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Six Ideas for Rejuvenating European Democracy

Stephen Boucher, Israel Butler, Maarten de Groot, Elisa Lironi, Sophia Russack, Corina Stratulat, Richard Youngs, and Anthony Zacharzewski

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About the Authors

Coordinated by:
Richard Youngs is a senior fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at Carnegie Europe.

With contributions from:
Stephen Boucher is the founder of Dreamocracy.

Israel Butler is head of advocacy at the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties).

Maarten de Groot is project manager of the Future of Democracy Program at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Elisa Lironi is senior manager for European democracy at the European Citizen Action Service.

Sophia Russack is a researcher in the Institutions Unit at the Center for European Policy Studies.

Corina Stratulat is a senior policy analyst and head of the European Politics and Institutions Program at the European Policy Center.

Anthony Zacharzewski is president of the Democratic Society.

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Introduction

In recent years some European states have suffered dramatic regression, while others have experienced more subtle forms of democratic erosion. Several EU governments have constricted civic liberties. There has been lively debate about how much European citizens are losing faith in core democratic values. In general, the demand for democratic participation is outstripping its supply at both the national and EU levels.[1]

In response to this challenge, new European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has called for a "new push for European democracy." She has suggested organizing a Conference on the Future of Europe in which European citizens will "play a leading and active part." She has promised to formulate a new European Democracy Action Plan focused in particular on the digital sphere.[2] The new commission's promise opens new opportunities for democratic innovation and experimentation. European leaders frequently commit to defending and deepening democracy, but they rarely follow through amid more urgent crises. EU and national authorities seem to recognize the importance of this endeavor, yet improving democracy often appears to be a more abstract and lower-priority goal than fixing the euro, agreeing on migrant quotas, or negotiating the budget.

One of the worst things the EU's new leaders could do would be to launch grandiloquent initiatives that fail to deliver meaningful and tangible change. Raising citizens' expectations only to dash them would leave trust and faith in democratic norms even lower than before. It is questionable whether a high-level conference on the future of Europe is really the most effective way to redress Europe's democratic malaise. Debates about the future of Europe and the "push for European democracy" could become too entangled with each other. The two issues are related to each other but not the same thing. A drawn out conversation about the wholesale reinvention of the EU could simply delay and divert attention from the need for concrete, targeted democratic reform.

It is important for the EU institutions and member state governments to get reform right at this decisive juncture. A European democratic reform agenda must be broad and multifaceted, with reforms not just at the EU level but at the national and subnational levels too. EU bureaucrats and member state government officials must pursue these various levels and types of democratic innovation simultaneously and work in tandem with each other.

There are at least six constructive, practical ways that European leaders can begin bolstering European democracy. These ideas aim to help EU institutions connect downward and use reforms to facilitate parallel national and subnational democratic improvements. Rather than replaying the most exhaustively covered subjects of debate—such as punitive rule of law measures against Hungary and Poland, the diverse roots of populism, or the regulation of tech companies—this paper explores less-covered but eminently feasible areas of potential progress. Democratic reform does not start from a blank canvas. Many options have been on the agenda for several years, showing that there is some positive momentum the EU can harness.

The paper's six ideas are:

- Craft a compelling democratic narrative against the rise in illiberal values.

- Establish a more democratic way to elect European leaders.

- Foster a more transnational form of European party politics.

- Improve direct citizen consultations and democratic participation.

- Embrace a more positive approach to digital democracy that not only manages the risks of new technologies but also harnesses their potential.

- Strengthen public participation through a revamped European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).

There will be no silver bullet to rescue or transform European democracy. Rather than attempt to address every dimension of democracy across Europe, it makes sense to select a number of concrete policy ideas that could help improve European democracy in specific ways. None of these measures would be a wholesale lifesaver for democracy, but together this modest, incremental progress would begin to make an appreciable difference to the quality of the democratic process across Europe.

Framing a Better Prodemocracy Narrative

The EU has gradually enacted laws and policies to pressure recalcitrant governments to reverse reforms that threaten democratic principles. Many debates and policy deliberations have focused on such measures—including the European Commission's infringement proceedings against Poland and Hungary and the possible suspension of these states' voting rights (the so-called Article 7 measures). While such top-down measures are welcome and necessary, it will prove difficult to

preserve the laws, policies, and institutions that put these principles into practice unless they enjoy broad public support. And the increasing popularity of some governments with authoritarian agendas suggests that such public support requires nurturing and cannot be taken for granted. The forces that menace European democracy have been framing their agenda more effectively than those concerned with safeguarding democratic values. The EU must go back to the basics and develop an effective narrative based on grassroots support for democratic innovation, not just institutional change.[3]

