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Under Construction

Citizen Participation in the European Union



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At a glance: from a participation patchwork to a participation infrastructure

It is fundamental for the European Union (EU), as for any democracy, that citizens feel they can participate in different ways in politics and policymaking. Over the years, the EU has put in place a considerable number of participation opportunities for citizens. Still, there is a persistent image of the EU as a distant and complex political apparatus, where decisions are made behind closed doors. The Union wants to be democratic and participatory, as indicated by its rhetoric around initiatives such as the European Democracy Action Plan.¹ But if it is not perceived as such, it has a legitimacy problem.

This study finds that the EU's participation instruments function reasonably well on their own but do not add up to a visible and comprehensive participation infrastructure. In the current system, each instrument works according to its own objectives, is fairly accessible and relatively easy to use. However, citizens are hardly aware of the existence of these instruments and their actual impact on EU decision-making is often difficult to detect.

What we see is a participation patchwork. EU institutions have no common strategy for well-defined, effective and sustainable citizen participation. It is often unclear to citizens which instruments to use and for what purpose. Learnings from one instrument are not sufficiently used to improve other instruments and the overall participation infrastructure. The patchwork provides various participation opportunities, but it does not alter or positively affect a political process that is still driven mostly by elites. Thus, it might be convenient for policymakers to portray the EU as a *Europe of the citizens*,² but de facto the Union pursues a rather closed policymaking approach from which citizens feel excluded.

The future of EU democracy depends on the ability of the Union and its member states to enhance

and extend the possibilities for more effective and continuous participation by European citizens in EU policymaking. A change in public perception regarding the ability of ordinary European citizens to have a stronger say in EU politics would require a re-evaluation and upgrading of the Union's participatory toolkit. The functioning of existing instruments, as well as their collective contribution to a participatory EU, should be improved. This review could entail tweaks to existing instruments and potentially also the addition of new elements to the current toolbox if they can help to complement and make today's EU participatory repertoire more complete.

To improve citizen participation, the EU needs to construct a participation infrastructure. In this infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work for themselves, but collectively establish the basis for a functioning participatory EU democracy next to the representative dimension of EU policymaking. In such a participation infrastructure, democratic accountability in the EU would not only mean elections every five years, but more visible, coherent, comprehensive, effective, and continuous participation by European citizens in the process of shaping concrete policies and the overall future of Europe.

Seven EU participation instruments

European Parliament elections are the EU's most significant democratic instrument, through which members of the European Parliament (EP) are directly elected. In 2019, voter turnout increased for the first time, suggesting a potentially renewed interest in European affairs. Still, it remains difficult for European citizens to see how elections make a real difference in the EU decision-making process, given the Union's complex institutional

setup and the still limited powers of the EP, despite its progressive gain in legislative powers via successive treaty reforms over the past decades.

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is another flagship participation instrument enshrined in the EU Treaties, allowing one million EU citizens to call on the European Commission to propose legislation. Until recently, it lacked impact and often left organisers frustrated. With the recent ECI *End the Cage Age*,³ however, it seems to have finally produced its first true success story.

