



Rebuilding the foundations of political participation and civic engagement

Policy Synthesis #2



10-10-2025

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Grant Agreement 101094258



**Funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union (INCITE-DEM, GA n° 101094258). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or of the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority (REA) can be held responsible for them.

1 Policy synthesis # 2¹

Rebuilding the foundations of political participation and civic engagement

1.1 Context: European democracy in distrust

Public debates about a "crisis of democracy"^[1] underscore the growing demand for direct and meaningful channels to influence decision-making. These channels, broadly understood as civic participation and engagement, are rooted in theories of participatory and deliberative democracy, which aim to foster direct citizen involvement and reasoned public argument ^[1, 2]. Connecting these democratic processes with sustainability, emphasizing citizen involvement is a vital instrument for crafting socially just and environmentally sound policies in Europe and its Member States ^[3, 4].

However, these democratic ideals are challenged by structural inequalities that can silence or marginalize individuals. This policy synthesis, therefore, concentrates on strengthening the standard, established channels of citizen interaction, such as public hearings and consultations. Before ambitious democratic innovations can succeed, the foundational structures of participation must be made more reliable, transparent, and accessible for all citizens.

1.1.1 Scope: improving political participation and civic engagement

This policy synthesis focuses on strengthening established channels, such as public hearings and official consultations. It does not propose new, large-scale democratic innovations, such as citizens' assemblies, a topic that warrants separate analysis. Instead, the goal is to apply key principles from such models to make pragmatic improvements to the existing foundational structures.

1.2 The landscape: the established channels for participation

In response to critiques of a "democratic deficit," the European Commission has spent two decades developing a formal consultation regime, which has been progressively reinforced by key governance and regulatory agendas. The stated goal is to institutionalize and broaden participation, countering historical biases that have favored well-resourced actors. This has resulted in a "participatory toolkit"^[5] that includes:

- Public Consultations: Citizens provide feedback on legislative proposals via the online "Have Your Say" portal.
- European Citizens' Initiative (ECI): Allows citizens to call on the Commission to propose new legislation.

¹This document is a continuation of the series that we have started in 2024 with our first [Policy Synthesis](#).

- Targeted Consultations: Structured engagement with stakeholders and formal advisory bodies like the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions.

At the Member State level, governments use their own distinct frameworks for national law-making. Public Consultations are the primary tool. These are complemented by targeted Stakeholder consultations with key economic and social partners. A defining trend across these frameworks is the widespread use of E-participation to lower practical barriers to engagement.

1.3 The diagnosis: the illusion of influence

Despite these formal frameworks, profound weaknesses limit the effectiveness of participation. Research from the INCITE-DEM project [6] reveals that core barriers, such as a lack of impact and feelings of exclusion, are perceived in strikingly similar ways across all levels of governance. The following analysis explores these key barriers, from the institutional fragmentation of the EU's participatory channels to the procedural hurdles and resource deficits that render citizen input ineffective and foster disillusionment.

- **From a fragmented landscape to a coherent infrastructure:** The EU's participation system functions as a collection of fragmented channels, where a multitude of initiatives exist in isolation rather than as parts of an integrated whole [7]. These initiatives often fail to complement or reinforce each other due to institutional fragmentation, as different EU bodies exhibit varying levels of commitment to integrating public input. The lack of a comprehensive vision connecting these efforts leads to wasted resources and creates a confusing system that is difficult for citizens to navigate effectively.
- **Untraceable influence and opaque outcomes:** A deep disconnect exists between the promise of participation and its outcomes. Citizens invest significant effort only to be met with an opaque process where it is often impossible to trace how their input shaped a proposal. According to OECD data [5], fewer than a third of Member States require a written response, leaving citizens to assume their effort was futile.

When citizen participation yields no tangible outcomes, it erodes trust and fuels disillusionment.

- At the EU level, the 'Save the Bees and Farmers' European Citizens' Initiative mobilized over a million citizens, only to have the legislative proposal it backed rejected by the European Parliament. An organizer captured the frustration: *"Considering the effort and the expectations... the outcome, sometimes it can be very sobering"* [8].
- At the regional level in Sicily, a grassroots coalition successfully passed a new law on agroecology. The victory was, however, nullified when the government failed

² Quote from an interviewee in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "Save the Bees and Farmers' European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)".

to issue the required implementation decrees, leaving the citizen-led law a dead letter due to political inertia [8].

