

The European Citizen's Initiative: Brussels lecture

When George Papandreou, former Prime Minister of Greece, proposed a referendum on the Greek austerity programme, the chanceries of Europe quailed, and the European Union's leaders collectively denounced the idea. But George Papandreou's proposal was not absurd. It was rooted in the belief that the Greek people needed to *own* the painful austerity policy, to recognise that Greece had to make fundamental changes that would not be popular.

Europe's political elites are, with a few exceptions, not close to Europe's people. National leaders live cloistered lives within the bubble of the political capital. As their workloads grow and those affected become ever more insistent on quick decisions, they have to postpone or cancel visits to the more distant parts of their countries, which happen often to be the more deprived parts as well. The public feels they are out of touch with the burdens ordinary citizens bear at a time of economic hardship and sometimes turmoil as well. Europe faces not just an economic crisis as economic growth stalls and market confidence declines. It faces a deep political crisis as well.

Citizen involvement in the European Union has so far followed conventional national patterns: elections to the legislature, in this case the European Parliament; meetings between EU officials and those interests capable of funding a presence in Brussels, or at least an occasional delegation there; and the weapon of direct democracy most disliked in Brussels, the national referendum.

Despite efforts to bridge the gulf between decision-makers and the public, electoral participation has steadily declined, with as few as 43% of European Union citizens bothering to vote in the 2009 European Parliament elections. The Union's dramatic expansion in the 1990s, to include much of Eastern Europe, has not inspired an outbreak of participation in the newer members. Voting among them is even lower. In 2009, under a quarter of Poles bothered to vote; in Slovakia, the figure was one in five.

It is not easy to build a European demos. There is no central common public space unless one defines the glass steel and concrete blocks of EU offices and institutions in that way. Language and culture impose a cobweb of differences and divergencies much more extensive than in federal states like Germany or the United States. There are also surprisingly few European-wide media: films to some extent, music both popular and classical, the visual arts, but both television and newspapers continue to be largely rooted in their home countries. Those that transcend national boundaries, like The Financial Times, the International Herald Tribune, Le Monde or Die Zeit, are global rather than European, and appeal to a specialised global elite. The building of a common European society remains elusive.

It is against this background that proposals for reform have been made. The European Citizen's Initiative, the fruit of determined campaigning over the last six years, was embodied in the Lisbon Treaty, based on Article 11 of the TEU and article 24 of the TFEU. Civil society organisations, among them Democracy International and the European Students' Forum, were prominent in that campaign. The core of the proposal is that a million EU citizens can petition the European Commission to initiate legislation within the area of competence of the Union itself.

There are a lot of obstacles to be overcome before the ECI can become effective. The complexities of electoral registration and voting rights in different countries are well captured in David Owen's paper. Voting rights in local elections, for EU citizens resident in the Union, are well-established, but in national elections the necessary requirements differ a great deal. In my own country, eligibility ranges widely to include not only EU residents, but also Commonwealth citizens and the British Overseas Territories. The one factor that limits the number of those entitled to vote is residency, the requirement that the voter must live in the country for at least six months each year.

Voting rights are not identical to electoral registration, and the integrity of the electoral register varies widely from country to country. This could become a source of difficulty if the ECI were to become an important channel for conveying citizen views to the Commission on controversial subjects.

Historically petitions have been associated with monarchies. The subject (not the citizen) presented a petition to the king, queen, sultan or ruler pleading for mercy or benevolence. The concept of accountability had not then evolved. In its modern form, it is seen as a direct way to influence the government and, more widely, the political elite.

In my own country, the coalition government has initiated two new proposals. One is for a public stage in the passage of Bills, where members of the public can give their opinions on new legislation before the formal Parliamentary stage begins. The second is an E-petition, signed by at least 100,000 registered voters, which can call for a debate in Parliament. The proposal is sent to the Business Committee of Commons back-benchers, i.e. Members of Parliament who do not hold a Ministerial or Shadow Ministerial position. This committee, set up in June 2010, can allocate up to 35 days in each session of Parliament, 27 of them in the Commons chamber, for debates inspired either by an E-petition or initiated by one or more backbench M.Ps.

So far, since the 2010 General Election, there have been two E-petition debates, one on whether people convicted in the recent London riots should lose state benefits, one on the 1989 Hillsborough disaster when football fans lost their lives in a stampede from the stadium. Many believed whatever caused such heavy loss of life had been covered up by the authorities. The debate required government documents to be published.

