

NOTE: this open letter is still undergoing a final technical and linguistic check. Please do not share it publicly.

Open Letter: European Parliament, make the ECI work!

On 20 June, the Constitutional Affairs Committee (AFCO) of the European Parliament will cast a vote of crucial importance for the future of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). With this open letter, civil society organisations and former ECI organisers call upon the European Parliament to take its responsibility for this participatory instrument by obliging itself to debate and vote on every single successful ECI in plenary before the Commission adopts its formal response.

Dear Members of the European Parliament,

We know that you have been waiting for this almost as long as we have been: the long overdue revision of the European Citizens' Initiative. Some of you may be tired of the topic because of the number of times you have already debated it in your House and elsewhere, with many arguments coming back over and over again. However, this is not the time to lose focus. This is your time to take your collective responsibility, to commit yourselves to this participatory instrument, and to make the ECI politically meaningful! Only YOU can do this. **We call upon you, the European Parliament, to oblige yourself to have a debate and vote in plenary on every single successful ECI before the Commission adopts its formal response.**

Even if it is a novelty at the transnational level, the ECI is not unique. In Latvia and Finland, they have successfully implemented citizens' initiatives at the national level that largely resemble the ECI. *Their* citizens' initiatives seem to work reasonably well, not only in the eyes of politicians, but also in the eyes of citizens.¹ Why can we not make the ECI work? There is a crucial difference that sets the ECI apart from these national citizens' initiatives. In the latter case, it is the Parliament that is in charge of dealing with citizens' initiatives successful at collecting the required number of signatures, not the government. Why is this relevant for their success? It is not because the Parliament has always agreed with these initiatives. From the 23 successful initiatives in Finland, so far only one has been approved by the Parliament and resulted in a direct legislative impact. What makes a critical difference, though, is that citizens who signed a successful initiative can follow what happens with their initiative, how it is taken up and debated by their directly elected representatives and what outcome this results in. If the initiative you supported as a citizen is rejected by the MP you voted for, you may have less reason to vote for that MP in the future and vice versa. This direct link between participatory and representative democracy is fundamental for the success of a participatory instrument, and as such it strengthens democracy overall.

At European level, we have a disconnect. A successful ECI can only count on a reply from the Commission, which is not directly answerable to citizens. The months between the

¹ See e.g. Christensen, Henrik Serup; Karjalainen, Marija; Setälä, Maija; 'Finnish Citizens' Initiatives – Towards Inclusive Agenda-Setting?'; published in *Scandinavian Political Studies* (December 2017), p. 17.

submission of a successful ECI and the Commission reply are like a black tunnel for ECI organisers and supporters. They have no way of telling how a Commission reply has come into being and whether this can be considered a democratically fair response. This disconnect leads to a structural mismatch of expectations on the type of impact a successful ECI can reasonably be expected to have, and only the European Parliament can do something about it. By obliging yourself to debate and vote on every single successful ECI before the Commission reply, the European Parliament takes on an indispensable function of representative politics: that of democratic mediator – mediating between the expectations of citizens and the institutional reality of policy-making, between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’. In the absence of such democratic mediation, there will continue to be a disconnect between this participatory instrument and our European system of representative democracy, and the ECI will continue to result in “more pain than gain” for all parties concerned.²

We count on you during your vote on 20 June!

Democratically yours,
[...]

² Quote from Bertelsmann Stiftung, ‘Factsheet to the Policy Brief 2/2018: More Initiative for Europe’s citizens’ (March 2018), p. 9. Available at: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/project-news/the-european-citizens-initiative-is-largely-unknown-and-hardly-has-any-impact/>