
13. Making the ECI Work – A Social Science Perspective

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Annette Knaut, University of Augsburg and Maximilian Conrad, University of Iceland, have worked on and published several articles on the ECI and are the editors of the forthcoming volume “Bridging the Gap? Opportunities and Constraints of the European Citizens’ Initiative” to be published later this year at Budrich Academic. In this article, they outline questions about the ECI that social science can help answer and share some preliminary research findings.

Since the ECI has now been in use for two years, one can point to numerous shortcomings that this first transnational citizens’ initiative in the world is still struggling with. However, attention should also be paid to a number of success stories. This article sketches a few critical points regarding the ECI as a participatory democratic innovation and discusses the role of social science research in further evaluating and developing the ECI. In our view, social scientific research can make three kinds of contributions to an improved ECI, namely: (1) documenting and archiving; (2) observing and interpreting; and (3) critically evaluating.

Storing and sharing the experiences of ECIs

Regarding the aspect of documenting and archiving, both researchers and potential future initiative organisers would certainly benefit from a revitalisation of the idea of a European Citizens’ Initiative Office (ECIO). Such an office could combine an ECI archive with a meeting and consultation point for ECI organisers, researchers and citizens. It would be an institutionalised access point available to all citizens which would also provide a comprehensive memory of all ECIs. It could be a forum where research meets practice, opening up opportunities to discuss current developments, obstacles and further challenges. This would create significant opportunities for dialogue that would in turn provide a solid source of empirical material that can be used in research and in developing the ECI further as a participatory instrument for all EU citizens.

The ECI as a new kind of democratic instrument

In relation to the aspect of observation and interpretation, social scientific research also helps us understand better what the ECI is to begin with. The ECI is a unique instrument of citizen participation, most of all in the sense that it is *transnational*, thus ‘forcing’ citizens from at least seven different member states to build a transnational agenda from below. The ECI is therefore innovative in relation to (a) what it *is*, as well as to the effect that it has on the EU’s institutional architecture (b), and on social relations between citizens from different member states (c) (see Knaut 2013).

The ECI is a previously unknown instrument of participatory democracy, namely a transnational (and electronically usable) *agenda-setting initiative*. So far, agenda-setting initiatives have been known only as a direct democratic instrument at the national (and sub-national) levels. Some researchers discuss the ECI as a weak form of direct democracy; for others, it is more of a (toothless) agenda-setting instrument for a minority of EU citizens.

The ECI transforms relationships between EU citizens-institutions-organisations

The social sciences help us understand the ECI as part of a larger transformation of the interactions between citizens and the EU institutions. The ECI brings about new rules, procedures and modes of communication between citizens and the EU institutions – most importantly the Commission and the European Parliament (Knaut/Plottka 2011; Van Brussel 2013).

Finally, the ECI is innovative in that it offers qualitative changes in terms of social relations, bringing together different types of individual and collective actors with different organisational and structural-cultural backgrounds. The transnational character of the ECI creates European communication networks of citizens with diverse cultural and language backgrounds that may promote the formation of a European ‘demos’. The transnational agenda of a citizens’ committee first has to be established in a process of discussion in a heterogeneous institutional context.

Learning can help future ECIs succeed

Social science’s contribution in the area of observation can also be highly practical in the sense that it can generate a strategy for success for prospective ECI organisers. In this context, it is important to look not only at the initiatives that have failed to achieve their ambitions, but also at those that have managed to drum up sufficient support to reach the required one million signatures. In some ways, it can be considered remarkable that three initiatives have managed to collect more than one million signatures. It is also important that ECI research incorporates initiatives that were not registered by the Commission.

With regard to critical evaluation, the social sciences have a number of contributions to make. For instance, further research is needed on organisational hurdles that ECI organisers have to surmount throughout the preparation and implementation process. The social sciences should further observe the interaction of ECI organisers with different publics in Europe. Questions to be addressed here include: which publics (social media, leading traditional media, expert circles, NGOs) are important for collecting signatures?; and which topics are likely to succeed (or fail) and for what reasons?

Can the ECI be a tool for “average” citizens?

A critical perspective can also address the question whether “average citizens” can in fact succeed with their initiatives, and whether the ECI in this sense can be considered a genuine citizens’ initiative in the first place. In some ways, one might find it naïve to expect the ECI to be a tool for *average* citizens to begin with, considering that the members of a citizens’ committee have to come from seven different member states and collect a minimum number of signatures in at least seven member states. It is certainly difficult to imagine that “average citizens” have the networks and resources to do this without any organisational support. Social scientific research can already show that the first round of initiatives, launched since May 2012, cover a broad spectrum in respect of the involvement of organised civil society or institutional/party-political actors (Conrad 2013).

Maybe the most important contribution is, however, that the idea of “average citizens” is problematic to begin with. Organisers of ECIs can be average citizens, but their involvement in ECIs obviously also shows that they have a level of interest in participating in EU politics that goes beyond

what can usually be expected of average citizens. This makes the ECI no less a *citizens'* initiative, but it underlines that there are limits to the expectations we should have on just how "average" its users will be.

The more relevant question is thus whether "active citizens" can make the ECI *their* tool for participating in the EU's legislative process. Research on the first round of initiatives has produced somewhat ambivalent results in this regard (Conrad 2013). The initiatives that have been organised more or less purely by citizens without any strong prior links to public- or private-interest groups, or to institutional actors, seem to stand very little chance of collecting the required number of signatures. Private initiatives of the kind of the initiatives for *One Single Tariff*, *Fraternité 2020* or *End Ecocide in Europe*, all fell far short of one million signatures. By comparison, *Right to Water* was organised centrally by the European Federation of Public Service Unions, while *One of Us* could draw on the support of domestic pro-life organisations from around the Union.

ECI's impact on democracy

Finally, ECI research also addresses important normative issues. It can clarify the relationship between participatory democratic tools and the overall democratic quality of the decisions made in the EU. The ECI can clearly serve as a bridge between citizens and their (somewhat indirectly accountable) representatives in the EU institutions.

One likely expression of this could be that it broadens the range of policy proposals that are placed on the agenda. However, this also raises important concerns about the normative validity (or desirability?) of a number of proposals. Even though it has been highly successful in collecting signatures, the *One of Us* initiative for instance raises normative questions that collections of signatures alone most certainly will not be able to answer. The ECI will therefore need to be complemented with institutionalised deliberation that goes far beyond the current practice of hearings in the European Parliament.

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Annette Knaut (University of Augsburg) and Maximilian Conrad (University of Iceland) are the editors of "Bridging the Gap? Opportunities and Constraints of the European Citizens' Initiative" (forthcoming in 2014).

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.

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