Busara Groundwork

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Global Hub for Participatory Democracy

Democracy narratives: What are they and how do they matter for democratic engagement and behavior?

A systematic literature review

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Busara

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The Democracy Narrative Alliance (DNA)

There is a growing consensus in the pro-democracy field that narratives are key to promoting, protecting, and preserving democracy in a time of rising authoritarianism. Dozens of organizations, researchers, funders, and strategists have already invested significant time and resources to identify and understand many of the most salient narratives that can encourage or discourage support for democracy as a system and practice. Yet, many of these efforts remain siloed without a clear strategy for coordination, consolidation, or knowledge sharing for the broader field.

The Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) is an initial step toward coordination and consolidation of narrative change efforts in the pro-democracy field. It brings together more than 30 organizations, research institutions, and funders working on democracy and communications with the goals to:

1. *Compile and develop new democracy narratives, messaging, and framing strategies that increase engagement and support for democracy.*
2. *Generate more aligned and strategic communications by democracy organizations and advocates, using shared narratives and tools.*
3. *Build support and resources for further development, testing, and application of new narratives and framing strategies at the global, national, and local levels.*

The DNA was born of a conviction that the stories we tell each other and ourselves about the way the world works greatly influence how we act, what we believe, and what we value. To change democratic attitudes, norms, behaviors and systems, we need to better understand the impacts of democracy narratives and narrative messaging - and then apply this understanding in practice. We believe in a more democratic and empowered world, and believe that collective action is necessary to realize this better future. The fight for democracy is in our D.N.A.

DNA members:
Asia Centre; Asuntos del Sur; Busara; Council of Europe; D-Hub; Dakila; Democracy Reporting International (DRI); Demos Helsinki; Enrique Bravo; Extituto de Política Abierta; Ford Foundation; Frameworks Institute; Fundación Avina; Fundación Corona; German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ); Latin American Open Data Initiative (ILDA); Institute of Public Finance (IPF); International IDEA; Janaagraha; Kettering Foundation; Kota Kita; Luminate; Metropolitan Group; National Democratic Institute (NDI); Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD); One Project; Open Government Partnership (OGP); Outright International; Oxfam Novib; People Powered; Political Watch; Puentes; SNF Agora Institute; Switzerland Federal Department of Foreign Affairs; Third Plateau; Trust, Accountability, Inclusion (TAI) Collaborative; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); VélezReyes+; Westminster Foundation for Democracy; Yiaga Africa.

This Research Brief is part of a three-part series of research produced for the Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) as an initial step toward coordination and consolidation of narrative change efforts and identifying research needs in the pro-democracy field.

- **Systematic literature review:** Democracy narratives: What are they and how do they matter for democratic engagement and behavior? (2026).
- **Research Brief:** How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know) (2026)
- **Behavioral Change Brief:** From Narrative to Action: Fostering Democratic Engagement And Engaged Citizens Through Behavior Change (2026)

Table of contents

Tables

Figures

Boxes

Executive summary

Democracy becomes meaningful through the experiences we have with it, and the stories we tell ourselves about those experiences. These stories show up in the broader narratives we hold about democracy. Narratives are deep, often subconscious frameworks that shape how we interpret individual events, assign broader meaning to them, and make decisions. Narratives are also the basis for our reasoning that leads us to take action, including whether we engage as democratic citizens or withdraw from and reject democratic processes.

This is an acute issue since currently a majority of citizens feel unheard, unrepresented, and alienated, having lost faith in their democratic institutions and the integrity of their elected policymakers. And yet: the evidence is also clear that democracy delivers better public goods for citizens, and usually with lower corruption, than alternatives. This suggests that despite a mental model that considers democracy a good system, and despite empirical evidence suggesting that democracy delivers, narratives about democracy can be negative, causing disengagement and disillusionment. The perception that participating in democracy is useless is not uncommon. There is also a disconnect in what people say they believe–which is that they broadly support democratic systems of government–and how they act.

Narratives of democracy are thus a key driver of whether and how people choose to act in support of democracy. In research, narratives of democracy are broadly studied in one of three ways:

1. *as a communications concern, focused on the content of communications;*

2. *as an interplay between the content of a message, the context in which it is received, and the person receiving it; or*
3. *as a systemic issue, focused on power structures that shape democratic engagement.*

To change narratives requires engagement on all three perspectives: systemic, communications and personal. However, the most prominent Theories of Change (ToC) in programmatic documents exist on questions of how to use communication strategies to send positive signals about democracy with the aim to create constructive and positive narratives that strengthen democratic engagement.

Democracy is more than values and institutions: it is also a set of practices and daily actions and interactions between institutions and citizens that shape the experience of living within a democracy. These practices of democracy can be summarized under four major headings:

- *upholding democratic principles;*
- *participating in democratic processes;*
- *expressing dissent;*
- *personal investment.*

Each practice connects to a number of narratives about democracy, which are high-level reasons as to why it is useful or not to engage in the democratic practice. Each of these democratic practices can be pursued with different motivations, which can be simplified as being driven by two archetypes:

1. *Idealism and collectivism: this archetype emphasizes democratic values and the strength of democracy to bring people together to jointly work on issues.*

2. *Pragmatism and individualism: this archetype views democracy as a pragmatic way to achieve aims for oneself or one's group.*

Narratives attached to either archetype can encourage or discourage engagement in the democratic practices. What narrative elicits what kind of engagement can be counterintuitive, and some narratives can fuel both engagement and disengagement. Democratic practices are pursued for specific outcomes, and the literature offers a vast range of insights on what specific practices can achieve or fail at certain democratic outcomes.

Broadly speaking, existing research on the practical impact of narratives of democracy on democratic engagement offers a limited perspective on what we know about democratic engagement as a matter of behavior change. This means that questions of what drives democratic behavior and what stops it often remain unanswered.

For constructive support to narrative change in pursuit of democratic engagement a number of steps are necessary. While it is crucial to understand finer points of messaging and communication strategies to improve attitudes towards democracy, narrative content is only one part of the equation, with personal experiences of a system of governance, personality, context, social influences, and personal preferences influencing how narratives are received and internalized (or not) and then translated into actions. Understanding these factors requires a multimethod approach, including experimental work testing specific narratives, and the actions they elicit, in different contexts. For positive narratives about democracy that fuel democratic engagement that keeps democracies alive, to take root, narratives must reflect the lived experiences of those living in democracies. Messaging that touts the benefits of democracy will continue to ring

hollow if a majority of citizens continue to feel unheard, unrepresented, and alienated by their political systems. Reforms, improvements, and innovations to democratic institutions and practices that make them more representative, responsive, and participatory are crucial and these efforts must go in parallel with narrative change strategies. But these will only comprehensively work if the lived experience of people is captured.

The need for repetition and consistency underscores the importance of building a coordinated network in support of democracy. This infrastructure requires knowledge and activities that explore the systemic and human aspects of how narratives are formed, changed and translated into behaviors that actively support democratic practices. This requires understanding context and testing different approaches. It also must take into account that narratives and how they translate into behavior are culturally specific–and that there is a real lack of knowledge on these mechanisms from many parts of the world–most starkly Africa–but also other parts of the Global South as they are represented in English-language literature. Narratives are the foundation on which actions flourish: they can motivate, but motivation alone is not enough to bring about engagement. Practicing democracy also requires that people live within a system that allows them to engage, and that they know how to be an engaged democratic citizen. To truly change mental models and subconscious narratives requires sustained and coordinated effort in communications, systems and behavior change.

Introduction

Democracy is a matter of practice. It requires doing. At its best, democracy practices the core value that everyone gets to have a meaningful voice in governance decisions that affect their lives. Yet, to be motivated to do the work that it takes to raise one's voice, we humans reason with ourselves. We ask: why am I doing this work? What keeps me motivated to support my democracy? Why is democracy meaningful to me?

Democracy becomes meaningful through the experiences we have with it, and the stories we tell ourselves about those experiences. These stories show up in the broader narratives we hold about democracy. This is more than a story of why it is good to find time to vote on the way to work. Narratives are our big-picture understanding about how we think the world works, and our place in it. They are formed from many smaller stories and experiences that are often repeated in one form or another throughout our lives. Narratives become the basis for our reasoning that leads us to take action.

Narratives of democracy are thus a key driver of whether and how people choose to act in support of democracy. Many nonprofits, researchers, and strategists have invested significant time and resources to understand which narratives promote or inhibit support for democracy, and which encourage personal investment in it. In developing effective communication strategies, communicators seek narratives that resonate most.

Understanding narratives of democracy, however, goes beyond answering how best to communicate about democracy to motivate people to participate. It is worth considering what actions any messaging aims to support, and through what processes this support is expected to come

about once people receive the message. In other words: how do people move from a narrative they hold about democracy to engaging in or withdrawing from democratic processes? To what extent can strategic messaging and communications help change people's narratives of democracy? Can constructive narratives of democracy lead to putting in the work that democracy practically needs—meaning they can support people to be engaged democratic citizens?

At a time when democracy is at peril, these questions matter. Narratives and communications matter in making democracy appealing and in building practices that keep a governance system alive in which everyone has a meaningful say. Focused communications efforts benefit from exploring the deeper narratives that underpin people's relationship with democracy, how these narratives emerged, and how these narratives affect how people practice or withdraw from democracy.

Why it matters: purpose and overview of findings

The narratives we hold influence how we act, what we believe, and what we value. To do democracy, it is necessary to pay attention to narratives and to the circumstances that allow narratives to support consistent practices of democracy.

This literature review brings together knowledge gained from academic research to understand drivers of attitudes and practices, wisdom activists have gleaned from years of organizing, and insights from strategists who have thought deeply about the power of narratives and effective communication. Each of these groups offers important perspectives, but they are not always in conversation with each other, which is what this literature review seeks to rectify.

Overview of findings

Drawing on academic and practitioner literature, this literature review is structured around a number of main findings, outlined below.

- **Narratives of democracy are studied through three dominant perspectives:**
  - as a communications concern, focused on the content of communications;
  - as an interplay between the content of a message, the context in which it is received, and the person receiving it; or
  - as a systemic issue, focused on power structures that shape democratic engagement.
  - To change narratives requires engagement on all three perspectives: systemic, communications and personal.
  - However, the most prominent Theories of Change (ToC) in programmatic documents exist on questions of how to use communication strategies to send positive signals about democracy with the aim to create constructive and positive narratives that strengthen democratic support.

- **Democracy comes alive if people practice it. These practices of democracy can be summarized under four major headings:**
  - upholding democratic principles;
  - participating in democratic processes;
  - expressing dissent; and
  - personal investment.
  - Each practice connects to a number of narratives about democracy, which are high-level reasons as to why it is useful or not to engage in the practice.

- These practices are pursued with different motivations, which in a simplified manner can be described as being driven by two archetypes:
  - Idealism and collectivism: this archetype emphasizes democratic values and the strength of democracy to bring people together to jointly work on issues.
  - Pragmatism and individualism: this archetype views democracy as a pragmatic way to achieve aims for oneself or one's group.
  - Narratives attached to either archetype can encourage or discourage engagement in the democratic practices. What narrative elicits what kind of engagement can be counterintuitive, and some narratives can fuel both engagement and disengagement.
- Democratic practices are pursued for specific outcomes, and the literature offers a vast range of insights on what specific practices can achieve or fail at certain democratic outcomes.

- **The English-language social science literature on narratives of democracy has a number of limitations:**
  - The English-language social science literature is methodologically and geographically incomplete, with a strong focus on numbers-based analysis and less emphasis on qualitative data.
  - It offers a limited perspective on what we know about democratic engagement as a matter of behavior change. This means that questions of what drives democratic behavior and what stops it often remain unanswered. The behavioral change brief From Narrative to Action: Fostering Democratic Engagement And Engaged Citizens Through Behavior Change, which accompanies this literature review, uses the existing scholarship to develop a behavioral framing around these questions.

Box 1: What informs this literature review: methodology overview

This literature review draws on a systematic review of publications in English-language peer-reviewed academic journals since 2014, as well as English-language gray literature (non-peer reviewed literature) published by organizations working on supporting democracy and the concept of narratives for social change. A detailed methodology for the peer-reviewed literature review can be found in Appendix II: Methodology.

To search the academic literature, we developed a list of keywords relevant to four areas of inquiry: communication or social and behavior change communication on complex or abstract issues; practices of participatory, deliberative, and direct democracy; behavior change requirements as they relate to democratic engagement (capability, opportunity, and motivation); and measurement of increased democratic engagement and action. We searched the keywords across the social science databases (J-STOR, Google Scholar, SCOPUS), which–after applying inclusion criteria–yielded 70 peer-reviewed papers for close reading and thematic coding for the final analysis.

Because there are no central repositories or databases for reports, studies, and other publications from practitioners (called gray literature), we combined network and snowball sampling to identify relevant publications. We first collected relevant resources produced by the 35 member organizations of the Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA), then we asked practitioners in our network to suggest additional resources. We also scoured references in other reports for additional publications and did keyword-based web searches to ensure we had identified as many relevant sources as possible. After developing a list of 126 potentially relevant publications, we narrowed the list for inclusion down to 68 reports and studies based on substantive relevance.

Limitations of this literature review

Despite seeking to include a global perspective as much as possible, our approach omits insights from non-English publications. But even with a focus on English-language publications, our search brought up very little English literature on most of Africa, Latin America and Asia. A few countries in these regions stand out, but it is fair to say that most readily-accessible and data-based English-language democracy research of the past decade focuses on North America, Europe and Oceania–with China and India notable exceptions in Asia. Figure 1 offers a heatmap of the geographic focus of the literature review.

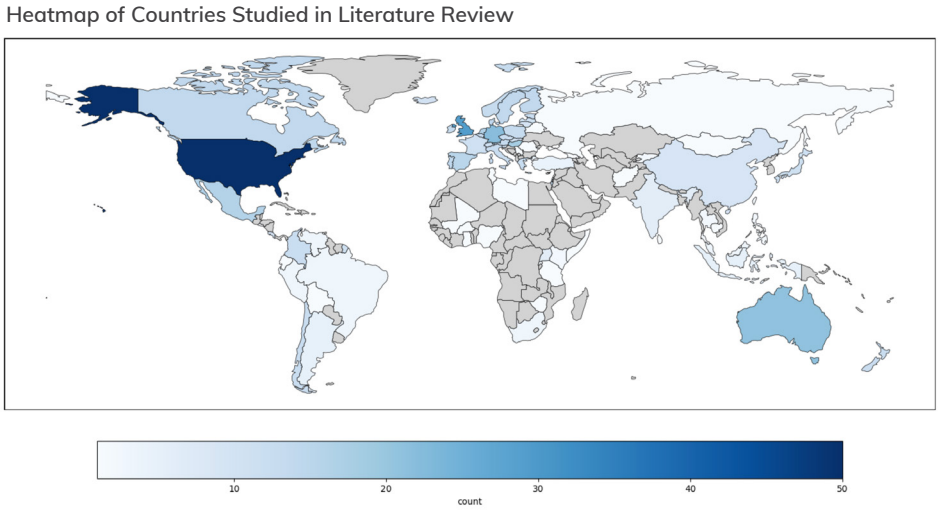

Figure 1: Heatmap of reviewed academic and gray literature

The thematic focus differed widely across regions. Appendix I unpacks this difference.

