



THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

**THE LONG ROUTE FROM TRANSVERSAL POLITICS TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

IDEAS FOR STRENGTHENING THE PARTICIPATORY INSTRUMENT OF THE
EUROPEAN CITIZENS INITIATIVES (ECI) BASED ON THE CASE OF
#STOPGLOBALWARMING

Authors: Claudia BASTA

Marco PERDUCA

Virginia FIUME

Marco CAPPATO

Brussels, February 2022





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Rue Montoyer 25

1000 Brussels

Belgium

Web: www.iedonline.eu

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With the financial support of the European Parliament





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The phenomenon of transnational activism in the European Union is attracting increasing attention in literature and in the respective political debate. Often, the transversal relevance of the relevant campaigns unite individuals, organizations and political parties of diverse backgrounds and worldviews. Relevant transnational, transversal and trans-party political initiatives can be therefore associated with the notion of transversal politics. Developed in the feminist stream of political studies, the notion of transversal politics is alternative to that of identity politics for it recognizes the inherent epistemological pluralism of “coalition politics in which the differential positionings of the individuals and collectives involved will be recognized, as well as the value systems which underly their struggles.” (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Such inherent pluralism, its recognition from the side of those involved in coalition politics, and the resulting transition from identity to transversal politics are the conceptual lenses through which this contribution discusses the “single-issue-based coalitions” constituted by the European Citizens Initiatives (ECIs). Established in 2009 in response to the democratic deficit of the European Union in the framework of the Treaty of Lisbon, the ECIs constitute the participatory instrument by means of which European citizens can convert transnational political goals into a set of policy proposals to the European Parliament and the European Commission. However, the capacities required to complete the long journey from the formulation to the actual admission of such proposals to the parliamentary debate make the ECI a scarcely known and challenging to use instrument. Improving the relevant institutional design by drawing on the ‘lessons learnt’ from the multiple ECIs initiated in the past years is therefore essential for closing the gap between what seems an increasingly active and transversal European citizenry on the one hand, and the effective representativity of the European policy-making process on the other.

Scope of this contribution is providing inputs in this direction by discussing the recently concluded ECI “A price on carbon to fight climate change”. Launched in 2019 by the pan-European movement EUmans, the ECI was audited at the end of 2021 by the European Parliament Petition Committee. The aim of this study is distilling some ‘lessons learnt’ from the relevant journey that may inform future reform of this important, but still underexploited instrument of participation of European citizens in their supranational policy-making process. Our conclusions provide recommendations on how to articulate future ECIs in ways conducive to a successful outcome. Further recommendations address the European Commission in regard to improving the accessibility of the ECI instrument from the side of European citizens.

Social Media summary

Scope of this contribution is providing inputs in this direction by discussing the recently concluded ECI “A price on carbon to fight climate change”

Keywords

#Transnationalactivism; #transversalpolitics; #Europeandemocraticdeficit;
#EuropeanCitizensInitiatives; #EuropeanCitizensAssemblies



Short bio

Claudia BASTA (1976) is a Scientist at the Dutch national institute for the living environment and Research Fellow at the department of Geosciences of the University of Utrecht, where she teaches theory and methodology of environmental and spatial planning evaluation. She has obtained her PhD in risk governance from Delft University of Technology with a thesis on comparative risk assessment practices in the European Union, and a post-doc in the ethics of technology from the 4TU Centre of Excellence for Ethics and Technology of the same university. Her broad-based research interests revolve around transdisciplinarity questions in the social-environmental sciences. As a volunteer for the international association Science for Democracy, she works on the theme of Open Science on questions of equitable access to scientific research from the side of disadvantaged researchers. Corresponding Author. Utrecht University, Department of Geosciences, Human Geography and Spatial Planning Group; Science for Democracy, Steering Committee

Marco PERDUCA Science for Democracy, Founder.

Virginia FIUME EUmans, Campaigns Director

Marco CAPPATO EUmans, Founder.



