

Rethinking the way we practice and involve people in European democracies

Introduction

Democracy is the cornerstone of our society. Depending on the form or shape that it takes it also reflects our values and priorities.

With climate change, biodiversity loss and the increasing pressure and demand put on individuals to save the planet, we now require political systems that engage people in the creative task of building community on a basis of environmental and social sustainability. However, despite the increase of tools (referendums, consultation, citizens' assemblies, petitions, European youth events, citizens dialogue, climate assembly) available for citizens to provide their opinions and increase of opportunities to shape policy, local budget, and their planning: two distinct developments have emerged raising questions regarding the democratic nature of the EU. One is about the [general lack of transparency](#) and the other one the lack of real impact for those citizens, local authorities or associations who engage in those dialogue, respond to those consultation; write petitions etc...

In its recent [report on Citizens' dialogues and Citizens' participation in the EU decision-making](#) the European Parliament points out that the questioning, mistrust, and lack of participation of citizens, local authorities and civil society in "democracy" comes from the current structure or tools (democratic practices) used to engage citizens. These tools and structures seem to only enable a certain category of citizens to be heard, leaving out many voices. Marginalised groups represent many of those silent voices, which are often most impacted by decisions requiring them to adapt or change their habits, while at the same time letting slide shortcomings of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and of assembly taken place in EU Member States.



Where at EU and national level the democratic deficits are screaming at us, there is however a vibrant and innovative set of democratic practices that have been emerging with the potential to reinvigorate European democracies and set the scene for bottom up, inclusive, and equitable systems of governance. This policy paper, looks at those practices, re-evaluates and provides specific recommendations on how to create the right space, conditions and provide the right support to ensure the democratic participation of marginalised groups. If Climate change is social justice and social justice is climate change then for example the implementation and evaluation of the European climate law must put citizens at its heart. This paper also reminds us that engagement is not an end in itself but should be a means to change a reality that does not satisfy us.

How to create the right space, conditions and provide the right support to ensure the democratic participation of marginalised groups?

Democracy is an ever-evolving concept, and like many concepts its application leads to the development of various practices (**Participatory democracy¹, Mini-Publics², Referendums³**,

¹ a model of democracy in which citizens are provided power to make political decisions. Etymological roots of [democracy](#) (Greek [demos](#) and [kratos](#)) imply that the people are in power, making all democracies participatory to some degree. However, participatory democracy tends to advocate greater citizen participation and more direct representation than traditional [representative democracy](#).

² representative samples of the population at large that meet to advise other legislative bodies or to write laws themselves. Mini-publics provide citizens the equal opportunity to exercise substantive agenda-setting and/or decision-making power as these bodies are chosen by [sortition](#), making the assemblies more representative of the population as a whole as compared to representatives that are elected. citizens are guided by experts and discussion facilitators to ensure meaningful deliberation. The results of mini-publics typically culminate in reports to be sent to the government or proposals that are directly sent to the people via referendums.

³ afford citizens greater decision-making power by giving them the ultimate choice in the passage of legislation. Referendums may also enable citizens to engage in agenda-setting power if they are allowed to draft proposals to be put to referenda themselves in efforts called [initiatives](#).



E-Democracy⁴, Town Meetings⁵, Participatory Budgeting⁶, Liquid Democracy⁷) which are currently available and used to foster citizens' engagement and participation in the “life of the city”. Despite the fact that each model of democratic practices are best fit to be used at local, national or international level, they are still falling short in the participation and engagement of marginalised, minorities and vulnerable communities⁸. Focusing on the concrete obstacles and needs for engagement for communities-led initiative; people living on the street or in precarious living situations and of the youth we bring forward recommendations to rethinking the way we practice and involve people in European democracies. While refraining from claiming any one form of democratic practice is a silver bullet, but instead recognize that different forms can be orchestrated to foster inclusive, equitable and sustainable communities

Recommendation: decentralisation of decision-making so that local communities can better influence and decide over their own futures.

Democracy for Communities

We want to first start by stating that community-led initiatives are a form of democratic practice. They are initiatives where people self-organise in the places where they live to take

⁴ an umbrella term used to describe a variety of proposals made to increase participation through the utilization of technology. Open discussion forums, for example, provide citizens the opportunity to debate policy online while facilitators guide discussion. These forums normally serve agenda-setting purposes or may be used to provide legislators with additional testimony when considering the passage of legislation. Another e-democratic mechanism is [online deliberative polling](#), a system under which citizens are provided the opportunity to deliberate with peers virtually before answering a poll question. The results of deliberative polls are more likely to reflect the considered judgments of the people and are thought to be a better way to assess public opinion while encouraging increased citizen awareness of civic issues.

