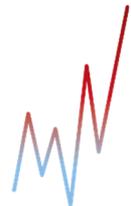




Worth high-quality EU-wide citizens' panels: The upfront case for (climate) change

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Executive summary

Citizens' panels were one of the three workstreams in the Conference on the Future of Europe via which EU citizens could share and debate their views in order to provide recommendations and advice to the Union on how to face current and expected challenges. Focusing on the panel on the environment, climate change, and health, it is possible to conclude that the citizens' recommendations are in support of the European Green Deal and its ambitious climate policy element. However, better design of the deliberative process could have led to more targeted recommendations.

Should citizens' panels be used as a legitimate tool in the future, it will be necessary to improve the process design to make better use of the unique and advanced EU-wide participatory exercise the Conference helped to popularise. Lessons learned from citizens' panels on the national and municipal level show that a more specific topic to be discussed in more sessions as well as in-depth expert presentations and overall better engagement with experts are a precondition for high-quality recommendations. Other factors that could be improved include better media coverage, provision of feedback to recommendations by involved EU institutions, some guarantees regarding the uptake of recommendations, or the organisation of panels primarily on national or regional levels.



Recommendations

- Citizens' panels are an advanced participatory exercise with the potential to increase the democratic legitimacy of climate policies. In order to tap into this potential and receive high-quality recommendations and, hence, forward looking high quality climate policies in times of climate crisis, more attention has to be paid to the quality of the design process as such.

- On the political level, it is essential that EU Member States provide support to the process. They should, for instance, collaborate with the media to bring attention to the citizens' panels and add weight to the exercise itself and its outputs and outcomes.

- Lessons can be learned from citizens' panels organised at national levels. Specifically, narrower, somewhat controversial topics could be the subject of debates that would lead to more targeted recommendations. This can also be enhanced by more in-depth conversations with experts who provide citizens with knowledge, particularly regarding context-specific issues and also with a reality-check to understand whether or not the citizens' line of thought and subsequent recommendations are relevant in the evolving EU policy-setting.

- EU Member States should bring attention to the recommendations and react adequately and in a transparent manner to those that are directed towards policy-making at the national level.

- The organising EU institutions should provide comprehensive feedback to the individual citizens' recommendations to show they have analysed citizens' work and that they take it seriously. The feedback should be put forward in written form to reach a wide array of stakeholders.

- More citizens' panels should be organised on the national or regional levels to better accommodate various contexts, overcome language barriers, and make the process more attractive to the public. EU-wide citizens' panels could then build on these national and regional citizens' panels that would enjoy the ownership of national governments and regional initiatives, and benefit from this cooperation.



Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) provided via its citizens' panels an innovative pan-European channel enabling EU citizens to contribute to the shaping of the Union's policy and boost European democracy. This is especially relevant as the EU explores its future policy direction in many areas including the climate crisis and transformation to climate neutrality. Together with the multilingual digital platform and national panels and events, the European Citizens' Panels were one of the three workstreams through which citizens could contribute to the charting of "the road to European renewal", as envisioned in March 2019 by the French President Emmanuel Macron.¹

After nearly a year of ongoing citizens' panels on the EU level, it is time to evaluate this deliberative process and identify lessons learned for the possible future repetition of such an unprecedented large-scale participatory exercise. One of the most relevant agendas that needs, in light of the latest scientific projections, fresh impetus is the EU's role in tackling the global climate crisis. This also includes adapting to climate change impacts and navigating through the turbulent geopolitical landscape of reaching climate neutrality by 2050. Overall, the EU-wide citizens' panels' recommendations are in support of the strengthening of the environmental and climate sustainability spirit of the European Green Deal. The panels are also a considerable step forward in terms of better inclusion of citizens into discussion of EU matters. However, should citizens' panels be of use to climate policymaking in the future, the design quality of this tool needs to be significantly improved.

