



A Transatlantic Listening Series Report

July 2021

Revitalizing Democracy



As leaders of The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnyslands, Ditchley Foundation and Wilton Park, we are pleased to share with you the *Report on the Transatlantic Listening Series to Revitalize Democracy*. Located in the United States and United Kingdom, our organizations have mandates to convene experts in dialogue to promote good public policy, and foster collaboration to resolve global challenges. We have watched with concern as nations on both sides of the Atlantic have experienced a trend of democratic backsliding. According to the 2020 Freedom in the World report issued by Freedom House, more than half the world's established democracies deteriorated over the past 14 years. In July 2021, our organizations joined forces for the first time to launch the *Transatlantic Listening Series to Revitalize Democracy*. We convened a broad cross-section of influential global thinkers to engage in candid dialogue on democratic regression and steps to revitalize democratic values and institutions. This took the form of three virtual dialogues that provided a venue for these transatlantic participants to share their perspectives and recommendations for policies that strengthen democratic processes.

Recognizing the daunting nature of addressing democratic revitalization in a comprehensive way, we targeted our efforts on three specific components that have driven democratic regression: the decline of local news, the inability of democracies to form a political consent for climate action, and addressing how COVID-19 has fostered distrust in democratic institutions. We are grateful for all the participants in this Listening Series who generously shared their time by providing the valuable insights included in this report. A list of participants appears on the following two pages, though their specific comments remain anonymous per the Listening Series ground rules.

We sincerely hope the discussion summaries and takeaways included in this report will contribute to the global conversation on democratic revitalization, and increase momentum on global action in this area.

From our perspective as convening institutions, this Series opened our eyes to new programmatic ideas for future conferences, dialogues and retreats. We anticipate this report will have a similar effect on you.

Sincerely yours,

Ambassador David J. Lane (ret.) *President*

The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnyslands

James Arroyo, OBE *Director*

Ditchley Foundation

Tom Cargill *Chief Executive*

Wilton Park

List of Participants

The participants listed below joined the Transatlantic Listening Series on Revitalizing Democracy in an individual capacity. Their participation does not indicate an endorsement of every report finding, nor does it represent the views any organization to which they are affiliated.

- **Professor Penny Abernathy**; Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, Northwestern University
- **Professor Simon Anholt**; Founder, Publisher, The Good Country Index
- **Mr. Joe Armitage**; Lead Analyst in UK Politics and Policy Practice, Global Counsel
- **Ms. Amanda Bennett**; Former Director, Voice of America
- **Ms. Elisabeth Braw**; Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute (AEI)
- **Professor Nicholas Cheeseman**; Professor of Democracy, University of Birmingham
- **Ambassador (ret) Kelley Currie**; Former U.S. Ambassador to UN ECOSOC and Ambassador at Large for Global Women's Issues
- **Mr. Jon Davies**; Chief Executive, CPA UK
- **Ambassador (ret) Kathleen Doherty**, Chief Strategy and Retreats Officer, The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands
- **Ms. Elizabeth Green**; Co-founder and CEO, Chalkbeat
- **Ms. Liz Greenhalgh**; Impact Lead, Ditchley
- **Ms. Erica Hope**; Director, Climate Planning and Laws, European Climate Foundation
- **Mr. Brian Joseph**; Vice President, Programs, National Endowment for Democracy
- **Dr. Markos Kounalakis**; Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution
- **Mr. John Lansing**; President and CEO, National Public Radio
- **Mr. Nick Linfield**; Programme Director and Head of Policy, Wilton Park
- **Ms. Marisa Luzzatto**; Director, Retreat Operations and Special Projects, The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands
- **Ms. Cécile Maisonneuve**; Senior Fellow, Institut Montaigne
- **The Rt Hon the Lord Mandelson**; Life Peer, House of Lords; Chairman, Global Counsel Ltd, London
- **Ms. Emily Mansfield**; Principal Economist, Europe, Economist Intelligence Unit
- **Ambassador (ret) Sarah Mendelson**; Distinguished Service Professor, Public Policy; Head, Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University

