

**LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY:  
HISTORICAL PATTERNS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR MODERN SECURITY  
POLICY CHALLENGES**

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**Abstract:** *This article analyses the lessons learned from the historical development of participatory democracy and uses a historical-comparative method to examine whether current challenges are actually new or whether a recurring historical pattern can be identified. The focus is on security policy conclusions for modern democracies and their national security. The historical analysis shows that democracies have repeatedly faced similar problems over different eras. Today, democracies are not only forms of government, but also models of order that are strengthened by stable institutions, social participation and functioning control mechanisms. At the same time, deficits in these areas can have a destabilizing effect and undermine existing political structures. While the framework conditions have changed due to digitalization, globalization and new geopolitical constellations, many fundamental mechanisms remain stable.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory Democracy; National Security; Security Challenges; Lessons Learned; Historical Patterns*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Participatory democracy is a popular and politically relevant topic in 2025. If you google “participatory democracy”, around 40,000 results come up (March 2025). The political interest is confirmed by the commitment of international organizations (e.g., Swiss Democracy Foundation, Democracy International, International IDEA), governments (e.g., European Parliament), foundations (e.g., Hanns Seidel Foundation, Berlin Institute for Participation). The first participatory elements and democracy itself emerged in antiquity in small Greek states (poleis) through the development of the first concept of a citizen (Makhamatov 2007, p. 114). The development of participatory democracy was not linear and often failed due to various events. The Bertelsmann Foundation’s BTI report points to the continuing political regression of democracy, as 74 developing and transition countries are currently governed autocratically and 63 countries democratically (BTI 2024, p. 2). If the findings of the BTI report are viewed from the perspective of Polybius’ anacyclosis, the current political regression could be seen as a phase of cyclical development (monarchy → tyranny → aristocracy → oligarchy → democracy → ochlocracy → return to monarchy) (Podés 1991). As in previous eras, democracy comes under pressure from internal and external tensions, which can lead either to its transformation or to its regression. Against this background, it is essential to reflect on the historical developments of participatory democracy in order to identify the causes of political stability and destabilization and to draw security policy lessons for modern democracies.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The historical-comparative method was chosen for the theoretical understanding of the historical stages within the scope of the article, as it allows complex objects and phenomena with very different characteristics to be interpreted from the perspective of participatory democracy and the prerequisites and dynamics of the process to be compared. The model of Emilio Betti (understanding – fixing – interpreting) is used as a basis to clarify the theoretical complexity and to provide a methodological structure for the analysis of historical development.

## **HISTORICAL LESSONS LEARNED FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE 20TH CENTURY**

The participatory elements of antiquity are considered in this article through Athens and the Roman

Republic. In Athens, democratic reforms began with Solon (594–593 BC) and were further developed by subsequent governments until Pericles (bpb 2017). The Athenian collective of citizens was characterized by equality before the law (*isonomia*), equality in freedom of expression (*isegoria*) and equality in political participation (*isopoliteia*), which meant a democratic form of government (Alekhin 2011, p. 11). Athenian democracy came to an end in 338 BC with the termination of Athens' independent existence (Mann 2020, p. 22).

Lessons learned from Athenian democracy:

– The democracy of the state can be destabilized or ended by external (e.g., wars) or internal (e.g., oligarchic resistance during the Peloponnesian War) factors.

– Populist demagogues can manipulate popular opinion. The loss of critical discourse due to the high frequency of meetings and increasing polarization lead to a weakening of the system.

– Inclusion of all citizens strengthens democracy – the exclusivity of citizen status, on the other hand, leads to tensions. The ancient *demos* consisted exclusively of free-born men. Rich groups had no civil rights despite their wealth (Khankevich 1999, pp. 3–7). From the middle of the fifth century BC, a person was considered a citizen in the Athenian polis if both parents were Athenians, or if citizenship was obtained individually through a legal election in the popular assembly (*ekkleksia*). This meant that a maximum of 15% of the total population could participate in governance (Gracheva 2022)

– Polarization between rich and poor leads to conflicts over income distribution, which in turn can contribute to the destabilization of democracy (Tridimas 2015, pp. 102–117)

– Wealthy population groups tend to favour peace, while poorer groups tend to be in favour of war (Tridimas 2015, pp. 102–117)

The participatory elements in ancient Rome can be identified in the period of the Roman Republic (V–I BC) (Koptev 2011, pp. 42–45; Meier 2018). These include Roman citizenship, the involvement of various population groups in state life through the establishment of popular assemblies (*comitia*), the Senate, the magistrates and various offices, as well as the distribution of civic duties (similar to Athens).

