
11. Let me Vote

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Editor's summary: This ECI campaign was created entirely from scratch by civic-minded EU citizens. It seeks to extend the rights of EU citizenship to voting in national elections, regardless of one's EU country of nationality. It suffered dramatically from personal data requirements which effectively disenfranchised many potential supporters. Without organisational backing, the campaign struggled to raise funds, arrange meetings and coordinate volunteers across Europe.

Giving all EU citizens the right to vote in national elections within the EU

The *Letmevote* ECI is campaigning for EU citizens' right to vote in national elections in their EU country of residence – even if they were born in and/or are a citizen of a different EU member state. Approximately 13.6 million EU citizens live “abroad” in another EU member state. Although they contribute to the economy, society and culture of their country of residence, they have no national voting rights. They are EU citizens living within the EU. Yet they are net contributors without a voice.

The ECI as the ideal tool to re-examine the meaning of EU citizenship

The ECI was an obvious choice for this issue. It is of pan-European concern. The right to free movement is inherent in the EU ideal. Since voting rights are tied closely to active citizenship, it re-assesses what EU citizenship means.

Our ECI campaign has felt very encouraged by many individuals and organisations who work at the European level. Many meetings have taken place and our endeavour has been taken seriously. We have been helped most by the endless energy and optimism of our small but dedicated volunteer network in different EU countries. They have contributed a diverse set of skills, enthusiasm and a strong commitment to a very real and “lived-in” Europe. But that has not been sufficient to resolve technical problems the ECI tool still faces.

The challenges of campaigning with limited resources

Given the ECI's current form, it is almost impossible for a “pure” citizens' group, without organisational backing and run by volunteers, to create, run and succeed in a pan-European campaign within the given 12-month timeframe. Since most volunteers have busy day jobs, each person can only contribute a limited amount of time. Arranging meetings or coordinating events to connect volunteers in different countries is difficult without resources.

Funding has been and remains a major overall challenge for our ECI campaign. There is no EU-level funding for ECIs. Potential partner organisations themselves struggle for funding. Most potential corporate sponsors regard an ECI campaign as too political. Given this, we solicited donations from the public – a difficult task since we are neither a registered charity nor a non-profit organisation. To optimise our limited resources, we have used social media extensively, as well as focused campaigning on a few key countries.

The ECI looks like a petition, so why all the personal data?

“Petition-fatigue” in many countries and low public awareness of the ECI has created challenges. When people first hear about the ECI, they often see it as a petition. However, it is harder to sign and often requires sharing personal data such as passport numbers. Many people support the issue, but are not willing to risk giving so much personal data for “just a petition”. Recent reports of online data security breaches have made this situation worse.

National data requirements exclude some expatriated EU citizens

Our ECI is different from other ECI campaigns in that our core target group is expatriates. Yet many national ECI data requirements assume people never leave their home countries. *Letmevote* has thus felt like a testing ground for the multiple personal data collection and signature validation problems the ECI still faces. When some countries request data related to residency and others to nationality, foreigners can fall through the cracks and be denied this right of EU citizenship.

For example, many British citizens who live in countries like Spain or Austria have been prevented from supporting any ECI. The UK requires a permanent UK address to sign an ECI and Spain requires a passport or Spanish ID number for signatures. UK citizens living in France have faced similar problems, although France allows more ID documents. Fortunately, Luxembourg, a country with many foreign residents, changed its original data requirements so non-nationals could support ECIs.

A nightmare: 27 different rules and paper signature collection forms

The ECI’s rules have made it nearly impossible for *Letmevote* to collect signatures on paper. There is one paper form per country and each country has different rules as to who can sign an ECI (nationals, residents or both). Volunteers struggle to choose the correct form. Furthermore, high printing and postage costs and resources needed to manage volunteer signature collectors in ways that respect personal data protection procedures make this approach cost prohibitive. Given our target audience, online collection is almost the only possibility.

Recommendations to improve the ECI

There are several areas where the ECI regulation and implementation would benefit from revision:

1. *Reconsider the role, make-up and support for the ECI citizens’ committees.* The successful ECI campaigns have been backed by large organisations with pan-European reach. Is the ECI a European *Citizens’ Initiative* or a European *Civil Society Organisations’ Initiative*?
2. *Consider new ways to fund ECIs run by citizens’ groups.* The EU could commit basic campaign funding to each registered ECI. This would preserve independence, but support meetings, an online presence and campaign materials. It could also provide each registered ECI campaign with certification. This “proof of independence” and “non-political” focus could help in securing funding from private donors.
3. *Provide ECI citizens’ committees with support to run effective campaigns, both before and after registration.* This could include advice on volunteer management techniques and technical knowledge on topics such as European data protection.

4. *Make the online signature collection form more accessible to users.* Fields, set-up and help functions could be improved. The excessively difficult captcha, which has led many to give up signing an ECI in frustration, needs to be improved.
5. *Review the personal data and signature validation requirements of individual member states.* These are often incompatible. Some countries use nationality and other countries use residence to determine who can sign. Expatriated EU citizens should not be excluded from signing an ECI.
6. *EU offices and representations in individual member states should help to familiarise the wider population with the concept of ECIs.* Individual ECI organisers must focus on their campaign topic. It cannot be up to them to also educate the European public about the ECI as a tool.
7. *The timeline of gathering one million signatures in 12 months needs to be reviewed.* Two years is more realistic. An ECI campaign's chances depend on whether it is independent and citizen-driven or run by established campaigning organisations.
8. *Allow peer-to-peer recommendation and organisers to stay in touch with those who have signed their ECI.* A true ECI should be as viral as possible. Ideally, citizens should be able to voluntarily share their email address on the ECI signature form. Email addresses would only be shared with ECI organisers and the other information used for official signature validation.

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The text in this file is a part of the book:

AN ECI THAT WORKS!
Learning from the first two years of the European Citizens' Initiative

Edited by Carsten Berg and Janice Thomson

Prefaces by Maroš Šefčovič, Martin Schulz and Dimitris Kourkoulas

2014, The ECI Campaign, Alfter (Germany)

This book contains contributions from 16 ECIs,
14 analytic and prospective contributions, and two interviews.

You may order the book by email: contact@citizens-initiative.eu

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