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1. Transversal politics and transnational activism in the European Union

The phenomenon of transnational activism in the European Union is attracting increasing attention in literature (e.g. Tarrow, 2005; Joachim and Locher, 2008). The relevant practices are generally approached from the perspective of the causes advanced – from lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual (LGTB) rights up to complex social-environmental questions – and of the type and goals of the individuals and organizations that join the respective campaigns. Often, the transversal relevance of such campaigns unite individuals, organizations and political parties of diverse backgrounds and worldviews. Relevant transnational, transversal and trans-party political initiatives can be therefore associated with the notion of *transversal politics* (Yuval-Davis, 1999).

Developed in the 90s of the past century within the feminist stream of political studies, the notion of *transversal politics* is alternative to that of *identity politics* for it recognizes that, from each individual standpoint, “the world is seen differently”; thus, “the only way to approach 'the truth' is by a dialogue between people of differential positionings.” (Yuval-Davis, 1999, p. 95). Such inherent epistemological pluralism generates “a mode of coalition politics in which the differential positionings of the individuals and collectives involved will be recognized, as well as the value systems which underly their struggles” (*Ibid*). Such “different levels of overlapping value systems” may generate “different levels of common political work, from a tight formal organisation to a loose informal network, from an ideological alliance to a single-issue-based coalition.” (*Ibid*, p. 96).

Such inherent pluralism, its recognition from the side of those involved in coalition politics, and the resulting transition from identity to transversal politics are the conceptual lenses through which this contribution discusses the specific case of the “single-issue-based coalitions” constituted by the European Citizens Initiatives (ECIs). Established by the Treaty of Lisbon of 2009 in response to the democratic deficit of the European Union (e.g. Kavrakova, 2021), since their entry into force in 2012 the ECIs are the main institutional instrument through which an emerging European “transnational civil society (TCS)” can “undertake voluntary collective action across state borders in pursuit of what they deem the wider public interest.” (Price, 2003, p. 580). Indeed, scope of the ECIs was to “add a new dimension to European Democracy, complement the set of rights related to citizenship of the Union and increase the public debate around European politics, helping to build a genuine European public space (see De Clerck-Sachsse, 2012). As such, the ECIs constitute a unique instrument for European citizens for converting transnational political goals into a formal set of policy proposals to the European Parliament and the European Commission.

However, the capacities required to complete the long journey from the formulation to the actual admission of such proposals to the parliamentary debate make the ECI “an agenda setting instrument challenging to use and with limited legislative impact” (Kavrakova, 2021). Indeed, the ECI procedure “can be difficult to put into practice” (Mengozzi, in Inglese 2017). Moreover, “Since the legislative initiative is the exclusive monopoly of the European Commission, the ECI is only a first step in the legislative process, in fact it is “an initiative of an initiative” (Bardazzi and Caramaschi, 2017).

Despite these clear limitations, the ECIs provide the only structured procedure by which European citizens can advance concrete policy proposals in the framework of the formal mechanisms of



consultation of the EU. Improving the relevant institutional design by drawing on the ‘lessons learnt’ from the multiple ECIs initiated in the past years is therefore essential for closing the gap between what seems an increasingly active and transversal European citizenry on the one hand, and the effective representativity of the European policy-making process on the other. At the same time, such ‘lessons learnt’ may provide valuable insights to the initiators of future ECIs, in particular regarding the definite and accessible articulation of the political objectives that they wish to pursue.

Scope of this contribution is providing inputs in this direction by discussing the recently concluded initiative “A price on carbon to fight climate change”, followed by the campaign StopGlobalWarming.¹ Launched in 2019 by the pan-European movement EUmans², StopGlobalWarming aimed at promoting the pricing of carbon dioxide emissions in the EU as a viable measure for accelerating the transition of the energy supply toward renewable sources. The proposal included the use of the relevant revenues for decreasing the taxes on labour. The relevant campaign did not reach the collection of one million signatures in seven European countries required for being admitted to the parliamentary hearing. However, in the light of the clear relevance of the proposed carbon pricing measure to the current debate on climate change mitigation and the institutional progressions within the EU of the Green New Deal and the Fit For 55 Package of the EU Commission, at the end of 2021 the proponents of the ECI were audited by the European Parliament PETI Committee.³ As such, the ECI has completed its journey up to the hearing of its proponents in the EU institutional framework.

