



Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Edited by Leo Shanahan

INTRODUCING

The Democracy Lighthouse Digest

Launched in May 2024, the Democracy Lighthouse appeared during a period of mounting anxiety and widespread political unrest about democracy's future. Funded and supported by the Toda Peace Institute, the Democracy Lighthouse has from the outset aimed to be an independent beacon and distributor of information on the global subversion and renewal of democracy.

Since the launch of the Democracy Lighthouse, the threats facing democracies have become more challenging and intractable. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, wars in Sudan, Myanmar and Palestine, the rise of a tech-oligarchy in the United States, the repression of public protests against the abuse of power in countries such as Argentina and Serbia, and weakened judiciaries in Israel, Hungary, Mexico, and Türkiye are just some of the many challenges facing democracies everywhere.

In this fast-changing and turbulent context, the Democracy Lighthouse is expanding its remit beyond its founding focus on platforming the hundreds of organisations and networks engaged in advocating for democracy. Our platform is now aiming to strengthen its public commitment to democracy and its global future by adding a range of new features, including podcasts featuring the work of activists, latest book reviews, and publications by our Global Challenges to Democracy group. Our newly expanded platform also includes the Democracy Lighthouse Digest, a recently launched newsletter that provides monthly updates on our group's work and information about the important worldwide contributions of the many organisations, activists and scholars currently engaged in the defence and reimagining of the past, present and future of democracy.

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July Feature Organisation: Ciudadanía Inteligente

John Keane and Leo Shanahan sit down with Colombina Schaeffer, Executive Director of Ciudadania Inteligente, a Latin American organisation that fights for the transformation of democracies in the region.

The Trump administration's deportation program has triggered a renewed focus on the politics of Latin America and the Caribbean. The administration's close ties to the government of El Salvador has emboldened President Nayib Bukele's autocratic regime and given other anti-democratic movements hope that they, too, will be embraced by the United States. In the early 2000s, Latin America enjoyed a progressive 'pink tide' that saw the emergence of left-leaning socially progressive governments in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, amongst others. However, this 'pink tide' has largely receded. In countries such as Argentina, El Salvador, and Mexico it is being replaced by the emergence of governments seeking to leverage the tools of democracy to erode democratic systems from within and thereby prolong their grip on state power.

In this context, the activists, organisations, and networks engaged in researching, reimagining, and advocating democracy have a crucial role to play in informing people about the subversion of democracy and inventing new ways of rejuvenating democracy in their countries. One such organisation, and our June feature organisation, is Ciudadanía Inteligente (CI), a Latin American civil society organisation that is at the forefront of Latin America's fight to transform democracy.

Established in 2009, CI initially sought to reduce the information asymmetries between candidates and citizens during elections using civic technology and innovative methods of communication. Its first project – Vote Smart Chile – created a digital tool aimed at informing citizens about presidential candidates. CI has since expanded and is now working in fifteen different countries and sharing alliances with over one hundred organisations.

Funded by grants from both domestic and international donors, CI embraces digital communication technologies as a means of promoting citizen participation and holding governments to account. CI works to transform politics so that power is distributed, never concentrated. It envisions societies where citizens are informed, organized, and have a voice; where civil society is a powerful actor; and where politics serves collective and ecological well-being.

This March, CI launched Transparentes, an alliance with Chile Transparente supported by the European Union. It seeks to strengthen transparency and citizen participation in Chile through the coordination, training, and advocacy of civil society organizations. Under the slogan "Democracy at stake, citizens in charge," the project has already brought together more than 20 civil society organisations to identify priorities and plan joint strategies. Transparentes is identifying challenges,



*Colombina Schaeffer,
Executive Director of
Ciudadania Inteligente*



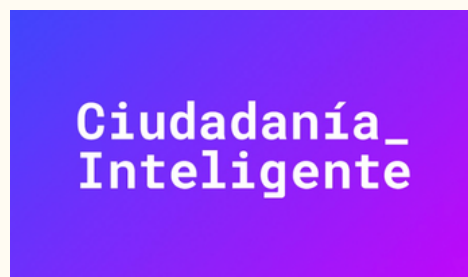
*CI project Transparentes, a
legislative monitoring platform that
seeks to diagnose the regulations
that affect transparency and citizen
participation.*

strengthening capacities to respond to these challenges, and promoting initiatives that foster transparency and citizen participation in Chile. It has also developed a technology platform to track legislation designed to promote transparency, participation, and civic space, so that civil society organisations can take joint actions to apply pressure for pro-democratic draft legislation and to launch alerts when bills threaten civic space and democracy.



