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Under Construction

Citizen Participation in the European Union

Abstract

The European Union (EU) has a plethora of participation instruments at its disposal. Elections, citizens' initiatives, consultations, petitions, and dialogues – citizens can participate in EU politics in various ways. But how well do the existing instruments really work? Are they well-known enough to citizens, and do they actually impact EU policymaking? How can the individual instruments be improved, and should new elements be added to the existing toolbox? This study shows that citizen participation in the EU is a patchwork of instruments that are relatively accessible, but largely unknown among the European public, often have a narrow user-base, are neither transnational nor deliberative enough, and overall create little impact. At the same time, four out of five citizens want to have a greater say in EU policymaking – and the EU and its member states should respond to this demand.

To make participation count, the EU needs to move from a participation patchwork to a participation infrastructure by addressing three gaps: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap. In a participation infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work on their own, but would collectively establish the basis for a functioning participatory EU democracy alongside the representative dimension of European policymaking. Democratic accountability and legitimacy would not only come from elections every five years, but from regular and effective participation by citizens. The future of the EU's democracy depends on the political will and ability of the Union and its member states to enhance and extend the possibilities for a more visible, more coherent, and more impactful citizen participation within EU policymaking.