- Mr. Casey Newton; Founder and Editor, Platformer
- Mr. Jeffrey Phillips; Policy Director, The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands
- Professor Victor Pickard; Co-Director of Media, Inequality & Change Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania
- Ms. Manveen Rana; Journalist and podcast host, Times Newspapers
- Mr. Aza Raskin; Co-founder of the Earth Species Project, Center for Humane Technology and the 'Your Undivided Attention' podcast
- Mr. Anthony Smith; Chief Executive Officer; Westminster Foundation for Democracy
- Ms. Suzanne Spaulding; Senior Adviser, Homeland Security, International Security Program, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
- Ms. Terri Taylor; Strategy Director for Innovation and Discovery, Lumina Foundation
- Ms. Laura Thornton; Director and Senior Fellow, Alliance for Securing Democracy, German Marshall Fund
- Ms. Susan Valentine; Acting Deputy Director, Program on Independent Journalism, Open Society Foundations
- Dr. Viktor Valgardsson; Research Fellow, TrustGov Research Project, University of Southampton
- Mr. Steven Waldman; President and Co-Founder, Report for America
- Deborah Yedlin; Chancellor of the University of Calgary, Canada.



Democratic systems around the world face major change and upheaval. The challenges for modern democracies transcend the temporary disturbance of election cycles and extend into divisive social, intergenerational, even existential crises.

This listening series focused on three areas identified as posing or reflecting particular challenges to democracy: the decline of local journalism and media, how political consent for climate action will be achieved and sustained, and how responses to the COVID19 pandemic have undermined global democracy by fostering distrust in democratic institutions.

In July 2021, experts gathered virtually as part of this listening series to engage in dialogues seeking to draw out the implications for democratic practice presented by these three challenges. They highlighted not only the threats presented by each, but also the opportunities, common ground, and possible routes forward.

There emerged through the discussions the clear contention that democracy is under pressure, and that there is a need for it to adapt so as to both restore faith in its mechanisms and survive increasingly harsh climates. Such change will rely upon there being sufficient political willpower and inclination to ensure a greater connection between democracies and the greatest issues confronting our populations.

There were several encouraging takeaways from the series which highlighted the presenting opportunities to revitalize democracy and reignite the prerequisite civic and non-partisan engagement.



On the decline of local journalism and media:

Social entrepreneurship is being marshalled to address the local news crisis. Start-ups are proliferating that fill the news access gaps, including in traditionally underserved communities. This model is proving effective in debunking misinformation because of early success forming trusted relationships with audiences.

In the United States, there appears to be a bipartisan agreement about the seriousness of the decline of local news and the negative impact on American communities. Both the House of Representatives and the United States Senate are considering legislation to address this problem. Solutions under debate include taxpayer credits to cover subscriptions to local newspapers, a payroll tax credit for hiring or retaining journalists, and a tax credit to small businesses for advertising in or sponsoring local media. While timely passage of this legislation is not assured, the fact that it has been introduced in both chambers on a bipartisan basis would appear to be a positive development.

Local news as a public good does exist on both sides of the Atlantic, and efforts are underway to increase its footprints. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the United Kingdom and National Public Radio (NPR) in the United States can be seen as encouraging examples of the public financing of local news. The BBC has a program called Local Democracy Reporters that sponsors newsrooms in different parts of the country and has been successful in creating small newsrooms that seek to foster higher quality local journalism. NPR has 260 local stations supported by membership, philanthropy and sponsorship, and is now emphasizing connecting with audiences digitally (as opposed to print, radio and TV), to better compete in an on-demand world.

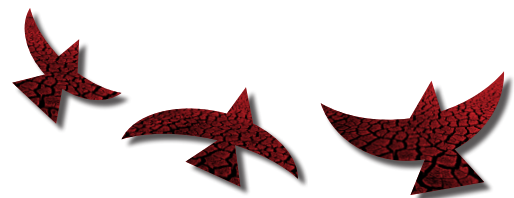


On political consent for climate action:

Communication between governments and citizens over climate policies will evolve and this could bring change in the way democracies operate. As high-level targets and currently unspecified assertions over a green transition become more defined for all the relevant sectors (energy, transport, agriculture, etc.) there is scope for publics, citizens, and communities to actively contribute to the policy detail, and in so doing enhance democratic practice and accountability for the longer term.

