

# 'I want to be European, but I find it hard to be'

## Identity between emotions and rights

Camille Dobler

Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow

### Summary

This brief presents research results on the resilience of European identity to a decade of socio-economic and political crises. It discusses the findings of a case study conducted in France ahead of the 2019 European elections. These confirm pre-2009 conclusions: political identities supporting the European Union's legitimacy are more likely to relate to civic rights and political values than cultural and ethnic attributes. The analysis also underlines that a European civic identity is being challenged by high levels of resentment and anxiety fuelled by limited opportunities to live up to the expectations it creates.

To make EU citizenship more impactful and inclusive, citizens should be given more decision-making power. Within the broader political debate on the future of Europe, three recommendations would take the EU in the right direction:

1. Increase synergies between existing instruments of participatory democracy
2. Keep strengthening the European Citizens' Initiative
3. Formalise the role of citizens' assemblies in EU decision-making

Inclusive and impactful participatory instruments can both strengthen a European feeling of belonging - a European identity - by giving a very concrete meaning to European citizenship, and consolidate EU parliamentary democracy, which remains fledgling.

## Introduction

In modern democracies, we take it for granted that a shared sense of political identification amongst citizens is a condition for legitimacy. The European Union has always been at odds with this assumption. Since 2008, overlapping crises have exposed a fragile sense of political obligation to the EU, threatened European solidarity and confidence in the EU, and encouraged a retreat into national communities. Be it a cause or a consequence of crises, citizens' lack of strong identification with the EU challenges its democratic legitimacy, hovering discussions on its future.

*Be it a cause or a consequence of crises, citizens' lack of strong identification with the EU challenges its democratic legitimacy, hovering discussions on its future*

Data collected in the framework of the PLATO project provides evidence of the resilience of European civic identity in the face of economic and political crises. However, this research provides no cause for complacency. Widespread perceptions of constrained possibilities for political influence challenge a fragile and hesitant European civic identity and encourage citizens to reassess their political allegiances. The findings stress the need for more inclusive, impactful and visible participation of citizens in European politics, beyond communication exercises.

Research findings from my doctoral project on European identity suggest that European citizenship needs to further gain in substance to encourage identification with the EU. Feeding into the ongoing 'Future of Europe' debate, I identify three potential reform paths that would strengthen citizen participation in EU politics:

1. Clearly and distinctly present existing instruments of participatory democracy at the EU level to citizens, and increase synergies between them.
2. Keep strengthening the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), through better mediatisation by the European Commission, better follow-up by the European Parliament (EP), and making it more accessible to younger generations.
3. Take advantage of the Conference on the Future of Europe as a unique opportunity to formalise the role of citizens' assemblies in EU decision-making.

## 'I want to be European, but I find it hard to be'

In my PhD project,<sup>1</sup> I look into what distinguishes a European identity from others and whether it emerged strengthened or weakened from the crises sparked by the 2008 financial crisis. The analysis builds on a case study conducted in the Strasbourg metropolitan area ahead of the 2019 European elections. I interviewed focus groups sampled according to the socio-economic status of participants. The research essentially reveals a familiar picture, yet one that also leaves old issues unresolved and stresses new challenges.

*The findings stress the need for more inclusive, impactful and visible participation of citizens in European politics*

## European Identity: rights (still) trump feelings

How do EU citizens come to identify as 'European'? Asked about European identity, participants predominantly refer to elements of

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Questioning indifference after the financial crisis: a qualitative account of emotional experiences to European integration', doctoral thesis, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University, forthcoming.

European *citizenship*. Freedom of movement is the most popular, and often single, answer given by participants across all socio-economic and generational groups. References to a right to move typically encompass other European advantages, particularly welfare rights.

