

The Taichung Declaration on Modern Direct Democracy

Greetings from Taichung, Taiwan, and from the 2019 Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy.

We, more than 300 people from six continents, have met here to discuss direct democracy at a forum that was free and open to anyone in the world who wished to attend. Our conversations were inspired by Taiwan's strong commitment to direct democracy, as expressed in the 2018 revamping of the Taiwan Referendum Act, and by the global growth of direct democracy, which is now legal in 115 countries.

We have many differences of opinion. But we also have a strong shared sense that modern direct democracy—and tools like the initiative and referendum—should have a greater role in the world, and thus must be better designed.

So we issue this “Taichung Declaration on Modern Direct Democracy” to offer ten basic ideas for people working at all levels—transnational, national, provincial, local, and community—for better direct democracy.

1) We seek systems of referendum and initiative robust enough to transform the world. Modern direct democracy holds the promise of unifying and educating people, countering autocrats, and addressing our planet's most complicated problems, including inequality and climate change.

2) Direct democracy should not be considered separately from representative democracy. Instead, direct democracy should always be designed to make representative democracy more representative.

3) Direct democracy systems must not exist by themselves, like a lone tree in a desert. They must be surrounded by participatory and democratic infrastructure—such as citizens' assemblies--that make clear the rules of the process and guarantee that all people can use direct

democratic tools and exercise their democratic rights. The goal is to provide resources, space, and media so that direct democracy is easy to understand and to use.

4) The Internet and digital tools can make direct democracy more robust, accessible, and transparent, as we have seen here in Taichung, with the city's mobile platform for government transparency and citizen ideas. And as much as possible, signature gathering should be available online. However, digital democracy must not exclude those who lack access to technology, and we must be careful that digital tools are at least as transparent, verifiable, and secure as non-digital ones.

5) Direct democratic decisions by the people should be binding upon the authorities and elected officials. When a referendum is qualified legally for the ballot, it must stay on the ballot, unless the organizers of the initiative decide to take it off. And when the people approve a law or other policy by direct democracy, their verdict must be respected and enacted.

6) We are concerned about a lack of time in existing direct democracy systems. We need more time in referendum and initiative calendars at all stages of the process—for organizing and qualifying measures, for administration, and for public deliberation.

7) Direct democracy should be a system for regular people—of all ages and all backgrounds—to advance ideas and make their voices heard. To the greatest extent possible, every aspect of it should be directed, overseen, and created by the people themselves. We are especially concerned about plebiscites, in which powerful officials refer measures to the ballot. Brexit, as such a plebiscite, is not the sort of direct democracy we seek.

8) We strongly oppose approval quorums, including Taiwan's requirement that 25 percent of all eligible voters vote yes for a measure to be valid, as well as high turnout quorums, like the 50 percent used in

Italy. Such hurdles discourage participation, and we believe direct democracy systems should always be designed to encourage greater political participation. Indeed, we strongly support the use of direct democracy to improve direct democracy itself.

9) Direct democracy should be pursued in the context of protecting human rights and the rule of law. We believe democracy should not be used to attack or limit the human rights of others.

10) We believe that democracy is a conversation that never ends, and that the work of improving direct democracy should never stop. There are more than 1,700 legal models of direct democracy around the world—offering us many ideas to inspire democratic innovation.

We see this declaration as a first draft of global guidelines for free and fair initiative and referendum processes. We welcome the suggestions, corrections, and contributions of the world.

Adopted—in love and solidarity with people in Hong Kong and all those fighting for their rights everywhere—on October 5, 2019 by the participants of the 2019 Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy