

Future of Europe: Remember we have a choice!

Political engagement and participation in Western democracies have decreased in recent years. At the European Union level, years of criticism of its supposedly inherent democratic deficit and lack of legitimacy have undermined citizens' trust in the EU as a political actor. Recent developments in EU governance, however, show increasing efforts to find innovative ways of engaging citizens.

'Houston we have a problem': political participation decreases

Political engagement and participation in Western democracies have decreased in recent years. A **deep divide** exists between those actively participating a lot – a minority – and the vast majority of citizens who take part in very few political activities. According to the [OECD](#), since 1970 voter turnout in OECD countries has decreased an average of eight percentage points. From 1990 to 2006, reports the World Value Survey, those who reported they had a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in political parties across the world dropped from 49% to 27%. The issue is even greater with supranational bodies, such as the European Union. Years of criticism of its supposedly inherent democratic deficit, opaque operations and lack of legitimacy have undermined citizens' trust in the EU as a political actor.

Online political participation: thus far, an unfulfilled promise

The litmus test of this argument rests in the delusional effect of e-participation. **Promoters of new forms of e-participation assumed that 'going online' would lower the threshold for political participation, with the consequence that more citizens participated in political actions online.** Instead, the divide between highly active and passive citizens remains for online participation. At the EU level, for instance, three years of the European Citizens' Initiative have shown limitations in achieving its goal of encouraging European citizens to participate in EU policy-making. Of the 51 initiatives proposed, only 3 have passed the 1-million-signature threshold.

Innovative avenues for political participation

Recent developments in EU governance show an increasing effort to develop innovative ways of engaging with citizens. Two of the most interesting and innovative paths are worth noting. The first consists of '**Gamification**'. A Google search for the term 'gamification' produces more than 6.3 million results – with 1 500 results appearing in Google Scholar alone. In its most widely accepted definition, gamification is described as the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts, with the former aimed at making the latter more fun. In 2012, the information technology and research advisory company Garner forecast that, within the next two years, more than 70% of the top 2 000 public organisations worldwide would have at least one 'gamified' application in place. At EU level, gamification has quickly become an acknowledged practice. The European Central Bank created 'Economia', a game that challenges players with basic concepts of monetary policy. '[Kids Corner](#)' is a game developed by the European Commission, in which players have to protect the interests of children and young people, and at the same time learn about the rights of their children.

The second innovative avenue is '**participatory budgeting**'. Participatory budgeting is believed to allow citizens and public administrators to jointly determine spending priorities, through 'co-deciding' on measures. Cooperation is expected to reduce conflicts and to favour broader acceptance of budgetary decisions. Albeit the EU has not yet experimented with participatory budgeting in its budget procedures, it incentivises its use at the national level, including with the aim of benefiting from citizens' greater engagement.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in May 2016.