The aim of this study is distilling ‘lessons learnt’ from this journey that may inform future reform of this important, but still underexploited instrument of participation of European citizens in their supranational policy-making process. In order to provide practical insights to the initiators of future ECIs, we also reflect on the articulation of the political questions raised by StopGlobalWarming in comparison with other four concluded ECIs. We do so by proposing three qualitative criteria of evaluation of the transnational campaigns engendered by transversal “coalition politics”. By applying these criteria to the questions raised by StopGlobalWarming and by the ECIs that, contrary to it, concluded with the public hearing in the European Parliament, we reflect on the efficacy of the instrument of the ECI for articulating political questions of different nature and complexity. In particular, we reflect on whether complex questions like those raised by StopGlobalWarming find in the ECIs the most appropriate instrument of participation in the EU policy-making process. Based on this and other findings, our conclusions provide recommendations on how to articulate future ECIs in ways conducive to a successful outcome. Further recommendations address the European Commission in regard to improving the accessibility of the ECI instrument from the side of European citizens.

¹ The European Commission dedicated page is available at: https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2019/000011_en (Last visited: January 2022)

² Founded in 2019, EUmans is an association of “citizens and activists from all around Europe engaged in a bottom-up political mobilization for socially and democratically sustainable EU policies.” (EUmans, 2022; *online*, available at www.eumans.eu (Last visited: January 2022).

³ The conversion of relevant ECIs into Petitions to the European Parliament is an option activated by the reformed ECI regulation discussed in the following section. More information is available at: <https://eumans.eu/globalcarbonpricing> (Last visited: January 2022)



Before doing so, in the following section we report a short summary of the genesis and main developments of the instrument of the European Citizens Initiatives from its introduction in 2009 to date.

2. The European Citizens Initiatives: An instrument that enables participation, or that unveils its deficit?

The introduction of the European Citizens Initiatives in the Treaty of Lisbon is often framed in literature as a response to the democratic deficit of the European Union. Some even describe it as a measure engineered for “alleviating the feeling that the evergreen rhetoric of democratic deficit is still present.” (Inglese, 2017). Indeed, the ECIs do not constitute an instrument of direct consultation of European citizens, but “a mechanism of participatory democracy which is fully subordinated to the political will of the representatives that could approve, alter or reject the citizens’ proposals.” (Sousa Ferro, 2007; in Bardazzi and Caramaschi, 2017).

Since its establishment, the procedure for launching an ECI remained substantially unvaried. Seven European citizens of different nationalities must gather in a Citizens Committee and conceive an agenda-setting proposal in a domain of policy that “does not manifestly fall outside the framework of the Commission’s powers to submit a proposal for a legal act of the Union for the purpose of implementing the Treaties” (*Ibid*). This means that the ECI is limited in scope – it excludes policy domains like security and defense – and content – the admissible proposals are bound to the implementation of the Treaties. Once the European Commission verifies the admissibility of the proposals, the European Citizens Initiative is registered and given publicity. At that point, the collection of 1.000.000 signatures in at least seven different European countries can start. Digital means of collection are permitted. Upon the reach of the required signatures, the proposal can be discussed with representatives of the European Commission and become object of public hearing in the European Parliament from the side of the committee responsible for the subject matter of the ECI (European Parliament, 2022, *online*).⁴ Whilst the Commission is obliged to issue a formal response to the proposals contained in the ECIs that achieve the required manifestations of support, neither the Parliament nor the Commission have the obligation to convert them into legislative acts.

To date, 40% circa of the proposed ECIs haven’t met the requirements for registration. Of the 86 registered initiatives, only 6 have reached the required signatures, namely, Right2Water, One of Us, Stop Vivisection, Ban Glyphosate, Minority SafePack, and End the Cage Age (European Parliament, 2022, *online*). These latter ECIs received formal response from the side of the European Commission and, in some cases, ignited important reforms of the regulation of the respective subject matter.⁵

The scarcity of successful ECIs on the one hand, and the cases of appeal to the European Court of Justice from the side of ECIs proponents who saw their initiative rejected on the other hand,

⁴ Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/149/european-citizens-initiative> (Last visited: January 2022)

⁵ The ECI website provides access to all registered ECIs per category (registered, in course, concluded, and successful). *Online* at <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/> (last visited: January 2022).



became the object of a dedicated European studies literature (e.g. Inglese, 2017). In parallel, a structured review of the burdensome ECI process from the side of the European Commission determined the entry into force, in January 2020, of a revised regulation. Several amendments meant to dissolve some of the intricacies of the process of collection of signatures and of their validation were introduced. *Inter alia*, signatory citizens may now not reside in the Union at the time of their signature. The burden of providing detailed personal information was also significantly lightened.

