SPECIAL REPORT
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WHOSE DEMOCRACY? THE TUMULTUOUS ROAD TO EFFECTIVE CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Consulting citizens on decisions that affect them, such as deciding how to spend money more often than not collected from their wallets, is seen as a way to increase trust and accountability at all levels of government.

But how can we ensure that people know about these opportunities to take part in decision making without running for office? On the flipside, who is to be held accountable when decisions taken by unelected citizens go wrong?

Participatory democracy can increase transparency around decision-making but leaders must be willing to share power with their citizens and put effective co-decision tools in place.

That is proving to be a tall order, as we move from city districts to civic engagement at the EU level.

Meanwhile, existing participatory exercises show that the lack of information around them and the unequal representation of citizens can limit the impact of civic participation, and could eventually undermine citizen’s trust.
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Should European citizens dictate the bloc’s budget?

By Silvia Ellena | EURACTIV.com

MEPs and experts propose to scale up a city-level tool allowing citizens to decide how to spend a part of the municipal resources and let Europeans shape the EU budget expenditure.

In a 2021 report, the European Parliament proposed experimenting with participatory budgeting at the EU level, allowing Europeans to co-decide how to spend the bloc’s money.

The report attempted to see “how we at the EU level could complement the decision making by giving citizens new tools and instruments in their hands to participate,” rapporteur Helmut Scholz told EURACTIV.

In Scholz’s view, the current political situation in Europe could create an “additional good momentum” for rethinking the way the EU budget is discussed.

“Do we spend billions of euros for the defence of the Union, or do we spend now these billions for the environment, mitigating climate change, other energy policies, migration?”

FEASIBILITY

Letting citizens co-decide the EU budget could be challenging but is “absolutely feasible,” according to Elisa Lironi, senior manager at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS).

In her view, EU-level participatory budgeting should start with a small part of the budget, asking citizens ‘where would you want the European Union to spend this amount of budget?’; similar to a consultation process.
However, introducing such a tool at the EU level is “not immediate”, said Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor in EU Law at HEC Paris.

“It is not so immediate to get citizens involved in allocating European budgets,” he told EURACTIV.

As European funds are generally transferred to national authorities who are in charge of redistributing these resources, “participatory budgeting at the European level can only be conceived and designed along national lines,” Alemanno said.

However, the EU could play a critical role in pushing member states to consult citizens on spending the bloc’s funds.

EU GUIDANCE

“Unless the European Union will kind of force them, nudge them by providing all the methods and conditioning also the delivering of fundings to participatory budgeting, I don’t think it’s going to happen as quickly as we would like.”

In Alemanno’s view, the EU should prepare a “participatory budgeting toolkit” for national authorities setting out the methods and procedures to be used.

Meanwhile, the post-pandemic recovery plan Next Generation EU could serve as “a good case study of what not to do,” he said.

The €800 billion recovery plan was designed at the EU level with a top down approach, despite being “possibly the major attempt by the European Union to transfer resources from the European level to the citizen level.”

“There was nothing participatory about it,” Alemanno said, adding that consultations should have been carried out at the national level to allocate part of the funds according to citizens’ expectations.

FROM THE CITY LEVEL TO THE EU

While national governments are still reluctant to introduce co-designing schemes, European cities have extensively used participatory tools in the past two decades.

Europe counts over 4,500 participatory budgeting processes, and some countries, like Scotland and Poland, have even introduced national frameworks which require local governments to consult citizens on the spending of resources.

Lironi said the advantage of using participatory budgeting at the local level is that “people can see immediately the effects of it, they can really see the money is being allocated to create a new park in the neighbourhood or a new school.”

In her view, participatory budgeting could be “very concrete” at the EU level as well, especially if it focuses on cross-cutting issues, like allocating funds to Erasmus and other EU programmes.

However, involving citizens on other matters on a national or European scale could be more challenging, according to Alemanno.

“Defining whether a European country like Spain should invest more on renewables and incentivise electric vehicles vis-à-vis reducing the number of plastic bottles on the market are decisions that might be felt a bit more far away.”

Yet, Alemanno remains optimistic that participatory budgeting has a future beyond local decision-making.