Authoritarian narratives are often essentially fear-based. Politicians with authoritarian agendas are provoking public ambivalence over fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democratic pluralism. Voters who support authoritarian political movements tend to do so because they hold authoritarian political attitudes. By creating the perception that national security, economic stability, and cultural traditions are under threat, such politicians can trigger some individuals to endorse authoritarian political attitudes.[4]

To create a contrast with such authoritarian narratives, progressive narratives should appeal to values like tolerance and pluralism. These kinds of messages create support for causes such as democracy, civil liberties, equality, and environmental protection. But as these narratives of liberalism have lost traction to populist authoritarian narratives across the EU, prodemocracy civic and political actors are struggling to construct and disseminate effective messages that foster support for progressive principles. Such narrative framing is a core foundation of what the EU's prodemocracy strategy should look like.

In recent years, the dominant communication style of European civil society organizations that promote democratic and liberal causes has exhibited three weaknesses. First, civil society actors tend to use facts alone to support their messages. Yet relevant research shows that using facts in isolation, without relating them to underlying values, is not typically persuasive.[5]

Second, civil society often reinforces the negative framing devices used by authoritarians. Civic actors tend to use the very frames and narratives authoritarians employ as part of their efforts to contradict them. For example, when authoritarians claim that a refugee crisis is happening, the typical response of civil society tends to revolve around proving that there is no such refugee crisis, a tactic that unwittingly reinforces the negative frame of a crisis. This is why techniques like "myth-busting" are not only ineffective but often counterproductive for creating support for progressive values.[6]

Third, civil society organizations tend to use clunky terminology that the public cannot easily grasp. Reformers need to be able to break down complicated concepts into simpler framing devices and metaphors that the public can intuitively understand.[7] For example, instead of using insider terms

like "closing civic space," they could build a narrative that human rights defenders protect the public from abuses of power in the same way that nurses or firefighters defend against illness and accidents.

Crucially, the challenge of communicating clearly to build support for democracy needs to inform how the EU funds civil society. The European Commission should use the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program to fund activities that build up the capacities of civil society organizations to engage in values-based framing. In the past, the commission has largely treated such organizations as subcontractors who carry out tasks like research, awareness raising, and training on EU law. The new fund gives the commission new powers to build the capacities of civil society organizations to engage in campaigning and communications work to promote democracy, fundamental rights, and the rule of law. New approaches that should be considered include providing training to communications staff at civil society organizations, supporting communities of practitioners, and funding the production of guides and tool kits as well as the establishment of a communications agency to provide ongoing assistance to civic actors. In addition to helping such organizations create compelling narratives, EU funding should also equip civil society to use effective communications strategies, tools, and channels to deploy their messages.

To increase its impact, the European Commission could collaborate in these ways with other governmental and nongovernmental donors, such as the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants, private donors, and international organizations that already run capacity-building programs for civil society organizations.[8] The commission could also ask the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights to dedicate some resources to supporting these projects.

Prodemocracy narratives will need to be tailored to different national contexts, and the general EU narrative also needs reframing. Many politicians' depictions of European integration have become too apologetic: even when they defend the EU, these leaders often seem to be giving justification to the views of authoritarian populists. Much of this discourse is based on fear that either Europe will become more centralized or the divisions and nationalism of the past could return. In other cases, policymakers tend to focus on practical achievements, when it has been shown for years that such accomplishments do not garner enough legitimacy to shore up support for integration.

Taking a page from Aristotle, the EU needs a positive narrative with more pathos and emotion. Such messaging could be combined seamlessly with an improved prodemocracy narrative through the concept of collective intelligence. This narrative could present the EU as a project that helps Europeans tackle shared challenges and drive the policy agenda in innovative new ways. A stronger sense of democracy frees up societies' collective intelligence to confront the big challenges facing Europe; this endeavor is not a formalistic, institutional agenda separate from these substantive challenges.

Selecting EU Leaders More Democratically

Beyond the potential appeal of a compelling overarching narrative, the EU urgently needs a more democratic process for choosing its leaders, as shown by the controversy surrounding the selection of the incoming European Commission president. This must be a core part of a new European prodemocracy agenda.

Excited by the high voter turnout, many observers were quite optimistic in the immediate aftermath of the May 2019 European Parliament elections. This time around, nearly 51 percent of voters cast a ballot, compared to 43 percent in 2014, marking the first increase in turnout since the first direct elections in 1979 and the highest mark in the past twenty years.[9] In addition, the political debates during the campaign were more dynamic, and there was a general feeling that pro-European forces had broadly won the elections.

