ACT FOR DEMOCRACY

Policy solutions for the future

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Rebuilding Trust Through Taxation What the Middle Ages Can Teach Us About Democratic Legitimacy?

Student contest winner.

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During a phone call with some of my relatives, some asked me the same question: “Why do we pay so much tax?” One even made the comment, “They're lining their pockets.” While the anecdote may raise a smile, it is in fact symptomatic of a deep-rooted problem in our modern democracies, which is the rise of populist ideologies, characterised by a radical decline in trust between those in power and those who vote for them. This issue of how funds are (mis)used is not new. In my previous research about representative assemblies at the end of the Middle Ages, I saw similar issues being raised. The taxes were harshly negotiated between the deputies and the royal administration, which gave the possibility to make compromises. This political culture can be found in our modern democracies. However, there is an apparent disconnection between citizens and taxation, which are presented as increasingly illegitimate because perceived corruption significantly undermines trust in democratic institutions (Montoya, 2024). In this essay, I argue that among the multiple factors behind democratic distrust, the weakening of fiscal legitimacy constitutes a particularly powerful mechanism. I will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I will explain the historical link between taxation, political consent and collective protection. Secondly, I will analyse how the weakening of this fiscal legitimacy has fuelled resentment, polarisation and distrust in contemporary democracies. Thirdly, I will propose two institutional solutions inspired by historical practices to restore this legitimacy.

Consent, taxation, and political community: A historical perspective

As a historian, I think that it is necessary to explain the basis of our fiscal system to understand why taxes are an essential tool of negotiation in our political system. I am not referring to the seigneurial fees that were imposed on subjects without their consent. Rather, I am talking about the “extraordinary” ones, which were negotiated with members of the clergy, nobility and the Third Estate within the representative assemblies. As explained by Scordia (2005), the legitimacy of taxes was founded on the necessity to protect the kingdom. Therefore, taxation was not only a financial tool, but a civic expression of belonging to the political community. For instance, the Estates of Dauphiné were convened in 1388 while mercenary bands threatened the principality. In the minutes, the contributions were explicitly presented as a way to defend the territory and the community (Boucard, 2024).

With the evolution of taxation, mostly during the modern era, it seems that this link has vanished. In fact, indirect taxation became necessary with the rise in state expenditure. Their role is to protect the community by ensuring public services, yet citizens no longer see the collective benefit but only the cost of it. One of the most striking examples is the recent protests in Bulgaria against the government budget (Reuters, 2025). This weakening of fiscal legitimacy becomes dangerous in times of geopolitical stress, when democracies are once again required to justify extraordinary collective efforts, notably in the field of defence. To face

From resentment to polarisation: How legitimacy is lost

When the purpose of taxation is not understood, or is perceived as unfair, it becomes a source of resentment. This is mobilised by political entrepreneurs who promise to "restore order" or "stop wasting taxpayers' money", especially with the rising criticism against the funding of Ukraine's arsenal by far-right political parties. These discourses about the misuse of taxes are among the main sources of the political polarisation in our modern democracies. It can be observed in Slovakia's 2023 (Stolle & Gareau-Parquette, 2023) election, which brought to power a coalition including parties openly sceptical of military aid to Ukraine and in Donald Trump's recent rhetoric, where he regularly exaggerates the scale of U.S. financial support in order to present it as an excessive burden on American taxpayers (Geoffroy & Maad, 2025). In fact, the "war fatigue" phenomenon in our democracies is deeply linked to this fiscal issue. According to Eurofound (2025), support for Ukraine has fallen among households affected by the inflation crisis by around 12% since 2022. The war does not create this fiscal distrust, but it clearly exposes its consequences.

Far-right political parties deploy a rhetorical strategy based on the misuse of public funds that makes the population suffer by aggravating inflation. The direct consequence is a fall of public trust in institutions. One of the latest examples is Moldova, where a pro-Russian candidate reached nearly 49% in the first round by using such arguments in the 2024 presidential elections. Therefore, we can see that the weakening of our democracies is deeply linked to discourse around the legitimacy of taxation, because the enemies of our system point out that citizens pay taxes without their needs being fulfilled by their governments. This is why I argue that it becomes urgent to reconcile the population with basic notions, especially that of political participation through voluntary consent to tax contributions.

The erosion of public trust is also aggravated by political scandals in our democracies. It is more consequential in our political system than in authoritarian regimes, because elected representatives have the responsibility to act with integrity and to be accountable, which makes scandals particularly damaging (Montoya, 2024). This creates fertile ground for authoritarian temptations. When taxpayers perceive that their money is misused, or that political elites do not respect the rules they impose on others, the legitimacy of taxation erodes. Combined with the spread of disinformation, this frustration fuels a growing appeal for "strong leaders" who promise order and efficiency, even at the expense of democratic checks and balances. Recent research shows that declining trust in public institutions is closely associated with increasing support for authoritarian solutions (Miranda et al., 2022). Thus, financial mismanagement and scandal do not only weaken trust, but they also endanger democracy itself. This can be observed in Argentina, with the election of Javier Milei in 2023, which was driven by a profound economic and fiscal crisis. After years of inflation, debt, and failed public policies, citizens lost trust in traditional parties and were attracted to a radical outsider promising to

"break the system". Milei campaigned on shock therapy, drastic cuts in public spending and a rejection of existing political institutions. His victory does not necessarily represent authoritarianism, but it illustrates how fiscal mismanagement and the erosion of trust can push voters towards radical alternatives that weaken democratic norms.

