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Democracy par excellence

A transnational Citizens' Assembly could enable a deliberative opening far beyond national enclosures and the 'Brussels bubble'

In a recent lamenting of the fading of democracy in the European Union, former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis said he won't give up on European democracy — but even he admits: 'I must convince myself that EU electoral politics is worth the trouble before I can convince anyone else.'

Varoufakis is far from alone. A decline in confidence in democracy and falling trust in political institutions are part of a worldwide trend, to which the EU is not immune. This is because electoral politics so often feel futile, petty and demoralising, as Varoufakis can no doubt attest. So, how can we shift to a more hopeful vision?

We can start by identifying the problem at the EU level: in the current governance system, citizen power is far too limited. Worryingly, 'democracy' was only mentioned once by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her 2023 State of the EU address. Yet, democracy must be the foundation for any other policy achievements. Von der Leyen touted her work in energy, labour, agriculture and more. However, even if one agrees with those policies, they are at risk of being underappreciated, undermined or reversed if they are not backed by democratic mandates and legitimacy.

'A new push for democracy' is, in fact, one of the European Commission's self-declared top priorities for the coming year. The EU has previously acknowledged that citizens are not sufficiently involved or empowered in its governance. But we need to move beyond lip service before it is too late.

The European Citizens' Assembly

In a new paper published by the European University Institute, I joined a group of experts to offer a blueprint for action: a rationale and outline for

the creation of a European Citizens' Assembly (EUCA). The ideas are in line with, yet more ambitious than the recent proposals from Franco-German scholars for institutionalised citizens' panels. The EUCA would be a new political organ, enshrining citizen power and deliberation, and sharing power with other institutions of the EU: the European Council, Commission and Parliament.

It is no small thing to set up an additional branch of government. But such an Assembly is needed, because at a time of systemic contestation of the worth of democracy itself – and of its very definition – the stakes could not be higher. If citizens do not have genuine agency and voice in deciding the big issues facing us in this age of turbulence, our political system will be choked by apathy and cynicism and further lock us in a downward spiral of democratic decline.

The EUCA would be transformative. To begin with, it would horizontally connect everyday European citizens directly to one another, in a civic sense and across borders — rather than the prevailing definition of citizen, narrowly based on what national passport one holds. To ensure representation, the continent-wide Assembly would draw its members from lotteries, also known as sortition, a practice that has been demonstrated at length both in theory and practice. Sortition involves two stages: a randomised lottery to invite people to be Assembly Members and a stratification to ensure broad representativeness of the community, following the techniques developed for opinion polls.

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This results in a broadly representative and diverse cross-section of everyday people. It is a different form of representation than elections, which tend to select individuals from the upper and middle classes of society. Could a few hundred citizens selected by lottery, rotating in and out, 'represent' 500 million citizens across 27 or more countries? They could, to the extent that both their selection and the debates they conduct are communicated with the wider public in a radically transparent way.

The Assembly must be permanent because only a standing Assembly can avoid arbitrariness and cherry-picking on when and how such Assemblies are convened, while at the same time opening up the promise for learning over time and acquiring a status understood by the citizenry.

The EUCA would strengthen a shared sense of democratic equality across Europe because the core ethos of randomness is equal chance.

Sortition allows everyday people from all walks of life to have an equal chance of being selected, whereas they would not stand a chance in the traditional electoral system monopolised by politicians and parties. Members of the assembly are entitled to paid time off work to take up their civic duties: child care and transport are covered.

The argument for enhancing democratic equality is all the more important in an EU where some states, and therefore their citizens, are perceived as more equal than others. In a Citizens' Assembly, a German worker or a Latvian teacher could conceivably feel closer to, respectively, a Spanish worker or an Irish teacher than to an 'elite' member of their own country.

Preventing state capture

Impartiality is also key here because, no matter how well-intentioned, politicians and technocrats will always be perceived as having biases. The EUCA would be untethered to any faction because randomly selected, rotating citizens do not have a political career or parties' interests to defend. They do not have time to be captured by special interests, lobbies and factions, and they are more immune to corrupting influences than career bureaucrats or politicians. And, as Hugh Pope has written while observing Assemblies in France, their initial lack of expertise in a subject can, over the course of the assembly, prove to strengthen the depth of the deliberation.

If we emphasise not only procedural but also substantive understandings of democracy, state capture is one of the greatest threats undermining democracy. At the EU level, lobbies hold great sway, and corruption scandals have further damaged citizens' trust. Citizens with no political career to defend will more genuinely deliberate, and be more open to considering both the national and the EU perspectives.

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Finally, the EUCA can uniquely embody 'epistemic democracy', or the expression of different types of world views, by confronting them under quasi-ideal circumstances: high-quality deliberation and moderation, wide-ranging information from all sides, contradictory viewpoints, general Assembly sessions alternating with small group discussions, inclusive and reciprocal listening, as well as shared decision-making by supermajority or consensus.

In these conditions, the many are wiser than the few. Citizens' Assemblies, as evidenced by the more than 600 examples documented by the OECD, as well as recently in France and Belgium, create the conditions to channel our collective intelligence. This is all the truer across political cultures and linguistic barriers, where diversity is magnified. A transnational Citizens' Assembly would enable a deliberative opening across local, regional, national and transnational identities — far beyond national enclosures and the 'Brussels bubble'.

The idea of self-government, whereby each citizen can imagine herself ruled and ruling in turn throughout her life, is both the oldest argument in favour of sortition-based bodies and the hardest to translate in the context of contemporary state-building and the complexity of governing. But working alongside other EU bodies, the EUCA would constitute a democratic method *par excellence* to reduce social distinction in the distribution of European power — and to prevent power from being monopolised by a group of professionals (political, bureaucratic, judicial or expert).

This is the great question of our time: what kind of democratic renewal can help deliver the existential transitions we are facing — green, social, digital and geopolitical? The EU has a crucial role to play in answering this question, both as a laboratory and as a leading actor on the global stage. Now is no time for pessimism. It is a moment for bold experimentation and for citizens to reclaim their power — for us to take our shared destiny into our own hands.



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