The reform of the ECI regulation drew on the priority of “Increasing the democratic legitimacy in the EU through enhanced citizens' involvement and participation (Priority no 10 – A Union of Democratic change).” This priority motivated the Commission to make the ECI “less burdensome and more user-friendly” (Euralex, 2022, *online*).⁶ Of the 34 points that constitute the preamble of the reformed regulation, approximately 20 revolve around the strengthening of the communication between the promoters of the ECI, the signatory citizens and the Commission from the phases of conception of the initiatives up to their public hearing (Euralex, 2022, *online*)⁷.

The establishment of such bridges and the strengthening of the support provided to ECIs proponents from the side of the European Commission is a welcomed development of the respective regulation. However, such development may be newly ineffective in addressing the more general question of the void of participation of European citizens in the policy-making process of the Union: the void, note, to which the very institution of the ECI aimed at responding. Such ineffectiveness may not be imputed solely to the procedural burdens of the ECIs. In fact, the disengagement of citizens of liberal democratic countries from ‘institutionalized’ forms of political participation is a wider and more complex phenomenon (e.g. Demetriou, 2013).

Whilst analysing this phenomenon is out of the scope of this contribution, several data seem to confirm its relevance to the European Union. According to a recent survey, only 3% of European citizens are aware of the existence of the ECI instrument (Eumans, 2022, *online*).⁸ On average, less than 50% of European voters participate in the election of their European parliamentary representatives (European Parliament, 2022, *online*).⁹ As the definition of transversal politics introduced above helped to clarify, indeed the void of political participation of the citizens of democratic countries empties electoral competitions, party-like activities, and discards institutional mechanisms of consultation. At the same time though, it occupies transversal territories of joint activism and nonviolent protest. These latter ‘single-issue’ movements may not resort to the use of institutional instruments like the ECIs for conveying their participants’ political

⁶ Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the European citizens’ initiative COM/2017/0482 final - 2017/0220 (COD), *online*. At: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017PC0482> (Last visited: January 2022).

⁷ For example, “In order to make the European citizens’ initiative more accessible and to provide support to citizens and organisers, the Commission should provide information and assistance to organisers and make available an online collaborative platform to provide a dedicated discussion forum and information and advice about the European citizens’ initiative”; furthermore, “To ensure proximity to citizens, Member States should establish one or more contact points in their respective territories to provide citizens with information and assistance regarding the European citizens’ initiative.” Additionally, “For the sake of transparency and smooth and efficient communication, the group of organisers should designate a representative to liaise between the group of organisers and the institutions of the Union throughout the procedure.”

⁸ Available at: <https://www.eumans.eu/europe-day-yougov-survey-shows-only-24-eu-citizens-are-informed-about-their-democratic-rights> (Last visited: January 2022)

⁹ Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/> (Last visited: January 2022)



demands, and rather opt for the informal instruments more congenial to the fluid nature of the coalition and to the specific causes advanced.

One example of a rapidly growing ‘single-issue’ transnational movement that organized periodic manifestations against climate change is Fridays for Future. The movement not only proved that a European citizenry politically engaged in the pressing questions of our time exists, but also that non-institutional forms of participation may influence the political discourse at multiple governance levels (Wahlström et al., 2019). On the other hand, participating in a manifestation for raising awareness on the urgency of preventing the consequences of climate change cannot be assimilated to the effort and capacities required to form an international Citizens Committee, formulate concrete policy proposals for abating CO₂ emissions in the European Union, and forming a coalition for convincing 1.000.000 fellow EU citizens of their relevance. Indeed, a productive discussion of instruments like the ECIs requires to make a distinction between “transnational networks, coalitions and advocacy campaigns, and social movements” (Price, 2003, p. 580), and to keep in mind that the “transnational networks” mobilized by an ECI may include, but are not limited to, social movements.

