



HEAD OFFICE

10 Rue du Commerce  
1000 Brussels, Belgium  
+32 2 285 41 63  
yepp@epp.eu

## STANDING FOR ELECTORAL REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

*Adopted at the YEPP Council Meeting in Helsinki, 18.02.2023*

### Recognizing that:

- Contemporary representative democracies are often argued to be in a crisis due to challenges like low voter turnouts, declining membership in political parties, political polarization, anti-establishment populism and a perceived lack of political representation. These challenges need to be taken seriously.
- Many academics, civil society organizations like the radical climate movement and political forces on the left have argued that the purported crisis of democracy should be addressed by a radical democratic innovation; **randomly selected citizens' panels** in which people's representatives are selected by lot rather than through elections. Many see that the panels should supplement electoral institutions, granting them substantial consultative and agenda-setting political power.
- The challenges that liberal democracies face are not confined to national-level governments. The European Union (EU) suffers from a democratic deficit; it is widely held that the union's decision-making procedures lack sufficient democratic representation, accountability and control.
- To address the EU's democratic deficit, the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFOE) was launched in 2021 under the Joint Presidency of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. The COFOE was established as a platform for citizen and civic participation and deliberation around matters concerning the future of the European Union.



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- A key feature of the COFOE was the establishment of 4 randomly selected citizens' panels consisting of 200 EU citizens from all Member states. Citizens were selected by drawing a lot from strata defined by variables like age, gender, socioeconomic background and level of education. The selection of panellists was weighted to favour young participants; a third of the Panels were composed of youth (aged 16-25).
- Citizens' panels are not confined to the EU; countries around the world have begun experimenting with citizens' panels, granting them substantial power in setting political agendas - and even in influencing the rewriting of constitutional law. This is no marginal trend but a wave that risks having a significant impact on how our democratic institutions function.

**Acknowledging that:**

- On the surface, randomly selected citizens' panels may sound like a sympathetic innovation. They are often sold as a harmless reform to increase citizen engagement in political decision-making. Thus, it is no surprise that many political forces on the centre-right - including the EPP - have granted political support to this idea, which is traditionally propagated by leftist forces.
- However, when one scratches the surface, it becomes apparent that randomly selected citizens' panels are fundamentally at odds with the fundamental democratic principles that the EPP family stands for;
  - First, citizens' panels are premised on the assumption that political representation follows from external traits like age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Our political family is a strong proponent of seeing people as individuals rather than as representatives of their group. Thus, we should denounce the idea that people are represented as long as their representatives look like them - people's political ideas do not follow e.g. their ethnicity or gender.



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- Second, citizens' panels deny people the right to decide who represents them. Instead of people getting to vote on who will deliberate for them on the panel, bureaucrats or elected representatives are granted the right to decide which strata to divide the population into. This moves substantial political power from individuals to the actors who decide which strata will be deployed. This is at odds with the fundamental democratic idea that people should hold the power to decide who represents them in formal democratic institutions.
- Third, citizen panels exercise substantial political power. Even when they are merely consultative, they hold substantial agenda-setting power. For example, the panels of the COFOE made recommendations whose implementation would require changes to the treaties. This was in turn used by various political forces as an argument for rewriting essentially constitutional law. Political power of this magnitude should be subject to control - like the popular vote - that allows people to remove their representatives from power. Representatives in citizens' panels cannot be removed from their position by those whom they are claimed to represent.
- Fourth, citizens' panels are vulnerable to political manipulation. The panels' discussions are often primed by educational material and lectures to ensure that people understand the topic they are deliberating. Those who get to decide what material is used and how it is framed significantly shape the outcome of the deliberations. The conclusions of citizens' assemblies often echo the advice they have been given by experts, bringing into question whether they constitute an organ that shares information of citizens' preferences to the political and administrative elite, or merely a tool for laundering - or "citizen-washing" - already prevalent elite preferences.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ahhissar, 2022



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- Fifth, citizens' panels passivize instead of energize our democracy. Democracy is a culture and an institution that requires active engagement. The EPP stands for an active civil society that gives everyone an equal opportunity to partake in shaping our future. Citizens' panels give this opportunity to a few random citizens. They require nothing of citizens - all they need to do is to sit back and relax while someone who looks like them does the talking for them.
- Sixth, citizens' panels suffer from self-selection bias. It is not possible to get a statistically representative sample of citizens into the same room to deliberate. Even if it were, we could not force people to partake. Those people who have resources and are politically engaged are the ones who partake in panels, while those not already interested in politics choose not to.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the panels fail to address the very problem that they are claimed to solve; lack of representativeness.
- Despite the severe democratic flaws outlined above, the COFOE's panels' proposals have had a significant impact on the EU's political agenda. The establishment of a permanent citizens' assembly or assemblies is currently being discussed at the EU level. Thus, now is a time for the EPP to actively engage in a serious discussion about how democracy should be defined and reformed in the future.
- Democracy is being challenged from within, by populist movements on the left and right. The EPP must acknowledge that our existing representative institutions require innovative new ways of engaging with the public. We must rethink how political parties operate, lower the threshold for political participation and ensure that people have equal opportunities to run for office and influence political decisions. However, we need not accept every radical proposition coming from the left. Democratic reforms should respect the fundamental value of democracy; equality.

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<sup>2</sup> Landemore,



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- The EPP should not compromise on the basic principles that make democracy worth defending; accountability, freedom, equality, and empowerment. Instead, it should lead the fight for democracy and against forces whose political rhetorics look good at the surface but severely compromise the fundamentals of liberal representative democracy.

**YEPP calls on:**

- The EPP to withdraw all political support for randomly selected citizens' panels;
- The EPP to commit to fighting for electoral representative democracy that grants people the right to yield equal influence over who represents them politically;
- The EU to take its democratic deficit seriously but to tackle it through institutional reforms that give individual citizens more and equal - not less and unequal - political power;
- The Joint Presidency of the COFOE to commission an independent and peer-reviewed evaluation of the citizens' panels, focusing on A) whether EU citizens knew that they were "represented" at the COFOE and B) how self-selection played into who partook in the panels;
- Political forces to refrain from claiming that the recommendations of the citizens' panels at the COFOE represent the will of European citizens. The recommendations represent a compromise among those who got the luck of the draw.