Inclusive Citizenship in a world in Transformation: Co-Designing for Democracy

Policy synthesis #5: Building Bridges in a Polarized World

10-10-2025
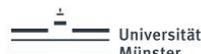
Authors: Francesc Cots, Jeremie Fosse and Inês Campos

www.incite-dem.eu

Grant Agreement 101094258

Partners:

1 Context: the twin challenge of polarization and distrust

A healthy democracy thrives on a diversity of viewpoints and vigorous debate. Some degree of political polarization is natural, helping to distinguish party platforms and encourage participation. However, contemporary European society is increasingly experiencing **pernicious polarization**, a process that simplifies politics into a binary division of society into mutually antagonistic camps [**1**]. As this dynamic deepens, normal differences align along a single dimension, and politics becomes a battle of 'Us' versus 'Them.'[**1**] This is not just a political disagreement; it's a psychological conflict where social identities, such as class, religion, or place of residence, merge with partisan identity, fostering fierce in-group loyalty and strong prejudice against the opposing side [**2**].

This toxic environment is both a cause and a consequence of declining **political trust**—not only in institutions and politicians but also in fellow citizens. Research from the Incite Dem project [**3**] confirms that a lack of trust in government and stakeholder conflicts constitute key barriers to citizen participation. When people believe the system is rigged or that their opponents are acting in bad faith, the motivation to engage in constructive, cross-cutting dialogue collapses. This poses a significant challenge to addressing complex, long-term socio-ecological challenges that require a broad societal consensus and sustained collective action. This brief outlines strategies to manage this polarization and rebuild the trust necessary for effective and democratic governance.

1.1. Scope: from toxic division to constructive dialogue

This policy synthesis confronts the twin challenges of pernicious polarization and declining political trust. The aim is not to eliminate political disagreement, but to transform it from a destructive force into a source of democratic resilience. Drawing on evidence from the INCITE-DEM project, this brief offers targeted and strategic recommendations.

2 The landscape: a fertile ground for division

The current European landscape is characterized by a rise in partisan animosity. While democratic experiences, such as the fall of authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, have historically been a strong force for depolarization, established democracies are proving vulnerable. Globally, only a small number of democracies have managed to depolarize from pernicious levels and sustain low levels of polarization in the long term [1]. This indicates that managing polarization at moderately high levels— while avoiding democratic erosion and government dysfunction—is a critical challenge.

Within this context, democratic innovations and participatory processes offer a potential counter-narrative. By bringing diverse citizens together to deliberate on shared problems, they can, in theory, foster mutual understanding and break down antagonistic identities [**4**]. However, these processes are not immune to the dynamics they seek to solve [**5**]. Analysis of European case studies reveals that perceived barriers in national-level cases frequently concern issues related to deliberation itself, such as power relations, conflicts of interest, and entrenched, conflicting perspectives within groups [3].

In **Croatia**, the We Can! (Možemo!) political platform emerged directly from "a feeling of distrust and alienation from the political system." A key success noted by citizens after the party won power in Zagreb was the restoration of integrity, which in turn helped rebuild public confidence [6]. As one citizen stated: "It is important for people's trust in politicians, given so many bad situations that people no longer vote in elections because they think everyone is a thief."[1]

3 The diagnosis: the vicious cycle of polarization and distrust

The erosion of trust and the rise of polarization are locked in a self-reinforcing cycle. Distrust fuels polarization by making citizens suspicious of their opponents' motives, and polarization in turn deepens distrust by reinforcing negative stereotypes and fostering zero-sum thinking. This cycle is sustained by several underlying challenges within our democratic ecosystem.

The need for empathy and mutual understanding

Pernicious polarization thrives when citizens lose the ability to understand the perspectives of those with whom they disagree. Deliberative processes are meant to bridge this gap, but they often fail when not designed with this explicit goal in mind.