While our literature searches spanned multiple disciplines, our review stayed within the social sciences. Other fields, notably public health, also offer insights on narratives, effective communications and behavior change that are not captured in this literature review. It is also difficult to systematically search literature that is not published in academic journals, but instead by organizations. Despite our best efforts, we likely missed gray literature with important insights.

Background: narratives and democracy

What are narratives?

The Sortition Foundation defines narratives as "beliefs about how the world works."[1] Every moment of every day our brains are flooded with sensory input. To help process this endless stream of complex information, we rely on mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. Narratives are deep, often subconscious frameworks that shape how we interpret individual events, assign broader meaning to them, and make decisions. Narratives shape our memory, our sense of self, and influence how we process new information. If a new piece of information contradicts or does not fit within an existing narrative that we hold, we are much more likely to reject that new information.

Whether we consciously think about it or not, we all filter new information through the narratives that we hold. Narratives can be very personal, informing our identity, values, and morals. They can also be cultural or collective. Narratives that get repeated often in society are likely to become so widely accepted that they become what is perceived to be common sense. This can occur even if they are factually incorrect and if there is not necessarily a shared understanding of what common sense entails.[2]

The way we make sense of the world involves hierarchies. Just Labs differentiates between frames, stories, narratives, and meta-narratives, as shown on the next page in Table 1.

1 (Sortition Foundation 2022)
2 (Gomez and Coombes 2019)

Table 1. Frames, stories, narratives and meta-narratives ((source: (Gomez and Coombes 2019))[3]

Concept	Frames	Stories	Narrative	Meta-narratives
Definition	Words, images, metaphors or other triggers that make the audience interpret a story through a certain narrative	How a specific moment or event is recounted. If repeated, stories start to form a consistent narrative	The way events or stories are connected and presented to form a new belief, a "common sense" understanding of what is happening	Narratives that become ingrained in our thinking, not just about that issue but other areas of life and how the world works
Example	Angry protestors take the fight to the street (frame of violence)	At noon today, protestors who were throwing bricks injured a police officer	The protest movement in the streets this month is violent, extremist and divisive	People who challenge the state are a fundamentally violent threat and sometimes need to be treated forcefully to preserve law and order

In this literature review we refer to meta-narratives as mental models. Mental models are deeply ingrained ways of, as Schomerus argues, explaining "the world around us. It is the go-to interpretation of why things are the way they are and how things function; it is the story we tell ourselves about who we are and why we do what we do."[4] Mental models are major drivers of behavior—and can be major barriers towards changing behaviors. Mental models are also difficult to identify: they seem so obvious to us that we struggle to even see them.

3 (Gomez and Coombes 2019)
4 (Schomerus 2023c)

One mental model is particularly important for understanding narratives of democracy and how they influence democratic practices. To engage in democracy or to be disappointed by democracy requires the mental model that democracy ultimately is a constructive and equitable system of governance. This mental model, as well as positive democracy narratives, builds support for democratic principles and practices. But first, why is democracy in need of positive narratives?

What is at stake: democracy in peril

In principle, a majority of people in most countries support the concept of democracy. In practice, many feel that the system is failing them.

In a global survey, 77% of respondents said that representative democracy is a good way to govern their countries.[5] Yet, only 33% found that the political system in their country lets them have a meaningful say over decisions.[6] Recent survey data from more than four million people across 154 countries established that global dissatisfaction with democracy is at a record high.[7] Democratic backsliding is prominent.[8] A majority of citizens feel unheard, unrepresented, and alienated, having lost faith in their democratic institutions and the integrity of their elected policymakers.[9] And yet: the evidence is also clear that democracy delivers better public goods for citizens, and usually with lower corruption, than alternatives.[10] This suggests two conclusions.

First, despite a mental model that considers democracy a good system, and despite empirical evidence suggesting that democracy delivers, narratives

5 (OECD 2024c; Wike et al. 2024; OECD 2022a)
6 (OECD 2024c; Wike et al. 2024; OECD 2022a)
7 (Foa et al. 2020)
8 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025)
9 (Avramovska et al. 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; Extinction Rebellion 2019) (OECD 2024c, 2022a; Foa et al. 2020)
10 (V-Dem 2022)

about democracy can be negative, causing disengagement and disillusionment. For instance, dominant narratives have emerged in many countries (including Ecuador, Indonesia, and Nigeria) that democracy does not deliver and that democratic institutions are corrupt, which has helped justify support for authoritarian leaders and fueled military coups, for example in West Africa.[11] 70% of Americans believe that their political system is rigged; similar narratives that elites control the government are widespread in South Africa and throughout Latin America, which encourages deep ambivalence or even hostility toward democracy.[12] The perception that participating in democracy is useless is not uncommon.[13] A disconnect exists between people's real world experiences of what democracy delivers, and the narrative of what it does not.

Second, there is also a disconnect in what people say they believe–which is that they broadly support democratic systems of government–and how they act. Their actions demonstrate a lack of the practices required to create a well-functioning democracy, such as being a grassroots member of a political party or voting. While democracy is much more than voting, it is also notable that average voter turnout has been steadily declining since the 1990s in every region of the world (and whether support for democracy shows up in such obvious measures as party membership is an open question).[14] In emerging democracies, a common argument is that democracy disappoints citizens because it is so disconnected from local realities; sometimes this argument is linked to a narrative of democracy as an imported system in conflict with cultural values. In countries where democracy is fairly young—such as post-independence African countries—citizens have not had good experiences with leaders who proclaimed themselves democratic.

11 (Metropolitan Group 2025)
12 (Garcia and Saiz 2025; FrameWorks Institute 2024, 2025)
13 (Vacquet 2017; Tabanao 2025)
14 (Solijonov 2016)

Growing dissatisfaction with democracy creates opportunities for authoritarian, populist, or other anti-democratic leaders to position themselves as attractive alternatives to the status quo. In Uganda, the Philippines, and the US, a majority of voters–despite believing that authoritarianism is harmful–have recently supported leaders with authoritarian tendencies who have trampled on democratic norms and weakened democratic institutions.[15]

Authoritarian and populist leaders have harnessed narratives to great effect, capitalizing on the real frustrations and negative narratives of democracy not living up to its promises. Authoritarians have offered versions of a common narrative: 'our democracy is broken, but as a regular person just like you, I understand your frustrations and can fix our political system if you give me the power to do so.'[16] This narrative is deployed, perhaps surprisingly, by politicians with long legacies in government who rebrand themselves as outsiders.[17]

This narrative has been powerful and persuasive. Deployed effectively, alongside strategically framed messages and a barrage of stories (some real and some manufactured), it has helped authoritarian leaders take power.[18] A broad base of dedicated supporters, especially young men, have been drawn to this narrative. These supporters are so disillusioned with the status quo that they believe authoritarian leaders are the better alternative.[19] In practice, these leaders have eroded democratic institutions, trampled political norms that help maintain the fragile equilibrium of democracies, repeatedly violated human and civil rights, and systematically amassed power for themselves and their partisan loyalists, while viciously attacking their opponents and dismantling institutional checks on their authority.[20]

15 (Metropolitan Group 2025)
16 (Garcia and Saiz 2025; D-HUB 2025b, a; Sarda and Fischler 2025; D-HUB 2024a)
17 (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019)
18 (Metropolitan Group 2025; D-HUB 2025b)
19 (D-HUB 2024b)
20 (D-HUB 2025b, a, 2024a; FrameWorks Institute 2023a; Hyde Townsend 2018)

Declining support for democracy, combined with a coordinated and compelling alternative narrative deployed by would-be authoritarian leaders around the world and the real erosion of democratic institutions and norms, means that democracies are under threat from within and without. If advocates of democracy hope to gain back some of the ideological territory that has been lost, narratives must be part of their strategy. But narrative change is not straightforward and narrative formation does not happen in isolation. Narratives are constructed through complex social processes mediated through the messenger, content, and the receiver.

Narratives can have negative power. Positive narratives can struggle to cut through an increasing noise of distractions, mis- and disinformation.

Targeting narratives across their hierarchy from mental models to communications is urgently necessary if democracy is to be saved through both people's belief in it and their willingness to practice it. Before we understand the different levels at which narratives function, we first review how narratives of democracy are studied.

How to understand narratives of democracy: systems, communications, and how humans interact with information

In the literature, we encountered three approaches to understanding narratives of democracy with the aim of supporting meaningful democratic engagement.

The first focuses on the content of communications: What is the best wording and framing for a pro-democracy message? The main objective within this approach is to develop effective communication campaigns. The approach dominates the literature from the United States (see Figure 7 in Appendix I). The second approach is grounded in the behavioral sciences. This approach emphasizes the interplay between the content of a message, the context in which it is received, and the person receiving it. A behavioral perspective asks how those receiving communications interpret these: how does a piece of information become a narrative that influences what type of actions people take? How does what they hear interact with the mental model they already hold, thus strengthening or challenging it? This perspective posits that talking about democracy with the objective of finding ways to best support the desired democratic practice is not only about the best language to choose or the structures that support or hinder democracy, but also requires understanding the roots of human behavior. This is dealt with in more detail in the separate brief From Narrative to Action: Fostering Democratic Engagement And Engaged Citizens Through Behavior Change.

The third approach emphasizes systemic issues. This perspective emphasises that studying narratives requires understanding the systems that have shaped these narratives. This perspective, in addition to asking what narratives people hold about the system of democracy, also asks: What structures of power can stand in the way of democratic engagement? What triggers changes in levels of support for democracy? What conditions encourage democratic engagement or disengagement? How do different actors, such as civil society, serve as checks and balances? This perspective is prominent in the academic literature on Asia and Africa (see Figure 7 in Appendix I), where the objective is often to understand the systemic barriers to change, rather than analyzing narratives in isolation from their context.

Taking these three approaches into account, this systematic literature review asks:

- *For communications: what do we know about how best to talk about democracy to support engagement in democracy?*
- *For understanding the interplay of message, context and person: how is the power of a narrative translated into practices–actual behaviors–that support (or reject) democracy?*
- *For systemic issues: what makes narratives powerful enough to elicit actions that can overcome systemic barriers?*

Before asking how studying narratives of democracy can support democratic engagement, we first clarify what practices the literature identifies as 'doing democracy.'

Doing democracy: what are practices of democracy?

Democracy is more than values and institutions: it is also a set of practices. These are those daily actions and interactions between institutions and citizens that shape the experience of living within a democracy. Because we want to understand the practical effects of narratives of democracy, we are concerned with how democratic practices link to narratives.

In classifying the literature, we identified four democratic practices. Figure 2 summarizes these democratic practices, who does them, and how.

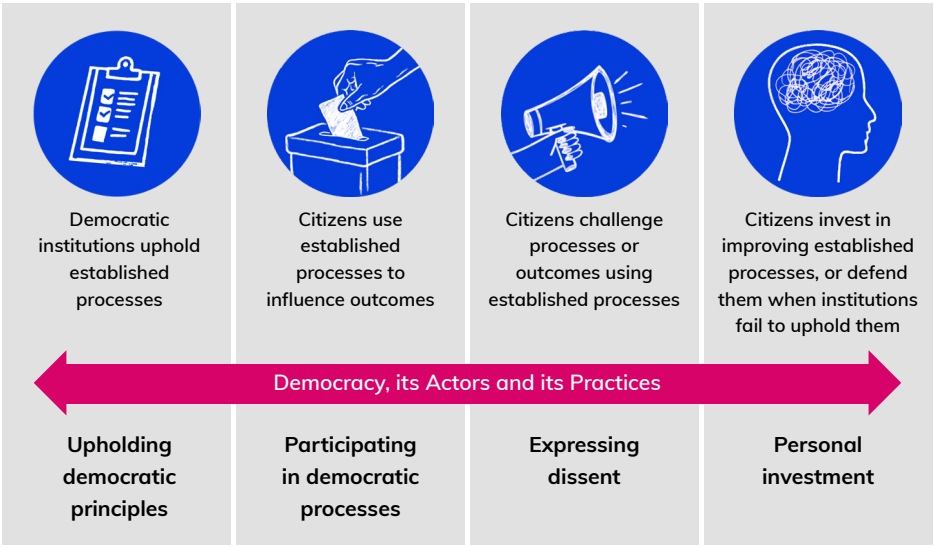

Figure 2: Four democratic practices, who practices them and through what processes

Practice 1
Upholding democratic principles

Upholding democratic principles often rests with institutions that help ensure that a democracy functions fairly and with procedural values that mirror democratic ideals.

Practices under this category include holding free and fair elections,[21] upholding the rule of law, [22] and maintaining public trust in institutions through accountability and judicial independence.[23] Within a healthy democracy, institutions protect media freedom,[24] free speech and open dialogue,[25] and respect diverse opinions and minority rights.[26] Finally, a spirit of cooperation among citizens and leaders sustains democratic principles.[27]

Processes, including the possibility for legal challenges,[28] are important to these principles, such as democratic governance, rights, civil liberties and procedural justice.[29] Teaching these processes is the backbone of civic education on practices of participatory democracy.[30] Processes are important in strengthening institutions, including civil society.[31]

21 (Mauk and Grömping 2024; Weßels 2015)
22 (Mauk 2022)
23 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017; Collins and Gambrel 2017; Weßels 2015)
24 (Mauk and Grömping 2024; Cho 2014)
25 (Collins and Gambrel 2017; Glassman and Patton 2014; Subba 2014)
26 Tuhuteru 2023; Weßels 2015)
27 (Tuhuteru 2023)
28 (Gamboa 2023)
29 (Carlin 2018; Tankebe 2014)
30 (Higham and Djohari 2018; Glassman and Patton 2014; Cho 2014)
31 (Zulueta-Fülscher 2014)

Practice 2
Participating in democratic processes

This describes when citizens actively shape a decision about how they are governed, including through versions of participatory, direct, and deliberative democracy.

By participating in democratic processes, citizens hold authorities to account[32] and intentionally push institutions to represent their societies.[33] The most obvious example of this is voting of all types, including in elections or referendums.[34]

Godinho divides citizen participation into a series of progressive levels: information (to achieve substantive knowledge),[35] consultation, collaboration, and eventually empowerment.[36] At times, these practices are designed explicitly to counter authoritarianism,[37] or as a means to reclaim once-existing processes. An example of this is the revival of pre-colonial systems of community participation that historically resembled modern deliberative democracy and rights-based approaches.[38]

Participation can also be visible in member consultations within political parties or in town hall meetings on specific issues.[39] Participation in deliberative approaches can make an issue relevant to a broad population, even if the issue does not affect everyone directly.[40]

32 (Llano-Arias 2015)
33 (Holdo 2020)
34 (Gamboa 2023; Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Kern and Hooghe 2018) (Gauja 2015) (Ummara 2024; Gherghina and Geissel 2020)
35 (Zoizner 2021)
36 (Godinho et al. 2021)
37 (Forsyth 2019)
38 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
39 (Gerber and Mueller 2018; Gauja 2015)
40 (Mulvale et al. 2014)

These practices can be formalized, such as through community or citizens' assemblies,[41] localized constituency engagement,[42] consensus conferences,[43] deliberative fora (including between citizen and parliament),[44] mini-publics,[45] or assemblies of the poor.[46] They can also be more informal, such as coalition-building as a way to defend democratic space,[47] or community-based problem-solving.[48] Other informal practices of participation happen through interactions with officials; for example, constituents may support their representatives through fundraising or by offering them platforms for communication.

