

R E S E A R C H R E P O R T

Measuring the Content of Democracy

with the Democratic Fitness Indicator

*Revealing where people hold power, where they don't,
and what to do about it.*

Marcin Gerwin · Beata Latos · Katarzyna Sobuś

Center for Blue Democracy, Poland

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MEASURING THE CONTENT OF DEMOCRACY WITH DEMOCRATIC FITNESS INDICATOR

Marcin Gerwin, Beata Latos, Katarzyna Sobuś

Abstract

Democracy is often seen through the lens of organizing elections; however, the core premise of democracy is something else. It is that people are in charge of running the country, either directly or through elected representatives, not just participating in elections.^{1,2} What can be observed in many countries is dissatisfaction with democracy.^{3,4} However, is it really democracy that people are dissatisfied with, or is it the lack of it? To measure the content of democracy in a political system at the national level, a new metric was created: Democratic Fitness Indicator (DFI). It analyzes the legal system in seven categories: elections, holding politicians accountable, parliamentary legislative initiative, citizens-initiated referenda, citizens' assemblies, safeguards, and ability to change the constitution. DFI is focused on evaluating whether people have real control over their country. The results are presented on a scale from 0% to 100%, with 100% being the maximum score. We applied the DFI to 20 countries from various continents. We found that the highest overall score was 38.63% (Colombia), and the lowest 13.49% (Norway), with an average score of 20.65%. The results show that many countries that are formally classified as democracies actually have either weak democratic mechanisms or lack them completely. Ten countries – USA, Botswana, South Africa, Sweden, Canada, Germany, Kenya, Norway, the UK, and Switzerland – scored 0% in four out of seven categories: Elections, Parliamentary Legislative Initiative, Citizens-Initiated Referenda, and Citizens' Assemblies. These findings reveal a clear need for improving the quality of democracies around the world.

Introduction

The core concept of democracy is that people are in charge of decision-making. In other words, it means that it is the people who are sovereign, not the monarch, religious leaders, politicians, or someone else.^{5,6} This understanding comes from recognizing the inherent freedom of every person, their worthiness, and capacity for self-determination.⁷ This is also why

¹ Barber, B. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (University of California Press, 1984).

² Elstob, S. & Escobar, O. (eds.) *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

³ Torcal, M. & Montero, J. R. (eds.) *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies* (Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Wike, R., Silver, L. & Castillo, A. Many across the globe are dissatisfied with how democracy is working. *Pew Research Center* (2019).

⁵ Held, D. *Models of Democracy*. *Stanford University Press* (2006).

⁶ Beetham, D. *Democracy and Human Rights*. *Polity Press* (1999).

⁷ Dahl, R. *On Democracy*. *Yale University Press* (1998).

in democratic systems all people are treated as equal, and why the vote of each person has the same power.^{8,9}

Throughout the ages, these democratic ideals have been implemented in practice to varying degrees. Even in ancient Athens, where citizens could vote directly on laws and policies during assemblies, the right to participate was limited to adult male Athenians.^{10,11} This meant the exclusion of women, slaves, and foreign residents, falling short of meeting the condition of equality. In modern times, it is common for both men and women to have voting rights regardless of their ethnic background, and slavery is forbidden by law. However, are elections what democracy is all about? Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed in "The Social Contract" (1762): "The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing."¹²

The parliamentary or presidential elections organized across the modern world are considered a cornerstone of democracy and can be recognized as a legitimate way for people to express their will.¹³ However, for the democratic system to work properly, elected representatives need to be fully accountable to the people so that the basic criterion of democracy can be fulfilled—that it is the people who govern the country, either directly or indirectly.¹⁴

At the same time, democracy does not mean that people need to be constantly engaged in the affairs of the country. It is fine to delegate tasks or to leave public issues to others to take care of. Participation should not be obligatory. Nevertheless, a well-designed democratic system should provide opportunities for people to engage in decision-making—be it through referenda, citizens' assemblies, or parliamentary legislative initiatives—should they wish to participate more fully.¹⁵

What has been observed in recent years is that in many countries people feel disillusioned with democracy. Studies show that citizens perceive traditional representative institutions as unresponsive, opaque, or captured by elites.^{16,17} This disillusionment has been documented by a wide body of literature that describes a "crisis of representative democracy" or even a "democratic recession".^{18,19}

⁸ Dahl, R. A. *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989).