Where there is broad public support for climate action, this must be built on carefully and not squandered. Political retreat from climate policies based on fears of backlash are apparent. Are there opportunities for a different kind of political leadership that honestly confronts the climate action needed together with other challenges and competing priorities.

The current transition could drive a new period of innovation, R&D and experimentalism not only in technologies and their applications, but also in processes of policy development, the international sharing of new knowledge and in methods of governance.



And on the impact of COVID-19 on trust and distrust in democratic institutions:

The widespread demands of citizens and myriad responses of states to address issues of trust in relation to institutional responses to COVID-19 is a strong indicator that democracies continue, on the whole, to function effectively. Calls for change and reassurances during a time of unprecedented global upheaval need not be seen as a sign that democracy is inevitably at its limits more that it is time for those in support of it to act.

The positive interventions of many governments are testament to both a continued faith in democracy and to its ability to successfully adapt, as demonstrated by governments better enabling citizens to become active and engaged agents of change and recognising this as an increasingly vital faculty of democracy.

Data on improved access to education and better voting rights also evidence a positive impact on informed and empowered participation. To build momentum, fundamental values and concepts that the next generation will need in order to respond to the global rate of change could helpfully be agreed upon in a global compact.





Specific Findings from Each Event: **The decline of local journalism and media**

- 1 Research demonstrates strong correlations between funding in public media and the quality of democracy; indicating that the role of the former is fundamental in shaping the latter. There is an opportunity for local journalism and media to become champions of healthy democracies, but due to various trends and constraints, they currently fall well short of such aspirations. To achieve this, local news requires reinvigoration and prioritisation, with review through a targeted, 21st Century lens.
- 2 Key areas of consideration in seeking ways forward.
 - **Perception:** local news and media outlets are increasingly dimly perceived, and the low expectations of their standards – both as producers and employers – inhibit their capacity to deliver a much-needed service for which an appetite might yet be redeveloped. Achieving a turnaround might be facilitated by engagement with new (and old) audiences via innovative online social platforms and digital means, allowing outlets to meet consumers where they are.
 - **Trustworthiness:** Trust is a crucial, but much beleaguered, element of the decline of outlets and their loyal base. Organisations, particularly those operating largely within underserved regions and communities, have often become trapped by business models that require assumed, default positions and leave little room for the kind of critical reporting that has come to define high quality and respected national and international outlets.
 - **Quality of content and communication:** Such respected quality will be a key factor in creating the trust needed to tackle disinformation. In addition, outlets should feel empowered to approach and report upon high consequence national and international affairs, providing critical and accessible insight. The trend towards click-baiting and low-cost journalism as a means of outlet survival inhibits this possible output.
 - **Reform:** institutions and legislative changes are needed that will treat local news like a public good, in order to protect it and support a higher quality production of it. There are excellent models available for this in sectors such as public education and health.

- **Public Relations:** this in turn could enable the creation of more trusting relationships between outlets and audiences – a crucial element if fact-based journalism is to counter and triumph over misinformation. Marginalised communities, themselves often a target for misinformation or media contempt require particular attention. “Othering” these groups to support fixed narratives is a dangerous trend that risks being escalated in political violence and polarisation, fuelling a downward cycle.
- **Finance:** due to the strong correlation between funding in public media and quality of democracy, legislation like the Local Journalism Sustainability Act proposed in the United States Congress has the potential to transform local news organisations by allowing local communities to access their publications more readily. If passed into law, this legislation is likely to mitigate some of the damaging survivalist business models that are currently commonplace. Philanthropy also has a significant role to play. Donors could provide resources for core organizational support of local newsrooms. They could also emphasize flexibility to help create sustainable models of funding, mixing philanthropy with independent fundraising mechanisms like memberships, sponsorships, and events. Donors could also consider innovative ways to reduce the administrative burden on freelance journalists. A report by the Forum for Information and Democracy issued recommendations for how governments can utilize tax policy to compel large technology companies to act responsibly, and recommends ways to create an enabling environment for journalism.





