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Political parties and democracy

Report¹

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 16005](#), Reference 4818 of 28 June 2024



A. Draft resolution²

1. Democracy in Europe is in danger. Across the continent, democratic backsliding continues, marked by the corrosion of institutional checks and balances, restrictions on media freedom, disinformation, and foreign interference. It is manifested in declining political participation, weakening public trust, and rising polarisation, which together erode the resilience of democratic systems. Political parties stand at the centre of this crisis. Strong, responsive, and inclusive parties are not only vital for healthy political representation, but indispensable for confronting these threats and safeguarding democracy.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly believes that political parties are the cornerstone of representative democracy. They are the key element of electoral competition, articulate and aggregate citizens' preferences, channel demands into political institutions, facilitate democratic government formation, and enable peaceful alternation of power. Without political parties, pluralism cannot be meaningfully represented, and parliaments cannot function effectively.
3. The Assembly considers that political parties, when they respect democratic norms, foster open competition and act transparently, are not only guarantors of representation but also the most effective agents of democratic renewal in Europe.
4. Political parties play a fundamental role beyond electoral processes. They serve as permanent institutions of democratic education, socialisation, and negotiation. By recruiting political leaders, fostering civic skills, and transmitting democratic values across generations, they build and sustain the trust and legitimacy on which resilient democracies depend. They are uniquely positioned to provide structured fora for dialogue and deliberation, to mediate between diverse social groups, and to transform competing interests into a coherent programme for government.
5. The Assembly observes, however, that political parties in many Council of Europe member States face profound challenges. Long-term decline in membership and active participation, combined with heightened electoral volatility, indicate a weakening of traditional forms of political attachment. Public opinion surveys consistently show that political parties are among the least trusted institutions, with many citizens associating them with elitism, self-interest, or corruption.
6. The erosion of trust has serious consequences. It fuels political apathy, anti-party sentiment, and the rise of anti-establishment movements. Polarisation and political gridlock often stem from parties' inability or unwillingness to build consensus. When parties fail to act as trusted bridges within society, or are perceived as unresponsive to the concerns and needs of citizens, democracy risks becoming dysfunctional.
7. These challenges are unfolding within the broader context of democratic backsliding across Europe, geopolitical pressures, and persistent attempts at foreign interference aimed at destabilising democracies. At a time when public trust in institutions is fragile, political parties bear a particular responsibility for safeguarding democratic cohesion and stability. Their most basic commitment must be to uphold the core principles of democracy including free and fair elections, respect for pluralism, and the protection of fundamental freedoms.
8. The Assembly, in the fulfilment of its political mandate, has consistently paid close attention to the state of democracy and the institutions that sustain it. It welcomes the call of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for a New Democratic Pact for Europe, and underlines that political parties are an essential motor for democratic renewal.
9. The Council of Europe, particularly through the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), has provided extensive guidance on the regulation and functioning of political parties. Through its "Code of Good Practice in the field of Political Parties" and numerous Opinions, the Venice Commission has underlined foundational principles of transparency, fairness, pluralism, and internal democracy. These standards affirm that political parties must be able to operate freely and independently, while at the same time remaining accountable and respectful of democratic norms.
10. The Assembly considers that these principles remain indispensable for restoring citizens' trust in political parties across Europe, and it is within this framework that it seeks to encourage further modernisation, innovation, and citizen engagement in party life.

2. Draft resolution unanimously adopted by the committee on 10 September 2025.

11. By enhancing inclusive membership, participatory decision making, and ethical political communication, political parties can reconnect citizens with political institutions and restore confidence in representative democracy. Far from being obsolete, parties can be the central actors in addressing democratic backsliding, rebuilding trust and fostering a democratic culture adapted to contemporary challenges.
12. In light of these considerations, the Assembly underlines that trust must be a guiding principle of all party reform, and calls on political parties across Council of Europe member States to actively demonstrate their integrity, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens' expectations in order to reinforce their role as pillars of both resilient democracies and democratic security in Europe.
13. In order to respond to citizens' expectations, the Assembly calls on political parties to reconnect with citizens by placing social justice and equality at the core of their programmes, ensuring that policies deliver measurable improvements in living standards, access to quality health care, education, housing and decent work.
14. With regard to strengthening the representational link to citizens, the Assembly encourages political parties to widen and deepen opportunities for political participation by:
 - 14.1. developing accessible and flexible pathways for engagement;
 - 14.2. adopting transparent and participatory mechanisms for leadership and candidate selection;
 - 14.3. strengthening intermediary structures, including local branches, affiliated organisations, unions, and civil society platforms, to ensure citizens' perspectives can inform and shape party direction;
 - 14.4. enhancing and sustaining internal forums for deliberation to foster dialogue, reflection, and consensus building among members and supporters.
15. To combat issues of under-representation, the Assembly urges political parties to adopt concrete strategies for inclusion by:
 - 15.1. integrating gender equality, youth participation and diversity into party statutes, vision and strategic plans;
 - 15.2. establishing measurable objectives, targets, and accountability mechanisms to enhance progress on gender balance, youth involvement, and representation of minorities and disadvantaged groups;
 - 15.3. exploring the application of inclusive procedures for candidate selection and leadership recruitment, such as parity measures, transparent quotas, or other measures designed to widen participation;
 - 15.4. ensuring diversity in electoral lists and leadership positions through fair and transparent selection processes.
16. The Assembly further invites political parties to promote diversity and inclusion across their internal functioning by:
 - 16.1. developing support and capacity-building initiatives for under-represented groups;
 - 16.2. endorsing the revised Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society;
 - 16.3. establishing mechanisms to prevent and sanction hate speech, incitement to hatred and discrimination by their members.
17. With regard to safeguarding integrity, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:
 - 17.1. fully implement recommendations by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) on the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns;
 - 17.2. review and enhance national frameworks governing financial contributions to political parties, advertising and electoral campaigns to mitigate the risk of inappropriate or illicit foreign financial interference;
 - 17.3. ensure effective monitoring and introduce clear sanctions against illicit foreign funding.
18. The Assembly calls on political parties to strengthen internal accountability by:
 - 18.1. adopting codes of conduct and conflict-of-interest rules for party officials;
 - 18.2. establishing transparent disciplinary procedures to address misconduct;

