



EuroPCom Report: Workshop 7

How can citizens' participation and deliberative democracy strengthen European democracy?

27 June 2023, 10:45-11:45

Welcoming remarks:

By the moderator

Janine Borg highlighted that deliberative democracy was a relatively new concept, with the main principles being for citizens to reach a consensus and to find solutions that are both legitimate and fair, and to allow citizens join in with policy challenges. Several European initiatives had been enacted to get citizens involved.

2 Slido questions were posed:

1st question: how regularly do you participate in EU elections? (a sizeable proportion of the audience answered positively).

2nd question: how involved are you in citizens participation and deliberative democracy? (a much lower number answered positively, a clear difference between the two questions).

Speakers:

- Joško Klisović, *President of the Assembly, city of Zagreb*
- Colin Scicluna, *Head of Cabinet of the Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica*
- Anna Renkamp, *Senior Project Manager, Bertelsmann Stiftung*
- Simona Pronckutė, *external expert for European Citizens' Initiatives and a board member of the European Citizens' Initiatives campaign*

Moderator: Janine Borg, *Head of the Relations with National Economic and Social Councils and Civil Society Unit, European Economic and Social Committee*

A takeaway from the session

Deliberative democracy is a useful addition to the democratic toolbox, and can, if the participant groups are randomly selected and their proposals seriously taken into consideration by policymakers, strengthen citizens' trust in democratic institutions and the EU.

Summary of the session

Q: Are citizens interested in participating in participative democracy? What types of citizens are there?

Joško Klisović explained a lesson that had been learned from the Croatian referendum on EU accession: it is very difficult to get a message to citizens if they are not interested in the subject. He said that some might ask why there was a need for citizens to be involved in "state affairs" if there were already empowered democratic representatives in place, and explained that it was because citizens could impact democracy both by influencing decisions and by overseeing policymaking. Data collected in Zagreb had revealed four types of citizens or participants who interacted with the platforms: those putting forward constructive proposals; the losers of previous elections, trying to use the platforms to their own ends; those promoting (private) interest groups; and troublemakers. He noted that there was a particularly large gulf between those promoting initiatives or decisions for public interest and those doing so on the side of private interest.

Q: It is known that the European Commission finds embedding deliberative democracy in policymaking process very important; how do you see the new initiatives (citizens panels, one stop shops, etc.) and how they move beyond the buzzwords?

Colin Scicluna started by pointing out that the discussion about deliberative democracy often assumed that it would involve replacing the previous system with this new one, but that this was not the case. He noted that democracy was currently under threat because citizens had less trust in the institutions representing them, and highlighted the importance, when organising deliberative democracy events (such as panels, etc.), of reaching out to the very people who think their opinion has no value. He also stressed the importance of providing feedback and following up on consultative/participatory sessions, otherwise people's trust in these actions would wane. He said that, so far, 1 200 people from all Member States had participated in a European citizens' panel.

Q: You evaluate projects on citizens' participation and have expertise in digital participation; could you tell us about your experience and lessons learned?

Anna Renkamp highlighted three lessons that had been learned: 1) Discourse is central (both citizen to citizen, and institution to citizen and vice versa). Results have shown that people enjoy these participatory meetings and exchanging ideas to find joint solutions. They have been shown to be able to find compromises to difficult issues. Politicians can learn from these results and implement better policies. However, 2) this requires a good knowledge of participatory techniques and broad inclusion (diversity). To contact marginalised groups, it is advisable to contact multipliers (intermediaries with good links to said groups) or to go to where they are. It is useful to take a multi-angled approach (for example, in addition to having random groups on panels, it is good to have online participation and side events to reach a wider audience). 3) The political will must be there (citizens' proposals must be taken seriously). If not, this will have a very negative effect on citizens' belief in deliberative democracy.

Potential synergies between ECIs and participatory democracy/citizens' panel were discussed during the EESC - ECI day; do you see any synergies?

Simona Pronckutė stated that, since 2012, only 10 ECIs (out of 125 submitted) had collected the 1 million signatures across the EU needed to be successful.

Two Slido questions were posed:

1) have you seen any ECIs on social media and signed them? Yes 34%, no 66%.

2) Do you follow any ECIs on social media? Yes 22%, no 78%.

Ms Pronckutė said that it needed to be easier for ECIs to reach and fulfil their goals and that, in particular, it would be great if they could have more of a presence within the European institutions. She echoed Mr Scicluna's statement that it was very important to use random selection when creating the panels.

Quotes

"It is very difficult to pass the message to citizens unless they are interested in the matter." - Joško Klisović

"We need to get to hear the opinion, actually, I would say, of people who think they don't have a valid opinion but who in reality do." - Colin Scicluna

"They [deliberative citizen participation processes] only work if the quality of the deliberations is good and processes are inclusive, interactive, and effective." - Anna Renkamp

"Those 10 successful ECI – those that had at least a few thousands of followers, and big partners such as PETA and Greenpeace – it was easier for them to collect signatures because citizens hear a little about this big network, this big organisation, and it creates a higher stress on citizens." - Simona Pronckutė