erc

European Research Council

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European Commission

Mapping ERC Frontier Research
Democracy

2024

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Introduction

The European Research Council (ERC) is the premier European funding organisation for frontier research. It has been a key component of the EU's funding programmes for research and innovation since it was set up in 2007. It gives its grantees the freedom to develop ambitious research projects that can lead to advances at the frontiers of knowledge and set a clear and inspirational target for frontier research across Europe.

The ERC funds a rich and diverse portfolio of projects in all fields of science, without any predefined academic or policy priorities. These projects can have an impact well beyond science and provide knowledge and innovation to help solve societal challenges and inform EU policy objectives.

ERC-funded projects on democracy: an overview

This report presents ERC-funded research projects that examine a wide variety of aspects linked to democracy. It explores the multifaceted challenges confronting democratic systems while also illuminating the enduring resilience of democratic principles and civic engagement.

The projects presented in this report were identified by keyword searches on all Horizon 2020 (2014 – 2020) and Horizon Europe (2021 – 2027) ERC-funded projects. As the list was broad, the resulting pool was refined, retaining 215 projects. The projects were divided into clusters to present these in a thematic manner, and some are highlighted in this report. The criteria for this selection were, first, how advanced the project was and whether it had produced research outputs that could be highlighted. Second, we aimed for variety, showcasing the plurality of topics covered.
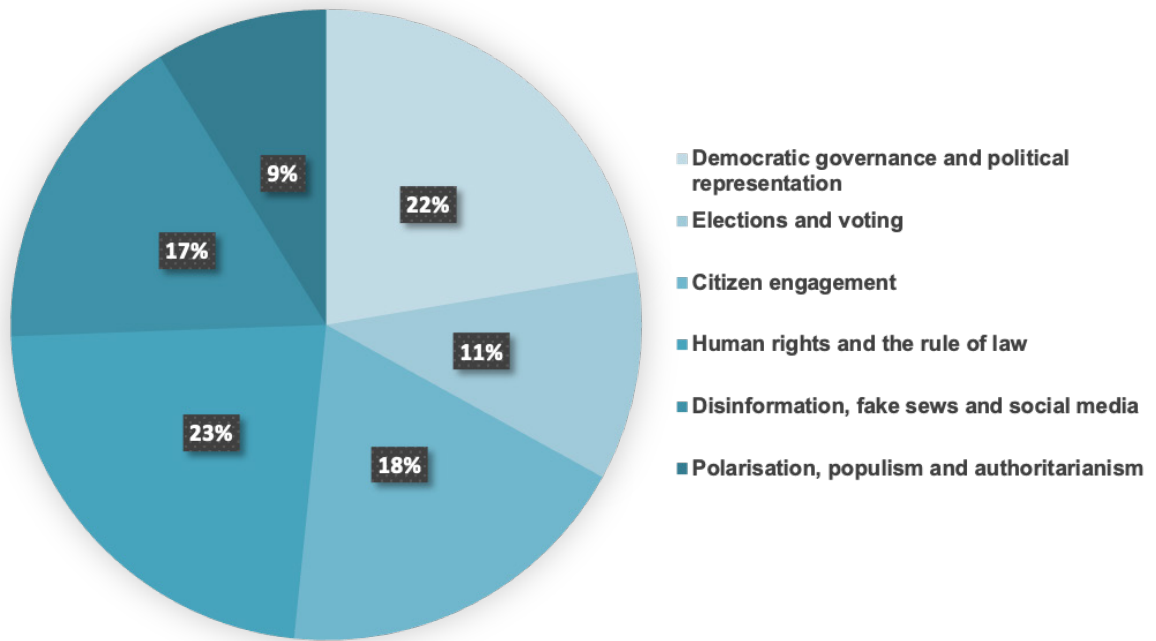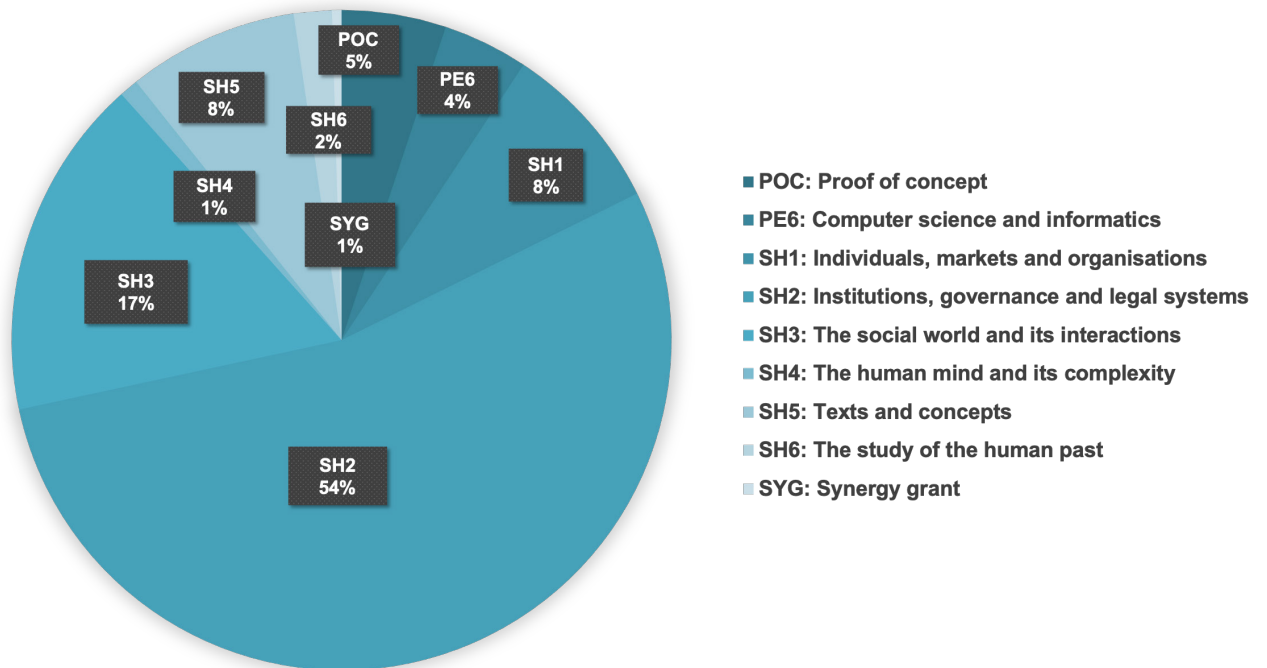
215 Projects | EUR 368 Million

Projects by theme

- Democratic governance and political representation — 22%
- Elections and voting — 11%
- Citizen engagement — 18%
- Human rights and the rule of law — 23%
- Disinformation, fake sews and social media — 17%
- Polarisation, populism and authoritarianism — 9%

Projects by ERC evaluation panel or funding scheme

- POC: Proof of concept — 5%
- PE6: Computer science and informatics — 4%
- SH1: Individuals, markets and organisations — 8%
- SH2: Institutions, governance and legal systems — 54%
- SH3: The social world and its interactions — 17%
- SH4: The human mind and its complexity — 1%
- SH5: Texts and concepts — 8%
- SH6: The study of the human past — 2%
- SYG: Synergy grant — 1%

Most common disciplines

Pie chart values:
- 41%
- 10%
- 9%
- 8%
- 6%
- 6%
- 5%
- 5%
- 5%
- 5%

Legend:
- Political science
- Law
- Economics
- Sociology
- Communication
- Social psychology
- Science and technology studies
- Anthropology
- International relations
- Cultural studies
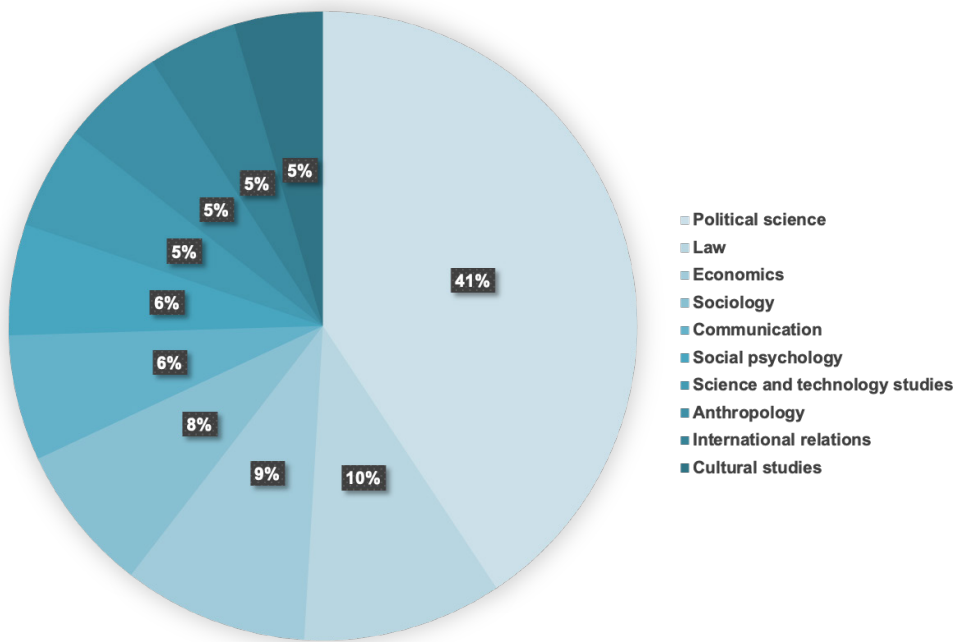
Most used scientific methods

