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From narrative to action:

Fostering democratic
engagement and
engaged citizens
through behavior
change

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Author affiliations:

1 Busara
2 People Powered
3 Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago
4 People Powered
5 Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago
6 Busara

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Copyedited by:
Michael Onsando

Designed by:
Lynette Gow

Acknowledgement and non-author contributions

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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; Extitudo 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; Luminata; 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

Introduction	7
Democratic Practices as behavior.....	8
Practice 1: Upholding democratic principles.....	8
Practice 2: Participating in democratic processes.....	9
Practice 3: Expressing dissent.....	9
Practice 4: Personal investment.....	9
Democracy as Behavior: Using the COM-B Behavior Change Model	11
What does capability to behave democratically need?.....	14
What does opportunity to behave democratically need?.....	15
What does motivation to behave democratically need?.....	15
Putting COM-B to use: Advancing our analysis of what supports or stops people from engaging in democratic practices	16
Step 1: Align - Define target behaviors, audiences and outcomes.....	17
Step 2: Understand - Identifying barriers and enablers of democratic practices.....	20
Step 3: Developing and prioritizing relevant behavior change interventions.....	28
About policy categories.....	29
Identifying opportunities for interventions to support democratic practices: Illustrated example	31
Conclusion	37
Understanding outcomes produced by behavior.....	38
Areas for Future Research to Improve Practice.....	39
References	40



Tables

Table 1: Definitions within the COM-B Model of Behavior Change (definition from West and Michie, 2021; sub-constructs from internal training documents, Busara)	13
Table 2: Democratic practices and examples of target behaviors (Source: Gem et. al, 2026a)	18
Table 3: What are barriers to democratic practices?	20
Table 4: What are enablers of democratic practices?	25
Table 5: Mapping COM-B to intervention functions	30
Table 6: Example of intervention opportunities and policy categories	31

Figures

Figure 1: Democracy, its Actors and its Practices	10
Figure 2: The COM-B Model of Behavior Change (Source: (West and Michie) 2021)	12
Figure 3: The Behavior Change Wheel (Source: Michie et al. 2011)	29

Boxes

Box 1: Three steps towards behavior change	17
Box 2: Archetypes of democracy support (Source: Gem et al, 2026b)	19

Introduction

Democracy is mostly defined as a set of values or a governance system. But it can also be thought of differently. What if we thought of democracy as a set of behaviors? Democracy cannot exist without citizens who behave in democratic ways. How people act in their capacity as democratic citizens expresses their values, but also keeps the governance system alive. And yet, behavior is rarely foregrounded as a crucial part of what democracies need. Initiatives to support democracy are rarely framed as supporting behavior change. However, this perspective can be valuable for those seeking to strengthen democracy.

Behavior is complicated: it can be in contradiction with intentions. It can express underlying challenges that often get overlooked. It can be characterized by inertia: not taking action is also a behavior. It is also often driven by narratives—the stories we tell ourselves and how we make sense of the world. Narratives are often the basis of our reasoning, which then pushes us to take action (or remain inactive). This is why a perspective that links narratives of democracy to democratic behavior matters.

This practitioner brief, developed for the Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) breaks down what we learned from the systematic literature review *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?*¹, and the Research Brief *How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know)*.² In systematically reviewing the vast English-language literature and seeking some additional insights from Spanish-language literature, we sought to understand what we know about how people move from a narrative they hold about democracy to practicing democracy, or to withdrawing from democratic processes. What role does strategic messaging and communications play in changing people's narratives of democracy? And can constructive narratives of democracy support people in doing the work that democracy practically needs—meaning they can support people to behave like engaged democratic citizens?

1 (Gem et al. 2026a)

2 (Gem et al. 2026b)



In the literature, we identified three ways in which narratives and democracy are usually studied: as a systemic issue, as an issue of strategic communications and as an issue of behavior and behavior change. A behavioral perspective on the relationship between narratives and democracy emphasizes that no piece of information is powerful on its own in eliciting responses and behavior. Instead, information and the narratives it creates becomes action through the interplay between the content of a message, the context in which it is received, and the person receiving it. A behavioral perspective foregrounds the processes through which people interpret information: how does information become a narrative that influences what type of actions do people take? This perspective suggests that in order to support democracy, we have to better understand what drives people to act as democratic citizens (and stewards of democracy). It requires understanding the roots of human behavior with the objective of best supporting the desired democratic practice.

Democratic practices as behavior

In the systematic literature review *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?*³ We identified a set of practices that express democracy: the daily actions and interactions between institutions and citizens that shape the experience of living within a democracy. We identified four main practices (which are outlined in greater detail in the systematic literature review):



Practice 1 Upholding democratic principles

Upholding democratic principles emphasizes the institutions and processes needed to ensure that a democracy functions fairly and with procedural values that mirror democratic ideals, including elections, rule of law, free media and speech, judicial independence and civil liberties.

3 (Gem et al. 2026a)



Practice 2 Participating in democratic processes

This describes when citizens actively shape a decision about how they are governed and hold authorities to account, including through participatory, direct and deliberative democracy.



Practice 3 Expressing dissent

The public expresses support or discontent either within or outside of political decision-making structures, for example through protests or petitions.



Practice 4 Personal investment

How people think and feel is a major driver and outcome of engagement. Therefore, personal investment in democracy and feeling good about participating is important. And yet, emotions and cognitive processes are a notable absence in the literature, meaning that there is rarely explicit acknowledgment of democratic practices that support and promote positive emotions about democracy, even though these affect feelings of personal investment. This oversight is significant because much of what we know from behavioral sciences about how humans engage with situations and derive meaning from and for their actions is based on emotions.

All four practices are summed up in Fig. 1.



