see a use for deliberation, governments have not embedded these processes into their systems - so they remain one-off events, gestures rather than renewed democratic infrastructure.

That's why achieving the scale of change - the new operating model - is so critical to meeting the current moment of deep frustration with democracy. This needs to feel different.

The failure mode to avoid is not too much participation but too little rigour: the tokenistic gesture that gives deliberation a bad name and teaches people that their input doesn't actually matter. Or the poor engagement that results in even less trust or disgruntled stakeholders. Done badly, without consistent standards, skills or safeguards, they introduce new risks. But done well, and at a scale that feels qualitatively different to people, they can de-risk and speed up policy making, and build new trust. This is democratic abundance.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ministers-rip-up-consultation-culture> 2026

# THE EVIDENCE

This is not naivety or blind faith in a process. There is hard evidence of the effectiveness of participatory and deliberative processes. A cross-European study examining levels of trust in politicians, parties and national parliaments from 2010-2023, found that regions which had implemented more deliberative initiatives showed measurably higher levels of public trust in political institutions. These benefits spill over to the wider public, establishing that when people can see a process working with people like themselves at its centre, confidence in political institutions rises more broadly.<sup>6</sup>

Deliberative processes that bring people together across attitudinal and political divides enable them to navigate polarising topics, find common ground and a pathway towards a negotiated compromise that can hold. In 2019, *America in One Room* brought together 523 randomly selected, representative American voters to deliberate over a weekend on five of the most toxic issues in US politics: immigration, healthcare, the economy, foreign policy and the environment. Pre-weekend polling identified extreme partisan polarisation on 26 policy proposals. After four days of deliberation, the two parties had converged significantly on 22 of them: On immigration, Republicans moved so far that they switched from opposition to support on some policies. And Democrats moved rightwards on some health care policy.<sup>7</sup>

Greater public participation has also been shown to increase the tax take. Evidence from Switzerland, where participation rights vary across cantons, shows that direct democratic rights have a significantly positive effect on tax morale and reducing the size of the shadow economy.<sup>8</sup>

And it's not just about formal engagement with national government. The most ambitious vision of this would also seek to strengthen the bonds between people, rebuilding social capital and tackling the loneliness epidemic. Economists have called this the hidden wealth of nations<sup>9</sup> - capable of contributing to the growth agenda.

This is hard-won, evidence-based confidence that when people are brought together - given the time, the space, the structured support to engage with real complexity - they respond in kind. They rebuild social strength. They find their way to the common good, moving from 'what do I want?' to 'what can we do?'. They get beyond the personal and the partisan and are wholly capable of nuance and wisdom and disagreeing agreeably with people with very different views to their own.

6 [Building Trust in Politics through Deliberative Democracy](#). Innocenti, G. Sciences Po École d'Affaires Publiques. 2025.

7 [Can Deliberation Cure the Ills of Democracy?](#) Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab. Fishkin, J. 2025.

8 [Tax morale and direct democracy](#). Torgler, B. European Journal of Political Economy. June 2005.

9 [The Hidden Wealth of Nations](#). Haldane, A. and Halpern, D. Demos January 2025.

# WHY CITIZENS NEED EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

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The core citizen experience of Everyday Democracy is power. The sense that your voice has weight. That decisions are not simply being delivered to you from above, but that you have had agency in shaping them.

There is not a lack of demand from citizens for this; there is a lack of opportunity. The UK government's Community Life Survey shows that only 25% of people feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area. But 50% think that it's important to be able to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Taking part has a profound effect on people. Participants in deliberative processes report feeling more politically efficacious, more trusting of institutions, and more confident that their voice carries weight. The experience of being treated as a competent partner - given real information, real trade-offs, and real influence, and importantly the chance to talk with people with different views and experiences to their own - is both rarer and more powerful than governments tend to assume.

People don't want to be engaged on everything all the time - that way exhaustion and gridlock lie. But the evidence suggests that if people know that someone like them has had the chance to be involved in policy decisions, they have more trust in the outcome and the decision-making body.<sup>11</sup> But this effect depends on the process being visible, well-communicated, and genuinely consequential.

# WHY LEADERS NEED EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

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If the core experience for citizens is sharing power, it requires political leaders to do something that goes against almost every instinct their careers have trained into them: to share their power, and to trust what happens when they do.

The fear is understandable. Open up a deliberative process and who knows what people will say? The opposition can accuse you of having no ideas of your own. Also, you share the power but not the responsibility and accountability your elected status demands. In short-term political cycles, the safest thing is to keep control of the message, manage the narrative, and present decisions as fully formed rather than opening them up to genuine influence.

<sup>10</sup> [Community Life Survey 2024/25: Civic engagement and social action](#). UK Government. 2025

<sup>11</sup> [Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on Voters' Political Efficacy](#). Knobloch, K.R., Barthel, M.L. and Gastil, J. Political Studies, 68, 426-445. 2020

But what is this caution costing? Policies launched without genuine public buy-in that get blocked, reversed, or abandoned as they fail at first contact with reality - all of which bears a trust and financial cost. An electorate that grows more hostile, more alienated, more susceptible to the shallow offer of the populist with every cycle of being talked at rather than listened to. Maintaining the status quo is not a serious option in a democratic emergency. There is more risk in not doing this, than in doing it.

As Audrey Tang, former first minister for digital affairs in Taiwan, says: "to give no trust is to get no trust".<sup>12</sup>

Politicians who genuinely share power do not lose it - it is not a zero sum game. They get a deeper legitimacy by working with citizens on understanding how problems are really experienced and what potential solutions might be. Not to mention the electoral win of being seen to really listen and act on citizens' considered collective conclusions.

Demos polling carried out just before the 2024 election showed that 32% of undecided voters and 23% of those intending to vote Conservative would be more likely to vote for Labour in the upcoming general election if they made a commitment to public participation in policy making. In Taiwan's case, the participatory and deliberative democracy that was instituted saw trust in government rising from 9% in 2014 to 91% 10 years later - a figure we can only dream of here.

What Everyday Democracy asks of political leaders is not that they become passive conduits for whatever the public says. It asks for a different kind of leadership: honest about the scale of the challenges we face, clear about the constraints within which choices must be made, willing to treat voters as adults who can handle complexity and ambiguity. The ask for ministers is that they empower departments to go out to the public on key policy questions, where the answers are contested, the topic polarising, or public buy-in critical. Empowering civil servants to use participatory policy making appropriately - not on every policy question, but where meaningful public input will help to develop a sustainable solution which is de-risked through early engagement with the people affected.

Finally - and this is key - this only works if political leaders follow through on what people recommend, as there's not much more likely to deplete trust than going through the motions of listening then ignoring what comes out of the process. This is a hard political sell, but it is vital. And it provides a positive alternative to populists who claim that politicians don't speak for the people or represent their best interests.

<sup>12</sup> [The good hacker: can Taiwanese activist turned politician Audrey Tang detoxify the internet?](#) Simon Hattenstone. The Guardian. 17 August 2024.

# WHY POLITICS NEEDS EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

Politics needs Everyday Democracy. Our current politics is primed for conflict and polarisation. Social media drives to extremes. Polls assess what people disagree on, more often than what they agree on. Politics increasingly seeks dividing lines rather than uniting ones. As Greg Maniatis has argued for Demos,<sup>13</sup> we need to build a practice for the centre in a time of polarisation — the practice of building things together with people you disagree with. In a moment of democratic emergency, he argues, this may be the most radical thing you can do. My colleague Polly Curtis calls this “optimising to depolarise”.<sup>14</sup>

Everyday Democracy is the approach to this. Not polling people on what they already think, but using deliberative practice to create the conditions in which people with different views can think together, find common ground, and develop ideas that can command durable cross-party support. Tools like [Pol.is](#) and [Remesh](#) use bridge-based ranking to find consensus between people. Starting from the point of agreement across divides is a much more sustainable way of building coalitions of support on policies that will benefit the broadest base of people and hold up under political pressure and survive contact with reality.

This is not centrism as an ideology, but as a practice that builds consensus for the difficult policy decisions ahead. This is a radical alternative to the inherently divisive current forms of populism.

## BUILDING THE NEW OPERATING MODEL

So what needs to change? We need to embed the processes across the policy making, service design and delivery landscape. We need to build it into the fabric of state and community.

Big, ethical, controversial issues should be subject to citizen assemblies to inform parliamentary votes, like the government is currently doing on Digital ID, or the Casey Commission’s National Conversation on Social Care will. These are nationally focused and amplified events and we only need one or two a year to normalise them into our operating model.

Beyond that, government and parliaments need to build participation into the ways of working, not as occasional bolt ons. Standing citizens’ panels at national and local government level, permanent democratic infrastructure that governments can draw on and that citizens can expect to be listened to. This could help navigate policy choices in a more ongoing way at a national level.

<sup>13</sup> [Repopulating the Centre: How to build the practice for a new political centre](#). Maniatis, G. Demos 2026

<sup>14</sup> [Upgrading Democracy](#). Curtis, P. Demos. July 2025

Policy and service delivery should integrate citizens into their design and iteration processes, building more localised iterative ways of communities being integrated in public service reform, as championed by the government's Test Learn and Grow<sup>15</sup> programme.

New models are needed for how MPs relate to their constituents to strengthen the frontline of democracy. Not the surgery as a complaints desk, but ongoing, structured dialogue with the people they represent whether they voted for them or not, not just those with the loudest voices or the most pressing problems.