Pie chart values:
- 15%
- 14%
- 13%
- 10%
- 10%
- 8%
- 8%
- 8%
- 7%
- 7%

Legend:
- Comparative methods
- Survey methodology, questionnaires
- Interviews
- Data collection
- Experimental methods
- Case studies
- Data analysis
- Theoretical analysis
- Digital participatory methods (e.g. apps, social network use, devices)
- Big data and big data analytics
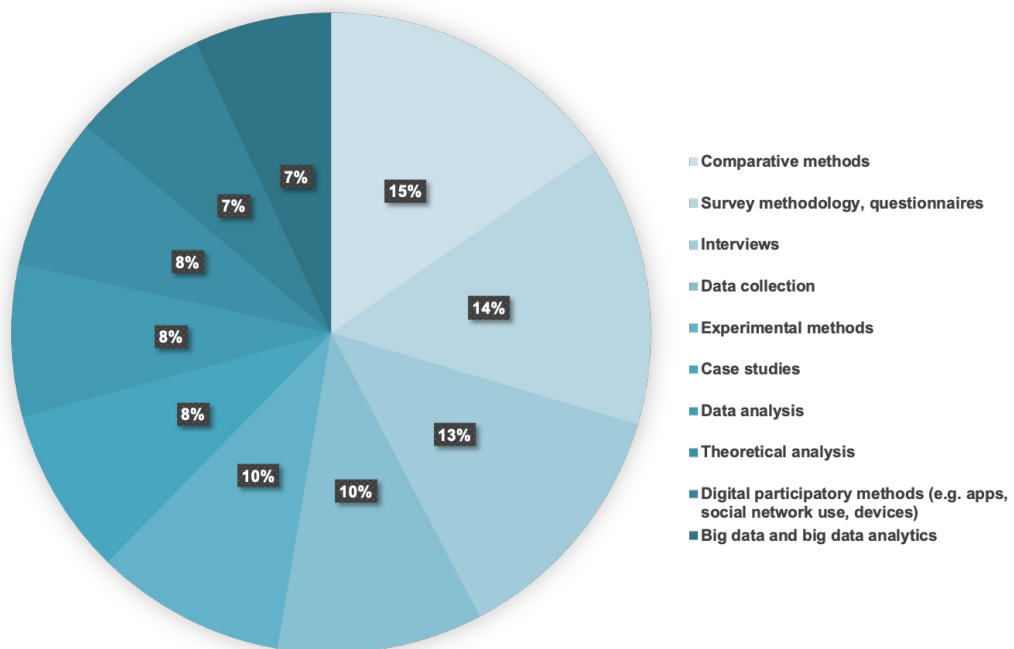
On democracy: building resilience and confronting challenges

In an era marked by socio-political transformations and rapid technological advancements, democracy is facing a complex array of challenges, alongside encouraging instances of innovative forms of citizen engagement. This section highlights some of the main issues identified by the projects within this portfolio that impacts democracy today.

Socio-economic inequality constitutes a significant challenge to democracy as it undermines fundamental principles of fairness, representation, and equal opportunity. As wealth and resources concentrate in the hands of a privileged few, societal divisions widen, posing risks of social unrest and susceptibility to populist exploitation of economic grievances. Moreover, such inequality also challenges the foundational idea of democracy as a system serving the interests of all citizens, which eventually fosters disillusion and erodes citizen's trust in politics and democracy.

Polarisation and populism emerge as significant forces, exacerbating divisions and hostilities that transcend conventional ideological boundaries. Economic polarisation often fosters fears of 'the other' and incites the search for 'enemies' within and outside a society, whether migrants, refugees, people with different ethnic or religious background or sexual orientation. Moreover, the echo chambers of **social media** amplify polarisation by isolating citizens within homogeneous ideological bubbles, hindering constructive dialogue and endangering the inclusivity and pluralism vital to the democratic ethos in culturally and demographically diverse societies.

Another central aspect highlighted by projects within the portfolio is the impact of social media and artificial intelligence on **public opinion** and **political discourse**. As these platforms wield increasing power in disseminating information, including disinformation, and in shaping political narratives, questions arise regarding the veracity of information, the vulnerability of public discourse to manipulation, and the broader implications for the fundamental tenets of democratic governance. The rapid spread of misinformation and fake news, exacerbated by the speed and reach of digital communication, undermines the foundations of informed citizenry essential for a robust democracy.

Foreign interference poses a significant threat to fair and free elections, as it is capable of subverting the integrity of electoral processes, manipulating public opinion, and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Likewise, increasing threats to **freedom of the press** and to the **safety of journalists** around the world constitutes a serious challenge to democracy.

At the same time, projects highlight the transformative evolution of democracy, marked by a series of **positive developments that bolster citizen engagement and strengthen the democratic fabric**. The introduction of deliberative and participatory democracy approaches, e-government initiatives, e-participation platforms, and a higher level of citizen inclusion in democratic debates and decision-making processes all together fosters more inclusive governance models and gives citizens greater influence over policy decisions. Additionally, open data initiatives allow for greater transparency, enabling citizens to access vital information for holding governments accountable.

The rise of **social media** and **digital activism** has **empowered citizen mobilisation** and amplified diverse voices. Moreover, the flourishing of community-based initiatives and grassroots movements, such as protests addressing climate change, actively involves young citizens, enriching the vibrancy of democratic systems. These positive developments collectively signify a dynamic and adaptable democratic landscape, harnessing technology and citizen-led efforts to fortify the foundations of democratic governance.

The ERC-funded projects presented in this report address these multifaceted aspects of democracy from different angles. Before delving into these, we present first a brief outline of the EU policy context, where the strengthening of democracy stands as a high political priority for the European Commission. Additionally, we outline how research is informing EU policies on democracy. Following the project highlights, we offer a brief analysis of some of the main ethics considerations researchers encounter when conducting research on democracy.

EU policies promoting democracy

Democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are founding values of the European Union.[1] They underpin all the EU's achievements in fostering peace, prosperity, economic competitiveness, social cohesion and stability across the continent and around the world.[2] The essence of democracy is that citizens can freely express their views and participate in democratic life, choose their political representatives, and have a say in their future.[3]

Given the importance of checks and balances and division of powers between legislative, executive and judiciary branches for a healthy democracy, the European Commission publishes a yearly report on rule of law.

When the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was appointed by the European Parliament in 2019, she made A New Push for Democracy one of her six political priorities.[4] In December 2020, the European Democracy Action Plan was introduced with the purpose of building more resilient democracies across the EU, particularly in response to challenges posed in a digital age. This comprehensive plan strives to promote free and fair elections, strengthen media freedom and combat disinformation. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of citizen engagement and an active civil society as cross-cutting priorities throughout the Democracy Action Plan. In this regard, the Conference on the Future of Europe stands as a valuable example of efforts to strengthen citizen engagement, leading to a new phase of citizen participation with the integration of European Citizens Panels into the European Commission's policy-making process. The commitment to democracy extends beyond internal affairs and is also embedded in the EU's external actions, serving as a central pillar of its engagements with accession and neighbourhood countries.

The democracy Action Plan involves several Commission initiatives. Promoting and safeguarding free elections has included legislation to ensure greater transparency in the area of sponsored political content, a revision of the regulation on the funding of European political parties as well as a new joint operational mechanism for electoral resilience through the European Cooperation Network on Elections.

In protecting free media and the safety of journalists, several recommendations were made, including the strengthening of measures to enhance the safety of journalists and other media professionals, Additionally, there was a recommendation to protect journalists and human rights defenders from manifestly unfounded or abusive legal proceedings and a proposal for a directive on strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). Moreover, a new set of rules was proposed under the European Media Freedom Act to uphold media pluralism and independence within the EU.

Key actions to counter the spread of disinformation include building on existing networks to coordinate EU action in response to increasing wave of disinformation campaigns; a reinforced EU toolbox to counter foreign information manipulation and interference, and ensuring more accountability of online platforms to prevent the spread of disinformation (Code of Practice on Disinformation and The Digital Services Act).

The European Democracy Action Plan is also supported by a number of other European Commission initiatives, including the new European rule of law mechanism, the new Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan as well as the package of measures taken to promote and protect equality across the EU.

On 12 December 2023, the European Commission put forward the Defence of Democracy package to complement and deepen the existing Action Plan. This comprehensive package includes a communication reviewing the work done under the European Democracy Action Plan; a legislative proposal to set up common transparency and accountability standards for interest representation activities seeking to influence the decision-making process in the Union that is carried out on behalf of third countries; a recommendation to promote free, fair and resilient elections, and a recommendation to promote the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policy making.[5] I also includes guides covering topics such as best electoral practices in Member States, ensuring the participation of citizens with disabilities in the electoral process, guidelines on EU citizenship and recommendations regarding e-voting and other ICT practices during elections.

Science for policy

Knowledge based decision-making is essential for ensuring robust and effective policies and governance systems.

