

Cooperation projects

Transformational Knowledge on Democracies under Change – Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Profile Area: Societal Transformations

Deadline: September 9, 2025 (2:00pm CEST)

This funding programme addresses transformation processes of democracies in times of multiple challenges and their social impact. Researchers and partners outside of academia collaborate to identify scientific questions, work on them and develop recommendations for action for relevant groups of actors in politics, business or civil society based on the research results.



Research Area: Humanities, cultural and social sciences (lead); cooperation with natural, life, data and technical sciences possible



Funding Type: cooperation projects



Target Group: inter- and intradisciplinary research groups with scientists and actors outside of academia, intl. participation possible



Up to 1.3 Mio EUR (in case of max. project duration)



4 to 5 years



Scientific results and development of specific recommendations for action

1 Objectives

Democratic forms of government are under pressure worldwide, the legitimacy of elected governments is often questioned and a growing dissatisfaction with the way democratic institutions function in liberal democracies exists around the world. We are therefore facing multiple challenges for our democratic societies today, which require societal transformations and the exchange of different perspectives in order to develop concrete solutions.

With this funding programme, the foundation encourages researchers and their partners outside of academia to bring together their respective perspectives, experiences and ideas in order to:

- work together on **acute and unresolved** issues related to the transformation processes of democracies
- jointly develop and test **scenarios** for the future organisation of the democratic state,
- develop **concrete recommendations for action** for selected target groups and to contribute to their implementation.

The focus should be on the interest of all participants to engage in a change of perspective and to develop transformational knowledge about processes of democratic change by bringing together different sources of knowledge.

In addition, the foundation would like to contribute to the development of a scientific community that conducts democracy research together with partners outside of academia. The funding initiative is intended to contribute to the establishment of transformation research in the German academic system and to its academic and social recognition.

2 Scope of Funding

The funding programme targets (possibly international) postdoctoral researchers from the humanities, cultural and social sciences (lead) and their partners outside of academia (see below). The main applicant (PI) must be employed at a German non-profit research institution by the start of the project, at the latest. Collaboration with (international) scientists from the natural, life, technical or data sciences is possible (Co-PI).

The research groups consist of **two to three (possibly international) researchers from different disciplines and two to three different (possibly international) partners outside of academia**. The main applicant is considered the PI, all other team members – including the partners outside of academia – are considered Co-PIs. Partners outside of academia have to have at least two years of professional experience/background in the field of democracy. **Possible partners outside of academia** include, among others, non-profit, non-governmental organisations, representatives of authorities and/or government agencies, politicians, media representatives and freelancers from the arts and culture who are involved in democratic processes. Social enterprises (social entrepreneurs) or non-profit limited liability companies can also be integrated into the project as co-applicants if they pursue a mission to strengthen democracies.

The foundation understands **transdisciplinary research** as a joint research process at eye level between scientists (possibly from different disciplines) and partners outside of academia. The aim is to tackle the major social challenges together and to include all necessary perspectives within and outside of the scientific community. In this partnership, all participants have

equal rights and work together from the development of the research topic and question, through the design of the research, to the implementation of the research results in concrete recommendations for action and their dissemination. The foundation emphasises the importance of translating findings into recommendations for action and contributing to their implementation in society. According to the foundations's definition, a further component of transdisciplinary research is to constantly evaluate one's own and joint learning process in the sense of open-ended research during the collaboration, to regularly reflect on the research design as well as one's own roles and agendas and, if necessary, to make sensible adjustments during the course of the entire research process.

The proposal must explain how applicants plan to deal with the individual interests of the different partners in the research process. Applicants are asked to elaborate on the project constellation and reflect on how the interests of the individual partners will be taken into account and continuously reflected upon in the project.

The foundation welcomes the inclusion of **global perspectives** if they place meta-themes of democratic processes in a global context or allow comparative conclusions to be drawn about learning processes for societies in Europe.

The Foundation particularly encourages the applicants to try out **new creative methods** and to take **scientific risks** if necessary. As project results, the foundation expects both scientific **publications** and **concrete recommendations for action** in the form of position papers, manuals, toolkits or similar formats. The foundation supports accompanying **creative science communication formats** (podcasts, science slams, theatre plays, exhibitions, etc.) for dialogue with relevant decision-makers.

The **funding period is 4 to 5 years**. The teams choose the period of their project according to their work plan and adjust the expenditure plan accordingly. Please note: **Task forces** already funded under funding line 1 (approval February 2024) are excluded. In justified cases, they can apply for a project of up to **3 years** building on findings of the taskforce with a maximum of **800,000 euros** under the above conditions.