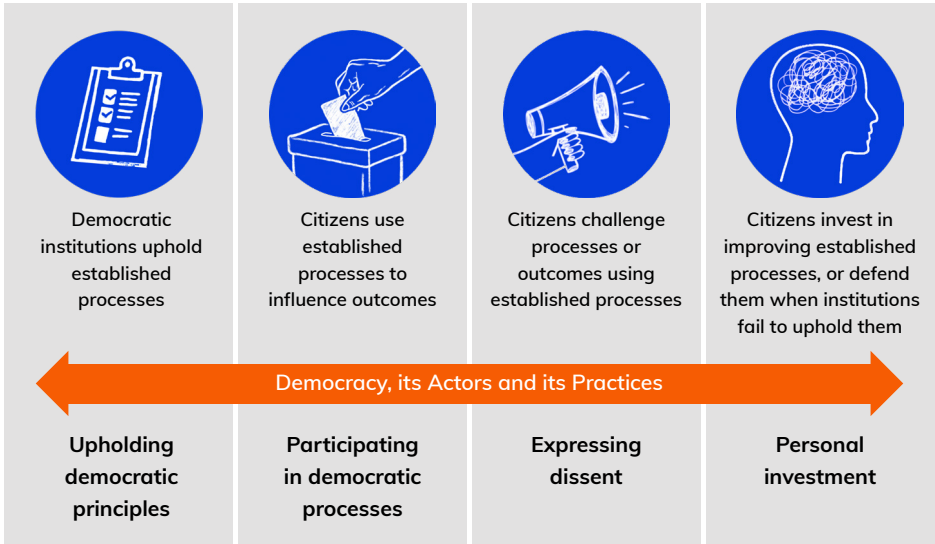


Figure 1: Democracy, its Actors and its Practices

Using these identified practices, we can unpack what a behavioral perspective can bring to understanding what supports or hinders democratic behavior.

Democracy as behavior: Using the COM-B Behavior Change Model

Looking at democratic practices through a behavioral lens—how citizens act in ways that support and deepen democracy—thus offers a new angle to the usual focus on communication strategies or structural concerns. A behavioral approach explores the many factors that shape human actions, including personality, information, context, social influences, and personal preferences.⁴ It also considers how people process information and make decisions based on new input. This perspective also helps us to understand the specific steps required to induce and sustain behavioral changes.

Behavior change frameworks are useful to break down the necessary pre-conditions for the desired change. A prominent framework is COM-B, which summarizes that for a behavior (B) to occur, a person needs to be capable (C: physical and psychological), have the opportunity (O: social and physical) and be motivated (M: automatic or reflective) to behave in a certain way. While these three influence each other, motivation alone can never cause behavior change without capability and opportunity.⁵ Figure 2 on the next page depicts the COM-B Model.

4 (Jang, Wendel, and Kabeer 2024)

5 (West and Michie, 2021)



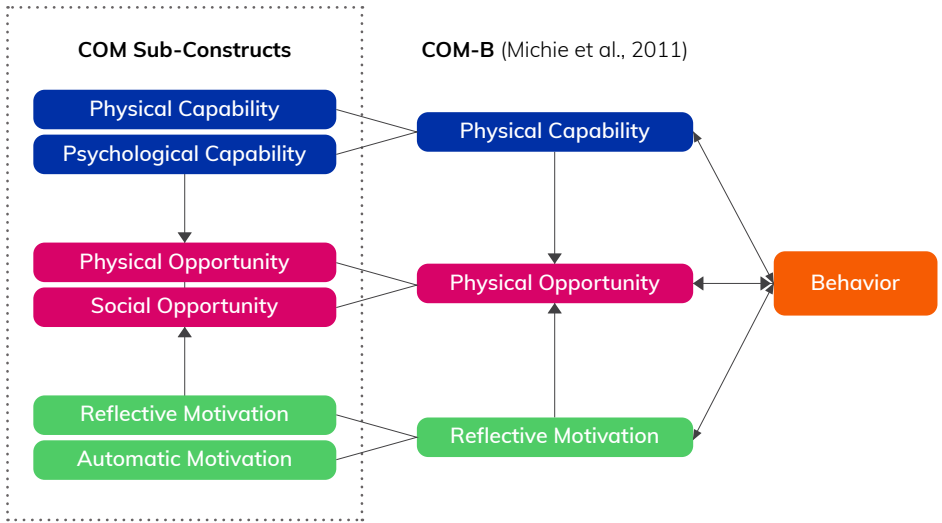


Figure 2: The COM-B Model of Behavior Change (Source: (West and Michie) 2021)

Table 1. Definitions within the COM-B Model of Behavior Change (definition from West and Michie, 2021; sub-constructs from internal training documents, Busara)

COM-B Component	COM-B Sub-construct	Definition
Capability <i>The knowledge, skills and ability to perform the behavior</i>	Physical Capability	The physical strength, coordination, or stamina to carry out the behavior.
	Psychological Capability	The mental skills, knowledge, and thought processes needed to perform a behavior.
Opportunity <i>The social or physical environment that makes the behavior possible</i>	Physical Opportunity	The external factors in the environment - such as resources, time, infrastructure, or laws that make the behavior possible (or not).
	Social Opportunity	The social and cultural environment - what's seen as normal, acceptable, or encouraged by others.
Motivation <i>The desire, intention, or belief that the behavior is worth doing</i>	Reflective Motivation	This is about conscious decisions, plans, and beliefs - what someone thinks is important or worth doing.
	Automatic Motivation	This involves emotions, habits, and gut reactions that drive behavior without conscious thought.

The COM-B framework, and its associated Behavior Change Wheel (which outlines different types of interventions to support behavior change), results from a synthesis of behavior change frameworks.⁶ Its analytical framework points to factors that influence behavior and the moments when various interventions can be introduced to help promote behavioral change.

This is a crucial addition to understanding the role of narratives of democracy, which can sometimes be understood as being primarily an issue of strategic communication. This is because of a prevailing assumption: new knowledge derived from better information will lead to changes in behavior. This narrative

6 (Michie, van Stralen, and West 2011)



of behavioral change assumes that people are rational and their bad decisions are due to a lack of knowledge that a given behavior is bad for them. It follows that if we simply provide new or more persuasive evidence explaining why a behavior is bad, those receiving this knowledge will change their behavior. Behavioral research has disproven this assumption, which is common (especially among the highly educated).

The COM-B framework provides useful insights for understanding why people do things that are objectively bad for them or otherwise run counter to their long-term self-interests. COM-B helps us to systematically break down the necessary conditions that must be met before behavioral change can occur and helps us understand where an intervention is most likely to promote the desired behavioral change.