Practices can be framed around specific policy outcomes or goals, such as participatory budgeting,[49] participation in decisions about infrastructure and resource management,[50] consultative (often issue-specific) platforms,[51] or crowdsourced lawmaking.[52]

The absence of meaningful participatory and deliberative practices is particularly stark in pseudo-democratic settings, where participation can look performative,[53] or where participatory features like sensor deployments and data dashboards can lack genuine citizen deliberation.[54] Voting, while central to participation, can also be problematic if it is merely symbolic in authoritarian contexts or when participation or consultations feel tokenistic rather than meaningful, even if anchored in law.[55]

41 (Renz 2022; Llano-Arias 2015)
42 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
43 (Aceros and Domènech 2021)
44 (Hendriks and Kay 2019; Grillos 2022)
45 (Čabraja 2022)
46 (Forsyth 2019)
47 (Gamboa 2023)
48 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
49 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019; Jash 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
50 (Forsyth 2019)
51 (Renz 2022; Jash 2019)
52 (Jash 2019)
53 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
54 (Hartley 2021)
55 (Too 2024; Kirsch and Welzel 2019; Higham and Djohari 2018)

Practice 3
Expressing dissent

The public expresses support or discontent either within or outside of political decision-making structures.

Within political decision-making structures, expression practices include visible civic engagement,[56] for example through formal channels for public input, including personal appearances before the government.[57] These can also be direct expressions to parliament or governing authorities through petitions[58] or citizen initiatives to force debate of an issue in the legislature.[59] Outside of decision making structures, expression practices include protests[60] or engaging in public debate, such as by posting political content online.[61]

Dissent can also be expressed through performance assessments of decision makers. Such assessment can happen through performance indicators shared with citizens through reports or scorecards;[62] citizen-led monitoring[63] and constitutional checks on power.[64] Performance assessment practices in extreme cases include coalition-building against the government to express dissent, which can build pressure on public officials to respond or even lead to ousting or overthrowing leaders.[65]

56 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)
57 (Mulvale et al. 2014)
58 (Purec 2024; Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019)
59 (Christensen 2018; Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)
60 (Purec 2024; Gamboa 2023; Forsyth 2019; Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018; Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
61 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019)
62 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
63 (Llano-Arias 2015)
64 (Issacharoff 2018)
65 (Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017)

Practice 4
Personal investment

How people think and feel is a major driver and outcome of engagement. Being personally invested in democracy and feeling good about participating is important. The sense of being personally invested can be strengthened when democratic processes resonate with people's locally-lived experience.

Emotions and cognitive processes are a notable absence in the literature. There is rarely explicit acknowledgment of democratic practices that support and promote positive emotions about democracy, even though these emotions affect whether people feel personally invested. This oversight is significant because behavioral research links emotions to how humans engage with situations and derive meaning from and for their actions.

Personal investment in democracy is cultivated through practices that nurture positive attitudes and perceptions of democracy and most notably of trust, which is an important driver of engagement and participation.[66] This absence may be explained by assumptions either that emotions do not matter in the context of democracy—an assumption rooted in a tradition that separates rational deliberation and reason from feeling, with governance considered a matter for reason only—or because it is implied or accepted as self-evident that engaging in some of the practices outlined above will result in positive emotions. Yet, trust in democratic institutions and processes is important and has dynamic effects.[67] For instance, higher trust in institutions influences how much people support citizens' initiatives.[68]

66 (OECD 2022b)
67 (Mauk 2022; Nahmias 2022
68 (Christensen 2018)

Personal investment can be facilitated by proximity to action. A push for localization in democracy aims to prioritize direct interactions with citizens to create emotional and cognitive connection.[69] These interactions can be intentional encounters between citizens and elected representatives, for example in town hall meetings[70] and opening up parliament to the public,[71] or take the form of relationships between governments and civil society.[72] Localization practices also include producing and consuming news stories that emphasize a local connection and emotionally resonate with people.[73] The effectiveness of these localized practices is debated. One question is whether direct encounters with democratic institutions spark a backlash from territory-defending elites or serve to galvanize the public to resist attempts to erode these institutions.[74]

69 (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020)
70 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
71 (Hendriks and Kay 2019)
72 (Kövér 2021)
73 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)
74 (Hyde 2020)

Idealism and pragmatism: how do democratic practices play out?

In identifying democratic practices and what gives them meaning for people, we found that the literature often implicitly draws on two archetypes of people. Both archetypes generally hold the mental model that democracy is a form of governance worth pursuing and protecting. People whose mental model consists fundamentally of anti-democratic values do not fall into either of these archetypes.

The two archetypes of support for democracy are:

1. *Idealist/Collectivist: the idealist/collectivist archetype emphasizes democratic values and the strength of democracy to unite people to work on issues together.*
2. *Pragmatist/Individualist: the pragmatist/individualist filters their views on democracy by asking what works best for me and my in-group.*

Figure 3 summarizes which practices most influence the behaviors of each archetype based on their underlying values and assumptions. While these models are useful explanatory tools, in reality a person can be influenced by both individualistic and collectivist values.

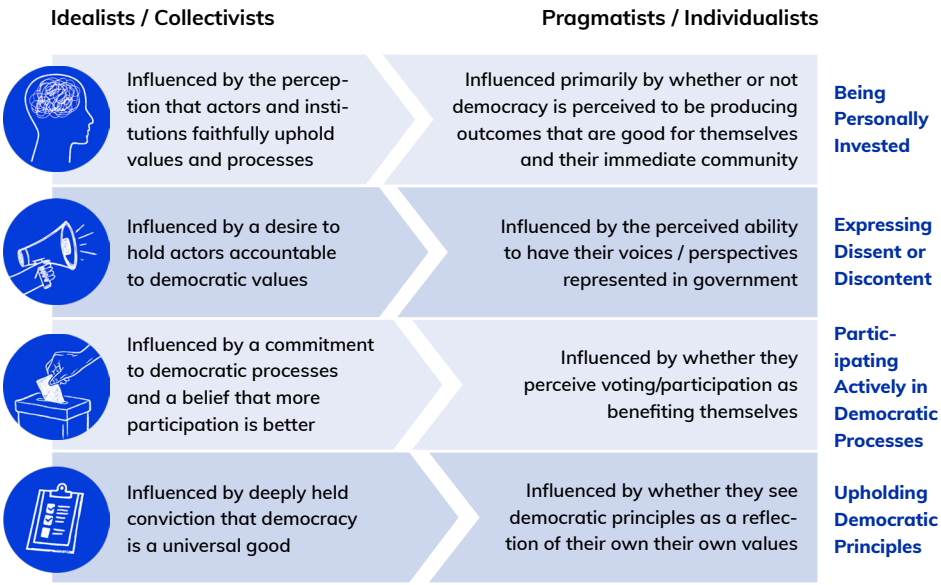

Figure 3: How archetypes of support for democracy translate into democratic practices

What are the outcomes of democratic engagement?

Narratives of democracy help people make sense and express beliefs about politics; this translates to engaging in or disconnecting from the practices discussed above. But what are the outcomes of these practices? One fundamental challenge to democracy is the narrative that democracy does not deliver on its promises. In other words: participating in democracy does not deliver the outcomes desired or expected by the idealist or the pragmatist archetypes.

This section draws on the reviewed literature to unpack what outcomes are expected from engaging in democratic practices and the level at which these outcomes may be observed–that is, the individual, local, national or international level. It is difficult to prove that one particular democratic practice produces one particular outcome (and few studies claim such certainty). This section therefore looks at democratic engagement more broadly. However, it is possible to give an overview of plausible consequences of democratic engagement at the individual, local, national or international level, including when democratic engagement might have negative consequences.

Table 2: Positive and negative outcomes associated with types of democratic practices highlights examples of positive and negative outcomes that have been associated with democratic engagement at different levels. This list is only based on the literature reviewed, and therefore is not comprehensive. It aims to show that engagement can have positive and negative consequences for democracy. Negative consequences often emerge from counterintuitive mechanisms or negative feedback loops.

Table 2. Positive and negative outcomes associated with types of democratic practices

On What Level is this Outcome Observable?	Positive Effect of Democratic Engagement	Negative Effect of Democratic Engagement
Individual	Democratic engagement can increase trust.[75] Engagement can support greater societal responsiveness that is experienced as positive on the personal level.[76]	Participation can dwindle if the goals that fueled the participation are not achieved.[77]
	More engagement in democracy correlates with stronger rejection of authoritarianism.[78]	Where civil servants, such as the police, were dissatisfied with outcomes of democratic processes, they were less committed to doing their work in the broader interest of society (such as through fair policing).[79]
	Being exposed to democratic engagement empowers critical thinking in students.[80]	If democracy is mainly covered in the media during crunch moments, such as political races, people's knowledge of substantive matters decreases, which can make them feel alienated from the process.[81]
	Engagement supports long-term societal commitment to democratic values.[82]	Where democratic values are held high by stressing citizens' agency (for example, by referring to them as clients or customers of political processes), citizens' expectations of that service are higher, creating the possibility for disappointment.[83]

75 (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
76 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
77 (Brodie et al, 2011)
78 (Cho 2014)
79 (Tankebe 2014)
80 (Subba 2014)
81 (Zoizner 2021)
82 (Subba 2014)
83 (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020)

On What Level is this Outcome Observable?	Positive Effect of Democratic Engagement	Negative Effect of Democratic Engagement
Individual	A nuanced understanding of what influences democratic processes (such as the networks that create power or marginalization) can support engagement.[84]	Street-level bureaucrats can prioritize their own opinion on what is right to gain power; this undermines participation and consultation.[85]
		Even if people articulate their support for democratic values, an outcome of engagement is not guaranteed: values do not easily translate into democratic participation.[86]
	Participation begets participation: if a participatory process is experienced as positive, this can increase participation and civic engagement,[87] including youth engagement.[88]	Where civil servants, such as the police, were dissatisfied with outcomes of democratic processes, they were less committed to doing their work in the broader interest of society (such as through fair policing).[79]
	Being exposed to democratic engagement empowers critical thinking in students.[80]	Participation can bring negative social experiences (for example through negative relationships or poor group structures) creating a negative feedback loop where the experience of engagement fuels disengagement.[89]

84 (Holdo 2020)
85 (Wittels 2020)
86 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
87 (Llano-Arias 2015)
88 (Jash 2019)
89 (Brodie et al, 2011)

On What Level is this Outcome Observable?	Positive Effect of Democratic Engagement	Negative Effect of Democratic Engagement
Local	Engagement leads to more informed civic discourse,[90] including fewer false narratives and more exchange of news between localities due to a network of community reporters.[91]	Engagement can perpetuate patron - client relationships between citizens and the state, thus limiting accountability.
	Engagement can increase representation.[92]	Democratic engagement can highlight that people are fragmented on specific issues.[93]
National	Engagement can empower marginalized groups, and strengthen citizen- or CSO-led innovations.[94]	Engagement can lead to fragmentation of the opposition, which can enable autocratization (for example in Venezuela).[95]
	Stronger democratic processes decreased the chance that leaders were ousted through military means, meaning that when leadership is challenged it is done through formal procedures such as impeachment or mobilization.[96]	Populist success in elections decreases capacity of government due to the ensuing polarization.[97]
	Direct democracy improves connections between citizens and institutions, and thereby supports social cohesion.[98] Institutional participation preserved democratic institutions (e.g. in Colombia).[99]	

90 (Jash 2019)
91 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)
92 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)
93 (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
94 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
95 (Gamboa 2023)
96 (Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017)
97 (Lee 2020)
98 (Godinho et al. 2021)
99 (Gamboa 2023)

On What Level is this Outcome Observable?	Positive Effect of Democratic Engagement	Negative Effect of Democratic Engagement
National	Engagement can strengthen public influence on policy so that policies better represent public interest.[100]	When populists win elections, government capacity decreases.[101]
International	Engagement might be better supported by structures that emphasise a culture of participation regardless of the institution.[102]	Where a culture of participation is supported, it may not be sustained or as effective if the cultural entity is unclear (for example, the Eurozone which struggles to develop a shared identity.)[103]

How do democratic practices support democracy?

How democratic practices translate into democracy is not always clear. Whether, for example, participation achieves the intended effect of supporting democracy is not comprehensively established and in fact Table 2 includes examples where engagement produces negative outcomes.[104] However, the literature indicates practices can work or interact to support the legitimacy of democracy,[105] and these interactions are summarized in Table 3.

100 (Llano-Arias 2015)
101 (Lee 2020)
102 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
103 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
104 (Trüdinger and Bächtiger 2023; Gerber and Mueller 2018)
105 (Holdo 2020)

One challenge with the academic literature is that scholars tend to deconstruct complex interactions into separate processes to facilitate analysis. In doing so, the analysis potentially loses sight of the holistic construction that is democracy. A more holistic perspective on democracy suggests that practice does not become valuable through its outcome: its presence is already a confirmation of democracy, meaning that the process of democracy and the outcome of democracy can be difficult to distinguish. Put differently, how things are done might be just as important as the fact that they are done, with what issues a process engages, and how inclusive it is.[106] This creates some of the challenges of measurement outlined in Box 3.

Table 3. How do democratic practices translate into support for democracy?

