



RESHAPING EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Beyond Consultations: Reimagining EU Participatory Politics

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There is a widespread conviction that without greater and more effective involvement from its citizens, the European Union is condemned to fail. The emergence of populist forces claiming to represent the people as a whole has eclipsed such a possibility, rather than accelerated it. The imminent failure of the much-awaited European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs)—the first pan-European participatory project to involve citizens from all twenty-seven member states of the European Union into the debate about the future of the continent¹—epitomizes the limited commitment to, and imagination for, genuine participation in Europe.

The EU needs to move away from such ad hoc and one-off participatory processes that are designed at the country level and conceived as quick, and often patronizing, fixes to the original democratic deficit of the union. It must instead urgently embrace an entire new participatory paradigm that puts citizens at the forefront of agenda setting and monitoring power.

As the effects of EU policies are increasingly felt on people's lives across European countries, there is a growing yet unrecognized demand for participation beyond elections.

The EU faces a challenge in capturing such a nebulous demand for plural and participatory democracy within its rather rigid and narrow institutional framework. As deep societal transformations and technological developments nurture greater expectations among citizens for political participation, the EU has no choice but to become more participatory and collaborative.

THE ORIGINAL SIN OF EU DEMOCRACY

The EU has always struggled with standard representative democracy due to a combination of its institutional design and history. The union lacks a European-wide party system capable of fostering a genuine transnational space for political debate, in which citizens can participate in decisionmaking that affects their common interests as Europeans. EU citizens cannot push a European government out of power and hold a political party properly to account.

The EU suffered a kind of original democratic sin. As a technocratic project driven by member states, it drew its political legitimacy from the democratic credentials of the



delegating countries. The EU found its way through a tacit and permissive consensus. Owing to its very genetic code, the union has been suspicious toward any expression of popular sovereignty. This atavistic hostility toward citizens' input explains why the EU is particularly vulnerable to political actors speaking on behalf of the people as a whole.

In light of the shortcomings in EU representative democracy, the last decade has witnessed new commitments to participatory democracy. The EU participatory toolbox seems to be quite full. First, it offers avenues for citizens to help set the agenda, such as the European Citizen Initiative (ECI). The ECI is the first transnational participatory democracy instrument, allowing at least seven EU citizens from seven different member states to suggest new policy initiatives in any field where the EU has power to propose legislation after collecting 1 million signatures. Second, the EU offers input mechanisms when creating policies, such as public consultations on new or revised initiatives. It has developed the Lighten the Load process within the [REFIT Platform](#) that enables any stakeholder to make a suggestion on how an existing policy can be simplified and improved to be more effective and reduce regulatory burdens. Third, there are administrative and monitoring actions available to citizens, such as requests for access to EU documents, petitions to the European Parliament,² and complaints to the EU ombudsman. Fourth, the EU participatory toolbox offers legal options to challenge the EU's actions.

DISCONNECTIONS IN THE SOLUTIONS

As a matter of principle, the EU participatory avenues are open to all stakeholders, whether citizens, grassroots organizations, private companies, or NGOs. However, most of these participatory tools tend to be little known,³ and—no surprise—are only used by a few actors. Two statistics make this plain. First, around 75 percent of meetings between EU decisionmakers and third-parties entail the participation of the corporate sector.⁴ Second, in the eight years since the ECI's introduction, fewer than sixty proposals have been registered and [only](#)

[9 million signatures have been collected](#) from an EU population over 500 million.

Most of these avenues are not fit for purpose. Public consultations are typically top-down exercises that only involve a few actors and fail to engage the individuals and groups that will be most affected by the policy under discussion. As a result, those individuals and groups are the [least represented during the decisionmaking process](#). When public consultations trigger an exceptional response—as happened during the summer 2018 [consultations about the summertime clock change](#)—they prove unmanageable, unrepresentative, and a source of confusion for the public.

More critically, EU participatory channels also tend to be disconnected from day-to-day decisionmaking. The Stop Glyphosate ECI, which demands that the usage of this pesticide cease, epitomizes such a trend. Despite reaching well above the required 1 million signatures, this ECI could not formally be factored into the ongoing EU decisionmaking process—because the process does not recognize any explicit link between an ECI demand and ongoing EU decisionmaking. The participatory and representative components of EU democracy are like ships that pass in the night.

The current EU institutional participatory mechanisms and practices were not primarily designed for broad participation by citizens. They were crafted instead to receive public input through functional intermediaries, like NGOs, trade associations, and other organized interests, formally representing the various interests affected by a given policy initiative. Yet the [representative nature of these organizations](#) has not only weakened but also become contested over time.