However, the mood turned sour because of how the EU's new leadership was chosen—a process that reawakened widespread criticisms of the union's democratic shortcomings. After all, von der Leyen neither was one of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (that is, one of the preselected candidates for commission president) nor did she even run in the elections. Instead she was nominated for the post by the European Council and eventually approved by the European Parliament by only a paper-thin margin. Many members of the new European Parliament felt that the European Council had ridden roughshod over the lead candidate procedure that was originally introduced to provide greater democratic accountability.

Granted, the European Parliament did not help its own cause. One reason the European Council did not select one of the lead candidates was that there was no clear majority in the European Parliament in support of any of the declared *Spitzenkandidaten*. The center-right European People's Party narrowly obtained the most votes, but the other parties did not agree to back its lead candidate and the party's leader, Manfred Weber. The major political groups in the European Parliament were simply unwilling to rally behind one common candidate. Given the circumstances, the European Council chose someone else who better reflected the political equilibrium among the various governments of the EU member states; governments insisted that the process was democratic to the extent that they have democratic legitimacy.

The EU must learn from and rectify these unfortunate missteps.[10] The European Council and the European Parliament—which share a mandate to find the European Commission president—should formulate suitable, legally binding ground rules. Otherwise, the same turf wars that plagued the 2019 selection process will resurface. While the next round of European Parliament elections in 2024 may seem a long way off, it is necessary to start working on this issue now to harness the

momentum that the recent elections generated. And even von der Leyen herself has acknowledged the need for reform. What the EU needs is a revised *Spitzenkandidaten 2.0* appointment procedure.

It is the European Parliament that determines how any revamped *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure should work. European political groups should continue to identify and profile their leaders so that EU citizens can recognize them. If any one party manages to cobble together a robust parliamentary majority behind their candidate, then the European Council would nominate that person. If no candidate secures a majority, the European Council should have the prerogative to put forward their own candidate, whether or not that person was included in the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. The clear lesson of 2019 is that this process would need to be explained clearly to everyone involved *before* the election rather than mid-deadlock.

Implementing this two-step procedure would mean revisiting the election and postelection timetable. This would give a commission president–designate hailing from outside the *Spitzenkandidaten* pool enough time to prepare for the postnomination hearing and confirmation before the European Parliament. To make the timing work, after the election is held in May, the European Parliament could spend June identifying a majority. The European Council could put forward a candidate in early July, giving that individual until early September to prepare for the hearing. The subsequent hearings for the commissioners-designate could be slated for later in September. It would be helpful to have the nominee appear in national debates too. With this timetable, the inauguration of the new commission could still be held in November. A key lesson from 2014 was that if the hearings of all commissioners-designate take only a week, there is little room for democratic accountability.

Firmer rules would make the process more democratic and less vulnerable to turf battles and backroom deals. An agreement along these lines would guarantee both institutions a fair share in the decisionmaking process and waste less energy on institutional posturing. Such institutional fights damage the selection process by distracting relevant actors from what is actually at stake: identifying the most suitable candidate.

A full-fledged *Spitzenkandidaten* system whereby the European Parliament gets to choose the commission president even when it cannot muster a firm majority for any single candidate is unlikely to be feasible. What is needed is a system that reflects the wills of citizens and of governments, as the EU is a union of citizens *and* states. The process does not need to be reinvented from scratch, but it does need to be more predictable and transparent. The EU will never cut out backroom arrangements altogether, but they should be far less dominant and opaque than they were in the sorry spectacle that followed the 2019 elections.

Making EU Politics More Transnational

This revised lead candidate process should go hand in hand with the introduction of a transnational list of candidates for the European Parliament. Such a list would consist of at-large candidates elected to represent the whole EU rather than a single country or constituency within the union's borders. This arrangement would facilitate voting for candidates across member states and give citizens two votes: one for their national constituency, the other for the EU writ large.

Many observers are discussing the introduction of such a list; French President Emmanuel Macron and other central political figures such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Ursula von der Leyen support the idea. That said, the introduction of such a list might not be quite the game changer that Macron argues it would be, though the list would be a natural counterpart to the revised *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure. The new procedure would have more legitimacy if all EU citizens could vote for all of the running candidates on that list, not only those of the same nationality. Of course, it would take time and several elections to fully familiarize voters with the idea of voting across national boundaries.

The institutional design of such a list still needs to be debated and defined. After the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, there will be twenty-seven vacant seats, which would be a good starting point for electing some representatives from a transnational list.[11] The list would focus debates on EU policies and tighten democratic accountability. National political parties would need to accept that some transnational elements are needed to fulfill their own declared aims to further democratize the union.

