



European Citizens' Consultations: Consultation begins at home

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Paul Butcher and Simona Pronckutė

Abstract

In 2018 the European Citizens' Consultations took place throughout Europe. These events were organised by national governments and local actors, and thus represented a significantly increased role for the member states in communicating about Europe, a task which had previously been carried out chiefly by EU bodies. Thus, the Citizens' Consultations hold great potential for the application of the principle of subsidiarity to citizens' engagement and inclusion in decision-making. However, for the consultations to be successful, political leaders need to ensure that the results are reflected in the European Parliament election campaign and the agenda of the new leadership, demonstrating that citizens' voices are being heard in Brussels. This article will give background information about the European Citizens' Consultations, evaluate their potential and provide recommendations on how policymakers can ensure this new tool is used effectively.

Keywords

Democracy, Citizens, Consultation, Dialogue, European Parliament elections

Introduction

In his speech at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed 'citizens' conventions' to identify the public's 'priorities, concerns and ideas' for the future of the EU (Macron 2017). His proposal was implemented in 2018 under the name 'European Citizens' Consultations' (ECCs). The consultations were an experimental innovation that aimed to improve the quality of European democracy by providing citizens with an opportunity to express and exchange their views about the Union and its future. In doing so, the consultations essentially duplicated the existing

Corresponding author:

P. Butcher, European Policy Centre, 14–16 Rue du Trône/Troonstraat, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium.
Email: p.butcher@epc.eu



Citizens' Dialogues and institutional consultation mechanisms, repackaging them as a democratic innovation, with the idea that citizens could have a direct impact on EU decision-making via the European Council.

This article argues that the significance of the ECCs is that they were conceived, designed and carried out at member-state level. It is true that there was an EU-level guiding process, including an online questionnaire hosted by the European Commission. But what set the ECCs apart from pre-existing formats such as the Citizens' Dialogues was their national- or local-level ownership. This meant that they had the crucial advantage of being perceived not as 'a Commission exercise' but rather as an EU-wide initiative driven by national governments and civil society actors. Thus, they represent the application of the principle of subsidiarity to the debate about democracy and the EU's future, and also serve to bring the member states and local politics into the discussion.

The result was that the ECCs and the Citizens' Dialogues formed a common front: in the former, local and national politicians discussed European issues, while in the latter, it was mostly EU representatives from Brussels who took part. The ambiguous relationship between the two initiatives somewhat obscured the supposedly innovative nature of the ECCs. Citizens were not always sure which institutions they were addressing at a given event: in some member states the Citizens' Dialogues were included in the branding of the ECCs, while in others the two were kept strictly separate. This ambiguity likely detracted from the ECCs' potential to demonstrate to citizens that their local authorities are also an appropriate channel for raising concerns about European issues.

However, the important thing is that the ECCs and increased numbers of Citizens' Dialogues represent an attempt to help citizens' involvement in European affairs reach a critical mass. For this to pay off, it is imperative that something tangible comes out of the discussions, with citizens' proposals shaping the agenda at the EU level. Formal results will depend on the next EU leadership. Nevertheless, the European Parliament (EP) elections represent an important opportunity for candidates to talk about the consultations, keep the results on the radar and demonstrate, even if only by referring to them in speeches, that the ECCs have been taken on board prior to the inauguration of the new politico-institutional cycle.

As awareness of the ECCs remains low, this article first provides details on how they were implemented. It then offers a cautious evaluation: the consultations should be welcomed for their contribution to the debate, but the magnitude of their success can only be measured by the extent to which their results are taken up by political figures. The article goes on to make recommendations about what policymakers should do, both in the EP election campaigns and afterwards, to show that the ECCs were more than merely a communication exercise and to reassure citizens that they have a voice in EU affairs.