What does capability to behave democratically need?

For example, if the desired behavioral change is to get more people to attend city council meetings and provide input on policy decisions, it is useful to think through barriers to this behavior across each category. First, people must be physically and psychologically capable of attending the meeting. Therefore, the meeting should be held in a central location with sufficient parking and public transportation options. The building, room, and content of the meeting must be accessible to a wide audience. Is there wheelchair and elevator access? Is there sufficient seating? Adequate acoustics? Is the meeting conducted in a language that most people in the area speak fluently, and is the format approachable? Is the meeting conducted in terms that are familiar to most people, or is it laden with jargon and strict procedural rules that make it intimidating or unintelligible for those who are unfamiliar with the norms? These are all important capacity considerations if the goal is to make city council meetings maximally approachable.

What does opportunity to behave democratically need?

People also must have the opportunity to attend. The meetings must be well advertised through multiple communication channels. They must be held during hours when most people can attend. There should not be unforeseen financial barriers, such as only having paid parking options nearby. The meeting must exist in the first place—requiring a basic foundation of democratic engagement opportunities.

What does motivation to behave democratically need?

Finally, people must have the motivation to attend. Sometimes motivation is driven by incentives. These incentives can be material, informational, or social. I might be motivated to attend a city council meeting because the council is making a decision about property taxes, and I have a financial incentive to try and keep my taxes low. I might care deeply about an issue and I want to attend so I have the relevant information about how the city council is likely to vote. If my identity is one of political activism or social consciousness, I might also be socially motivated to attend so that it affirms (to myself and others) that I am an engaged citizen. Finally, I may attend because I want to voice my opinion and try to influence an outcome. This final motivation is likely to be present only if I have reason to believe that the city council will be responsive to my input. That is, if I have a narrative based on prior experience that this type of democratic participation is effective. Since narratives inform our sense of self and beliefs about how the world works, motivation is often deeply intertwined with narratives.



Putting COM-B to use: Advancing our analysis of what supports or stops people from engaging in democratic practices

As highlighted in *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?* (2026), democracy is a set of practices: those daily actions and interactions between institutions and citizens that shape the experience of living within a democracy. What does it look like to apply a COM-B analysis to the question of what factors support or hinder people from engaging in the above practices (see Figure 1)? How can democracy practitioners use these insights to inform the development and rollout of strategies (narrative-based or otherwise) to strengthen our set of democratic practices?

In democracies under threat, interventions to stem its decline or to strengthen it are needed now more than ever. Unfortunately, while the stakes are high, the spaces and resources dedicated to such interventions are shrinking or disappearing all together. Practitioners therefore can't afford a trial-and-error approach. We need to be precise and confident with our strategies through a step-by-step, transparent and systematic approach to developing democracy interventions. Interventions that rely on behavior change theory in a holistic and accessible way are relevant to their specific context, effectively use data to inform both its design and implementation, mitigate risks of unintended consequences, and provide opportunities for learning and replication.

We therefore recommend a systematic, evidence-based approach, summarized in the three-stage process in Box 1.

Box 1: Three steps towards behavior change

Step 1: Align

Practitioners and involved stakeholders begin by clearly identifying the target behaviors, audiences and outcomes of our intended interventions.

Step 2: Understand

Next, use behavior change frameworks like COM-B to synthesize evidence and provide a clear and documented understanding of the behaviors of target audiences in context. Uncover the key factors hindering or enabling adoption of the target behavior.

Step 3: Design

Use behavior change frameworks (like the Behavior Change Wheel) to develop and prioritize relevant, evidence-informed behavior change interventions (such as media narratives) that specifically target the identified barriers and enablers.

Step 1: Align - Define target behaviors, audiences and outcomes

A better understanding of what drives people's levels of engagement with and stewardship of democracy can often be found within the roots of human behavior. Our democratic practices, and their respective outcomes, are a culmination of repeated decisions and behaviors by stakeholders within a political ecosystem - citizens, politicians, bureaucrats, media, etc. In other words, an outcome is the impact you want to see in the world, the behavior is how you are going to get there, and the influence is how you unlock that change in behavior.



Therefore, for practitioners seeking to influence behavior change, the first step is to accurately define our target behavior or behaviors. This will determine, among other things, the frameworks, evidence, target audiences, communication channels, and types of resources that will determine our success.

Table 2. Democratic practices and examples of target behaviors (Source: Gem et. al, 2026a)

Democratic Practice	Examples of target behaviors
Upholding democratic principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demand elected officials uphold democratic norms - Defend and embody democratic values and principles - Support free speech and media freedoms
Participating in democratic processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vote in local and national elections and referenda - Engage actively in politics by staying informed, engaging in civic debate, or expressing their opinions to elected officials - Participate in local politics, or in deliberative processes like participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies
Expressing dissent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demand accountability from government officials on policy decisions that affect people's lives - Petition for citizens' initiatives, referenda on unpopular policy decisions, or for more opportunities for direct participation - Engage in public debate via protests, testimonies, or social media
Personal investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participate in the local politics that affect their community - Recreate democratic processes in their own lives in the classroom, workplace, or home - Share the positive experiences or outcomes that democracy has helped them to achieve

Examples of target audiences (Idealist/Collectivist vs. Pragmatist/Individualist)

Recognizing that different types of people will place emphasis on different practices and narratives, the Democracy Narratives Alliance (DNA) created two archetypes of individuals to model how democratic messaging might be

received and internalized. These are: the Idealist/Collectivist and Pragmatist/Individualist (see *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?*,⁷ and *How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know)*).⁸

Box 2: Archetypes of democracy support (Source: Gem et al, 2026b)

Idealist/Collectivist

For Idealists/Collectivists, upholding democratic principles is foundational to their internalized narratives about democracy. They not only believe deeply in democratic values and principles, but also feel that democracy is the best system of government for maintaining and protecting these principles. An idealist believes that direct democracy is inherently empowering. More opportunities to vote, such as referenda, or to participate actively in decision-making are always better. Democracy depends on acknowledging others' views and is made stronger when more people engage. Everyone should participate.

