



Realizing a Positive Technology-Enabled Democratic Future



ANTHOLOGY FOR
A FUTURE OF
TECH-ENABLED
DEMOCRACY

A high-level roadmap for private sector partners around the world

The [Center for International Private Enterprise \(CIPE\)](#) is dedicated to strengthening democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform. As part of that mission, CIPE launched the [Future of Democracy](#) initiative alongside the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#) and [International Republican Institute \(IRI\)](#). This initiative is guided by the belief that the tired narratives about technology's future impact on democracy—from the inexorable advance of digital authoritarianism to the unchecked rise of surveillance economies—are as fatalistic as they are false. The initiative is therefore dedicated to identifying how private-sector actors can work alongside democratic reformers to conceive a new and positive vision of technology-enabled democracy—and then make that future a reality.

Surveying the landscape

CIPE, NDI, and IRI commissioned a [global survey](#) of their partners to identify not only the most imposing challenges facing a technology-enabled democratic future, but also the most promising areas where democratic reformers could make a real difference. From May 3 to June 22, 2022, 518 democratic reformers across countries from the CIPE, NDI, and IRI network were interviewed by Ipsos via an online survey in 6 languages (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, and Mandarin).

Identifying key opportunities for action

Based on the survey's key findings, CIPE convened a multistakeholder focus group to further draw out the survey's findings—and ultimately transform those insights into a more actionable, high-level roadmap for the private sector. This group, comprised of a broad cross-section of thought leaders in the democracy and technology spaces, met on the sidelines of the 7th annual Copenhagen Democracy Summit in May 2023 and provided a series of insights that are reflected in this document.

Presenting an action-focused roadmap

The following pages outline the core elements of a high-level, global roadmap for the consideration of private sector actors and democratic reformers around the world. These principally include CIPE's private-sector partners (e.g., chambers of commerce and business associations) along with companies of all shapes and sizes including small-and-medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The goal is to provide ideas that these and other actors can use, discuss, disseminate, and adapt in their own contexts—from sharing with member companies to launching new initiatives designed to advance a technology-enabled democratic future.

HIGH-LEVEL ROADMAP: INSIGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION

The public sector and civil society each have important roles to play when it comes to realizing a positive future for technology-enabled democracy, but what about the private sector? Where is it best placed to take the lead? Or where might it partner with others? That is the key thrust of the insights contained in this roadmap. They are designed to reflect the strengths of what the private sector brings to the table—qualities like innovation, flexibility, and efficiency—in order to...

- ...make technology work for democracy
- ...help people engage better with their own governments
- ...advance the space for democratic reform

The insights below are high level and global by design. They are meant to inspire private sector actors to care about democracy in the digital age while also articulating ways in which they can help advance a technology-enabled democratic future themselves. In many cases, the ideas will be most useful when transformed by democratic actors into concrete initiatives that are actionable for local contexts. Some ideas will have greater resonance for larger technology companies while others will be more applicable to local businesses or entrepreneurs. By the same token, some elements may be extremely useful in one country yet less so, or perhaps even detrimental, in another—a divide that's particularly acute when considering the needs of stable, open democracies versus more closed systems.

These distinctions are made where possible.

#1 The private sector can help build trust in a digital future.

According to our survey, there was little consensus on the most effective way to strengthen trust in future applications of technology. The focus group, however, found greater alignment. They emphasized the potential for business associations to take leadership roles in bringing private sector stakeholders to the table to create new sets of ethical standards and best practices that can shape technology's future role in their own communities (with each customized depending upon a country's particular issues and legal traditions). Associations would serve first as conveners and mediators and then as trainers and enforcers once standards are adopted.

➤ **Rethink the business case for democracy.**

Business associations have a critical opportunity to lead a discussion on how to address the fact that there is currently an unclear business case for a startup or SME to consider democracy as a core part of its business. Just as there was no business case for the environment until the private sector created one, so too is there a chance now to build a case for a 'democracy by design' approach with tangible, market-based incentives. These discussions will need to gather the private sector and bring all stakeholders to the table—especially the venture capital community, which will play a critical role in nurturing the next cadre of startups.

➤ **Create industry standards.** Trust in technology has clearly eroded in recent years; in some cases, this is due to the actions of 'bad actors' in the sector. Individual companies have tried to address their own problems—and many have done so in admirable ways—but it is time for the private sector to stand up and collectively announce

voluntary standards to address past errors and best practices to ensure better trust in the future. These standards would set out the fundamental rights to be respected by each company, eliminate the relative competitive disadvantage of doing the right thing, and ideally head off the need for further regulation from government in this area. In some contexts, however, a co-regulatory process in partnership with the public sector may be a preferred approach.