Being already a “permanent and institutionalised” exercise at the city level, he said participatory budgeting is more developed than other civic participation tools and more likely to expand to the national and European levels.
Weak participatory tools hinder citizens’ attempts to shape EU policies

By Silvia Ellena | EURACTIV.com

The EU’s attempts to encourage citizens’ engagement through participatory tools has made little impact due to the lack of information and clear follow-up, experts say.

The EU has put in place consultations, citizens’ initiatives and other tools which Europeans can use to influence decision-making, in an effort to strengthen democracy across the bloc.

“The future of European democracy depends on making sure citizens participate actively,” the EU’s Věra Jourová values and transparency commissioner told MEPs during a European Parliament discussion on citizenship earlier this month.

“The opinion of citizens is valuable,” she said, adding that civic empowerment is one of the Commission’s priorities.

However, the 2020 citizenship report shows that over 60% of respondents think that EU citizens are poorly informed about their rights.

On top of that, “the current set-up of the EU participatory framework may leave people doubtful about which channel is more suited to their needs,” a recent Parliament’s report on citizenship states.

Estonian lawmaker Yana Toom, who drafted the report, said the Parliament’s petitions committee often receives requests that are better suited for the European Ombudsman – the independent body dealing with
complaints of maladministration by EU institutions.

“This makes me think Europeans might be confused about participatory tools that they should be using,” she said.

**LACK OF INFORMATION**

A “single platform” and “better guidance to the appropriate tool” are needed to make sure citizens’ voices get heard, said Toom.

“The European citizenship rights we are so proud of can’t make a difference if Europeans are not aware of them,” Toom said, calling for more political education on European affairs.

Lack of information is also hindering the effective use of another participatory instrument, according to Elisa Lironi, senior manager at the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS).

“If we take the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), people don’t really know about this tool, although it is a good tool, and then it doesn’t have the impact they would expect it to have,” she said.

The ECI was first launched ten years ago and allows Europeans to propose new EU laws.

To increase the use of this tool, Commission officials said the EU executive has recently intensified its efforts to promote the ECI.

“Those efforts are bringing tangible and positive results,” a Commission official told EURACTIV, adding that there has been “a steady increase of the traffic on the ECI website and an overall positive trend in terms of new requests for registrations.”

However, “there is more to be done,” the official added.

**LIMITED IMPACT**

Since 2012, 88 initiatives have been registered and 6 have reached one million signatures, the required threshold for the Commission to consider the proposal.

Last year, the “End the Cage Age” initiative pushed the EU executive to commit to a legislative proposal to ban cages for animals by 2023.

However, Lironi said not all ECIs become EU laws, making it difficult to measure their impact.

“The problem with these participatory democracy experiments is that impact is never a guarantee unless the political actors since the beginning agree that they’re going to do something with it.”

The same issue is emerging in another EU-wide participatory exercise, the Conference on the Future of Europe, where it is not yet clear how the recommendations drafted by participants will be taken into account by EU policy-makers.

Meanwhile, despite the limited impact of these exercises, MEPs are already calling on the Commission to experiment with more participatory tools at EU level.

**PILOT PROJECTS**

“I see a participatory approach as part of an attempt to change the way we are coming to decisions, which are more responding to the needs of citizens,” said MEP Helmut Scholz, rapporteur of a 2021 report calling for pilot projects on co-designing tools for citizens.

In his view, participatory tools could be the best way to address challenges such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and poverty.

“Participatory democracy could be a transmission element in picking up that awareness and addressing it also in the process of solution finding,” Scholz told EURACTIV.

This approach is currently being experimented through two pilot projects, DigiDEM and CODE Europe, which crowdsources citizens’ ideas on air quality.

The initiative is carried out in ten different cities and is an attempt “to have a real transnational participatory democracy experiment,” said Lironi.

Citizens are asked to identify problems concerning air quality and brainstorm solutions. The most supported solutions will then be formulated as policy recommendations together with NGOs and experts in an effort to influence the EU directives on air quality.

“We’re going to take the contributions of citizens, and then we’re going to knock on doors at institutions and say ‘this is what citizens want’,” Lironi said.
Giving citizens a say in decision-making beyond elections can help the leadership make better decisions, but sharing power requires a clear division of roles, politicians and experts have said.