Pragmatist/Individualist

Pragmatists/Individualists on the other hand approach democracy from a more instrumentalist perspective. Their foundational narratives are that democracy is good primarily because it produces the best outcomes for themselves, their family, and what they identify as their community. This is not to say that pragmatists do not care about the greater good or do not value more abstract democratic principles. Instead, the emphasis they place on each level of engagement is the inverse of idealists. To pragmatists, democracy is mainly about voting. Other forms of participation are often burdensome, and they are likely to hold the following sentiment: "I am not confident I understand the issues well enough. I would rather elect representatives who are more knowledgeable to govern in my best interests or will participate only if I truly believe it will have an impact."

7 (Gem et al. 2026a)

8 (Gem et al. 2026b)



Step 2: Understand - Identifying barriers and enablers of democratic practices

We queried the literature to identify barriers and enablers to democratic engagement in terms of capabilities (knowledge, skills and ability to engage), opportunities (the social or physical environment that makes engagement possible), and motivations (desire, intention or belief in the worthiness of the practice) for engagement in democratic practices. In practice, this process benefits from additional primary research to gather specific and contextually-relevant insights.

Table 3 indicates illustratively (not exhaustively) how a COM-B approach can provide practitioners with a framework with which to unpack the observed or documented barriers democratic practices, and therefore the opportunities to potentially intervene.

Table 3. What are barriers to democratic practices?

COM-B Component	Barriers to Democratic Practices
Physical Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of access to information (due to literacy, democratic literacy or digital literacy).⁹ - Poorly designed instruments for engagement¹⁰ or lack of political experience.¹¹

9 (Renz 2022; Godinho et al. 2021; Hartley 2021; Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019; Jash 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)

10 (Jash 2019)

11 (Čabraja 2022)

COM-B Component	Barriers to Democratic Practices
Psychological Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Limited knowledge on how democratic institutions function or how they can be influenced,¹² creating knowledge gaps.¹³- Limited political experiences in non-democracies and weak civic education,¹⁴ leading to low exposure to genuine democratic practices and increased misunderstanding of what democracy entails.¹⁵- Lack of civic knowledge,¹⁶ uncertainty about how to engage politically,¹⁷ including online.¹⁸- Too much information, leading to overload;¹⁹ or misinformation,²⁰ including partisan information²¹ or distrust in the information,²² coupled with a lack of adequate storytelling skills in documenting and producing news.²³- A lack of understanding of what a plural political landscape could look like;²⁴ how to deliberate in democracy.²⁵- How to unpack complex policies leading to the application of mental shortcuts and heuristics.²⁶- Social desirability leading to underreporting or overreporting on issues,²⁷ creating low public awareness.²⁸

12 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)

13 (Ummara 2024)

14 (Cho 2014)

15 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)

16 (Too 2024)

17 (Gerber and Mueller 2018)

18 Gainous, 2019 #19}

19 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)

20 (Wuttke and Foes 2025; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

21 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)

22 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)

23 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)

24 (Wuttke and Foes 2025)

25 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)

26 (Fesenfeld 2025)

27 (Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019)

28 (Ummara 2024)



COM-B Component	Barriers to Democratic Practices
Physical Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of resources (e.g., time, financial) to engage in political activities.²⁹ - Opportunities for the less privileged are constrained by discrimination, stigmatization, social exclusion,³⁰ lack of civil society,³¹ or lack of access to communication and digital infrastructures needed to have demands heard.³² - Shifting power to the less-privileged is extremely difficult.³³ In part because benefits of globalization have been extremely unevenly distributed³⁴ and because in times of economic distress, people grant leaders nondemocratic powers to resolve the issue,³⁵ with an emphasis on short-term economic outcomes;³⁶ or colonial era and historical patterns of marginalization continue to underprivilege groups;³⁷ social segregation by race, class, geography, and gender is prevalent,³⁸ which would require deliberate effort to overcome,³⁹ including in spending extra effort in supporting children in learning about communal behaviors,⁴⁰ with ethnic favoritism and clientelism influencing perceptions of the legitimacy of democratic institutions.⁴¹ - Established institutions for safeguarding democracy such as courts have come under strain,⁴² making engagement with politics more risky in some cases.
Social Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of understanding of democracy is exacerbated by the cognitive demands of everyday life in lower socio-economic strata.⁴³ - Where histories of democracy are short, learning from how crises have been overcome in the past is limited⁴⁴ and governments might be tempted to present themselves as saviors, concentrating power and obscuring the opportunity to build democratic networks of collaboration.⁴⁵

29 (Purec 2024)

30 (Purec 2024)

31 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)

32 (Llano-Arias 2015)

33 (Higham and Djohari 2018)

34 (Issacharoff 2018)

35 (Carlin 2018)

36 (Mauk 2022)

37 (Mulumba et al. 2021; Kim 2019)

38 (Kim 2019; Barker 2017)

39 (Kersting 2021)

40 (Tuhuteru 2023)

41 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)

42 (Issacharoff 2018)

43 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)

44 (Weßels 2015)

45 (Kövéř 2021)

COM-B Component	Barriers to Democratic Practices
<p>Reflective Motivation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identity-based processes can amplify stereotypes.⁴⁶ - Commonly held values such as social conformity and obedience to authority (sometimes rooted in religion) may counter motivation to support democracy;⁴⁷ strong egalitarian values may respond to promises of authoritarian forces to create equality at the expense of democracy;⁴⁸ and nostalgia for authoritarian or neoliberal leadership that emphasises individual responsibility.⁴⁹ - A weak sense of political efficacy.⁵⁰ - The perception or experience that one's voice does not actually count,⁵¹ or that only the loudest voices count,⁵² or that bureaucrats will act in the interest of politicians (and are influenced by behavioral biases in their actions), failing to respond to citizens' input.⁵³ - Apathy;⁵⁴ fear of repercussions.⁵⁵ - Certain beliefs—or narratives—that are mistaken about how democracy works can reduce willingness to democratically engage.⁵⁶ For example, direct democracy on one hand can be championed, but on the other hand it can reduce voter participation, which can exacerbate existing inequalities.⁵⁷ The belief that the private sector is better able to provide services than the public sector.⁵⁸ - Much of public policy is sometimes hard to connect to daily life.⁵⁹ - Legacies of instability diminish motivation to support a democratic political culture.⁶⁰ - Low socioeconomic status.⁶¹ - Prejudice against other groups (sometimes based on a misjudged understanding of how the outgroup thinks about the ingroup), which expresses itself in lack of interest in collective action or even support for aggression.⁶² - The media is motivated to report on polarization as this is more profitable.⁶³ - Motivation has different drivers in different strata of society, with economic grievances more likely to mobilize groups of low socioeconomic status groups, whereas political repression is more likely to mobilize high socio-economic groups.⁶⁴