The introduction of a transnational list will not be enough on its own. For such a list to provide an effective link between citizens and EU institutions, the EU must be more proactive about supporting the emergence of transnational party politics. While the EU has introduced Europarties and political groups into the European Parliament to facilitate coordination with national political parties, these do not constitute genuinely transnational political parties. The role of Europarties in the run-up to the European Parliament elections is very limited. Despite the introduction of Europarty manifestos, national political parties continue to be the dominant forces in European elections: they compete for votes at the national or subnational level on the basis of their own candidates, party identities, and political programs.

The disconnect stems at least in part from the fact that the entities that citizens vote for—national political parties—are not the same entities that hold members of the European Parliament accountable for their voting behavior—the parliament's political groups. This problematic mismatch significantly limits the ability of political parties to mediate between citizens and EU decisionmakers. At a time of rising citizen concerns over European affairs, as exemplified by the increase in turnout

during the 2019 European Parliament elections, it is more important than ever that European politicians think and act transnationally.

During the latest round of European elections, there were two pan-European movements that showed in practice what transnational party politics can look like: DiEM25/European Spring and Volt. While they performed better than any other transnational party had performed in the past, their results nonetheless show how much the current system is biased in favor of national political parties. Volt managed to get one candidate elected in Germany, while DiEM25/European Spring did not win a single seat (falling narrowly short of securing a seat in Greece).

To give new, truly transnational parties like DiEM25/European Spring and Volt a fair chance of competing and to create incentives for established political parties to think and act transnationally, the rules for Europarties should be changed to make funding opportunities available for political parties that run for European Parliament elections on a transnational platform. Furthermore, electoral processes should be unified for European Parliament elections, ensuring that the candidates competing for seats participate under the same basic rules. In 2018, the council agreed on very minor changes to this effect, but this remains a contentious issue where meaningful reform is outstanding.[12] Lastly, European broadcasting agencies should invite these truly transnational parties to the transnational election debates they organize.

These kinds of changes are more feasible now than they were in the past to the extent that the 2019 elections saw a more Europeanized political debate across the EU. Voters are realizing that their own interests and choices depend on political developments in other member states. Yet political parties remain steadfastly national; they need much more help to run on genuinely transnational political platforms and serve as the transmission belts between Brussels and European citizens that are sorely needed.

Improving Consultations With European Citizens

As for other efforts to bridge the gap between EU citizens and policymakers, the new citizen-centered conference on Europe's future that von der Leyen has proposed is an idea that resonates closely with the so-called European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs) that took place in 2018 and 2019. The ECCs were inspired by Macron who, in the autumn of 2017, raised the idea of holding events across Europe to give people a voice in European affairs.[13] The ECCs contained two tracks. The European Commission designed an online survey posing questions framed by a panel of citizens, and member states were tasked with delivering the survey and tabulating the results.

The ECCs were supposed to bring citizens into the decisionmaking process and inform the European Council's discussions about the future of the EU at the Sibiu Summit in May 2019.[14] In practice, EU leaders failed to take on board the results of the ECCs. So far, the ECC process has had no tangible impact, leaving the impression that the initiative has been forgotten already.[15] To avoid letting the ECC initiative get shelved along with all the other democratic and open government initiatives that have failed to make much of a difference in recent years, national and European leaders must find a way of incorporating their results within von der Leyen's proposed conference.

The ECCs provided a wealth of useful information on European citizens' priorities, proposals, and demands. The reports from the ECCs reveal that European citizens are concerned about climate change, migration, and the lack of unity in the EU.[16] They also care about European values, the rule of law, and more solidarity and cooperation among member states. These headline findings may be unsurprising, but they provide useful context for the EU's existing policy agenda. Politicians should feel encouraged to acknowledge the results of the consultations as a way to draw people's attention to the overlap between popular and elite policy preoccupations and to derive legitimacy for their work in Brussels.

The 2018–2019 ECC discussions offered valuable insights on other policy and procedural issues too. They showed, for example, that citizens saw the migration issue as a test case for EU solidarity and did not debate the question only in terms of strict quotas. Furthermore, a remarkably consistent finding of the national ECC reports was that citizens want more information on the EU and a greater voice in its functioning by means of more systematic engagement. Demands for more consultations were mentioned explicitly in half of the national reports, and in some member states— including Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Slovenia—citizens unambiguously called for the ECCs to become a permanent EU mechanism.