Possible topics include, but are not limited, to projects on democratic decision-making processes, the influence or interaction of culture, religion, media and global economic, social or ecological developments on democratic processes as well as the effects of digitalisation and AI on democracies under change. Projects that deal with participatory processes that have no discernible impact on democratic structures, investigate organisational psychological and cultural processes or have no explicit focus on democratic transformation processes (e.g. sustainability, health or climate issues without a direct link to democracy) are not eligible for funding.

3 Application and Selection Procedure

3.1 Overview

Processing time approx. 10 months:

- Deadline to submit proposals: September, 9 2025 (02:00 p.m. CET)
- Initial (formal) selection by the Volkswagen Foundation

- December 2025 written pre-evaluation of the proposals by an external expert committee with scientific experts and experts outside of academia
- Early 2026 invitation of the pre-selected proposals to participate in the selection days (max. 3 persons/team)
- April 2026 selection days (pitches, poster presentations and interviews with the invited projects) with members of the expert jury
- July 2026 at the latest: final decision and notification.

In the run-up to the deadline, the Volkswagen Foundation offers open **webinars** to answer questions about the application process. In addition, the Foundation offers a webinar particularly addressing partners outside of academia and their specific questions. The dates will be announced on the website of the funding programme. Participation in one of the offered webinars is highly recommended.

3.2 Procedure

Please submit your application by the deadline via the application portal. The application is to be submitted in English. Please note the evaluation criteria and application documents to be submitted below.

The foundation carries out an internal pre-selection based on the formal requirements. Subsequently, the pre-selected applications are reviewed by an expert panel (two step selection process; see below). The final funding decision is made by the Volkswagen Foundation's Board of Trustees based on the recommendations from the previous selection steps.

The following criteria are relevant in the review process:

- Originality and scientific quality of the transdisciplinary research
- Potential for the generation of new knowledge on (the design of) transformation processes of democracies under change and recommendations for concrete options for action for project-specific target groups (suitability to the program)
- Coherence of project design and methodology, results free from any bias and scientific independency of the approach
- Relevant expertise and qualifications of the scientific partners and the partners outside of academia as well as target-oriented composition of the team
- Career prospects within and outside of academia for all employees as a result of working on the project
- Cooperation at eye level in the sense of transdisciplinary research
- Convincing (self-)reflection, integration and learning process integrated into the project

4 Information on the Application

4.1 Our Funding Platform

Applications and short proposals have to be submitted via the Volkswagen Foundation's [funding platform](#). All templates (CV, staff concept, expenditure plan, etc.) are available for download on the funding platform and on the website for the respective programme announcement. Please only use the templates available for download there when submitting your application.

In the case of international participation, the partner at the German research institution must create the application in the funding platform and be defined as PI. Otherwise, PI and Co-PI are equal partners.

It is important that all applicants (PI, Co-PIs, etc.) register early on in the process. Co-applicant(s) can only be invited to work on an application if they have registered.

For further support please contact support@volkswagenstiftung.de.

4.2 Information on Enclosures

Unless otherwise specified below, please use only the template available for download at the funding platform or on the website for the respective programme announcement.

4.2.1 Project Description

Please observe the specifications in the template regarding the maximum number of pages as well as the other formal requirements.

4.2.2 Expenditure Plan

Please use the Excel template only available for download at the funding platform. It is not possible to upload and use other Excel sheets. For instructions on how to fill in the template, please refer to the respective help sheet.

Please note: Each Co-PI has to submit an individual expenditure plan.

All types of costs, including those for partners outside of academia, must be managed and forwarded by the main applicant's (PI) university or research institution. In the case that the applied funds will be granted, the Foundation requires that the participating research institutions agree to the administration and forwarding of these funds.

The following costs can be applied for:

- Research staff
 - Funds for own position (Please calculate the actual costs. The increase of already existing positions (up to 100 %) is possible in justified cases. If you have a permanent position, it is possible to apply for a substitute professor or – in specified cases – for a teaching substitute)