Citizen participation has increased rapidly in recent years and at all levels of government, making Europe the region that is experimenting the most with deliberative processes involving citizens, a 2020 report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) showed.

These participatory exercises allow inhabitants to influence decisions on matters that affect their lives, such as urban planning and health.

While most leaders see this kind of civic participation as a way to better inform their decisions and increase trust in governments, they also warn that it should not replace representative democracy.

“I think the rules have to be defined very clearly,” Anna Lührmann, German minister of state, said during a discussion on citizen participation in the EU, organised by the Conference Observatory.

In her view, consulting citizens is “a way to inspire the political process to bring new ideas, new life, new priorities, and fresh debates.”

However, “it’s up to the representative bodies to make the decisions” in the end.

DEFINING ROLES

Lührmann said defining clearly the role of citizens and politicians in
these participatory exercises could help increase acceptance among policymakers, who are sometimes reluctant to share power with citizens.

Herman Van Rompuy, former president of the European Council, also called for a clear repartition of roles during the discussion.

“The moment of decision belongs to those who have been democratically elected,” he said, adding, however, that decisions should be preceded by a “moment of listening and discussion” with the people.

At the same time, experts warn that politicians should not ask too much of citizens.

“We shouldn’t get in a situation where we demand of citizens things that are not part of their job, citizens also have their life and they have their own business to go about,” said Corina Stratulat, policy analyst at the European Policy Centre.

However, leaders should also give citizens “the opportunity to voice their opinions in other ways, rather than through elections or petitions or traditional instruments,” she added.

Participatory exercises could then complement representative democracy, allowing citizens to actively influence their leadership beyond electoral polls.

**POLITICAL WILL**

While activists are calling on all levels of governments, including the EU, to boost citizen participation, most of the existing co-decision programmes are carried out at the municipal level.

Some 52% of cases of civic participation occur at local and 30% at regional level, while only 15% of cases are national and 3% international, according to the OECD.

In Van Rompuy’s view, citizen engagement is more easily carried out on a smaller scale because “there is constant contact with citizens,” while on a national level politicians can become “in some way disconnected from the daily concerns of the people.”

Ultimately, the success of participatory tools depends on the political will of the elected representatives to engage citizens.

“Once elected, most of the time you’re in your bubble,” Van Rompuy said, adding that listening to citizens can become “challenging.”
Irish mayor: the challenge of integrating youth in public participation networks

By János Ammann | EURACTIV.com

Forms of deliberative democracy, such as public participation networks, can support traditional politics – but integrating young people into the process remains a challenge, Gillian Coughlan, mayor of Cork County in Ireland, said in an interview with EURACTIV.

In 2014, Ireland introduced so-called “Public Participation Networks” (PPN), in order to help bring the concerns and ideas of civil society organisations to public authorities and the more traditional institutions of representative democracy.

As an elected mayor of Cork County, Gillian Coughlan is part of the representative democracy, rather than the deliberative democracy that the PPNs represent due to their largely consultative role in policymaking. Nevertheless, Coughlan sees a lot of value in the involvement of PPNs in local policies.

“As you become more and more involved in the political side of things, you lose some of that on the ground feeling,” she told EURACTIV.

“And so, to keep our policies as
close to the citizen as possible, the public participation network was established. And it’s extremely successful.”

The blooming of PPNs across Ireland appears to prove Coughlan’s point. By the end of 2020, roughly 17,500 local civil society organisations were part of one of the 31 PPNs that have been established all over Ireland, according to a 2020 annual report. This is an increase of more than 10% compared to 2019.

Members of a PPN can nominate representatives who sit in on meetings of local policy committees of city councils and county councils to provide their views. They act as a “failsafe”, as Coughlan puts it, ensuring that concerns, as well as practical information held by environmental, social, and economic associations, is not overlooked.

However, since involvement in the PPNs is self-selective, they do not automatically ensure the inclusion of all people.

“I am seeing the age profile rise,” Coughlan said, relating this to the issue of reduced civil society activity at the local level.