Practice	How does it support democracy?
Upholding Democratic Principles	The presence of trust in institutions that uphold democratic principles reduces support for populism,[107] thereby increasing the strength of democracy. Through education on democratic principles, teachers can be role models with the mandate to create spaces in which students can practice democracy,[108] or to support students in recognizing their capabilities as democratic citizens, thus supporting that they feel able to act in the interest of democracy in the future.[109] When institutions transparently evaluate, monitor, and communicate government initiatives and activities this can build trust in institutions, which strengthens democracy.[110] When elites intentionally respond to the concerns of citizens, modeling adherence to democratic principles, this can strengthen support for democracy.[111]

106 (Aceros and Domènech 2021)
107 (Mauk 2022)
108 (Subba 2014)
109 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
110 (OECD 2023d)
111 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)

Practice	How does it support democracy?
Participating in democratic processes	Participatory practices enhance democratic decision-making.[112] In particular, voting is essential for strengthening democracy. Voting indirectly expresses needs and policy preferences and facilitates a way to guide service delivery, strengthening democracy's credibility as a system capable of providing public goods.[113]
Expressing dissent	When the public has a channel to share perspectives early in the policymaking process, positive feedback loops between government and citizens are created. These build trust in and support for democratic institutions.[114]
Being Personally Invested	If democratic values are embedded in cognitive processes (for example, in learning or in a person's belief that different opinions can coexist), commitment to democracy is enhanced.[115]

The more citizens are involved in the entire process of decision-making from policy ideation to voting and through online, offline, or blended methods, the more they support democracy.[116] Involving the public in co-creating knowledge for participatory policy generates public trust and social capital.[117] Collaboration and coalition-building are also influential in strengthening democracy and slowing democratic backsliding.[118] Process and outcome overlap in their significance for support for democracy when an outcome is contentious, but the process highlights the need for mutual understanding as a matter of democratic principle.[119] The virtuous cycle between a democratic process and a contentious outcome is expected to be self-reinforcing; however, it might also be hindered when an outcome is experienced as exclusive, leading citizens to have the perception that democracy does not include everyone in the same way.[120]

112 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020)
113 (Purec 2024)
114 (OECD 2023d, 2024a)
115 (Cho 2014)
116 (Jash 2019)
117 (Godinho et al. 2021
118 (Gamboa 2023)
119 (Barker 2017)
120 (Forsyth 2019)

Democratic processes can have ambitious goals. For example, citizens may seek to entirely redefine the state's role and demand new democratic spaces, such as the case of citizens' assemblies that seek more autonomy for the public in policy design and decision-making.[121] Finland's citizens' initiatives redefined the citizen-state relationship by treating proposals from a specified number of citizens as equal to legislative proposals from members of parliament.[122]

The literature covers a few cognitive processes that influence support for democracy—for example, processes that seek to overcome perceptions in the case of one group framing another as a political enemy. Such perceptions of confrontation can be self-reinforcing: attitudes deteriorate as each group believes the other views them negatively. This echo chamber is considered a major factor in cases of social groups dehumanizing other groups and threatening the legitimacy of democratic processes, leading to withdrawal.[123] Other cognitive processes focus on how information is framed and presented in ways that can change perceptions. An example of this is bundling complex policies into a simpler, more accessible format or narrative that makes them easier to understand.[124]

A major focus of cognitive approach is in rejecting the idea that questions of governance are binary with a right or wrong answer. This cognitive approach to supporting democracy instead seeks to move people towards accepting and valuing other perspectives and knowledge.[125]

121 (Extinction Rebellion 2019; Cronkright and Pek 2020; Sortition Foundation 2022)(Llano-Arias 2015)
122 (Christensen 2018)
123 (Moore-Berg et al. 2020)
124 (Fesenfeld 2025)
125 (Mulvale et al. 2014)

Box 2: Unpacking the monolith: the complexities of talking about democracy

It can be tempting to think of narratives as something that makes things easier. With a clear story to tell, it seems straightforward to show people that engaging in democracy is not only necessary, but also rewarding. The challenge with a simple narrative of democracy is that it can neither capture what democracy is, nor can it predict how the same narrative might be perceived differently by diverse audiences. Therefore, it is important to differentiate messages according to both the messenger and audience.

This challenge arises because democracy is not one thing: it is a set of practices, institutions and interactions. It is also a mindset and an emotional haven for those who seek governance that respects different perspectives but appreciate that balancing these is difficult work. In democracy narratives, such complexity can easily be reduced, possibly making it much harder to use these different dimensions of democracy to convince people to engage. At the same time, overly simplifying what democracy is can make it easier to disengage. Democracy narratives that seek to support engagement thus cannot afford to shy away from complexity.

Complexity is part of the elements discussed below. Research cannot provide a straightforward answer to some obvious dilemmas on how best to support democracy. Studies that seek to show connections between democratic programming and, for example, increased participation in elections, have produced mixed results.[126] Even sophisticated explanations—for example that neoliberalism has created a crisis of masculinity that expresses itself in the dismissal of democracy—are challenged through more complex frameworks.[127]

126 (Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)

Overall, the literature invites us to appreciate the complexity of democracy. To serve as a reference list, the facets of this complexity are grouped under a number of headings below, pointing towards how this complexity shows up in scholarship.

Acknowledging trade-offs

Democracy is an imperfect system of trade-offs that are often difficult to sell to citizens.[128] These trade-offs are real and often contradictory: for example, while technology-driven solutions might bring masses into a decision-making process, the governance of such technology might clash with democratic values.[129] Prioritizing equality over democratic norms might mean democratic backsliding.[130] Disagreement, essential to democracy, can reinforce polarization.[131] Pluralism—widely considered a crucial element of democracy—can complicate more straightforward explanations of what democracy is since it highlights the need to understand many different types of motivations and pathways for people's engagement.[132] An effective policy may be so complex that, despite its success, it is not legible to the public and thus more vulnerable to attacks on the policy's legitimacy.[133]

Trade-offs occur at the procedural level, such as when a crisis is used to justify a rapid government response at the expense of deliberation with the public.[134] Rather than glossing over the complexities of trade-offs, acknowledging them drives home the idea that for complex problems, no simple or obvious solutions exist.

127 One such framework, for example, is gender race capitalism (Sugg 2015)
128 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
129 (Renz 2022)
130 (Facchini and Melki 2021)
131 (Moore-Berg et al. 2020)
132 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
133 (Fesenfeld 2025)
134 (Kövér 2021)

Nobody is an island

Each narrative is created by a person within their context, which is an interplay (and often a feedback loop) of personality, structure and other aspects of human behavior.[135] Context adds complexity: people will experience and think about democracy differently depending on whether they feel socially integrated[136] or on their identity, such as their gender.[137] Understandings of democracy can also differ depending on socioeconomic status.[138] A behavioral perspective highlights that cognitive biases play a role,[139] which can help explain gaps between attitudes and behavior; i.e. to explain cases in which people express commitment to democracy, but this commitment is not reflected in their actions,[140] or where the support for direct democracy is actually support for populism (based on the idea of cutting out a political elite.[141] A behavioral lens also foregrounds emotions, which are crucial to understanding how people trust processes and institutions, including how to explain possible gaps between what authors refer to as objective institutional measures of performance and how institutions are perceived.[142]

The literature acknowledges other factors influencing how people view and interact with democracy.[143] Democratic outcomes depend on socioeconomic status and the resiliency of democratic institutions[144] as much as they depend on people's enthusiasm for democracy. For example, a study rejects the notion that teaching citizens about voting will produce democratic citizens, and instead points to influence from other cultural, institutional, and contextual factors, such as elite privilege, national political systems, and differing perspectives between teachers and students.[145]

135 (Diaz del Valle, Jang, and Wendel 2024) See also (Gem et.al, 2026b
136 (Barker 2017)
137 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020)
138 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)
139 (Hartman et al. 2022; Canagarajah et al. 2021; Cho 2014)
140 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Christensen 2018; Tankebe 2014)
141 (Trüdinger and Bächtiger 2023)
142 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
143 (Jash 2019)

Breaking through a complex information landscape is difficult

People consume information differently and have different ways of engaging.[146] Targeting a group with a clear message is challenging. Polarization of a media landscape increases this complexity.[147] Power asymmetries can make citizen engagement seem futile or dispiriting.[148]

Contradictions

Support for democracy is not linear. Increased engagement in democratic processes can fragment the people involved into sub-groups, particularly if no improvements are observed, such as in service delivery.[149] Media coverage of elections as a 'horse race' (meaning the emphasis is on who leads and who trails in the polls, rather than on the substance of political campaigns) can increase cynicism, but also spark interest in politics in a way that nourishes engagement.[150] People might in principle support democracy, but in practice their support is shaped by crises, government performance, or peer trust.[151] Corruption might correlate with higher support for democracy as an ideal but lower trust in institutions.[152]

Engagement is not about success

Democratic engagement cannot be judged solely on the success of its outcomes. Yet, when citizens see little impact of their engagement, it is difficult to convey why engagement is worthwhile, which can fuel withdrawal.[153]

Democracy interacts with other challenges

Democracy is not a standalone system: it interacts with information, governance, power and political interests. This interaction involves

144 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)
145 (Higham and Djohari 2018)
146 (Nielsen and Langstrup 2018)
147 (Barker 2017)
148 (Čabraja 2022)
149 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
150 (Zoizner 2021)
151 (Mauk 2022; Amessou Adaba, Koffi and David Boio 2024)
152 (Collins and Gambrel 2017)
153 (Gerber and Mueller 2018) (Brodie et al. 2011)

managing challenges that can be hard to disentangle, contributing to disillusionment. For example, when a government relies on data and technology to facilitate decision-making, issues around transparency and data privacy could arise.[154] Within institutions, relationships between political parties and legislative and executive bodies are constantly negotiated, sometimes creating dysfunction or overreach–none of which are conducive to positive perceptions of democracy.[155] Tension can exist between elite-driven initiatives and citizens' interests.[156] Communications technology has upended checks and balances against populism because information is distributed via many different challenges, bypassing previous editorial processes.[157] In addition, the context of a person receiving information—particularly mis- and disinformation—shapes how this information is perceived, making it difficult to pass general policies.[158]

Democracy is long-term

It is important that we expand our understanding of democracy to include longer-term, more complex processes of democratic systems—including how institutions gain legitimacy or how values and performance of institutions interact.[159] A long-term perspective takes into account historical narratives of democracy to understand whether and how they shape present-day narratives.[160] The long-term perspective illuminates trends and the impact of historic events, such as the 2008 economic crisis, as turning points in public understanding of and demand for democratic accountability.[161]

154 (Hartley 2021)
155 (Issacharoff 2018)
156 (Hendriks and Kay 2019)
157 (Lee 2020)
158 (Wuttke and Foos 2025; Mauk and Grömping 2024)
159 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)
160 (Forsyth 2019)
161 (Weßels 2015)

What are the major narratives of democracy?

Narratives suggest stories. While stories and narratives are similar, they are distinct. The Narrative Initiative developed this helpful metaphor: "What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning."[162] This implies that narratives must plausibly reflect lived experiences and observable reality. Lasting narratives must feel intuitively true based on observation, experience, beliefs, and values.

Stories and the narratives they form are the backbone of how many societies have shared their history and developed their morals and values. Narratives shape worldviews and define how people interact with power, how people think about their own identities and those of other groups from which they want to distinguish themselves, and how they make decisions. Narratives are not a matter of simply being told what to think: the mechanism through which narratives are formed is an interplay of experience, personality, identity, repetition and, overall, context.

Context can be complex, requiring consideration of 'the mental landscape,' which captures the interaction of "how people experience their world, act in it and make decisions" with "the deep links between memories of events long gone, the everyday experience of life (and of waiting for life to happen) and how an individual makes sense of it."[163]

162 (The Narrative Initiative 2017, 12)
163 (Schomerus 2023b, 104)

Some of the deepest narratives we hold are formed by these "events long gone," such as in childhood. Children's fairy tales offer strong narratives: good conquers evil; hard work pays off; reciprocity is important. Stories are powerful vehicles for learning because they operate at an emotional and experiential level, helping us relate to and internalize abstract ideas.[164] Narratives formed in adulthood through stories and our lived experiences become an internal story about the world and our place in it.

Through repetition of similar themes, lessons, or morals, a collection of stories (or experiences) becomes a narrative. Once these narratives are rooted in our mind, we unconsciously use them to understand our experiences and give them meaning. Thematically similar or complementary narratives are then used to build our broad belief systems or mental models of how the world works, powerfully shaping our beliefs, which inform our actions. For instance, the narratives that "democracy is captured by elites" or "strong leaders will protect us" come to shape and justify our actions like choosing not to vote or supporting a candidate because they project an image of strength. Similarly, if someone holds a narrative that "democracy doesn't work for people like me," they may ignore messages about voting or civic engagement unless those messages are presented in ways that challenge or reframe that belief.[165]

The literature explains how narratives about the practices of democracy are formed.

164 (D-HUB 2025b; Garcia and Saiz 2025; Cronkright and Pek 2020)
165 (Apau et al. 2025; Prats, Smid, and Ferrín 2024)

Connecting major narratives to democratic practices

The same narrative of democracy can prompt different actions, depending on context. In this section, we break down what narratives exist, how these are divided between idealists and pragmatists and how they link to democratic practices. What these narratives show is that people can be disillusioned and disengaged, even if their mental model is that democracy in principle is worth supporting.

The narratives presented here are not always explicitly articulated in the literature. The following section identifies major narratives associated with the four democratic practices introduced earlier, many of which are only implicit. They include narratives that support the notion of democracy and those that fuel disengagement with democracy. Some narratives do both. However, we exclude narratives of people fundamentally opposed to democracy.

Practice: Democracy means upholding democratic principles

In these narratives, democracy represents values, processes and outcomes. Narratives can emphasize either how upholding certain principles can revive democracy or how elites can circumvent those principles by manipulating processes, thereby hollowing out democracy.

Table 4. Motivating factors for democratic engagement and meta-narratives connected to upholding democratic principles

Idealists	Pragmatists
Motivating factors	
When engaging in upholding democratic principles, idealists are influenced by a deeply-held conviction that democracy is a universal good.	When engaging in upholding democratic principles, pragmatists are influenced by whether they see democratic principles as a reflection of their own values.
Mental model/ meta-narrative on democracy (connected to upholding democratic principles)	
Democracy is unquestionably good. Its ideals and institutions must be defended and protected. I hold democratic values dear.	Democracy is not perfect, but is the best available choice for achieving the outcomes that I view as important–and I do not oppose the values it represents.

Table 5. Narratives on upholding democratic principles

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Upholding Democratic Principles		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic principles?**
Democracy is an unquestionable value.	This captures the notion of democracy and participation as a human right,[166] or an expression of cultural norms.[167]	This can strengthen democratic engagement when citizens might emphasize different aspects of democracy as important—for example as simple understanding of majority rule or as a safeguard of liberal values.[168]
Democracy is a call to action.	Narratives can emerge from resistance, for example when democracy is under attack, helping to unify actors towards joint support.[169]	This can strengthen democratic engagement through the refrain that "voting is a civic duty," which is a commonplace version of this narrative.
Processes can contribute to accountability.	This narrative insists on democratic processes to hold institutions to account, demanding that institutions make changes to ensure processes remain inclusive.[170]	This can strengthen democratic engagement through holding institutions to account.

