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EU Democracy After the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe represented a positive first step in the innovation of European democracy. Policymakers will need to use the experience as a catalyst for broader change, well beyond the kind of citizen engagement pioneered during the conference.

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The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) concluded on May 9 with mixed results for democratic reform. EU officials worked hard to design an innovative process that gave citizens a voice in key debates over the EU's future. However, ambitious and wide-ranging follow-up will be required if the conference is to generate tangible progress toward democratic renovation. While the CoFoE was undoubtedly the most open and participative exercise of this kind that the EU has ever held, it did little to address the broader state of European democracy. The conference may lead to one or more regular EU-level citizen forums; the even more important advance would be if it serves as a catalyst for wider democratic improvements across Europe.

Citizens' Chance

Despite its rocky start, the CoFoE offered a refreshing contrast with previous elite-dominated intergovernmental conferences. Initially, the conference preparations were tense, prolonged, and fractious. The start date was pushed back due to considerable interinstitutional wrangling. There were moments when many member states seemed intent on retaining so much control that the citizens' input

would have been largely symbolic. It is remarkable that the CoFoE ultimately gave European citizens a far more meaningful role than might have been expected, even if it is governments that will now decide how the conference's proposals are taken forward.

The conference's four thematic citizen panels gave 800 randomly selected citizens the ability to explore an extremely wide range of topics and policies. Citizens were able to deliberate on new agenda items and ideas, and then presented 178 policy recommendations. Over a hundred of the citizens involved in the panels also participated in the conference plenary. In parallel, a digital platform enabled thousands of citizens to offer further input, with Decidim software (pioneered in Barcelona) enabling interactions across different languages. Also, after initially being frozen out of the conference, civil society organizations were included in its plenary, albeit in limited form.

Some deliberative experts expressed concerns that the randomly selected citizens were considering overly broad sets of issues in a short time frame and that the panels felt more like open conferences rather than carefully targeted deliberation. Critics also pointed out that there was no role for minority rights groups, pushing aside rights-oriented agenda items. Another concern was that some (although not all) of the EU institutions and experts guiding the panels tilted debates toward their own desired outcomes. Input on the digital platform came mainly from well-organized pressure groups with technical expertise rather than the so-called unengaged citizenry.

Citizen panel recommendations fed into the plenary that included citizens alongside government and EU representatives—this hybrid form standing in contrast to standard citizen assembly processes. It was not clear at first how these recommendations would be dealt with in the plenary, as there was no predetermined process that guaranteed they would be taken on board. Several filters existed between citizen deliberation and the outcome: so-called working groups chose their favored recommendations from the panels; the plenary could then pick and choose from these working groups; an executive board could in turn pick and choose from the plenary; and finally, governments are likely to pick and choose from the final set of recommendations.

Despite all the shortcomings, however, the CoFoE undoubtedly put the need for citizen engagement more prominently on the EU agenda—adding to the momentum created by other initiatives like the union’s new **Competence Centre on Participative and Deliberative Democracy**. Some teething difficulties in creating the first transnational panels were to be expected, as tried and tested national- or city-level citizen assembly processes cannot simply be cut-and-pasted to the EU level. The conference’s **final report** calls for citizen assemblies to be held “periodically” in the future. The exercise has raised expectations around citizen participation that will be hard to rebottle. Surveys suggest that citizens are certainly **interested** in directly participating in EU-level decisionmaking beyond the conference. The European Commission plans to reassemble the citizen-panel participants later in 2022 to review what progress has been made on their recommendations.

Step-Change Still Needed

The citizen panels and the digital platform countered some of the initial skepticism over the CoFoE. The commitment to more regular, post-conference forms of citizen participation is a significant development. However, notwithstanding the positive changes, the way in which the CoFoE approached the issue of democracy had its downsides. The overwhelming focus on mini-public deliberation might be seen as both boon and bane. It prompted dynamic innovation in citizen participation but may also have smothered some elements of debate about wider elements of democratic reform.

Much of the focus in the latter stages of the conference was on the precise details of a possible permanent assembly—whether this should sit as a de facto second chamber of the European Parliament or be linked to very specific thematic issues, whether it should propose new ideas or only monitor existing legislation, and so forth. Ultimately, these questions were left unresolved and the **final report’s** calls for ongoing participative forums are couched in very general and imprecise language.