⁵ open to all residents and their outcomes have legislative power

⁶ allows citizens to be part of making decisions on the allocation of a public budget.

⁷ In a hybrid between direct and representative democracy, [liquid democracy](#) permits individuals to vote on issues themselves or to select issue-competent delegates to vote on their behalf. Proponents of liquid democracy argue that it has the potential to improve a legislature's performance through bringing together delegates with a greater issue awareness, thus taking advantage of epistemic knowledge within the populace. In order to make liquid democracy more deliberative, some advocates suggest the use of a trustee model of delegation in which the delegates are free to vote as they see fit following deliberation with other representatives. Today, liquid democracy is utilized by [Pirate Parties](#), groups known for their support for more democratic reforms and greater internet transparency, for intra-party decision-making.

⁸ which include youth, women; socially and economic disadvantage citizens, racial and ethnic groups, people with disabilities, Roma, LGBTQI+ (this is a non-exhaustive list)



action on issues that concern them. They bring a new vision for a hopeful future⁹ as they shape new sustainable living values, infrastructure, and the interaction between these living values and infrastructure. Their people are put into action, whether it be in the rural or urban area. Community-led initiatives manifest themselves through the will and need of people to better align their values with their natural environment. Community-led initiatives create a consciousness of one's surroundings and the impact we have on it. Community-led initiatives are incubators which challenge the current structures, values and try through innovative means to address specific societal challenges. It has been said that as we realise the values of others with different values and intersections, we expand our way and use adaptive approaches or transformative approaches which benefit all; thus, leaving and excluding no one.

The European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability (ECOLISE) is a network of organisations engaged in promoting and supporting local communities across Europe in their efforts to build pathways to a sustainable future. As most people identify first and foremost with the tangible and immediate realities of community with its members ECOLISE seeks to establish a common, Europe-wide agenda and a platform for collective action. To do so, we require that our political systems become more inclusive and people centred. In its 2019 Status Report, *Reshaping the Future*, ECOLISE highlights how local [community-led initiatives are](#) re-energising our political systems through the [creative task of building community on a basis of environmental and social sustainability](#). For community-led initiatives, democracy exalted through their capacity to access land, to be recognized, to establish themselves and self-determine. While community-led initiatives are democratic practices they evolved outside of the “normal” democratic spectrum as their development is the reflection of disengaged citizens as well as that of a democratic deficit. Over the past decade, we can observe the rise of democratic fatigue, resistance to change, lack of re-evaluation, democratic exclusion of the most social and economic marginalised groups. Despite the effort of institutions and politicians to revive democracy and trust through the use and implementation of new structures or tools meant to provide citizens, local authorities and civil societies the means and spaces, people are not biting and are still feeling disenchanting and disengaged more than ever. Why? First, let's look at the disengagement of people living on the street or in precarious living situations then that of the youth.

⁹ To quote Karl Marx from the “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1852), “The social revolution of the nineteenth century can only draw its poetry from the future, not from the past”

1. Democracy for people living on the streets or precariously

Too often, the participation of people living in precarious situations is not really expected or desired and doesn't change anything in their lives. First there must be it's important to have a real political will in associating people living in poverty. That association should bring an impactful result at the end of the process. A political will to change is therefore the first necessary condition so that people excluded from participation want to participate. Second, in order to ensure that people living in precarious situations can fully participate in democratic practices, various conditions must be fulfilled.

Shortcoming of current democratic practices being used to consult citizens, and which exclude vulnerable groups

- **The draw**: this is something that is currently fashionable in terms of guaranteeing the participation of all parts of society. It is a tool that has been used both for major national issues, including the Citizens' Convention for the Climate, and for very local issues in France such as the Citizens' Councils.

