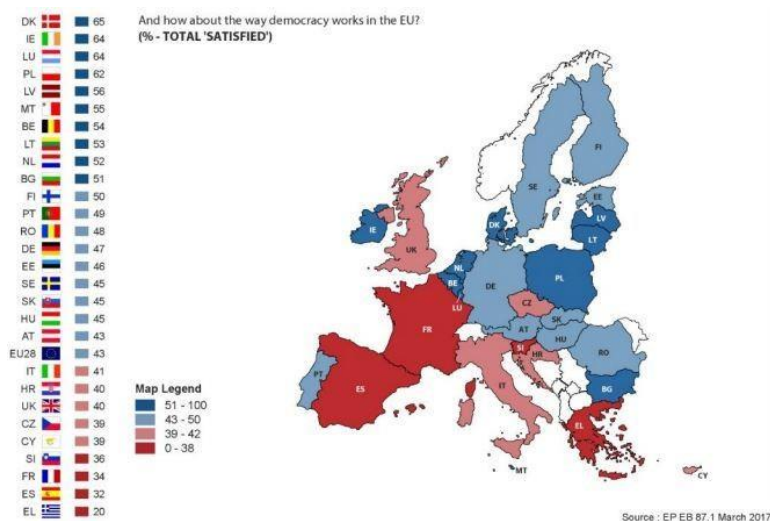


EU democracy?

Author: *Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law, HEC Paris and author of 'Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society' (Iconbooks, 2017). Young Global Leader 2015, World Economic Forum.*

There is a widespread, intensifying belief that without the greater involvement of its citizens, the European Union is condemned to fail. While this realization is far from new, recent events in Catalonia along with Brexit have lent it fresh force.



Seeing red: Many Europeans are unhappy with how democracy functions in the EU

At the same time, as our everyday realities become less and less "national" in scope and in scale, a sense of collective destiny is growing among the peoples of Europe.

Citizens no longer look exclusively to their own governments to solve emerging challenges. They expect the European Union to play an active role in anything from ensuring food safety, mitigating climate change or mediating territorial disputes. Yet the level of interdependence that exists among European countries and peoples appears in stark contrast with the current EU political system, which is based on the nation state.

Hence the question of ... **How to ensure the EU's citizens are active protagonists, not passive spectators, in the political system?**

While the EU has attempted to gather feedback with projects such as the thousands of [Citizens' Dialogues orchestrated by the EU Commission](#) across Europe this year, this doesn't go far enough.

An EU-driven, top-down debate is very distant from the demand for change that is emerging from the bottom up, and contrasts with the vivacity of many democratic innovations happening at the local level.

Here's a fresh set of ideas that may revitalize citizens' participation in Europe.

1. The EU as an electoral and participatory democracy

Since 2009, the EU - unlike most of its member states - draws its democratic legitimacy and accountability not only from electoral democracy, but also from participatory democracy. While under the former citizens take part in the political process through their elective representatives, via the European Parliament and the governments gathering in the Council, under the latter citizens participate directly via a multitude of channels of participation. These include public consultations, petitions, and the European Citizens Initiative (ECI), which unfortunately remain largely unknown, underused and perceived with great distrust by EU institutions themselves.

Indeed, given its historical *raison d'être*, the EU has generally been suspicious of any expressions of popular sovereignty. European countries originally came together to constrain national majorities from questioning EU values, previously defied by fascist and Nazi occupiers, rather than to boost the popular will. No surprise that due to its natural hostility towards citizens' input, the EU is particularly vulnerable to political actors speaking on behalf of the people.

2. Democratic conventions and mini-publics

French president Emmanuel Macron has proposed a series of "democratic conventions" to allow citizens across Europe to have a say on the EU's future. Although antithetical to the top-down approach characterising the [EU's 2017 White Paper on the Future of Europe](#), this proposal recently received the support of Jean-Claud Juncker, President of the European Commission. Yet the exact purpose, format and methodology remain largely undefined, meaning it runs the risk of raising unrealistic expectations.

Many wonder whether this form of citizen deliberation will be a one-time, constituent opportunity or rather a more permanent exercise, often referred to as ‘mini-publics’ (or citizens’ assemblies). This would entail the participation of randomly selected and demographically representative citizens from various populations tasked with advising elected decision-makers. Given [successful experiments](#) in Canada and Australia, the EU would do well to consider how to integrate mini-publics into their decision-making process. A randomly selected group of lay EU citizens could meet in parallel to the EU legislative process and inform it by formulating a set of recommendations. This would have the merit of sparking a EU-wide public debate about the policies discussed, thus underpinning the legitimacy of the EU policy process.