In the following sections we develop this and other arguments by focusing on the political questions raised by StopGlobalWarming and by other ECIs that completed the long journey from their conception to their public hearing successfully. Their comparison will set the basis for our conclusive remarks, which address recommendations to the European Commission and the proponents of future ECIs for, respectively, strengthening the accessibility and the potential of success of future ECIs.

3. From transversal politics to transnational campaigns: What makes them successful?

The notion of transversal politics described in the introduction captures those forms of “coalition politics” that unite individuals and organizations of sharply different backgrounds in initiatives aimed at achieving generic and, at the same time, ‘narrow’ political objectives. With ‘generic’ we refer to their relevance – i.e. the political questions raised regarding virtually any individual – whilst with ‘narrow’ we refer to the specificity of their subject matter – i.e. the political goal consists of establishing or banning highly specific rights or practices. An important feature of such subject matters is that, generally, the individuals that become involved in the coalition or provide support to it have different levels of familiarity with them. For example, while all European citizens are arguably familiar with the fact that chemical fertilizers cause some degree of soil and water pollution, not all the signatories of the ECI “Ban Glyphosate” may have had previous knowledge of this specific substance and of its effects on the cultivation and consumption of crops. From this perspective, together with the other ECIs that will be discussed in the following sections, the political campaign of Ban Glyphosate qualifies as a typical “awareness raising” campaign (e.g. Borawska, 2017).

Other examples of generic and yet ‘narrow’ political questions whose campaigns have had great political impacts within and beyond the European Union are the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which developed in the last decade of the past century (e.g. Shawki, 2010), and the campaign initiated by Greenpeace in the first years of the 2000s for limiting the import in



the EU of palm oil from South-East Asia (e.g. Pye, 2010). Both campaigns were extremely successful. In the former case, a so-called Ban Mine Treaty was adopted in 1997. The Treaty was joined by 164 signatory countries (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, 2022, *online*).¹⁰ In the latter case, by raising awareness on the pervasive use of palm oil in virtually all shelf-products and cosmetics produced in the EU, the palm oil campaign was able to create enormous consensus among European citizens regarding the need of regulating the social-environmental impacts of the cultivation of oil palms in South-East Asia. Such consensus engendered a real “transnational crisis” between the two world regions (Pye, 2010) and affected the governance of palm oil production and trade in a permanent way.

These campaigns suggest that transversal politics initiatives that generate dedicated transnational campaigns ‘function’ when they succeed to relate highly general questions to each individuals’ experiences; in other words, when they create a sense of relevance of the invoked political goals for the life of each person. Such relevance passes through the dissemination of new knowledge and narratives; indeed, through the tailoring of “public awareness campaigns” (e.g. Borawska, 2013). Keeping the concept of transversal politics as our starting point, on the basis of these observations we propose some qualitative criteria through which reflecting on StopGlobalWarming and other four ECIs campaigns, namely:

1. the *transversality* of the political questions raised: in practice, *how many*, and *how much* citizens are directly touched by them;
2. the *definiteness* of the political objectives, that is, whether such objectives establish new rights or ban old practices, or rather complement existing ones;
3. the *accessibility* of the content that articulates such objectives from the side of the large majority of citizens.

Whilst for the sake of our exercise the three criteria are of equal weight, we anticipate that the criteria of transversality and accessibility seem to have been pivotal for the success of the European Citizens Initiatives that concluded their long journey up to the European Parliament.

3.1 StopGlobalWarming: Lessons learnt from a ‘perfectly failed’ ECI

The ambition of the ECI StopGlobalWarming was to lead the European Commission to introduce a minimum price for carbon emissions in the EU and use the relevant revenue for financing EU policies that “support energy saving and the use of renewable sources” and “the reduction of taxation on lower incomes.” (StopGlobalWarming, 2022, *online*). The text of the ECI was detailed up to the actual “minimum price on CO₂ emissions, starting from 50€ per CO₂ tonne from 2020 up to 100€ by 2025.” The proposed measure aimed at abolishing “the existing system of free allowances to EU polluters and introduce a border adjustment mechanism on non-EU imports, in such a way as to compensate for the lower pricing on CO₂ emissions in the exporting country.” (*Ibid*).

