Issues of Representation and Social Change

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Introduction

On May 27th, 2021, the Oslo Center hosted a webinar to discuss the importance of democratic resilience, the threats encountered, and global cooperation. In this webinar, the now Executive Director of the Oslo Center, Karolina Olofsson, emphasized the relationship between *democratic erosion* and *issues of representation*, questioning the effect of poor political representation for youth, women, and ethnical minorities on the democratic backsliding seen across the world in recent years. Furthermore, the question of the role of information and communications technology was brought to the fore: Are political institutions in democracies able to adapt to the significant social changes brought by these technological advancements, and what does this pose for democratic representation?

Issues of representation and social change

Despite progress being made on issues of political representation in democracies worldwide over the last decades, there are still many prevailing challenges – both in newly democratized countries and established liberal democracies. Gender representation in official political positions is still an issue with only 24 women leaders of state in the world – out of 195 countries. Indeed, the issue is still prevalent even in liberal democracies as evident by the figure on gender representation in parliament.

Yet gender representation is not the only issue. The proportional representation of ethnical groups in political institutions is still subpar in most democracies, as is the representation of citizens under the age of 40. For instance, in the U.S. Congress as of 2021, 8,59% of seats are filled by politicians of Hispanic ethnicity – despite Hispanic Americans numbering 18,5% of the total population. In India, a country with 65% of the population under the age of 35, the average age of Members of Parliament in 2019 was 55.

In the webinar, Ms. Olofsson also highlighted the social changes brought by the development of information and communications technology, such as the internet. 16,8% of the world's population had access to the internet in 2005 versus 53,6% in 2019. This massive change has

Gender representation in parliament as of 2019 (IPU data)

(U.S. numbers are from the House of Representatives only)

■ Women ■ Men
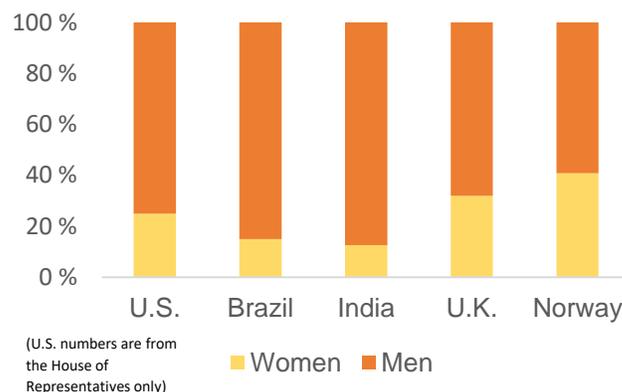
marked a significant shift in the accessibility of information and the possibility for citizens to connect in ways previously not conceivable. People, especially those that are marginalized and lack representation, now have a way of making their voices heard and find like-minded individuals. How much role has this change in social dynamics, combined with inadequate progress on issues of representation, played in the democratic backsliding of democracies in recent years?

As Ms. Olofsson pointed out, there is no such thing as a finished democracy – it is all about continuous adaptation and evolving. The failure of political institutions to adapt to these new technological changes and disproportionate political representation may exacerbate the current issues, and successful adoption may remedy them. Citizens that experience a lack of representation through political institutions due to their gender, age, or ethnicity, may feel alienated by society, and grow dissatisfied with the democratic system – threatening the existence of the social contract and questioning the purpose of the state.

The development of information and communications technology may act as a mobilizing agent for these citizens – in a positive direction through increased public participation, yet also negatively through promoting anti-democratic sentiments. These grievances are often not unwarranted. To prevent democratic erosion, it is necessary to address the root causes of these grievances: amongst them social exclusion and the lack of political representation for marginalized groups.