1. Why Citizens' Panels, and Why Now

Deliberative democratic processes (e.g., citizens juries and citizens assemblies) are being run now more than ever as new democratic models are being explored to help advance the current insufficient results from global, national, and local climate policies. These tools have been put into practice as they are argued to be a method "for increasing citizen engagement, bridging the gap and building trust between the scientific, political and social consensus on climate change and increasing the democratic legitimacy of climate policies by creating more citizen-centred policymaking."² The deliberative process provides an opportunity for citizens to consider the political, social, economic, cultural, and moral ramifications of the matter being discussed. They also enable and encourage participants to listen to different points of view, seek progressive, rather than regressive consensus, and help find the middle ground on polarising political topics. The "poster child" of such a successful process was the Irish Citizens' Assembly on divisive abortion legislation which led the Irish citizens to accept the Assembly's recommendation for a historic referendum on abortion, further leading to abortion legalisation.³ Further clarification of the importance of this process was given in a TEDx talk by George Zarkadakis, a writer, engineer and dot joiner, "If we want to preserve our democratic freedoms and liberties for us and for the generations to come, we must reinvent democracy by enabling more direct citizens' participation in political decision making. Citizen assemblies are a great way to do so."⁴

¹ For European renewal. News [online]. Paris, 2019, 4th of March 2019. Available at <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal>.

² Wells, Rebecca, Candice Howarth and Lina Brand-Correa. Are citizen juries and assemblies on climate change driving democratic climate policymaking? An exploration of two case studies in the UK. *Climate Change* [online]. 2021, 16th of September 2021, 168(5). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03218-6>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zarkadakis, George. TEDx Talk - Reclaiming democracy through citizen assemblies [online]. Thessaloniki, 2019, 26. 6. 2019 [cit. 2022-04-01]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKQmKlxytkI&t=2s>.



2. In search of collective will to boost political will

Despite alarming scientific evidence and expert opinion, the climate crisis is far from being tackled. However, the negative effects of climate change must be decisively addressed should we want to maintain our European way of life. The author of the Stern Review, Nicholas Stern, comments that “while it is still technically feasible to limit warming to 1.5°C, we will not succeed without strong political will and leadership.”⁵ By understanding political will as a collective endeavour of strategic alliances, policy networks, and advocacy, citizen-centred assemblies may help shift “a static and reductionist view of institutions initiated and sustained by ‘political will’, to a more dynamic and temporal view of politics as a process of contestation to establish ‘collective will’.”⁶ The citizens’ assemblies can in this context signal to the elected representatives a preference for policy,⁷ and at the same time make participants feel engaged, become more active in the public domain as knowledge-holders and oversee the implementation of policies on the global,⁸ national or local level.

The shift to a climate-resilient and climate-neutral society requires social and cultural change at all levels of governance. In this context, climate-focused citizens’ assemblies have already been organised in Poland,⁹ France¹⁰ and Austria.¹¹ Needless to say, this form of advanced citizen engagement is still embedded in “classic” democratic models - the organisation of assemblies and the recommendations’ implementation is to a large extent under the control of an elected political representation. Nevertheless, by inviting randomly selected citizens with their personal experience to the table to discuss current reality and concrete solutions, the deliberative process aims to go beyond widely recognised democratic tools such as voting in elections, becoming elected or supporting a public cause via active engagement. As noted above, so far, these more traditional methods of (leading) change have proved to be insufficient in resolving the intensifying climate crisis even as in July 2021 Europeans considered climate change to be the most serious problem facing the world.¹²

⁵ Stern, Nicholas. We must reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero or face more floods. The Guardian [online]. London, 2018 [cit. 2022-03-16]. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/we-must-reduce-greenhouse-gas-emissions-to-net-zero-or-face-more-floods>

⁶ Hudson, David, Claire McLoughlin, Chris Roche a Heather Marquette. Inside the black box of political will: 10 years of findings from the Developmental Leadership Program [online]. Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2018 [cit. 2022-03-16]. Available at <https://res.cloudinary.com/dlprog/image/upload/inside-the-black-box-of-political-will-10-years-of-findings-from-the-developmental-leadership-program>.