⁹ Beitz, C. R. *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Hansen, M. H. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹¹ Ober, J. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹² Rousseau, J.-J. *The Social Contract* (Penguin Classics, 1968).

¹³ Przeworski, A. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Manin, B. *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Pateman, C. *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹⁶ Crouch, C. *Post-Democracy* (Polity Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Pharr, S. J., Putnam, R. D. & Dalton, R. J. Troubled democracies: political discontent in the OECD democracies. In *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Crozier, M., Huntington, S. P. & Watanuki, J. *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York University Press, 1975).

¹⁹ Lührmann, A. & Lindberg, S. I. A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization* **26**, 1095-1113 (2019).

However, the disillusionment expressed by people in the polls may not be with democracy as such, but in fact with the lack of it. Even though a particular country may be considered democratic, a more detailed examination may reveal the absence of meaningful and effective mechanisms for people to exercise their power, or deficiencies of current practices. The democratic label may be merely a façade—a reputation not backed by actual democratic processes.²⁰

Until now, several indicators have been developed to assess forms of democratic governance. For instance, Vanhanen's Index focuses on electoral competitiveness and participation, drawing on data such as vote shares and turnout.²¹ The Democracy-Dictatorship index applies a simple classification: a country is either democratic or not, based on whether contested elections are held and power alternates between political actors.²² The Polity V dataset offers a graded scale from -10 to +10, combining sub-dimensions such as executive recruitment and political competition.²³ The Freedom House index assigns countries a numerical score from 1 to 7 based on civil liberties and political rights.²⁴ The V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project takes a different route, breaking democracy down into five models—electoral, liberal, deliberative, participatory, and egalitarian—each composed of numerous indicators coded by regional experts.²⁵

None of these indicators, however, addresses the critical question: to what degree, in a democratic system, can people exercise their power? Answering this question requires a new approach.

The Democratic Fitness Indicator in detail

The Democratic Fitness Indicator (DFI) is designed to evaluate the content of democracy in a political system, at the national level, on the scale from 0% to 100%. It examines primarily the legal system, whether it allows people to exercise their sovereignty in a meaningful way. In other words, it asks: who holds the power? Is it the people or someone else?

The DFI includes seven categories weighted as follows:

- 1) Elections - 25%,
- 2) Holding Politicians Accountable - 15%,
- 3) Parliamentary Legislative Initiative - 5%,
- 4) Citizens-Initiated Referenda - 10%,
- 5) Citizens' Assemblies - 15%,
- 6) Safeguards - 15%,
- 7) Ability to Change the Constitution - 15%.

²⁰ Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²¹ Vanhanen, T. A new dataset for measuring democracy, 1810-1998. *Journal of Peace Research* **37**, 251-265 (2000).

²² Cheibub, J. A., Gandhi, J. & Vreeland, J. R. Democracy and dictatorship revisited. *Public Choice* **143**, 67-101 (2009).

²³ Marshall, M. G., Gurr, T. R. & Jaggers, K. *Polity V Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2018* (Center for Systemic Peace, 2020).

²⁴ Freedom House. *Freedom in the World* (Freedom House, 1994).

²⁵ V-Dem Institute. *V-Dem Codebook v14* (University of Gothenburg, 2024).

By examining these categories in detail, the DFI identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the political system, while at the same time it offers concrete solutions for its improvement.

The category of Elections is composed of the following sections:

- a) Campaign Finance Controls
- b) Electoral District Design
- c) Parliamentary Election Voting Methods
- d) Electoral Threshold
- e) Presidential Election Voting Methods
- f) Distortions of the Popular Vote

Each section includes specific components, for example, for the “Campaign Finance Controls” they are: donation restrictions for foreign sources, corporate donations, and individual donations limits. The detailed structure is as follows:

- a) Foreign Source Donations: max. 8 points
 - Official Campaign Account:
 - * Completely prohibited: 4 points
 - * Partially restricted: 0 points
 - * Allowed: -25% for elections category (penalty)
 - Other Campaign Channels:
 - * Completely prohibited: 4 points
 - * Partially restricted: 0 points
 - * Allowed: -25% for elections category (penalty)
 - Loopholes exist that allow foreign source donations: -25% for elections category (penalty)

The key element of the DFI is the system of penalties signifying strong deviation from democratic principles. Penalties add up; however, the minimum possible score for any particular category is 0%, even if combined penalties would mathematically result in a negative value. For example, unrestricted corporate donations through the official campaign account would result in a -25% penalty, no limits for campaign spending in presidential elections would mean another -25%, plus an additional -25% for no limits in parliamentary campaign spending. In total, this would give a -75% penalty that would be subtracted from the score gained in the Elections category.

