

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Lessons from the European Citizens' Panels

Conclusions from the project “*The Future of the EU – Make Climate Action its Trademark*”

16 December 2022

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Main findings

- 1 The recommendations of the European Citizens' Panels shaped the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CFE). In this respect, panels were a success.
- 2 Citizens' panels can become a standard feature of EU decision making in the future if (1) their scope is clearly defined, (2) their composition also reflects the values and political convictions of citizens, and (3) they are likely to advance deadlocked debates. The Commission is the best place to launch panels. As a rule, panels could take place after the Commission has published a communication but before it has tabled a legislative proposal.
- 3 CFE recommendations are unlikely to shape the EU's climate and energy policies. Existing EU policies already cover many CFE recommendations. Moreover, many CFE recommendations are too abstract and vague to impact climate and energy policies. Hence, implementation of CFE recommendations is not very challenging.
- 4 CFE did not address important gaps of EU climate and energy policies, such as phaseout dates for coal combustion, fossil fuel subsidies and short distance flights.
- 5 The recommendations on expanding majority voting and expanding the ordinary legislative process, however, are very relevant for climate and energy policies.

Background: The project

At the Conference on the Future of Europe (CFE), citizen assemblies – the so-called European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) – took centre stage. Composed of 800 citizens randomly selected from all Member States, these panels developed recommendations on all topics relevant to the future of Europe – spanning from climate protection and labour market policy to foreign policy. These recommendations shaped the outcome of the conference.

Against this backdrop of the CFE, the project "*The Future of the EU – Make Climate Action its Trademark*" established a network of think tanks from eight Member States – Germany, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Poland.¹

The main objectives of the project were

- to monitor the domestic debates on the CFE and its link to climate policies,
- to facilitate dialogues on the CFE between Member States, and
- to contribute regularly to the domestic debates on the CFE.

The project was funded by the European Climate Initiative (EUKI).

Citizens' panels in EU decision making: Lessons from the CFE

The European Commission plans to make citizens' panels a more permanent feature of EU decision-making. To this end, the CFE and its ECPs offer at least six lessons:

First: Politicians must be more honest and assertive in stating what citizens' panels really are: advisory bodies, not substitute parliaments. "The citizens of Europe have spoken and are now being heard" has been a frequent statement. "Their proposals

reflect the expectations of European citizens" is another common statement. As a quasi-expression of the electorates' will, recommendations have to be implemented. This rhetoric problematically overstates the importance of the panels. While they complement other forms of citizen participation, they do not represent the people.

Second: For the recommendations to add practical value, citizens' panels should address narrowly defined topics. The topic of "the future of Europe" was too broad. Given such a vast topic, the development of concrete and thus action-oriented recommendations was hard. As a result, many recommendations were general and reiterated already existing EU decisions, resulting in little added value for the EU.

Citizens' panels for specific legislative projects – as planned by the Commission – are one option for narrowing down topics. Citizens' panels on the strategic direction of the EU, on the other hand, are at risk of drifting into abstract statements.

Third: To ensure that participation in the EU's legislative process is timely and focused on specific issues, citizens' panels should convene following a Commission's communication but before the Commission's legislative proposal. The Commission's proposal defines scope and helps clarify mandate. Citizens' panels could be conducted in parallel to the regular stakeholder consultation process.

To ensure a clear demarcation from the actual legislative decisions, the panels' work should end with comments on the Commission's proposal.

After the legislative process, the panels should receive publicly and in detail feedback on why specific recommendations were or were not adopted.

Fourth: The Commission seems to be the best placed body to launch citizens' panels in the future. The Commission already

¹ <https://www.ecologic.eu/18077>

initiates public consultation. It has broad experience and necessary resources. It initiates legislation but is no legislator. This system is best suited to avoid delays and complex initiation processes.

Fifth: The panels should not bog down already slow and complicated legislative processes in the EU, and they should not be disproportionately costly. For these reasons, panels should be restricted to legislative projects which are of strategic importance for the EU and for which panels are likely to advance the debate. Citizens' panels could help unlock deadlocked issues.

Sixth: Citizens' panels ought to be as representative as possible. This means that panels must not only represent a mini-Europe in terms of gender, age, education, and socio-economic background but also in terms of values, political beliefs, and electoral choices.

European Citizens' Panels: the impact on EU climate and energy policies

The ECPs adopted several recommendations directly relevant for climate and energy policies. The CFE endorsed all these recommendations.

All in all, only a few recommendations have the potential to advance EU climate and energy policies. Most recommendations are vague. Many reiterate existing EU policies; some even request less than what EU laws already require.

Recommendations that have the potential to advance policies and the political discourse include for instance:

- Recommendation 12 (Panel 3) on redirecting “generic subsidies for agriculture mainly towards projects related to the development of sustainable agriculture”.

- Recommendation 16 (Panel 3) on phasing out intensive animal farming gradually, including the elimination of disrespectful living conditions of animals.
- Recommendation 22 (Panel 3) on limiting advertising for products that damage the environment.
- Recommendations on expanding the ordinary legislative process and majority voting in climate-relevant policy areas, such as energy taxation, energy mix or spatial planning.

Most other recommendations, however, are unlikely to impact climate policies because they are vague, only reiterate existing policies or even fall behind existing laws. Examples include:

- Recommendation 7 on adopting and implementing “a common European charter targeting environmental issues”.
- Recommendation 9 on “*considering* the entire ecological and social impacts of the energy production process for current and future generations”.
- Recommendation 11 on the extension of protected areas for nature conservation requests less than what EU laws already require and will require, once the more detailed and robust nature restoration law is adopted.
- Recommendation 32 on setting up an enforcement system to fight pollution – with the support of an expert organisation – does not take account of the existing compliance system.

In addition, recommendations do not address some of the most pressing and contested climate policies, such as a phase out date for ending fossil fuel subsidies, coal combustion or short distance flights.

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Date

16.12.2022

Suggested citation

Meyer-Ohlendorf, Nils (2022): The
Conference on the Future of
Europe: Lessons from the
European Citizens' Panels.
Ecologic Institute, Berlin.

Conclusions from the project "*The
Future of the EU – Make Climate
Action its Trademark*"

Supported by:



on the basis of a decision
by the German Bundestag