46 (Hartman et al. 2022)

47 (Ben-Nun Bloom, Arkan, and Vishkin 2021)

48 (Sugg 2015)

49 (Sugg 2015)

50 (Too 2024; Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016;

Horn and Keyman 2016)

51 (Forsyth 2019)

52 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019)

53 (Wittels 2020)

54 (Jash 2019)

55 (Shen and Zhang 2018)

56 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

57 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)

58 (Luoma-aho and Canel 2020)

59 (Gray and Jones 2016)

60 (Pérez-Liñán and Polga-Hecimovich 2017)

61 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)

62 (Moore-Berg et al. 2020)

63 (Hartman et al. 2022)

64 Letsa, 2018 #100)



COM-B Component	Barriers to Democratic Practices
Automatic Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Performative democratic processes (called 'window dressing'), such as when consultations are designed to elicit predetermined answers⁶⁵ can create the illusion of participation, but do not result in citizens feeling empowered.⁶⁶ - A prevalence of institutions that look democratic, but do not deliver⁶⁷ or are weak;⁶⁸ institutions that outright restrict the political rights of certain groups.⁶⁹ - Obstacles to citizen participation can have a long historical pedigree: for example when laws from colonial times that are inappropriate for today still shape how citizens view their government.⁷⁰ - Easier access to engaging in democratic practices for those who have privilege and resources,⁷¹ including capture by elites with interests that do not benefit the general public;⁷² dominance of well-resourced groups which incentivize parliaments not to listen to ordinary citizens or experts.⁷³ - Apathy,⁷⁴ or lack of trust in and disconnect from government,⁷⁵ including through the distance to rural populations,⁷⁶ or how politics are covered in the news.⁷⁷ - Political cynicism, in part due to news coverage of political races.⁷⁸ - People can trust institutions that are not necessarily supporting democracy, and this trust can create an obstacle for democratic practices.⁷⁹

65 (Wittels 2020)

66 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)

67 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

68 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)

69 (Purec 2024)

70 (Mulumba et al. 2021)

71 (Higham and Djohari 2018)

72 (Mattes and Thompson 2018) (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018) (Collins and Gambrel 2017)

73 (Hendriks and Kay 2019)

74 (Jash 2019)

75 (Hartley 2021; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

76 (Brezzi et al. 2021; Mattes and Thompson 2018)

77 (Democracy Resource Hub 2024; Zoizner 2021)

78 (Zoizner 2021)

79 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)

Table 4. What are enablers of democratic practices?

COM-B Component	Enablers of Democratic Practices
Physical Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Creating spaces for activism, for example by NGOs,⁸⁰ + Using digital technologies to enhance engagement.⁸¹ + Teaching media literacy.⁸²
Psychological Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Supporting knowledge production from different actors, including grassroots movements and organizations.⁸³ + Tapping into people's internal and external political efficacy (knowledge of political systems and ability to navigate these; perceptions of how easy it is to navigate the system) because people are more likely to participate if they feel knowledgeable about a context and see their participation making a difference;⁸⁴ such efficacy might be derived from previous civic engagement.⁸⁵ + Strengthening cognitive mobilization through increased political knowledge and political or issue literacy.⁸⁶ + Supporting independent coverage of issues.⁸⁷ + Strengthening social norms⁸⁸ and civic culture.⁸⁹

80 (Forsyth 2019)

81 (Ummara 2024; Kersting 2021)

82 (Boräng, Nistotskaya, and Xezonakis 2017)

83 (Forsyth 2019)

84 (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016)

85 (Gherghina and Geissel 2020)

86 (Christensen 2018)

87 (Forsyth 2019)

88 (Weßels 2015)

89 (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)



COM-B Component	Enablers of Democratic Practices
Physical Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Supporting social networks, including networks that cut across social or political divides,⁹⁰ or that allow access to global information⁹¹ and pro-democracy movements in other countries,⁹² or other types of diverse information⁹³ from media that is resilient to disinformation⁹⁴ to create exposure to global norms.⁹⁵ + Crafting constructive media messages⁹⁶ including through uncensored media,⁹⁷ participatory journalism⁹⁸ and critical public discourse.⁹⁹ + Including political education and teaching on democratic values and challenges of democracy in school curricula.¹⁰⁰ + Co-production of knowledge and recording the experience of democracy.¹⁰¹ + Technological infrastructure,¹⁰² for example, mobile telecommunications penetration,¹⁰³ digital tools,¹⁰⁴ platforms on which citizens can brainstorm solutions.¹⁰⁵ + Autonomy of institutions,¹⁰⁶ that aim to increase people's competence to make policy judgements¹⁰⁷ and community-led institutional buy-in,¹⁰⁸ including through more diverse institutions.¹⁰⁹ + Creating opportunities for deliberate and direct engagement on policy issues,¹¹⁰ such as grassroots mobilization¹¹¹ or dialogue across party lines,¹¹² participatory events like assemblies,¹¹³ and gamified formats.¹¹⁴
Social Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Maintaining trust by guaranteeing data privacy and transparent communication about data during consultative processes.¹¹⁵ + Using moments of shock (e.g., economic shocks) to mobilize across class lines.¹¹⁶ + Strengthening civil society to build solidarity and belonging.¹¹⁷ + Localizing engagements to build on people's attachment to their locale,¹¹⁸ such as through local government openness to innovation and¹¹⁹ more indigenous NGOs that can advocate for local needs.¹²⁰

90 (Barker 2017; Llano-Arias 2015)