The Euro comes second, and its meaning is more ambiguous than freedom of movement. The common currency can figure as a traditional symbolic attribute of the European political system. However, such a dimension is largely omitted by most participants. Most see in the Euro a banal transaction instrument rather than a symbol of European solidarity. This result is supportive of the findings of Joris Melman in another PLATO PhD project.<sup>2</sup>

*Freedom of movement is the most popular answer given by participants across all socio-economic and generational groups.*

References to shared values and human rights come third, yet are more rarely mentioned, except for those participants with higher economic and cultural capital. Nevertheless, it is invoked to signal a difference from the Americas of Trump and Bolsonaro and participants' opposition to Russia and China.

None of the focus group participants referred to a 'European civilisation', a 'European way of life', let alone feelings of belonging to a culturally meaningful political community.<sup>3</sup> Only very few referred to European culture or heritage. The predominance of civic components in participants' answers confirms the relevance of a European civic identity over

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Melman and G. Porcaro, 'Europeans take the Euro for granted', Bruegel Blog, 3 March 2020. <https://www.bruegel.org/2020/03/europeans-take-the-euro-for-granted/>

<sup>3</sup> C. Dobler, 'Ambiguous identities at the Rhine border' in Donat et al. *European regions: perspectives, trends and developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Transcript 2020.

cultural identity. This research concludes that European *citizenship* remains more socially meaningful than European *identity*.

### European Citizenship: emotions (increasingly) trump facts

Although European citizenship means something to the people interviewed, it is hardly significant in their daily lives. Instead, diffuse anxiety and latent resentment gloss over the personal benefits derived from European integration and encourage participants to question the social and political relevance of their European citizenship.

Participants doubt its social relevance the most. Many of them are resentful of the reinforcement of old and establishment of new boundaries between socio-economic groups. In citizens' political imaginaries, European citizenship has led less to the transcendence of national borders, than to the reconfiguration of borders between rich and poor citizens, between better-off and worse-off states. Unsurprisingly, this perception is found above all among participants with lower and middle socio-economic status, many of which exclude themselves from European citizenship.

*These results highlight the challenges faced by a European identity entangled with 'thin' European citizenship' rights*

More surprising is the reconsideration of European citizenship's political relevance, shared by all participants regardless of their socio-economic status, age or gender. Despite voicing support for the integration process, most participants expressed feelings of alienation towards European politics and discomfort vis-à-vis the utilitarian narrative surrounding European citizenship. Feelings of disempowerment add up to economically induced anxiety. As one participant put it:

‘I want to be European, but I find it hard to be. I will vote in May, but then...?’

These results highlight the challenges faced by a European identity entangled with ‘thin’ European citizenship rights. ‘Useless’, ‘foreign’ and ‘abstract’ are well-known shortcomings of European citizenship,<sup>4</sup> which add up to latent resentment towards politics and make participants reassess their commitment to the EU.

## Fostering a European civic identity through participation

### Consolidate European citizenship

Research on a European identity has extensively emphasised the potential for a mass European civic identity to develop. Encouraged by European citizenship rights, identification with the EU today still relates to the perceptions of belonging to a salient political system, rather than to a political community.<sup>5</sup> It is no cause for alarm: historically, citizenship precedes the formation of political identities. Indeed, it is widely accepted that, in Europe, modern political communities are a product derived from citizenship rights and obligations towards the political system.<sup>6</sup>

However, the intrinsic value of holding European citizenship fails to create identification with the EU alone. Instead, the EU’s failure to live up to European citizenship rights during and after the Euro-crisis encourage participants to question their European political status.

*Identification with the EU today still relates to the perceptions of belonging to a salient political system, rather than to a political community*

Hence, European citizenship needs to be made ‘thicker’ to encourage a truly European civic identity. In particular, a more impactful citizenship is key to a more active and inclusive European identity. Indeed, increasing citizens’ influence over EU affairs can encourage them to make more systematic use of their European citizenship rights, and help the EU reach beyond usual pro-European groups. This requires reforming the role of citizens in EU democracy by giving them decision-making power.