Specific Findings from Each Event: **Political consent for climate action**

- 3 There is in most democratic countries a broad consensus as regards climate change. Politicians frequently refer to climate change as the overwhelming challenge of our times; public support for climate action can be high and the need for a rapid transition is often generally accepted. But there is also a gap between ambition and reality. The political project to navigate an energy transition and deliver deep decarbonisation has only just begun and will require leadership, communication, and new engagement with publics.
- 4 This session considered how democratic processes – political parties, governments, the media, citizens, sectoral interests and wider climate movements – create political consent for the action needed to deal with climate change and to manage the necessary transition. What will climate policies mean for peoples' lives? What will decarbonisation look like in practice and where will the costs fall?
- 5 The frame for policy is substantial and complex in relation to energy, transport, buildings, industry, agriculture, and adaptation (to prepare for the predicted impacts of climate change). It has relevance for most areas of governance, and much can be achieved at sector level. The vision of a Green industrial revolution based on public and private investment and the promise of new jobs is powerful, talked up by politicians (and others) across democracies as the greatest economic opportunity of our time.
- 6 But the impression given is that our countries can transition seamlessly to clean technologies with new energy sources and adaptation of infrastructure so that we can carry on living our lives much as we have been. How will the climate transition affect economies, peoples' jobs and lives and the ways we eat, heat and work? Climate policies and indeed climate impacts may change the landscapes, travel, labour markets, supply chains and the ways we consume. Change must be inevitable and could bring much that is positive as well as challenging. Yet our political classes fear backlash over the ways policy will play out in practice.
- 7 As we move towards practical implementation there could be a concurrent shift in democratic politics towards greater transparency. If much of the change needed to decarbonise is to happen in the next decade, the risk is that electoral politics could undermine and slow the action needed.

8 The political consent for climate action relates to:

- **Finance:** How will democratic societies fund the coming climate transition? Who will pay?
- **Political leadership:** what needs to be qualitatively different in the way governments and political parties offer leadership? There are opportunities for renewed democratic accountability beyond the electoral cycles with social partnerships, commissions and uses of technology. Can these reinvigorate relationships between citizens and governments?
- **The organisation of government itself:** Can government restructure to create a better institutional and organisational response to deliver the climate related policies that are needed?
- **The quality of public debate and communication:** How are news media framing climate action in the public imagination? Publics support climate goals, but policies have not been widely exposed to public debate in honest and transparent ways that can contribute to better policymaking. There was concern that media debates about climate policies are oriented towards elites.
- **Fairness and equality:** Will governments face and properly mitigate the risks that inequalities may be further reinforced as the costs of climate policies become clear? Experimentation in political processes could create new forms of democratic practice. But as with the impact of COVID 19, certain groups are more affected than others.
- **Geopolitical understanding:** As energy sources shift, so geopolitics will change. How prepared are collective international institutions to deal with the likely shifts in geopolitics caused by climate change impacts and by energy transitions?
- **Climate action raises national security complications.** For the US, transitioning to greener energy sources could mean switching from fuels which are available, affordable and under national control to supply chains that either rely on China or do not yet exist.
- But there are also **incentives for countries economically compelled to find cleaner solutions.** For Canada, there is an economic imperative to change as a sizeable proportion of the economy relies on oil and gas. These risks are already driving some collective action amongst energy companies at a sector level.

- 9 There is much uncertainty over how policies to achieve climate goals will play out and there is need for more public debate over their specific consequences for fairness and where cost burdens fall but there will be much greater risks if climate targets are missed and pledges left unfulfilled.