On 8 December 2023, the Council of the European Union endorsed the conclusions aimed at strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation on policymaking within the European Union.[6] The conclusions highlight the contribution of science to reinforce policymaking, thereby positively impacting the lives of citizens and strengthening democracy. As expressed by Diana Morant Ripoll, the Spanish Minister for Science, Innovation and Universities,

"Strengthening the contribution of research and innovation to policymaking benefits society as a whole, has a positive impact on the planet and eventually improves citizens' lives and reinforces democracy."[7]

The European Commission employs various measures to promote evidence-based policy making. One key initiative is the Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM), which brings together leading scientific experts to provide independent advice on a range of issues. SAM facilitates the integration of scientific knowledge into policy discussions, ensuring a well-informed decision-making process. Similarly, the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE) provides the Commission with expert advice on the ethical, societal, and fundamental rights implications entwined with the advancement of science and new technologies. Furthermore, through the Projects for Policy (P4P) programme, the Commission fosters collaboration between scientists and policymakers.

In June 2023, the EGE issued its Opinion on Democracy in the Digital Age.[8] Developed at the request of President von der Leyen, it informed the revision of the European Democracy Action Plan and the development of the Defence of Democracy package. In the Opinion, the EGE examines how certain configurations of digital technologies can contribute to a weakening of democratic institutions, even if they may not be its sole cause. Among these are the spread of harmful information, an unduly narrow understanding of privacy, algorithmic surveillance, manipulation and discrimination, foreign interference, and the expansion of Big Tech into public sectors. The transmission of the EGE's recommendations prompted a follow-up request by Vice-President Dubravka Šuica, asking the EGE for additional advice in the context of the upcoming year of elections and of topical questions around the European civic space and European identity.

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) provides independent, evidence-based knowledge and science to support EU policies. As part of the European Commission's commitment to strengthen democracy, the JRC develops and implements participatory and deliberative practices in science and policy through their Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy. One of the main objectives of the knowledge centre is to enrich the EU knowledge base on participatory and deliberative practices, while providing guidance for both researchers and policymakers. Additionally, the JRC also played an important role in developing the aspects of the European Commission recommendation pertaining to citizen participation in policy-making processes.

Furthermore, research supported by the European Commission's funding programmes more broadly generates a wealth of knowledge and innovations that contribute to a solid knowledge base and that offer solutions to pressing societal challenges and needs, including related to democracy. This includes the research and proof of concept projects funded by the European Research Council, as presented in this report.

ERC-funded projects on democracy: highlights

The portfolio analysis of ERC-funded projects exploring various aspects of democracy yielded a total of 215 projects funded under H2020 (2014 – 2020) and Horizon Europe (2021 – 2027). Based on a qualitative assessment, the projects were divided into six thematic clusters, covering: 1) Democratic governance and political representation, 2) Elections & voting, 3) Citizen engagement, 4) Human rights & the rule of law, 5) Disinformation, fake news & social media, and, 6) Polarisation, populism & authoritarianism. The following chapters present highlights of selected ERC-funded projects from each thematic cluster.

Democratic governance & political representation

In a democracy, power is divided among various branches of government - the legislative, executive, and judicial - establishing a system of checks and balances. This division aims to prevent the concentration of power in a single entity, promoting accountability and safeguarding citizens' rights.

Another cornerstone of democracy is representation, embodying the principle that citizens delegate authority to elected representatives to make decisions on their behalf, reflecting the collective will of the people. Trust in the political system is essential, as citizens must have confidence that their representatives genuinely advocate for their interests.

ERC-funded research in this area covers a wide range of topics such as the division of power, legitimacy, political parties and campaigning, transparency, eroding trust in the political system, gender equality in politics, the robustness of democracies and much more.

From the European debt crisis and the Great Recession to security threats and Brexit, numerous developments have resulted in conflicts over solidarity, sovereignty, and identity. SOLID examines what has proven to be the **resilience of the EU institutional architecture in the face of multiple crises** that have hit Europe since 2008. As the researchers leading the project, Maurizio Ferrera from the University of Milan, Hanspeter Kriesi and Waltraud Schelke from the European University Institute, posit, sequences of policy crises tend to disrupt routine policymaking, jeopardise its responsiveness, and put political legitimacy at risk. At the same time, a severe crisis may also activate polity maintenance incentives for keeping the political community together "whatever it takes". Covering developments since 2008, SOLID **assesses the overall soundness of the EU's foundations in the wake of political crises**.

Navigating the complexities of **governance** in an era characterised by connectivity, transparency, accountability, and increasingly assertive, sceptical, and empowered citizens poses significant challenging for governmental institutions. While there is abundant knowledge about the failure of policies and public institutions, there remains a scarcity of robust insights into the practices that foster 'good governance'. Addressing this gap was the primary aim of SuccessfulGovernance, led by Paul 't Hart at Utrecht University, which offers a **systematic investigation of successful governance**. Through the project, innovative conceptual frameworks were developed to study policy successes and high performing public organisations. These frameworks were tested through over 100 case studies of policy successes from around the world. The outputs and findings of the project are available here and on their website.

In political science, **state-market relations** are often conceptualised as a delicate balance between the public sphere (the state) and the private sphere (the market). The expansion of the global market has largely been driven by the rise of large multinational companies. Many of these companies wield turnovers comparable to the GDP of middle size states, leading to the perception that globalisation represents a **shift of power from states to markets**. At the same time, these large companies have strategically divided themselves into hundreds and even thousands of multi-unit, multi-layered and multi-jurisdictional entities, which has, contrary to expectations, increased their power rather than diminished it. To better understand the consequences of this trend, CORPLINK, led by Ronen Palan at Copenhagen Business School, **developed an innovative new tool for studying private companies as political actors**. The project found that modern multinational companies are not simply avoiding rules; rather, they create their own preferred regulatory environments through arbitrage techniques. This capacity to shape the regulatory landscape, rather than being subjected to it, constitutes a form of power known as arbitrage power, which is pervasive in contemporary markets. The project further demonstrated that this arbitrage power helps to shape and coalesce the wealthiest elite, a rule-based transgressor elite, that uses societal norms to their advantage. Read more in this and this article about how the novel approach used by the project team to map corporate architecture **offers the possibility for greater transparency in modern capitalist systems**.

Similarly, CORPORATOCRACY, led by Rutger Claassen at Utrecht University, investigates **the political power of business corporations**. The project analyses the extent of transnational corporations' political power and evaluates its legitimacy based on three key criteria for legitimate ruling: adherence to the **rule of law** and **human rights**, **democratic decision-making** processes, and the fulfilment of **social justice** requirements. The findings of the project are available here.

While **transparency in politics** remains a cornerstone of democratic governance, achieving a balance between transparency and secrecy is crucial for effective government functioning. Therefore, the question arises: **what is the appropriate ratio of secrecy and transparency in politics**? DEMSEC, led by Dorota Maria Mokrosinska at Leiden University has developed a theory of democratic secrecy, reshaping conventional perspectives in democratic theory. Against the prevailing view that state secrecy is, at best, a justified suspension of democratic governance, the project demonstrated that, under certain conditions, secrecy is a legitimate form of democratic governance, not merely a justifiable suspension of it. Read the outputs of the project here and here

The role of **digital technology in modern political campaigns** is increasing. Data-driven messages from political parties are more direct and oriented toward individual target groups. However, disinformation towards voter manipulation is also on the rise. DiCED, led by Rachel Gibson at the University of Manchester studies the impact that new political campaigning techniques have on democratic processes. It designs an index to compare data-driven techniques used by political parties, assesses the impact of these new methods and analyses the longer-term consequences on liberal democracy. Read the interview with Rachel Gibson, on **how digital technology is changing the way political parties campaign for power.**

Despite the importance of the **European Parliament's party groups** to **democratic representation** in the European Union, there is limited understanding of how these groups conceive gender, gender hierarchies and gendered relations, or how they seek to address **gender inequalities**. EUGenDem, led by Johanna Kantola at Tampere University, carried out a systematic analysis of the gendered policies and practices of the eight European Parliament (EP) party groups and generated findings on the significance of gender in party political transformations in Europe. The book, European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times presents the project's findings to a broad audience. The outputs of the project are available here and on the project website. Read also the article on how political groups in the European Parliament shape gender policy.

Studies show that **various forms of democratic engagement**, including attitudes and behaviour such as political trust, political support, loyalty, and formal and informal participation, **have come under considerable pressure** in recent decades. To better understand how citizens' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by public policies, QUALIDEM, led by Virginie Van Ingelom at Louvain Catholic University conducted a qualitative (re)appraisal of citizens' (dis-)affection towards politics. Focusing on the turn to neoliberalism and supra-nationalisation in public policy, the project analysed the effects of these macro-level transformations on citizens' experiences with politics. Read the findings of the project here and on the project website.

It is widely acknowledged that **politicians increasingly rely on emotional appeals**, often of an extreme nature, as such appeals are believed to resonate with citizens. However, the effectiveness of such emotional appeals is moderated by citizens' pre-existing emotional attachments to parties, leaders, or issues. POLEMIC, led by Gijs Schumacher at University of Amsterdam uses novel methods to **explain when different types of emotional appeals are persuasive**, and when existing emotional attachments prevent persuasion. The project combines a macro-perspective (what politicians say) and a micro-perspective (how citizens respond), thus bridging the realms of party politics and political psychology. Read the project outputs here.