The debate that has attracted most attention, on holding a national referendum on the U.K's membership of the European Union, did not begin with an E-petition. It was proposed by David Nuttall, a Conservative backbench M.P., at a meeting with the Business Committee on October 18. A large number of backbench MPs indicated their support for such a debate, and several NGOs organised paper and online petitions on the same lines. The signatories of these certainly exceeded a hundred thousand names. The debate was held on October 24, producing a substantial rebellion in favour of a referendum among Conservative M.Ps, despite instructions from their Whips that they should vote against it.

The structure of an E petition in the European Union is more challenging. It requires not just a million signatories; these signatories must come from " a significant number of member states", now defined as a quarter of the total, a compromise between the European Parliament's proposal of a fifth, and the Council's of one third. There is not much cross-border political activity in the Union, nor are there any major transnational political parties. True, there are groupings of ideologically similar parties, for instance the Socialists, the Christian Democrat People's parties, the Liberals, but often the differences between parties within these groupings are quite wide. Language differences also still present a formidable barrier. So how can the requirements of the ECI be met within the present European Union?

In the shadowy wings of the political theatre, an answer is waiting. Technological advances in the information society, above all the mobile phone, have made possible the rapid evolution of social networks, like Facebook and Twitter. Among young people, their use is extensive, and in the richer countries, almost universal. Already, in the Arab spring and elsewhere, we have seen how powerful the social networks can be as a political weapon, capable of bringing together large numbers of people at very short notice. In the United Kingdom, we have seen the rise recently of organisations like 38 degrees, funded by groups of concerned

or interested citizens, which can flood Parliament with emails conveying opinion, advice and legal information. On the issue of health service reform, a highly sensitive topic in England at the present time, I recall getting eight hundred emails in just one and a half days, inspired by one of these organisations. Such a tsunami of public opinion is of course valuable, but can effectively gum up Parliament's normal operations.

The European Citizens Initiative is a natural vehicle for these network based bodies. Twitter, for instance, operates in almost every country in the world. The language barrier is easily overcome by means of Link, a Europe-wide website which allows the user to select his or her own country and language. The user can then register on that country's website, if necessary including an electoral number of some kind. A million signatures could thereby be collected within days.

But there are drawbacks to web-based direct democracy. It bypasses the essential elements of deliberation and debate that characterise effective Parliamentary democracy. It plays to the soundbite culture so beloved of television. So while the ECI is a useful complement to the political debate, it is not a satisfactory substitute.

So grave is the democratic deficit in the European Union that I believe we need to use every channel we can to persuade our citizens to participate. The European Parliament has acquired significant additional powers, but it remains remote from many European citizens. Under Protocol One on the Role of National Parliaments, draft legislative acts of the Commission and of the European Parliament are now sent to national Parliaments. It is important that national Parliaments construct European oversight and scrutiny committees that can respond quickly and effectively, and can hold their own governments to account.

Title ii of the Protocol refers to inter-parliamentary cooperation. Conferences of national Parliamentary committees on the European Union have the right to submit contributions to the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council. I suggest that these conferences should have a regular slot on the agenda of these three bodies, meeting with each of them two or three times a year and hosted by different national Parliaments.

What makes the vigorous use of all these channels so important is underlined by the crisis of the Eurozone, attended as it is by the angrily demonstrated frustrations of Greek, Spanish, French and other citizens. If the Eurozone moves towards a fiscal union, the democratic deficit will become acute. Taxation of the people without representation from the people has been the explosive initiator of political reform, and the anvil of democracy in many countries, from the death sentence on Charles I^{c17} In England to the French and American revolutions. A fiscal union, if it occurs, must be accompanied by a democratic dimension. The European Citizen's Initiative will contribute to that but it is far from being enough. It is only one, albeit a welcome one, of several paths we can take towards a citizens' democracy.

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Social Networks

Main Sites:

Twitter (to 'tweet' short sentences)

Facebook (multi-purpose, develop a profile about you and create events)

Linked-In (Professional / Career-development)

YouTube (upload films onto the internet)

Twitter

This is one global network and is in nearly every country around the world.

Tweets stay in the language they were written – so if you had a friend in France you would read their tweets in French.

How Tweeting an ECI would work

Example Tweet: Sign the #ECI CP to get the European Commission to debate capital punishment- www.eci.eu

Because of the language barrier, you would need (influential) people/newspapers starting off tweeting about it in each country, and it would be best if they all used a common #hashtag. This is the thing which allows people to search on a topic to see tweets on that topic by people who you are not following.

