

Book Review: Citizens' Initiatives in Europe: Procedures and Consequences of Agenda-Setting by Citizens

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2011 was a year of protests around the globe. In Europe and its wider neighbourhood, citizens took to the streets and squares to protest against austerity, inequality, and financial mismanagement and to call for greater accountability from political leaders. In **Citizens' Initiatives in Europe: Procedures and Consequences of Agenda-Setting by Citizens**, **Armine Ishkanian** finds an informative and timely publication about how citizens across Europe attempt to influence agenda-setting and policy making processes.



Citizens' Initiatives in Europe: Procedures and Consequences of Agenda-Setting by Citizens. Maija Setälä and Theo Schiller (eds). Palgrave Macmillan. March 2012. 280 pages.

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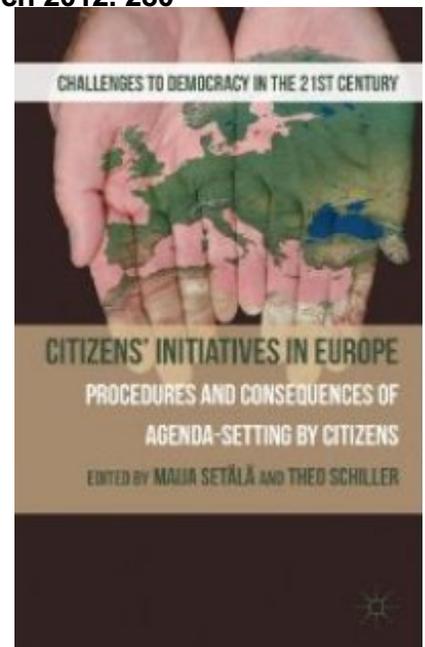
Providing an insightful analysis of citizens' initiatives across eleven European countries, including the new EU-level European Citizens' Initiative, editors [Maija Setälä](#) and Theo Schiller focus on institutions that allow citizens to raise new political proposals and to oppose an act passed by parliament. The contributors examine two types of initiative: *full-scale initiatives* are those which are followed by a ballot vote (referendum) and *agenda initiatives* are those which are dealt with by a representative body. Schiller and Setälä examine the variation in impact and effectiveness of citizens' initiatives due to the differences in legal frameworks, procedural requirements as well as the strength of civil society across European countries. But the main obstacles to the success of citizens' initiatives are actually procedural requirements such as admissible subject matter, as well as signature, turnout or approval quorums.

Schiller and Setälä write,

The institution of citizens' initiative seems to provide formally equal rights for citizens to raise issues on the political agenda and thus enhance equal opportunities for all citizens to participate in public deliberation (page 10).

The key phrase in the above quote is "formally equal rights", because as Schiller and Setälä go on to argue, although the initiatives provide formally equal rights for citizens, whether citizens can actually put those rights into practice remains another matter. Citizens do not have equal opportunities to take advantage of national, let alone supra-national, initiative institutions such as the [European Citizens' Initiative](#). Initiatives require access to significant resources and wide-reaching networks in order to be successful. Improvements in procedural design, the editors contend, will be the key to enhancing the role of citizen initiatives in the democratic process.

Citizens' initiatives have had the most success in Switzerland. Georg Lutz's chapter about the Swiss experience with direct democracy analyses the historical emergence of citizens' initiatives in Switzerland and their impact on the political agenda and policy-making. Full-scale legislation on citizens' initiatives was adopted in 1891. Currently, initiative organisers in Switzerland have 18 months to collect the required 100,000 signatures (approximately 2% of the population). In 2010 alone, 281 initiatives were submitted to the parliament of which 174 went to a popular vote leading to 18 accepted initiatives. This is quite a high figure and no other country examined in the edited volume even comes close to this number of submitted initiatives.



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In Switzerland, Lutz argues, “direct democracy co-exists well with elements of representative democracy” (32) and initiatives act as a “reality check” on political parties and elites. They expand the space for politics and avoid the complete monopolization of the political agenda by a small circle of political actors.

On the other end of the spectrum is Lithuania, which is a newer democracy than Switzerland and has more stringent procedural requirements for citizens’ initiatives. In Lithuania organisers of citizens’ initiatives have 3 months to collect 300,000 signatures (11.4% of population). These requirements have dampened enthusiasm for initiatives and in 2010, no initiatives were submitted. Algis Krupavičius, discusses how two decades after the collapse of communism in Lithuania, direct democratic instruments of law and decision making are now legally recognized in the domestic political framework. Yet, in spite of the presence of such legal frameworks and instruments, the political impact remains highly questionable. Krupavičius argues that the major obstacles stem from the underdevelopment, weakness and passivity of civil society and skepticism toward the “possibilities of citizens to influence politics, deep distrust towards politicians and political institutions, and lack of habits of political and social activity” (148).

Moving from specific national contexts to the EU level, the chapter by Bruno Kaufmann, examines the introduction of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), which was passed by the European Commission in April 2012. The ECI is an invitation to the European Commission to propose legislation on matters where the EU has competence to legislate. A citizens’ initiative has to be backed by at least one million EU citizens, coming from at least 7 out of the 27 member states. As the book was published before the ECI went into effect, this chapter primarily offers a background to and history of the ECI and analyses its constitutional and statutory framework. Kaufmann considers the “practical challenges of the near future, when more than half a billion Europeans potentially gained the power to influence politics between elections” (228). This ECI has been hailed by supporters as a move towards direct democracy in Europe and was seen as a way to make up for the democratic deficit of EU decision making. Critics are cautious and argue that the stringent procedural requirements mean that it is unlikely to lead to widespread citizen action and that it may become an instrument primarily used by large NGOs, consulting firms and lobbyists. It is too soon to tell what impact, if any, the ECI will have on citizens’ participation in the EU.

Overall this is a very informative and well-organised edited volume. The strength of the book is its breadth and scope. The editors have maintained consistency by asking each contributor to focus their discussion on standard areas including the historical context, motivations, institutional design, procedural requirements and political impact. The comparative approach allows for an examination and analysis of the reasons for ‘failure’ or ‘success’ given certain normative criteria as well as the political and social contexts.

Although there is a comprehensive discussion of theories of democracy, I would have liked a stronger engagement and consideration of civil society as an analytical framework. There is an implicit recognition that the strength or weakness of civil society matters to the success of initiatives, but this matter is not fully explored or analysed. And a related issue is that the discussion of the initiatives was largely normative. I would have liked a more critical analysis by the editors in the Introduction or Conclusion of how initiatives can be used or abused, but well organized and well-funded parties or lobbyists for their narrow ends. Apart from these two points, I found the book to be a very informative and I believe it will be a useful resource for scholars, policy makers and activists interested in the institution of citizens’ initiatives and the processes of collective action.

Dr Armine Ishkanian is the Programme Director of the MSc in NGOs & Development, [LSE Department of Social Policy](#). She is the author of *Democracy building and civil society in post-Soviet Armenia* (2008 Routledge, London), *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* (May 2012 together with Simon Szreter; Edward Elgar Publishers) and numerous academic journal articles. Her research examines the relationship between civil society and social transformation as well as how civil society organisations and social movements engage in policy processes. [Read more reviews by Armine.](#)

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