Elections and voting

In 2024, the world is witnessing an unprecedented number of elections, including in the USA, India, South Africa and not least for the European Parliament. This year, more than 2 billion voters in 50 countries will head to the polls.[9] Free and fair elections form the bedrock of democratic societies, providing citizens with the crucial opportunity to shape the policies and laws that govern them through their voting rights. Understanding voters' preferences and expectations surrounding elections is important for facilitating responsive governance and building trust in the democratic process.

ERC-funded research contributes to a better understanding of this area and covers topics such peoples' voting behaviours, their expectations to elections and to democracy more broadly, intergenerational differences, election campaigns, and how to make elections more inclusive, among many other topics.

Electoral disagreements have long been viewed as results of social divisions, but recent research shows that they have evolved as a distinct source of antagonism. **Electoral hostility** are negative feelings

(frustration, anger, contempt, disgust) held towards individuals or groups because of their effective or perceived electoral preferences. While scepticism towards political elites has been well-studied, the phenomenon of hostility towards fellow voters is a novel area of inquiry. Electoral hostility may have far reaching consequences. It can lead citizens to resent one another due to differences in electoral stances, causing further divisions in already polarised societies. Additionally, it can contribute to the delegitimisation of electoral outcomes and negative attitudes towards solidarity. ELHO, led by Michael Bruter at London School of Economics **examines the causes and consequences of electoral hostility** at individual, group, and aggregate levels. Michael Bruter and his team at the Electoral Psychology Observatory have made advancements in modelling and measuring electoral atmospheres, electoral ergonomics, hopelessness, and electoral hostility. They have achieved this by leveraging techniques from psychology, resulting in a more precise, analytical and explanatory model. Moreover, through a cross-disciplinary approach, the team is enhancing our understanding of citizens' desire for new forms of democracy and their preferences regarding adaptations of elections to address major external threats, such as pandemics, terrorism, and environmental disaster. Read here the recently published monograph providing an in-depth look into the psychology of voters around the world, how voters shape elections, and how elections transform citizens and affect their lives.

Drawing on insights from a previous ERC-funded research project on **first time voters** (INMIVO), Michael Bruter also received a Proof of Concept grant, entitled FIRSTTIME. This grant was dedicated to developing innovative tools for Election Management Bodies (EMB) to **tailor electoral experiences for first time voters**, ultimately enhancing their satisfaction and voter turnout. Protocols to optimise first time voters' experience were tested before (election packs, mentoring system, etc), during (dedicated help at polling stations, etc) and after (certificate, celebration, etc) voting. The results were used to produce first time voter guidelines disseminated to end-users, presented in conferences and major events (UN, European Parliament) and made available to EMBs to re-attract young voters to polling stations.

Individuals do not make decisions on complex political matters, such as whether to vote and who to vote for, in insolation. Instead, these decisions are influenced by their particular social settings: the family, the peer group, the workplace, the neighbourhood. The aim of CONPOL, led by Sven Aron Oskarsson at Uppsala University was to examine **how the social context of individuals impact their political participation**. Based on data from the Swedish population-wide register, the project completed a large number of studies to show the mechanisms through which social contexts influence people's inclination to engage in politically activities. Read the project's results here.

Public opinion regarding **European integration and the EU** is divided. Once considered a consensus issue with stable and broad elite and public support across the continent, it has become contentious, with opinions shifting rapidly. These evolving **EU opinions are significant, influencing voting behaviour** and shaping the future trajectory of both the EU and European democracies. EUROPINIONS, led by Claes de Vreese at University of Amsterdam, studied the causes and consequences of EU opinions and how these change in response to real world developments, domestic political factors, and personal experiences. Read the article on the causes and consequences of changes in public opinion about Europe, and find the project outputs here.

It is widely theorised that large electorates can make accurate decisions by collectively considering information from numerous voters. However, this theory overlooks the presence of biased organisers who seek to manipulate the outcomes. These organisers can include CEOs conducting shareholder votes, regional governments organising referendums and political parties during general elections. InfoAggregation, led by Stephan Lauermann at University of Bonn investigated whether **biased entities can influence voting behaviour** by manipulating participant numbers or by releasing additional information about issues that citizens care about. They also investigated whether informal political processes, such as protests, share some of the properties of elections, in which case voters themselves weigh up the real or perceived costs of participation and decide whether to engage. Read the article on how game theory can offer insights into voting behaviour.

What are the motives behind small political campaign contributions? Does tax policy affect political giving? What is the ability of the media to induce citizens to make electoral decisions? While evidence exist at the macro level on the flow of money in elections and on news consumption, relatively little is known about individual-level behaviours such as the motivations of small donors, the tax-price elasticity of political donations, or the exposure to competing information flows. PARTICIPATE, led by Julia Cagé at Sciences Po provides evidence on **new forms of citizen participation**, leading to the reassessment of influential theories of **special interest groups and policy formation**. Read the findings of the project here.

Citizen engagement

A robust democracy flourishes when citizens are not merely spectators but active participants, impacting the direction of their society and ensuring that their voices are heard. Beyond voting, citizen engagement takes many forms, including participatory forms of democracy, deliberative democracy, community forums, grassroots movements, and other avenues for people to contribute to decision-making processes. Demonstrations and protests are likewise strong signals of citizen engagement.

ERC-funded projects on citizen engagement examine a variety of issues linked to citizen participation and engagement in democracy, including participatory forms of governance, participatory budgeting, stakeholder consultations, data activism, citizen movements, protests, citizen referendums, the relationship between socio-economic and educational contexts and citizen participation, and much more.

The emergence of **participatory governance** has resulted in the delegation of governmental responsibilities to citizens. Citizens position themselves as voluntary mediators, or brokers, between the government and their fellow citizens. BROKERS, led by Martijn Koster at Radboud University, investigated **how brokers influence democratic governance** with a focus on participatory urban governance. The project adopted a comparative urbanism design to study four cities, renowned for their democratic participatory governance, namely Rotterdam (NL), Manchester (UK), Cochabamba (Bolivia) and Recife (Brazil). Its findings contribute to understanding the conditions under which participatory governance can give rise to more democratic cities. Read the project's findings here.

Citizen consultations are used by national governments, regulatory agencies, and the European Commission to design policies and formulate legislative proposals. Consultations provide a direct communication link between decision-makers and stakeholders, playing a key part in democratic governance and driving improvements in regulatory reforms. However, we currently lack a systematic analysis of the role consultations play in policymaking. To address this knowledge gap, CONSULTATIONEFFECTS, led by Adriana Bunea at University of Bergen, investigates the role of stakeholder consultations in the EU at national and supranational level. The aim is to understand the conditions under which consultations can improve policymaking. Read the project's findings here and follow the project on its website.

Should people be allowed to vote on the adoption of immigration restrictions that risk violating international law? Should it be permissible to launch a citizens' initiative demanding the reintroduction of the death penalty? May a proposal be put to a popular vote even though voters are not properly informed about its effects? With the introduction of **direct-democratic instruments throughout Europe**, the relationship between popular sovereignty and the rule of law is set to become a defining political issue. Yet, the question of where the legal limits of direct democracy should be drawn and how compliance with these limits should be reviewed have remained almost completely unexplored. This leaves a major gap in the research that has serious repercussions for the functionality and legitimacy of direct democracy. To address this gap, LIDD, led by Daniel Moeckli at Zurich University, provides a scientific basis for resolving this urgent challenge. Read some of their findings in this edited volume offering a comparative analysis of referendums and initiatives across Europe and other project outputs here. Read also the interview with Daniel Moeckli, on the limits of direct democracy.
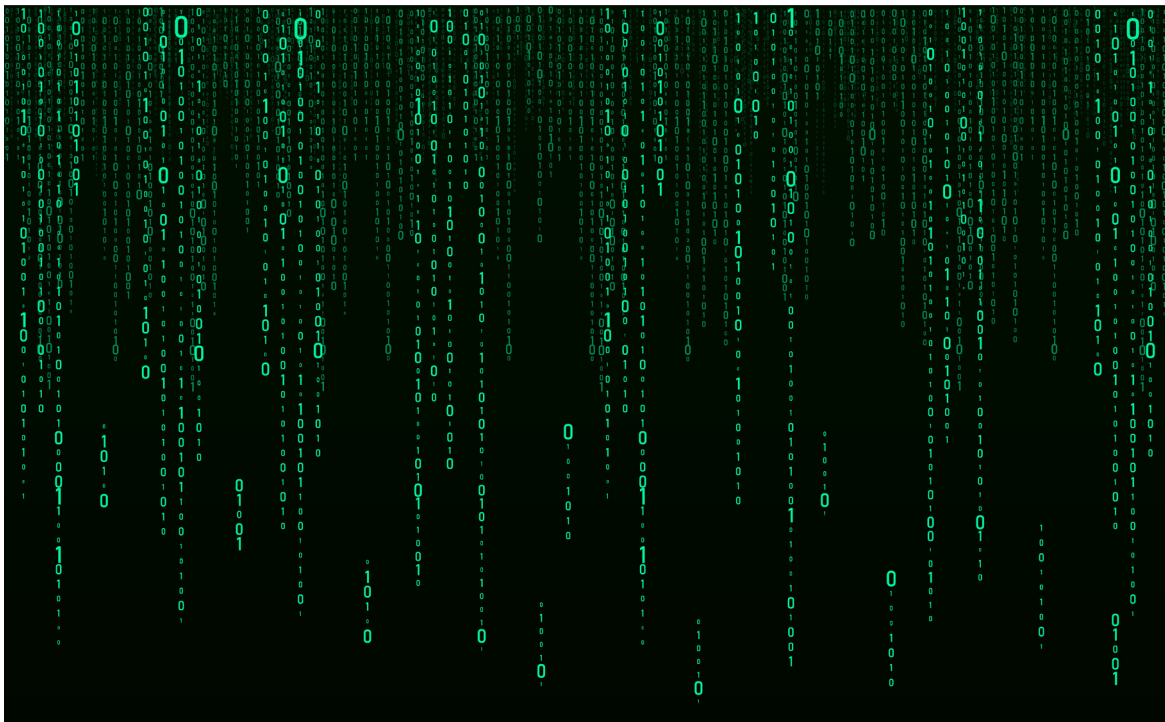
With the diffusion of big data, citizens become increasingly aware of the critical role of information in modern societies. This awareness gives rise to new social practices rooted in technology and data, which can be termed **data activism**. While activists see massive data collection by governments and businesses as a challenge to civil rights, big data also offer new opportunities for collective action. DATACTIVE, led by Stefania Milan at University of Amsterdam, investigated civil society's engagement with massive data collection by analysing how citizens resist massive data collection by means of technical fixes (re-active data activism); how social movements use big data to foster social change (pro-active data activism), and how data activism affects the dynamics of transnational civil society, in particular transnational advocacy networks. Read the findings of the project here. Read also the article on how data and democracy interact.