### Two reform pathways

There are two ways to do so, one for each pillar of the EU’s democratic legitimacy. The first is to strengthen representative democracy by making European voters more influential in shaping EU policies. This entails reforming the European electoral system or the ordinary legislative procedure. So far, the lack of competitiveness between pro-European parties has added to an established consensus culture which depolarises EU politics. Moreover, having a European Parliament that shares decision-making power with the Council blur the electoral choices for voters.<sup>7</sup> Proposals to reform the legislative process inside the Council, extend the EP’s right of initiative, establish transnational voting lists, and a direct election of the European Commission all seek

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 4 in A. J. Menéndez and E. Olsen, *Challenging European citizenship: ideas and realities in contrast*, Palgrave Macmillan 2020.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bruter, *Citizens of Europe? The emergence of a mass European identity*, Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

<sup>6</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso 2006.

---

<sup>7</sup> C. Lord, ‘Actors: should we further democratise EU decision-making?’, *High-level Interdisciplinary Conference on the Future of Europe*, College of Europe, 29 January 2021. <https://www.coleurope.eu/events/high-level-interdisciplinary-conference-future-europe/>; M. Müller, ‘Make European elections more meaningful’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung EU, July 2020. <http://iep-berlin.de/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/Make-european-elections-more-meaningful-Manuel-Mueller.pdf>

to address these problems, by improving the connection between citizens and institutions in the EU.<sup>8</sup> However, strengthening the representative dimension of EU democracy only gives European citizens an indirect say over the future of Europe debate.

At the EU level, citizens' expectation for more decision-making power was clearly stated in the 2018 European Citizens' Consultations.<sup>9</sup> The testimonies gathered in my research confirm this demand, as do the conclusions of an increasing number of pan-European self-initiated projects.<sup>10</sup> This all takes place in a context of crisis of confidence in representative institutions and global challenges encouraging participatory initiatives in and above the nation state. The ongoing success of mini-publics and citizens' assemblies at different levels of governance attest to a growing trend favouring direct citizen participation.<sup>11</sup>

This demand for participation echoes the second pillar of the EU's democratic legitimacy:

---

<sup>8</sup> See K. Auel and G. Tiemann, 'Europeanising European public spheres', European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, June 2020, at p. 33. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654628/IPOL\\_STU\(2020\)654628\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/654628/IPOL_STU(2020)654628_EN.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Citizens' consultations - Joint Report', 14535/18, 3 December 2018 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14535-2018-INIT/en/pdf>; P. Butcher and C. Stratulat, 'Citizens expect: lessons from the European Citizens' Consultations', Discussion Paper, European Policy Centre, 21 May 2019. <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Citizens-expect-Lessons-from-the-European-Citizens-Consultations~26c3d4>

<sup>10</sup> See for example the 2019 Catalogue of Ideas from the Public Sphere Project Tour. <https://www.publicsphere.eu/pdf/idea-catalogue-2019-en.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> H. Landemore, *Open democracy: reinventing popular rule for the twenty-first century*, Princeton University Press 2020.

its participatory democracy. Mechanisms of participatory democracy can extend political rights beyond voting in European elections and is a promising second avenue to give EU citizens more political influence. In the EU, there are already well-established channels for citizen participation at different stages of the policy cycle, with the ECI, the right to petition the European Parliament and the Commission's consultations and citizen dialogues. However, those instruments support

*EU participatory democracy needs a clearer and more binding link to the EU decision-making process to be effective.*

rather than complement representative democracy.<sup>12</sup> In particular, they lack a direct impact on the decision-making process and are poorly known by ordinary citizens. They are often used as campaigning tools by organised civil society instead of citizens, when they are not limited to communication exercises by EU institutions.<sup>13</sup>

## Recommendations

Today, the challenge of a European identity is also one of an active and inclusive European citizenship. How to accommodate this growing demand for citizens' participation in EU affairs within a rigid institutional framework? EU participatory democracy needs a clearer and more binding link to the EU decision-making process to be effective. It also needs to be democratised to reach all Europeans. I suggest

---

<sup>12</sup> A. Alemanno, 'Europe's democracy challenge: citizen participation in and beyond elections', *German Law Journal*, 2020, 21(1).