- **Conflict and entrenched positions:** Barriers to successful participation frequently include conflicts between stakeholders and conflicting perspectives within a group [**3**]. When processes are not skillfully facilitated, they can simply provide another arena for entrenched groups to fight their battles, reinforcing rather than resolving polarization [**6**].
- **Lack of connection:** Pernicious polarization thrives when genuine dialogue breaks down. Research shows that citizens' ideal of democracy often involves quality conversations, which they describe in relatable terms, such as "friends debating" or "political discussions." [**7**] They envision spaces where people can disagree respectfully and exchange ideas openly. When the formal political system fails to provide forums for reasoned and constructive debate, it creates a void. This void is quickly filled by more toxic and antagonistic forms of communication, allowing division and hostility to replace understanding.

Well-designed deliberative processes can counteract polarization by creating an environment where citizens can move beyond media-driven conflict and find common ground.

The **Spanish Citizen Climate Assembly** brought together a representative sample of the population,

---

[1] Quotes from interviewees in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on "We Can! Political Platform".

The problem of political impact: a driver of institutional distrust

A primary driver of distrust is the perception that citizen participation has no real impact on policy. When people invest their time and energy only to be ignored, their faith in the democratic system itself is damaged.

- **Institutional inertia:** The failure to achieve and demonstrate real-world impact is a universal barrier to successful participation. This gap between citizen effort and political outcome can be deeply disillusioning, leading to the belief that the system is unresponsive or illegitimate [**5**].
- **A lack of transparent feedback:** Trust requires transparency and accountability. Initiatives should share their goals, processes, and outcomes openly to build community trust and establish feedback mechanisms between citizens, stakeholders, and policymakers.

Insufficient skills for a polarized age

Navigating a polarized environment and participating in complex policy debates requires specific skills and knowledge that are often underdeveloped.

- **Civic education deficits:** Effective participation requires citizens to understand complex issues and engage in reasoned debate. Citizens themselves recognize that a lack of knowledge can be a barrier and that **training and education** are key enablers of democratic engagement [**3**].
- **Need for facilitation:** High-quality deliberation does not happen automatically. It requires expert facilitation and processes designed to manage conflict and build consensus. Without investment in these skills, even well-intentioned dialogues can descend into unproductive arguments [**6**].

The **Municipalities in Transition** project, for instance, used a sophisticated but "very complex and challenging" methodology to foster a new culture of collaboration. The project's own analysis revealed that a critical factor for success was the *"experience of the project team, who were expert facilitators used to dealing with different power dynamics."* Without this skilled guidance, even the most successful cases struggled to change established habits [**6**]. As one organizer admitted, the

---

[2]   Quotes from interviewees in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "Spanish Citizen Climate Assembly".

4 Recommendations: building a resilient and trustworthy democracy

To counter pernicious polarization and rebuild trust, a multi-faceted strategy is needed to create an ecosystem that supports constructive disagreement and fosters a sense of shared fate.

4.1 Foster deliberation by building new community networks

The most direct way to combat polarization is to create structured opportunities for citizens to engage with diverse perspectives in a safe and facilitated environment. To achieve this, public authorities should invest in and institutionalize deliberative forums, like citizens' assemblies, that intentionally bring together community networks that do not normally interact. The goal is to have them learn about complex issues and find common ground.

This approach is supported by social simulation modeling from the INCITE-DEM project [8], which finds that interventions targeting community networks are the single most effective strategy for reducing polarization. This means the process is about more than just discussion; it's about intentionally forging new social ties between disconnected or opposed groups to break down echo chambers and build mutual understanding.

4.2 Implement targeted and strategic interventions

Insights from Incite Dem simulation research[8] show that to implement effective strategies to reduce pernicious polarisation, they should take into account the following considerations:

Know your goal: healing divisions vs. winning support

First, you must clarify your primary objective. There's a crucial difference between **managing polarization** and **building policy support**, and they require completely different tools.

- **Managing polarization** is about healing societal rifts. The goal is to bridge divides and bring opposing groups closer together. It focuses on *how* a community disagrees. The most effective strategy for this is creating new networks that connect different community groups [8].
- **Building policy support** is about achieving a specific outcome. The goal is to get as many people as possible to agree with a proposal. It focuses on *what* the community thinks.