- 18.3. introducing clear rules on lobbying and relations with donors to safeguard parties from undue influence.
19. In highlighting the role of political parties in sustaining democratic culture, the Assembly:
 - 19.1. calls on political parties to re-centre their role as platforms for dialogue across social divides, promoting compromise and cohesion;
 - 19.2. encourages political parties to provide spaces for democratic education, debate and civic engagement;
 - 19.3. in line with its [Resolution 2552 \(2024\)](#) “Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes”, calls on political parties to foster more robust civic engagement with deliberative technologies and participatory processes.
20. The Assembly recommends that political parties harness digital tools and innovations responsibly by:
 - 20.1. using online consultations, deliberative forums, and transparent digital primaries to widen citizen participation;
 - 20.2. committing to ethical online campaigning, avoiding manipulative micro-targeting, and ensuring disclosure of digital advertising;
 - 20.3. supporting digital literacy initiatives to help citizens navigate the information environment.
21. As regards its own work, the Assembly, including through its General Rapporteur on democracy, resolves to:
 - 21.1. continue actions to strengthen democracy, counter its backsliding and promote innovative practices to enhance citizens’ trust in democratic institutions and their participation in political decision making;
 - 21.2. continue to review, in co-operation with the Venice Commission, the Code of Good Practice in the field of Political Parties and the issues raised in it, with a view to developing it further if required.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Ingrid Schie Schou, rapporteur³

1. Introduction

1. Across Europe, political parties face mounting challenges in fulfilling their democratic functions. Membership has declined, anti-party sentiment is widespread, and many citizens feel that parties have failed to provide convincing solutions to pressing social and economic problems. As a result, support for representative democracy has decreased, and criticisms about its functioning have accelerated.⁴

2. This weakened anchoring role of political parties as vehicles of democratic participation and representation has been reflected in lower voter turnout across Europe, electoral volatility, low public trust in parties, and growing youth disillusionment. An engagement gap has emerged with the withdrawal by ordinary citizens from conventional political involvement, creating an atmosphere conducive to anti-establishment mobilisation and forces that seek to weaken democratic institutions.

3. Despite these difficulties, political parties remain fundamental to the functioning of democracy. They continue to provide the organisational framework for political debate, are the main vector for electoral competition, and offer citizens a means of seeing preferences and interests enacted by government.⁵ At their best, parties help shape public opinion, provide a space for the negotiation of policy differences, and channel the aspirations of citizens into collective action. In this sense, political parties remain the central institution to link citizens to the State and ensuring the legitimacy of democratic governance.

4. This erosion of political parties' representative function has taken place against the broader trend of democratic backsliding both in Europe and globally, manifested in the weakening of judicial independence, constraints on media freedom, challenges to institutional checks and balances, growing electoral irregularities, and the rise of polarising political rhetoric that undermines social cohesion. Such warning signs should serve as a reminder that democracy is not guaranteed, and that in some member States of the Council of Europe, it is visibly in danger. These challenges have been exacerbated by global themes of conflict, the disruptive impact of new technologies, widespread socio-economic inequalities, and the transnational spread of disinformation.

5. The Council of Europe has responded to these developments through an array of instruments and initiatives. These include work on strengthening electoral processes, promoting transparency in political financing, developing and piloting participatory tools for local governance, as well as supporting inclusive processes and civil society.

6. However, the scale of the threat to democratic values has meant further action remains necessary. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe has called for the revitalisation of democracies, and a New Democratic Pact for Europe to address the erosion of the values that the Council of Europe promotes and protects.⁶

7. Although political parties have a decisive influence on the shape of a democracy and are a primary channel through which citizens' preferences are translated into legislative and governmental action, comparatively little attention has been placed on the potential role and contribution of political parties themselves in addressing democratic backsliding⁷ and in enhancing democratic participation.

8. This report builds on the Assembly's [Resolution 2552 \(2024\)](#) "Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes", [Resolution 2615 \(2025\)](#) "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary life: gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies", and [Resolution 2610 \(2025\)](#) "Social mobilisation, social unrest and police reaction in Council of Europe member States: is there a need for a new social contract?" by seeking to explore how strong and robust political parties can act as bulwarks against democratic backsliding, safeguard institutional pluralism, and adapt to contemporary challenges while remaining open and responsive to citizens.

3. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.

4. Pew Research Center, [Report](#), 28 February 2024.

5. D. Kuo, *The Great Retreat: How political parties should behave and why they don't*, OUP, 2025, 1.

6. Council of Europe, [Towards a New Democratic Pact](#), May 2025.

7. T. Poguntke (ed.), W. Hofmeister (ed.), *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, <https://academic.oup.com/book/58013/chapter/479031311>, August 2024.

2. Scope of the report

9. The report draws on examples from across Council of Europe member States with the primary objective of identifying best practices that can strengthen democratic governance. On this basis it develops practical recommendations for modernisation and improved citizen engagement while also providing a foundation for steps to enhance party responsiveness, accountability, and public trust.

10. To do so, the report examines the internal structures, functions, and broader societal roles of political parties to assess their effectiveness in supporting democratic governance. The evaluation is structured around key themes, focusing on representation, responsiveness, integration, integrity, and digital transformation and communication.