If it is prepared by considering a certain number of social criteria but excludes racial, ethnicity, sexual orientation. The draw is known to have the capacity to allow a certain justice but its success relies heavily on criteria taken into account. Meaning that the criteria can support the offer of participation to the well-off classes as well as to the disadvantaged classes, to men as to women, to graduates as to those who are not graduates, but, in terms of response to these requests, there will be a huge gap. We will indeed find people who will be OK to respond positively to this solicitation among people who have the habit of thinking and contributing, who have the habit of debating, who have the habit of reading texts, of giving their opinion. But what about those who do not master reading/writing or speaking in front of a group? Well, they will not respond to these requests, and ultimately not be present in these assemblies. Getting picked to provide your opinion without having the tools and support to do so, looks more like a way to ease conscience and tick boxes. In addition to having an inclusive selection we also need to have inclusive access. This is something which should be built with communities, something which should be adapted based on consultation and cooperation with civil society organisations. It should foster peer to peer engagement.

Furthermore, in order to reach full participation from people living in precarious situations, it's important to **take into account concrete obstacles by removing organizational frontiers**. This means taking a close look at all the material conditions (cost of transportation, accessibility of the place, possibility for childcare during the event, taking charge of meals, possibility to pick up the person the first time, proposition to come with someone, thinking

about translation if some people doesn't speak well the spoken language...); having, in parallel to the project, interlocutors that people can speak with in order to support them facing different problems they meet; accepting that people sometimes don't come (letting them know this information at the beginning and be careful they keep the link even if they haven't been able to come, inform them about what happens, continue to make them exist in the group even when they are absent, etc.)

Full participation doesn't mean only being heard during a meeting but **being fully part of the process, with a clear and accurate goal**, before, during, and after the negotiations and discussions. However, this means letting them have time to prepare before or during meetings with their peers, with the support of an organization. As the others, people living in poverty need to be recognized and considered as full actors with their own knowledge, on an equal footing with others¹⁰.

Example on how vulnerable groups are being left out of the conversation regarding the environment:

- Renovations of Buildings:

In Nogent le Rotrou (France) that renovations of buildings that have led to low energy consumption have resulted in a considerable increase in rents, and therefore previous tenants, that were expected to return after the renovation, could not afford the new rents and end up in other buildings just as rotten as the one they left before the renovation. People cannot be expected to take part in consultation, support the renovation to then be left out dry and not be able to benefit from it.

This is the perfect example of how participation feels that it is only for those who are privileged, that they are the only one benefitting from those consultations. The surveys and reflections on participation should not remain a nice intellectual and technocratic activity that only provide for some to live in a healthy environment.

¹⁰ What people living in people tell us about the implementation of their participation in environmental struggles:

- only top-down injunctions do not work; people in poverty must be involved and recognized in their capacities as actors and partners; behind ecology (as behind poverty), there is knowledge to be shared and links to be created. People in precarious situations lack the information and means available for day-to-day ecology (is there not even some discrimination, when, for example, the means for selective sorting are not sufficiently implemented in working-class neighbourhoods?)
- There is also the question of minimum basic security, in particular access to a decent job and income; it is difficult to act sustainably for the ecology when one lives permanently in the anguish of the next day.

During the meeting, for people who have always experienced exclusion to be able to fully participate in forums; consultation; dialogues or projects; those must be conceived pedagogically and animated by people competent in animation and attentive to that everyone finds their place and are respected. Moreover, in order for individuals to be encouraged to continue or re-engage, the results of their participation must be made visible and make a real change.

Recommendations

- 1) **removing organizational barriers**
- 2) **being fully part of the process, with a clear and accurate goal**, before, during, and after the negotiations and discussions. However, this means giving them time to prepare before or during meetings with their peers, with the support of an organization.
- 3) be recognized and considered as full actors with their own knowledge, on an equal footing with others
- 4) forums; consultation; dialogues or project; those must be conceived pedagogically and animated by people competent in animation
- 5) the results of their participation must be made visible and make a real change

2. Democracy for Youth

Traditionally, young Europeans are the least likely to vote in local, national or European elections¹¹ and those who care are unable to vote because they just don't know where to search or find the information needed to make a decision. There is a need to have a further study on how to make that kind of information more viable, more accessible, more coherent, more practical and more interactive to engage more youth.