91 (Shen and Zhang 2018)

92 (Hyde 2020)

93 (Glassman and Patton 2014)

94 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)

95 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)

96 (Llano-Arias 2015)

97 (Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019;

Shen and Zhang 2018;

Collins and Gambrel 2017;

Cho 2014)

98 (Čabraja 2022)

99 (Renz 2022)

100 (Purec 2024; Kruse, Ravlik, and

Welzel 2019; Mattes and Thompson 2018;

Higham and Djohari 2018; Subba 2014)

101 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuisen, and Deat 2019)

102 (Hendriks and Kay 2019; Gauja 2015)

103 (Jash 2019)

104 (Kersting 2021)

105 (Čabraja 2022;

Godinho et al. 2021)

106 (Gamboa 2023)

107 (Gerber and Mueller 2018)

108 (Subba 2014)

109 (Kim 2019)

110 (Mulvale et al. 2014)

111 (Kersting 2021; Kim 2019)

112 (Hartman et al. 2022)

113 (Llano-Arias 2015)

114 (Jash 2019)

115 (Godinho et al. 2021; Hartley 2021)

116 (Letsa and

Wilfahrt 2018)

117 (Kövér 2021; Collins

and Gambrel 2017)

118 (Bartoletti and

Faccioli 2016)

119 (Jash 2019)

120 (Barker 2017)

COM-B Component	Enablers of Democratic Practices
<p>Reflective Motivation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Perceived ability of the government to address short-term crises (e.g., Covid-19),¹²¹ and long-term challenges (e.g., climate change and digitalization) increase trust in and support for democracy.¹²² + Intrinsic motivation from seeing participation in democratic processes as directly connected to one's life, such as in negotiation of water access,¹²³ protection of forests,¹²⁴ or, for opposition political party members, the protection of processes that offer a chance to return to power.¹²⁵ + High-quality government services, including social welfare systems, increase motivation to pay taxes and support the government because taxpayers clearly receive benefits in return.¹²⁶
<p>Automatic Motivation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Creating role models by showing elites respectfully debating trade-offs.¹²⁷ + Nourishing trust by showing institutions that are stable and reliable¹²⁸ and offer procedural legitimacy.¹²⁹ + Framing complex political news with an element of entertainment that piques people's interest.¹³⁰ + Motivating through narratives that promote communal ideas.¹³¹ + Instilling democratic values in all levels of society and everyday life,¹³² and rooting these values in other value systems (e.g., faith) to foster democratic commitment.¹³³ + Seeking self-reflection to foster deeper democratic engagement and responsible leadership.¹³⁴

121 (OECD 2023b)

122 (OECD 2023a, 2022a)

123 (Llano-Arias 2015)

124 (Forsyth 2019)

125 (Gamboja 2023)

126 (OECD 2023a, 2022c)

127 (Wuttke and Foes 2025)

128 (Mauk 2022)

129 (Facchini and Melki 2021)

130 (Zoizner 2021)

131 (Sugg 2015)

132 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)

133 (Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Vishkin 2021)

134 (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019; Higham and Djohari 2018)



Step 3: Developing and prioritizing relevant behavior change interventions

Once we have conducted a behavioral diagnosis to understand and surface the key barriers and enablers of desired democratic practices, we can design evidence-informed interventions to target priority barriers and enablers. To do this, we propose using the behavior change wheel.

Using the Behavior Change Wheel to develop interventions

The Behavior Change Wheel (BCW), as outlined by Michie et al. (2011), is grounded in a thorough causal analysis of behavior (see Figure 3). It first asks: “What internal conditions within individuals and in their social and physical environments must exist for a specific behavioral target to be reached?” The BCW acknowledges that target behaviors can emerge from various combinations of the components within the behavioral system.

This framework provides a theoretically informed, evidence-based approach for crafting contextually appropriate interventions that are more likely to facilitate desired behavioral changes. The BCW is built upon a unified theory of motivation that predicts the elements of the motivational system that must be influenced in specific ways to achieve a behavioral goal.

When designing interventions using the BCW, practitioners begin with a theoretical understanding of behavior to ascertain what changes are necessary to meet the behavioral target and which intervention functions are likely to be effective in implementing those changes.

The BCW is frequently employed to pinpoint the most suitable intervention functions associated with the COM-B sub-components that are targeted for modification. By utilizing the BCW in this manner, practitioners can strategically design behavior change interventions that are tailored to specific contexts, employing a theory-driven, evidence-based methodology.

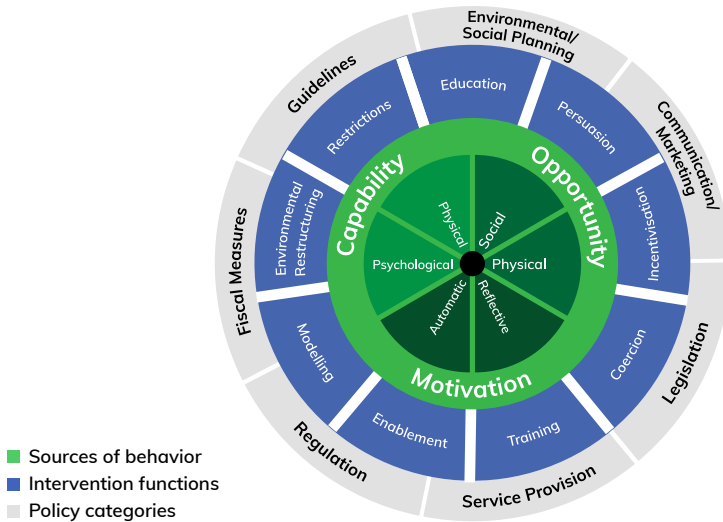


Figure 3: The Behavior Change Wheel (Source: Michie et al. 2011)

About policy categories

The BCW offers seven broad policy options: Guidelines, Legislation, Service provision, Fiscal policies, Environmental planning, Communications and Marketing, and Regulation. These are represented by the outer gray layer of the wheel. Policy categories complement intervention functions by focusing on how the intervention will be delivered.

Table 5 on the next page maps COM-B barriers and enablers to intervention functions, using the BCW.



Table 5. Mapping COM-B to intervention functions

	Physical Capability	Psychological Capability	Physical Opportunity	Social Opportunity	Reflective Motivation	Automatic Motivation
Education Increase knowledge or understanding		●			●	
Persuasion Use communication to induce positive or negative feelings to stimulate action					●	●
Incentivization Create an expectation or reward					●	●
Coercion Create an expectation of punishment or cost					●	●
Training Impart skills	●	●	●		●	
Enablement Increase means or reduce barriers to increase capability (beyond education or training) or opportunity (beyond environmental restructuring)	●	●	●	●		●
Modeling Provide an example for people to aspire to or emulate				●		●
Environmental Restructuring Change the physical or social context			●	●	●	
Restrictions Use rules to reduce the opportunity to engage in the behavior			●	●		

Identifying opportunities for interventions to support democratic practices: Illustrated example

Depending on the target audience, one can apply the BCW to identify opportunities for interventions and the corresponding intervention functions that support positive engagement in democratic practices. Table 6 offers an example.

Table 6. Example of intervention opportunities and complementary policy categories

COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
Physical Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of access to information (due to literacy, democratic literacy or digital literacy).¹³⁵ - Poorly designed instruments for engagement¹³⁶ or lack of political experience.¹³⁷ + Using digital technologies to enhance engagement.¹³⁸ + Spaces for activism, for example by NGOs.¹³⁹ 	<p>Training: Building the capacity of citizens to use digital technologies to enhance engagement</p> <p>Enablement: Translating policy documents into vernacular language or braille to ensure everyone can participate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication and Marketing - Guidelines - Regulation

135 (Renz 2022; Godinho et al. 2021; Hartley 2021; Gainous, Abbott, and Wagner 2019; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019; Jash 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)

136 (Jash 2019)

137 (Ćabraja 2022)

138 (Ummara 2024; Kersting 2021)

139 (Forsyth 2019)



COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
<p>Psychological Capability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A lack of understanding of what a plural political landscape could look like;¹⁴⁰ how to deliberate in democracy.¹⁴¹ - How to unpack complex policies leading to the application of mental shortcuts/heuristics.¹⁴² - Too much information, leading to overload¹⁴³ or misinformation,¹⁴⁴ including partisan information¹⁴⁵ or distrust in information,¹⁴⁶ coupled with a lack of adequate storytelling skills and media models for effective journalism.¹⁴⁷ + Supporting knowledge production from different actors, including grassroots groups.¹⁴⁸ + Tapping into people's internal and external political efficacy (knowledge of political systems and ability to navigate them). 	<p>Education: Using vignettes and story telling initiatives to demonstrate the power of political knowledge and literacy, through examples of how various forms of engagement strengthened democracy around the world.</p> <p>Enablement: Developing sustainable funding models for supporting locally-relevant citizen journalism to cover local issues and educate the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communications and Marketing - Guidelines - Fiscal policies - Service provision

140 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)

141 (Mattes and Thompson 2018)

142 (Fesenfeld 2025)

143 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)

144 (Wuttke and Foos 2025; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019)

145 (Mauk and Grömping 2024)

146 (Piotrowski, Grimmelikhuijsen, and Deat 2019)

147 (Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015)

148 (Forsyth 2019)

COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/ Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/ Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
Physical Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of resources (e.g., time, financial) to engage in political activities.¹⁴⁹ - Established institutions for safeguarding democracy (e.g., courts) are under strain,¹⁵⁰ potentially making engagement with politics more risky. + Supporting social networks, including networks that cut across social and political boundaries,¹⁵¹ or that allow access to global information¹⁵² and pro-democracy movements in other countries.¹⁵³ + Technological infrastructure,¹⁵⁴ such as mobile telecommunications penetration,¹⁵⁵ digital tools,¹⁵⁶ and platforms on which citizens can brainstorm solutions.¹⁵⁷ 	<p>Environmental Restructuring: Creating opportunities for deliberate and direct engagement on policy issues, such as grassroots mobilisation or dialogue across party lines; participatory events like assemblies and gamified formats.</p> <p>Training: Including political education and teaching on democratic values and challenges of democracy in school curricula.¹⁵⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Environmental planning - Legislation - Regulation - Guidelines

149 (Purec 2024)

150 (Issacharoff 2018)

151 (Barker 2017; Llano-Arias 2015)

152 (Shen and Zhang 2018)

153 (Hyde 2020)

154 (Hendriks and Kay 2019; Gauja 2015)

155 (Jash 2019)

156 (Kersting 2021)

157 (Ćabraja 2022; Godinho et al. 2021)

158 (Purec 2024; Kruse, Ravlik, and Welzel 2019; Mattes and Thompson 2018; Higham and Djohari 2018; Subba 2014)



COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/ Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/ Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
<p>Social Opportunity</p>	<p>- Lack of understanding of democracy is exacerbated by the cognitive demands of life in the lower socio-economic strata.¹⁵⁹</p> <p>+ Maintaining trust by guaranteeing data privacy and transparent communication about data use during consultative processes.¹⁶⁰</p> <p>+ Strengthening civil society to build solidarity and belonging.¹⁶¹</p> <p>+ Using moments of shock (e.g., economic shocks) to mobilize across class lines.¹⁶²</p>	<p>Restrictions: Strengthening the autonomy of the judiciary as an objective arm of the government, and custodian for the democratic rights of a country's citizens.</p> <p>Enablement: Promoting diverse representation through programs that increase the participation of underrepresented groups in political processes.</p> <p>Modelling: Local, relatable, fact-based narratives in popular media that depict historical accounts of moments when democratic societies overcame crisis.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legislation - Regulation - Communications and Marketing - Service provision

159 (Kern and Hooghe 2018)

160 (Godinho et al. 2021; Hartley 2021)

161 (Kövéér 2021; Collins and Gambrel 2017)

162 (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018)

COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
<p>Reflective Motivation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A weak sense of political efficacy.¹⁶³ - Identity-based processes can amplify stereotypes.¹⁶⁴ - Commonly held values such as social conformity and obedience to authority (sometimes rooted in religion) can counter motivation to support democracy.¹⁶⁵ 	<p>Education: Civic education programs that educate voters on their rights and responsibilities.</p> <p>Persuasion: Targeted outreach for specific, hard-to-reach voters.</p> <p>Incentivization: Encouraging citizen participation by building tech-enabled or social media platforms for public consultations. Encouraging opportunities for citizens to voice their concerns and contribute to policy decisions.</p> <p>Coercion: Encourage government policy that guarantees media freedom, while also sanctioning misinformation and disinformation about electoral processes (e.g., vote rigging allegations).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legislation - Regulation - Communications and Marketing - Service provision

163 (Too 2024; Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2016; Horn and Keyman 2016)

164 (Hartman et al. 2022)

165 (Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Vishkin 2021)



COM-B Component	Example of Idealist/ Collectivist Barriers(-) and Enablers (+)	Examples of Idealist/ Collectivist Interventions (using BCW)	Complementary Policy Categories
Automatic Motivation	<p>- Performative democratic processes can create the illusion of participation, but do not leave citizens feeling empowered.¹⁶⁶</p> <p>+ Creating role models through showing elites respectfully debating trade-offs.¹⁶⁷</p> <p>+ Nourishing trust by showing institutions that are stable and reliable¹⁶⁷ and offer procedural legitimacy.¹⁶⁹</p>	<p>Persuasion: Voter registration media campaigns that demonstrate how citizen input has directly influenced policy outcomes.</p> <p>Enablement: Campaigns aimed at educating citizens on how to identify disinformation and navigate digital spaces securely are crucial for maintaining an informed electorate.</p> <p>Modeling: Programs designed to increase the participation of women, youth, and underrepresented groups in electoral politics.</p>	<p>- Communications and Marketing</p> <p>- Legislation</p> <p>- Guidelines</p>

166 (Kirsch and Welzel 2019)
 167 (Wuttke and Foos 2025)
 168 (Mauk 2022)
 169 (Facchini and Melki 2021)

Conclusion

This Practitioner Brief provides an overview of the potential for a behavior change approach to developing and implementing initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic practices. It extends what we have learned from the systematic literature review *Democracy Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Matter for Democratic Engagement and Behavior?*,¹⁷⁰ and the *Research Brief How to Talk about Democracy: What We Know (and Don't Know)*¹⁷¹ by zooming into democratic behaviors. Democracy is a **set of behaviors**: practices expressed through the daily actions and interactions between institutions and citizens that shape what it feels like to live within a democracy.

Drawing on our systematic literature review for the Democratic Narratives Alliance (DNA),¹⁷² we use a behavior change lens to demonstrate its potential for strengthening behaviors under four broad categories of democratic practices:

1. *Upholding democratic principles*
2. *Participating in democratic processes*
3. *Expressing dissent*
4. *Personal investment*

If democracy is enacted through repeated actions—by citizens, institutions, and intermediaries—then strengthening democracy requires more than communicating values or distributing civic information. **Information alone is insufficient to motivate behavior change or maintain engagement**; citizens' participation is shaped not only by what they know, but by whether they can act (capability), whether their environment supports action (opportunity), and whether they want to act (motivation) in the first place. Put simply: **to better support democracy, practitioners must better understand what drives people to act.**

170 (Gem et al, 2026a)

171 (Gem et al, 2026b)

172 (Gem et al, 2026a)



A behavior change approach, therefore, is powerful because it offers theory-based, holistic, and accessible ways of developing interventions that are contextually relevant, grounded in data and evidence, and designed to reduce the risk of unintended consequences, while also creating clearer opportunities for learning, iteration, and replication across settings. This is where the **COM-B Model** and the **Behavior Change Wheel (BCW)** are particularly useful. COM-B proposes that behavior occurs when people have:

- **Capability** (psychological and physical ability to perform the behavior),
- **Opportunity** (social and physical conditions that make the behavior possible), and
- **Motivation** (reflective intentions and automatic impulses that energize behavior).

The BCW then builds on COM-B by providing an analytical framework to (a) diagnose which barriers and enablers are most important in a given context, and (b) identify where interventions can be introduced to shift those conditions through coherent, evidence-informed interventions and supporting policy or delivery.

Understanding outcomes produced by behavior

For democracy practitioners, a behavior change approach also helps to correct a common planning error: practitioners often label their program goal as a “behavior” when it is actually an outcome produced by behavior. An outcome is the impact you want to see in the world; the behavior is how you get there; and influence is how you unlock that change in behavior (by shifting capability, opportunity, and/or motivation). Being explicit about these distinctions strengthens program logic, improves measurement, and clarifies what must change—especially across the four democratic practice areas identified in this report series.

Like any discipline, a behavior change approach has limits. First, behavior change frameworks can sometimes simplify a domain - governance - that is inherently complex. Second, in some contexts, the term “behavior change” can raise ethical concerns about manipulation, especially when interventions affect identity, belonging, or perceived legitimacy. In today’s complex environment, these concerns cannot be dismissed. The right response is not to abandon behavioral approaches, but to apply them carefully and responsibly: combine behavioral diagnosis with political economy and institutional analysis; be transparent and seek consent where feasible; put safeguards in place for rights and pluralism; and assess potential harms, including uneven impacts on marginalized groups. Used well, behavioral frameworks can help reveal structural barriers (particularly within “opportunity”), rather than hide them.

Areas for future research to improve practice

Finally, there are a few areas of this brief that can be extended in subsequent research and publications. Further research is needed to:

1. *create stronger evidence on which intervention pathways best support each of our four democratic practices across different political contexts and information environments, as these will be very contextually specific;*
2. *establish longer-term and spillover effects of behavior change interventions on various types of democratic behavior; and,*
3. *unpack how democracy narratives interact with COM-B drivers over time and through social networks (i.e., through social network analysis).*

Overall, democracy practitioners can leverage behavior change frameworks like COM-B and the BCW to understand and influence the behaviors that make up democratic practices in order to create a more rigorous and practical foundation for the design and implementation of democracy initiatives. These initiatives, in turn, can help reverse the current decline of democratic political systems around the world.



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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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38 Apple Cross Road,
Lavington, Nairobi, Kenya
www.busara.global