<sup>13</sup> D. Hierlemann, 'Future of Democracy', Bertelsmann Stiftung, Issue 4, April 2019. [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/ZD\\_Einwurf\\_4\\_2019\\_EN\\_Conference\\_Talk.pdf](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/ZD_Einwurf_4_2019_EN_Conference_Talk.pdf)

three recommendations to meet this twofold objective.

### **Increase synergies between existing instruments**

In the last 15 years and especially under the Juncker Commission, efforts to strengthen the EU's legitimacy include the introduction and development of a series of instruments of participatory democracy. Today, this toolbox consists of the ECI, the right to petition the EP, to make a complaint to the European Ombudsman, the Commission's online consultations and offline citizens' dialogues. The limits of those tools are well-known, and one reason why most remain unknown and underused by citizens is their very scattered nature.<sup>14</sup>

*A coherent and user-friendly online eco-system around participatory tools would be a valuable first step*

The EU institutional and law-making framework's complexity acts as a strong disincentive for European citizens to engage with EU politics. A scattered toolbox only makes it more difficult for them to identify available and adequate participation channels. At the moment, the Commission's public consultations have a dedicated website, 'Have your say', while the ECI has its own ECI Forum. The Petition Web Portal is hosted by the Parliament's website, while the European Ombudsman has its separate domain. This confusion weakens each instrument individually, while there is a great deal of potential in increasing synergies between them.

To make European citizenship less elitist, a coherent and user-friendly online eco-system

around participatory tools would be a valuable first step. Then, it is essential to raise public and media awareness of the differences between the ECI and the right to petition and of their respective potential outcomes. It would also be useful to connect more effectively the right to petition and its follow-up to the work of the European Ombudsman. Furthermore, ongoing ECIs could act as agenda-setters for the Commission's citizens' dialogues and consultations. That would help ECI organisers to collect signatures and the European Commission to increase public awareness of the tool.

### **Keep strengthening the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**

As of 1 January 2020, new ECI rules came into force. They include long-awaited improvements: among others, an online collaborative platform for ECI stakeholders to exchange information, increased flexibility in the start date of collecting signatures, support tools such as translation services and legal assistance from the Commission, and a more user-friendly process for citizens to sign an initiative.

The credibility of the ECI depends on its impact on European agenda-setting, otherwise, it remains a meaningless instrument of participation. Despite the improvements introduced by the new regulation, the EU's single tool allowing citizens to suggest policy ideas at the EU level still has no binding impact. At minima, the EP's hearings and plenary debates, held for all successful ECIs, should be followed by a mandatory plenary vote on a parliamentary resolution, and a report asking the Commission to submit a legislative proposal. It would be done by means of a change to the EP Rules of Procedure and would give additional political weight to ECIs in their requests for a Commission's positive reply.

---

<sup>14</sup> J. Plottka, 'Making civil society involvement bottom-up', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung EU, July 2020. [https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/2020/Q3/FES\\_Paper\\_Participative\\_Democracy.pdf](https://brussels.fes.de/fileadmin/public/editorfiles/events/2020/Q3/FES_Paper_Participative_Democracy.pdf)

Moreover, lowering the age of signature to 16 would allow younger generations to help set the Future of Europe's agenda. If it is possible under the new ECI regulation, however, it falls under national competence to lower the statutory age for ECIs to 16 in national electoral laws. Many ECI topics have touched upon political issues of great importance to youth, such as climate protection, respect for European values and the rule of law, and civic rights. Building on youth mobilisations and engaging Europeans early-on in their political socialisation can help encourage future participation and strengthen a European civic identity.