⁷ Wells, Rebecca, Candice Howarth and Lina Brand-Correa. Are citizen juries and assemblies on climate change driving democratic climate policymaking? An exploration of two case studies in the UK. Climate Change [online]. 2021, 16th of September 2021, 168(5). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03218-6>.

⁸ Global Assembly [online]. 2022. Available at <https://globalassembly.org>.

⁹ Gerwin, Marcin. Designing the process of delivering recommendations by the citizens’ assembly [online]. Available at https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/delivering_recommendations_attachment_to_gdansk_case.pdf

¹⁰ Climate Assembly: “Act quickly and together.” Burgerrat [online]. 2022, 18th of February 2022. Available at <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/climate-assembly-act-quickly-and-together/>

¹¹ Climate Assembly in Austria. Burgerrat [online]. 2022, 15th of January 2022 Available at <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/climate-assembly-in-austria/>

¹² Eurobarometer Survey: Europeans consider climate change to be the most serious problem facing the world. Press Release [online]. Brussels: European Commission, 2021, 5th of July 2021. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3156.



3. European Citizens' Panels as a Key Feature of the CoFoE

Disregarding the institutional rivalry accompanying the organisation of citizens' panels within the CoFoE framework,¹³ four EU-wide ECPs were organised with 200 European citizens representing all 27 Member States in each panel. Based on information on the official CoFoE website, the citizens were chosen through random selection reflecting the EU's diversity in terms of geographic origin (nationality, urban/rural), gender, age, socioeconomic background and level of education. A third of each Panel was composed of people aged 16-25.

There were 4 thematic panels in total and the citizens met three times for a weekend (twice in person, once online). The third panel focused explicitly on climate change, environment and health but in all other panels, climate change-relevant recommendations were also proposed. Namely, Panel 1 on Stronger economy, social justice and jobs / Education, culture, youth and sport / Digital transformation proposed 6 (out of 48) specific climate-relevant recommendations; Panel 2 on European democracy / Values and rights, rule of law, security - 3 (out of 39) recommendations, and Panel 4 on EU in the World / Migration - 6 (out of 40) recommendations explicitly mentioning climate, including a stream "The EU as an International Partner" and sub-stream on International Climate Action. Most of Panel 3's 53 recommendations are linked to climate change in relation to overarching streams on Better Ways of Living, Protecting our Environment and our Health, Redirecting our Economy and Consumption, and Towards a Sustainable Society.

Interestingly, in regard to the ongoing Russian aggression, Panel 4 recommendations on self-reliance and stability include far-sighted advice relevant to climate. The EU should, for instance, reduce dependencies on oil and gas imports as this would create a win-win situation both for the autonomy of Europe as it will decrease vulnerability stemming from external dependencies, and, secondly, it will help ambitious climate and CO₂ reduction targets. If put into practice, these specific climate and energy policy suggestions could strengthen the EU foreign policy. It is important to note that one recommendation touching upon EU Treaty change asks that "all issues decided by way of unanimity are changed to be decided by way of a qualified majority", also including energy and climate issues.

4. Vagueness, (policy) inconsistencies, and lack of urgency

Focusing on Panel 3's specific climate-relevant recommendations, the citizens covered a wide array of topics including sustainable agriculture and farming, transport, education, international cooperation, financial investment, consumerism, green urban spaces, renewable energy, etc. Overall, the recommendations are in line with the European Green Deal and call for the EU to be an active player in mitigating climate change worldwide. However, the level of detail among recommendations varies with many being very vague and with no direct linkage to specific directives, EU or national policies or IPCC reports.