While these are important issues, they are largely organizational and relatively narrow in nature when set alongside the magnitude of challenges facing democracy. More regular citizen participation is key but still needs to be flanked by

other democratic advances. And yet, these other types of reform did not gain the same degree of prominence on the CoFoE agenda.

The conference's final report calls in familiar, often-repeated terms for transnational lists and an elected European Commission president. (Outside the CoFoE, on May 4 the European Parliament voted for electoral reforms that would include twenty-eight seats to be elected through an EU-wide list.) Yet, in broader terms, a highly favorable narrative about the CoFoE's democratic inclusiveness has risked diverting attention from deeper political reforms. The routinely repeated line was that the conference was moving citizen involvement in a significantly positive direction. But the conference did nothing to stop the ongoing deterioration in many aspects of democratic quality across Europe that was evident even as the conference was taking place. The need for a step change in democracy is far greater than member states and EU institutions still seem willing to acknowledge.

It is also doubtful that the CoFoE's democratic advances keep pace with new EU policy developments. As the EU moves toward common debt, hugely increased financial transfers, new taxes, loosened fiscal rules, an incipient health union, and many other policy changes, the absence of deeper political reforms will overall leave the EU *more* democratically challenged than it was before the CoFoE. Moves forward in policy integration are now significant enough to require a major jump forward in democratic accountability. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted moves toward common energy procurement, more defense cooperation, and a more security-oriented union, raising even more profound questions for democratic accountability.

The conference did not acknowledge or address this fundamental policy-versus-politics disjuncture. Far from addressing the imbalance between deeper policy cooperation and stalled democratic processes, the conference ended with this gap between policies and politics even wider than when it began. In this sense, it risks bequeathing a false sense of adequacy and exaggerated sense that its level of citizen involvement will have game-changing significance.

The conference's citizen panels and digital platform could hardly be expected to alter the EU's quasi-constitutional settlement or to come up with completely new,

out-of-the-blue solutions after so many years of different policy proposals being discussed at multiple institutional levels. Rather, the measure of citizen engagement should be whether it gives citizens the formal and regularized ability to hold decisions to account. A skeptic might fear that the CoFoE was framed as an exercise in a looser ethos of “listening,” “consulting,” and “debating” to avoid giving citizens those tangible and incisive formal tools of democratic accountability.

Bolder Innovation

The necessary step change should involve wider approaches to democratic innovation. The EU would benefit from multiple forms of democratic experimentation. EU policymakers and European experts have largely been focused on one specific type of mini-public deliberation that has found traction mainly (although not exclusively) in Western countries. They have generally not been open to different kinds of innovations tried in other countries.

More effective avenues that directly involve a mass citizenship are still needed. Even if permanent EU participative forums do materialize, these will still involve a very small number of citizens. These citizens will function as representatives, simply selected rather than elected like politicians. This form of representativeness may be well-grounded, but a wider, active citizenship is equally important. Those involved in burgeoning citizen participation commonly agree that citizen panels and the like are not meant to replace but rather complement other reforms. However, in practice, these other kinds of reforms gathered little momentum in the CoFoE.

Two points repeated often during the conference were first, that the citizen panels must not be a one off and second, that future citizen forums must be connected to formal institutional policymaking processes. These points are clear-cut, but the argument here is a different one. Even these much-repeated calls do not take the debate over democratic reform as far as it needs to extend. The EU needs to be guided by a full spectrum vision for what a future democratic system should look like. New citizen initiatives should then be designed to fit around this, rather than taking shape as piecemeal, stand-alone initiatives. (It has been argued that already-existing participative channels need a fuller, more democratic infrastructure to

function properly and that without this there will be little value in simply adding one or two more citizen initiatives.)

Several types of initiative might help create a wider base of legitimacy for advances in European integration. For example, a broader and more ambitious EU crowdsourcing vehicle could allow citizens to provide input into very concrete legislative and other policy proposals. While direct democracy voting initiatives have fallen out of favor, it might still be helpful to link assembly proposals to EU-wide referendums. Indeed, the citizen panels called for this link, but governments generally balk today at more direct democracy. Parliamentary and party reforms are needed just as much as citizen forums, and far beyond the narrow question of transnational lists. More boldly, EU citizen forums that include political party representatives could be especially interesting and innovative.