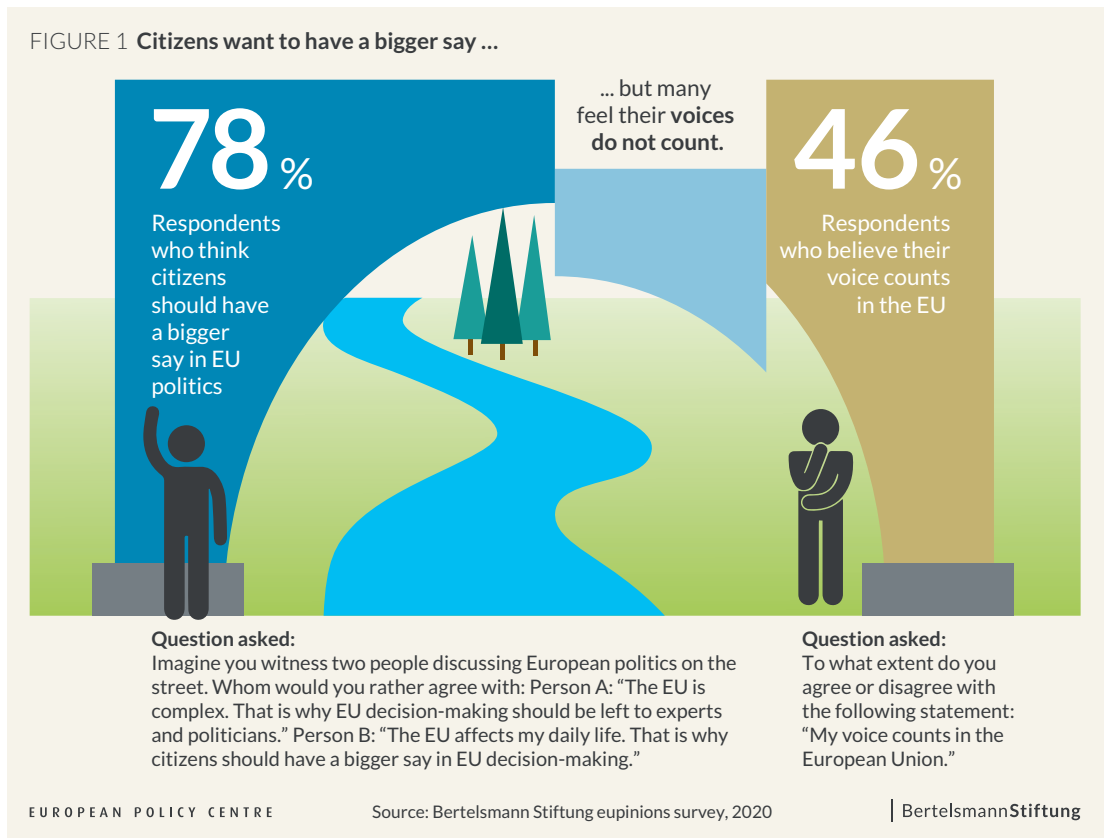
Petitions to the European Parliament can be submitted by any citizen or resident in the EU and are the Union's oldest participation instrument. Petitions are relatively popular in a handful of EU countries, but have otherwise kept a low profile, as the EP itself does not attribute a high priority to them.

The European Ombudsman is an independent institution that investigates complaints against maladministration by EU bodies, whether lodged by EU citizens and residents or undertaken on its

own initiative. The Ombudsman has been a key player in making EU public administration more open and accessible, but still lacks wide public attention.

Public consultations are organised systematically by the European Commission for individual policy proposals, inviting citizens and stakeholders to provide feedback. Though the Commission is increasing efforts to make them more visible, participation is often imbalanced towards organised interests, and it remains largely unclear how consultation input is reflected and translated into policy output.

Citizens' Dialogues are town-hall meetings organised by the Commission with Commissioners or other EU officials as speakers. They offer citizens an opportunity to receive immediate feedback on their questions and ideas, but they mainly cater to a pro-European audience and there is a lack of real deliberation between citizens and policy-makers.



European Citizens' Consultations were a one-off initiative in 2018 featuring an EU-wide online survey, a European citizens' panel and various events in the member states. They influenced the overall objectives and shape of the Conference on the Future of Europe but lacked any concrete follow-up by decision makers.

Three gaps between patchwork and infrastructure

As is, these seven instruments constitute a participation patchwork. The Union has expanded its participatory scope considerably over time, adding new instruments and reforming existing ones. Today, citizens are offered various ways to participate in EU politics. However, no new instrument and no reform has led to the development of a visible, coherent, comprehensive, and effective participation infrastructure. This is mostly due to three major gaps that need to be addressed: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap.