11. In preparing the report, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy is grateful for the participation of Professor Thomas Poguntke at a hearing held in 2025, and his valuable insights into the evolving role of political parties in contemporary democracies, the structural challenges they face, and the opportunities for renewal through institutional reform and citizen engagement.

12. The Council of Europe has long provided guidance on the legal and institutional frameworks within which political parties operate, notably through the work of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). The guidance and Opinions of the Venice Commission have been instrumental in setting normative standards to guarantee pluralism, transparency, and fairness that ensure that political parties can exist and function free from undue State interference. The emphasis of these standards has been on compliance with the rule of law and the protection of the rights of association and political participation.

13. To compliment these standards, the Venice Commission produced upon the request of the Assembly a “Code of Good Practice in the field of Political Parties” in 2008.⁸ This report takes the Council of Europe *acquis* as a point of departure. It focuses on how political parties, as central institutions of democratic life, can themselves contribute to democratic renewal in Europe.

14. As much as political parties can be sites of democratic renewal, they can also be vectors for democratic backsliding. The Venice Commission notes that as major actors in a democratic society, political parties enjoy the benefits of the guarantees of the rule of law, democracy and human rights by the State and accordingly, must respect and promote these same principles.⁹ The recommendations of this report are intended to reinforce these shared commitments.

3. The role and functions of political parties

15. A political party is a “free association of individuals, one of the aims of which is to express the political will of the people by seeking to participate in and influence the governing of the public life of a country, *inter alia*, through the presentation of candidates in elections”.¹⁰

16. Historically, the development of political parties has gone hand in hand with the evolution of democracy in Europe. Emerging first as small parliamentary factions, parties gradually expanded into mass membership organisations and later professionalised electoral machines.¹¹ In each stage, they adapted to wider social changes, serving as vehicles of political participation, channels of mobilisation, and shapers of public debate. Their institutionalisation represents one of the key milestones of modern representative democracy.

17. Parties are a collective platform for the expression of individual's fundamental rights to association and expression and the most widely utilised means for political participation and exercise of related rights. They are foundational to a pluralist political society and the European Court of Human Rights has underlined in its case law the primordial role played in a democratic regime by political parties.¹²

18. The proper functioning of representative democracy ensures that political parties can operate in a free and safe environment, guarantees parliamentary immunity, and provides conditions whereby politicians are able to express themselves and exercise their political mandates.

8. Venice Commission, “[Code of Good Practice in the field of Political Parties](#)”, CDL-AD(2009)002, 28 January 2009.

9. *Idem*.

10. Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, “[Guidelines on political party regulation](#)”, Second Edition, December 2000, CDL-AD(2020)032, para. 11.

11. P. Mair & R. S. Katz, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party”, 1995.

12. Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, [Guidelines on political party regulation](#), CDL-AD(2010)024, October 2010.

19. According to the Venice Commission, political parties contribute to the performance of at least three vital functions in a democracy.¹³ First, facilitating the co-operation and co-ordination of individuals in the exercise of their fundamental rights of association and expression. Second, furthering co-operation and co-ordination among the holders of public office, both within parliaments and across levels and institutions of government, thereby facilitating the coherence and effective making and implementation of policy. Third, providing a means to connect citizens to officeholders through the formulation of political programmes between which voters can choose, the nomination and support of candidates in elections, and by taking collective responsibility for government in a way that would be impossible for officeholders individually.¹⁴

20. These functions can be understood as parties' representative and integrative roles, each of which emphasises their essential task of linking citizens to democratic institutions.¹⁵ In their representative role, they translate societal demands into concrete policies and governing agendas, adapting programmes and decisions to reflect public priorities and evolving needs. They articulate and aggregate social interests, acting on behalf of communities and constituencies in the political process. The integrative functions socialise citizens into political life, creating spaces for engagement and education that equip people to participate in public affairs, including via electoral competition, candidate selection, and policy platforms. In fulfilling these roles, parties act as a "transmission belt" between society and the State,¹⁶ and a key forum for democratic deliberation.

21. The Assembly has recognised that, in fulfilling these roles, political parties serve as crucial actors in promoting social inclusion and democratic culture. They are well placed to combat racism, intolerance, and hate speech, while fostering diversity and inclusion within European societies. Through their communication and activities, parties shape political discourse and can promote the political representation of all social groups. Their internal autonomy, balanced with democratic accountability, positions them uniquely as gatekeepers of elected bodies and promoters of political pluralism.¹⁷

22. The effectiveness with which parties carry out these functions depends on their capacity to adapt to changing social, technological, and political conditions. While their foundational role remains constant, the environment in which they operate has evolved dramatically, bringing new opportunities and challenges for their functioning in contemporary democracies.¹⁸

4. Challenges

23. Parties face mounting challenges in fulfilling their essential functions. Without effective and responsive political parties, democracy risks gridlock, polarisation, apathy, distrust, and extremism. Without genuine political pluralism, the effectiveness and sustainability of democracy are eroded.¹⁹

24. As observed across multiple Council of Europe member States, declining party membership, trust and participation are long-term societal trends. In all established European democracies, the average number of members of political parties has almost halved since 1980.²⁰ A global survey of public attitudes towards democracy found in 2021 that political parties were the least trusted institutions in the democratic world, with only 27% overall trust, while more than four in ten people do not feel represented by any political party.²¹ These findings have been replicated across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, where in 2024 only 24% of populations surveyed reported high or moderately high trust in political parties.²² This steady erosion of confidence threatens the integrative role of parties in connecting citizens to democratic life.

13. See CDL-AD(2020)032, op. cit.

14. Idem.

15. D. Kuo, *The Great Retreat: How political parties should behave and why they don't*, OUP, 2025, 15.

16. Sartori G, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

17. Assembly Resolution 2443 (2022) "The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society".

18. *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, op. cit.

19. Venice Commission, "Parameters on the relationship between the parliamentary majority and the opposition in a democracy: a checklist", CDL-AD(2019)015, June 2019.