Specific Findings from Each Event: **How COVID-19 has undermined global democracy by fostering distrust in democratic institutions**

- 10 The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened a crisis for democracy around the world, providing cover for some governments to disrupt elections, silence critics and the press, and undermine the accountability needed to protect human rights as well as public health. Whilst such emergency powers might be justified to address the crisis, there is also a risk that they can negatively affect democracy, particularly where countries have gone so far as to restrict democratic liberties.
- 11 Key areas of consideration in seeking ways forward.
 - **Perception and portrayal:** perceived failure of some governments to deal effectively with the pandemic has led to a breakdown in trust, alongside a lack of clarity about the unique responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments. Measures to cope with the pandemic, such as closing airports and borders, blocking goods at customs, declaring states of emergency and the centralization of all powers, would in normal times be seen as direct attacks on the most basic constitutional and democratic principles. Democratic institutions need to continue to be seen to demonstrate that democracy is a viable and attractive form of government, with an increased focus on socio-economic issues, equitable recovery packages and informed approaches.
 - **Identifying risk:** the pandemic is increasingly seen as having exacerbated challenges already undermining global democracy and democratic institutions. It is crucial that we identify risk factors threatening trust in global democracy, so that we are able to mitigate their consequences. Actors wishing to foster greater trust in democracy will need to be clear about what exactly the pandemic has exacerbated. Whilst not everything in the immediate future will be about COVID-19, activities will inevitably be conducted in an environment shaped by it.
 - **Countering disinformation:** we are inherently in a difficult place for democracy now because the problems that we face cannot be solved in an election cycle. All that those against democratic systems have to do to sow doubt is to raise questions and point out a lack of tangible results. COVID-19 disinformation has thrived in the environment of unfamiliarity with global pandemics, a lack of transparency from governments and confusion regarding the threat posed, sustained by unclear or incomplete government messaging and hostile actors, and by citizens across the world sharing inaccurate information. New approaches to clear, trustworthy communication between state and citizen must be found. In some cases, these are already being developed and adopted with success.

- **Empowering healthy democracies and holding state powers accountable:** we must continue to question the extent to which governments are making a conscious or unconscious overreach of power in this period. Healthy mistrust of governance is the basis of democracy. Whilst it has highlighted some weaker aspects of democracies, the pandemic has often seen a rise in public engagement with decision making, a vital element of strong democratic government. To restore people's faith in democracy, and to help them battle disinformation, citizens need to be empowered to be agents of change. This requires greater access to participation and education, and a global compact on what fundamental values and concepts the next generation needs to have and grow up with to take on the changes in the world, with emphasis upon teaching critical thinking.
- **Addressing inequality and rising discontent:** many people feel left behind under democracies, with pre-existing states of inequality, vulnerabilities and discontent amplified in recent months. Democratic institutions need to be seen to be delivering at home to demonstrate that democracy is a viable and attractive form of government. They need to elevate their focus on socio-economic issues, with equitable recovery packages and informed approaches using disaggregated data. Preparedness in political infrastructures to protect elections and the right to vote across societies must be improved.