Lessons learned from the participatory elements of the Roman Republic:

– The democratic (participatory) elements can also coexist within a state structure alongside aristocratic and military components (Smorchkov 2018, pp. 2–5; Glekov 2021, pp. 56–57; Khankevich 2018, pp. 50–60).

– Participatory democracy requires a system of legal and procedural order.

– A balance of power (separation of powers including checks and balances) between different institutions (People's Assembly, Senate, magistrates) is essential to prevent individual actors from gaining superiority.

– The non-involvement of different social groups in the political process can lead to the emergence of parallel institutions (e.g. tribunes of the people as the protective body of the plebeians).

– A lack of mechanisms for the (peaceful) transfer of power can lead to the erosion of democratic structures and conflicts (Kazakov 2004, pp. 47–54).

– The inability of local authorities to react quickly to rapid developments (e.g., expansion of the state) can trigger a political crisis (Kazakov 2004; pp. 47–54).

Although there were no fully-fledged participatory democracies in the Middle Ages, some participatory elements (representation, co-determination, self-administration and legal autonomy) can be found in the form of “early cities“ (early Middle Ages), assemblies of estates (high Middle Ages) and city states (late Middle Ages).

Lessons learned from the participatory elements of the Middle Ages (V–XV centuries):

– A close connection between business and politics can favour both stability and a concentration of power, which is why economic groups should also be regarded as political actors.

– Basic democratic structures can also function without a centralized state (“early cities“, city states).

– Early separation of powers can prevent an excessive concentration of power (e.g. Magna Charta 1215).

– Religious and ideological movements influence democratic developments (for example, the Reformation of the XVI century and the ideas of Luther, Bodin, More, Campanella).

The theoretical foundations for modern participatory democracies (the sovereignty of the people, the social contract, the separation of powers, the rule of law, the right of participation, the right of resistance,

the separation of church and state, the principle of representation, basic civil liberties) were laid in the early modern period (XVI–XVII centuries) and the Enlightenment (XVIII century). These concepts were used in the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789–1799) and were later enshrined in the constitutions of the XVIII–XXI centuries.

Lessons learned from the early modern period and the Enlightenment:

- Democratic principles do not arise spontaneously but are based on philosophical and political ideas.
- Without freedom of expression and freedom of the press, citizens cannot actively participate in political processes, which is why the introduction of laws on freedom of the press is indispensable (the first postulates in Poland in 1532, the law on freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Sweden in 1766); (Levkina 2015, pp. 125–126).
- Suppression of participation rights can lead to revolutions.
- Democratic developments need time from their formulation to their practical implementation.

The modern period from the XVIII to the XX century is characterized by the increasing development of local democracies, which influence each other (e.g. US, English, French democracies). In the XVIII–XIX centuries, the first constitutions (e.g. the US Constitution of 1787, the French Constitution of 1791) with participatory elements (civil and electoral rights, separation of powers) were created and the first referendums were held (Switzerland 1802). In addition, the participatory elements were extended to the economic and social spheres, which led to the emergence of trade unions (e.g. Trades Union Congress in England in 1868, Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeitsverein in 1863) and the introduction of social laws (e.g. social insurance in Germany 1883–1189, French social law 1893). In the XX century, women were also included in universal suffrage (e.g. in the USA in 1920, Germany in 1918/19, France in 1944). In the XIX and XX centuries, the development of democracy was restricted by the return of monarchies and dictatorships (Great Britain, France, Germany). These anti-democratic currents often had an impact beyond national borders and led to setbacks in general democratization. After the Second World War, democracy began to be seen not only as a form of government, but also as a stabilizing factor for national and international security (e.g. democratic peace theories by Babst 1964, Russett 1993, Rummel 1997) and to be integrated into the security architecture (e.g. Truman Doctrine 1947). In this context, participatory democracy develops into an independent concept (e.g. works by Pateman 1970, Barber 1984).

Lessons learned from the modern era of the XVIII–XX century:

- Participatory democracy is not limited to the form of government, but can influence the economic, social and security model of a state or region.
- Constitutions with participatory elements are essential for democratization.
- The democratization of the economy and social policy strengthens political participation.
- Democracies are vulnerable to internal crises and external threats if there are no mechanisms to safeguard them.