For the category of Elections, there are multiple potential penalties identified in the section called "Distortions of the Popular Vote." They include: "Electoral College overriding results of the popular vote for presidential elections," "Monarch's power over prime minister selection," gerrymandering, and many others. Some of these distortions may be ceremonial, and where they have not been used in practice over the last 100 years, only part of the impact is applied to the score. Intentional gerrymandering—a manipulation of district boundaries to give one political group an advantage—is treated as an investigative finding requiring documented evidence, such as legislative-process records or public statements about deliberate partisan advantage.²⁶ The DFI framework also includes a check for electoral disproportionality, using the Gallagher Index to compare each party's vote share to its seat share.

²⁶ Stephanopoulos, N. O. & McGhee, E. M. Partisan gerrymandering and the efficiency gap. *University of Chicago Law Review* **82**, 831-900 (2015).

The penalties are proportional to the effect of the distortion. For example, if severe disproportionality is identified, the impact is -100% for parliamentary elections because it completely subverts the will of the people by giving a majority of seats to candidates who received only a minority of support. Limited disproportionality results in a -50% penalty, acknowledging the impact of the distortion without disqualifying the outcome of the elections entirely.

The DFI awards points for voting methods based on their accuracy in capturing the genuine will of the electorate.²⁷ In both parliamentary and presidential elections, the scoring reflects how precisely a voting system translates voter preferences into representative outcomes. Methods that most accurately reflect voter intent receive the highest scores. For example, preferential voting systems such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and Borda Count receive the maximum 20 points because they capture nuanced voter preferences through ranked choices, allowing citizens to express support for multiple candidates in order of preference.²⁸ Conversely, First Past the Post (FPTP) receives 0 points due to its significant limitations in accurately representing voter intentions. Under FPTP, a candidate can win with a small plurality rather than a majority, potentially leaving most voters unrepresented.^{29,30}

The DFI accounts for countries with or without direct presidential elections. In parliamentary systems without presidential elections, the framework redistributes the scoring weight proportionally across other relevant categories. Similarly, the assessment differentiates between unicameral and bicameral parliaments, applying specific criteria to each chamber when applicable. By adjusting category weightings proportionally when certain elements are absent in a political system, the DFI provides a standardized approach to measuring the content of democracy across different constitutional arrangements. This enables comparison between diverse democratic systems while respecting their structural differences.

The second category of the DFI is 'Holding Politicians Accountable' and it includes: national-level recall referendums (60% of this category), abrogative referendums that allow citizens to repeal laws they consider unacceptable (20%), and freedom of information laws (20%). The greatest weight is given to recall referendums as they represent the most powerful mechanism providing a check on elected representatives' actions. A bonus of up to 20% is awarded for having an independent institution that has the authority to investigate alleged misconduct by elected officials and public servants at any level, and which can issue binding remedial actions. An example is the Public Protector in the Republic of South Africa.

The DFI framework includes also Parliamentary Legislative Initiative (5% of the DFI), a mechanism allowing citizens to submit proposals for ordinary legislation directly to parliament for deliberation and potential adoption. Unlike referenda, these proposals don't automatically trigger a public vote, which explains their modest weight in the overall framework.

The Citizens-Initiated Referenda category (10% of the DFI) differentiates between two types: legislative referenda, which enable citizens to vote on fully drafted legislation

²⁷ Emerson, P. *From Majority Rule to Inclusive Politics* (Springer, 2016).

²⁸ Farrell, D. M. *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²⁹ Lijphart, A. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (Yale University Press, 2012).