- **Procedural barriers to impact:** A key structural reason for this disillusionment is the dual failure of late intervention and a lack of demonstrable impact. The current model often confines citizen participation to a single, legally required consultation period that occurs only *after* a draft of a law or plan has already been established [9]. This late timing reduces public influence to minor adjustments and, combined with no assurance of how their input will be used, makes the process feel like a procedural formality, reinforcing the cycle of distrust.
- **Imbalances in participation and an over-reliance on stakeholders:** Consultation processes often prioritize engagement with traditional stakeholders. This focus, while valuable, can inadvertently sideline the general public and present higher barriers for vulnerable groups such as women, youth, and people with diverse cultural backgrounds [3,10]. This structural emphasis on organized groups can result in the lived experiences of ordinary citizens being underrepresented in final policy considerations.

The City of Helsinki initially developed its Carbon Neutral Action Plan through a broad citizen co-creation process. However, this commitment was later reversed. Justifying the shift by arguing that "citizen proposals lacked much-needed technical knowledge³", officials created an entirely new plan with a select group of 300 experts. This technocratic U-turn sidelined the original citizen-driven agenda and risked framing the initial public engagement as a mere formality [8].

- **Shrinking civic space and targeted pressures:** The ability for citizens to organize is being actively constrained. Evidence from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency confirms a 'shrinking civic space,' manifested through concrete **pressures** faced by civil society organizations (CSOs), including negative media campaigns, online harassment and surveillance, legal challenges, and the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) [11].

The "Save Kresna Gorge Coalition," a citizen-led environmental campaign in Bulgaria, became the target of significant online hostility. Organizers reported that "hostile actions against the campaign have included professional communication campaigns using public relations, fake news, and misinformation"⁴. This made it difficult for the NGOs to educate the public about

³ Quote from an interviewee in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "City of Helsinki Carbon Neutral Action Plan".

⁴ Quote from an interviewee in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "Save Kresna Gorge Coalition" campaign in Bulgaria.

their cause. One participant described it as a "very targeted campaign that marginalises environmental organisations"⁵ and the local people involved [8].

- **Institutional and financial resource deficits** present a major barrier to public participation. Public administrations often lack necessary funding and skilled staff, a problem compounded by organizational inertia and skepticism from political elites [4]. This scarcity is mirrored on the civil society side, where organizations face difficulties securing the predictable, long-term funding needed for operational independence. These issues are exacerbated by deficits in media literacy and digital skills among citizens, who often lack the skills needed to navigate complex policymaking processes.

1.4 Recommendations: building a responsive participatory architecture

To address these challenges, a multi-level approach is required to transform the EU's existing participatory structures.

1.4.1 Prioritize genuine inclusivity and accessibility

Achieving genuine inclusivity requires more than just an open invitation; it demands the proactive removal of the very barriers that deter people. The following proposals aim to shift our focus from processes that are merely accessible in theory to an infrastructure of support that enables participation in practice for everyone.

- **Protect civic space and enable civil society:** Member States have a fundamental duty to create a safe and enabling environment for CSOs, which are essential vehicles for channelling the voices of diverse and vulnerable communities. This includes implementing strong safeguards against pressures, such as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).
- **Extend participation to all citizens:** Public authorities must actively design processes that value the lived experience of individual citizens, creating specific compensatory mechanisms to facilitate the participation of women, youth, the elderly, and diverse cultural groups.
- **Promote media literacy and digital skills:** Invest in national and EU-level programs to empower citizens with the skills needed to access information, interact with authorities, and build resilience against disinformation.

⁵ Quote from an interviewee in the INCITE-DEM project's case study on the "Save Kresna Gorge Coalition" campaign in Bulgaria.

A Design Fiction Proposal from the Democracy Labs – The 'Democracy Welcome Kit'⁶

To formally onboard new citizens into democratic life, the 'Democracy Welcome Kit' is a physical and digital toolkit provided upon reaching voting age or naturalization. The kit would contain a highly accessible guide to civil rights and participation opportunities, alongside a secure digital device for direct access to consultations and voting platforms, transforming civic entry from a formality into a meaningful, supported invitation.

- **Provide resources and support for effective participation:** For participation to be truly inclusive, it cannot be a luxury afforded only by those with the time, resources, and confidence to navigate complex processes. Practical barriers like the cost of transportation, the need for childcare, and the loss of income from taking time off work disproportionately exclude citizens from lower-income backgrounds, caregivers, and marginalized groups. To address this, citizen support must be institutionalized: it must be treated as a core public service and essential democratic infrastructure.

A co-created proposal from the Democracy Labs – The 'Neighbourhood House'⁷

Envisioned as an engine for grassroots democracy, the 'Neighbourhood House' is a model for a permanent, accessible hub in a local community. Staffed by skilled facilitators and volunteers, it would provide clear guidance on public services, host inclusive dialogues, ensure early citizen involvement in local planning, and create a direct two-way communication channel with elected officials.