As explained in the explanatory note of the ECI, the rationale of introduction of a minimum price for carbon emissions and the proposal of using the relevant revenue for lowering the taxes on labour aimed at ‘hitting two pigeons with one rock’. In fact, “the two most important challenges

¹⁰ Available at: <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/the-issues/mine-ban-treaty.aspx> (Last visited: January 2022)



facing the European Union are, on the one hand, to control climate change by reducing fossil fuels consumption and increasing the use of renewable energies, thereby initiating the ecological transition of the economy; on the other hand, to reduce the tax burden on workers and businesses by reducing social security contributions - particularly for low-wage workers -, combating poverty and promoting employment through reductions in labour costs.” (StopGlobalWarming Explanatory Note, 2019). The ECI identified the common solution for these two challenges in “the revenue generated through carbon tax”, which “can thus lead to a double dividend: combating climate change and increasing employment.” (*Ibid*).

Conceived by a Citizens Committee that included two former members of the European Parliament, natural and social scientists, and experienced environmental activists¹¹, the ECI passed the initial scrutiny of the European Commission and, in July 2019, started the collection of signatures. After the two extensions of the relevant deadline granted by the European Commission in virtue of the spread of the Coronavirus, the collection ended in July 2021. The campaign closed with 61.047 signatures in 27 countries; that is, not even a tenth of those required for qualifying for public hearing.

Whilst discussing the scientific foundations of the proposal is out of the scope of this contribution, one observation can be certainly done: the proposal addressed objectives of clear supranational relevance that align with the EU target of achieving ‘0 carbon emissions’ by 2050 (European Commission, 2022, *online*).¹² Notably, in the same period of activity of StopGlobalWarming, the ECI “Citizens Climate Initiative” launched a simplified version of the same proposal, consisting of pricing carbon emissions and dividing the revenue evenly among EU citizens (European Commission, Citizens Climate Initiatives, *online*).¹³ A third ECI that run in parallel with these two climate-related ECIs aimed at introducing the taxation of aviation fuel (EU Commission, Ending the Aviation Fuel Tax Exemption in Europe, *online*).¹⁴ Altogether, these three ECIs show the clear relevance of pricing and taxing carbon emissions and fossil fuels respectively in the framework of the EU policy on climate.

This relevance is confirmed by the fact that StopGlobalWarming obtained the support of 100 European majors and of tens of political leaders and European associations. Yet, quantitatively, it did not achieve more than a few tens of thousands of manifestations of support from the side of ordinary citizens. The same occurred to the other two ECIs campaigns, which scored a comparably low number of signatures.

To appreciate the (in)significance of this number, it may be useful to compare the outcomes of StopGlobalWarming with the outcomes of the recently concluded campaign for legalizing euthanasia in Italy, namely, the campaign *Liberi Fino alla Fine* (Eng. ‘Free Until the End’;

¹¹ The Author of this contribution has participated in the Citizens Committee in the capacity of reviewer of the proposed measures from the perspective of their scientific foundations and feasibility in the EU policy framework. This involved consulting international experts in the field of carbon pricing, in particular professor Alberto Majocchi from the University of Pavia (see Majocchi A, Maresca C and Basta C (2020), *Introdurre un Prezzo minimo, etc, online*. Available at: <https://www.climalteranti.it/2019/09/13/introdurre-un-prezzo-minimo-sulle-emissioni-climalteranti-una-iniziativa-dei-cittadini-europei/> (Last visited: January 2022).

¹² European Commission Climate Action, 2022, *online*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/clima/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2050-long-term-strategy_it (Last visited: January 2022).

¹³ At https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2019/000006_en (Last visited: January 2022).

¹⁴ At https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2019/000009_en (Last visited: January 2022).



Associazione Luca Coscioni, 2022, *online*).¹⁵ The collection of the 500.000 signatures required for calling a national referendum that would unlock the possibility of legalizing the practice of euthanasia in the country took place during the sanitary emergency, and could not count on digital means of collection. Yet, the campaign collected 1.239.423 valid signatures (*Ibid*). Notably, the two campaigns were initiated by the same network of experienced politicians and activists.¹⁶

Of course, the national and the European reach of the two campaigns and the nature of the ECI in comparison to that of a national referendum undermine any attempts of doing an analytically sound comparison. However, there are some general aspects of the political campaigns that share the struggle of collecting a challenging number of signatures in a limited period of time on which, in view of elaborating recommendations for improving the instrument of the ECI, we find useful reflecting in an analytical, albeit qualitative, fashion. We do so in the following sections.