More effective CSO involvement in EU-level policy developments could also be of the utmost importance. A civil society convention that ran in parallel to the conference did not manage to wield much influence. For many years, the EU has been criticized for consulting selectively with large CSOs that have a well-organized presence in Brussels and largely share a desire for deeper integration—and these were the kind of organizations that took the eight seats granted to CSOs in the conference plenary. Even though the [final report](#) calls for civil society involvement in democratic innovation, the CoFoE missed the opportunity to rectify this imbalance through a more broadly cast initiative for CSO engagement.

Most fundamentally, the step change in democratic renovation requires a less instrumental approach to EU citizen participation. Among policymakers and analysts, there is still a tendency to judge democratic participation in terms of whether or not it triggers deeper EU integration and overcomes obstacles in the European Council—with an assumption that citizens will see participation as credible only if certain [policy reforms](#) toward deeper integration are forthcoming. The final report fuses democratic reform ideas with the need to develop [“a stronger common European identity.”](#)

In the final stages of the conference, debate about democratic reforms was displaced somewhat by a focus on the CoFoE possibly leading to a new convention or some

kind of constitution-building process. Some civil society groups insisted that a constitution-drafting process could itself be a channel of citizen participation, and French President Emmanuel Macron supported this notion in his speech at CoFoE's closure on May 9. However desirable such options might be, this approach appears to make democratic renewal more conditional on or subordinate to wider policy and institutional changes.

If the goal is a higher-quality democracy, this should be prioritized regardless of what it means for the institutional restructuring of the EU or what kind of integration model might emerge in the future. EU cooperation, if it transpires, needs to be the outcome of stronger democratic engagement, not vice versa. The primary objective should be to legitimize the policy cooperation that is already afoot. Now that the CoFoE has finished, a more comprehensive “enhancing European democracy” agenda is needed, as opposed to the current “deliberative participation on select EU policies” approach. This would be helpful in more constructively engaging citizens who might feel that participation in the CoFoE was somewhat loaded in favor of certain pro-EU outcomes.

Notably, it is unlikely that any reform exercise—CoFoE, convention, or constitutional assembly—could result in a new model of integration that all parts of Europe would accept. But EU initiatives could usefully serve as umbrellas for local-level participation by a broad, diverse group of citizens. For example, the EU could set up something like a network of democracy facilitator hubs across Europe to help and encourage local initiatives feed into the European level of decisions. This effort would show that the union is concerned with shared citizen empowerment more than simply the mediation of member-state interests. It should also foster horizontal connections between democratic forums across borders, not only vertical connections through Brussels.

Conclusion

The CoFoE unfolded well enough to represent a genuine opening for democratic change. The risk now is that the expectations generated will remain unfulfilled and trigger another cycle of popular frustration with both the EU and democracy. Policymakers say they are fully aware that the conference itself was only a first step

forward. Rather than assuming the job of listening to citizens is now done, policymakers will need to use the period *after* the conference for further democratic renovation. The question of what kinds of reforms could deliver meaningful democratic accountability still needs to be answered.

The conference demonstrated that EU-level citizen participation can be made to work, and it should remain a core strand of future democratic renewal. Permanent deliberative structures could combine two levels of change, one giving citizens a more active role in decisionmaking on theme-specific issues, the other for them to monitor the overarching direction of EU integration (not in an abstract sense of ‘what kind of EU citizens want’ but keeping track of whether leaders are following through on their concrete promises). Still, it would do a disservice to democracy if a few such institutional initiatives were to deflect attention away from the need for more far-reaching and bolder adjustments to democratic practices.

Political reform processes cannot simply use citizen initiatives as pressure valves to periodically vent frustrations with the EU. They also cannot involve merely adding supposedly benign popular legitimacy to plans for deeper EU policy centralization. Rather, political reform efforts must employ more radical extensions in citizen empowerment and rigorous contestation of both EU and national government policy models. The CoFoE may have slightly nudged open this door, but governments have not yet chosen to cross its threshold.

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