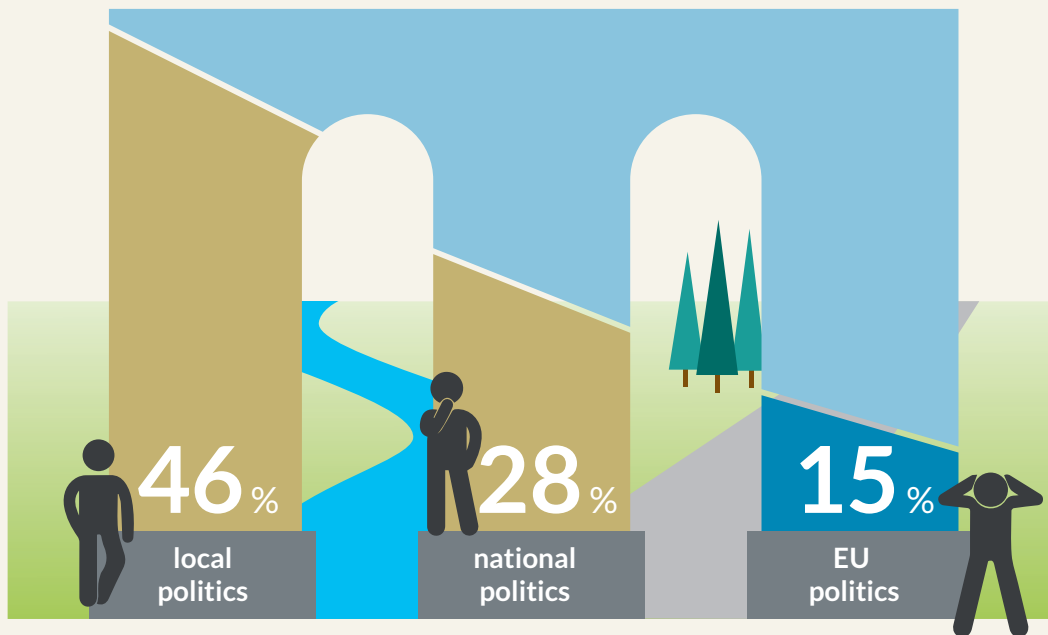
(1) The awareness gap

Citizens want to participate. But many feel that their voices do not count. Citizens think it is difficult to take part in European politics and they have little knowledge of their opportunities to participate. This creates a gap between citizens' ambitions to participate effectively and their perception that there is little opportunity to do so.

According to an opinions poll conducted as part of this study, four out of five EU citizens want to have a bigger say in EU politics. They feel that European policymaking should not be left to politicians and experts alone. At the same time, only a minority (46 percent) believe that their voice counts in European politics. Citizens experience a discrepancy between their own desire to participate in EU politics and the unclear effect their vote, their opinions, their insights, and their participation have on the EU. Most citizens do not perceive the Union's participatory system as one that they can engage with.

FIGURE 2 European citizens find it more difficult to participate on the EU level than nationally or locally

Respondents who answered "[somewhat/very] easy" to the question "how easy or difficult is it for you to participate in ..."



The primary level of participation for citizens is neither the European nor the national but the local level. 46 percent of citizens believe that it is rather easy to participate in local politics, compared to 28 percent on the national level and 15 percent on the EU level. Our research found that this is not primarily due to EU participation instruments being difficult to use; they are simply not well-known among European citizens.