To preserve their legitimacy, democracies must restore the link between taxation, consent and protection. This requires new mechanisms of transparency and participation to help citizens understand that public money is used for the common good. We therefore need to reinvent the mechanisms of consent. The fiscal contract must once again be visible, negotiated and legitimate. To try to solve this issue, I will propose two concrete solutions, inspired by the historical functioning of representative assemblies.

Restoring the legitimacy of public spending

To raise extraordinary taxes, the estates created three institutional functions: the collector, the distributor and the auditor of finances. The third one is the most interesting, because the members of the estates were responsible for questioning their peers on the proper use of their taxes. More than granting money, the representatives of the community monitored its use and confronted abuses, which indicates that their political role and the legitimate use of taxes were rooted in financial accountability. In the context of our modern democracies, we could imagine a similar mechanism to restore public trust in institutions. Audit institutions, such as Courts of Accounts, guarantee legal and financial transparency. Yet, they remain technical, distant and inaccessible to most citizens, which gives the impression of a lack of consent.

This new institution, as I imagine it, would not replace existing ones but complement them by allowing more accessibility and civic legitimacy through clear explanations. The members of these new courts could be selected from voters or through a random selection process that would ensure representativeness and limit partisan capture. Members would serve for a limited and non-renewable mandate to avoid professionalisation. In the context of renewed geopolitical threats, they could examine areas such as defence spending. This would help citizens understand why some investments are necessary and restore the logic of collective protection. Their mission would be to translate financial data into clear, accessible information and to communicate it widely, in cooperation with journalists and civil society. By doing so, it would facilitate debate about the use of public expenditures. Such citizen auditors could rebuild the link between taxation, consent and democratic legitimacy. Moreover, while corruption thrives in opacity, these citizen auditors would create a culture of public visibility where misuse becomes harder, and suspicion less necessary. This proposal does not simply improve management; it aims to restore a political culture of collective responsibility and negotiation, which historically was at the heart of representative assemblies.

If transparency is not enough to restore consent, participation might be. This is

why my second proposition follows logically from the first one but goes even further. I suggest that these citizen assemblies could not only audit public spending but also participate in the decision-making process by organising consultative votes on some expenditures. Citizens could express their consent for key collective investments, especially in the matter of common military defence, which would restore the direct link between taxation and political legitimacy and unite the political community for its survival. Such mechanisms would not imply unconditional popular control over public spending. Their objective is not to turn citizens into military or budgetary experts, but to restore a visible link between collective contribution and purpose. For this reason, these votes would need to be integrated into a strict institutional framework, including constitutional limits, expert oversight and predefined spending thresholds, in order to prevent disinformation or strategic manipulation by external actors.

At European Union level, such a mechanism could transform the very meaning of European citizenship, by engaging the people across the Union in their common defence. This would require a redefinition of our relationship with European institutions, but it could strengthen both democratic participation and strategic cohesion. Clearly, such a reform would be ambitious, and more complex than organising small assemblies of estates. Yet, modern communication tools make it possible to include citizens in a way that was unthinkable during the Middle Ages. With political will, it is feasible. By reforging the connection between contribution and consent, these deliberative mechanisms could restore citizens' trust in institutions that currently appear distant, opaque or unaccountable. These proposals do not claim to offer a definitive solution, but rather a historically grounded framework to rethink democratic consent in times of crisis.

Conclusion: Democracy needs consent as much as votes

To conclude, I argue that one of the main dangers in our democracies is the crisis of trust linked to the disappearance of the historical link between contribution and consent. Taxes were not only financial obligations, but political commitments negotiated within representative assemblies, especially at moments of military dangers for the political community. There are two major threats to our democracies. The first is internal and linked to the erosion of trust in institutions. It causes a rise of extreme political parties and a widespread use of populist discourse. I propose to address this issue by reintroducing the political culture in which citizens can see, question and approve the use of public money in order to legitimise taxation. It requires institutions that make public expenditure visible, intelligible and shared. Citizen auditors, working alongside traditional Courts of Accounts, could restore legitimacy by translating financial information into accessible knowledge.

The second threat is external with the renewal of major geopolitical danger, mainly Russia, for our democracies. It does not only challenge Europe militarily but also test the capacity of our democratic systems to mobilise

consent. In response, I propose to develop the same logic as in medieval representative assemblies, by letting citizens participate in the organisation of their common defence through votes. It is crucial to make people understand why collective investments are necessary. This would not only strengthen accountability but also reinforce the feeling of belonging to a common political project. Restoring consent to taxation is therefore not a technical adjustment, but an imperative, because democracies cannot defend themselves if their citizens do not understand what they are defending. The next time my relatives ask, “Why do we pay so much tax?”, I will answer that democracy costs money, but it also gives us a voice.

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