And we need new public governance models for democratic guardrail institutions, like universities and regulators. Institutions that are publicly funded and ultimately work for us carving out space for citizen scrutiny and accountability. These involve building public panels into governance structures to act as a bulwark against politicisation - or an anchor in the public to help navigate difficult choices. This is a new way of thinking about public governance, and needed to ensure independence in increasingly volatile political contexts.

There are also exciting opportunities at the local and hyperlocal level to design and bring to life new forms of neighbourhood governance. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill has paved the way for a generational shift in power towards communities. So there is work to be done to create and build the architecture of everyday democracy at this neighbourhood level and to stitch it into the existing democratic framework. But we need to go beyond institutional design, to help build capacity and support people from all walks of life to invest their time and energy into their communities.

Civic infrastructure needs urgent investment. Deliberative processes do not emerge from nowhere. They require people who are used to engaging with public life, who have experience of acting together, who have the civic muscles built up over time. Libraries, youth centres, local journalism, trade unions, community organisations are fundamentals of shared civic life, and their decline is a democratic emergency in its own right. They provide the spaces for Everyday Democracy to flourish - for the hidden wealth that is social capital to grow.

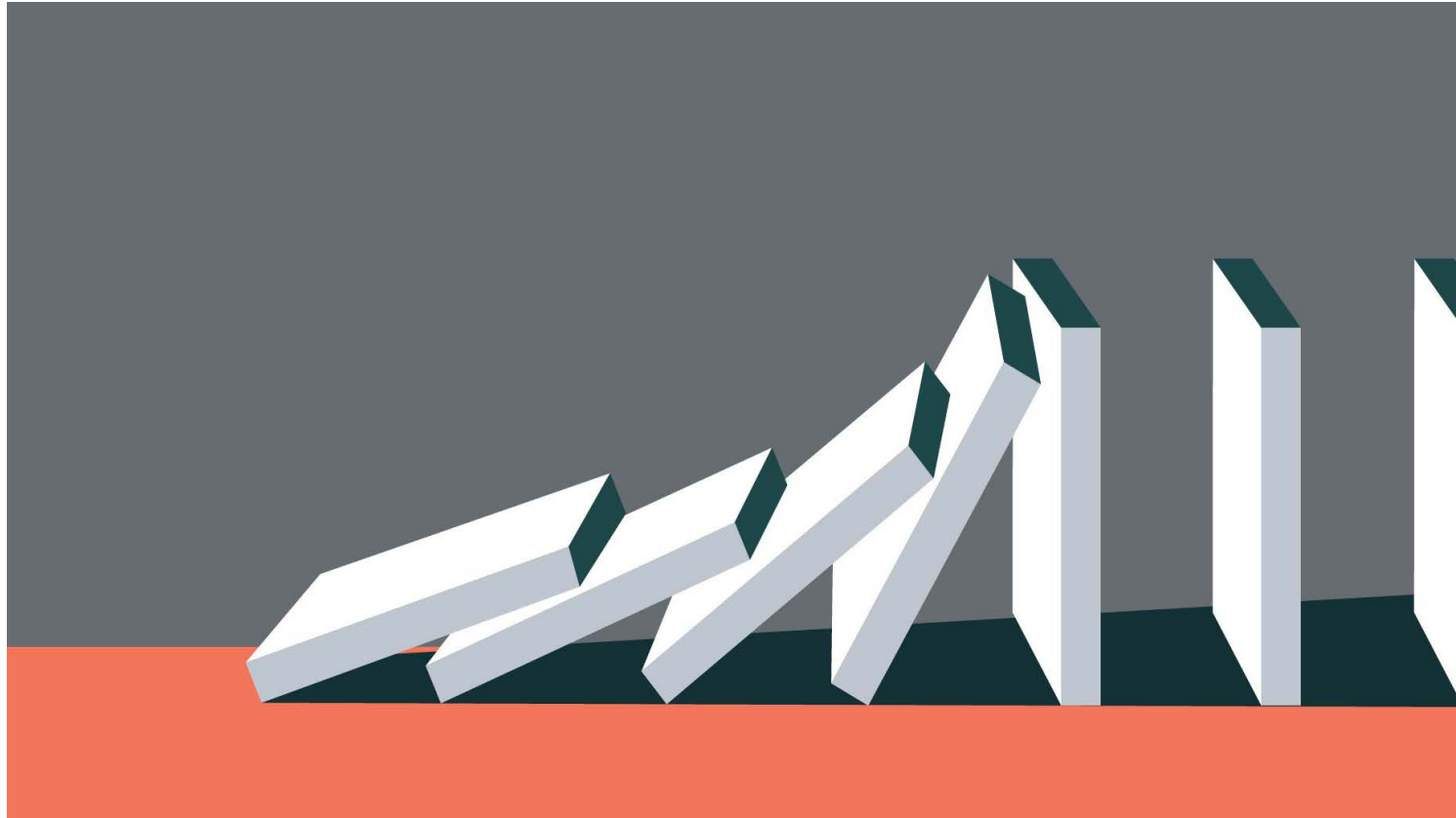
Civic education needs to start young and be real. Not civics as a dry module about how parliament works, but genuine experience of participating in decisions - school councils with actual power, youth input into local governance, the lived experience of having a voice and seeing it matter. If we want a generation that is equipped for Everyday Democracy, we need to build civic muscle from childhood. Votes at 16, which the government is currently legislating for, offers a once in a lifetime opportunity to accelerate this.