3.2 Articulating an ECI: The difference between public relevance and public consensus

As mentioned above, the proposal of pricing carbon emissions in the EU advanced through the ECI StopGlobalWarming aimed at accelerating the transition toward a renewable energy supply: a goal of clear transversal relevance, together with the one of using the relevant revenues for lightening the fiscal pressure on labour. However, how truly accessible to European citizens could such relevance be? How much may individuals at large relate with the concept of “carbon pricing”? Could any ordinary citizen judge the soundness of the proposal of starting with “50€ per CO₂ tonne from 2020 up to 100€ by 2025.”? Arguably, not. The very team formed for conceiving the proposal had to invest significant time in researching the topic. Notably, the important detail of the starting price of 50 euro per unit of carbon emissions could be the object of never-ending debate among the very experts that were consulted.

Different answers though may be given in relation to the accessibility of the ECIs that achieved the collection of 1.000.000 signatures. One example is the ECI “End the Cage Age”, which concluded in September 2019 with more than 1.300.000 manifestations of support (European Commission, ECI portal, *online*).¹⁷ The question raised by the initiative regards the “Hundreds of millions of EU farm animals [that] are kept in cages for most of their lives, causing great suffering.” (*Ibid*). The ECI called the European Commission “to end this inhumane treatment of farm animals.” (*Ibid*). The public hearing of the proponents of the ECI primed a lively debate on what they called an “inhumane practice”. Finally, the European Commission endorsed their proposal. In June 2021, a press release informed European citizens that by 2023 a dedicated

¹⁵ Associazione Luca Coscioni, Referendum Eutanasia Legale, *online*. Available at: <https://referendum.eutanasialeale.it/> (Last visited: January 2022).

¹⁶ Of course, there are also important elements of these two campaigns that make them utterly incomparable. First, the referendum is a binding and well known instrument of citizens’ participation in Italy, whilst the ECI is not binding and relatively unknown among European citizens; furthermore, the Liberi fino alla Fine campaign capitalized on at least fifteen years of campaigning led by the Associazione Luca Coscioni, which is recognised as the leading political association on this and other sensitive political themes.

¹⁷ Available at: https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2018/000004_en (last visited: January 2022)



regulation will phase-out the practice of caging several farm animals (European Commission, 2021, *online*).¹⁸

A similar path with different outcomes was followed by the “Ban Glyphosate” campaign. Also here, the proposal articulated the clear objective of banning a practice considered noxious for human health and the environment. The wide public support given to the ECI forced the European Commission to review the scientific evidence on the alleged causal relation between glyphosate and cancer. The review concluded that “there is no link between glyphosate and cancer in humans”, thus, “[through] a positive vote by Member States' representatives on 27 November 2017, the Commission today adopted a renewal of the approval of glyphosate for 5 years.” (European Commission, 2017, *online*).¹⁹ However, the Commission “commits to presenting a legislative proposal in 2018, to further increase the transparency and quality of studies used in the scientific assessment of substances.” (*Ibid*). Comparable outcomes were achieved by the ECI Stop Vivisection, which called the Commission to “(...) abrogate directive 2010/63/EU on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes and to present a new proposal that does away with animal experimentation and instead makes compulsory the use - in biomedical and toxicological research - of data directly relevant for the human species.” (European Commission, 2015, *online*).²⁰ The Commission responded by sharing “the conviction that animal testing should be phased out in Europe”, however, “its approach for achieving that objective differs from the one proposed in this Citizens' Initiative”; in fact, “a complete ban on animal research in the EU would be premature and it would risk chasing out biomedical research from Europe.” (*Ibid*).

In Table 1, we collect some observations in relation to these ECIs by looking at the articulation of the respective political questions through the lenses of the three criteria introduced in the previous section. For the sake of comparability, we report the original summary of each ECI. Of the five ECIs, only the ECI StopGlobalWarming hasn't reached the target of signatures required for being admitted to public hearing in the European Parliament. In the following section, we discuss the content of the Table shortly and elaborate our conclusive remarks.