“People who joined in their 50s are now still there in their 70s. But the people now in their 50s are no longer joining. It is a challenge, there is no doubt about it.”

“It is not necessarily a bias, it is a real reflection of the people who are doing what needs to be done on the ground.”

But Coughlan fears this might result in skewed priorities of local politics – for example, on climate issues.

“I don’t want to be ageist about it, but maybe, when in their middle-ages, where people are in council, they maybe see primarily short-term goals. Whereas I think the breadth of vision of a younger person can maybe spur us to action,” she told EURACTIV.

As a secondary school teacher herself, Coughlan knows about the challenge of getting young people to participate. She thinks that the COVID pandemic made the situation even more difficult.

“Well, that might have got them out of the habit,” she said.

“But when they came back to school, there was no boldness. In fact, there were no real behavioural problems. But everybody was just sort of zoned out”, Coughlan said, adding that her former teacher colleagues often used the word “zombified” to describe the situation.

While this COVID-related issue might normalise over time, the challenge of how to include young people looks set to remain.

“You can get them together and they’ll talk and talk and talk. But how do you get them to take the next step to action?” Coughlan asked.

A recent case study of PPNs conducted by the Irish authorities states that the inclusion of young people is an important facet of meaningful participation. It suggests that this can be done through local child and youth councils and through community groups that cater primarily to young people, for example, sports or environmental groups.

Another question is how ready local politics will be to hear the suggestions of young people once they shake off their lockdown-related zombification and regain their boldness.

“Maybe some politicians think young people are too radical,” Coughlan told EURACTIV, affirming that she was not one of them.

“We must have their dreams and their creativity”, she said.
Ensuring participatory democracy without abdicating responsibility

By János Ammann | EURACTIV.com

While participatory democracy sounds like an important goal to many, it also raises questions of responsibility, accountability, power and trust, according to a panel on citizen engagement.

“Participatory democracy” sounds nice. Why should citizens not be more engaged in the decision making process than by simply putting a name on a piece of paper every four or five years?

Advocates of participatory democracy argue that giving citizens a possibility to voice their concerns and ideas more regularly leads to better solutions as well as a more democratic result.

“Democracy should be a continuous process, it’s a daily process, building trust, and collecting ideas every moment of the day,” Rotterdam’s mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb told EURACTIV, following a panel discussion on participatory democracy in Marseille.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUE

However, participatory democracy also raises the question on who is
responsible for political decisions. While politicians who make a bad decision can be reprimanded by the voters in the next election, citizens deciding something in a citizen forum cannot be held accountable in the same manner if bad outcomes occur.

“Citizen forums can only be a complement to representative democracy, not a substitute,” Muhterem Aras, president of the parliament in the German region of Baden-Württemberg, said during the discussion.

Under this condition, she said that there should be more citizen participation.

According to Aras, citizen panels could be especially useful when political debates were stuck in difficult debates and compromise seems impossible.

“Sometimes political questions are so blocked that a citizen forum is needed to overcome the blockade,” she said. In her regional parliament of Baden-Württemberg, for example, politicians could not agree on a reform of the parliament’s pension system.

A citizen forum that was largely independent from the party bickering finally helped to overcome the blockade.

POWER AND TRUST

While Aras advocated a more consultative role for participatory democracy, Rotterdam’s mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb argued that real power should be shared.

“You are most effective with power if you share it,” he said.

Rotterdam has divided the city into 39 neighbourhoods, in which neighbourhood commissions can decide some matters on their own, for example on how to spend the budget that the city assigns to the neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood commissions are elected, but unlike in usual Dutch elections, people can take part from the age of 16.

Moreover, Aboutaleb defined ten especially critical neighbourhoods to which he assigned so-called “city marines”, who are powerful figures in their areas. According to the mayor of Rotterdam, these “city marines” receive budgets to organise activities with citizens.

While giving local neighbourhood commissions or “city commissions” budgets sounds promising, as they are close to the ground and thus might have good ideas what to spend the money on, this also raises the question of possible corruption or other misuse of funds.

How would Aboutaleb ensure that accountability was also ensured in financial matters?

“It’s a matter of trust,” he told EURACTIV, to which he added after short reflection: “High trust and high penalties.”