Common Findings

- 1 Across the series, several core concerns were voiced repeatedly, regardless of the specific topic to hand. Five stood out as the most acute facing democracies today: lack of government transparency and trusted, accessible and reliable information and a corresponding need for open communication between governments and publics; a lack of recognition and investment into aspects and institutions of healthy democracies seen to be declining or structurally unable to cope; a lack of protection against newly exacerbated inequalities and for vulnerable populations; the threats to security posed by the destabilisation of current world order; and the issue of both actual and perceived government abuses or misuses of power (due to incompetence or deliberate abuse of power). Can government institutions or structures adapt to respond the pace of change?
- 2 The phenomena of Covid-19, climate change, and the advent of near-universal information access and creation capabilities have dramatically transformed geopolitics and economics. There is evidence to suggest that some hybrid and authoritarian regimes have emerged with higher levels of government trust, whilst democracy is increasingly likely to be seen as fractious, broken and incapable of change. For those who would seek to undermine democracies and their institutions, this presents opportunity; for those whose faith wavers in them, it presents ostensible proof. Beyond the economic and security realms, democracy building will need to re-adapt to connect to the issues people care about most, if it is to restore the faith required to strengthen it.
- 3 One silver lining in this drive for re-adaptation is the potential that such an overhaul contains: an untapped possibility to create new impetus to reinvigorate international and national support for democracy by ensuring connection to the greatest issues confronting our populations.
- 4 Across the three dialogues, five major areas of possible redress were identified:
 - i Government openness to more readily acknowledge and identify risks, and to productively engage with critics so that these risks might be confronted and mitigated. Risks of a Green Revolution either not going far enough, disadvantaging many, or pursuing the wrong route are valid and must be dealt with if climate action can be successful. Understanding how democracy is under threat beyond high level discourse will require more inclusive discussion and better listening. These conversations can be held in media and through critical, diverse journalism, but such a possibility is under threat from disinformation, low consumption rates, survivalist business models for local news and media, and a failure to adequately recognise the dangers of this by those seeking to lead in democracies.

- ii The importance of engaging and empowering populations as agents of change through greater autonomy, agency, responsibility, capabilities and tools, that allow for a personal stake in issues facing democracies. Demonstrating the political will to redirect transparent and honest debate away from elites only and towards the broader populace is seen as an essential promoter of the sort of activism that could ably underpin the reinvigoration of democracy.
- iii To address poor perception of both democracies and those bodies and representatives that might otherwise be their champions. The demands on political leadership in democracies have changed. Breakdowns in trust are evident: whether that be based on promises of a pain, cost and specifics free Green Revolution, state oversteps and failures in Covid-19 measures including corrupt, dishonest, repressive and violent responses, the ability of the democratic state to care for the most vulnerable, or the quality, reliability and trustworthiness of information seen to be coming directly from its inner chambers.
- iv Politicians will need to find new, more inclusive ways of engaging and communicating with diverse and changing populations facing a range of challenges. Short term manifestos will no longer reassure an increasingly put-upon public that these challenges are being met in sufficient keeping with their needs, and those of successive generations. Cycles of political violence, wherever they may arise, will need to be broken, whether this is in “othering” marginalised communities, overstepping the boundaries of state control and coercion into people’s lives, or employing political bluff tactics that allow populations to suffer whilst the most pressing issues go unaddressed and unresolved.
- v To improve access to high consequence information that can be trusted, and both conveyed and received critically. New approaches to clear, trustworthy communication between state and citizen are much needed, underpinned by a media that can reach out to all communities. In particular, media should reach those feeling marginalised by traditional news outlets, have a long-term mistrust in media and are vulnerable targets for misinformation. Politicians will need to be much more skilful, proactive and transparent in their approach to reverse the growing mistrust by being able to demonstrate an increased focus on socio-economic issues, equitable recovery and informed approaches that deal honestly and head-on with the concerns of the populace.

- vi The full implications of both climate change, COVID-19 or the policies to address them have yet to be fully realised, yet both are creating division and mistrust, fuelled by misperceptions and polarisation resulting in a perceived inability to have open dialogue about the issues and prospective solutions. It is not clear what the costs of climate change or COVID-19 will be or over what timescales we will be affected. What is less certain is the extent of that impact or the willingness of people to tolerate and adapt. For this reason, it is essential (as referenced at point 2 above) that people feel empowered, with greater access to participation and education underpinned by a robust media that has the political and institutional support and wherewithal to reach the broadest of audiences.

Conclusion

While this Listening Series and its findings evidence the significant challenges faced by democracy at this time, the presence of so many commonalities suggests a strong basis upon which to develop the kind of political, private and social capital that would be prerequisite to addressing poor perception of both democracies and those bodies, representatives and citizens that might otherwise be their champions.

These dialogues are an important step in identifying that which is most pressing to confront in seeking to strengthen and recalibrate the many facets of healthy democratic societies – crucial in informing what concrete steps might then be taken.

Nick Linfield and Jennifer Easton

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