³⁰ Riker, W. H. *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (Freeman, 1982).

that becomes law if approved; and policy issue referenda, which present general policy questions without specific legislative text. The framework evaluates their effectiveness based on whether they are legally binding or merely consultative, the signature requirements (adjusted for country size), whether electronic signatures are permitted, and the majority requirements for validity (such as minimum turnout thresholds).

The Citizens' Assemblies category (15% of the DFI) evaluates deliberative processes involving randomly selected citizens whose composition reflects the demographic, economic, and social diversity of the society in appropriate proportions. This category carries greater weight than referenda because citizens' assemblies include an in-depth learning phase about the topic, and structured deliberation among participants, potentially delivering more thoroughly considered outcomes.³¹ While the main focus is on legal frameworks for citizen-initiated assemblies, the DFI also recognizes countries where general legal provisions for public consultations have been used to implement national-level citizens' assemblies.

The category of Safeguards (15% of the DFI) focuses on ensuring that key positions and institutions in the country, beyond parliament and government, serve the well-being of the whole society by protecting them against potential capture by, for instance, political parties. This safeguarding is achieved primarily by controlling the selection processes for judges (2% of this category), media control bodies (2%), members of the electoral commission (2%), prosecutor general (2%), constitutional court members (4%), and the body tasked with election results validation (3%). Selection processes are evaluated based on how well they consider candidates' professional qualifications while placing meaningful control in citizens' hands. As it turns out, citizens' assemblies serve this purpose particularly well, as they create a structure where experts can provide input regarding substantive professional competencies, while citizens retain the power to decide which candidates are most trustworthy and suitable for the position.³²

The final category evaluates the ability to change the constitution (15% of the DFI). The key question here is: who controls the rules of the game? The DFI framework takes into account initiation methods, process type – whether it's a parliamentary commission, special constitutional convention, or citizens' assembly – and approval mechanisms.

Overall, the DFI framework includes 89 elements (scoring rows) – distinct features of the political system. Most of these elements contain multiple options, representing different policy choices or implementation methods. For example, the number of signatures required to initiate a legislative citizens' assembly (3 thresholds for 3 different country sizes), the voting method used in elections to the lower house of parliament (22 options), or the approach to validating election results (7 options). In total, the DFI framework includes a total of 404 options.³³

To verify the performance of the DFI, we have tested it on 20 countries from various continents. Even though the set of 20 case studies constitutes a modest sample of the total number of democratic countries around the world, it does give a glimpse into the state of democracy worldwide.

³¹ Dryzek, J. S. et al. The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. *Science* **363**, 1144-1146 (2019)

³² Fishkin, J. S. *Democracy When the People Are Thinking: Revitalizing Our Politics Through Public Deliberation* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³³ The complete DFI framework is available for download from Figshare at: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.32229057>

Method

From the outset, we assumed that the DFI score calculation would be performed using AI. Manual calculation is possible but extremely time-consuming. The first question was which model to use. After testing various options, we found that Claude demonstrated the best understanding of democracy-related issues. Using Claude alone for DFI scoring became feasible with the arrival of Claude 4, which can browse the internet and offers an advanced "Research" capability that analyses hundreds of pages over an extended period to answer a single query.

While it is possible to share the DFI framework with Claude and ask for a complete score directly, the results can be inaccurate. We therefore developed a method that separates the research phase (data collection) from the scoring phase (calculation of results). For the research phase, we provided Claude with both the DFI framework and detailed guidelines on how to conduct the research. For each country, research begins with "special research requests" addressing specific topics: the presence or absence of an independent institution that can investigate misconduct by elected officials and public administrators, foreign donation loopholes, gerrymandering, and issues related to public campaign funding.

Initially, in 2025, basic research for each category was conducted in one conversation and then verified in a second. If errors were spotted during verification, we returned to the first conversation and requested amendments. The research guidelines include explanations of key terms, documentation requirements, a hierarchy of sources (e.g. starting with the constitution), clarifications of the DFI framework's nuances, and guidance on handling incomplete data. Direct quotes from legal documents were required throughout. Research verification follows its own set of guidelines, with detailed criteria for each DFI category.