### Formalise the role of citizens' assemblies in EU decision-making

The decision to hold a Conference on the Future of Europe and to include citizens' panels has opened a debate on the selection of participants and their role in setting the agenda. Sortition, or the selection of participants by lot in an EU-wide procedure, would avoid socio-economic and ideological homogeneity, a well-known weakness of EU citizens' dialogues. Recent examples of mini-publics' deliberations and the growing success of citizens' assemblies at all level of governance show that a stratified random sample of citizens is very successful in unblocking political gridlocks.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the democratic, environmental and socio-economic challenges ahead for the EU, and with a view to strengthening European civic identity through participation, the possibility of establishing a permanent citizens' assembly at the EU level should also be explored. A European Citizens' Assembly would allow a

---

<sup>15</sup> OECD, 'Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: catching the deliberative wave', 10 June 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

much more targeted and intense engagement of citizens, with a direct feedback mechanism to feed into EU politics. Ideally, it would be given a formal role in the EU's decision-making framework, and participants would be given the freedom to decide on an agenda topic. The proposals of a European Citizens' Assembly could also benefit from the support of a European Citizens Initiative to gain political leverage over EU and national institutions.<sup>16</sup>

In a more pragmatic and short-term scenario, EU co-legislators will in all likelihood set the agenda, and proposals generated by a Citizens' Assembly might not be binding. The latter scenario would however be extremely damaging for the EUs' democratic legitimacy. In a context where citizens question the political relevance of European citizenship, non-compliance with proposals made by 'their' Assembly could have dramatic effects.

The success of the Conference on the Future of Europe will lie in its ability to include citizens' inputs in the official legislative process and to lay the groundwork for mechanisms for citizen participation that will survive the Conference itself.

---

<sup>16</sup> M. Fiorillo, 'Creating the European Citizens' Assembly: a new institution for the future of Europe', *The Federalist Debate*, year XXXIII, no. 2, July 2020.

---

**Camille Dobler** is PLATO PhD candidate at the Institute of European Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow. She was a visiting fellow at Democracy International and Sciences Po Paris during her PhD and would like to thank Daniela Vancic



and Andreas Müller at Democracy International for their valuable comments on an earlier draft. This brief is based on her doctoral research, which is part of the EU MSCA-funded doctoral network PLATO.

**The Post-Crisis Legitimacy of the European Union (PLATO)** investigates the legitimacy of the EU's responses to the financial crisis and generates new understandings of the EU's legitimacy crisis. It uses the example of the financial crisis to build and test theory of what would amount to a legitimacy crisis in the case of a multi-state, non-state political system such as the EU.

As part of PLATO, 15 PhD researchers study the legitimacy of the EU's crisis responses in a number of different areas. They are enrolled in nine universities across Europe as part of a 20-partner consortium coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo, with Prof. Chris Lord as scientific coordinator.

[www.plato.uio.no](http://www.plato.uio.no)  [info@plato.uio.no](mailto:info@plato.uio.no)  [platoitn](https://twitter.com/platoitn)  [plato.itn](https://www.instagram.com/plato.itn) [#platophd](https://twitter.com/platophd)

**PLATO policy brief** | ISSN 2703-8335

Issued by  
ARENA Centre for European Studies  
University of Oslo  
P.O.Box 1143 Blindern, N-0318 Oslo

UiO : **ARENA Centre for European Studies**  
University of Oslo

 **UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**

**SciencesPo**

**SCRIPTS**  
CLUSTER OF EXCELLENCE  
BGTS Graduate School

 **JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY  
IN KRAKÓW**

**UNIVERSITY  
OF TWENTE.**

 **INSTITUT FÜR HÖHERE STUDIEN  
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES  
Vienna**

 **Universiteit  
Antwerpen**

**SOU**  
Institute of Sociology AS CR



PLATO is an Innovative Training Network (ITN) under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 722581 (2017-2020).

*The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author. It does not reflect the opinion of the European Union and the Research Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.*