Acknowledging the fact that the recommendations will be fed into the Conference plenary in order to become "proposals", many recommendations, already at this stage, cannot - due to their vagueness - be considered a constructive

¹³ Lehne, Stefan. The Conference on the Future of Europe—an Experiment in Citizens' Participation [online]. Carnegie Europe, 2021, 13th of May 2021. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84511>. Alemanno, Alberto, Nicolaidis Kalypso a Niccolò Milanese. The Conference on the Future of Europe: An Open Letter. VerfBlog [online]. Carnegie Europe, 2021, 1st of February 2020. Available at <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-an-open-letter/>. DOI: 10.17176/20200201-225821-0.



contribution to climate policy. In fact, their lack of focus only indicates a direction of possible EU policy-evolution. To the contrary, some recommendations are somewhat specific but impracticable, proposing, for instance, that coal plants install “CO₂ filters” and that “the EU provides financial aid to member states that do not have financial resources to implement CO₂ filters”. This does not reflect the reality on the ground that mechanisms such as carbon capture and storage (“CO₂ filters”) are extremely costly to implement and that the EU is already providing resources via various funds and programmes to help the decrease of greenhouse gas emissions via energy efficiency measures. Another recommendation under the heading “renewable energy now” seems unintelligible stating that “We (the citizens) recommend that although it is a cost-intensive process to generate green hydrogen, as 75% energy should be produced in order to get 25% hydrogen, there are multiple positive sides to this type of energy.” The overall lack of a sense of urgency to tackle climate change and develop carbon-free sources of energy was manifested e.g. by a recommendation asking – only – for the consideration of the entire ecological and social impacts of the energy production process for current and future generations.

5. What went wrong and can be improved

Due to the limited length of this paper, it is not possible to comment on individual stages of the citizens’ assembly process design in detail. However, several key elements were identified that could improve the overall process in the future as the quality of the process design is related to the quality of the outcome. These elements focus on several areas: choice of discussed topics and length of process, role of experts, media attention and uptake of recommendations.

5.1. Choice of discussed topics and length of process

Firstly, within each panel, the participating citizens were to discuss a large array of topics and identify narrower thematic areas from which they would further develop recommendations. As the focus of the panels was broad, so were the recommendations. This is related to the fact that a lot of time was dedicated to the identification of sub-topics of interest. Had the debated questions been narrower and more straightforward from the beginning and at the same time reflected citizens’ preferences, the potential to achieve constructive recommendations would have been bigger.

As in the Irish case, the narrow and controversial framing question brought attention to the matter and allowed the debate to be highly specific while at the same time providing space for various perspectives on the matter. In the case of the CoFoE, one panel could be, for instance, on ways to increase the energy production from renewable sources, the role of nuclear energy or how to decrease methane emissions.

The citizens should also have more time to discuss the (specific) matter. Meeting over only three weekends while at the same time being asked to identify “concrete” topics from among a myriad does not provide space for an efficient discussion on substantial and often technical matters.

5.2. Role of experts

Secondly, based on the quality of the discussions and final recommendations, the citizens did not have sufficient knowledge about the topics discussed in terms of physical realities or policymaking on the EU level. Acknowledgement of this should be instrumental in discussing the role of experts and facilitators who were to provide the latest knowledge to the citizens and so support them in delivering recommendations of a certain depth.



As only four climate experts shared their knowledge with the citizens in Panel 3 and yet climate change is a cross-cutting issue, it is highly probable that the information shared with the citizens could not have been exhaustive. If the topic discussed was clearly presented, relevant stakeholders could be invited to present their views so as not to provide citizens with one-sided information. The lack of awareness about the EU policies already produced on climate-relevant matters also shows that the citizens were not provided with background information that would tell them about the current state of affairs.¹⁴ What's more, the lack of information about the method by which the experts were selected creates space for confusion in regard to narratives and contextualising of the climate-relevant facts provided.

As many of the topics were relatively technical, it is also essential for the citizens to have the possibility to ask questions to experts. This would contribute to the quality of the recommendations and the overall outcome of the process and prevent the citizens feeling that their recommendations might not be relevant.¹⁵ In the design process of citizens' assemblies in Polish cities, for instance, "coffee with experts" take place for the citizens to have access to experts during the process and to (re)assure themselves that their recommendations are valid.