166 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
167 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)
168 (Zaslove and Meijers 2024)
169 (Gamboa 2023)
170 (Kim 2019)

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Upholding Democratic Principles		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic principles?**
Democracy needs to show measurable results.	This narrative upholds that democracy's success is measurable.	If indicators are viewed as neutral, then improvements (e.g. in economic performance) can increase commitment to democracy.[171] This narrative can fuel disengagement when indicators are not viewed as neutral tools. For example, when indicators are manipulated to show improvement or control the narrative.[172]
The tools of democracy have not established a fundamentally better system.	This narrative suggests that democracy has established the norm that power structures are not to be challenged.[173]	This narrative can fuel disengagement through the sense that democratic deliberative structures, even if formalized, are insufficient to address deeply structural issues, such as racial inequality.[174]
Democracy does not fit with cultural values.	Histories of oppression (where participation in governance was forbidden) created a legacy of inequity (often rooted in colonialism). This means that for democracy to be seen as culturally appropriate, it needs to be reimagined as participatory and representing indigenous values–which as a process is only possible if people are engaged in the first place.[175]	This narrative can fuel disengagement when democracy does not change legacies of inequity and oppression, or when overcoming those legacies towards democracy requires the belief that ultimately democracy has not overcome oppression needs to be supported. Words laden with the wrong connotations or spoken by the wrong person can be counterproductive to effective messaging.[176] Words spoken in the wrong context, or while being unaware of the specific culture of democratic engagement in a particular setting, can deter from engaging.[177]

171 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)
172 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
173 (Forsyth 2019)
174 (Barker 2017)
175 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
176 (Volmert and Blustein Lindholm 2025)
177 (Too 2024)

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Upholding Democratic Principles		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic principles?**
Elites can shape their own processes.	This narrative acknowledges the power structures which activists might be up against;[178] the power of the political elite;[179] or the independence of bureaucrats to act according to their own judgement, rather than taking citizens' interest into account.[180]	This narrative can fuel disengagement when perceptions are widespread that a government is captured by elites, is unresponsive to the desires of regular citizens, is corrupt, or its processes are rigged.[181]
Democracy cannot be implemented by democratic institutions.	This tension is especially strong in the US where democracy is often equated with individual liberty, and government is often understood as existing to serve individual needs.[182] This narrative also shows a tension in diagnosing where harm to democracy comes from. A story intended to convey the harms of structural racism, for instance, might unintentionally lead to the conclusion that the success or failure of the protagonist was due to their individual choices and actions rather than systemic causes.	This narrative can fuel disengagement when majoritarian decisions are perceived to infringe upon individual liberties or do not represent the will of the minority; this may undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions writ large.[183] Communications about the dysfunction of democratic institutions that focus on an individual within an institution can obscure the role of systemic factors.[184]

178 (Forsyth 2019)
179 (Cho 2014)
180 (Wittels 2020)
181 (Avramovska et al. 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; FrameWorks Institute 2024; OECD 2023c; Brezzi et al. 2021; Extinction Rebellion 2019)
182 (FrameWorks Institute 2023b; Volmert, Gerstein Pineau, and Cohen 2023)
183 (Volmert, Gerstein Pineau, and Cohen 2023)
184 (Topos Partnership 2020)

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Upholding Democratic Principles		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic principles?**
Democratic processes are ignorant of politics.	The narrative that process matters above all can depoliticize and depersonalize processes,[185] ultimately making democracy seem naïve.	This narrative can fuel disengagement when processes seem too removed from political realities.
Democracy is not crisis proof: in hard times, other considerations need to come first.	This narrative makes space for democratic processes to be bypassed when circumstances are interpreted to require action or extraordinary measures, such as for national security.[186]	This narrative creates disengagement when it suggests that other considerations—for example national security—need to take precedent over democratic processes.

185 (Aceros and Domènech 2021)
186 (Kövér 2021)

Practice: Democracy as participating in democratic processes

Where democracy is equated with discrete decision points—such as elections— narratives often narrowly understand participation as voting. Where democracy is understood as requiring consensus—such as through consultations— narratives may emphasize the need for participation and the effort these processes require.

Table 6. Motivating factors for democratic engagement and meta-narratives connected to participating in democratic processes

Idealists	Pragmatists
Motivating factors	
When participating in democratic processes, idealists are influenced by a commitment to democratic processes and a belief that more participation is better.	When participating in democratic processes, pragmatists are influenced by whether they perceive voting/participation as benefiting themselves.
Meta-Narrative on Democracy (connected to participating in democratic processes)	
Direct democracy is inherently empowering. More opportunities to vote, such as referenda, or to participate actively in decision-making are always better.	Democracy is mainly about voting in order to get my candidate to represent my issues in the way most beneficial to me. Democracy also sometimes requires nuanced knowledge that I do not have, so I would rather someone else took the time to deal with it.

Table 7. Narratives on participating in democratic processes

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Participating in Democratic Processes		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic processes?**
Voting, referenda and direct democracy empower citizens and are a crucial expression of democratic values.	The narrative on voting is influenced by civic attitudes in different contexts,[187] and is culturally specific.[188]	This can strengthen democratic engagement when voting is experienced as empowering or a fundamental expression of citizenship.
Democracy depends on acknowledging other views.	This narrative stresses that engagement cannot be a one-off, but requires consistent engagement with those with whom you disagree.[189]	The understanding that differences are fundamental and require ongoing engagement can support participation.
Democracy depends primarily on casting a vote, therefore there is nothing else to do.	This narrative is prevalent in both established and emerging democracies and can create disengagement between elections and also pave the way for electoral manipulation.[190] In the US, people often equate democracy solely with the act of voting,[191] so when a vote does not go their way they may be prone to concluding that democracy does not work.	This narrative can fuel disengagement due to the experience of performative elections with predetermined outcomes. Where people feel complacent about their democracies (for example by taking elections for granted), pressure to reform is decreased and it is easier for autocratic regimes that claim to be democratic to take hold.[192]

187 (Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)
188 (Ummara 2024)
189 (Barker 2017)
190 (Lee 2020)(Higham and Djohari 2018)
191 (FrameWorks Institute 2023b)
192 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

What is the narrative?	What does it entail?	How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from upholding democratic processes?
Engaging in democratic processes (such as referendums) is a burden to citizens, or it is meaningless.	Civic attitudes are culturally specific, with some countries lacking a referendum tradition (Canada), others being accustomed to it (Italy) and some using the tool to elevate the profile of an issue (UK).[193]	Where cultures are not supportive of referendums, this narrative might decrease participation. When participation is supported, but superficial, it can feel tokenistic or performative with the effect that decision-making remains concentrated in leadership elites.[194] Participation can be experienced as tokenistic when it is uneven across different issues and populations,[195] with minorities finding it difficult to participate.[196] Mistrust can emerge if people feel marginalized, including through use of electoral technology that is not accessible to them.[197]
Elections only serve politicians.	This narrative emerges when, for example, political campaigns are covered through what is called 'strategic, horse race, or game coverage'—i.e. with the main emphasis on how a politician tries to win.[198]	This narrative increases political alienation because the public experiences politics as a cynical competition.[199]
Democratic consensus cannot be achieved through democratic institutions.	People can hold seemingly contradictory beliefs: on the one hand, claiming belief in democracy as a system and at the same time expressing higher trust in non-democratic institutions.[200]	This narrative decreases engagement because it is not clear what institutions can actually support democratic consensus, hence engagement loses its meaning.

193 (Ummara 2024)(Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)
194 (Gauja 2015)(Renz 2022)
195 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)
196 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
197 (Hartley 2021)
198 (Zoizner 2021)
199 (Zoizner 2021)
200 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)

Practice: Democracy as expressing dissent

Where democracy is equated with expression—such as protests— narratives will involve a tipping point: with enough protest, change will come. Where democracy is judged by its ability to deliver good outcomes, narratives may emphasize that expressing dissent with the performance of democracy—such as when a democratically-elected government fails to fulfill its promises–will correct policy towards better outcomes. However, even when dissent is expressed, pathways for rectifying bad performance may be unclear and measures of performance may be a non-democratic tool.

Table 8. Motivating factors for democratic engagement and meta-narratives connected to expressing dissent

Idealists	Pragmatists
Motivating factors	
When engaging in expressing dissent, idealists are influenced by a desire to hold actors accountable to democratic values.	When engaging in expressing dissent, pragmatists are influenced by the perceived ability to have their voices represented in government.
Meta-Narrative on Democracy (connected to expressing dissent)	
Democracy requires acknowledging and engaging with people with whom you disagree. Cooperation and consensus building with diverse people and perspectives is key.	Democratic processes–of which expressing dissent is part–can contribute to accountability and legitimacy, both of which are helpful in helping me achieve my goals.

Table 9. Narratives on expressing dissent

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Expressing Dissent		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from expressing dissent?**
Democracy means freedom of expression.	Citizens—including those with recent histories of violent political repression—can safely show their dissent.	The sense of safety encourages engagement.
Democracy needs to be called upon in moments of crisis, when decision-makers tend to make the wrong decisions.	This narrative could arise when parties evoke democracy to justify reforms that look as if they are protecting democracy, even if in reality they protect existing power structures;[201] or when authoritarians signal that their action is in line with democracy, leading to overconfidence amongst the public in the status of democracy.[202]	This narrative increases engagement through a sense of urgency that fundamental democratic values are under threat.
Freedom of expression is meaningless if my demands are not heard.	This narrative is born out of a sense of frustration that change is slow or not noticeable.	Protesting without a noticeable effect can erode the willingness to participate. Social hierarchies are confirmed when freedom of expression is curtailed through the power of those who have stronger control of, for example, media.[203]
Institutions are dysfunctional, so only acute and radical acts of dissent work.	This narrative seeks to find ways of expressing dissent outside democratic structures, for example through violence.	This narrative on the one hand fuels engagement in protests, but due to its foundation in disillusionment with democratic processes can create disengagement from other processes.

201 (Gauja 2015)
202 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)
203 (Forsyth 2019)

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Expressing Dissent		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from expressing dissent?**
Democracy has not delivered.[204]	This narrative includes personal dissatisfaction with governance,[205] low civic expectations,[206] and perceptions of corruption, elite capture, lack of government responsiveness, and systemic inequality.[207] It captures that current deliberative structures, even if formalized, are insufficient to address deeply structural issues, such as racial inequality.[208] Authoritarian and populist movements have capitalized on this disillusionment by offering emotionally resonant narratives that promise strength, security, and belonging.[209]	A lackluster performance of democracy can result in disillusionment even if fundamental values of democracy have not been abandoned.[210] A backlash can also occur when the issue that fueled dissent (such as corruption) is not addressed, leading to an erosion of trust.[211] Misperception of what democracy is and how it deals with issues (such as corruption) might lower public demand for genuine democratic reforms, thereby making it easier for autocracies to take hold,[212] and in turn decreasing trust in democracy.[213] Where there is low trust to begin with, accountability and political pluralism are weakened.[214]

204 (Metropolitan Group 2025)
205 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
206 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
207 (Avramovska et al. 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; OECD 2023c; Brezzi et al. 2021; Extinction Rebellion 2019)
208 (Barker 2017)
209 (Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; D-HUB 2024a)
210 (Weßels 2015)
211 (Collins and Gambrel 2017)
212 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)
213 (Issacharoff 2018)
214 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)

Narratives Held By Idealists & Pragmatists on Expressing Dissent		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from expressing dissent?**
We live in a democracy, but it is not working.	When people believe they live in a democracy but they see that key democratic practices are lacking, this can create disillusionment.[215] People in authoritarian contexts might also misunderstand democratic norms–for example inclusion–in ways that reinforce non-democratic preferences.[216] Populism and democratic backsliding threaten democratic institutions and processes,[217] and can undermine democracy through seemingly democratic practices (such as majority rule, institutions, or deliberative practices).[218] The literature highlights issues such as corruption;[219] breakdown of democratic practices to replace unpopular governments;[220] or crisis.[221]	People's strong psychological need to defend, rationalize, and justify existing political arrangements may lead to people stubbornly clinging to the narrative that they live in a democracy even after its democratic institutions have been hollowed out.[222] The sense of frustration, however, can lead to disengagement or the rationalization that the system does not benefit from citizens' support.

215 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
216 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)
217 (Hartman et al. 2022) (Issacharoff 2018)
218 (Zaslove and Meijers 2024; Lee 2020)
219 (Collins and Gambrel 2017)
220 (Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017)
221 (Kövér 2021)
222 (Davidson 2022)

Practice: Democracy as personal investment

Where democracy is a matter of how citizens feel about it (and how these feelings influence their thinking), narratives can foreground emotions. Democracy is also a matter of proximity to decision-making and its consequences: the closer these are, the more personally invested citizens are.

Table 10. Motivating factors for democratic engagement and meta-narratives connected to personal investment

Idealists	Pragmatists
Motivating factors	
When personally invested in democracy, idealists are influenced by the perception that actors and institutions faithfully uphold values and processes.	When personally invested in democracy, pragmatists are influenced primarily by whether or not democracy is perceived to be producing outcomes that are good for themselves and their immediate community.
Meta-Narrative on Democracy (connected to being personal investment)	
Democracy leads to a better version of society. It creates positive experiences and its values are universally resonant. Democracy allows local knowledge to constructively inform decision-making.	Democracy can be frustrating and often feels distant. In the abstract it does not necessarily resonate, but democracy is good primarily because it has worked for me.

Table 11. Narratives on personal investment

Narratives Held By Idealists and Pragmatists on Being Personally Invested		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from being personally invested?**
Democracy creates positive experiences.	Foregrounding personal stories, this narrative emphasizes how democracy has made things better for individuals, such as those emerging from a non-democratic past.[223]	People are much more likely to engage in processes and experiences that leave them with positive feelings.
Democracy is good because it worked for me.	In this narrative, people's personal experience with the system will influence their perception of democracy.[224]	People are more likely to engage when they can see a clear benefit for themselves.

223 (Llano-Arias 2015)
224 (Nielsen and Langstrup 2018)

Narratives Held By Idealists and Pragmatists on Being Personally Invested		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from being personally invested?**
Democracy resonates with me.	This narrative can be created from often simple, social media-driven messages people receive and respond to emotionally.[225]	This narrative can support engagement based on emotional attachment or a sense of identity tied to democracy. While stories and anecdotes are often more persuasive than facts and statistics because they tap into emotions and can make us feel connected with the protagonists,[226] personalized stories are not always an effective messaging strategy for changing behavior or building support for systemic change.[227] This can be because salient aspects of a person's identity may be lost when crafting a message[228] and the aspects of an identity a person considers important may be left out.[229] In such cases, a story intended to build rapport and empathy might backfire because the recipient does not relate to the protagonist and instead feels alienated from the message.[230]

225 (Toode 2020)
226 (Extinction Rebellion 2019; Cronkright and Pek 2020)
227 (Konno 2020; Topos Partnership 2020)
228 (Akinyi Kay, Liang, and Kombo 2015)
229 (Schomerus 2023a)
230 (Busara 2018)

Narratives Held By Idealists and Pragmatists on Being Personally Invested		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from being personally invested?**
Democracy is a better version of society.	This narrative is shaped by mass culture, which may present apocalyptic societies (often capitalist)[231] as the breakdown of democratic structures.	Engagement can be fuelled by belief that a dystopian society must be actively avoided.
The increased effort democracy takes is worthwhile in good times.	This narrative is tied to positive economic conditions,[232] as well as a positive experience of personal political freedom.[233]	When experiences of democracy are positive, the increased effort is overlooked or accepted.
Democracy can support that decisions are locally relevant.	This narrative emphasizes that local knowledge can interact constructively with decisions.	This can support engagement as the relevance of an outcome is clear.
Democracy is impossible because the other side treats me badly.	This narrative can be fueled by the expectation that the opposing side holds deep resentments against one's own side, creating resentment and rejection of democracy.[234] Perceptions are particularly powerful when people assume how they are perceived (for example across partisan lines) and believe that others think less of them than they actually do, reinforcing actions that are increasingly polarizing or hostile and increasing partisan animosity.[235]	This narrative can fuel disengagement due to a resignation that working with others will create more (imagined) hostility.

231 (Sugg 2015)
232 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018; Weßels 2015; Tankebe 2014)
233 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)
234 (Moore-Berg et al. 2020)
235 (Hartman et al. 2022; Moore-Berg et al. 2020)

Narratives Held By Idealists and Pragmatists on Being Personally Invested		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from being personally invested?**
Democracy is frustrating.	In this narrative, cynicism wins. For example, frustration with or negative views of politicians' behavior during campaigns may dampen interest in elections.[236]	This can fuel disengagement out of frustration and lack of purpose.
Democracy does not represent anything that is important to me.	This narrative can dominate when the object of government, for example the EU, is experienced as too abstract to be meaningful.[237] Overly opaque or procedural processes conducted in language that is inaccessible to the general public can add to this sense of alienation. Proximity also matters: to what extent do people feel that the locus of decision-making is politically relevant for them—for example, is the EU perceived as an institution that directly influences lives and thus warrants engagement?[238]	This narrative creates disengagement through distance, where it seems that power is held in opaque systems.