Youth today are growing up in a visual world, where their understanding of political action is often shaped by various forms of visual participation. ImagiDem, led by Eeva Luhtakallio at Tampere University, investigates the **visual participation of young European citizens**, both online and offline, with the aim of developing a model of democratic practises for the 2020s. Using a combination of visual ethnography and computational big data mining and analysis, the project analyses images and memes shared on social media platforms, following young people's visual ways of participation as part of their everyday actions. Project outputs are available here. Read also this interview with Eeva Luhtakallio, on how young people have found a political outlet in social media.

Economic inequality has been on the rise in almost all Western societies for the last decades and has long been thought to diminish societal openness. POLAR, led by Markus Gangl at Goethe University Frankfurt, examines the relationship between economic inequality and societal openness, a foundational element of liberal societies. Specifically, the project provides new empirical evidence into **how inequality affects social mobility, support for democracy, and social cohesion** in Western societies. Read more in this and this article about how inequality erodes trust in political institutions over time. The project can also be followed on its website.

How does protest impact democracy? POWDER, led by Christian Volk at the Free University of Berlin, assessed whether contemporary protest movements influence the premises of democracy, and whether the democratic order gives rise to specific forms of protest. Empirically, the project focused on selected contemporary protest movements, namely anonymous digital protest movements, transnationally organised alter-globalisation protest movements, the No Border movement, and the right wing identitarian protest movement. Project findings are available here. Read also the article about the relationship between protest and democratic order.

What are the **implications of rising income inequality for the political process in advanced democracies**? UneqDems, led by Jonas Pontusson at Geneva University, examined the influence of inequality on citizen participation, citizens' expectation from government, and government responsiveness to citizens' preferences. Additionally, it studied how the political consequences of low-end inequality (the widening gap between the poor and the middle class) differ from those of high-end inequality (the growing concentration of income among the wealthiest). Read the findings of the project here and learn more about the project on their website.

The **educational context** in which children are raised significantly shapes their opportunities in life, affecting not only their future economic well-being but also their propensity to participate in civic and political life. While the importance of education is not a new insight, there is a lack of systematic comparative data on the educational contexts of the current adult population, the political factors shaping these contexts, and their long-term impact on a range of social and political outcomes. To address this knowledge gap, SCHOOLPOL, led by Jane Gingrich at Oxford University, investigates the impact of education politics. It aims to identify how broad public objectives (growth, equality) in education interact with the objectives of organised groups and voters to shape different distributions of educational resources. Read the project findings here.

Human rights and the rule of law

The European Union is built upon the core values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights, as outlined in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

ERC projects explore various challenges related to upholding human rights, turning their attention to specific policy areas. These include immigration policies, rights of people with disabilities, regulation of sensitive data management, prison management, EU constitutionalism, and the impact of emergency legislation on human rights and the rule of law.

In recent years, there have been a renewed interest in the effectiveness of **human rights law and judgments**. Yet, little attention had been given to the impact of remedies on states' compliance practices or the **internalisation of human rights into their domestic legal systems**. HRNUDGE, led by Veronika Fikfak at Copenhagen University, aims to address this gap by analysing how monetary and non-monetary remedies change states' behaviour in this regard. Through an empirical study of the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, the project seeks to ascertain the compliance practices of different European states and their correlation with different types of remedies. See here, for a range of articles on non-compliance challenges related to rulings of the European Court of Human Rights on rule of law questions in EU Member States.

The Council of Europe plays a key role in safeguarding European values and fundamental rights, while the European Union advances European integration. **While the Council of Europe was initially placed at the forefront of fundamental rights protection, the EU has now taken the lead in setting fundamental rights standards**. RESHUFFLE, led by Elise Muir at KU Leuven, explores the EU's dual role and examines the potential mismatch between advancing of European integration and protecting European values and rights. Specifically, the project assesses the evolution of the EU's contribution to European fundamental rights law to better define the EU's function and ability to fulfil this role.

While the importance of an **independent judicial system** with clear, respected, formal rules for the health of democratic systems has been extensively studied, recent literature suggests that the role of **courts and judicial systems may also be influenced by informal practices**. These practices can either contribute to (such as patronage) or counter (such as informal ethical norms) democratic deterioration, regardless of their formal design. To address this knowledge gap regarding intra- or extrajudicial informal institutions, INFINITY, led by David Kosar at Masaryk University conducts an in-depth comparative legal study, combining sociological and political sciences, and focuses on analysing differences in informal judicial systems and their role in both 'new' and 'old' EU Member States. Read their findings here.

Equality can be understood as both the condition of being equal and **the right of different groups of people to have a similar social position** and receive the same treatment. Although all major national and international human rights instruments include norms protecting equality, there is a lack of agreement about its precise definition and implications. EQUALITY, led by Niels Petersen at University of Münster, studies the extent to which legal equality guarantees tolerate inequality. Specifically, the project analyses **how courts conceptualise equality in constitutional and international human rights law**.

Civil justice is under pressure, resulting from the ineffectiveness of procedures in terms of long duration, high costs, and complexity. This undermines **access to justice as guaranteed by the Human Rights Convention** and the **EU Charter of Fundamental Rights**. A well-functioning civil justice system is pivotal for enforcing rights for consumers and businesses and for protecting citizens' fundamental rights. Using a unique combination of legal-normative, comparative law, and qualitative research, EU-JUSTICE, led by Xandra Ellen Kramer at Erasmus University Rotterdam, developed an integrated approach to digitalisation, privatisation, self-representation, and specialisation. These aspects were examined in the context of strengthening access to justice as a fundamental right and as the pillar of civil justice in the EU.

Forensic architecture is an emergent field that involves the presentation of architectural evidence in legal contexts. As contemporary conflicts frequently unfold in urban areas, homes and neighbourhoods are increasingly targeted, leading to a rise in civilian casualties within cities and buildings. Consequently, **architectural investigation has become an essential tool for conflict analysis**, serving not only to establish accountability, but also because to facilitate ground-breaking methodological and theoretical inquiries into the nature and dynamics of urban conflicts. Forensic architecture, as developed by lead researcher of FAMEC, Eyal Weizman at Goldsmiths, University of London employs a novel set of research techniques to analyse violations of international humanitarian law and human rights as they bear upon the built environment. Read more on their website, and read the article on how state crimes and human rights abuses are exposed through architecture.

Crisis situations resulting from financial instability, terrorist activities, pandemics or military threats can have profound **effects on the rule of law and human rights**. In response, states tend to implement emergency legislation and measures. While emergencies are typically viewed as having temporary and limited impact on legal systems, they can, in fact, have significant and long-lasting consequences. EMERGE, led by Cosmin Cercel at Ghent University, traces **how emergency legislation impacts constitutional culture in democracies**.

The increasing world-wide adoption of **digital technologies** has led to unprecedented data flows from diverse places and populations. This data revolution, often termed 'datafication', is praised as a transformative force for human and economic development. Yet, while these advancements grant immense power to monitor, categorise and intervene, they have not been connected to a **social justice agenda**. Moreover, the potential discriminatory aspects of data technologies remain largely unaddressed. In response to these challenges, DATAJUSTICE, led by Linnet Taylor at Tilburg University, adopts a critical stance towards the assumption that the power to visualise and monitor will inevitably benefit the poor and marginalised. Instead, it proposes a conceptualisation of data justice as necessary to determine ethical pathways going forward. Read the project findings here.

