



Let's build a better future together

Strengthening Participative Democracy and Civil Society when building the Post-Corona World

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Participative Democracy and the Conference on the Future of Europe

- This Conference is a proposal by the European Union to involve EU policy makers and citizens from all over Europe in shaping ideas for the future of the Union and beyond. The conference should have been already launched on Europe Day in May but because of the health crisis and, to be honest, also due to a lack of commitment by some EU member states, the new start date of the debate has not been confirmed yet.
- The conference is going to address important topics such as climate change, digitalisation, social justice, equality or Europe's role in the world, and, in principle, it is a great chance to strengthen participative democracy and to establish a third pillar of democratic legitimacy for the European Union: Citizens & civil society, the European Parliament, and the European Council.
- European participative democracy, defined as the participation of organised civil society AND individual citizens in decision-making on European level, should complement and support rather than replace representative democracy. It strengthens input legitimacy, as participative democracy is an additional channel to insert citizens' demands into decision-making and strengthens transnational opinion formation.
- By holding European decision-makers accountable and forcing them to be more responsive, participative democracy helps to make electoral alternatives more visible.
- Finally, participative democracy contributes to further developing European public spheres and it is less vulnerable than direct democracy to be manipulated by other actors.
- For the conference on the future of Europe, the European Parliament has suggested to adopt a bottom-up approach to engaging directly with citizens in a meaningful dialogue, and, furthermore, the parliamentarians would like to implement a permanent mechanism for engaging with the citizens on the future of our continent.

- The European Parliament wants the “diversity of our societies fully represented”. That means we have to take into account at least questions of geography, gender, age, socio-economic backgrounds and levels of education. We should also include different political point of views, be it pro-European integration or against.
- A better social balance of participating citizens is the key challenge. Views of citizens, who do not vote in elections and who are underrepresented in civil society, need to be heard in participative democracy and the conference, too. Here, it is also important to guarantee a multi-lingual conference set-up, where everyone can speak in one of the EU’s 24 official languages.
- A very interesting proposal is to select citizens across Europe randomly (but according to the criteria of representativeness). This might open a way for citizens, who do not think everyday about politics, to participate and bring in their opinion.
- A key target group of the proposed citizen’s agoras should be young people, and youth across Europe should have a strong say in the conference on the future of Europe.
- Since we are meeting only virtual today, and the Corona crisis has also contributed to further postponing the start of the conference on the future of Europe, we should use the momentum to think more about digital formats how to start the conference virtually. The upcoming German EU Council presidency (from July) could set a good example and find new ways how to make participative democracy online possible. We know that online debates cannot and should not replace physical meetings and discussions, but a second-best solution is better than none. And in the end, this could also lead to innovative new ideas and forms how to combine on- and offline tools for transnational discussions.
- Final remarks: Participative democracy as well as the conference on the future of Europe can only be successful if the proposals and opinions by the citizens and the civil society are taken seriously by elected decision makers. People expect feedback from decision-makers to their input. Being responsive to citizens’ input remains the most problematic part of European level participative democracy. People want to see a policy impact. Therefore, citizens need an opportunity to easily track the follow-up to their input and decision-makers must engage in debating with citizens.
- In an upcoming research paper, the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation will underline five key proposals to strengthen participative democracy on a European level:
 1. It must become more inclusive to win citizens with changing participatory demands back for European politics and improve its potential to generate input legitimacy.

2. Participative governance has to overcome its top-down approach by giving citizens an agenda setting power.
3. Reforms of participative instruments need to make political institutions more responsive to citizens' input.
4. The EU needs to become more transparent and open to citizen's input.
5. The Conference on the Future of Europe can be a good opportunity to test innovative instruments of participation of citizens on- and offline. Therefore, the conference should be used to learn how citizens and organised civil society can participate in reforming the European Union.