We the people

Decisions can now be genuinely democratic, thanks to the Internet.

Is this the end for politicians? Niall Firth shares his perspective

1 The system's broken. Nothing changes. All politicians are the same. Why vote? It's a voguish refrain, particularly among the young. People feel disenchanted with the political process and unrepresented by the political elite.

5 Just 16 per cent of Britons say they trust politicians – that's even worse than bankers. 'We're living through a crisis of mainstream politics,' says Carl Miller at London-based think tank Demos. Voter turnout has been steadily declining in established democracies in Europe, Latin America, and

10 the US for the past few decades. Turnout for the last three general elections in the UK, for example, has been the lowest since the 1940s.

If it's broken, fix it how?

What has gone wrong? Ask people in the street and

15 the answer is likely to be different each time. But most griping tends to boil down to wariness and a sense that governance is something other people do on your behest, whether or not they have your support. 'It wasn't always like this,' says Miller. 'We used to get involved. Political

20 parties have lost millions of members since the 1950s and underlying this is an enormous deficit of trust.'

At the same time, however, there has been a rise in the number of protest movements around the world – a surge in the number of people voicing their opinions on the

25 streets, in online petitions, and via Facebook campaigns.

For some, the birth of the Internet spelled the end for politicians. Digital rights activist Aaron Swartz, who killed himself in 2013, believed it could reinvent democracy. 'As the Internet breaks down the last justifications for a

30 professional class of politicians, it also builds up the tools for replacing them,' he wrote.

The most radical means of flipping traditional politics on its head is liquid democracy. In this model, every voter has a mandate to exercise as they see fit. The mandate

35 is transferable, so voters can decide to pass theirs on to someone they trust. That designated person can then opt to cast their own vote and yours – or hand them on again to someone else who can vote for both of you. If you feel strongly about a particular issue later on, you can take back

40 your mandate and vote directly.

Could it ever scale up to replace the existing system? Germany's Pirate Party popularised the concept when it started using software called Liquid Feedback, a platform that supports the process of liquid democracy, in all of its

45 internal decision-making. However, the system does not differentiate between voters and representatives; every vote has to be recorded, open and transparent. That makes a secret ballot impossible – one of the bedrocks of modern democracy. This is more than just a wrinkle – even Liquid

50 Feedback's most passionate supporters accept the lack of secrecy makes it inapposite in most situations.

By the people

Deliberative democracy is another option. Championed by James Fishkin at Stanford University since the 1980s, the focus is on how we can become more involved in deciding the way our lives are run, rather than changing the way we vote. 'Democracy should be about connecting policy to the will of the people,' says Fishkin. 'That means judging what the people really want – and competitive elections do not guarantee that.'

Now deliberative democracy is moving online, inviting even more people to wrestle with difficult topics and reach a consensus. It is having an impact, too. Finland has just passed its first crowd-sourced bill. The Finnish model was set up by Open Ministry and has allowed hundreds of people to collaborate on policy documents at the same time, making amendments or tweaking wording until agreement is reached – much like the evolution of a Wikipedia article.

Collaborative drafting can be complex, but dedicated software is helping to streamline the process. One such tool is Adhocracy, built by Brues and colleagues at Liquid Democracy. It lets large numbers of people collaborate on policy documents, make proposals, and reach agreement on difficult decisions without calling in elected officials. You can start or contribute to discussions and vote for or against proposals.

Another is a website called Loomio, which again supports crowd decision-making. Springing out of the Occupy movement of 2011, more than 65,000 people in 80 countries are trying Loomio, and it has been translated into 31 languages. It is the tool of choice for more than 25,000 people in Spain alone, many of them part of the grassroots base of the Podemos political movement. Debated topics range from green energy to artists' incomes. 'More than 23,000 decisions have been reached in 59,000 discussions,' says Loomio's founder Ben Knight. 'That's a lot of people engaging in deliberation.'

'A new generation of politically active young people has sprung up in response to the austerity measures in Europe that followed the financial crisis,' says Francesca Bria at innovation-fostering charity Nesta in London. 'Outside government, there's huge dissatisfaction with the way representative democracy is – or isn't – functioning,' says Knight. For Knight, the large number of protest movements around the world sends the same basic message. 'People want to have more of a say in the decisions that affect their lives.'

Virtually viable?

With all the buzz, it is no wonder mainstream politicians are getting in on the act, too. Miller and his team at Demos worked alongside Wikimedia – the organisation that runs Wikipedia – to crowd-source a submission to the UK Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, which was published in January this year. The commission has recommended that Parliament should include a 'cyber chamber' that would let members of the public take part in debates held in Westminster Hall. If the experiment is deemed successful by the end of next year, debates in the House of Commons itself will also include cyber chambers.

But will any of this make a difference? We'll see whether the yeas or nays have it. ●

Four flavours of democracy

Direct democracy
Citizens vote on policy decisions directly. This was the approach used in ancient Athens, one of the birthplaces of democracy, and is still used in parts of Switzerland today. A referendum is a one-off example of direct democracy in action.

Representative democracy
Citizens vote for representatives who make decisions on their behalf. This approach is used in most modern democracies.

Liquid democracy
Citizens have the option of delegating their mandate on a per vote basis to individuals who may be better placed or informed on a particular issue. In turn, delegated individuals can choose to pass mandates on to others. Citizens can take back their mandate at any time.

Deliberate democracy
A form of direct democracy in which citizens participate in policy debates as part of a consensus-building process.