While the technical ability to 'datafy' and collect information on ever-more social activities has raised concerns regarding surveillance and privacy, there is a growing recognition that data processes do not affect everyone in the same way. Instead, they contribute to a system of 'social sorting', which creates new categories of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. DATAJUSTICE, led by Lina Dencik at Cardiff University, **examines the concept of data justice** and investigates **how new social stratifications emerge with datafication**. Taking a holistic approach, the project studies the concrete experiences and practices of specific communities, analyses algorithmic processes, data sources and outputs, and evaluates policy frameworks related to digital rights and social and economic rights.

SECURITY FLOWS, led by Claudia Aradau at King College London, investigates the key role of data collection and exchange for EU **border security**, examining the **political and ethical implications of datafication** in this context. The project seeks to trace how digital data flows and frictions redistribute knowledge among border security actors, NGOs and undocumented migrants. To understand the practical implications of datafication, the project develops methods to 'follow the data' along the migration routes in the Mediterranean. Politically, the project shows how data shapes actors' decision-making. Ethically, it aims to understand how datafication affects the rights of both citizens and non-citizens. Follow the project on their website.

When individuals use the Internet, they are required to entrust their data to a single service provider. This poses a risk due to many service providers being located outside the EU. **Incidents involving governments, attackers (external or internal), or human errors have resulted in user data leaks**. In response, the EU has taken measures to prevent such attacks, primarily through the enforcement of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which obligates companies to properly protect users' data. PSOTI, led by Thomas Schneider at the Technical University Darmstadt, **enhances this protection** by applying not only **legal**, but also **technical measures** when processing sensitive user data.

VINO, led by Kristine Eck at Uppsala University, aims to explore **how states address police misconduct.** As Kristine Eck posits, police violence and abuse occur throughout the democratic world, posing a challenge for states that seek to exercise coercive force judiciously. One approach used by states to address this issue is through the establishment of police misconduct oversight institutions. These institutions facilitate civilian reporting and state investigation of misconduct. Through systematic cross-national comparative research, VINO seeks to increase our understanding of how different types of oversight institutions influence citizens' behaviour and attitudes towards the state.

Prisons represent places characterised by **considerable power differentials**. Establishing systems to ensure fair treatment of prisoners and uphold their rights is essential for promoting justice and maintaining order within correctional facilities. PRILA, led by Mary Rogan at Trinity College Dublin, examines how mechanisms for securing rights, ensuring accountability and achieving adherence to the rule of law are experienced in European prisons. Read the project findings here.

Mary Rogan also received an ERC Proof of Concept grant, POIRE, aimed at strengthening international oversight in prisons and prisoners' capacity to engage with human rights monitoring. In so doing, POIRE aims to **improve human rights compliance in prisons** and empower prisoners to engage with their rights, thereby upholding the European value of fundamental rights protection in vulnerable settings.

DANCING, led by Delia Ferri at Maynooth University, investigates the extent to which the **protection of the rights of people with disabilities** to take part in cultural activities and the promotion of cultural diversity intersect and complement each other in the EU legal order. It relies on a novel combination of legal, empirical, and arts-based research to identify and categorise barriers to cultural participation, and to provide a normative exploration of how the EU has used (and can use) its competences to combat discrimination. In doing so, it bridges, in an unprecedented way, the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Find the outputs of the project here.

Approximately 10% of the world's population is estimated to have a disability, and this number is expected to rise. **The meanings attributed to disability vary across different cultural contexts**. DISABILITY, led by Monika Baar at Leiden University, seeks to bridge the local and global dimensions of disability by examining the interaction, tension and conflicts between these two aspects. It undertakes the first comprehensive study of the far-reaching political, societal and cultural implications of the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP), organised by the United Nations in 1981. The project's innovative contribution and academic impact lie in its ability to contextualise the IYDP within broader political, social and cultural processes in the late twentieth century. Read the outputs of the project here.

InclusivePublicSpace, led by Anna Lawson at University of Leeds, examines the **accessibility of public spaces**, focusing on pedestrian access to streets. It explores with the legal dimension of exclusion that occurs when streets are designed, operated or managed in ways that limit access to pedestrians whose bodies, minds or life circumstances do not 'fit'. To enhance our understanding of **how states and the EU can better promote inclusive public spaces**, the project aims to achieve several key objectives. These include identifying the specific physical features of streets that contribute to exclusion in five countries and assessing the effectiveness of legal mechanisms in challenging such exclusionary practices as well as examining how perceptions of the issue are shaped and politically challenged. Read the project findings here.

Disinformation, fake news and social media

While social media has transformed communication and information sharing, its impact on democracy is multifaceted and poses significant challenges. The rise of bots and the spread of disinformation and fake news have become pervasive issues, distorting public perceptions and undermining trust in information sources. This erosion of trust jeopardises the foundation of a well-informed citizenry, essential for the functioning of a democracy.

ERC-funded research contributes to addressing this issue, including by developing innovative ways to counter the spread of disinformation, fake news and hate speech online as well as the use of social media for propaganda by foreign powers.

COMPROP, led by Philip Howard at Oxford University, was the first multi-national, multi-method, multi-lingual, and multi-platform research project analysing the **spread of misinformation on social media** in the context of important moments in public life such as elections, referenda, and political crises. Their research demonstrated that even simple bots effectively keep negative messages and fake news in circulation longer, target journalists and civil society groups, and operate with little oversight from social media firms. This has negative consequences both for public trust in technological innovation and for the quality of public democratic deliberation.

Philip Howard and his team have used the project's findings to inform and shape policy responses in Canada, the EU, UK, US and other democracies, and the team has been recognised by policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic as pioneers in the field of online disinformation. Read more about how COMPROP lifted the veil on political propaganda here and about the secret robot armies fighting to undermine democracy here.

Philip Howard also received an ERC Proof of Concept grant to produce an **online tool that allows people to evaluate suspicious social media accounts**. Entitled BOTFIND the junk news aggregator interactively displays articles from unreliable sources as they spread. It was launched in the lead-up to the 2018 US midterm elections. As the team behind BOTFIND explained:

"The aim of this public tool is to make the issue of junk news on social media more transparent, while enabling journalists, civil society groups and all interested members of the public to examine in real time what kinds of junk news are spreading on social media. This helps raise awareness and improve media literacy and should ultimately contribute towards preventing users from being influenced by online misinformation and junk news." [10]

You can read more about the contribution of BOTFIND to the systematic evaluation of news credibility on social media here.

Likewise, several other ERC research projects have developed innovative frameworks and tools to identify and halt the spread of fake news and disinformation on social media.

For instance, the ERC Proof of Concept grant GoodNews, led by Michael Bronstein at University of Lugano, developed the technological capability for **algorithmic fake news detection** in social media using a novel class of geometric deep learning algorithms. Instead of following a traditional approach of analysing news content, Michael Bronstein analysed the news spreading patterns within social networks. Ultimately, Bronstein and his team successfully converted this novel technology into a commercial application for detecting fake news on social media platforms.

FARE, led by Maria Joana Gonçalves de Sá at the Laboratory of Instrumentation and Experimental Particles Physics, integrated state of the art knowledge from behavioural psychology to assess **the role of cognitive biases in susceptibility to fake news,** as well as current models from network science and epidemiology to analyse the spread of fake news. This article explains why the project focuses on the act of sharing content rather than the disinformation itself.

Additionally, Maria Joana Gonçalves de Sá received a ERC Proof of Concept grant for her project FARE_AUDIT, aimed at developing an innovative tool to audit search engines. This tool seeks to understand how browsing history influences search engine results, particularly regarding the likelihood of encountering disinformation. The goal is to create a system capable of identifying new disinformation in near real-time and breaking information bubbles by simulating alternate search results based on different online profiles.

In recent years, verifying social media content has become increasingly important for journalists and news organisations. A**utomated verification methods have emerged as a solution to assess the truthfulness of claims efficiently**. AVeriTeC, led by Andreas Vlachos at Cambridge University, uses machine learning approaches to develop an automated verification system capable of processing complex claims requiring cross-checking with multiple pieces of evidence. Read more about the project in this article and read their findings on real-world verification here.

Beyond lacking factual knowledge, some individuals harbour **misperceptions** that **distort public opinion** and **influence policymaking** and government decisions. DEBUNKER, led by Jason Reifler at University of Exeter, analyses the misperceptions held by Europeans on topics like immigration, vaccines, and climate change. It explores who holds these misperceptions, and strategies to reduce them. Read more about the project in this article and find the project outputs here.

While the rise of online media initially created expectations of greater democratic access to diverse information and increased public debate, the proliferation of online platforms, especially social media, has instead revealed a tendency to fragment audiences into isolated echo chambers and exacerbate polarisation. To help tackle this issue, REBOUND, led by Aristides Gionis at The Royal Institute of Technology Sweden, is developing an **algorithmic framework** that is scalable to large data **for reducing bias and polarisation in online media**. The result will be a set of new methods and tools that will contribute to increase exposure to diverse ideas and improve online deliberation. Read their findings here and follow the project on its website.