CI's DemocracyKIT

Bridging the gap between public officials and citizens has also been a priority for CI since its inception. CI's projects are not only aimed at citizens but also at public officials whose role is crucial in building confidence in democracy. CI's interactive and gamified tool, DemocracyKit is the product of more than a decade of regional work and was launched in its beta version in 2024. It provides local and regional officials, as well as civil society organisations, with tools that foster more innovative, transparent, and representative policies. DemocracyKit provides



Ciudadania Inteligente

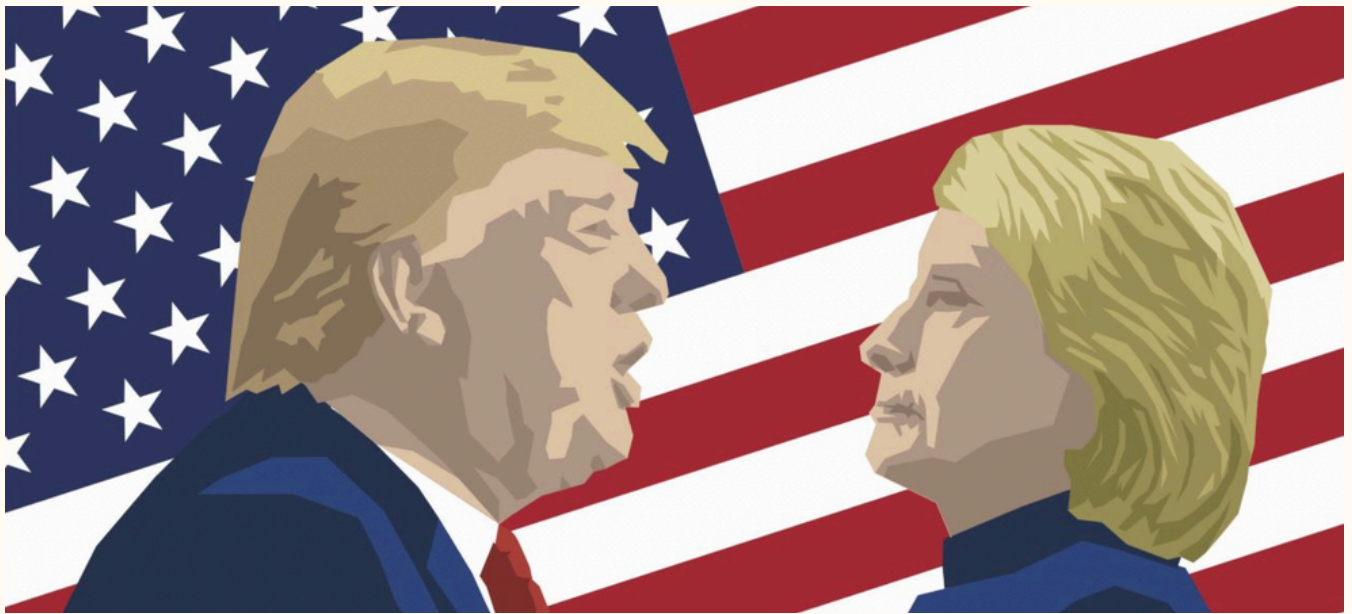
training and guides participants through the stages of good policymaking: from identifying a problem and its causes, to finding a solution that empowers stakeholder groups. It enables individuals and organisations to design their own participatory projects with the hope of strengthening local democracy in Latin America.

In times of crisis, CI aims not only to respond to challenges and problems; it proposes and articulates alternative solutions designed to have transformative effects. CI's main tools are accessible information, grassroots work, civic education, and the building of diverse alliances. It seeks to create open public spaces where citizen participation is worthwhile, where the common good regains its meaning, and where politics once again becomes a means of better living for all.