In practice, EU participatory channels are not intended to impact directly how decisions are made, but simply to legitimize existing policy approaches.⁵ The EU participatory toolbox remains fundamentally misaligned with society's participatory expectations, and also largely untapped. Such a reductionist vision of the role of citizens in European affairs shows that governments and EU institutions are still skeptical of citizens' ability to contribute to decisionmaking beyond the

ballot box—despite all their rhetoric to the contrary. The original sin of the EU continues to taint its current participatory tools.

CLOSING THE GAP

This outcome appears all the more startling when contrasted with the growing demand for participation beyond elections across European societies and the many democratic innovations taking shape across the continent. A panoply of new, democratic experiments has been taking place, including the G1000 assemblies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain⁶; the citizens' assemblies in Gdansk; and the [Fearless Cities of the municipalist movement](#), unfolding in different countries.

Yet most of these democratic experiments remain concealed and unmapped, even by the EU institutions themselves. As such, they escape the attention of mainstream media and, more generally, the public. Typically, due to their bottom-up and participatory nature, these initiatives take place outside of formal institutional processes and originate from diverse ecosystems committed to promoting citizen-oriented democratic legitimacy.⁷ While these kinds of initiatives may be difficult to scale, they offer a platform for the EU to build on.

The EU needs to do more to draw from alternative, unconventional forms of participation. These may be capable of channeling citizens' pluralistic and increasingly chaotic input into the political conversation and bring citizens closer to their representatives—and they may be able to do this between elections and across countries.⁸

To unleash EU participatory democracy entails breaking the agenda-setting monopoly enjoyed by the European institutional apparatus, notably the European Commission and the European Council. It will involve supporting unorganized citizens and facilitating their access to participatory opportunities within and outside EU channels. These avenues should also trigger a feedback loop so as to guarantee that input from citizens and grassroots organizations be considered in tangible ways within EU decisionmaking.

To thrive, this streamlined and revamped participatory framework will require a set of positive, supportive measures to level the playing field with other interests so as to build a pan-European civic grid, that is, an infrastructure for local and transnational citizen engagement. To improve civic literacy and build civic capacity, citizens must benefit from a range of supportive actions, such as

1. civic time off, enabling citizens in their working time to focus on civic engagement beyond voting;
2. citizen lobbying aid, a form of advocacy assistance modeled on the system of legal aid;
3. opening up parliamentary research services—such as the European Parliament Research Service—to grassroots campaigners in need of advocacy advice;
4. skill-sharing advocacy platforms, such as [the Good Lobby](#), which provide legal and advocacy pro bono support to citizens, grassroots groups, and NGOs; and
5. lobbying stimuli, enabling citizens to receive tax breaks or subsidies to let them support the causes they deeply care about.

In sum, the EU needs to increase access and multiply the opportunities for citizens to participate in problem-solving. To this purpose, public input must be allowed during the entire policy process, from agenda setting through to monitoring and evaluation of existing policies. While there exists embryonic forms of citizen participation at virtually every stage of the policy cycle, they remain unknown, scattered, and underused by average European citizens.

A NEW PARTICIPATORY PARADIGM

Given the complexity of the EU institutional apparatus, it is unrealistic to expect EU citizens to understand it and be fluent in its workings before they have a chance to voice their opinions. Therefore, any meaningful attempt to make participatory democracy work in Europe requires drastically simplifying the institutional



operations in the eyes of the public. Yet doing so does not necessarily entail embarking on complex institutional reforms. A new EU participatory agenda could instead be established through inter-institutional decisionmaking to integrate existing avenues of participation and amplify their collective power.

The three major institutions—the European Commission, Council, and Parliament—involved in decision-making should commit to creating an informal participatory framework aimed at embedding public input into their day-to-day operations. This could take the name and form of a European Question Time, after the British institution, but adapted to the EU context. In its simplest form, this might consist of a trilogue-type, informal committee charged with receiving and publicly discussing, on a monthly basis, preselected input presented by citizens living and residing in the union.

This input—be it informal letters on a specific issue, observations about an ongoing public consultation, comments on a registered ECI, a complaint to the EU ombudsman, a petition to the European Parliament, or an informal call for action or inaction directed to the EU as a whole—would have to be submitted through a dedicated, user-friendly, comprehensive website. Each submission would be shareable and would organically attract visitors who would be able to vote for the most relevant items.