20. Behavioural Insights Team, Report: "Collectivism is out and individualism is in", 12 August 2024.

21. Fondation pour l'innovation politique, "Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century", January 2022.

22. OECD, "Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions", 2024.

25. The drivers of low trust levels include individuals' perception of whether they have a meaningful voice in political decision making. OECD research showed that people who feel they have a say in what government does are, on average, more than three times as likely to express trust compared to those who feel excluded. This trend related to representative functions, when applied to political parties, underlines that efforts to promote political inclusivity and engagement can help raise trust levels.²³

26. The decline of membership further exacerbates these trends by reshaping the relationship between parties and citizens. It undermines the ability of parties to renew their leadership, integrate young people into political life, and sustain grassroots links to communities through volunteering, policy debates and local activism. The consequent reductions to parties' local presence and youth wings may reduce opportunities for citizens to acquire democratic skills and participate in shaping policy.²⁴

27. Further, with fewer members providing financial and organisational support, many parties have become more dependent on private donations or State subsidies. Where reliance on private funding is significant, concerns arise over equity and independence, with major donors often unrepresentative of the broader population, and corporations, wealthy individuals, and organised interest groups exercising disproportionate influence.²⁵ In certain cases, the role of foreign donations or State-affiliated actors has raised additional questions about the integrity of political processes.²⁶ Public opinion surveys consistently show that perceptions of undue donor influence are among the strongest drivers of distrust in political parties.

28. Conversely, systems where parties are primarily funded through public resources avoid some of these distortions but are not without challenges. Reliance on State funding can risk widening the perceived distance between parties and citizens, particularly if subsidies appear to shield parties from the need to engage with grassroots supporters or adapt to societal change.²⁷ In such contexts, parties may be viewed less as civic organisations rooted in society and more as State-centred bureaucracies, undermining their representative legitimacy. Balancing the need for financial sustainability with safeguards for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation is therefore essential to maintaining parties' representative legitimacy and democratic credibility.

29. The erosion of trust contributes to continued trends of political disengagement, with a key indicator for this being voter turnouts at elections. The declining public confidence in political processes was highlighted by the Council of Europe in 2023, which showed that by the end of 2020, 13 member States elected their parliament with a turnout lower than 50%.²⁸ This forms part of a global trend of voter turnout decline that has been recorded from the beginning of the 1990s, with a near 10% fall in participation in elections in European Union member States between 1991 and 2022.²⁹

30. Rising disillusionment with democracy has been prominent among young people surveyed across Europe. Polls have indicated that while individual rights and freedoms remain valued, a growing share of younger generations have expressed frustration with the perceived inefficiency, polarisation, and short-termism of electoral politics. Some favour alternative forms of governance, such as technocracy or rule by experts, while significant minorities have expressed openness to non-democratic arrangements if these are believed to deliver stability or address urgent issues.³⁰

31. These challenges are compounded by the transformation of political communication and organisation. The role of political parties as intermediaries between citizens and officeholders has evolved significantly from the days of mass-party models in part due to the professionalisation of party structures, changes in campaign strategies, and the rise of digital media. Traditional mechanisms of sustained political engagement, such as local party branches and grassroots mobilisation, have been partially supplanted by targeted online outreach and data-driven campaigning.

23. Idem.

24. A-K Kolln, "The effects of membership decline on party organisations in Europe", *European Journal of Political Research* 54(4), August 2015.

25. OECD, "Financing Democracy", 2016.

26. [Assembly Resolution 2390 \(2021\)](#) "Transparency and regulation of donations to political parties and electoral campaigns from foreign donors".

27. *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, op. cit.

28. Council of Europe, "State of democracy, human rights and the rule of law", 2023.

29. Truedem, "Trust in European Democracies 2023-2025, Voter Turnout: Overtime and regional trends in Europe", 2024.

30. See, for example, Adam Smith Institute, "One third of young people prefer authoritarianism to democracy", 12 August 2025; Pew Research Center, "Attitudes toward different types of government", 28 February 2024.

32. While these developments have allowed parties to reach broader audiences, they have also raised concerns about the centralisation of decision making, reduced direct citizen participation for consensus-driven policy formulation, and the growing influence of external actors, including interest groups and corporate donors.

33. At the same time, comparative research has shown that polarisation has increased as a result of changes to media habits, targeted online campaigning, and algorithm-driven content that rewards divisive messaging.³¹ Polarisation can weaken the capacity of parties to act as mediators between different societal interests, reducing the scope for compromise in parliamentary work.

34. The increasingly fragmented information ecosystem has proven vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and the influence of foreign actors. Hostile and malicious interference can include co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour on social media, the amplification of polarising narratives, or covert financial and organisational support. It aims to distort electoral competition and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. Political parties therefore face a dual challenge of adapting their communication strategies to the realities of the digital age, while safeguarding democratic debate against manipulation and external influence.

35. These developments underline the need to re-examine how political parties operate in contemporary conditions. The Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, endorsed by the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe in 2023, underscore that political pluralism and citizen participation remain essential to resilient democracies. Political parties can be active agents of this democratic renewal.

5. Responses

36. The challenges outlined above underline the need for political parties to adapt in ways that preserve and enhance their democratic functions. Parties across Council of Europe member States have introduced a range of innovations that both reconnect them with citizens and strengthen trust in the political system as a whole.

5.1. Strengthening representation

37. Restoring public trust and ensuring effective democratic functioning can be enhanced via the representational link to citizens. This comprises widening membership, reforms to internal democracy, and improved inclusivity as central strategies to reconnect parties with their constituencies, and ensure that leadership and policy platforms reflect voters and their preferences.