European leaders must respond to these kinds of demands. To the extent that citizens went into these consultations expecting their contributions to be taken up by leaders, only to then learn that their ideas were being roundly ignored, their long-standing perceptions of politicians as unresponsive and unrepresentative and of the EU as distant and evolving beyond their control are likely to be reinforced. Such perceptions could also diminish public support for European integration. To answer people's demands, future rounds of ECCs should be held, but for these gatherings to gain legitimacy, governments and the European Commission must correct the weaknesses that emerged during the first round. A prodemocracy EU agenda needs to incorporate the insights from the ECCs and launch a new, better-organized round of such consultations. The initiatives of von der Leyen and her new leadership team need to build on what has already occurred and lend some continuity to efforts to get European citizens more involved.

Notably, the ECCs conducted so far have not followed any agreed-upon model; in exchange for their agreement to participate, member states were given free rein to implement the consultations in whichever way best suited their aims, resources, and national practices. So the ECCs effectively were implemented through separate national campaigns,[17] each with their own branding, format, and timeframe. With so much national variation, the initiative failed to form an identity and no clear criteria were formulated to judge its success. Future ECC rounds should put more stress on standardization, with the goal of making the process more unified and coherent, so citizens feel that they are engaged in a single Europe-wide discussion. EU leaders must define the ECCs' objectives more precisely. They did not identify a clear goal for this inaugural round. Some organizers interpreted the ECCs as awareness-raising tools, while others saw them as input for decisionmaking. With no consensus on this point, there was no basis for effective evaluation. This was the fundamental weakness of the 2018 ECCs experiment. Any future iteration of the consultations should therefore define the scope and purpose of the exercise in advance.

While both participation and awareness-raising are needed, these two goals must not be conflated with each other. Improving participation must be recognized as the more challenging priority. The ECCs did not properly distinguish between these two objectives, so their ability to deliver meaningful results was undermined. If the aim is to foster popular participation in EU decisions, some fundamental changes to existing processes will be required. EU bodies, member states, and civil society organizations should all support the ECCs and look for ways to improve their format and impact. An interinstitutional agreement prompted by von der Leyen could formalize such coordinated action, a process that should be kick-started promptly, before the 2018 ECCs are completely discredited and forgotten. The priorities and proposals determined by the ECCs should be linked to ongoing policy processes, like von der Leyen's promise to reform the asylum system and put forward a European Green Deal.[18]

Strengthening Digital Democracy

Apart from personnel and procedural changes, safeguarding Europe-wide democracy also requires harnessing the potential of digital tools while mitigating their possible risks. In the past two years, the EU and member states have begun to react to the dangers that digital technology poses to healthy democratic discourse. So far, they have done so mainly through regulation. The EU has made some of its biggest headlines worldwide with its increasingly tough approach to tech regulation, as seen in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) online privacy bill it passed, the fines it levied on Google for breaching EU antitrust rules, and the questions it posed to Facebook Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg in the European Parliament. In the lead-up to the May

2019 European Parliament elections, the EU focused on getting companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter to implement commitments made under a code of practice on disinformation.[19]

This focus on constraining the disruptive side of digital technology is needed and overdue. But it is one-sided. The EU also needs to do a lot more to harness the positive power of digital innovations to improve democratic accountability. Innovations like e-petitions and e-initiatives have had a significant impact in several member states in recent years—including Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Slovenia. In many cities, online platforms have given citizens a say in how municipal funds are spent through participatory budgeting; Paris is an especially good example of this. And some governments including those of Estonia and Iceland have crowd-sourced policy ideas from citizens through digital platforms.

The development of e-democracy tools at the EU level has been more modest and leaves considerable room for improvement. Existing EU-level e-participation measures exhibit notable weaknesses and limit the extent to which citizens can influence policymaking. For instance, the scope for e-petitions to the European Parliament is limited to only those on existing legislation. EU online public consultations are limited to specific issues chosen by the European Commission, and they are designed to receive feedback on policy issues mainly from stakeholders and experts. The European Commission has co-funded some e-participation projects, and some directorates have worked on their own platforms. Yet such initiatives are few and far between, and they have not been mobilized together in a coherent e-democracy strategy. Essentially, the current EU participatory tool box does not include formal channels for citizens to take part in online decisionmaking processes on a systematic basis or to co-create policies with their representatives.

To rectify these shortcomings, the EU should formulate a coherent, comprehensive e-participation strategy by including online crowdsourcing methods in its decisionmaking. The European Commission and the European Parliament could explore how to incorporate such methods on a more systematic basis, inspired by some of the successful national initiatives of recent years. The European Commission should test out ways to crowdsource legislation by gathering ideas from citizens, especially prior to EU public consultations, and formulating policies with citizens at different stages of the policymaking process. Unlike public consultations, which mainly attract technical experts and organized stakeholders, crowdsourcing is designed to tap into citizens' collective intelligence, and the resulting insights can help align government resources with grassroots priorities.

