

The European Citizens' Initiative is a significant move towards greater "participatory democracy" – but there is still room for it to be improved

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is a step towards the more direct involvement of citizens in European decision-making. However, [Erminia Mazzoni](#), Member of the European Parliament, and Chairwoman of the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament believes the ECI alone will not solve the European Union's democratic deficit. She calls for a simplification of procedures and a lowering of the legal age required to participate.



The European Commission recently launched the first European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). The introduction of this new initiative, which has its origins in the Lisbon Treaty, provides a significant move towards greater "participatory democracy" for Europe's citizens in European affairs, going beyond and reinforcing the existing right of petition. Every initiative is addressed to the European Commission and must have the objective of requesting that the Commission makes a legislative proposal, an opportunity which, incidentally, is very similar to the right enjoyed by the European Parliament itself.

Of course, criticisms are already being voiced that this new procedure is too cumbersome and will only create a new option for powerful lobbies to influence EU policy-making. I disagree with such views. I would concede however that it could have been even more simplified and user-friendly, but the regulation did finally establish a workable compromise which went far beyond what the original drafts had proposed.

My own criticisms of the new ECI are the following:

- During the formulation of the ECI, the European Council's position prevented the attempts of the Petitions' Committee of the European Parliament to lower the legal age required to participate from 18 to 16. My thoughts on this are well known, and I have [touched on them elsewhere](#).
- It would have been better if there had been no unnecessary technical burden imposed on the citizens such as the verification procedures which could hinder the 'right to sign', which is not after all the same as the 'right to vote'.
- The regulation as it stands also foresees a number of difficult requirements for data servers which, in my opinion, could be better taken on board by the European institutions, which have the capacity to address them. Providing an independent, reliable and data-safe facility to which all initiatives could link in, would be a small step for the EU as such, but a bold step in providing uninhibited potential to citizens' participation. No more commercial/pro-bono providers, no more Member State-issued certificates of conformity and more freedom to channel all of the energies towards what the initiative should be – with much less bureaucracy and red-tape.

It is rather difficult to try and spur Europeans, younger and older alike, to go to vote in elections for the European Parliament in two years' time if we have not created a better public sphere for the voices of the citizens to express themselves freely and democratically.

On a different but related note, on May 8th Vice-President Maros Šefčovič – the Commissioner responsible for the European Citizen's Initiative made a [statement](#) to the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament which, apart from praising the role that the petitions process plays in the democratic life of the Union, highlighted the importance of providing a direct connection between the world of social-media and the ECI. While the Committee on Petitions cannot, and will not, try to reclaim some sort of paternity to this, it is a widely-known fact that the European Parliament, and some of its Committees, has already engaged a wider audience through its presence in [the social-media sphere](#).

In these information-overloaded times, we believed it to be extremely important to provide agile, fresh and relevant information as it becomes available, and we can only rejoice at the fact that the European Commission seems to have decided to act in a similar fashion. Fostering conversations, providing feedback and allowing for some human touch are qualities that I strongly advocate and perceive as consonant to the mission towards a more mature participation by the European people in the democratic life of the Union.

Public interest, at least initially is likely to be focused on specific policy areas. I feel that that the attention that EU citizens pay to the environment, to fundamental rights, and to the development of freedom of movement with all that this entails, earmarks these sectors as being the most likely targets. I would not be surprised in the least, therefore, to see many Initiatives revolving around these three basic domains and I would hope that the EU gives the citizens the benefit of the doubt and allows Initiatives proposed to be interpreted in the most open possible way, in line with the Treaty provisions and, most importantly, in tune with its essential values.

I felt very reassured by the comments of Maros Šefčovič and feel that the European Commission is headed in the right direction which reinvigorates our own mission. I, personally, am all for a full evaluation of goals achieved and missed-targets, if any, of the ECI after its three year trial period, and am sure that when the time comes, several adjustments to the process will be required no doubt on the initiative of the European Parliament which in any event guarantees each successful ECI with a full public hearing where the organisers will themselves launch the debate.

I remain also confident that a proper role for the Committee on Petitions and its important interaction with the citizens as such, will be successfully made, enabling us to be directly involved in the proceedings and helping us formulate relevant feedback.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [Is Britain becoming another European consensus democracy? \(26.7\)](#)
2. [Book Review: Citizens' Initiatives in Europe: Procedures and Consequences of Agenda-Setting by Citizens \(26.2\)](#)
3. [An independent Scotland would face little European opposition to membership of the European Union \(23.9\)](#)
4. [Book Review: Citizens, Context and Choice: How Context Shapes Citizens' Electoral Choices \(21.7\)](#)