

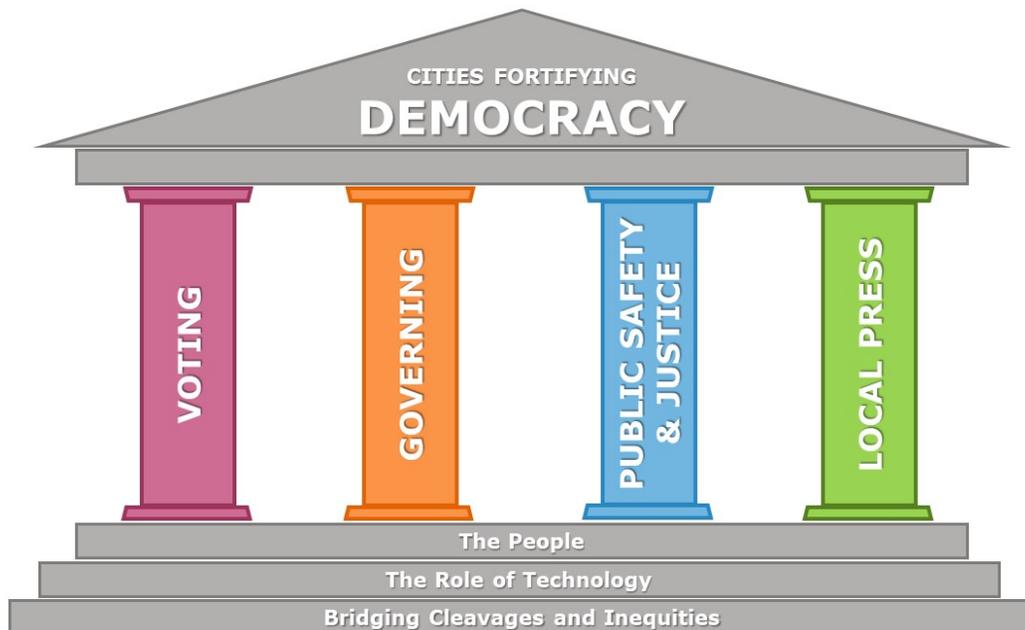
CITIES FORTIFYING DEMOCRACY

BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

“Is democracy in decline?” This question was posed in the 25th anniversary edition of the Journal of Democracy in 2015 and has remained the subject of intense scholarly debate ever since.¹ Though there is no easy answer, it has become increasingly clear that the values and institutions that form the basis of democratic governance cannot be taken for granted.

Across Europe and North America, cities are on the front lines of this struggle because they deal with the kinds of problems that most visibly impact their residents on a daily basis. From potholes to policing, citizens can see when the government responds to their immediate needs proactively or witness the decline of their neighborhood firsthand as it falls victim to neglect. Experiences with this level of government can profoundly shape a people’s outlook on government at large. When cities succeed in actively engaging residents, the trust this generates not only inoculates them against populist appeals but also creates an ongoing dialogue that fosters innovation and a strong sense of community.

GMF identified four pillars of democracy that form the basis of public trust in government: voting, governing, public safety and justice, and the local press. The ongoing actions of citizens, government, and other institutions can either fortify or weaken each of these pillars, which in turn can either enrich or erode a city’s commitment to democratic governance. In discussions about each pillar, GMF will also address themes that cut across all four of them: the people, the role technology, and strategies for bridging cleavages and inequities within communities.



¹ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Plattner-26-1.pdf>

THERE IS NO REAL DEMOCRACY WITHOUT A STRONG LOCAL DEMOCRACY. DEMOCRACY IS NOT ABOUT VERTICAL POWER, IT'S ABOUT HORIZONTAL POWER.

MARC COOLS, MUNICIPAL COUNCILOR
IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Project Overview

For the Cities Fortifying Democracy project, GMF Cities will look at the impacts that technology, equity, and resident involvement have on the health of four pillars of local democracy. These pillars form the basis of public trust in government and include: voting, governing, public safety and justice, and the local press. Over 18 months, GMF will invite expert fellows and key stakeholders from ten transatlantic cities to examine the practices being used to keep democratic institutions and core values strong and meaningful to everyday life. The culmination

of this work will be a Democracy Toolkit including research, case studies, and practical resources that can be used by citizens and their governments to keep their local democracies strong. The project will consist of a remote introductory session including all fellows and city teams, two remote meetings per pillar to discuss best practices and case studies (eight virtual meetings in total), and an in-person launch event for the Democracy Toolkit that GMF will produce based on the findings of the 18-month project.

To begin, GMF will select eight fellows, with one European and one North American specializing in each pillar. These fellows will be responsible for conducting desk research on their assigned pillar from a transatlantic perspective, presenting those findings at the corresponding virtual convenings, helping GMF guide the virtual discussions, collecting case studies and resources for the Democracy Toolkit, and collaborating with GMF to produce the final product. GMF will also select seven participants from each of the 10 selected cities (70 total participants) to join in various virtual convenings. After a virtual introductory session, the four pillar groups will each meet twice via a virtual convening platform for multi-day workshops, where they will engage in roundtable discussions on points of vulnerability and intervention, present their perspective on what the group they represent can do to contribute to the strength of democracy, and discuss what other groups can do to support them in a joint effort to meet that goal.

GMF will ultimately compile useful tools, case studies, and notes from the convenings into a comprehensive Democracy Toolkit to be distributed in cities in Europe and North America and made broadly available online. The final product will be presented at a public, in-person launch event, and the resources will be packaged in a variety of easily consumable ways to maximize their reach.