38. Underpinning all measures to enhance representation is the principle of political pluralism. Ensuring that citizens can choose from a wide range of competing visions, policies, and leadership is crucial to the health of democratic systems. The presence of political parties from across the political spectrum can encourage debate, foster compromise, and strengthen the legitimacy of democratic institutions by making them more representative of society's full diversity.

5.1.1. Membership

39. Parties have sought to reimagine membership in a range of ways to redefine and regain a role as transmission belts between the State and society.³² Key elements for strengthening this role include seeking ways to widen the membership, and finding ways to address issues caused by under-representation among groups such as women and youth.

40. One approach is to encourage participation via multilevel membership to decrease barriers to party involvement.

41. Multilevel membership has become an increasingly adopted innovation in contemporary party organisation. It offers differentiated pathways for engagement to respond to citizen's preferences and capacity for involvement. In many cases, this involves distinguishing between full members who pay a fee and enjoy formal voting rights within the party's internal structures, and supporters or sympathisers who may contribute

31. E. Kubin, C. von Sikorski, [The Role of \(Social\) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review](#), International Communication Association, Volume 45, Issue 3, September 2021.

32. International IDEA, [New Forms of Political Party Membership](#), June 2020.

ideas, attend events, or participate in campaign activities without assuming the full obligations of membership. This approach allows parties to widen their social base, reduce barriers to party involvement, and reach citizens who may be reluctant to commit to traditional membership but still wish to be politically active.

42. Research in the last decade showed that only 14 of 109 parties studied offered multilevel membership options.³³ Examples of this multilevel membership are found across Europe, such as with the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom, the Partido Popular in Spain, and the Livre party in Portugal.³⁴ While the long-term effects on participation and trust remain mixed, they illustrate how organisational innovation can help reconnect parties with citizens who may otherwise remain outside traditional structures.

43. Political parties have also sought to widen access to membership by offering differentiated membership fees based on age, income or employment status. In Norway, most parties, including the Conservative Party, have discounted membership rates for certain groups.

44. As well as efforts to raise membership, political parties have taken measures to try and improve how representative the membership is of society. Where available, country-level data has shown that party membership remains older and male,³⁵ even though comprehensive, disaggregated statistics on political party membership across Europe remain scarce.

45. Lower levels of female membership in political parties pose challenges not only for equality, but also for the quality and legitimacy of democratic governance, with the Assembly acknowledging that the equal participation of women and men in political life is a precondition for genuinely pluralist and representative democracy.

46. Fostering participation at the membership stage is a vital component to candidate and leadership selection reforms, helping to build a more inclusive and representative base. Women's organisations within parties such as within the German SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Frauen Union of the CDU (Christian Democrat Union), or women's sections of Austria's ÖVP (People's Party) and SPÖ (Socialist Party) actively engage in outreach and campaigns to encourage women to join. In the United Kingdom, initiatives such as the Labour Party's Women's Network and the Conservative Women's Organisation combine recruitment with mentoring to expand the pool of active female members. In my party, the Norwegian Conservative Party, our women's organisation has contributed significantly to the high level of women's participation in the party and political life in Norway.

47. Organisations such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) have provided tools to allow political parties to conduct their own gender audits. Audits can improve understanding of current imbalances, help identify barriers to participation, and create an evidence base for reforms that can make parties more inclusive and representative.

48. Beyond gender, age is another critical fault line in political party membership. Data from several European countries suggest that the typical member is disproportionately older, with younger citizens far less represented despite often being engaged in informal political activity. This imbalance risks narrowing the horizons of party debate and limiting intergenerational renewal.

49. Youth organisations affiliated with parties play an important role in countering this tendency. While many political parties have some form of youth organisation, previous research has shown that one in four parties do not have an active youth branch.³⁶

50. By offering leadership opportunities, political education, and pathways into decision-making, youth organisations can provide young people with a voice inside party structures. In Germany, the Jusos of the SPD and the Junge Union of the CDU/CSU (Christian Democrat Union/Christian Social Union) actively shape debates on climate, social justice, and digitalisation, ensuring that youth concerns influence party platforms. In Austria, the Junge ÖVP and the Socialist Youth (SJÖ) have long functioned as schools of political leadership, preparing future generations of national and local representatives. In the Nordic countries, youth wings are not only training grounds but are formally integrated into parties' policy-making processes, allowing young members to propose and vote on programme priorities. All the major political parties in Norway have youth

33. S. Scarrow, *"Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilisation"*, OUP, 2015.

34. *"New Forms of Political Party Membership"*, op. cit.

35. See, for example, UKRI, *"Grassroots- Britain's party members: who they are, what they think and what they do"*, January 2018.

36. European Youth Forum, *"Youth & Political Parties"*, 2018.

wings that are integrated in the parties. From my party's experience, the Norwegian Young Conservatives contribute greatly to the political discourse and have several candidates standing for election in both local government and parliamentary elections.

51. Representation also requires attention to other forms of exclusion that can affect party membership and participation, including socio-economic barriers, ethnic and linguistic diversity, and the participation of citizens with a migrant background.

52. Parties that succeed in engaging underrepresented groups broaden not only their electoral base but also the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Initiatives such as targeted outreach campaigns, partnerships with civil society organisations, and mechanisms to lower material barriers to membership fees or participation can help create a more socially diverse party base. Efforts of this kind contribute to a pluralist and inclusive political culture, ensuring that parties more accurately reflect the societies they aspire to govern.

5.1.2. Internal democracy

53. Strengthening representation also requires reforms to internal party democracy. The Assembly has stated that participatory and deliberative democracy processes can contribute to revitalising and strengthening democracy by increasing citizen's capacity to directly influence decisions that affect their lives.³⁷ Political parties are uniquely positioned to channel these processes into their functioning.