---

[3]   Quotes from interviewees in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on "Municipalities in Transition".

Interventions that strengthen shared values or increase individual satisfaction are more effective in this context.

Be targeted, not general

The method matters as much as the strategy. Research has shown that targeted interventions, which are strategically focused on specific subgroups, are far more effective at reducing polarization than **blanket interventions** applied to everyone [**8**]. Instead of general information campaigns, it's better to invest in initiatives that bring specific, opposed community segments into direct dialogue.

Anticipate the trade-offs

Interventions can have complex and even contradictory effects. For example, a successful effort to win over a resistant group by addressing their core concerns might increase overall support for a policy. However, that same action could unintentionally lower overall satisfaction on the broader community [**8**] . These complex ripple effects must be anticipated and managed.

Timing is everything

The timing of an intervention can significantly alter its impact, and the optimal time to act depends on the goal.

- To **manage polarization**, intervene **early**. This prevents opinions from hardening and allows new social connections time to stabilize [8].
- To **build policy support**, interventions are often most effective in the **mid-term** of a debate— a period when people are paying attention but may still be open to persuasion.

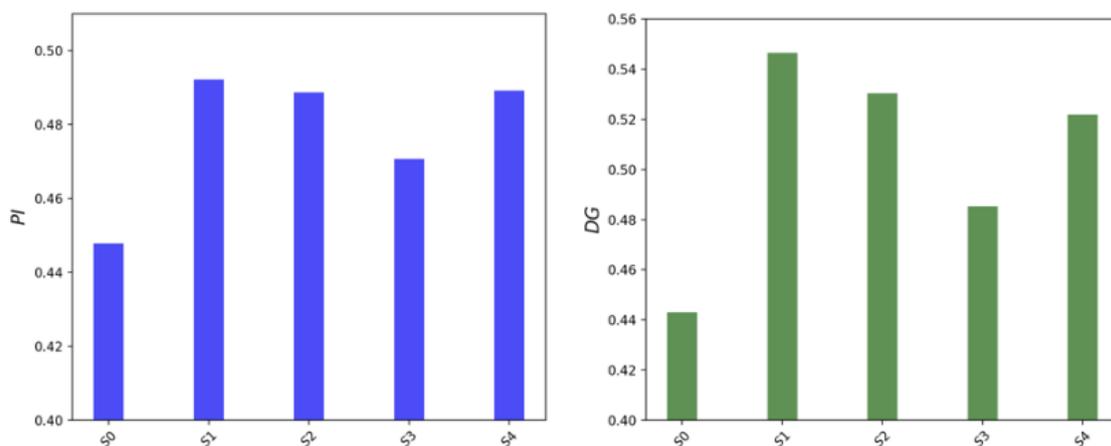Figure 6: Impact of Policy Interventions on Polarisation and Group Division [**8**]

Figure 6: These graphs compare the effects of different policy interventions on community **polarisation (PI)** and **group division (DG)**. The results show that network-based strategies that connect different community groups **(S0)** are effective at fostering unity. In contrast, interventions that target only individual, non-social needs **(S1)** can paradoxically increase division and polarisation within the community.

4.3 Invest in civic education for a complex world

Citizens need to be equipped with the skills to navigate a polarized information environment and engage constructively in democratic life. Fulfilling the public's desire for better deliberative and procedural aspects of democracy requires building civic capacity directly through two key actions:

- **Modernize civic education:** School curricula should move beyond teaching government structures to focus on developing critical skills like media literacy, argumentation, perspective-taking, and resilience to disinformation.
- **Support lifelong civic learning:** Public investment in accessible, adult-focused educational programs is needed to provide citizens with the knowledge and tools to understand complex socio-ecological challenges and participate effectively in the policy debates that surround them.