➤ **Provide resources and training.** The business associations that convene and develop new standards should then stand as their guardians. As part of this charge, they should also provide trainings on the standards and serve as valuable resources to smaller businesses in particular. For instance, if the standards recommend that each company appoint an ethics officer, this may not be realistically possible for a small enterprise. The association could offer pooled resources or other shared services to help fill such gaps.

#2 The private sector can utilize technology to increase access to information.

In the global survey, increasing access to information was named as the most important way for the private sector to use technology as a force for good. The focus group largely agreed, emphasizing that while digital accessibility may be taken for granted in prosperous democracies many other communities still struggle with unreliable access to the same resources—especially in the life-or-death moments when they are needed most (e.g., during anti-regime protests). Stakeholders underlined the opportunity for the private sector to step in with more accessible, trustworthy, and user-friendly tools for the public to access the information they need to make informed civic choices. They similarly highlighted the importance of promoting greater transparency in general while also thinking critically about where and when privacy guardrails should be applied.

➤ **Develop affordable, accessible Internet solutions.**

When protests erupt in authoritarian states, one of the first things government officials do is clamp down on Internet access. Outsiders have sometimes stepped in with satellite-based Internet solutions that can prove to be lifesavers—often literally—for those fighting for democratic freedom. But this is not a long-term solution and the systems themselves are often too expensive for individuals to afford. An alternative would be for the private sector to develop low-cost, tamper-resistant, and portable Internet connectivity options—offerings designed not just for the heat of protest but for daily use too (especially in countries which lack reliable connectivity).

➤ **Fill gaps in information accessibility.** With the decline of legacy media as a source of information and the rise of social media platforms that are curated but often less reliable, there is an obvious gap to fill in

terms of delivering news that is both high quality and highly accessible. This is a gap that startups are uniquely positioned to address. Doing so, however, will first require them to rethink how to best capitalize on emerging technological trends. In other words, how to provide the independent information services citizens need, while also innovating monetization strategies that can ensure more stable and trustworthy revenue streams for the companies that will need to provide them.

➤ **Create localized versions of software.**

Creating versions of popular apps and other software in local languages is not only a smart business practice; in some contexts, it can pre-empt manipulation by authoritarian governments. One of the best ways to do this is for companies to work in concert with civil society actors with expertise in, or experience with, the effects of malign technologies. When the private sector fails to take the lead

➤ in this area, regimes may simply copy the software themselves and create localized versions that are more attractive and thus organically adopted by the population—all of which opens the door to even more malign government control.

➤ **Shine a light on public officials and procurement.** Developing searchable databases with in-depth information on elected officials, bureaucrats, and public

contracts is one of the best ways to give citizens more insight into the inner workings of their government while also fighting corruption. It also presents a strong opportunity for partnership between the private, public, and civic sectors. However, the push for transparency should also be weighed against the need to protect the privacy rights of the individuals named in such a database.

#3 The private sector can utilize technology to advance freedom of expression.

The survey identified freedom of expression as the most important principle that should underpin a democratic future in the digital age. There was a divide between advanced democracies, which tended to value this principle less than privacy and data protection, and the rest of the world which placed it much higher. The focus group highlighted this split by explaining that several of the ideas presented below may be more important in non-democratic contexts than in democratic ones—where the emphasis may be less on protecting the freedom of protestors and more on fighting terrorism and intervention by hostile foreign actors.

➤ **Guard against algorithm misuse.** In countries where there is little freedom, social media is often the only platform where individuals can make themselves heard and defend human rights. Yet, algorithms can be easily used to implement so-called ‘shadow bans’ that effectively silence the voices of reformers online. This is a problem that must be guarded against most clearly in authoritarian states, which often run coordinated discreditation campaigns. But care should also be taken in democratic societies, especially to guard against

incorrect wielding of the term ‘disinformation’ to suppress information that is accurate but may be politically unpopular in a particular moment. Algorithmic manipulation can occur due to either the influence of governments or other influential actors, including in the private sector. All of this underlines the importance of encouraging the promotion of more transparency around algorithms as all stakeholders continues to work through the best way to tackle this issue overall.

➤ **Fight deepfakes and other abusive**

content. In democratic countries, the most powerful way of expressing one's opinions is often at the ballot box – and making informed choices requires a thoroughly informed populace. Yet, the rise of manipulated, AI-created content threatens to disenfranchise citizens by leaving them unable to separate truth from fiction. While there are no easy answers here either, the private sector should work with democratic actors to identify strategies that help push back against this looming threat.

