

# 10 Reasons Why Democracy is in Crisis

By [Jan Oberg](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, June 06, 2014

[Transnational Foundation for Peace & Future Research](#)

Democracy is a core feature of Western society, normally understood as *representative* parliament – i.e. in free elections citizens vote for people to represent their interests in a parliament consisting of parties of which some form the government and some the opposition.

It's not always included in the definitions that democracy requires a reasonable level of knowledge and information, freely available. For instance, one often hears that India is the world's largest democracy but 26% of the people are still illiterate (287 million people).

So the "world's largest democracy" also has the world's largest population who can't read and write. In comparison, China's illiterate citizens make up about 3% and it is regularly called a dictatorship.

The state of democracy – 10 points for dialogue

When we talk about global crisis, people think much more of the economy, environment, identity issues or warfare than of democracy being in crisis. I think it is in fundamental crisis for the the following reasons.

*1. The state is being challenged from below and from above.*

Democracy is tied to the nation-state. But citizens' activity from below plus regional and global organisations, summits, forums and groups make the state weaker.

*2. Economic perspectives dominate.*

Most of what is discussed in democracies are related to the economy, and that is further dominated by the politics of the wallet.

*3. Materialism over life values.*

Compared with economics and what is called "realistic", democratic debate seldom touch values, ethics or concepts such as justice and peace.

*4. A time horizon far too short.*

Who can achieve anything meaningful in the larger world with a 4-year perspective?

*5. National parliaments less and less important.*

Larger, more distant and elite-based structures such as Wall Street, NATO, EU, the IMF, SCO, ASEAN, banks, and stock market manipulations etc. set up the parameters within which the state – national governments – may operate.

*6. Economic and military elites think of the world as one system.*

But the political sphere remains national, even sometimes nationalistic. We don't have even the embryo of a global democratic decision-making that can match these two powerful actors.

*7. Politicians must choose between getting elected and speaking the truth.*

A politician whose campaign would emphasise what we must give up and how we must show solidarity to save the world won't get elected. Those who get elected promise more and more money in your pocket, brilliant futures built on extrapolations of the present and they make promises everybody somehow knows won't be kept after election day.

*8. Public relation replaces knowledge.*

Politics has become pragmatic navigation and positioning, and less a matter of values and principles. Deals are being made and "sold" afterwards to the public.

Decades ago, political leaders would seek knowledge about certain options from independent expertise; these still exist of course but the army of spin doctors, marketing people, lobbying etc. has replaced most of it.

Thanks to modern communication and media demands the time for knowledge-based decision-making has been reduced enormously during the last 20-30 years. This mostly probably impacts negatively on the quality of most decisions.

*9. Politics as a calling versus a career option.*

*10. Finally, democracy should be about creating choice, not just voting.*

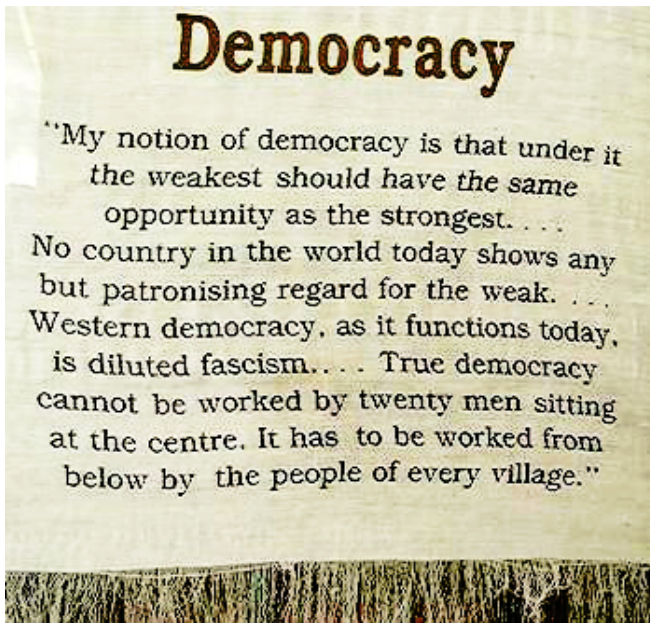
Most people seem to believe that democracy is about voting for some policy or law or voting 'yes' or 'no' to some alternatives set up by the political elites (also called referendum).

But fundamentally, democracy's very idea is not to vote on an issue set up in advance; democracy is to contribute to establishing the agenda in the first place. Example: Yes or no for a country to join the EU. But that is not democracy. Democracy is to develop a broader spectrum of which, say, the EU is only one option/alternative among a series.

Genuine democracy is about *setting agendas*. It's not about voting yes or no to somebody else's more or less cunning agenda. It's about *dialogue* and not just debates.

You could, perhaps, summarise these ten points by saying that democracy is no longer *lived*, it is being *performed*. It's become a ritual with little ethos.

Consequently, throughout Western democracies citizens feel that it is *almost impossible to "get through" to top leaders*.



Mohandas K. Gandhi – Photo © Jan Oberg

In one of his last interviews, French existentialist philosopher *Jean-Paul Sartre* (1905-1980) said that every time you vote, you give away your power.

That statement points to the essential, classical distinction between *representative* democracy and *direct* democracy.

In the first you delegate to someone else who has convinced/seduced you, to take care of your interests. We know this generally leads to false promise-making and considerable disappointment with the whole idea of politics.

In the second, citizens take issues in their own hands – which of course has other disadvantages and encompasses a whole series of other problems. But without a vibrant citizenship, no democracy is possible.

Least bad but far from good enough

*In summary, while democracy perhaps remains the least bad system, we should be very careful not to equate that statement with democracy being good enough.*

It is *no* test of its quality that Western democracy is – *ceteris paribus* – better than authoritarian regimes or dictatorship.

Complacency in this matters could easily lead us towards whatever we associate with the opposite of democracy in years to come. Was the EU Parliamentary elections an indicator of just that at a deeper level?\*

Since the above discussion is critical, the next article will invite the reader to a dialogue about some possible things that could be done to regain the basics of democracy and make it better for the future.

[A longer version with elaborated arguments is available at TFF's blog](#)

\* An [earlier PressInfo](#) dealt with the recent EU elections in perspective of democracy's crisis

[Jan Oberg](#) is TFF director, dr. hc.

*TFF provides research and public education related to the basic UN Charter norm that "peace shall be established by peaceful means".*

*We are always happy to hear from you or try to answer your questions.*

*This text may be reprinted as it is with due credit and links to TFF but we shall appreciate you telling us. If shortened, please send the abridged version to obtain our permission.*

The original source of this article is [Transnational Foundation for Peace & Future Research](#)  
Copyright © [Jan Oberg](#), [Transnational Foundation for Peace & Future Research](#), 2014

---

**[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)**

**[Become a Member of Global Research](#)**

Articles by: [Jan Oberg](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)