In parallel to this initiative, the European Commission has proposed "to empower Europeans to participate in the democratic process," by acting either as petitioners via a revamped, user-friendly European Citizens Initiative, or as electors (or candidates) via genuinely, EU –funded, transnational political parties. This so-called democracy package represents a credible, yet timid, attempt to politicize the European policy space in view of the next European Parliament elections.

3. Citizens’ petitions

The European Citizens Initiative is the only avenue for EU citizens to set the political agenda of the EU in between elections. With this instrument, citizens can petition the EU Commission with a new legislative initiative, but only after collecting one million signatures in support. Despite its democratic potential, the ECI has shown poor results: only one out of more than 60 petitions have led the European Commission to act. Now the EU Commission proposes to transform this transnational tool into a more accessible and inclusive mechanism by eventually simplifying the way in which the petitions are initiated, processed and followed up.

4. Transnational voting lists

Despite voting for their representatives at the European Parliament since 1979, EU citizens do so on different dates, according to different electoral laws, and in support of candidates selected by national – as opposed to EU – parties. Yet, under the Treaties, the members of the European Parliament should not represent "their" nationals, but the "Union’s citizens".

According to an old federalist idea, to move toward a more genuine EU election process, political parties should be entitled to present transnational lists. This would entail that political parties present one political manifesto and one list of candidates to all EU citizens across the territory of the whole Union. This would be in stark contrast with the current situation in which European Political Parties, being an artificial collection of national parties and their domestic bases, are only European in name. This idea has recently been revamped by Emmanuel Macron, endorsed by EU Commission President Juncker (against his own political party), and is publicly supported by Italy, Belgium and Spain. While historically opposed to it, the UK might actually give the idea its best hope of coming true, as it leaves 73 seats free in the European Parliament that need to be reapportioned.

By breathing new life into European electoral politics, the creation of transnational lists would eventually nudge political parties to compete for ideas, votes and seats on a pan-EU scale. This would in turn energize the generally dull European Parliament electoral race and possibly stimulate a greater turn-out. The creation of transnational lists would build upon the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, whereby EU parties select the lead candidate for the campaign, and bring it a step further in its ideal of politicising the European public space.

The ball is in the European Parliament's camp now, which – in the framework of the reapportionment of the UK seats – has proposed creating a pan-EU constituency for up to 50 MEPs. This would give each citizen a second vote in the election, additional to his or her traditional vote for candidates standing in national constituencies. Yet the uncertainties surrounding Brexit (will the UK still be part of the EU by May 2019?) have been used by the European Parliament to put off this proposal until 2024.

Failing that, political parties could still consider presenting their own candidates across several EU Member States. In the absence of a dedicated pan-European constituency and a uniform electoral procedure, parties could register their organisations and candidates in various Member States. While extremely cumbersome – as tested by previous experiences by the *Radicali* in the 1990s, and *Newropeans* in the 2000s – this will enable the emergence of transnational lists. It is only by so doing that genuinely transnational parties will be able to convey their pan-European political message and have different nationalities appear on each transnational list. As a result, a German could be elected in France, and a Polish in Hungary.

5. Random selection of representatives

An even more ambitious proposal would be to randomly select a given number of Members of the European Parliament. Like in the [old days of democracy](#), a quota of our MEPs would be selected by drawing lots so as to enhance not only the representative nature of our assembly but also its diversity. This would disrupt the party logic dominating the operation of the European Parliament and offer a unique opportunity to bring new, fresh and unconventional voices to the EU political system.

Conclusions

While none of these proposed reforms alone will be able to match the gap between our daily lives and the EU political system, they could help citizens to set Europe's agenda.

The purpose of all these initiatives would indeed be to *Europeanise* both electoral and participatory democracy in Europe.

Indeed, if the ECI reform nurtures participatory democracy by making it more citizen-friendly, the creation of transnational political lists carries the potential to transform national political elections into a pan-European electoral competition.

Stars are aligning in favour of a more bottom-up and inclusive EU: let's seize the opportunity. It's time for citizen-driven politics to shape Europe.

Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor of European Union Law, HEC Paris and author of 'Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society' (Iconbooks, 2017). Young Global Leader 2015, World Economic Forum.