A co-create proposal from the Democracy Labs**– The Democracy Laboratories**

The Democracy Laboratories is a network of spaces, potentially housed in existing public facilities such as municipal libraries, that serve as hubs for experimental and hands-on civic education for citizens of all ages. The labs would partner with schools to integrate democratic concepts into the curriculum, while also serving as a resource for adult learning. They would use facilitated games, collaborative workshops, and role-playing exercises to teach essential skills for a polarized age, including critical thinking, media literacy, constructive argumentation, and perspective-taking**.** The focus is on informal, experiential learning, creating a safe environment where citizens can practice navigating disagreement and building consensus. This approach makes civic engagement feel like an exciting, empowering opportunity rather than a daunting obligation, building the skills and confidence needed to foster a more resilient and less polarized democracy.

4.4 Leverage technology to anticipate and bridge divides

While digital tools can amplify polarization, they can also be designed to mitigate it. New technologies, particularly social simulations, offer powerful ways for citizens and policymakers to understand complexity and the consequences of collective action before taking action.

The Dialogue Tool: a model for proactive engagement

Public authorities should integrate social simulation tools into the policy planning phase, following the model of the **Dialogue Tool**[8], which was created and tested as part of the INCITE-DEM project's participatory sessions. These tools allow policymakers and citizens to run "what-if" scenarios for contentious issues (e.g., land use, energy projects), visualizing how different intervention strategies might affect community cohesion and polarization. By using such tools, public authorities can move from a reactive to a proactive approach—testing and refining their public

engagement strategies to select the most effective, targeted, and timely interventions that are proven to depolarize debates and build consensus

5 Conclusions

Pernicious polarization and political distrust pose a fundamental threat to the ability of European democracies to address the urgent socio-ecological challenges of our time. Reversing this trend requires more than just new participatory formats; it demands a concerted effort to rebuild the social connective tissue. The path forward is not to avoid conflict but to manage it with evidence-based, strategic interventions. By investing in deliberative processes that strategically build new community networks, implementing targeted policies that align with specific goals, equipping citizens with the skills necessary for a complex world, and leveraging technology to foster foresight and understanding, we can create a more resilient democracy. A system where citizens trust the process, and each other, enough to tackle the shared challenges of the 21st century.

6 References

[1] McCoy, J., Press, B., Somer, M., & Tuncel, O. (2022). Reducing Pernicious Polarization: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Depolarization. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[2] Wang, S., & Jager, W. (2025). 3.2 Report on social simulations of the quality and inclusiveness of the democracy process. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[3] Repo, P., Bogach, M., Kousa, I., Campos, I., & Timonen, P. (2025). D5.1 Opportunities and requirements for inclusive participation and engagement. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[4] Falanga, R., Ribeiro, J., Moniz, J., & Buth, V. (2024). Report and timeline of (e)participation and engagement practices, Deliverable 1.1 for the project INCITE-DEM. Grant Agreement 101094258.

[5] Cots, F., Fosse, J., Campos, I., Falanga, R., Ribeiro, J. D., Moniz, J., Buth, V., Schlipphak, B., Simsek, C., Treib, O., Fuchs, D., Wang, S., Jager, W., Repo, P., Limão, J., Oliveira, S., & Barchiesi, E. (2024). D6.1 Policy synthesis #1: Democratic innovations for sustainability. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[6] Campos, I., Limão, J., Oliveira, S., Repo, P., Timonen, P., Buth, V., Cots, F., Barchesi, E., Pagano, A., & Živčič, L. (2024). D2.2 Case Study Narratives. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[7] Campos, I., Limão, J., Peniche, D., Lamas, D., Buth, V., Oliveira, S., & Sion, Y. (2025). D4.3 Report on the collection of individual and collective narrated imaginaries. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[8] Wang, S., & Jager, W. (2025). 3.2 Report on social simulations of the quality and inclusiveness of the democracy process. INCITE-DEM Grant Agreement 101094258.

[9] Wang, S., & Jager, W. (2024). Dialogue Tool based on the HUMAT Framework and Instructions for Users. Deliverable 3.1 for the project INCITE-DEM. Grant Agreement 101094258.

incite-dem.eu

facebook.com/InciteDem

twitter.com/InciteDem

linkedin.com/company/incite-dem-citizens-reinventing-democracy