## RESULTS

Participatory democracy in the XXI century faces many challenges that impair its functioning and occur both nationally and internationally. These may include, for example: declining voter turnout and growing mistrust of political institutions (WZB 2021), populist movements and the spread of disinformation via social media (Vey 2024), the shift of political decision-making processes to supranational levels (Kriesi et al. 2011), short political cycles with an increasing number of tasks on various long-term issues (IDW position paper 2024), the collection and use of large amounts of personal data (Rehman 2019), pandemics (Grande et al. 2022, pp. 42–49).

But are these challenges really new, or could we have prepared for them based on historical experience? Many developments from the past are similar to today's problems, even if the framework conditions have changed. The following tabular comparison shows which challenges have historical parallels and which are really new.

Table 1. Comparison of modern challenges and historical findings (own compilation)

Modern challenge	Allocation	Evidence
Falling voter turnout and mistrust of political institutions	Known	Lessons learned Athenian democracy: Inclusion of all citizens strengthens democracy – the exclusivity of citizen status, on the other hand, leads to tensions. Lessons learnt Roman Republic: The non-inclusion of different social groups in the political process can lead to the emergence of parallel institutions.
Rise of populist movements and polarisation	Known	Lessons learned Athenian democracy: Populist demagogues can manipulate popular opinion and contribute to weakening the system.
Spreading disinformation via digital media	Unknown	This is a modern challenge posed by digitalization.
Shifting political decision-making processes to supranational levels	Known	Lessons learned Roman Republic: Balance of power between institutions is essential to prevent individual actors from gaining superiority. Lessons learned Middle Ages: The inability of local authorities to react quickly to rapid developments (e.g. expansion of the state) can trigger a political crisis.
Short political cycles with an increasing number of tasks	Known	Lessons learned early modern times: Democratic developments need time from their formulation to their practical implementation.
Socio-economic inequality and political influence	Known	Lessons learned Athenian democracy: Polarization between rich and poor leads to conflicts over income distribution. Lessons learned in the modern era XVIII–XX centuries: The democratization of the economy and social policy strengthens political participation.
Climate change and long-term political decision-making	Unknown	This is a new challenge posed by modern environmental conditions.
Data protection and digital liberties (collection and use of large amounts of personal data)	Unknown	This is a new specific challenge posed by technological developments.
Pandemics and democratic crisis management	Known	Lessons learned Roman Republic: Lack of mechanisms to respond quickly to crises can cause political instability. Lessons learned Middle Ages: Inability of local authorities to react quickly to rapid developments (e.g. expansion of the state) can trigger a political crisis.

## CONCLUSIONS

The historical-comparative analysis has confirmed that not all of today's challenges are new. This means that their occurrence or negative consequences can be mitigated or even avoided through regular historical analysis. Such a forward-looking approach would also create space to focus on the truly new challenges. The lessons learnt are generally applicable and can support the development of measures to overcome future challenges. It was also confirmed that political decisions require the involvement of several advisors or a broad range of in-house knowledge, as the concepts of democracy and national security are multidisciplinary in nature.

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## **ПОУКИ ОТ ИСТОРИЯТА НА ДЕЙСТВАЩАТА ДЕМОКРАЦИЯ: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИ МОДЕЛИ И ЗНАЧЕНИЕТО ИМ ЗА СЪВРЕМЕННИТЕ ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВА ПРЕД ПОЛИТИКАТА ЗА СИГУРНОСТ**

**Резюме:** В тази статия се анализират поуките от историческото развитие на демокрацията и се използва историко-сравнителен подход, за да се провери дали настоящите предизвикателства са всъщност нови, или може да се установи повтарящ се исторически модел. Фокусът е върху изводите от политиката за сигурност за съвременните демокрации и тяхната национална сигурност. Историческият анализ показва, че демокрациите многократно са се сблъскали със сходни проблеми през различните епохи. Днес демокрациите са не само форми на управление, но и модели на ред, които се укрепват от стабилни институции, социално участие и функциониращи механизми за контрол. В същото време дефицитите в тези области могат да имат дестабилизиращ ефект и да подкопаят съществуващите политически структури. Въпреки че рамковите условия са се променили поради цифровизацията, глобализацията и новите геополитически констелации, много основни механизми остават стабилни.

**Ключови думи:** демокрация на участието; национална сигурност; предизвикателства пред сигурността; извлечени поуки; исторически модели

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