5.3. Media attention, feedback and uptake of recommendations

Another element that could be improved is the media coverage of the citizen assemblies. Hampering the CoFoE's importance as such, the lack of media attention to the process is paradoxical as the aim of the process was to bring the CoFoE closer to the citizens and vice-versa. In fact, the CoFoE was supposed to be citizen-led, however, this proved difficult as the process was not advertised enough to the public via mainstream media. Lastly, not knowing exactly how the recommendations would be worked on also created confusion among many, including experts and government officials who claimed that citizens' expectations needed to be managed when it comes to subsequent work with the recommendations and the overall outcome. Other recommendations on how to improve the process include the creation of open channels for citizens' communication and further learning, and the panels receiving written feedback on each of the recommendations.¹⁶

6. The Genie of the European Citizens' Assembly has been released

The design process of the CoFoE could learn from on-going events on the national level. For instance, it has already been proposed that in order to provide credibility and trust in the process, while at the same time not replicating opinion polls but actually delivering well-informed context-specific recommendations, there should be 27 national assemblies organised according to basic demographic criteria. These national assemblies would then exchange information between themselves, enabling energy and climate-related recommendations to act as bridge-building narratives among the EU Member States. The aim of such a design is to "respect national

¹⁴ Kalypso, Nicolaidis a Kateřina Zichová. Reportáž: Lidé řešili ve Varšavě budoucnost EU, na neočkované čekalo zklamání. Euractiv.cz [online]. Prague: Carnegie Europe, 2022, 14th of January 2022. Available at <https://euractiv.cz/section/budoucnost-eu/news/reportaz-lide-resili-ve-varsave-budoucnost-eu-na-neockovane-cekalo-zklamani/>.

¹⁵ Conference on the Future of Europe Observatory. Conference Conversations 9 - Knocking on Brussels Doors. 2022. Available at <https://conference-observatory.eu/news/conference-conversations-9-knocking-on-brussels-doors-ideas-information-insights-from-the-european-citizens-panels>.

¹⁶ Conference on the Future of Europe at mid-term: still significant risks of back-firing. Citizens take over Europe [online]. 2021, 17th of December 2021. Available at <https://citizenstakeover.eu/blog/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-at-mid-term-still-significant-risks-of-back-firing/>.



perspectives, to bring the democratic process closer to home while at the same time enabling a dialogue across the whole European Union”.¹⁷ Such a process may overcome given “language barriers and highly diverse cultural background of European citizens,”¹⁸ be more attractive to the media and may also be more resistant to wider geopolitical turbulence as national governments would feel ownership over the process and results. The closer collaboration and engagement of stakeholders are of key importance as there is no successful climate action without cooperation.

The implementation of a unique EU-wide citizens’ panels exercise is a leap forward for European democracy and the inclusion of citizens into a pan-European project. Once the inclusion of citizens has happened on such a large scale, “the genie cannot be put back into the bottle.”¹⁹ What, however, can be done is to assure that the process design quality is high enough and transparent enough to translate citizens’ informed voices into well-thought-out applicable climate-tackling innovative recommendations and more importantly, concrete steps leading to a much-needed change of the status quo.

¹⁷ European citizens’ assembly. Citizens’ Assemblies: Democracy that works [online]. Sopot, 2018. Available at <https://citizensassemblies.org/european/>.

¹⁸ Lehne, Stefan. The Conference on the Future of Europe—an Experiment in Citizens’ Participation [online]. Carnegie Europe, 2021, 13th of May 2021. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/84511>.

¹⁹ Conference on the Future of Europe Observatory. Conference Conversations 9 - Knocking on Brussels Doors. 2022. Available at <https://conference-observatory.eu/news/conference-conversations-9-knocking-on-brussels-doors-ideas-information-insights-from-the-european-citizens-panels>.



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