



European democracy, citizens' participation and the role of regions and cities

Working conference, 27 June 2022, 14:00-20:00,
European Committee of the Regions, rue Belliard 101

Thematic briefing for workshop 1
Benefits of citizens' participation at different levels of democracy

Questions the workshop should address

- 1) *Which experiences do we have with citizens' participation at different levels?
What does the lived reality look like?*
- 2) *What is the added value of citizens' participation on European issues at local
and regional level?*
- 3) *Which formats of citizens' participation between regions and cities have proven
to be successful?*

Background

Conventional wisdom suggest that democracy is globally under threat including in some member states of the European Union. This finding is shared by most political observers and academics and usually verified by low levels of election turn-outs and eroding trust in political parties, governments and public institutions. As surveys and research confirm, this trend is unequally spread across different groups of society, different ages and levels of education. Last but not least, it varies significantly between and even within regions and cities. The latter aspect – branded by academics through the notion of the “geography of discontent” - has led to quite some political debate in recent years. Such concerns have, among others, led to “the deliberative wave” in many countries and new forms of experimenting with democratic innovation at local, regional, national and transnational level as well as at the level of the European Union. That deliberative wave has come a long way and regularly hits the beach of “representative democracy” with at times heated discussions between and within political parties and among experts about representativeness and legitimacy of citizens assemblies, juries or other “new” forms and formats of democratic innovations – and the “right way” of doing things.

In its [Communication on the follow-up on the Conference on the Future of Europe of 17 June 2022](#), the European Commission suggests that regions and cities shall be systematically put on the map of the EU when it comes to democratic innovation. The Communication refers to a “European public space” to flourish and “democracy to be enriched at European, national, regional and local level” through “Citizens Panels to deliberate and make recommendations

ahead of certain key proposals". Such views are also supported by a [2021 Report of the European Parliament on citizens dialogues and participation in EU decision-making](#). This makes sense because cities and regions are laboratories and sources of such processes and because what the EU does matters to them as much as what cities and regions do matter to the EU as well.

Citizens' participation in the EU: From patchwork to infrastructure

A [recent study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung](#) analyses the existing channels of citizens' participation in the EU and combined them with evidence from surveys and research. The study concludes that in order to make citizens' participation work, the EU needs to move from a participation patchwork to a participation infrastructure by addressing three gaps: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap. In a participation infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work on their own, but would collectively establish the basis for a functioning participatory EU democracy alongside the representative dimension of European policy-making.

Looking back, it can be stated that continued and permanent citizens' involvement at EU level will build on the proof of concept, which the Conference has delivered as regards to methodology: a combination of a multilingual, digital platform with randomly selected citizens' panels has confirmed the potential to create another layer of active citizens' involvement.

Further reading

Conference on the Future of Europe Observatory (2022), Conference on the Future of Europe: what worked, what now, what next? High-Level Advisory Group report (22 February 2022): Brussels, [online](#)

Dijkstra, Lewis, Hugo Poelman and Andrés Rodriguez-Pose (2018), The geography of EU discontent, European Commission, DG REGIO Working papers 12/2018, Brussels, [online](#)

European Committee of the Regions (2019), From local to European. Putting citizens at the heart of the EU agenda, Brussels, [online](#)

European Parliament (2021), Citizens dialogues and citizens' participation in EU decision-making, report (Helmut Scholz), 21 June 2021, [online](#)

Hierlemann, Dominik, Stefan Roch, Paul Butcher, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Corina Stratulat, Maarten De Groot (2022), Under construction – citizen participation in the European Union, Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh, [online](#)

OECD (2020), Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions. Catching the deliberative wave, Paris, [online](#)