[VISIT CI'S WEBSITE](#)

[WATCH THE FULL INTERVIEW](#)



The Shift from Smart to Dumb Power

BY HERBERT WULF

Donald Trump may be a good campaigner, but his government policy in the first few months is characterized by chaotic and irrational decisions: "Dangerous and dumb", according to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. But how much dumber will it get?

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An Arab 'MAGA' Reset

BY LARBI SADIKI

US president Donald Trump's visit to three of the world's richest states in the Gulf calls for reflection on the prospects of an Arab MAGA.

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Amerika: MAGA, China, Imperial Decline, Democracy

BY JOHN KEANE

This report examines the current rivalries between the USA and China which are triggering mental confusions, public anxieties and political misunderstandings and fears.

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In Twilight is published by Campus books and is available for purchase for 39€

the turn of the millennium. But alongside the new fragility of democracy there have also been considerable democratisation successes, for instance in tackling gender discrimination and in the resurgence of civil societies. Despite all the concerns, argues Wolfgang Merkel, the resilience of liberal democracies should not be underestimated.

FROM THE SHELF

In the Twilight: the Fragility and Resilience of Democracy in the 21st Century

BY WOLFGANG MERKEL

Democracy today is confronted with an extraordinary concentration of external crises: climate change, migration, pandemics, war, and unbound capitalism. But what do we actually mean when we speak of “democracy”? How are developed democracies dealing with these challenges? Are they responding to time pressures by streamlining democratic processes? Or responding to right-wing populist movements with illiberal instruments such as bans, increased surveillance, and institutional exclusion? Are democracies in decline?

Future pathways aren’t predetermined and decline isn’t inevitable, yet the weaknesses and wounds of liberal democracies are more apparent today than they were at

Democracy Watch

Aries Arugay, Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines Diliman, explains the impact of the Trump administration on the Philippines.

The far-reaching repercussions of Donald Trump’s ascension to the United States presidency are particularly salient for the Philippines—a treaty ally deeply embedded in the US security architecture, an emerging economy tightly integrated with American markets, and a democratic polity steeped in postcolonial entanglements with its former coloniser. His restoration to the peak of American power could not come at a more complicated moment for the Philippines. During his first term of his disdain for the US alliance almost resulted in the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement between the two allies.

On the domestic front, the US under Trump 1.0 was radio silent while Duterte deliberately assaulted the democratic institutions of the Philippines and waged a bloody war that killed tens of thousands of



Aries Arugay, Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

mainly Filipino drug dependents in the country's poorest neighbourhoods. Expressions of alarm only started at the tail end of the Duterte presidency under the Biden administration in 2021. By then, Duterte had succeeded in eroding Philippine democracy to the extent that in the 2022 elections it became easy for authoritarian nostalgia to catapult Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., son and namesake of the country's brutal dictator into the presidency, with Rodriogo's own daughter, Sara Duterte, as vice-president.

While Trump 2.0 may not pay attention to directly addressing the democratic erosion challenges of the Philippines, pro-democratic actors in the US and the rest of the world need to find ways to help states like the Philippines to recalibrate their democracies or help foster their resilience. More innovative ways of emphasising the mutuality of interests between the US and the Philippines must replace conventional policies and the usual measures. The challenges offer an impetus for recalibration. The Philippines must not fall into the trap of binary alignments or reactive diplomacy. Instead, it should pursue a proactive strategy of democratic resilience, economic diversification, and foreign policy autonomy. The sustainability of democratic and strategic choices must be rooted in internal consensus, not external tutelage.



President Trump meeting with President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines on the sidelines of the ASEAN in 2017.

Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times



Ferdinand Marcos Jr. with Sara Duterte at his inauguration in June 2022. They promised national unity when they were elected president and vice-president.

Credit...Eloisa Lopez/Reuters

IN THE NEXT EDITION OF THE DIGEST: Trump Special

Over the past month, our global team of experts on democracy have been preparing articles and conducting interviews about the impact of Donald Trump's presidency in their respective regions. Next month's digest will highlight our researchers' work and contribute to our understanding of the global impacts of Donald Trump's presidency.

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