Only after the research phase was complete for all categories did Claude begin calculating the score. This process also used two conversations: in the first, Claude performed the calculations; in the second, these were verified. For the scoring phase, we prepared detailed guidelines for each DFI category. Calculation results were checked against three sets of verification guidelines, including a dedicated set for verifying the application of penalties. As in the research phase, any detected error sent us back to the first conversation for amendment. Score calculation proceeded one category at a time, with the final results compiled in a standardized format.

In May 2026 the method was refined. Following detailed instructions, Claude Opus 4.7 launches several agents to conduct the basic research in parallel. Once the research files for a category are written, Claude verifies them before moving on to the next, until all seven categories are complete. A YAML file is then generated for each country, capturing its classifications across all categories. The DFI score is calculated by the DFI Builder — a Python application we developed that contains the scoring engine and produces both an Excel scorecard for each country and the final DFI results. The two phases are preserved: research is performed by Claude under detailed guidelines; scoring is performed deterministically by the Builder. Human focus can now be placed on the research phase, while the Builder handles scoring, producing accurate and replicable results — anyone running the script with the same YAML obtains the same outcome.

The DFI Builder is released with full documentation, making it possible to calculate the DFI score for any democratic country not covered by this study.

Results

The study results reveal a clear need for improvements in political system design across all 20 analyzed countries. Colombia achieved the highest overall DFI score at 38.63%, while Norway scored lowest at 13.49%. Notably, ten countries—the USA, Botswana, South Africa, Sweden, Canada, Germany, Kenya, Norway, UK, and Switzerland —received 0% scores in four DFI categories: Elections, Parliamentary Legislative Initiative, Citizens-Initiated Referenda, and Citizens' Assemblies.

	Country	Score		Country	Score
1.	Colombia	38.63%	11.	Germany	21.13%
2.	Mexico	26.74%	12.	Netherlands	19.08%
3.	Costa Rica	26.13%	13.	Kenya	18.30%
4.	Poland	23.90%	14.	Switzerland	16.84%
5.	Japan	22.87%	15.	Canada	16.34%
6.	Peru	22.76%	16.	Sweden	16.07%
7.	South Korea	22.65%	17.	USA	14.28%
8.	Latvia	22.38%	18.	UK	14.07%
9.	Spain	21.87%	19.	Botswana	13.90%
10.	South Africa	21.35%	20.	Norway	13.49%

Table 1. Overall DFI scores for all case studies.

In the Elections category, 15 countries scored 0%, while 19 countries received one or more penalties. These penalties were primarily for: lacking party campaign spending limits, lacking parliamentary candidate spending limits, allowing unrestricted corporate donations, having no individual donation limits to parties, lacking presidential campaign spending limits, and permitting foreign donation loopholes. The highest total penalties reached -375% (floored at 0%) — for the USA. Only Colombia received no penalties, scoring 50.32% in this category. The room for improvement for Colombia is in such areas as corporate donations (currently allowed with caps), individual donation limits, and campaign spending controls. For South Korea, which scored 1.32%, enhancements can be made in areas of transparency requirements for campaign donations, improved electoral district design, and replacing the First Past the Post method in presidential elections with a more accurate one.

In the 'Holding Politicians Accountable' category, Mexico received 47.50% thanks to the possibility of presidential recall and well-designed access to information. Latvia offers an option for parliamentary recall, while South Africa received a 20% bonus for the office of Public Protector with legally binding decision-making powers. Mexico achieved the highest score for freedom of information laws at 87.50%, with Sweden a close second at 84.85%.

Netherlands received 90% in the Parliamentary Legislative Initiative category thanks to a relatively low signature requirement for submitting proposals (0.3% of the electoral population), unlimited time for signature collection, and guaranteed parliamentary consideration within 90 days. Both electronic and paper signatures are accepted. Its weak spot is that initiatives lapse at the end of the parliamentary term rather than carrying over to the next one.

16 of the 20 analyzed countries do not allow citizens to initiate referenda on regular legislation or policy-related questions. This includes Switzerland, where referenda can be organized on constitutional matters or to veto parliamentary acts, but not to introduce regular legislation, thus resulting in a score of 0% for this category. What is worth noting is that while Costa Rica does have legal provisions for citizens-initiated referenda, all 65 attempts to initiate them have been rejected since the adoption of the referendum law in 2006, on the grounds of broad topic-based exclusions.