54. Efforts to introduce open and participatory mechanisms to give members influence over leadership choices, candidate selection and policy formulation can strengthen trust, improve legitimacy, and create a stronger link between citizens and political institutions. Having a genuine say in the direction of the party also strengthens incentives for joining a party, and remaining active in party life.

55. Among the mechanisms to deepen internal democracy are the use of open primaries for party leaders and presidential candidates. Examples from Italy and France have seen experimentation with offering rights to participants from outside the formal membership, whereas in the United Kingdom there have been examples of allowing registered supporters without full membership status to vote in leadership contests.³⁸

56. At the same time, for effective party renewal, it has been argued that intra-party democracy must go beyond plebiscitary devices such as leadership primaries or membership ballots as these risk bypassing intermediary structures. While these tools offer participation, they can concentrate power in the leadership by reducing choice to yes/no endorsement.³⁹

57. Ideas such as participatory democracy within parties was popularised by movements favouring collective decision making and bottom-up structures, such as the Green and Alternative parties in the 1980s,⁴⁰ and in the last decade emergent political formations such as the German Pirates Party, and the Italian Five Star Movement used mass participation internet-based policy formulation as a central feature of their political credentials.⁴¹

58. Proposals to improve intra-party democratisation have included introducing models that give members and local branches greater influence over party direction. Members and activists would shape competing visions, which the leadership is then tasked with representing and negotiating. In this model, the "middle layer" of parties (branch officials, activists, and affiliated organisations) serves as the link between the rank and file and the leadership, transforming diffuse preferences into policy.⁴²

59. Examples of this include in Germany, the SPD's Landesverbände (regional organisations) which retain significant influence over leadership choices and policy direction, acting as intermediaries between the base and the national leadership. In the UK, Labour's historic links with trade unions illustrate how organised interests can serve as a structured channel between members and leaders. Each model demonstrates how strengthening intermediary structures can seek to anchor parties more firmly in society, while keeping leaders accountable.

37. [Assembly Resolution 2552 \(2024\)](#) "Strengthening democracy through participatory and deliberative processes".

38. See, T. Poguntke, S. Scarrow, P.D. Webb, ["Party leadership selection and party leaders' powers: Empowered grassroots or leader-centric parties"](#), Parliamentary Affairs, May 2025.

39. C. Bickerton, C.I. Accetti, ["Normative Reflections on Technopopulism"](#), OUP, 2021.

40. European Political Science, G. Piccoline, L. Puleo, ["Ideological drivers of participatory democracy in Europe"](#), Vol 23, 2024.

41. ["Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilisation"](#), op. cit.

42. ["Normative Reflections on Technopopulism"](#), op. cit.

60. These approaches can also comprise recognising the role of civil society organisations as partners in shaping party debate. With the weakening of historic ties to unions religious organisations, and civic associations, rebuilding transparent and accountable links with civil society can help revitalise parties' intermediary functions, ensuring that voices from diverse communities, professions and movements are included in deliberation.

61. Further approaches have seen the implementation of deliberative processes within parties to widen participation and that aimed to improve the quality of the debate and the decision making by fostering dialogue, reflections and consensus building among members. Examples include the use by the Danish party Alternativet of "political laboratories" where members and citizens jointly deliberated on policy ideas before their integration into the party's programme. In Belgium, Les Engagés undertook two years of deliberative meetings, assemblies, and online workshops to conclude a new party manifesto.⁴³

62. Improved intra-party democracy allows diverse social groups to see their views debated and mediated within the party, and it produces real alternatives between which citizens can choose. By strengthening these functions, parties not only renew their own vitality but also reinforce pluralism in the wider democratic system.

5.1.3. Inclusivity

63. In strengthening representativeness, a wide membership and robust forums for deliberation both depend on and are enhanced by inclusivity. The Assembly has stressed the importance of ensuring gender equality, accessibility and inclusive policies within political life to foster well-functioning democracies.

64. Following the trends of membership, there is under-representation of women, young people, minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups of people in leadership and decision making roles in political parties, with consequential impact on their overall under-representation in parliament.

65. Political parties therefore have a significant role in improving inclusivity and ensuring balanced representation within democratic institutions. At present, limited information is available about political parties' diversity and inclusion strategies. Systematic publication of such strategies could improve transparency, allow monitoring of progress, and signal to citizens a genuine commitment to addressing barriers to participation.

66. Internal democracy in political parties can have a decisive impact on inclusivity, shaping who has access to power and decision making. Practical measures include the adoption of gender-responsive rules for candidate selection, transparent quotas for leadership positions, and procedures to ensure meaningful participation of under-represented groups.⁴⁴

67. As noted by the Venice Commission, various OSCE and Council of Europe documents have called upon States to counteract the continued under-representation of women in decision-making structures by supporting programmes aimed at enhancing gender balance in relevant bodies and enabling or adopting positive action or special measures for this purpose.⁴⁵ Voluntary party quotas have been widely adopted in the Nordic States since the 1980s, which have led to consistently high levels of women's representation in parliaments.

68. Youth quotas also provide examples of inclusive innovation. Examples of political party youth quotas have been reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany and Sweden. These quotas commit the parties in question to putting a certain number of youth candidates on their party lists or making them compete in constituencies.⁴⁶ Innovations such as "newcomer quotas" to limit incumbency advantages have also been trialled by parties in Germany to encourage young people's participation.⁴⁷

69. These measures, while varying in form, demonstrate how structural reforms can ensure that parties more fully reflect the societies they seek to represent.

43. The Innovation in Politics Institute, [Report](#), 2023.

44. See, for example, International IDEA, ["A Framework for Developing Gender Policies for Political Parties"](#), 2016.

45. Venice Commission, ["Compilation of Venice Commission Opinions and Reports concerning Political Parties"](#), 2021.

46. CEPPS, ["How effective are pro-youth laws and policies?"](#), 2019.

47. F. Bellato & B. Coraglia, ["Addressing the underrepresentation of young European through the adoption of youth quotas"](#), November 2022.

