

Democracy at the University: Principles, Practices, and Challenges in a Globalized World

International, Multidisciplinary and Multilingual Conference:
French, German, English, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese

**Under the patronage of the Institute for Economic and Social Research (IRES)
and the Henri-Aigueperse Center (CHA)**

Venue: University of Poitiers, France

Dates: 9–10 October 2025

Democracy is a fundamental concept, commonly defined as a form of government in which sovereignty resides in the people. But what does it mean to "be democratic" within the specific context of the university? In France and elsewhere, the role of democracy in higher education raises critical questions, both in terms of principles and in terms of practices.

This conference aims to explore the concept of university democracy as a principle and/or core value. It also seeks to investigate both institutional and non-institutional forms of democratic engagement and to highlight the interactions between the French model and other international models in a context of globalization.

An International and Comparative Approach

The first part of the conference will examine the French model. The second part will adopt a comparative approach to the study of foreign models. Does democracy in universities manifest itself differently depending on the national context? This perspective will shed light on the specificities of the French case while offering a broader, interconnected view.

Suggested Topics for Reflection:

- Are democratic principles at the university universal or adapted to the specific context of each country?
- How do universities, as spaces whose mission is to educate citizens, integrate the particularities of societal models in a globalized world?

Bringing together scholars, educators, institutional stakeholders, students, and experts, this conference proposes a transdisciplinary and comparative reflection articulated in two complementary sections. The first will focus on the French context, while the second will broaden the analysis through an international comparative focus, placing other models in dialogue with the French situation.

Each section will be structured around two thematic areas :

Area 1:

Institutional University Democracy: France / Abroad

This axis examines the implementation and exercise of democratic principles within university institutions through questions such as:

- **Democratic conditions for university elections:** How do electoral processes within universities ensure genuine representation of stakeholders (staff, students, external members)?
- **Institutional transformations and democracy:** With structural reforms, such as in France with the creation of Experimental Public Institutions (EPEs), how are democratic principles reconciled with new models of governance?
- **Impact of widening access to higher education:** How does opening universities to a broader public influence internal democratic practices?

Axis 2:

Democracy at the University Beyond Formal Structures: France / Abroad

This axis focuses on non-institutional forms of democracy within universities and their interactions with civil society.

- **Actors, motivations, and objectives:** Who are the key actors in non-institutional university democracy (students, staff, unions, associations, non-organized groups)? What are the key stakes involved?
- **Forms and practices:** Are there non-institutional democratic forms and practices that have a legitimate place within universities? Do these practices—such as participatory democracy—replicate institutional models, or do they offer genuine alternatives? Consideration will also be given to the material and organizational means required to sustain such democratic practices daily, including the space afforded to them, the dynamics they generate, and the obstacles they encounter.

(A roundtable or a specific workshop will be dedicated to participatory democracy – see details below.)

- **Freedom of expression and academic freedom, within and beyond the university:** Are these freedoms fundamental achievements in a democratic society? Are they respected or challenged in today's academic context? What is the scope for expression granted to other university community members (staff and students)?

Supplement: Workshop / Roundtable

Participatory Action Research: A Space for Educating Citizens

Behavioral change lies at the heart of psychosociological inquiry. How can citizens be influenced without coercion or manipulation?

Kurt Lewin (1947) considered action research to be a key tool for scholars engaging with their subjects as citizens. His work demonstrated both scientific rigor and impact, notably influencing dietary habits among American families during wartime. Participatory Action Research (PAR)

emerged with ethical concerns in the human sciences (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). It is a process by which researchers and participants jointly determine objectives and methods; they also collaborate in data collection and analysis.

Sustainable development and the fight against climate change require major shifts in everyday behavior. How can citizens be engaged in research to enact such changes democratically, while maintaining the scientific integrity of academic work?

Submission Guidelines

Proposals should include:

- A provisional title, specifying the chosen axis (Axis 1 or Axis 2)
- An abstract (maximum 300 words) outlining the topic and including five keywords
- A short biography of the author(s)
- Modality: in-person or remote

Proposals should be sent to: democracyanduniversity@gmail.com

Timeline:

- Submission deadline: July 25, 2025
- Notification of acceptance: August 8, 2025
- Conference dates: 9–10 October 2025

For further inquiries, please contact Christèle Le Bihan-Colleran and Rodolphe Pauvert at: democracyanduniversity@gmail.com

Suggested bibliography

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