The European Parliament could also strengthen its representative character by harnessing this kind of technological potential. There are several ways in which members of the European Parliament could use digital platforms to facilitate and allow citizen participation in EU policymaking. They could open up their own initiative report processes more often to collect crowdsourced ideas from

their constituents. They can support citizen participation in online EU public consultations by explaining technical issues to them. And members of the European Parliament can contribute to EU public hearings by fostering interactions with citizens online.

So far, the crucial online component of the EU's prodemocracy agenda is still underdeveloped. Although von der Leyen has promised "a Europe fit for the digital age," her political guidelines do not mention digital democracy or e-participation.[20] The EU needs to foster far more experimentation with e-participation. The positive potential of digital technology can only be fully realized if the EU invests effort and resources in solving the weaknesses of existing participatory tools and in encouraging more e-participation mechanisms. The union will need to be less inhibited in trying out new tech solutions for getting citizens more involved in day-to-day governance decisions.

E-participation tools can be a form of engagement suitable for citizens who are jaded with traditional politics and help promote more grassroots support for EU policy. While national experiences can inspire the EU, these e-participation experiments cannot be simply transposed to the EU but must be adapted to its particular form of governance. Such innovations can help nurture participation and active citizenship, engage young people in policymaking, generate novel policy ideas, and strengthen political trust and legitimacy.

Revitalizing the European Citizens' Initiative

One final way the EU can work more democratically is to improve the workings of a relatively new participatory mechanism. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is the world's first-ever instrument for transnational, participatory, and digitally facilitated democracy. If an ECI proposal attracts at least 1 million signatures from EU citizens, the European Commission has to decide whether to enact legislation to address the issue. ECIs have been criticized for not being cost-effective for citizens, as they require a huge amount of time, effort, and resources from those who develop such proposals, often without much actual impact.[21] The potential of ECIs has not been fully exploited, and so far they have made negligible contributions to European democracy.

The EU has recently reformed the ECI, but the changes introduced will not fundamentally redress the mechanism's shortcomings unless other adjustments are made. The most crucial reform needed to make ECIs work better is to get the European Parliament and its national counterparts more involved. Stronger parliamentary involvement and follow-up would enhance the political impact of ECIs by helping to close the disconnect between participatory and representative democracy in the EU.

When ECIs were introduced, they were designed to be an agenda-setting instrument exclusively targeted at the gatekeeper of EU policymaking: the European Commission. ECIs are meant to afford citizens the same right enjoyed by the European Parliament and the European Council to invite the European Commission to propose legislation. Around the time the ECI regulation came into effect in April 2012, two similar agenda-setting instruments were introduced in two EU countries— including in the cases the examples of Finland and Latvia mentioned above. Despite similar designs, such as the ability to collect signatures online, there is an important difference between the ECI and these national agenda-setting instruments, a difference that goes a long way toward explaining the greater success the national instruments have enjoyed.

While ECIs target the European Commission, the Finnish and Latvian citizens' initiatives target their respective national parliaments. These national parliamentarians have a lot of freedom in deciding *if* and *how* they decide to follow up on a particular successful proposal. By following the debates on successful initiatives, Finnish and Latvian citizens have the chance to observe the decisionmaking process from start to end, find out which members of parliament agree with their own views, and discover which members of parliament do not. Additionally, citizens can use this information while deciding how they will vote in the next parliamentary election. None of this happens with ECIs because the European Commission takes control of the process. The problem with making the commission the sole addressee of successful ECIs is that it meets behind closed doors, so citizens have no idea how it makes decisions on ECIs. And because it is not directly elected, the commission has few incentives to respond positively to such proposals.

In the absence of treaty reforms, the European Commission will continue to make the ultimate decision on whether or not to enact legislation in response to successful ECIs. However, this handicap could be partially offset if both the European Parliament and national parliaments were more strongly involved in the follow-up on successful ECIs, pressing and guiding the commission on its decisions and actions. Until now, the European Parliament's role has been limited to organizing public hearings on successful ECIs. By means of a change in its rules of procedure, the parliament has recently committed to debating future successful ECIs in plenary sessions as well.[22] To give more meaning to this development, it is important for the European Parliament to go a further step and commit to concluding each debate with a vote—even if such votes were not legally binding, this procedure would put pressure on the European Commission to respond in a concrete manner. Only then can citizens and ECI organizers feel reassured that their elected representatives take citizens' initiatives seriously.