New legislation can also be adopted through citizens' assemblies; however, no country has implemented this mechanism yet. Government-initiated citizens' assemblies have been organized as a form of public consultation in eight countries—Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, UK, Japan, and Norway—earning them a bonus of 1-3% for this category.

In the Safeguards category, Spain received the highest score at 70%, followed by Germany at 63.33% and South Korea and Kenya tied at 62.67%. In South Korea, Constitutional Court justices are nominated by three different branches with equal numbers of nominees: the President nominates three justices, the National Assembly selects three, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court nominates three. While the final appointment is made by the President, the appointment of the six nominees from the National Assembly and Chief Justice is considered procedural, as the President has no discretion to reject these selections.

Both South Africa and Kenya performed particularly well in the electoral commission section, receiving 90%, which highlights this institution's independent role. Spain received the highest score for media safeguards (85%) for running a "Mixed Stakeholder Model" for both public broadcaster (RTVE) governance and private media regulation. Public broadcaster council members are appointed by Parliament with a 2/3 supermajority, requiring cross-party consensus, while private media regulation has multi-stakeholder representation.

In contrast, Norway scored 36.33% in the Safeguards category. Norway has no independent electoral commission; instead, the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development is responsible for the electoral system and electoral rules, with the Norwegian Directorate of Elections serving as an administrative agency. While election results are validated by the Supreme Court in South Korea and by the Independent Electoral Commission in South Africa, in Norway the constitution grants the exclusive authority of validating the results of parliamentary elections—to the parliament.

The lowest score in the Safeguards category belongs to the Netherlands (24.00%), which has no constitutional court and no judicial review of national legislation against the constitution. While the cultural norms may allow the country to function well despite this, the low score in this category indicates a structural susceptibility to autocratic takeover or to passing laws that are not in accordance with basic democratic principles enshrined in the constitution. Yet having a constitutional court alone is not a solution. The key question is: who selects the judges,

and how? One possible answer is to have constitutional court judges appointed by a citizens' assembly. This moves selection beyond partisan politics and gives the court genuine democratic legitimacy.

In the 'Ability to Change the Constitution' category, Switzerland achieved the highest score at 63.58%. Swiss citizens can initiate constitutional changes by collecting 100,000 signatures, with electronic signatures legally permitted (though paper collection remains standard practice). Both chambers of parliament can also initiate amendments through a simple majority vote. However, regardless of the initiation pathway, the final say rests with the people—all constitutional amendments must be approved through a referendum requiring a double majority: a majority of voters nationwide plus a majority of cantons. Where Switzerland could enhance its system is in developing a meaningful process for formulating constitutional amendment proposals, such as Colombia's constituent assembly mechanism.

Only in 7 of the 20 studied countries, citizens can initiate constitutional change. Besides Switzerland, these are Peru, Costa Rica, Colombia, Kenya and Latvia. While Mexico established a mechanism for citizen-initiated constitutional amendments in 2012, Congress has not yet passed the required implementing legislation, meaning it cannot be used in practice. Only 4 countries require citizen approval of constitutional changes through referendum: Switzerland, Japan, Peru and South Korea. In the remaining countries, the constitution can be changed by parliament alone, with referenda either optional or non-existent.

What the study results reveal first and foremost is the scale of deficiencies across all analyzed countries. Even though there are positive examples where some countries excel in specific areas, they fall short in others, resulting in low overall DFI scores. In other words, some countries have pieces of the puzzle in place, but none has the full picture. What the DFI framework offers is not only a diagnostic tool. It also provides a comprehensive set of solutions that can be implemented, from citizens' assemblies to more robust campaign finance controls and safeguards. Designing a political system where people are truly in charge of their country is an achievable goal, and numerous design options for this exist.

Data availability

The complete DFI framework, scoring guidelines and results of the study are available for download from Figshare at: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.32229057>

Author information

Authors and affiliations

Center for Blue Democracy, Poland

M. Gerwin, B. Latos, K. Sobuś

Contributions

M.G. was the lead author of the article and created the DFI framework. B.L. and K.S. calculated the DFI scores for the majority of countries.

Corresponding author

Correspondence to Marcin Gerwin (email: marcin@bluedemocracy.pl)

Ethics declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.