In the 2014 European Parliament elections, only 28% of voters aged 18-24 voted, compared to 51% of those aged over 55¹². Even though the 2019 European elections were driven by a surge in participation by young people, according to a Eurobarometer survey commissioned

¹¹ <https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2019/11/12/why-dont-young-people-vote/#.YKy4SOhKiUI>

¹² <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190923IPR61602/2019-european-elections-record-turnout-driven-by-young-people>



by the European Parliament in June of the same year¹³. Despite these positive results, there is still work to be done to increase even more the number of young people and students voting. **According to several Eurobarometer surveys added to the 2017 European Parliament surveys on “Why do large numbers of young people not vote in elections?”¹⁴ it often comes down to the same answer: A considerable proportion of citizens does not feel heard and consider the EU to be far away¹⁵.**

Research by the ‘League of Young Voters’¹⁶ showed that young people are interested in politics, but that political parties are out of touch with them and the different ways that young people wish to get involved¹⁷. One of the ideas given is that it is needed to study individual countries to understand how young people engage with politics and spread best practice. Other ideas are to adapt a European approach to citizenship education that involves schools and youth society and develops a space where youth participation is learned and practiced. Lowering the voting age to 16 could also help reverse the lack of interest in politics and build a youth-inclusive European politics¹⁸.

One other reason to take into account is the place of voting, which may be far from the person’s place of residence and because of that s/he can’t go vote. The solution to this would be to provide free public transportation so that these young people, or anyone else, can travel to the polling stations. In Brussels, public transport is either integrated into the price

¹³ The results of the post-electoral Eurobarometer survey, one of the most comprehensive quantitative surveys on the last European elections publicly available, show that the turnout increase was powered mostly by the younger generation across the EU. Specifically, young citizens under 25 years (+14 percentage points) as well as the 25–39-year-olds (+12 percentage points) turned out in greater numbers than before.

¹⁴ https://europa.eu/youth/nnfe/why-do-large-numbers-young-people-not-vote-elections_en

¹⁵ Here some answers to the European Parliament Survey *“Because we feel like politics is not about us. To change the situation is to change how things work. A more personal connection with a future president and with all the system is needed which involves a totally different approach using mobile phones and other.” “Young people don’t always fully understand the consequences of not voting, such as allowing the rise of fascist governments. There needs to be a more direct approach to teaching young people that their vote and opinions. When you want people to listen, you have to speak their language, and that is a huge part of the problem.”*

¹⁶ LYV’s report, “Addressing Youth Absenteeism in the European Elections” :

https://www.youthforum.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/YFJ-LYV_StudyOnYouthAbsenteeism_WEB%20%281%29.pdf

¹⁷ by signing petitions, becoming a Poll Worker, by interning or volunteering for a campaign, getting in contact with the community representative, getting involved in school politics.

¹⁸ The idea is that by lowering the voting age, young people start dealing with political issues at an earlier stage and this would lead to more investment in political education.

of festivals or free to access for people attending them, and to sensitize people to use public transport, one in a while when the city declares a car free day, then public transport is free for everyone. In France, public transport is free for people over 65 this could be easily extended to young people not yet in employment. There is also the example in Luxembourg where nationwide public transport is free for everyone.

Recommendations:

- 1) A study on how to make political, legislative information more viable, accessible, coherent, practical and interactive in order to engage more young people
- 2) Adopt a European approach to citizenship education that involves schools and youth society and develops a space where youth participation is learned and practiced
- 3) Make people feel heard and considered by ensuring that their input is valued, reviewed and answered whether taken on board or not
- 4) Provide free public transportation so that young people, or anyone else can travel to and from the polling stations

Conclusion: We all have a role to play

How to create the right space and conditions and provide the right support to ensure that marginalised groups practice democracy?

Being recognized :

- If everybody is paid, people living in poverty have to be paid too.
- If everybody has a tabletop (*chevalet de table in French*), people living in poverty have it too.
- Everyone's word is respected.
- Everybody has the same speaking time.
- Everybody has the same welcome.
- Everybody's speech is listened to and taken into account
- Not pretending: involving from the beginning of the process until after the end
- Allowing preparation upstream
- Being physically around the table and not at only one end of the table
- Being considered as everybody (on an equal footing)



**COMMUNITIES
FOR FUTURE**

- Preparing the meetings with people living in precarious situations, checking all the participants have well understood the theme, the purpose of the event etc.

Being involved :

- Thinking about the theme and the organization of the event (form and content) with people living in poverty from the beginning of the process and until the end.
- Involving people in poverty in suggesting research themes, rather than in just telling their stories, as is generally the case