

ECI Day 2020: activists call for "meaningful" public involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe



Looking back to their past experiences as organisers of European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs), activists attending the ECI Day 2020 at the EESC on 25 February warned against asking people what Europe they want and then ignoring their input.

The disappointments incurred by the first generation of ECI organisers, who went through the intricate process of initiating an ECI, collecting and validating one million signatures, then to be told that no action would follow, have taken a heavy toll, activists said.

The [new, simplified rules](#) in place since 1 January, coupled with better support for organisers such as the [overhauled ECI Forum](#), have helped alleviate "petition fatigue", sparking an impressive 16 new ECIs, several of which were actively collecting signatures at the event.

However, it is imperative to avoid making the same mistake again with the

[Conference on the Future of Europe.](#)

What place is there for digital democracy in shaping the future of Europe?

The role of digital technologies in the future of democracy, and specifically in the Conference on the future of Europe, spurred a passionate debate.

EESC President **Luca Jahier** reasserted the lasting value of representative democracy and of intermediary bodies while emphasising the EESC's unswerving commitment, over the years, to the success of the ECI, seen as a valuable complement to representative democracy.

Technology makes it possible to have a say beyond structured political channels, outside political parties and organised civil society, he said.

At the same time, we should not accept the new digital age without any critical thought. We are already well aware of the danger of fake news, disinformation and big data, and the enormous power consigned to very few that, through algorithms, can manipulate and control us, he said.

Dubravka Šuica, European Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, responsible for the Conference on the Future of Europe, stressed the Commission's resolve to "be on the side of open, yet well-regulated technology", embracing its democratic potential (openness, responsiveness, transparency, availability) while warding off the dangers (manipulation and data security).

She also stressed the need to get the methodology of the Conference right: *We must take our time to reflect on the best way of actually doing deliberative democracy at the EU level, she said.*

This is important because it has the potential to lay the ground for a new type of politics. For a new dynamic between representative democracy and citizens for generations to come.

Is more democracy always better?

Jamie Susskind, author of award-winning best seller [Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech](#), argued that with technology opening up a variety of political options for either direct participation or use of data for fine-tuning policy that were not on the menu before, we should raise the question: is more democracy always better?

The history of liberal democracy over the last two-three hundred years has been about putting restraints on what the demos could do – inventing such things as embedded human rights, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and intermediating parliaments to limit people's power rather than enhance it. Because sometimes snap decisions may not lead to the best possible results, he said.

We should step back and ask ourselves: 'what is the moral or philosophical justification for the steps that we are currently taking? Otherwise we will fall into the trap of thinking more democracy is always better, that participatory democracy is superior to representative democracy. This a risk that is too serious for us to ignore. And unless we start that intellectual work now, the technology will be moving faster than our ideas.

Harnessing the digital like a river

Lisa Lironi, senior manager for European Democracy at the [European Citizen Action Service](#), closed the debate by highlighting several successful experiments recently carried out in a number of European countries (participatory budgeting in France, national citizens' initiatives in Latvia and Finland, crowdsourcing in Iceland and Finland) with the help of digital technology.

She said Europe needed to move beyond fear of the disruptive and destructive force of the digital world and embrace its positive potential.

This is how democracy can be safeguarded: not by fearfully shielding it from the challenges of this global digital age, but by courageously upgrading democracy to channel the opportunities those challenges bring. Just as we harness a river's power to bring electricity and light to our cities, it is time we harness the power of the digital to enlighten our democracies, she said.

The results of the survey, which do not reflect the EESC's views, but those of the participants in the ECI Day, are available [here](#).

No more token democracy, says poll

The ever more insistent demand by people to have a say not only in setting the EU's agenda, but in decision-making itself, can no longer be ignored.

A survey conducted at the event showed that **a large majority of participants thought it was vital for citizens' input to have a real impact on EU decisions beyond elections.**

67% believed citizen participation at European level must always have a clear link to the formal decision-making process.

69% agreed that rather than being one-off exercises, conferences such as the one on the future of Europe should take place regularly and have proper follow-up.

71% said that in addition to the Conference, a citizen-initiated convention should explore the future of citizen participation and democratic reform. It should start and end with an EU-wide people's vote.

In addition, 85% thought ongoing ECIs should be given prominence in the online multilingual platform that the European Commission is going to set up as the go-to resource for people wishing to know more about the Conference.

Speakers and participants were also very clear about the missing link in the chain – the actual engagement of the Member States. So far, at national level there is little feeling of ownership and barely any sense of political responsibility for the ECI, which needs more visibility and recognition at all levels in order to become a truly impactful instrument.

For more information about the event and the speakers' presentations