236 (Zoizner 2021)
237 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
238 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)

Narratives Held By Idealists and Pragmatists on Being Personally Invested		
What is the narrative?	**What does it entail?**	**How does it strengthen support for or disengagement from being personally invested?**
Democracy does not resonate with me.	Perceptions that the government is controlled by elites or corporations lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement from politics,[239] making many people, especially youth, believe that the concept of democracy is hollow.[240] Geographic factors such as greater distance to urban centers, lower population density, and lower access to public services can also affect trust in institutions.[241] Trust in institutions and processes matters,[242] with higher trust in institutions and more knowledge critical to influencing how much people support citizens' initiatives.[243]	This can fuel disengagement through distance to decision-makers and power. Addressing the geographic effects on trust is key to restoring support for democracy, especially in more rural communities.
Democracy means that decisions are made in a center of power that is far removed from where I am.	This narrative embodies that the centers of decision-making and power are far removed (both physically and figuratively) and do not care about the consequences of their decisions.	This expresses a sense of alienation and irrelevance that can fuel disengagement.

239 (D-HUB 2025c)
240 (Apau et al. 2025)
241 Brezzi et al. 2021)
242 (Mauk 2022)
243 (Christensen 2018)

What influences changes to narratives: connecting communication and context

Once a narrative has become rooted in someone's mind it can be difficult to change, especially if it supports or is supported by other widely held narratives.

Narratives often reinforce and support each other in ways that can make some narratives more difficult to adjust than others. Efforts to map the mutually constitutive relationships between dominant narratives are important for identifying where narrative change efforts are most likely to succeed.[244] While strategic messaging, intentional framing, and persuasive storytelling all contribute to narrative change—see the accompanying brief *How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know)* for more detail[245]—effective communications alone are rarely enough to displace deeply held narratives or induce long-term change in systems towards sustainable practices. Repetition and consistency are crucial since narratives are formed from collections of thematically similar stories and messages, underscoring the need for coordination across organizations and actors with shared goals for narrative change.[246]

That does not mean the messaging should be identical in all settings—pursuing that would ignore how contexts in which people live shape narratives. Narrative diversity tailored to the local social, cultural, and political context

244 (Metropolitan Group 2025; IRIS (International Resource for Impact and Storytelling) 2023)
245 (Gem et al. 2026a)
246 (Comninos and Warren 2025; IRIS (International Resource for Impact and Storytelling) 2023; Robson 2018)

is key, and such localized narratives plausibly develop over time from within those communities, rather than being imported via communication strategies by outsiders.[247] As information ecosystems have become increasingly decentralized, moving away from a top-down broadcast model of messaging, toward communications that foster dialogue, community, and relationship-building is crucial.[248] To reach and resonate with target audiences, communication strategies to support narratives intended to influence practices and behaviors must be multilingual, multi-channel, and culturally informed, with messages tailored to diverse audiences.[249] If behavior change towards sustainable practices is the goal, evidence-based insights on communication strategies can support uptake or abandonment of specific behaviors.

Box 3: What works? Measurement of narratives of democracy and their effect

How we measure democratic engagement and the quality of democratic processes remains a significant challenge. Performance indicators are prominent,[250] but they are often crude and unable to capture the nuance of, for example, online and offline political behavior,[251] differences in how democracy is understood,[252] or broader systems of democratic engagement.[253] The extent to which democratic engagement directly strengthens democratic stability remains a question.[254]

247 (SNF Agora Institute 2025; Comninos and Warren 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025)
248 (Gibbons and Mohabir 2024; Matasick, Alfonsi, and Bellantoni 2020)
249 (Too 2024; Alfonsi et al. 2022)
250 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
251 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019)
252 (Claassen et al. 2025)
253 (Holdo 2020)
254 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)

Yet, what does measuring success entail with regard to supporting positive narratives of democracy? Measurement is always a challenge, but there is a particularly striking disconnect in how studies measure the effectiveness of narratives. Measurement is often focused on perceptions, but practices that are expected to be an outcome of a narrative treatment are often overlooked—partially because the effectiveness of democratic practices is itself difficult to establish.[255] General support for democracy is a focus of measurement,[256] sometimes broken down into democratic values (e.g., pluralism, civil liberties, equality, freedom of speech, tolerance, responsibility of citizens),[257] and rejection of authoritarianism[258] or willingness to take pro-democracy actions.[259] Decreased polarization is measured by asking about changed attitudes towards other groups.[260]

How people feel about democracy is also measured through changes in perceptions, such as perceptions of trust in and the legitimacy of political initiatives or institutions,[261] of satisfaction with the success and accountability of such systems,[262] or of democracy as a system of winners and losers.[263] Emotional responses to democracy are also measured,[264] as are changes in knowledge and one's ability to distinguish the nuances of political systems.[265]

255 (Wittels 2020)
256 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Facchini and Melki 2021; Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018; Carlin 2018)
257 (Tuhuteru 2023; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Vishkin 2021; Shen and Zhang 2018; Subba 2014)
258 (Cho 2014)
259 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
260 (Barker 2017)
261 (Hartley 2021; Čabraja 2022; Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
262 (Wuttke and Foos 2025; Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019; Weßels 2015)
263 (Mauk and Grömping 2024; Mulvale et al. 2014)
264 (Hartman et al. 2022)
265 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019; Kirsch and Welzel 2019)

Processes can be measured. For example, do new spaces for dialogue emerge[266] and do people participate in these more?[267] Do processes achieve measurable change, such as in policies or agreements,[268] in a decrease of conflict,[269] or reduction in demand for populism.[270]

Change of behavior is measured through general participation,[271] voter participation,[272] or broader political engagement,[273] including through protests.

Recognized caveats with current measurement include small sample sizes,[274] lack of robust impact metrics,[275] biases such as self-selection bias,[276] social desirability bias,[277] and publication bias,[278] crude measures of how values are understood,[279] and an emphasis on self-reported data.[280]

There can be a lack of nuance in measurement. For example, failing to account for cultural context[281] or complex realities[282] in different socioeconomic settings[283] or considering the meaning of democracy to

266 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)
267 (Jash 2019)
268 (Gerber and Mueller 2018; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016; Llano-Arias 2015)
269 (Zulueta-Fülscher 2014)
270 (Lee 2020)
271 (Godinho et al. 2021; Hartley 2021; Subba 2014)
272 (Čabraja 2022; Kersting 2021; Kim 2019; Mattes and Thompson 2018; Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017; Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
273 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
274 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
275 (Jash 2019)
276 (Wuttke and Foos 2025; Kersting 2021; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
277 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019; Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)
278 (Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)
279 (Carlin 2018)
280 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Shen and Zhang 2018; Tankebe 2014)
281 (Facchini and Melki 2021)
282 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
283 (Gerber and Mueller 2018)

respondents,[284] particularly in under-researched contexts, such as minority or indigenous populations,[285] or outside European and North American contexts.[286]

Measurement reflects complexity in that it acknowledges that indicators are themselves political tools that create and maintain narratives. They can be manipulated.[287] There is a need to measure broadly, such as with a basket of indicators or through numerous types of measurement, including narrative and other types of qualitative analysis, to understand what commences and sustains engagement.[288]

Insights for practice: typology of communication strategies

The strategies and practice of communication about democracy with the goal of influencing how people actually practice democracy can be broadly divided into the approaches outlined in Table 4.

284 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)
285 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
286 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)
287 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
288 (Kersting 2021; Gray and Jones 2016)

Table 12. Common strategic approaches to communications

Communications Strategy Approach	Description
Framing	Framing strategies and insights on how to best use them are a major focus in the literature on strategic communications. These strategies include to make a message is framed in context-specific ways[289] that emphasize the agency of the recipient.[290] Good framing emphasises that a message can be understood,[291] taking into account divergent sentiments on a topic,[292] or the need to unpack policy narratives.[293] A successful framing in a post-colonial setting might be to amplify local rights to counter legacies of colonialism.[294] In situations of confrontations, framing strategies advocate mutual understanding,[295] and the need to build common ground across diverse stakeholders, including through direct democracy.[296] Where there is an identified need for accountability, framing strategies might presenting performance indicators as a tool of transparent management in governance[297] supporting legitimacy through transparency.[298] Successful frames might emphasise the need for deliberative and collaborative processes.[299] Appealing to emotions–primarily hope–can be an effective framing that emphasizes solutions, agency, and collective power; hope-based messages have outperformed fear-based or oppositional messaging.[300]

289 (Zulueta-Fülscher 2014)
290 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
291 (Too 2024)
292 (Renz 2022)
293 (Gray and Jones 2016)
294 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
295 (Barker 2017)
296 (Godinho et al. 2021)(Mulvale et al. 2014)
297 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
298 (Weßels 2015)
299 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
300 (D-HUB 2025b; Garcia and Saiz 2025; FrameWorks Institute 2025)

Communications Strategy Approach	Description
Source and Messenger Effect	This strategy consciously considers the effect that different sources, platforms, and messengers will have on how the message is received. It seeks to understand the source of a narrative;[301] and use a trusted messenger to create a credible narrative. The messenger matters almost as much as the message, with recipients being much more likely to believe, repeat, and share messages from someone perceived to be within their in-group or community,[302] including community media sources.[303] The channel of communication also matters,[304] particularly since there are age or generation gaps and different norms for length, tone, and format of content across social media platforms.[305] An example of how the messenger matters is seen when elites engage with the trade-offs of a decision and do so in public, grassroots settings, increasing their credibility.[306]
Education	Education is often a default strategy when attempting to build support for democracy or democratic initiatives, but reason-based appeals that rely mainly on facts and statistics to make their case are often the least effective.[307] At the same time, research shows that education is extremely important for building more resilient democracies. Those with a higher understanding of democratic processes and who have had more opportunity to develop and practice civic skills are more likely to support democracy.[308] More interactive and experiential learning is most effective,[309] and providing the opportunity to practice civic skills, especially in youth, is critical to developing a life-long commitment to democracy.

301 (Forsyth 2019)
302 (Metropolitan Group 2025; Extinction Rebellion 2019)
303 (Llano-Arias 2015)
304 (Cazenave and Bellantoni 2022)
305 (Busara 2020; SNF Agora Institute 2025)
306 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
307 (Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; Extinction Rebellion 2019)
308 (Apau et al. 2025; SNF Agora Institute 2025)
309 (Higham and Djohari 2018)

Communications Strategy Approach	Description
Incentives	Messaging campaigns will have limited success changing norms or practices if they conflict with incentive structures.[310] Incentives can be used to make communications more effective and engaging through gamification techniques,[311] like point-based systems, mobile scavenger hunts, and participatory budgeting interfaces to incentivize civic behaviors.[312] Narratives can also create social incentives if they tap into one's sense of self, values, or activate the desire to be perceived a certain way by others.[313] For example, an experiment testing the impact of nine narratives about men's role in domestic work all successfully incentivized men in Kenya to take an action or change their opinion.[314]
Stopping othering	Othering is the process through which an in-group and an out-group (or "other") is defined. Authoritarians all use othering to create out-groups who they can then use as scapegoats for the in-group's problems and cast as villains in their narratives. Common "others" include immigrants, the political establishment, or urban and global elites.[315] One antidote to othering is values-based messaging that fosters a sense of shared responsibility and inspires collective action.[316] Though people may tend to associate community with their place of residence,[317] shared values can create a sense of community and connection that transcends geography and identity.[318] Communications or engagement strategies to counter othering can also be established through media algorithms.[319]
A focus on systems change	While communications alone are unlikely to change systems, they can contribute to this goal by: explaining and advocating for more democratic processes and practices; expanding the collective understanding and definition of democracy;[320] offering hopeful visions of a better future that can be co-created based on shared values;[321] and by introducing novel solutions, such as new software or platforms for democratic participation.[322]

310 (Miller 2023)
311 (Lerner 2024)
312 (Jash 2019)
313 (Metropolitan Group 2025; D-HUB 2024b; Too 2024)
314 (Ojha et al. 2024)
315 (Metropolitan Group 2025; Avramovska et al. 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; D-HUB 2024a)
316 (Comninos and Warren 2025)
317 (Busara 2020)
318 (Metropolitan Group 2025; D-HUB 2025b
319 (Hartman et al. 2022)
320 (Comninos and Warren 2025; FrameWorks Institute 2023b)
321 (Sarda and Fischler 2025; JASS 2024)
322 (Llano-Arias 2015)

It is never just the message: what else shapes narratives?

While the content of communication is important, the literature suggests that in the interplay between messenger, message, context, and receiver, a number of factors (summed up in Figure 4) also influence whether narratives move the recipient towards support or rejection of democracy.

Figure 4: Factors that shape narratives

Socioeconomic Context: what shapes narratives?

- Historical events, such as war[323] or economic hardship.[324]

Values and Norms: what shapes narratives?

- Cultural and social norms,[325] including democratic norms.[326]
- Reclaiming oppressed indigenous values.[327]

Communications Landscape: what shapes narratives?

- Framing of democracy in the media (positively or negatively);[328] media that does not change its tune under pressure;[329] framing in other information sharing.[330]
- The media environment—what is reported, how is it reported on, who influences either—influences how democracy is talked about. The interplay between how political leaders take the media environment into account and how much this influences the media environment as well as the information citizens get and how they engage with society, requires further research.[331] The question of framing (how to segment messages to reach different audiences, how to build reputation, how to shape a message for greatest effect) is prominent.[332]

323 (Forsyth 2019)
324 (Facchini and Melki 2021)
325 (Forsyth 2019)
326 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)
327 (Mulumba et al. 2021)
328 (Forsyth 2019; Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)
329 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)
330 (Wittels 2020)
331 (Toode 2020)
332 (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020)

- Technology is not just a vehicle for messages, but also influences people's trust in democratic governance;[333] seeking to capture the difference between digital communication and digital political behaviour and respective real-life counterparts continues to be a prominent research agenda.[334] How technology can support circumventing authoritarian mechanisms (e.g., VPNs in China) is examined with the question of whether these create stronger democratic values.[335] A specific emphasis lies on the role of disinformation and how people perceive political processes, such as elections.[336]

Relationships: what shapes narratives?

- Engagement with peers or opponents through dialogue;[337] particularly trustbuilding face-to-face interactions;[338]
- Interaction between citizens and decision-makers;[339]
- Exchanges across borders;[340]
- Inclusive ways of sharing experiences and impressions;[341] deliberative communication.[342]

333 (Renz 2022)
334 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Nielsen and Langstrup 2018; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
335 (Shen and Zhang 2018)
336 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)
337 (Wuttke and Foos 2025; Higham and Djohari 2018)
338 (Llano-Arias 2015)
339 (Jash 2019)
340 (Higham and Djohari 2018)
341 (Aceros and Domènech 2021)
342 (Čabraja 2022)

Learning: what shapes narratives?

- Experiential learning of democratic processes[343] or other education;[344]
- Gamification of participation;[345]
- Increasing understanding of democracy,[346] for example through information or education.[347]

Experiences: what shapes narratives?