How the democratic experiment played out

The prominent role played by President Macron in proposing the idea and the European Commission's efforts to provide an overarching framework could give the impression that the ECCs were a unified series of events fitting a single template. In fact, the hallmark of the initiative was diversity: in exchange for their agreement to participate, member states were granted a huge amount of flexibility to implement the events in whatever format best suited their own aims, resources and national practices. They made full use of this flexibility, which meant that the ECCs effectively took place in 26 separate campaigns, each with its own branding, formats, time frames and even goals (Butcher and Stratulat 2018).

Such a flexible process inevitably has certain downsides. With so much variation between national interpretations, the initiative had no common identity. This had consequences for its visibility, credibility and meaning, as well as for its prospects of having a lasting effect. Beyond the somewhat general aims set forth by Macron in his Sorbonne speech—identifying citizens' priorities, raising public awareness about the EU and getting citizens to debate European issues domestically—there was no predetermined objective for the ECCs. That means there are no clear criteria for measuring their success.

For example, the joint report that the Austrian and Romanian presidencies prepared for the European Council refers to a total of 1,700 events organised by member states (Council of the EU 2018b). According to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Quelle est votre Europe 2018a*, 4), nearly 1,100 of these took place in France, meaning that France alone accounts for a comfortable majority of the total events. This could be taken to mean that the other countries did not put in the same effort or have the same commitment, but to do so would be to misunderstand the principles behind their interpretations of the idea. The French 'model' allowed anything from conferences to participatory theatre performances to be labelled 'consultations' via an open application process. This was certainly an inspiration for some participating member states. But in others it was consciously rejected in favour of a smaller-scale vision. In the Netherlands, for example, the consultations took the form of just five meetings, where citizens hand-picked from a set of applicants discussed the EU's future not with politicians but among themselves.

Judging the European Citizens' Consultations on their own merits

The example just given demonstrates the difficulty inherent in trying to evaluate events with such diverse formats. Instead, the ECCs should be considered in the light of what they achieved given the very limited resources available. The idea was conceived, developed and implemented in the space of less than a year. Most member states agreed to participate in the initiative at the European Council summit on 23 February, and this left only a few months before events were launched in earnest shortly before

the summer period. National budgets had not been prepared with the ECCs in mind, meaning each government had to set aside money from existing budgets. Thus, funds were necessarily limited.

What is more, the ECCs took place at a time when Europe is facing deep divisions. New political forces, from the pro-EU liberal centrism of Macron's *En Marche!* to radical populist challengers—who are often opposed to further European integration and are increasing their support across the continent—are sources of concern for many incumbent governments. In this environment it was no mean feat to find the political will to embark on a process of consulting citizens and to risk giving voice to populist views. Yet the ECCs not only went ahead but actively involved all of the member states but one.¹ In practice, populist or anti-European voices did not feature prominently.

The ECCs should not be measured against some hypothetical model of what a perfect consultation should look like. Rather, in evaluating their impact, one has to take into account the situation before they took place. Whatever the weaknesses of individual event formats, it is undeniable that the ECCs brought discussions on Europe to a new level and succeeded in engaging citizens in each member state, albeit to varying extents. In many countries it was the first time that European issues had been discussed prominently by national actors, as opposed to those from the EU level.

This initiative was not intended to be a cure-all, but rather a first step, and an experimental one at that. Given the obstacles it had to overcome, it is an encouraging sign that it went ahead at all, and the important thing now is to ensure that the opportunity is not wasted. What happens next will determine whether the initiative can really be described as a success. While the ECCs represent an innovative application of subsidiarity to the question of engaging citizens, their success remains chiefly dependent on the response at EU level.

Analysing the key outcomes and mixed results

In most of the participating countries, the ECCs concluded in the autumn of 2018. Each country was required to submit a report summarising the discussions for consideration at the European Council on 13–14 December. Citizens participating in the consultations had been informed that their views would be discussed by the heads of state and government.

