

Is Europe Listening to Us? Successes and Failures of EU Citizen Consultations

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This book probes into the question that has captured policy-makers and citizens alike: how to bridge the gap between the European Union (EU) and those it is to represent? The more general debate on the democratic legitimacy of the European Union and its possible shortcomings – what has been coined as democratic deficit – is so lively that some have described it as ‘crowded waters’ (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2007).

The editors of this volume have, however, found a niche in this debate. Authors have thus been asked to examine the steps and measures that have been undertaken at EU level to engage EU citizens into EU affairs. The question that is raised is therefore whether ‘experiments’ in citizen participation do in fact offer good opportunities for ‘transnational political practices’. This then is linked to the very topical question of whether these new types of transnational forums could actually ‘substantiate’ European citizenship. In this vein the general objective of this book is to evaluate the ‘legitimizing potential’ of Deliberative Citizens Involvement Projects (DCIPs).

Against this background the book is divided into a contextual section and several empirical chapters then zoom in on some selected DCIPs such as transnational citizens’ forums and the deliberative opinion poll EuroPolis. The third section takes a more bird’s eye view by drawing lessons from the EU experiments and by adopting a comparative approach on ‘deliberative designs across the globe’.

The authors are very renowned scholars in the field, both from within and outside the European Union. The fact that the book includes a foreword by Viviane Reding, at the time Vice-President of the Commission, reflects the fact that the audience of this book is to extend beyond academia. It is noteworthy that some authors were in fact involved in the implementation of DCIPs, which of course means that they have first-hand experience, but this is seen by the editors as possibly ‘nurturing a legitimate element of suspicion’ (p. 13).

So what is the balance sheet? Is Europe actually listening to its citizens?

Here the verdict seems to be more ‘glass half empty than glass half full’. On the one hand the empirical case studies reflect that the newly introduced instruments have the potential to strengthen the civic dimension of EU citizenship. Those citizens that were in

fact involved in these endeavours not only expressed that they were satisfied with the way these instruments work, but also testified that they gained improved knowledge on the functioning of the EU in general.

On the other hand there seems to be a gap between claim and reality (p. 30). Contrary to what was proclaimed in the so-called 'reflection period' which followed the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty, there has been no paradigm shift in EU communication policy, which was to lead to the emergence of a European public sphere and a more deliberative democracy.

Moreover, authors identify several shortcomings when it comes to the design and implementation of DCIPs themselves. These include the limited inclusion of citizens of all walks of life into these new instruments, the limits of multi-lingual debates (which lead to the predominance of English, given that no translation is provided) and the fact that the impact of these initiatives on EU decision-making is unclear and unpredictable.

Is Europe Listening to Us? is an edited volume. Although edited volumes do offer the opportunity of bringing together several authors and viewpoints, they suffer from the danger that each chapter examines separate questions. In this case, however, authors do refer to each other's chapters and also reflect on each other's findings. This makes the book a coherent whole. This coherence could have been heightened even more by way of a concluding chapter where some of the main findings are examined and some of the fundamental questions revisited that were raised at the outset.

This is to some extent done in the introduction but we have no clear response to the question, for example, of whether some of the initiatives lead to a 'substantiation' of European citizenship. What is more the editors have not sketched a research agenda, which could be done rather easily given that there are several open questions.

This does not take away from the fact that this book is a comprehensive contribution to the debate that extends our focus beyond the EU's polity.

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Reference

Kohler-Koch, B. and Rittberger, B. (eds) (2007) *Debating the Democratic Legitimacy of the European Union*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.