5.2. Safeguarding integrity and independence

70. The resilience of democratic systems depends on the integrity and independence of political parties. As this report has highlighted, declining trust levels in political parties across Europe are often driven by concerns over corruption, donor influence, and external manipulation. Where parties are perceived to be captured by private interests or susceptible to foreign interference, citizen's confidence in the overall democratic system is eroded.

71. Over-reliance on large-scale private donations raises concerns of undue influence and carries risks of skewing policy agendas towards narrow interests. Transparency International and the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) have highlighted recurring gaps in the disclosure of donations, reporting of campaign expenditures, and the monitoring of links between money and political decision making. Addressing these gaps is central to strengthening trust in politics.

72. While there are major differences across political financing rules across member States, the Venice Commission has underscored that frameworks for party financing must ensure transparency and accountability, with effective enforcement by State authorities, as prerequisites to prevent corruption and undue influence.⁴⁸ Several countries have introduced strong practices. France, for example, bans corporate and trade union donations altogether,⁴⁹ while Germany requires the disclosure of all donations above €10 000, with immediate reporting for sums exceeding €35 000.⁵⁰ In Sweden, Finland and Norway, robust public subsidies combined with detailed transparency obligations seek to reduce the risks of capture by private wealth.⁵¹ In Norway, for instance, all donations are published on a government-managed website, though debate continues as to whether the system is sufficiently transparent.

73. The OECD Trust Survey showed that many citizens held concerns about the integrity of decision making, believing that private interests exert an oversized influence on decisions. The perception that public decisions over policies may be repeatedly diverted from the public interest towards special interests continues to be a large driver for distrust and weakened democratic participation.⁵²

74. Citizen trust levels have been further hampered by concerns about foreign interference and the receipt of funds from foreign actors in national democratic institutions. As addressed by the Assembly in [Resolution 2593 \(2025\)](#) "Foreign Interference: a threat to democratic security in Europe", the use of covert donations and foreign-controlled foundations, and disinformation campaigns co-ordinated and funded by hostile actors have revealed how external actors may seek to distort democratic debate and electoral competition and ultimately diminish the effectiveness and legitimacy of institutions.

75. Member States have taken a wide range of actions to restore trust in democracies by strengthening rules around political donations, including reforms to electoral law frameworks, due diligence on the origin of donations and controls on company contributions to guard against foreign influence.⁵³

76. Efforts have also been made at the European Union level, with revisions to the regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations aiming to enhance transparency and counter the risk of foreign interference and manipulation.⁵⁴

77. Safeguarding integrity also requires strong internal accountability. Parties can demonstrate to their members and voters how funds are raised and spent, ensuring that leadership is subject to effective oversight. This can include independent audits, annual public financial reporting, and clear internal rules on spending.

78. Beyond financial regulation, safeguarding integrity also requires political parties to uphold clear public standards of conduct. Citizens' confidence is not only shaped by how parties raise and spend money, but also by how their representatives behave while in office and in public life. Codes of conduct, conflict-of-interest rules, and transparent disciplinary procedures for party officials can help ensure accountability and ethical behaviour. GRECO has underlined that ethical standards and integrity mechanisms are essential to preventing corruption,⁵⁵ while the Assembly has stressed that political parties bear particular responsibility for

48. See CDL-AD(2020)032, op. cit.

49. [Loi n° 88-227 du 11 mars 1988 relative à la transparence financière de la vie politique](#).

50. Germany, Federal Ministry of the Interior, [Funding Political Parties](#), December 2024.

51. International IDEA, [Political Finance Database](#)

52. OECD, [Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions](#), 2024.

53. UKGOV, [Restoring trust in our democracy: Our strategy for modern and secure elections](#), July 2025.

54. Council of the EU, [Press release](#), 17 June 2025.

55. GRECO, [Greco\(2019\)5](#), Codes of conduct for public officials, 20 March 2019.

promoting a culture of honesty, responsibility, and respect for democratic norms.⁵⁶ Embedding such standards within party statutes and practices can strengthen the credibility of political institutions and signal that parties place the public interest above partisan advantage.

79. Parties that are transparent in their financing, accountable in their operations, and protected from undue influence are better positioned to fulfil their democratic functions of representation, competition, and policy making. Restoring public trust requires that citizens see parties as autonomous actors working in the public interest.

5.3. Promoting democratic integration

80. Political parties are not only instruments for electoral competition. They are also central actors in fostering democratic culture, helping induct and integrate the people at large into the democratic political system.⁵⁷ In shaping political debate, selecting leaders, and structuring participation, parties play a vital role in transmitting democratic values and practices to citizens. Research has shown that party affiliation plays a critical role in building long-term attachments to politics and, more broadly to democracy itself.⁵⁸

81. This integrative role lies in providing a common democratic space where competing interests, identities and perspectives can be debated and mediated.

82. In times of heightened political polarisation, this role becomes even more crucial. By promoting democratic culture, encouraging dialogue across divides and avoiding zero-sum approaches, parties can help reduce tensions, foster compromise, and sustain pluralist democracies. Where parties instead adopt divisive or exclusionary rhetoric, they risk deepening fragmentation and weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

83. Political parties also serve as engines of civic education. Through youth wings, training schools, and public debate initiatives, they equip citizens with democratic skills and foster habits of participation. In several member States, political foundations affiliated with parties play an important role in sustaining this connection. In Germany, the party-affiliated foundations such as the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (SPD), the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (CDU), and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (Greens) organise political education, foster dialogue across social groups, and provide forums where citizens, academics, NGOs, and policy makers can engage. In Norway, though not formally affiliated with parties, political think tanks perform a similar role. Civita, with a liberal agenda, and Agenda, with sympathies to the left are think tanks that run training schools for youth and young professionals, and are active contributors to the public debate.