➤ **Strengthen end-to-end encryption.** With many governments looking to find ways to break the encryption found in popular text-based apps, it has never been more

important to find ways to ensure the anonymity of protestors and to protect others exercising their democratic freedoms from harassment and possibly much worse. Companies should stand firm when governments apply pressure to unpick these locks—especially in authoritarian contexts. In states with a stronger tradition of individual rights, companies may also need to weigh the fact that this same technology can sometimes be abused by terrorists and other hostile actors. This underlines the importance of working with the public sector, when possible, to encourage better public policies that can preempt such challenges or result in win-win outcomes for citizens.

#4 The private sector can utilize technology to facilitate political mobilization and participation.

There was a wide global consensus on the most beneficial application of technology for the future of democracy: enabling a digital environment for political mobilization and participation. The focus group shared this consensus view but again underlined the importance of taking each society's particular political culture and context into consideration when searching for private sector solutions. For instance, in some societies, digital debates and digital mobilization have effectively replaced "real" political participation. Putting aside whether or not this is desirable, it is important to figure out how to use the power of digital to actually raise awareness of issues, engage public officials to inform policies and regulations, and push for positive change.

➤ **Ensure safe and reliable methods of communication.** Similar to the encryption recommendation above, reformers need methods of communication that are safe, erasable, untraceable, and resistant to a

government's ability to shut them down in the moments when they are needed most. The private sector should focus on providing more of these tools that ensure reliable access to communications in critical

moments.

➤ **Help activists get the word out.** Mass communication tools, such as those enabled by short messaging services such as texting, have proven their ability to reach large amounts of people in a short period of time. There is clearly strong potential for organizing and mobilizing. But this can only happen if the private sector uses its internal and external platforms to encourage political participation and social media companies continue to develop solutions that focus

more on political mobilization rather than on shares, views, or likes.

➤ **Create voter registration incentives.** In many democracies, the act of registering to vote can be one of the first and most important steps any citizen will take. Private sector companies can be instrumental in making the registration process as simple as clicking a few buttons within an app or filling out a form when making a purchase. There are significant opportunities to build on this in the future.

#5 The private sector can help expand the education, reskilling, and retraining of workers.

Given that innovation often outpaces society's understanding of technology as well as the regulations that govern it, survey respondents cited education, reskilling, and retraining as the most helpful way to bridge that gap in the future. The focus group agreed that this is a key area where the private sector can play a part and emphasized the many opportunities for businesses to develop partnerships with government and civil society in the process.

➤ **Demonstrate the value of education.** Businesses should make a conscious decision to adopt newer technologies where possible and accompany this with appropriate investments of time, capital, and other resources to ensure proper training and implementation. This is likely not only to lead to productivity gains over the long term, but also help ensure that proper ethical considerations are taken with regards to consumer data and trust. Pairing new technology adoption with the right kinds of training and implementation can also help improve the private sector's image by

serving as a role model vis-à-vis partners in the public and civic sectors.

➤ **Encourage lifelong learning.** The private sector should enter into mutually beneficial partnerships with peers in government and civil society to create programs that encourage lifelong learning. For instance, companies could work with universities, business schools, and other institutions to develop self-sustaining educational pipelines that encourage continual learning and relearning over the decades. Companies should also focus on educating their current employees and then deploying them to

- partners like those mentioned above to serve as training ambassadors who can share what they have learned with others.
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The high-level, global insights contained in this roadmap are by no means exhaustive. Nor are they applicable to every country or company. Sometimes, private sector companies can and should take the lead on their own; other times, they would do better to work together as a sector or serve in a more supportive role with the public sector or civil society. In some cases, the recommended course of action is detailed and prescriptive; in others, a broad conceptual starting point is offered. Additionally, there are several areas where more research will be needed to arrive at the best course of action. Regardless, each insight is built around the strengths of what the private sector can bring to the table—each is designed to advance the same goal: to help private sector actors and democratic reformer allies get inspired and to articulate ways where they can ultimately take action to advance a technology-enabled democratic future.

About

[The Center for International Private Enterprise](#) (CIPE)

The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) is a global organization that works to strengthen democracy and build competitive markets in many of the world's most challenging environments. Working alongside local partners and tomorrow's leaders, CIPE advances the voice of business in policy making, promotes opportunity, and develops resilient and inclusive economies.

[The National Democratic Institute](#) (NDI)

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

[The International Republican Institute](#) (IRI)

The International Republican Institute (IRI) advances democracy and freedom. IRI links people with their governments, guides politicians to be responsive to citizens, and motivates people to engage in the political process.

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

1211 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036
cipe.org | facebook.com/CIPEDC | twitter.com/CIPEglobal

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

455 Massachusetts Avenue NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC 20001
ndi.org | facebook.com/National.Democratic.Institute | twitter.com/ndi

INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

1225 I (Eye) Street NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005
iri.org | facebook.com/InternationalRepublicanInstitute | twitter.com/IRIglobal