In the end, a joint report was published by the Austrian and Romanian presidencies (Council of the EU 2018b), accompanied by executive summaries from each participating member state (Council of the EU 2018a). The European Commission also produced an interim report on the results of the online questionnaire and a summary of the 2018 Citizens' Dialogues (Kantar Public 2018a; European Commission 2018a). Individual member states have also produced longer reports, many of which are available in English (European Commission 2018b). Several of these reports describe the substance of the

discussions in considerable detail. The French report, for example, runs to 170 pages (Quelle est votre Europe 2018b), while its German counterpart consists of a 32-page report and a 119-page scientific analysis of the full results (Germany, Federal Government 2018; Kantar Public 2018b).

However, the reference to these discussions in the Council conclusions suggests that the issue was discussed only marginally. The conclusions merely say that the consultations ‘could serve as an inspiration for further consultations and dialogues’ and that future priorities will be discussed at the Sibiu summit on 9 May 2019 (European Council 2018). This is inadequate, given that citizens had been led to expect that leaders would engage in detail with their discussions and propose concrete outcomes.

Having carried out a relatively high-profile initiative with the aim of bringing citizens closer to European decision-making, EU leaders must now ensure that those who participated feel that their contributions have been heard. If this does not happen, the perception that the EU is distant, unresponsive and undemocratic is likely to increase as citizens will feel that their contribution was meaningless.

The EP elections: the next test of citizens’ engagement with Europe

The campaigns for the EP elections in May 2019 are the next opportunity to demonstrate that the ECCs and their results are on EU politicians’ radar. The reports produced by each member state, the Council and the European Commission are excellent resources for politicians seeking to understand what is important to the public. These reports go far beyond the quantitative data supplied by opinion polls such as Eurobarometer, as they go into details about why citizens feel the way they do, the reasoning behind their views and what they want the EU to do in response. Candidates and *Spitzenkandidaten* running in the EP elections should pay attention to these reports and use them to help construct their own campaigns so that they address the European issues their constituents feel are most important.

This need not mean that candidates should surrender their autonomy or allow the content of their campaigns to be dictated by the consultation results. The topics most frequently mentioned in the reports are generally little different from those that one might expect: citizens are concerned about immigration, security and climate change. But if there is one thread that runs through all the national reports, it is the frustration of citizens who feel that the EU is not listening to them. The benefit of including explicit reference to the ECCs in candidates’ campaigns is that it would indicate that 2018’s most prominent ‘listening exercise’ has not already been forgotten and that politicians are aware of the concerns citizens have expressed. What is more, as populist and anti-European actors are likely to be serious challengers in this election, making reference to these detailed discussions with citizens would be a good way to counter their claim to speak for ‘the people’.

It has long been argued that European elections are not truly transnational contests, but ‘second-order national’ elections in which national parties campaign chiefly on national issues (Reif and Schmitt 1980). If candidates in 2019 wish to Europeanise the debate and turn the European elections into a real vote on EU issues, the ECCs and their results can tell them what is important to their local electorates and how they can best make the link between citizens’ day-to-day concerns and European policy. The results can also be used to demonstrate similarities between the priorities of citizens in different parts of Europe, which would help create the feeling that the election campaign is an EU-wide discussion. In this way, candidates can be the bridge between local-level discussions and decision-makers in Brussels by actively encouraging further discussion on European issues at a local or national level. At the same time, reference to the ECCs is an opportunity to emphasise how ‘local’ issues have a European dimension and vice versa.

The continuity of consultation after the 2019 European elections

Engagement with and reference to the results of the ECCs should not end with the EP elections. The Strategic Agenda 2019–2024, which will be discussed at the informal Council summit in Sibiu on 9 May, is supposed to take the ECCs on board. Members of the European Parliament and national politicians should follow the implementation of this agenda closely and hold the new Commission to account to ensure that both the consultation topics and specific proposals made by the citizens are given due consideration. As in the election campaigns, the link between policy proposals and discussions during the ECCs should be made explicit to ensure that citizens in general are aware that these events took place and are having a tangible impact on the development of European policy.