- Funds for scientific staff (postdocs or PhD students) and/or research/student assistants (Please calculate the actual costs in case the candidates are already known and use the average personnel rates provided by Volkswagen Foundation otherwise. Existing postdoctoral positions can be increased in justified cases (up to 100%).
- Further personnel (optional, see respective explanation sheet of budget plan, e.g. for partners outside of academia)
- Travel expenses (e.g. conferences, workshops, project meetings, research stays, field-work)
- Equipment > 10,000 EUR,
- Further costs (e.g. software, licenses, laptops, equipment for interviews/surveys/science communication, organisation costs for workshops, events, science communication formats, fee/work contracts for support from professional communicators for science communication activities, activities in the field of science communication; fee/work contracts for so-called integration experts (for process support/mediation/facilitation))
- Publication costs (open access)
- Overheads in addition to the grant applied for (if eligible; see also 4.3.1)
- Lump sum for administrative costs for partners outside of academia (up to 10% of the direct project costs, but max. 12,000 €. The lump sum for administrative costs is part of the grant applied for / max. funding sum).
- Equal opportunity funds (see 4.2.5)
- Sustainability funds (see 4.2.6)

Funds for staff and travelling can also be used for fellowships/research stays at the research institutions or organizations of the respective Co-PIs (please specify scope and duration).

Please note: For partners outside of academia, project-related personnel, other research funds and travel expenses as well as costs for non-scientific publications can also be applied for under the above-mentioned conditions. The administration of these funds is the responsibility of the scientific institution of the PI.

4.2.3 Curricula Vitae

Please submit the curricula vitae of all applicants in tabular, narrative form and use the template available for download in the funding portal.

Partners outside of academia should also submit information on their institutional affiliation and their CV using the template provided.

4.2.4 Staff Concept

The Volkswagen Foundation is committed to support good working conditions in academia. Hence, the foundation requires a so called staff concept which entails detailed descriptions of the team structure, responsibilities and career development opportunities for all positions.

Further information on the staff concept and personnel costs can be found [here](#).

4.2.5 Equal Opportunity Funds

To support equal opportunities and diversity in the research system, the Volkswagen Foundation offers the possibility to apply for equal opportunity funds. These funds – granted in addition to the maximum funding sum – support measures that serve to compensate for disadvantages at an individual level and/or aim to strengthen diversity in the education and research system in general. Equal Opportunity Funds can be applied for up to 1% of the total application amount (excluding overheads).

For further information please refer to our [website](#).

4.2.6 Sustainability Funds

The Volkswagen Foundation is committed to sustainability, and in particular resource-efficient research processes. It therefore provides funds to certify research laboratories involved in the research project via providers such as [LEAF](#) or [mygreenlab](#) as sustainable. These funds – granted in addition to the maximum funding sum – amount to a lump sum of up to 3,000 EUR per laboratory. Laboratories are eligible if at least one of the PI/Co-PIs conduct the respective research there. To apply, please indicate the correct lump sum in the expenditure plan at the corresponding position.

4.2.7 Further Enclosures

- Generally understandable summary in German and English with approx. 200 words each
- Data management plan

4.3 Further Information

4.3.1 Overheads

With the exception of Max Planck, Leibniz, Fraunhofer and Helmholtz institutes, public or non-profit scientific institutions in Germany can apply for up to 10% overheads in addition to the direct project costs. The same applies to comparable scientific institutions abroad. Non-profit, non-scientific institutions can apply for an administrative allowance of up to 10%, but not more than 12,000 EUR. For more information on overheads, see 'Information on Lump Sum for Overheads', which is provided at our [download section](#).

4.3.2 Open Science

The foundation is committed to Open Science ([Open Science Policy](#)). Thus, we expect that results will be published open access and that data generated will be made available for scientific use following the FAIR principles via recognized repositories (see [NFDIs](#), [re3data](#), and [RI-sources](#)). If data generation is intended, please submit a data management plan provided by the foundation ([Basic Data Management Plan](#)). Alternatively, you can submit a more detailed, discipline specific data management plan. Please clearly state in your application if you don't intend to generate data.

Note: The Volkswagen Foundation offers the module 'Data Reuse - Additional funding for the preparation of research data' for funded projects to prepare research data. You can apply for the module during or up to six months after the project duration.

4.3.3 General Information

The foundation cannot be held responsible for any obligations entered into prior to the receipt of grant approval.

Applications that have been or are intended to be submitted in this or a similar form to another funding organization will not be processed by the foundation. Applications that do not meet the formal requirements will not be considered for review. The foundation can only award funds to scientific institutions.

5 Contact

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6 Further Information

- [Website VolkswagenStiftung](#)
- [Democracies under change - cooperation projects](#)
- [FAQ and Service \(including download section\)](#)
- [Influence of Generative AI on Research and the Volkswagen Foundation's Funding Activities](#)
- [Recommendations for Sustainable Travel](#)