A co-created proposal from the Democracy Labs – The 'Democracy Allowance'⁸

To address the critical barriers of time and cost, the 'Democracy Allowance' is a proposed legal entitlement to one state-reimbursed, paid day off per month. Citizens could freely dedicate

⁶ The 'Democracy Welcome Kit' is a **Design Fiction Product**, a specific methodological output that uses narrative and speculative artifacts to contextualize and explore the potential of democratic innovations co-created during the project's **Democracy Labs (DLabs)**. The concept emerged from a multi-stage process where diverse participants—including citizens, policymakers, and technical experts—collaborated to develop '**imaginaries**' for democratic futures and then worked to translate those ideas into tangible, story-driven proposals.

⁷This is a direct policy proposal that emerged from discussions within the INCITE-DEM Democracy Labs (DLabs). It reflects a consensus among participants—citizens, civil society members, and public officials—on a practical, immediate solution needed to strengthen local democratic infrastructure and address barriers to participation.

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this day to community projects or democratic engagement, supported by local hubs and digital platforms, transforming civic participation from a luxury into an accessible right.

1.4.2 Improve the quality, impact, and transparency of consultation processes

To address the issue of untraceable citizen input, the goal must be to transition from a single, late-stage checkpoint to an integrated process where citizen oversight and influence are embedded at key stages. This ensures that public input is both timely enough to be meaningful and transparent enough to be seen, from initial agenda-setting through to final monitoring.

- **Mandate early and meaningful engagement:** Shift the default for public consultation to the pre-formulation stage of the policy cycle, when public input can still fundamentally shape a proposal and where evidence shows citizen engagement is highest.
- **Guarantee a transparent feedback loop and political follow-up:** To eradicate this lack of transparency, every major consultation must conclude with a public report detailing how input was analyzed and justifying the final decision. In major consultations, the outcomes could then be linked to a requirement for a relevant parliamentary committee to publicly debate and formally respond to the citizen proposals within a set timeframe.
- **Improve clarity and standardize timelines:** Ensure that consultation documents are clear, accessible, and published with sufficient, standardized advance notice to allow for meaningful input.
- **Leverage digitalization for broader reach:** Systematically use online platforms to centralize and publicize all consultation opportunities at the Member State level. Explore the ethical use of new technologies such as AI to reduce barriers and make processes more intelligible and accountable.
- **Ensure institutional integration:** To transform the legally required public consultation from a procedural formality into a genuine opportunity for influence, its role and timing within the decision-making process must be fundamentally reimagined. The focus should shift from a single, late-stage consultation to a more integrated model with built-in mechanisms that guarantee accountability and impact.

A co-created proposal from the Democracy Labs – **The Accountable Timeline**⁹ :

Drawing from the INCITE-DEM “Provotyping”¹⁰ sessions in the Democracy Labs, citizens designed a new process with built-in checks and balances for traditional decision-making

⁹ This is a direct policy proposal that emerged from discussions within the INCITE-DEM Democracy Labs (DLabs). It reflects a consensus among participants—citizens, civil society members, and public officials—on a practical, immediate solution needed to strengthen local democratic infrastructure and address barriers to participation.

¹⁰ A ‘provotype’ is a term that blends ‘provocative’ and ‘prototype.’ It refers to a design artifact or concept intentionally created to be thought-provoking. Unlike a traditional prototype that tests a potential solution, a provotype is used early in a co-creation process to challenge assumptions and spark debate among participants about a particular issue or a desirable future

processes on plans, policies and regulations which usually only foresee a compulsory period of public information. This introduces two new mandatory stages to the official timeline:

A "Consensus Period" would be a required deliberative stage before any final decision is made. This brings public officials, experts, stakeholders, and citizen representatives to the table to negotiate a shared agreement, preventing public input from being easily dismissed.

Figure 1: Conceptual prototype designed in the Portuguese and Italian Democracy Lab