Scale requires both digital and human investment. Digital tools can reduce the cost and increase the reach of participation - but they are not a substitute for the depth that genuine in-person deliberation provides. The goal is not to move everything online but to use digital intelligently to lower barriers, increase accessibility, and allow participation at scale, while protecting the quality of the deliberative core.

Underlying the new suite of interventions, the government should make a commitment to participation and deliberation - the UK's leadership role in the Open Government Partnership from October 2026 to September 2027 offers a moment to do this. Unlike most other European countries including the Scottish Government, the UK Government has not yet made a commitment on participation. And it should invest in new capacity, skills, standards and ethical safeguards to ensure that processes are conducted with rigour and to avoid risks to delivery, reputation and trust.

The new operating model embeds participatory and deliberative processes, new forms of governance and service delivery and design across government, bringing in citizens at key points in a more porous model of government.

15 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/communities-across-the-country-to-benefit-from-innovation-squads-to-re-build-public-services>



# CONCLUSION

## THE COST OF INACTION

What happens if leaders don't engage with the public in this new democratic operating model? The democratic doom loop will speed up past the point of no return. Politicians cannot govern effectively without public trust. It will become ever harder to make the difficult decisions that come with short term pain or hard trade offs, unless they take the public with them. This will leave politicians with no option but to promise the impossible and deliver on nothing, further undermining trust that liberal democracy is the most effective governing option.

There is now a consensus that the status quo is not sustainable. It faces a dizzying array of challenges - with more, such as the advent of agentic AI, looming on the horizon that will further test its capacity for trusted governance. Government must renew democracy, deliver better and build trust with the public.

This government has already overseen a quiet, tentative participatory and deliberative wave: through public engagement on the NHS 10 year plan, on SEN reforms, with the People's Panel on Digital ID and through the participatory philosophy of its Test, Learn and Grow programme. There is more to come. But a substantial shift in gear is demanded to reap the true benefits of this and to tell a different story of government. This would be a more humble government, built on partnership through difficult times, but ultimately more powerful in its decisions, more effective in its outcomes. **That's how to build a hope loop.**

# WHAT DEMOS IS DOING ON EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

We are working with national government, parliament, regional and local authorities, and neighbourhood bodies, developing and testing new forms of deliberative and participatory democracy to improve policy making and the effectiveness of government, strengthen citizenry and build back trust.

We're taking on the most polarising topics of the day to show that it's possible to detoxify the debate and build legitimacy around policy making that only genuine public participation can provide, most recently on [immigration for the Home Affairs Select Committee](#).

We're advising the government on the [Citizens' Assembly on Digital ID](#), and helping to design the delivery of the [National Conversation on Social Care for the Casey Commission](#).

We've developed [Waves](#) - a new model for tech-powered local democracy. Its purpose is to make it easier, quicker and simpler for local authorities to meaningfully engage people at scale and in depth on local issues. The first pilot in Camden on the future of adult social care proved the model's success and the next pilot in South Staffordshire on local planning will refine it and stress test the rollout.

We're tackling problems on the frontline of democracy - in the breakdown of trust between MP and constituents. We're experimenting with a new model of [MP - citizen conversations](#) leading to a co-designed action plan that the MP can deliver and constituents can hold them to account on.

We're working to develop the detail of neighbourhood governance structures, drawing on examples and case studies from around the world and across the UK. And we're working with local authorities allocated Pride in Place funding, to deploy best practice methodologies that will draw out the experiences, insights and aspirations of local citizens in order to shape the programme in their area.

And we'll be exploring the vulnerabilities of institutions that should act as guardrails against democratic backsliding (courts, universities, regulators), and developing interventions that can be put in place now to strengthen their resilience to democratic degradation and political attack.

We are developing the infrastructure for a New Deal for Democracy. This is the new operating model for democracy - not tearing it up, not defending the status quo, but upgrading the current model.<sup>16</sup> We're here to respond to the urgency of the political moment and provide a route-map for any and all political parties to upgrade democracy so it's fit for the 21st century.

16 [The New Deal: How to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen](#). Curtis, P. Demos. June 2026

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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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