- Disappointment,[348] such as when resistance fails[349] or when checks and balances seem not to deliver;[350] or good experiences[351] in being able to influence a situation.[352]
- Experiencing democratic participation as draining,[353] or the way issues are debated as superficial.[354]
- When the present narratives correspond with lived experience (either to critique or support the value of democracy).[355]
- Keeping democracy alive requires exploring new governance mechanisms—such as community-led governance mechanisms that reimagine basic services such as water as a common good[356]—or exploring technology as a vehicle for new governance mechanisms by supporting trust and legitimacy.[357]
- Individualized understanding of democratic support.[358]

343 (Higham and Djohari 2018)
344 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
345 (Lerner 2024; Jash 2019)
346 (Cho 2014)
347 (Glassman and Patton 2014)
348 (Gauja 2015)
349 (Gamboa 2023)
350 (Zaslove and Meijers 2024)
351 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)
352 (Nielsen and Langstrup 2018)
353 (Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)
354 (Zoizner 2021)
355 (Gray and Jones 2016)
356 (Llano-Arias 2015)
357 (Hartley 2021)
358 (Carlin 2018)

Better democracy narratives: combining systems focus, communications, and context

Messaging through communication strategies must align with experience and observed reality. To be effective in supporting democratic practices, however, new narratives of democracy must be paired with structural reforms that make democratic participation more accessible, inclusive, and impactful. People are more likely to trust and engage with democratic institutions when they feel heard and see that their input leads to real change.[359] This means investing in civic education, public listening infrastructure, and participatory mechanisms that reflect diverse voices and experiences.[360] It also requires supporting local media, community leaders, and trusted messengers who can amplify democratic values in culturally-relevant ways.[361]

When people encounter narratives of democracy that accurately reflect their values and lived experiences, they may begin to see democracy not as an abstract ideal but as a system that benefits and empowers them. When these narratives are reinforced by inclusive practices and responsive institutions, trust grows and these narratives begin to be viewed as self-evidently true. As trust increases and these positive narratives deepen, they encourage engagement through voting, advocacy, and civic participation. Over time, this builds a more resilient culture of democracy, where democratic values and practices are more deeply embedded. This in turn makes societies more able to withstand authoritarian threats and adapt to new challenges.

Figure 4 summarizes some influences on narratives that can be utilized for programming. While some elements are either difficult or impossible to influence, others can help in drafting contextualized and detailed theories of change to support positive narratives of democracy.

359 (OECD 2024b; Prats, Smid, and Ferrín 2024; OECD 2023c, d)
360 (Apau et al. 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; FrameWorks Institute 2023a)
361 (Alfonsi et al. 2022; Matasick, Alfonsi, and Bellantoni 2020)

Insights for practice: what Theories of Change (ToCs) underpin work on narratives of democracy?

To renew public support for democracy and increase participation in democratic processes, we must begin by reshaping how democracy is understood, felt, and experienced. In seeking to offer a positive experience and association with democracy, programs to support democratic engagement often use implicit or explicit ToCs: an articulation of the steps needed in order to achieve the desired result (for example, participation in one of the democratic practices). Broadly, programs can be separated into working with three archetypes of ToCs—change via information provision, change via processes or change via emotional change. These are outlined further in Table 5.

SNF Agora outlines the key elements for a comprehensive ToC which "typically includes: a problem statement and its root causes; long-term goals (the desired change); key assumptions about how change happens; strategies and interventions needed to achieve the goals (short and medium-term outcomes); indicators of success."[362] However, in practice ToCs can often lack specificity of the intended outcome (for example, it is not always clear what democratic practice a ToC seeks to elicit beyond broadly seeking to have people support democracy more), rely too much on one mechanism (for example, providing information) without adequate consideration of the messaging context, or lack rigor in testing and evaluating whether a program or intervention has the intended effect. Without considering how information lands and through what mechanisms it is supposed to translate into behaviors, such as democratic practices, the impact of programs will likely be limited. Table 5 lists three common pathways through which narrative change is pursued.

362 (Comninos and Warren 2025)

Table 13. Common Theories of Change to improve democracy narratives

Category	Example
Change via information provision	Strengthening informed understanding of democracy to foster support via creating a positive bias for democracy and a negative one for authoritarianism; this can be enforced by prolonged democratic experiences,[363] or by highlighting the relevance of decision-making to one's own life.[364]
	Combining education (including on democratic values) with skills for democratic participation to increase greater individual collective capabilities leading to social change.[365]
	Utilizing charisma and the dynamics of information provision in media to achieve more effective messaging.[366]
	Acknowledging that communication can also decrease participation through increased cognitive costs, particularly for lower status groups.[367]
	Using Brettschneider's concept of "democratic persuasion" for value-based reasoning.[368]
	Influencing belief formation by countering disinformation.[369]
	Increasing trust by being present as a communicator.[370]
	Highlighting benefits of a policy to voters.[371]

363 (Cho 2014)
364 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)
365 (Tuhuteru 2023; Glassman and Patton 2014)
366 (Toode 2020)
367 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)
368 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
369 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)
370 (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020)
371 (Fesenfeld 2025)

Category	Example
Change via processes	Establishing participatory and co-production communication to enhance trust and relevance.[372]
	Supporting deliberative democracy;[373] relational approaches[374] and inclusion (beyond mere voting)[375] that emphasise mutual understanding even in deep disagreement and rational discourse[376] with the aim of finding support for deliberative processes[377] and offering an opportunity for different voices to be heard.[378]
	Including e-participation tools for knowledge co-creation.[379]
	Applying contact theory to reduce prejudice[380] and counter negative perceptions of others that contribute to mutual intergroup hostility.[381]
Change via behavioral/ mental/ emotional vectors	Using epistemologies as a way to understand and adjust deep-rooted narratives and how these are reproduced particularly through news coverage.[382]
	Taking into account lived experience of democracy to understand what shapes narratives about it.[383]
	Creating intentional spaces for reflection.[384]
	Fostering democratic agency and engagement by understanding how people connect to the material world, resolve conflicts and communicate with other people.[385]
	Supporting legitimacy and building trust through aligning democratic norms and technocracy.[386] Signalling inclusion, such as by supporting women's voices.[387] Championing participatory tools that enhance legitimacy and efficacy of policies by making decision-making more inclusive and transparent and empower civic skills and build trust.[388] Strengthening democratic norms when regimes or corrupt institutions receive negative performance evaluations.[389]

372 (Llano-Arias 2015)
373 (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)
374 (Holdo 2020)
375 (Gerber and Mueller 2018)
376 (Čabraja 2022)
377 (Barker 2017)
378 (Mulvale et al. 2014)
379 (Godinho et al. 2021)
380 (Hartman et al. 2022)
381 (Moore-Berg et al. 2020)
382 (Forsyth 2019)
383 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020)
384 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)
385 (Aceros and Domènech 2021)
386 (Hartley 2021)
387 (Kim 2019)
388 (Kersting 2021)
389 (Collins and Gambrel 2017; Weßels 2015)

Conclusion and the task ahead: connecting humans and stories

We set out to answer several connected questions with this systematic literature review. We asked how to best talk about democracy so that it motivates people to engage, what form such engagement should take, and what other factors influence behaviors that support democracy. We acknowledged that the power of narratives goes both ways: it can support engagement, but also fuel disengagement or rejection of democracy.

Our survey of the literature strongly supports the emergent consensus that narratives are important drivers of behavior and are key to building more robust and resilient support for democracy. However, it also makes clear that narratives are both socially and individually constructed based on lived experiences,one's interpretation of observed reality, and the messages or stories that we hear repeated, especially by those we trust most, including friends, family, community members, and those we perceive to be similar to ourselves. Further, narratives do not equate to action: a narrative does not automatically create commitment to a particular democratic practice, such as the ones outlined in this literature review.

What do we not know?

A strong behavioral perspective is notably absent in the literature. Instead, the literature mainly focuses on narratives as either a communications tool or an outcome of structural elements, but less so as an instrument of behavior change. The accompanying Behavioral Change Brief *From Narrative to Action: Fostering Democratic Engagement And Engaged Citizens Through*

Behavior Change explores support for democracy as an issue of behavior change.[390] In addition to this gap, the literature on democratic practices calls for deeper structural understanding, including of how networks allow powerful actors to emerge,[391] the role of shocks or elite actions in influencing public support for democracy,[392] how online political participation represents a distinct kind of political participation,[393] and of ways to measure the effectiveness of policy narratives at different levels of society. Finding ways to measure what policy narratives achieve requires methodological innovation and openness to move beyond opinion surveys to understand the micro-level of the individual.[394]

The evidence is unclear on whether direct democracy is a tool to counter or enable populism.[395] Direct democracy has uneven effects across contexts, with voter turnout in referendums differing vastly across contexts and issues.[396] How to maintain voter mobilization over time remains a question.[397] More research is needed.

In addition, there is a methodological consideration involved in answering what we do and do not know. The academic literature on democracy research is dominated by quantitative data and knowledge, with qualitative data or mixed methods are comparatively rare. While Figure 5 shows a broad classification of what methods papers used, it also highlights that methodological descriptions in papers often lack precision–for example, the broad category of 'qualitative' is a methodological black box that should be unpacked.

390 (Gem et a. 2026b)
391 (Holdo 2020)
392 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)
393 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019)
394 (Gray and Jones 2016)
395 (Trüdinger and Bächtiger 2023)
396 (Ummara 2024)
397 (Dvořák, Zouhar, and Novák 2017)

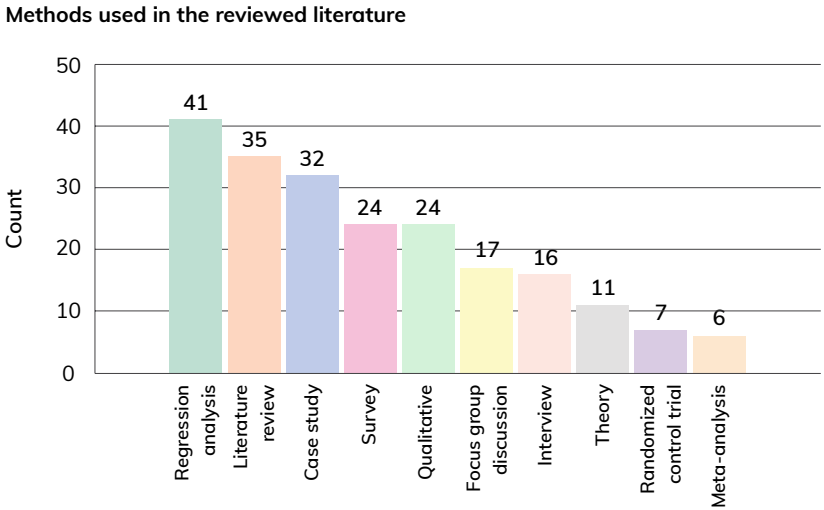

Figure 5: Spread of research methods used in the reviewed academic and gray literature

Where can the work on narratives go from here? An agenda for research and practice

Studies of narrative change often focus only on the narratives themselves: the content and framing strategies used to convey messages and stories. While it is crucial to understand these finer points of messaging and communication strategies, narrative content is only one part of the equation, with personal experiences of a system of governance, personality, context, social influences, and personal preferences influencing how narratives are received and internalized (or not) and then translated into actions.[398] Understanding these factors requires a multimethod approach, including experimental work testing specific narratives, and the actions they elicit, in different contexts.

398 (Jang, Wendel, and Kabeer 2024)

Another conclusion is that for positive narratives about democracy, those which fuel democratic engagement that keeps democracies alive, to take root, they must reflect the lived experiences of those living in democracies. Messaging that touts the benefits of democracy will continue to ring hollow if a majority of citizens continue to feel unheard, unrepresented, and alienated by their political systems.[399] Therefore, real reforms, improvements, and innovations to democratic institutions and practices that make them more representative, responsive, and participatory is crucial and these efforts must go in parallel with narrative change strategies. But these will only comprehensively work if the lived experience of people is captured in the first place

It is imperative, therefore, to expand our understanding of democracy. Democracy is the many practices that we outlined here: upholding democratic principles, participating in democratic processes, expressing dissent and personal investment. It is emotions, showing up, trusting institutions and processes or having ways to hold them to account if they fall short. Rebuilding trust in democracy requires strengthening practices of democratic engagement in ways that are contextually appropriate. It requires reforming systems, institutions, and processes to integrate and reflect people's voices and experiences more fully and expand opportunities for participation. It also requires acknowledging that emotions and cognition matter in building trust. It involves maintaining the motivation to support democracy while strengthening the capability and the opportunity to democratically engage.

The need for repetition and consistency underscores the importance of building a coordinated network in support of democracy–what IRIS, SNF Agora, and others have called a narrative infrastructure.[400] This infrastructure needs

399 (Avramovska et al. 2025; Philea (Philanthropy Europe Association) 2025; Garcia and Saiz 2025; Extinction Rebellion 2019)
400 (SNF Agora Institute 2025; IRIS (International Resource for Impact and Storytelling) 2023; Robson 2018)

to be strengthened with knowledge and activities that explore the systemic and human aspects of how narratives are formed, changed and translated into behaviors that actively support democratic practices. This requires understanding context and testing different approaches. It also must take into account that narratives and how they translate into behavior are culturally specific–and that there is a real lack of knowledge on these mechanisms from many parts of the world–most starkly Africa–but also other parts of the Global South as they are represented in English-language literature.

Creating and sustaining a pro-democratic narrative infrastructure that can support actively getting citizens to engage needs resources. Narrative change requires long-term investment because humans change their behavior slowly and inconsistently.[401] Shifting mental models–the more profound way of thinking that underpins narrative formation–is not simply a matter of identifying the right slogan or telling a compelling anecdote.[402] Narratives are the foundation on which actions flourish: they can motivate, but motivation alone is not enough to bring about engagement. Practicing democracy also requires that people live within a system that allows them to engage, and that they know how to be an engaged democratic citizen. To truly change mental models and subconscious narratives requires sustained and coordinated effort in communications, systems and behavior change.[403]

401 (Garcia and Saiz 2025)
402 (Schomerus 2023b)
403 (Gibbons and Mohabir 2024; Gomez and Coombes 2019)

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Appendices

Appendix I: Geographic spread of themes on democracy in the literature

In reviewing the global English-language literature on democracy narratives, a number of prominent topics emerged:

- Narrative strategy and framing
- Communication practices and information environment
- Motivation, capability and opportunity to engage
- Education, knowledge and civic development
- Perceptions of democracy and democratic values
- Trust, legitimacy and political efficacy
- Civil society, mobilization and collective action
- Populism, polarization and democratic backsliding
- Governance innovation and institutional changes

Looking across the geographic regions covered by the literature, we can see that different topics are prominent in different regions (see Figure 6). Yet, all topics share an underlying question of how to support positive democratic engagement.