In addition to upgrading the role of the European Parliament, national parliaments also merit more meaningful influence over ECIs. Even though national parliaments are not co-legislators at the EU level, the national governments that they are meant to control have significant power through the European Council. Stronger involvement by national parliaments would incentivize the council to

pay closer attention to successful ECIs because legislatures are likely to press executives to ensure that the ECIs receive the follow-up they deserve. While, legally speaking, ECIs concern EU-level decisionmaking only, many areas of EU politics require EU- and national-level decisionmaking to work in tandem to the extent that policy competences are split between them.

National parliaments should be invited to the European Parliament's public hearings on successful ECIs, and they should hold their own corresponding parliamentary debates and votes, stating what they expect from the European Commission and the executive branches of their own national governments in terms of suitable follow-up. Involving national parliaments in this way would facilitate better linkages between EU policy evolution and national politics as well. Connecting ECIs to both the European Parliament and national parliaments could help ensure that citizens know about these initiatives and recognize their democratic and political relevance.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it would be best for the EU institutions and national governments to work upward and outward from prosaic but tangible political changes that give citizens a real sense that they are participating in, engaging in, and influencing decisionmaking in Brussels. There is no one big, eye-catching change that will suffice as a push to save European democracy, much less to defeat nativist populism or restore supposedly European values. The EU should avoid defining the democracy agenda in these questionable, unrealistic terms. Even in the best of cases, it will be a long and iterative process, mostly undramatic, prone to cyclical regression, and requiring quiet perseverance.

The EU can help draw together the diverse range of democratic initiatives under way at different levels. Democratic innovation is at a tipping point of experimentation and growth akin to the early days after the internet went mainstream. There is demand for public participation. Citizen assemblies on climate change, for instance, have mushroomed across Europe. New forms of participation are becoming commonplace with respect to local and national governments. It is now difficult to imagine a significant policymaking process that would not include citizen participation of some sort. Turn back the clock twenty years, and it would be difficult to find one that did.

At this exciting but dangerous moment, democratic innovation could become mainstream. Cities, regions, and countries are experimenting with participation in different ways. At the moment, citizen assemblies are fashionable, while last year it was participatory budgeting, and next year it will be something else. Civic tech's stock is down at the moment, but next year it may be up again. EU-level reforms are a constant topic of discussion. Underlying all the shifts, though, is a clear sense of

momentum that points toward citizens having a more participative, personalized, and responsive relationships with the state.

The EU institutions could play a major role not just by enacting the aforementioned policy recommendations but also by serving as overarching standard setters. This kind of coordination is needed because so far the EU, governments, parties, and civil society organizations have only experimented with reforms at the edges. These participatory initiatives have been interesting but fragmented, and episodic rather than continuous. The Convention on the Future of Europe should be couched as a means of making such a systemic shift.

The EU will be instrumental not just for its own sake but for others and for the system as a whole. Policy issues are inherently multilayered. European institutions cannot enact democratic reforms on their own. They need to harness local and national institutions and conversations, working in coordination to access the networks of other institutions and organizations. Brussels can help to set open standards and support the broader network of democratic and participative initiatives.

The EU will benefit from reaching downward and outward to other democratic partners. European-level policymakers will have a much clearer understanding of public views, and a much broader set of inputs into their policymaking processes, which would improve both the legitimacy and the quality of the policies that result. Building this kind of high-quality engagement with the concerns of citizens is an important part of making the case for European unity, as von der Leyen has stated.[23] A coherent effort, working inter-institutionally, should aim to join up at European level the existing routes for participation.

Europeans can choose to have their institutions open to public participation or allow them to become essentially privatized. If they are to be open, the infrastructure of government, citizen networks, and civil society that is working in this area needs to improve. If the EU engages, a new sense of political normalcy could emerge, whereby populist voices are challenged by a more open governance system that has a much richer flow of information and opinions between the different levels of government as well as between citizens and the institutions that serve them. If the EU chooses to stand back, however, the political and democratic landscape is likely to remain fragmented, along local or national lines, and much weaker in the face of commercial or geopolitical actors who are content for the strongest and the wealthiest to shout the loudest.

Modest but achievable action at different levels and in different areas where European democracy is lacking is the best path forward. These reforms should encompass everything from the way democratic discourse is framed to very specific institutional changes and broader efforts to entice citizens into participating directly. While none of these proposals is a game changer on its own, they would be more effective together. An improved *Spitzenkandidaten* process and transnational lists

could get people more interested in politics, which in turn can make citizens more interested in consultative assemblies, e-participation, and ECIs. And if national voters are taking part in politics and watching closely, the European Commission and the European Council might be more likely to take the *Spitzenkandidaten*, transnational lists, and ECIs more seriously.