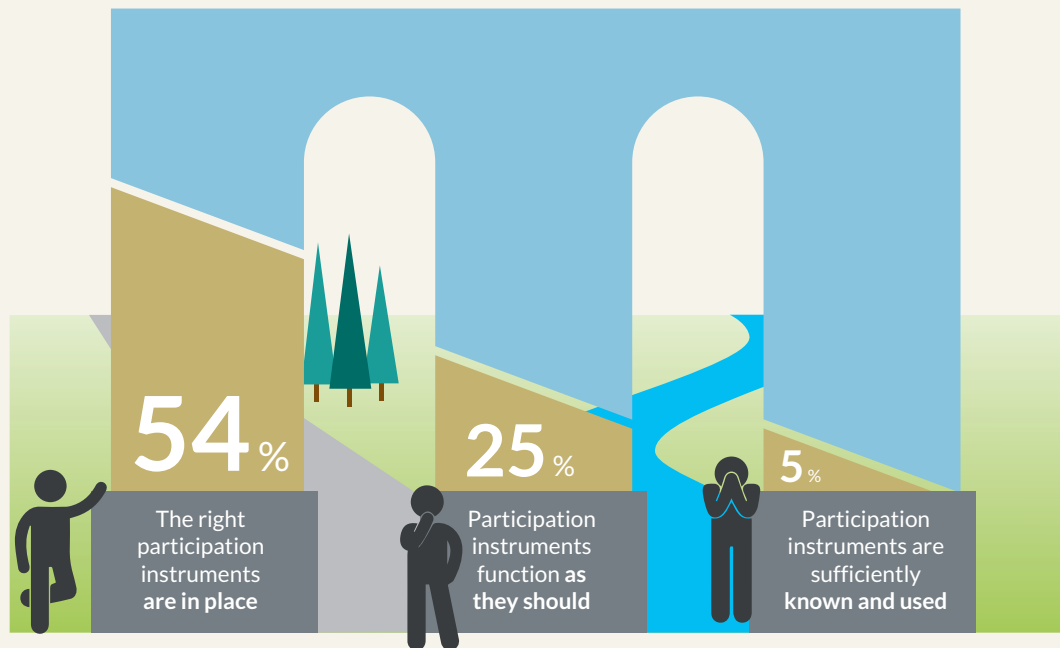
Our eupinions survey also shows that most citizens find it difficult to identify existing EU participation instruments, except for the one that is best known – the European Parliament elections. One of the reasons is that there is hardly any media coverage of citizen participation in any EU member state. It is also largely unclear to citizens what a given instrument does and when to use one instrument or the other. As a result, the EU participation landscape is still *terra incognita* to many citizens.

(2) The performance gap

The EU has an array of different participation instruments at its disposal, but most of these have significant room for improvement. Not only are they unknown, relatively unrepresentative, not very transnational and mostly not deliberative, but their political impact on European policymaking is fairly low.

The EU has a variety of relatively accessible instruments at its disposal. Since the first petition in 1958, the Union has considerably expanded citizens’ opportunities to participate. From the possibility to vote for their representatives in the European Parliament, to that of submitting individual complaints to the Ombudsman, joining consultations about legislative acts or having dialogues with politicians, citizens enjoy a broad spectrum of participation opportunities at the European level, more than in many EU member states. The Euro-

FIGURE 3 Instruments often do not function as they should or could



59 EU democracy experts were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements:

1. The appropriate instruments for citizen participation at EU level are in place.
2. The existing EU participation instruments function as they should.
3. The existing EU participation instruments are sufficiently known and used.

pean elections are clearly the flagship instrument, being the most recognisable and most used (53 per cent of respondents in the eupinions survey claim to have participated in EU elections).

But most instruments do not function as well as they should or could. Our analysis reveals deficiencies, unrealised potential and room for improvement with respect to all of the instruments. They are relatively unrepresentative in terms of participation, catering mainly to a relatively narrow group of highly educated EU supporters. Most instruments exhibit little transnationality, taking place either on the local or national level, with little cross-border interaction. Citizens are often left in the dark as to what happens to their input. Equally important, the actual effect of participation instruments on EU policymaking remains low.

Little surprise, then, that Europeans feel that they have little ability to influence EU decisions. In this sense, the Conference on the Future of Europe presents an important step forward in an attempt to make the Union more participatory. The European Citizens' Panels involving randomly selected citizens from all over Europe, in particular, are a test case of whether citizens' assemblies could serve as an inspiration for future efforts aiming to modernise and further complete the EU's participatory framework.

(3) The political commitment gap

Citizen participation in the EU lacks the political will it needs to succeed. There is a gap between the Union's rhetoric on participation and the actions taken and resources invested to make citizens' voices count.

FIGURE 4 The EU's participation rhetoric is not in line with its participation reality



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