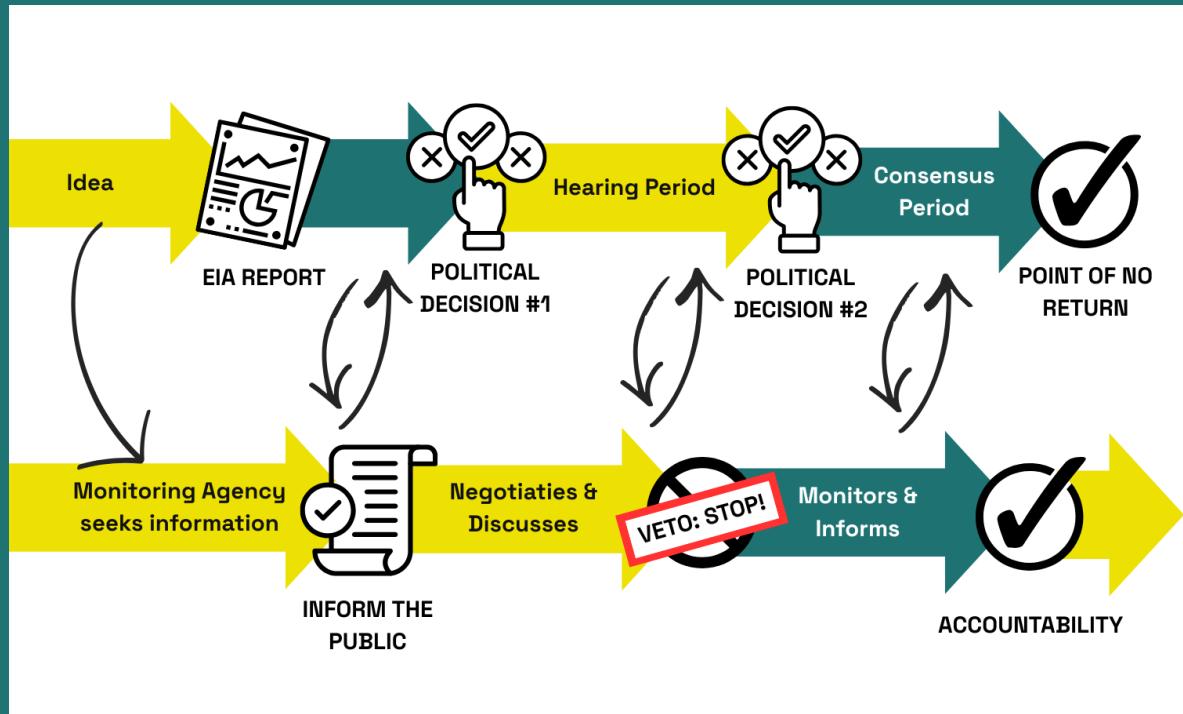


Figure 1: It redesigns the traditional decision-making timeline by introducing a **"Consensus Period"** after the second political decision. This creates a "Point of Return," allowing stakeholders to send the process back to the hearing period if a consensus is not reached, giving citizens more than one chance to state their case [12]. It proposes a parallel process managed by an external "Monitoring Agency" that informs the public and oversees the official timeline. This agency has the power to **veto** a political decision if it fails to consider public input, forcing the process back to negotiation and discussion.

Additionally, an independent "Monitoring Agency" would be established to oversee the policy's implementation. Critically, this body would have veto power to halt the project if it determines that the process is ignoring the agreement reached during the Consensus Period, ensuring long-term accountability [12].

The practical implementation of this new architecture—specifically regarding the formalization of the Consensus Period and the oversight powers of the Monitoring Agency—would be subject to

the pertinent legal reforms and institutional adjustments necessary to align these innovations with existing administrative and constitutional frameworks.

1.4.3 Build a coordinated system with stronger oversight

Develop a Coherent EU Participation Strategy: The EU and its Member States should develop a policy on participation that establishes common standards at European, national and local level with clear feedback mechanisms between citizens, stakeholders, and policymakers at each stage.

- **Redefine the role of politicians as facilitators:** Citizens envision a future where their direct participation leads to more transparent and less partisan outcomes, especially on local issues like housing and green spaces. This requires a shift in the role of politicians: away from top-down decision-making and towards facilitating and safeguarding citizen-led policy. Their primary function becomes ensuring the integrity of the process and using the insights from the "different realities of people's lives to make holistic decisions,"[13] which empowers citizens as the central drivers of policy.
- **Embrace a culture of learning and independent evaluation:** Establish robust and independent mechanisms to regularly monitor and evaluate participatory processes. This must include collecting data on participation rates, the diversity of participants, and the perceived impact of citizen input on final policy outcomes.
- **Invest in system-wide capacity building:** Fund ambitious capacity-building programs and facilitate knowledge sharing for both public officials—to improve their skills in facilitation and outreach—and for CSOs, to enhance their ability to engage effectively in complex policy debates.

1.5 Conclusions

Strengthening citizen participation is an essential strategy for improving policy effectiveness, enhancing social cohesion, and restoring public trust. The current landscape reveals a significant gap between the formal promise of participation and the practical reality experienced by citizens. Closing this gap requires a fundamental shift from a passive, formalistic approach to a genuinely embedded culture of open and responsive governance. By implementing the robust measures outlined here, the EU and its Member States can transform existing channels of participation into a resilient, legitimate, and effective democratic infrastructure.

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