Concrete institutional modifications need to be measured against their ability to foster a spirit of common societal problem solving. The quality of collective participatory engagement is an essential component of democratic recovery. While there are many other areas of necessary reform, focusing attention on this notion of collective citizenship will hopefully pay dividends as the EU's push for democracy moves forward.

Notes

[1]   For representative overviews, see Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2018: Me Too? Political Participation, Protest, and Democracy," 2019, https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=democracy2018; and Varieties of Democracy, "Democracy Facing Global Challenges: Annual Democracy Report 2019, May 21, 2019, https://www.v-dem.net/en/news/democracy-facing-global-challenges-v-dem-annual-democracy-report-2019/.

[2]   Ursula von der Leyen, "Opening Statement in the European Parliament's Plenary Session," July 16, 2019, Strasbourg, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_4230.

[3]   This section draws predominantly from the following book, particularly chapters 4–7 and chapter 10. Israel Butler, *Countering Populist Authoritarians: Where Their Support Comes From and How to Reverse Their Success*, (Berlin: Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2018), https://dq4n3btxmr8c9.cloudfront.net/files/XmTi_x/populist_authoritarians_israel_online-1.pdf.

[4]   For an introductory account, see the Public Interest Research Center, "The Common Cause Handbook," 2011, https://valuesandframes.org/resources/CCF_report_common_cause_handbook.pdf.

[5]   Meg Bostrom, "When the Facts Don't Fit the Frame," Frameworks Institute, no. 30, 2005, http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ezine30.html.

[6]   See, for example, Ben Baumberg Geiger and Bart Meuleman, "Beyond 'Mythbusting': How to Respond to Myths and Perceived Undeservingness in the British Benefits System," *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 24, no. 3 (2016), 291–306, https://doi.org/10.1332/175982716X14721954314968.

[7]   Diane Benjamin, "Creating and Using Metaphors," Frameworks Institute, 2007, https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/framebytes/framebyte_hc_metaphors.pdf.

[8]   The EEA and Norway Grants, "Organisational Structure," https://eeagrants.org/about-us/organisational-structure.

[9]   European Parliament, "2019 European Election Results: Turnout by Year," updated September 25, 2019, https://election-results.eu/turnout/.

[10] For one of the contributors' prior published work on this topic, see Daniel Gros and Sophia Russack, "The Nomination of von der Leyen: Towards Institutional Balance in a Reformed Lead Candidate Process," Center for European Policy Studies, July 12, 2019, https://www.ceps.eu/the-nomination-of-von-der-leyen/.

11 European Parliament, "Number of MEPs to be Reduced After EU Elections in 2019," June 13, 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180607IPR05241/number-of-meps-to-be-reduced-after-eu-elections-in-2019.

12 For more information, see European Parliament, "Legislative Train Schedule: Union of Democratic Change," September 20, 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-union-of-democratic-change/file-reform-of-the-electoral-law-of-the-eu.

13 Emmanuel Macron, "Discours du Président de la République devant le Parlement réuni en congrès" [Speech by Emmanuel Macron before the French Parliament convened in Congress], Office of the President of the French Republic, July 3, 2017, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/07/03/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-devant-le-parlement-reuni-en-congres.

14 See Paul Butcher and Corina Stratulat, The European Citizens' Consultations: Evaluation Report," European Policy Center, November 16, 2018, http://www.epc.eu/pub_details.php?cat_id=1&pub_id=8839&year=2018.

15 See Paul Butcher and Corina Stratulat, "Citizens Expect: Lessons From the European Citizens' Consultations," European Policy Center, https://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_9227_lessons_from_eccs_consultations.pdf?doc_id=2173.

16 Council of the European Union, "Citizens' Consultations—Executive Summaries," December 4, 2018, http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14791-2018-INIT/en/pdf.

17 In Italy, political factors, notably the crisis resulting from the March 2018 general election, prevented the European Citizens' Consultations from taking place. The United Kingdom decided not to participate given its forthcoming departure from the European Union.

18 Ursula von der Leyen, "A Union That Strives for More: My Agenda for Europe," European Union, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf.

19 The commission asked the three platforms signatory to the Code of Practice to report on a monthly basis on what actions they have undertaken to improve the scrutiny of ad placements, ensure transparency of political and issue-based advertising, and tackle fake accounts and the malicious use of bots.

20 Von der Leyen, "A Union That Strives for More."

21 The new ECI regulation will enter into force in 2020. See Elisa Lironi, "Potential and Challenges of E-Participation in the European Union," the European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2016, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556949/IPOL_STU%282016%29556949_EN.pdf.

22 European Parliament, "Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament," July 2019, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-9-2019-07-02-RULE-222_EN.html.

23 Von der Leyen, "A Union That Strives for More."

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