Personalising digital media can boost reader engagement and income streams for content providers. However, it can also have a **significantly negative impact on the democratic role of the media**. PersoNews, led by Natali Helberger at University of Amsterdam, combined legal research, communication sciences and political sciences in undertaking comparative, normative and evidence-based research on this pressing issue. Through extensive user surveys and close collaboration with European newsrooms, technical experts and regulators, Natali Helberger and her team have developed new tools and guidance that inform the work of both policymakers, journalists, editors and information providers. Read this article to learn more about the implications for democracy of artificial intelligence and personalised news as well as this article on how algorithms are reshaping our news reading habits.

Traditional news consumption is on the decline as citizens increasingly turn their attention to social network sites (SNSs). To accommodate this, the news industry has been incorporating SNSs into its platforms, thereby changing news into a social product. SNSNEWS, led by Shira Dvir at Tel Aviv University, explored this process as well as its implications for news production and consumption. This research uncovered a significant transformation with news organisations adjusting their content to align with platform algorithms, resulting in **emotionally-driven articles designed to capture attention**.

This shift in news production raises concerns about the independence of news organisations as they navigate the influence of social media and content curation algorithms that prioritise performance over democratic values. The project's findings also revealed a significant shift in news consumption, where social motivations play a crucial role: news has become a means of social interaction and validation, with algorithms reinforcing existing interests and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. This perpetuates societal divisions and raises questions about the role of media in promoting informed citizenship. Read more in this article on how social networks transform news and citizens' political behaviour and read the project's enlightening findings here.

The internet has profoundly changed the environment in which traditional media operate. Competition from online platforms has contributed to a sharp decline in advertising revenues forcing many news outlets to drastically rethink their business model and organisation. These changes may have detrimental consequences for the quality of news reporting and the provision of political information. MIRAGE, led by Ruben Durante at Pompeu Fabra University, investigates the impact of the internet on content quality and the independence of mass media from private interests, such as advertisers and lenders, and provides policymakers and media practitioners with **novel insight into how the industry is transforming and what it means for the quality of democracy.**

The gradual erosion of trust in traditional institutions (including banks) and new intermediaries (such as social media) has spurred the development of new **blockchain-based applications**. Blockchain is defined as an incorruptible distributed ledger that can be programmed to record not only financial transactions but virtually everything of value. Created in 2008 to verify transactions for the Bitcoin digital currency, it has since then evolved into a promising technology for many areas, including managing healthcare records. Blockchain's potential for disintermediation has been touted as a catalyst of innovation that could displace existing power structures. But **is it shifting power away from former centres of power only to create new ones?** BlockchainGov, led by Primavera de Filippi at the European University Institute, investigates the impact of blockchain technology on new and existing governance structures as well as the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of existing attempts at distributed governance from a legal and political aspect. The project aims at developing a new interdisciplinary field of scholarship on distributed governance, integrating computer science, political science and law. Read the interview with Primavera de Filippi, and find the project outputs here.

The expansion of internet technology has enabled **digital disinformation attacks targeting electoral campaigns** in the EU in recent years. Amongst others, Russia has been accused of attempting to influence votes in a number of European countries, as well as in the US. RUSINFORM, led by Florian Toepfl at Passau University, is using computational and traditional methods to systematically research the relationship between Soviet **foreign propaganda** and the actual Russian **digital war of information**. It studies the role that foreign on-line audience and social media play in the transmission of Russian media content to Russian speaking media abroad. It also investigates the role of the Kremlin-controlled search engine Yan-dex in foreign influence. Read their findings here.

In 2016, the European Commission launched a code of conduct together with major IT companies in an effort to respond rapidly to the **proliferation of hate speech online**. In this context, the ERC Proof of Concept project, AI4Dignity, led by Sahana Udupa at Ludwig Maximilian University, investigated the potentials and limits of artificial intelligence in **detecting, decelerating, and removing online extreme speech**, which ultimately hinges on the quality, scope and inclusivity of training data sets. The project developed an innovative solution of collaborative bottom-up coding moving beyond keyword-based detection systems. The AI4Dignity solution used a community-based classification approach that identifies fact checkers as critical human interlocutors in the fight against digital hate and disinformation. Read the project's policy brief on artificial intelligence, extreme speech and he challenges of online content moderation here.

Polarisation, populism and authoritarianism

In recent years, the world has witnessed the rise of authoritarian leaders, backed by popular support, not only in politically volatile states and regions, but also in advanced democracies. There has been a wave of electoral successes of populist politicians who support extreme messages, illiberal ideologies, and anti-democratic reforms. In some cases, this has resulted in a series of reforms and new legislation which together constitute a new tendency of democratic backsliding. The reasons behind this tendency are manyfold, therefore it has become ever more important to identify solutions to counteract these, and to build more resilient democratic societies.

ERC projects in this area cover a wide range of interrelated topics, including the connection between conspiracy theories and disruptive populist movements, authoritarian politics, political polarisation, what makes right or left populism more prominent in some countries than in others as well as anti-elite sentiments in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

Autocracies are defined by the absence of, or the lack of adherence to, democratic principles: in autocracies, the opposition is repressed, and individual freedom is limited. These regimes are known for their 'authoritarian values', which control resources and information. ELDAR, led by Carl Henrik Knutsen at Oslo University, studies the core policies in autocracies. It investigates **the rise and demise of autocratic regimes**, focussing on policies in areas such as education, infrastructure, pensions, and the media. The aim of the project is to shed light on how institutions interact in affecting regime change and policymaking in autocracies. Read the outputs of the project here.

Polarisation over the combative issues of immigration and climate change is intensifying across the EU. To better understand the impact of such issues on the growing incidence of **group solidarity and affective polarisation in European societies**, TRANSNATIONAL, led by Elisabeth Hooghe at the European University Institute, studies the social contexts in which citizens respond to major events. While earlier

research has made advances in understanding individual political attitudes and party-political influences in shaping one's views on policy issues, the TRANSNATIONAL project takes a holistic approach in explaining how a person's social context forms a response to issues that arise on the political agenda.

PACT, led by Michael Butter at University of Tübingen, **examines the spread of populist movements and conspiracy theories**. Populist leaders regularly employ conspiracist rhetoric, and as studies have shown, the followers of populist parties and movements tend to believe more in conspiracy theories than others. The project analyses when, how, why, and to what effects populists articulate conspiracy theories. It takes both a historical approach in linking conspiracy theories to rising populism, but also addresses contemporary issues, including by tracing Covid-19 conspiracy theories in a global perspective. Read the project's findings here and follow the project on their website.

PRODEMINFO, led by Stephan Lewandowsky at Potsdam University, investigates people's **perception of truth amidst fake news and conspiracy theories**, with the aim to **protect the democratic information space** in Europe. It builds on the realisation that factual inaccuracy can be a political asset rather than a liability. Populist politicians may state obvious falsehoods to signal disregard for the "establishment" norm of honesty, thus identifying themselves as authentic champions of "the people." The rebranding of inaccuracy as authenticity by populists has changed the nature of public discourses. There is little point in correcting falsehoods if facts are not considered a relevant attribute of public discourse. To address this challenge, the project builds tools and toolkits (for example to understand and address climate scepticism) with the aim to protect democracy in Europe. Project findings will contribute to raise public awareness of the threat that derives from some populists' practice of systematically disregarding the truth.

Why do some **dictatorships transition to democracy**, whereas others **resist pressures to liberalise**? And why do some democracies exhibit resilience when others experience backsliding or break down altogether? While the study of **democratisation** lies at the centre of political science, there is little conclusive evidence about endogenous sequences of democratization critical to our ability to provide sound policy advise. To address this knowledge gap, FASDEM, led by Staffan Lindberg at University of Gothenburg, examined the trajectories that fail to lead to democracy, and the pathways that are successful. Thanks to a novel and vast data set on regime transformation, the project has broken new ground by, among other things, developing an **advanced prediction ensemble-model and an online dashboard tool.** Read more about the project on their webpage, and read about the dataset in this article.

Ethics considerations related to research on democracy

For the majority of research endeavors, including those focused on democracy, ethical considerations regarding the conduct of the research are essential. This section outlines key ethical considerations relevant to the research fields addressed in this report.[11]

Our analysis, based on the external expert assessment of the ethical aspects of a subset of the projects covered in this report[12], shows that the main ethics considerations relate to the protection of personal data (~87%); the involvement of human participants in research, including vulnerable demographics (~79%), and research conducted in non-EU countries and the potential for misuse (~73%).[13] Some 70% of the projects in our portfolio included ethical considerations that can be categorised as low or medium sensitivity. The remaining 30% were considered as high sensitivity and potentially involving more complex ethical considerations.[14]

When we look at the prevalence of specific categories of ethics issues in relation to the overall sensitivity of the projects, we can identify three clusters of projects.

The first cluster covers ~40 projects.[15] Generally, this cluster encompasses research that raises low to medium sensitivity ethics considerations. The involvement of human participants is highly prevalent (80% of the projects) and only 14% of the projects involve participants that could be considered as potentially vulnerable (minorities, members of disenfranchised groups, activists in non-democratic settings). The processing of personal data is an ethics consideration in 98% of the projects and in 81%, the data being processed is considered sensitive. In addition, half of the projects in this cluster involves the use of previously collected personal data, either in the form of pseudonymised datasets or because data is extracted from social media platforms (digital methods). Finally, whereas all the projects in this cluster involve research being implemented outside the EU, only in 25% of the proposals the countries involved pose risks related to carrying out research and/or the planned research activities entail working in resource-poor settings.