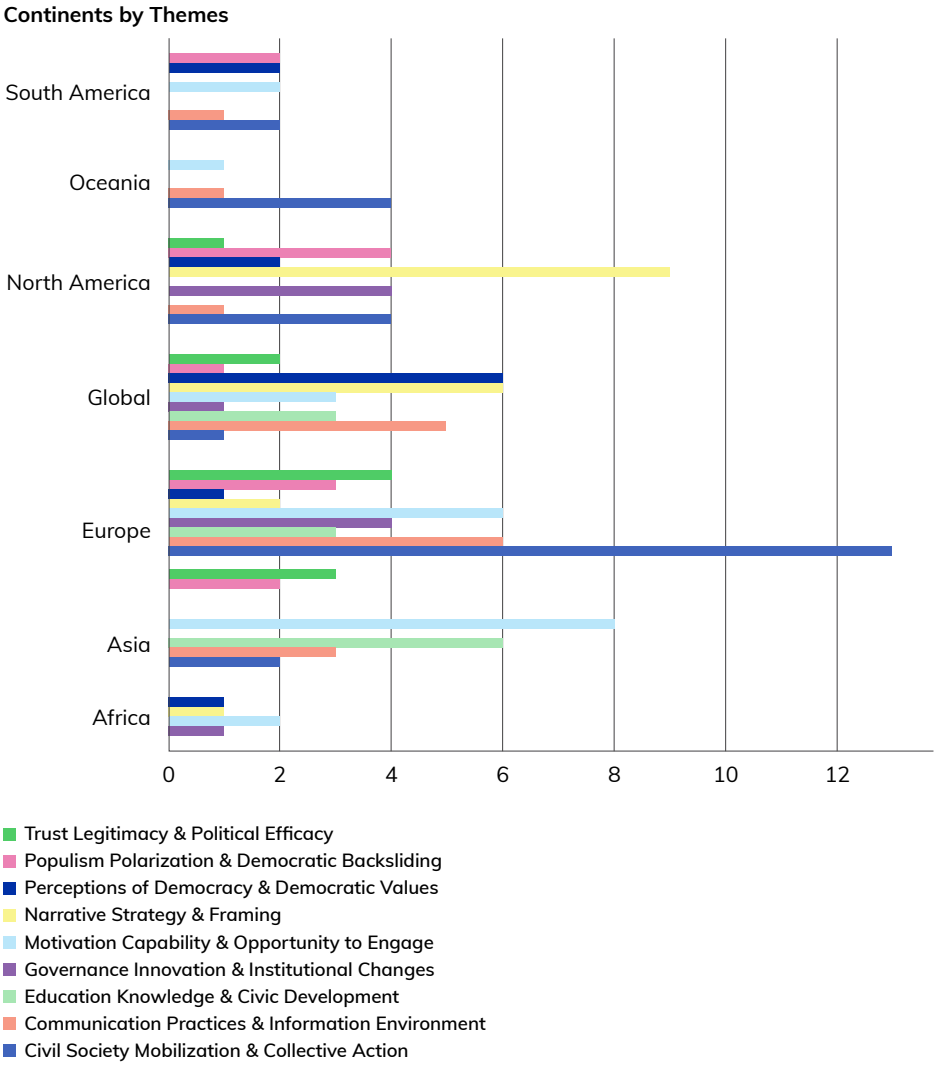

Figure 6: Geographic spread of the reviewed literature and identified themes (Source: Authors)

When overlaid on a map the distribution of topics is as follows in Figure 7.

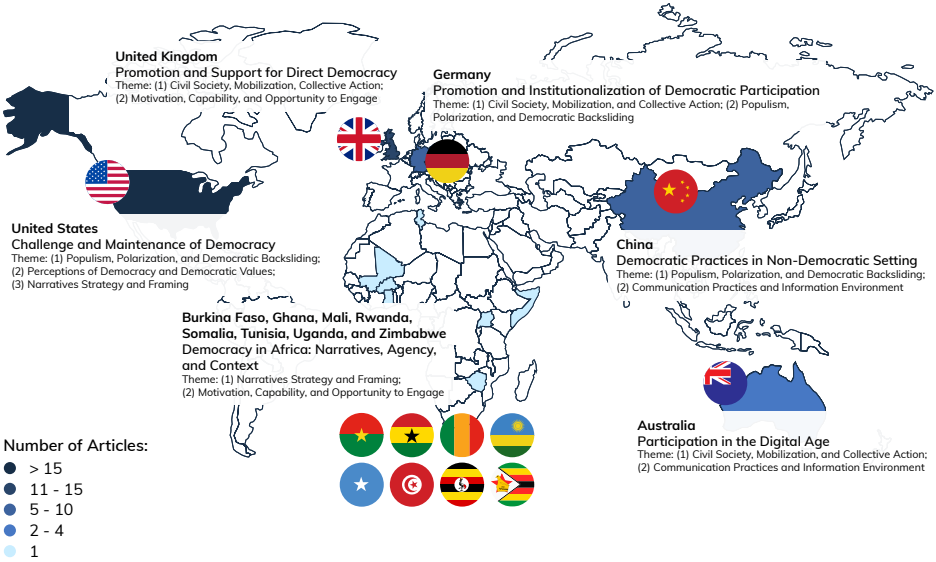

Figure 7: Map of research emphasis and topic in the reviewed literature (Source: author)

Appendix II: Methodology

Literature review of academic/ peer-reviewed literature

In this work, we conducted a systematic literature review to identify, select, and critically evaluate academic literature on the barriers and enablers of democratic engagement, using a prominent behavior change model—COM-B—as the organizing framework. To guide the search process, we defined four key focus areas, which are outlined in Table 14.

Table 14. Themes and focus areas for querying the academic literature

Theme	Focus Areas
Q1	Communication or social and behavior change communication on complex or abstract issues.
Q2	Practices of participatory, deliberative, and direct democracy.
Q3	Behavior change requirement (capability, opportunity, and motivation)
Q4	Measurement of increased democratic engagement and action.

We performed a lexical search across three databases—JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar—using a set of keywords aimed at identifying articles related to democracy and democratic behavior. The same keywords were applied to each database, with minor adjustments made when initial results were irrelevant. To improve the breadth of results, we extended our search beyond article titles to include abstracts and keyword fields. Table 15 presents the keywords used across all databases, along with the themes associated with each.

Table 15. Keyword searches in academic databases and associated themes

Theme/ Databases	J-STOR	Google Scholar	SCOPUS
Behavior Change and Democracy	((behavior change OR COM-B) AND (democracy OR democratic values OR support for democracy))	("social and behavior change" OR "behaviour change" OR "COM-B" OR capability OR motivation OR opportunity) AND ("support for democracy" OR "democratic values" OR "democratic norms")	("social and behavior change" OR "behaviour change" OR "COM-B" OR capability OR motivation OR opportunity) AND ("support for democracy" OR "democratic values" OR "democratic norms")
Communication Strategy and Democracy	(framing OR strategic communication) AND (citizen engagement OR civic engagement OR democra*)	(fram* OR "message framing" OR "strategic communication") AND ("citizen engagement" OR "public support" OR "political responsiveness") AND ("democracy" OR "democratic institutions")	(fram* OR "message framing" OR "strategic communication") AND ("citizen engagement" OR "public support" OR "political responsiveness") AND ("democracy" OR "democratic institutions")

Theme/ Databases	J-STOR	Google Scholar	SCOPUS
Communication and Civic Engagement	((participatory communication OR deliberative communication OR direct democracy) AND (civic engagement OR citizen engagement OR public support))	("participatory communication" OR "deliberative communication" OR "direct democracy") AND ("civic engagement" OR "political participation") AND ("public support" OR democracy)	("participatory communication" OR "deliberative communication" OR "direct democracy") AND ("civic engagement" OR "political participation") AND ("public support" OR democracy)
Institutional Messaging and Trust	((government communication OR public messaging OR institutional narratives) AND (citizen trust OR public trust OR democra*))	("government communication" OR "organizational messaging") OR ("citizen trust" OR legitimacy OR "public perception") AND ("support for democracy" OR "democratic trust")	("government communication" OR "organizational messaging") OR ("citizen trust" OR legitimacy OR "public perception") AND ("support for democracy" OR "democratic trust")

We then set the timeline of this research to begin in 2014 to capture a period marked by significant global political shifts, including the election of Narendra Modi in India and the broader rise of right-wing populist movements across democracies. This year represents a turning point in many countries where democratic norms began to erode more visibly, aligning with global concerns about increasing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding.

SCOPUS allowed us to limit the subject areas, and we chose to include only articles from journals in social science, art and humanities, psychology, economics, decision science, and multidisciplinary fields. While JSTOR also offers the option to filter by specific journals, we decided not to apply these filters due to the overwhelming number of choices, which made the process impractical. In contrast, Google Scholar does not provide any option to filter results by subject areas. Figure 8 shows the results.

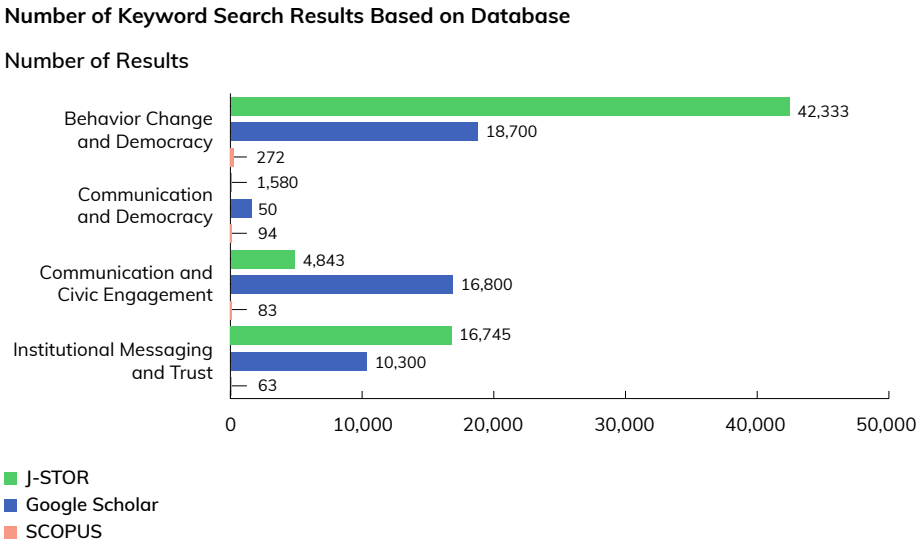

Figure 8: Number of hits on themes in different databases (Source: authors' documentation)

The number of search results varied across databases, with JSTOR and Google Scholar producing significantly more hits than SCOPUS for all keyword combinations. For example, "Behavior Change and Democracy" returned over 42,000 results in JSTOR and 18,700 in Google Scholar, compared to just 272 in SCOPUS. To ensure consistency and manage the workload, we selected the top twenty most relevant articles for each theme in every database—resulting in a total of 239[404] articles for our review.

Our next step was to screen the selected articles using several filters. The first filter was language—specifically, whether the article was written in English. While we were open to including articles in other languages we are proficient in, none of the selected articles were written in those languages. The second filter was whether the article qualified as white literature. Lastly, we assessed the abstracts to determine whether the articles addressed the four focus areas of our research. Articles lacking an explicit focus on democracy or democratic behavior were excluded. Through this process, we ended up with 88 articles.

Focusing only on the abstract might not be enough to understand what the articles are about. That's why we also skimmed through each article to see if it contained the insights we aimed to gather through this literature review. After some deliberation, we decided to focus on four key questions and excluded articles that did not appear to address them. The questions are as follows:

- Is there a clear engagement with theory or a Theory of Change that underpins interventions to support democracy?
- Is democracy broken down by components/ practices/ definition?

404 One article was found to be a duplicate, and we didn't include a replacement.

- Is it about behavior change (capabilities, opportunities, motivations)?
- Is there a theoretical or empirical engagement with the concept of narratives, stories, or mental models?

Through this process, we ruled out 14 articles and ended up with 74 articles to be used as sources of information for the review. Figure 9 illustrates the filtering process used in the systematic literature review. However, four of the identified articles were unavailable, leaving us with 70 articles to review.

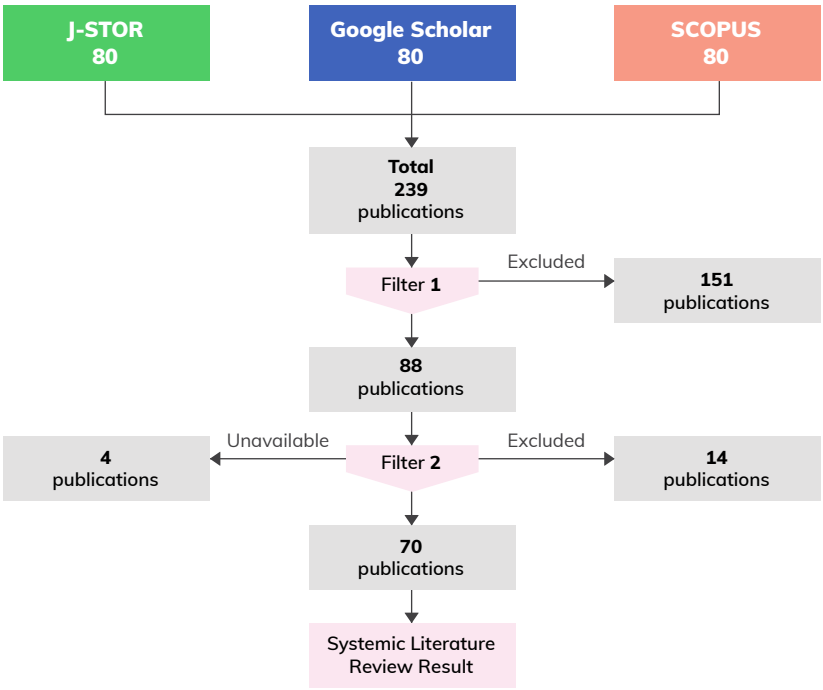

Figure 9: Systematic literature review process chart (authors' documentation)

For the analysis through close reading, we queried the identified and available 70 papers with the following questions:

- Methodology of the research
- Sample population
- What is the case that is being studied (time period/events/ location)?
- Communications/ social and behaviour change communications on complex issues or narratives
    - What is the issue that is being communicated about?
    - What makes this topic complex?
    - How is this complexity acknowledged?
    - Is there a simple identified cause (x) to lead to a clearly identified outcome (y)?
    - Are other possible aspects (z) acknowledged?
    - What is the strategy/ practice of this communication?
    - What theory/ Theory of Change underpins this strategy?

- Practices of participatory, deliberative and direct democracy
    - What democratic practices are covered?
    - Is there a clear process on how this practice supports democracy?
    - What are the consequences of these practices?

- Behavior change requirements (capability, opportunity, motivation)
    - What are barriers to democratic practices or changing narratives?
    - What are enablers to democratic practices or changing narratives?

  - Are people able to engage in these practices or new narratives/ do they have opportunity to/ are they motivated (values/ peers/ culture/ narratives) to?

- Measurement of increased democratic engagement and action
  - What is considered a success worth measuring?
  - How is democratic engagement measured?
  - What empirical evidence exists?
  - What caveats does this measurement have?
  - Are these caveats openly acknowledged?

- What is known in the literature about mental models or narratives of democracy?
  - What influences the formation of narratives/mental models?
  - What influences changes to narratives/mental models?
  - What empirical evidence supports effective strategies for shifting narratives/mental models?

Busara Groundwork
SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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