Referring to the ECCs prominently in the new politico-institutional cycle should serve to raise awareness about them, among both the public and political leaders. This will in turn make it all the more crucial that the consultations do not remain a one-off exercise but are repeated to give citizens further opportunities to influence decision-making.

The presidents of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee have raised a proposal for an EU ‘permanent mechanism’ for consulting citizens (Lambertz and Jahier 2018). Political leaders in the member states should throw their weight behind this plan and push for a repetition of a consultation process that puts national governments, local authorities and civil society actors in the driving seat. They should also undertake to maintain proactive communication with citizens on European issues to ensure that discussion on these topics continues to take place at the national and local levels.

Conclusion: looking ahead to new engagement

The ECCs are still a new tool, especially for those member states that do not have a strong tradition of actively engaging with citizens. However, this new experience was generally well received by both civil society and national governments. This shows that

local actors are indeed interested in this kind of event, but the Commission's Citizens' Dialogues were not an appropriate means to involve them. It took an initiative that was driven by the member states and had local ownership to bring them on board.

The ECCs need not replace or be merged with Citizens' Dialogues, but the relationship between them should be better clarified and kept consistent across Europe. The ECCs are valuable as a new tool for consulting and engaging with citizens on EU-wide subjects at the local and national levels. They help ensure that local and national political figures are involved in EU-level issues and that these issues do not remain the exclusive remit of 'Brussels bureaucrats'. This makes the ECCs the most promising example of the application of the principle of subsidiarity to citizens' engagement and involvement in decision-making.

Brussels officials, for their part, need to show that they are aware of these consultation processes and to reassure citizens that their input has been heard and taken on board. They can make a start by referring to the results in speeches and campaign material, and it is vital that this forms part of the EP election campaign.

In the future the ECCs should take place regularly to collect citizens' input on an ongoing basis. As suggested by the presidents of the European Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, a consultation mechanism based on the ECCs could run on an annual cycle. Consultations could begin when the European Commission's work programme is announced and then run throughout the first half of the year, resulting in reports being submitted to the Council, Parliament and Commission in time for the State of the Union speech. In this way they would serve as tools for both communication and feedback, while also bringing the citizens closer to the policymaking process.

In light of the rising populist and anti-EU sentiment, member states should find new ways to allow citizens to provide input into the policymaking process. New tools such as the ECCs could help complement representative democracy, not with the blunt and unannounced tools of direct democracy, such as referendums, but with deliberative democracy, giving citizens the chance to express themselves and influence decision-makers in a consensus-oriented manner. With the ECCs, consultation begins at home, driven by the member states and local civil society in such a way that the participating citizens can feel the local relevance of European issues. They must now see that the supposedly distant EU-level politicians have heard them and intend to act.

Note

1. Only in Italy did political factors, notably the crisis resulting from the March 2018 general election, prevent the ECCs from taking place. The UK decided not to participate due to its forthcoming departure from the EU.

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Author biographies

Paul Butcher is a Policy Analyst for the European Politics and Institutions Programme at the European Policy Centre, where he works on citizens' participation, EU enlargement to the Balkans and the impact of disinformation on European democracy. He holds a BA in modern and medieval languages from the University of Cambridge and an MA in Southeast European Studies from the Karl-Franzens University of Graz, Austria. In addition to working as a research assistant at the University of Graz, he has completed traineeships at the European Parliament under Alyn Smith MEP and with SOS Children's Villages International in Vienna.



Simona Pronckutė was formerly a programme assistant for the European Politics and Institutions Programme at the European Policy Centre. Before this she worked at NATO and the European Commission. She has also worked as an electoral analyst at VoteWatch Europe. Ms Pronckutė was an organiser of *Fraternité 2020*, the first-ever European Citizens' Initiative. She has written extensively on participatory democracy and youth-related issues. She acts as an external expert to EU institutions on the European Citizens' Initiative and is a board member of the European Citizens' Initiative Campaign.