To be discussed publicly during European Question Time, each public item would have to meet one of the following requirements: collect a given number of votes (well below the amount of signatures required for an ECI) from the general public; be voted for by one-fifth of members of the European Parliament; or be proposed and/or selected by a majority of members in a European Peoples' Assembly (consisting of EU citizens randomly selected from across Europe every six months).

Regardless of and beyond the institutional engineering needed to set it up, this new participatory framework could overcome the currently inaccessible and fragmented EU institutional apparatus by creating a space for all citizens to have a say in the union. It would force EU policymakers to be exposed on a regular basis to public

input from all corners of Europe. This would in turn foster a Europeanized debate on matters of common interest across the continent. More critically—given the resulting public salience of the issues debated—this European Question Time would strengthen the incentives for the EU institutions and European representatives to respond thoughtfully to public input.

Ultimately, the aim pursued by this participatory and performative framework would be to grasp the most relevant and promising proposals coming from the citizens and then have them slowly influence the daily work of each institution. How this will occur depends on the competences as well as political sensibilities of each institution and their respective roles within the policy cycle. Thus, the European Commission might incorporate some inputs into its own working program, or it might even drop or accelerate some pending initiatives. The members of parliament—who since 2009 [represent both their electors and all EU citizens](#)—might turn some of these grassroots inputs into own-initiative reports or, should there be a majority within the European Parliament, into a legislative initiative under Article 255 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Also, the members of the Council of the EU might flag some of these citizen-driven inputs, which might also influence their voting behavior and ultimately might also feed into the European Council debates.

CONCLUSION

Europe will not find its democratic soul in a large-scale, stand-alone, and pre-framed deliberation exercise, such as the European Citizens' Consultations. Only an accessible, intuitive, and safe space accommodating public input on a daily basis will bring the EU to terms with its original democratic sin. By centralizing all public input entailing the participation of all EU institutions, a European Question Time might crystalize and eventually connect the daily realities of Europeans with the day-to-day operation of their institutions. A European Peoples' Assembly of randomly selected citizens from

all over the union would further contribute to such an objective by humanizing and transnationalizing EU decisionmaking.

While this participatory framework would not magically fix the European accountability deficit, it may compensate by making the system responsive to citizen-driven issues and eventually making the system more intelligible and accessible to the many. More immediately, its implementation would mark a change in the EU institutional attitude toward the role of citizens in the union.

The clock is ticking: either the EU institutions provide meaningful participatory, user-friendly opportunities to their citizens or the EU as it exists now could soon all be over. There is no better incentive for current and future EU political leaders than to be forced to listen their electorate through a pan-European, informal framework animated by citizens.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the way to solve the challenges of the twenty-first century, as nations across the world become more interconnected, is by involving the people in shaping the policies that affect their lives. Europe could and should become a leader in promoting and realizing such a citizen-driven model of governance to renew itself and set the standard for other nations.

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NOTES

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by this teal colored text.

- 1 For an initial assessment, Paul Butcher and Corina Stratulat, "The European Citizens' Consultations - Evaluation report," European Policy Centre, November 16, 2018, http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=1&pub_id=8839. The outcomes of the consultations will be discussed at the European Council in December 2018.
- 2 Since 1992, European citizens have been entitled to address, individually or in association with other citizens or persons, a petition to the European Parliament on a matter that comes within the union's fields of activity and that affects him, her, or it directly. See Article 227 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) and Rule 215 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament.
- 3 "Standard Eurobarometer 89, Spring 2018," European Commission, June 2018, p. 47.
- 4 Mark Perera et al., "The European Union Integrity System," Transparency International, 2014, and for current information, see the EU Integrity Watch homepage at <https://www.integritywatch.eu>.
- 5 For an authoritative analysis, see, for example, Joana Mendes, *Participation in European Union Rulemaking: A Rights-Based Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 6 The G1000 emerged as a Belgian crowd-funded citizens' assembly initiative, founded as a result of a manifesto published in five national newspapers in 2011, and run by volunteers. It took a multi-level—local, regional, and national—approach to citizen assemblies, with the aim of providing recommendations on economic and sociopolitical themes in Belgium during the government crisis (2011–2012). The assembly's final report listed a number of recommendations aimed at various audiences, including parliamentary commissions, local and provincial governments, regional and federal parliaments and governments, political parties, social partners, citizens, the European Union, and the Council of Europe.
- 7 Richard Youngs, *Europe Reset: New Directions for the EU* (London: IB Taurus, 2017).
- 8 For a new model of citizen participation beyond elections, see Alberto Alemanno, *Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society* (London: Icon Books, 2017).