The second cluster of ~14 projects are mostly medium sensitivity projects. In this cluster, we observe less prevalence in the involvement of potentially vulnerable participants and/or minors. All projects process sensitive categories of personal data, which in some cases include also biometric data. Moreover, the prevalence of digital methods results in 70% of the projects using previously collected data (e.g., social media data), while approximately 50% have potential for profiling and tracking of research participants[16]. Finally, potential for misuse is identified for 45% of the projects. Yet, the most distinctive feature is the total absence of research being conducted in countries outside the EU, which is why, despite the combination of ethics issues described above, the overall ethical sensitivity of this cluster remains medium.

A third cluster of ~32 projects involve higher levels of sensitivity.[17] Here, roughly 70% of the projects involve participants that may be considered vulnerable (e.g. asylum seekers, migrants, victims of Human Rights abuses or members of disenfranchised groups). Moreover, in 42% of the projects in this cluster minors are involved. Similarly, all the projects involve the processing of personal data and almost all (90%) entail the processing of sensitive personal data. The ethical sensitivity is further enhanced because of the use (22%) of biometric data (e.g. biophysical measurements in experimental set-ups). In addition, in almost all the projects, data is being collected in countries outside the EU, in research settings presenting higher safety and security risks for research participants and staff (70%) and in resource-poor settings (60%). Finally, potential for misuse of research results and/or research methods has been identified as a potential ethics consideration in nearly 80% of the projects in this cluster.

There are **two main ethical categories** that have comparatively more impact on the potential ethical complexity of research in the field of democracy, namely the **research participants** and **the place** where the research is being conducted.

Issues related to potential **vulnerabilities of research participants** is one of the **main ethics considerations** related to research on democracy. Engaging the voiceless, the marginalised, the disenfranchised or the oppressed, remains central to expand our understanding of our political systems and policy processes (and our ability to challenge them), and researchers assume important responsibilities in doing so. Refugees or irregular migrants are examples of vulnerable research participants, but also hard to reach populations, politically disenfranchised groups, activists, or journalists can all also fall under this category and even governmental officials in certain contexts can be considered as potentially vulnerable.

Ensuring that research participation does not unintentionally increase vulnerability or perpetuate stigmatisation among these groups requires a thorough understanding of the factors contributing to vulnerability within participants' groups, as well as the ability to anticipate and mitigate associated risks.

Numerous strategies have been employed by projects to facilitate early engagement, trust-building and establish a more balanced relationship between the research team and vulnerable participants. These strategies are implemented throughout all stages of the research process: from the identification of participants, to obtaining consent, designing, and implementing research protocols for data collection, data management, and developing dissemination strategies for research results.

Also, **the context in which research is conducted** can significantly influence the complexity of a research project, in particular when conducted in locations with heightened safety and security risks for both researchers or research participants, or in resource-poor settings. Approximately one third of the projects analysed are situated in such challenging environments.[18]

Addressing the challenges posed by location to researchers' and research participants' safety and security is complex. **Risks are dynamic and contingent upon local circumstances**, making them difficult to predict or to track. Moreover, risks often intersect across various dimensions and may impact different parts of the project. As shown by the projects in our portfolio, this often required the development of locally tailored strategies to monitor and react to often rapidly changing situations on the ground.

Generally, **navigating ethical considerations in cross-cultural settings** remains a central concern, particularly due to differences in ethical norms between home and host countries. In many parts of the world, research may not be institutionally standardised, placing the responsibility on researchers to adapt core ethical values (benefits of research, ethics of care, respect) and practices (e.g. informed consent) to local contexts. Moreover, these questions are often compounded by power imbalances between international researchers, local counterparts, and the communities/groups involved in the research, particularly in resource-poor settings. Our analysis shows that researchers address these complexities through multilayered strategies, involving stakeholders from the onset of the research process to establish more equitable (and in some cases empowering) partnerships.

In a nutshell

ERC frontier research contributes cutting-edge solutions to the pressing issues that society faces. It contributes to strengthening the science-policy interface by contributing to a solid evidence basis in the form of new knowledge, concepts, data, and methodologies. This report outlines the rich diversity of ERC-funded projects examining and providing insights into the many facets of democracy. It covers diverse topics such as democratic governance & political representation, elections & voting, citizen engagement, human rights & the rule of law, disinformation, fake news, and the impact of social media on democratic debate and not least the challenges of polarisation, populism, and authoritarianism. Not only do these projects contribute scientific knowledge to the evidence base that policies can, and should, be based on, many of them also provide innovative and concrete tools to address some of the challenges that democracy faces today.

Further reading

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Cordis Results Pack: New tools and insights to better connect citizens with democracy, New tools and insights to better connect citizens with democracy (europa.eu)

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This report is part of a series aiming to demonstrate the relevance of ERC-funded frontier science, for addressing acute societal, economic and environmental challenges and thus their contributions towards key EU policy goals. This F2P series does not offer any policy recommendations.

More information: https://erc.europa.eu/projects-statistics/mapping-erc-frontier-research

Endnotes

1 Article 2, Treaty on European Union (TEU).

2 Article 8 & Article 21, TEU.

3 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Defence of Democracy. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0067

4 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

5 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/protecting-democracy_en

6 Council approves conclusions on strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation in the policymaking process in the Union - Consilium (europa.eu)

7 Council approves conclusions on strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation in the policymaking process in the Union - Consilium (europa.eu)

8 European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies, Biller-Andorno, N., Céu Patrão Neves, M., Laukyte, M. et al., Opinion on democracy in the digital age, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/078780

9 Why 2024 is a record year for elections around the world | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)

10 https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/286126-junk-news-aggregator-aims-to-restore-trust-in-media-and-democracy

11 The ERC's evaluation process includes an ethics assessment in relation to 9 ethical categories of projects selected for funding, carried out by external experts. We conducted an analysis of the ethics assessments of projects covered in this report to learn what are some of the main ethic aspects that researchers have to consider when carrying out research on the topics covered. The 9 ethical categories are: use of human embryos or human embryonic stem cells, the involvement of humans in research, the use of human cells and tissues, data protection, involvement of animals in research, research being conducted outside the EU, environment health and safety issues, Artificial Intelligence and other possible ethical issues – such as misuse of research. These categories are then subdivided in several (more specific) sub-sections for a total of 50 ethics variables.

12 Data for mapping of ethics issues has been obtained from the outcomes of the ERC's ethics review process. Because of data access limitations, it covers only projects that have been funded from 2017 onwards. As a result, this part of the document works with a subset representing just under half of the total project portfolio analysed in the rest of this document, more precisely 104 projects.

13 The European Commission guidelines define potential misuse in research as research involving materials, methods or technologies or generating knowledge that could be misused for unethical purposes (e.g., potential to harm humans, animals or the environment). Under Horizon Europe, the risks for misuse with potential security implications are treated separately from other risks (e.g., impacts on vulnerable communities, violations of Human Rights, environmental impacts, etc.) under the security review process. See: guide_research-misuse_en.pdf (europa.eu)

14 Low and medium sensitivity proposals either do not involve ethical questions or involve relatively standard ethical questions in the given research field, for which there is available guidance, clear legal or ethical references and consolidated practice that can guide researchers in addressing them. High sensitivity projects, on the contrary, are those requiring potentially more serious and complex ethical considerations. According to the European Commission guidelines, research activities may be considered as serious when the proposed research methods or likely outcomes have the potential to cause harm (including through violations of fundamental rights or freedom) to researchers, research participants or the general public. In addition, research may be considered complex because of the involvement of particularly complicated methods or technologies or because they raise significant ethics issues at scale. See: guidelines-on-serious-and-complex-cases_he_en.pdf (europa.eu)

15 Characterising for these is that they combine a wide variety of methods ranging from large-N survey data collection (including survey experiments) and social media data collection and processing, to elite interviews, textual analysis methods and ethnographic methods, while process tracing appears in some of the more policy-oriented studies. In most proposals several of these methods are combined.

16 This connected to the use of more intrusive digital data collection and data processing methods and the combination of several (generally very granular) datasets.

17 These projects make use of a similar range of methodologies and a general tendency towards multi-methods approaches.

18 An important part of the democracy research agenda has revolved around understanding how democratic regimes come to be, the mechanics of democratic transitions and their impact on regime consolidation. Unavoidably, this research agenda has often unfolded in midst of political crises and in many occasions during revolutions. Moreover, the globalisation of democracy following the successful democratic transitions in parts of Asia, Africa or Latin America has spurred the interest of researchers (in particular in the field of comparative politics) to explore the multiple articulations of democracy (and its various manifestations – institutions, governance, actors) and its politics in different geographic settings. Lastly, democracy research has been intrinsically linked to the analysis of authoritarian rule. In more recent times the agenda of the crisis of democracy, has spurred researcher's interest in understanding democratic backsliding and the processes of hybridization of political regimes, which have brought researchers to work on increasingly complex and uncertain settings.

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