84. Other models have seen parties build their own civic platforms. Austria's NEOS created the "NEOS Lab" to connect party debates with wider society, and to provide services such as political education and training.⁵⁹

85. The messages that parties convey in public debate help to shape the broader democratic climate. The Assembly has emphasised the responsibility of parties to counter hate speech, racism, and intolerance, particularly during electoral campaigns when rhetoric has the greatest reach. The Council of Europe has called on political parties to put in place specific policies to address and combat hate speech including the adoption of codes of conduct, as well as to avoid expressions that are likely to foster intolerance and to openly condemn hate speech.⁶⁰

86. In Ireland, civil society group INAR (the Irish Network Against Racism) introduced an Anti-Racism Election Protocol, developed and endorsed by multiple political parties. It recommit signatories at each election to running campaigns free from racist language, fear-based scapegoating, and divisive tactics, demonstrating how voluntary pledges can help retain civility and safeguard democratic norms.

87. Codes of conduct for campaign behaviour or cross-party pledges against hate illustrate how parties can actively safeguard democratic discourse and promote a culture of civility in campaigning.

56. See, for example, [Resolution 1903 \(2012\)](#) "Code of conduct of members of the Parliamentary Assembly: good practice or core duty".

57. V. Randall, L. Svasand, "The Contribution of Parties to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation", 2002.

58. Pew Research Center, "Negative views of democracy more widespread in countries with low political affiliation", 2018.

59. NEOS, [Neos Lab- About](#).

60. CM/Rec(2022)16 – Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech, 20 May 2022.

5.4. Digital transformation and communication

88. The digital transformation of politics has re-shaped how parties interact with citizens, organise internally, and compete in elections. Cross-cutting across themes of participation, deliberation and engagement, online platforms have disrupted traditional forms of political organising, enabling political parties to connect with broader audiences at lower cost.⁶¹ When effectively harnessed, digital tools can strengthen democratic engagement by giving citizens more direct avenues to participate in decision making and shaping party programmes.

89. Parties across Europe have utilised digital innovations on a broad basis to widen participation, such as the use of online primaries or member ballots, or online consultations, crowdsourced manifestos, and digital forums for policy debate. These approaches can enhance transparency, reduce barriers to engagement, and appeal to citizens accustomed to digital forms of interaction.

90. There are internal power consequences of digital tools, with research suggesting that intermediary political party agencies are sometimes more frequently bypassed in digital-era party governance that has been characterised by enhanced leader autonomy and direct communication channels with supporters.⁶²

91. Digitalisation has presented a range of further risks. Algorithm-driven content and micro-targeted campaigning can exacerbate polarisation by amplifying divisive messages and fragmenting the information environment. Foreign interference via the proliferation of disinformation threatens to distort debate and reduce trust.

92. Digital campaigning also raises questions about fairness and accountability. The use of personal data for micro-targeting, opaque funding of online advertising, and the role of large technology platforms in shaping political debate all risk undermining transparency. Citizens' concerns that political communication is manipulative or unaccountable further weaken trust in parties and democratic processes.

93. Best practices to mitigate these risks are emerging across Europe including digital literacy programmes, and reforms in campaign finance regulation have extended disclosure requirements to online advertising to ensure transparency in spending and message origin.

94. Political parties themselves have adopted voluntary codes of conduct for ethical online campaigning, committing to avoid manipulative techniques and respect citizens' data privacy. In the Netherlands, a Dutch Code of Conduct on the Transparency of Online Political Advertising was signed ahead of parliamentary elections in 2021 by 11 political parties and major global online platforms to address manipulative campaigning and increase transparency on the purchasers of advertisements.⁶³ On the basis of this practice, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in collaboration with the European political parties and the European Commission developed a code of conduct for the 2024 European Parliament elections.⁶⁴

95. In a digital-first political era, parties must strike a balance in harnessing technology for participation and inclusion, while upholding democratic values and public trust. Ethical digital tools, coupled with clear regulation and public norms, can empower parties to enrich engagement rather than dilute democratic integrity.

6. Conclusion

96. The promotion and consolidation of pluralist democracy are among the main objectives of the Council of Europe and its Assembly. Political parties are fundamental to this as they provide a connective tissue between the democratic institutions of a State and its citizens. Yet they face mounting pressures that threaten their effectiveness and legitimacy.

97. Declining membership and engagement reflect broader trends of political disengagement and low trust, weakening parties' capacity to channel citizen interests into policy making. Increasing centralisation within parties, growing influence of money in politics, and the impact of digital disinformation have strained their representative function. The erosion of party legitimacy not only fosters voter apathy but also creates openings for populist and extremist movements that exploit discontent with traditional democratic structures

61. "Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform", op. cit.

62. S. Gherghina, O. Barberá, M. Lisis, "Political Parties and the Use of Digitilisation in Daily Politics", 10 March 2025.

63. International IDEA, "Codes of conduct on the rise: Fair and ethical political campaigning online", April 2024.

64. International IDEA, European Commission, "Code of Conduct for the 2024 European Parliament Elections".

98. Strengthening internal democracy, improving accountability mechanisms, and fostering meaningful citizen engagement are crucial to reversing these negative trends

99. Enhancing trust in political parties requires proactive efforts to strengthen party structures, improve political financing transparency, and develop strategies to counteract polarisation and disinformation. Ensuring that parties remain open, participatory, and adaptable will help revitalise democratic engagement and reinforce their role as mediators between the electorate and government institutions.

100. Above all, parties retain a special capacity to reinforce social cohesion and promote democratic culture. They are spaces where differences can be debated, compromises forged, and collective visions for the future shaped. By investing in these integrative functions, political parties can ensure resilient, pluralist, and representative democracy in Europe.