



Remarks by the Secretary General of the Community of Democracies Thomas E. Garrett

Dear Chair, your Excellencies, Colleagues and Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States as you commemorate International Democracy Day.

It is an honor to be here this morning representing the Community of Democracies and to learn of your plans for the creation of the Voluntary Group of Member States to Support Follow-Up on the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

In the Joint Statement just read by the Ambassador of Colombia, one of the pledges was of committing to programs for the education of youth to ensure the continuance of democratic values such as liberty, equity, and social justice - this will be well received by young people.

Young people are a focus the Community of Democracies shares with you on this 15th International Day of Democracy which has the theme **“Empowering the Next Generation.”** Youth are key to resilient democracy worldwide; they help to advance fundamental freedoms and they drive democratic changes in their countries.

At all opportunities like today, we must welcome them to the decision-making table.

According to some analysis and statistics young people are seen as disengaged from traditional political life, for instance prone to voting less and rejecting political party membership. It seems the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perceptions in ways we are just beginning to understand, as they were impacted by limitations on their education

opportunities, and still suffer in a jobs market which changed radically following pandemic lockdowns.

But, while some feel dissatisfied and not included, there are examples of youth leadership, activism, and mobilization in the OAS region, as in the United States in its last election, and as we have seen recently, in Guatemala's presidential run-off election. There, mobilization of young voters, of first-time voters brought a surprise result in the democratic process.

Alongside the election results in Guatemala, this region also gave the world the strong example of supporting youth inclusion, in Costa Rica, earlier this year in the Second Summit for Democracy. Youth from around the world, enabled by the Costa Rican government, presented practical means of increasing political participation. I was privileged to be there in San Jose and commend the government of Costa Rica for the numerous youth-focused Summit events they offered.

In today's changing democratic environment, youth participation extends beyond political platforms of the past. It still encompasses involvement in institutions like universities, civil society, but also in online media, in digital activism.

I think the older generation often overlooks the digital activism of young people, but we can now see it as a legitimate expression of political engagement. Very importantly for democracy's present and future, young people bring to our challenged democracies the ability to discern disinformation and misinformation which seeks to exert malign interference in our elections.

The inclusion and active participation of youth in decision-making processes is not just commendable—it's imperative.

Young individuals, with their innovative ideas and fresh perspectives, possess the potential to reshape the democratic dialogue and reinvigorate our democratic institutions. Recognizing this, our **Community of Democracies YouthLeads** initiative emphasizes the need to foster

platforms where the voices of young democracy leaders are not only heard, but where they are given opportunities to lead.

A newly launched cohort of CoD YouthLeads includes 10 pro-democracy advocates from across the globe, who will be invited to advise the Governing Council Member States of the Community of Democracies on effective practices and strategies to enhance youth engagement in democracies worldwide. There are three impressive activists in the current cohort of Community of Democracies YouthLeads from OAS member states: from **Canada, El Salvador, and Guatemala.**

In 2023, there are more young people in the world than ever before, some 1.8 billion. They possess the collective power to strengthen democracy and counter the rise of authoritarianism. I'll repeat myself: Now is the moment for decision-makers to actively involve them.

The International Day of Democracy serves as a significant occasion to reaffirm commitment to democratic values and principles. As we see authoritarian regimes grow more aggressive in contravening democratic norms, our mission is more relevant than ever.

Democracies must stand together and respond to the challenges by strengthening their adherence to universal freedoms, the rule of law and human rights, values included in both the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the Warsaw Declaration, the Community of Democracies founding document.

Supporting one another and holding open discussions and dialogue among member states with the inclusion of civil society and youth, on policy issues, actions, and trends that represent a threat to democracy and its institutions, is important to ensure sustained and concerted actions in response to concerning situations that may arise in the region.

In this regard, I commend the efforts of the OAS General Assembly to enhance the use and application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and in particular, on the establishment of the **“Voluntary Group of Member States to Support Follow-up on the Inter-American**

Democratic Charter” to promote dialogue, cooperation, and the sharing of best practices to strengthen democracies and counter democratic backsliding.

This new initiative aligns closely with the objectives of the Community of Democracies. At a time of growing efforts to undermine democracy it is critical that we work together.

I look forward to opportunities to enhance collaboration and knowledge-sharing with the “Voluntary Group” to address challenges to democratic governance in the region, support the effective implementation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and make democracy work for the next generations. Thank you for your invitation today and best wishes for your important efforts.