¹⁸ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3297 (Last visited: January 2022)

¹⁹ Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_17_5191 (Last visited: January 2022)

²⁰ Available at: https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2012/000007_en (Last visited: January 2022)



Table 1. A qualitative evaluation of the transversality, definitiveness and accessibility

	Evaluation criteria		
	Transversality	Definiteness	Accessibility
	<i>the question regards virtually all individuals and touches upon significant aspects of their life and consumptions together with those of future generations</i>	<i>the question aims at establishing new rights or banning given practices</i>	<i>the scope and articulation of the question are easily comprehensible by the large majority of individuals</i>
Stop Global Warming			
<i>We ask the European Commission to propose a EU legislation to discourage the consumption of fossil fuels, encourage energy saving and the use of renewable sources for fighting global warming and limiting temperature increase to 1,5°C. Our proposal introduces a minimum price on CO₂ emissions, starting from 50€ per CO₂ tonne from 2020 up to 100€ by 2025. At the same time, the proposal shall abolish the existing system of free allowances to EU polluters and introduce a border adjustment mechanism on non-EU imports (...)</i>	Yes. However, the intergenerational horizon of the consequences of climate change may undermine the ability of individuals to perceive the urgency to take action at the present time.	Partially. The proposal aims at introducing a pricing measure and, at the same time, at complementing the existing EU carbon trade system. Additionally, the measure aims at lightening the fiscal pressure on labour.	No. The pricing of carbon emissions in the EU is a highly technical question on which the very scientific community is relatively divided, particularly in regard of its feasibility and compatibility with existing frameworks like e.g. global trade agreements.
End of the Cage Age			
<i>We call on the European Commission to end the inhumane treatment of farm animals.(...) The Commission is invited to propose legislation to prohibit the use of cages for [a list follows]</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ban glyphosate			
<i>We call on the European Commission to propose to member states a ban on glyphosate, to reform the pesticide approval procedure, and to set EU-wide mandatory reduction targets for pesticide use. Ban glyphosate-based herbicides, exposure to which has been linked to cancer in humans, and has led to ecosystems degradation; ensure that</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes



<i>the scientific evaluation of pesticides for EU regulatory approval is based only on published studies, which are commissioned by competent public authorities instead of the pesticide industry; set EU-wide mandatory reduction targets for pesticide use, with a view to achieving a pesticide-free future.</i>			
Stop vivisection			
<i>Proposing an European legislative framework aimed at phasing out animal experiments. Considering clear ethical objections to animal experiments and solid scientific principles that invalidate the “animal model” for predicting human response, we urge the European Commission to abrogate directive 2010/63/EU on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes and to present a new proposal that does away with animal experimentation and instead makes compulsory the use - in biomedical and toxicological research - of data directly relevant for the human species</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
Minority SafePack			
<i>We call upon the EU to adopt a set of legal acts to improve the protection of persons belonging to national and linguistic minorities and strengthen cultural and linguistic diversity in the Union. It shall include policy actions in the areas of regional and minority languages, education and culture, regional policy, participation, equality, audiovisual and other media content, and also regional (state) support.</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes



4. Strengthening the impact of future ECIs: one reflection, and two proposals

The limited overview offered by Table 1 enables only some general observations on the articulation of different ECIs. Only a thorough analysis based on multiple criteria and on a bigger sample of data regarding each ECI could generate accurate insights on the factors that have determined their outcomes. However, it is quite evident that the four successful ECIs share the character of transversality and accessibility that the ECI StopGlobalWarming displays only partially. In particular, the articulation of this latter ECI – both in general terms and in terms of its level of detail – is poorly accessible by anyone who is not familiar with its underlying rationale, which consists of introducing market mechanisms for disincentivizing environmentally harmful behaviours. This remark does not undermine the political relevance of the proposal – on the contrary, it shows its scientific robustness. On the other hand, is the ECI the most suited instrument for conveying the political relevance of highly complex issues for which the acquisition of field-specific knowledge is preconditional?

The experience of StopGlobalWarming and of the ECIs that have raised similar political questions seem to confirm the unsuitability of this instrument for policy issues of such complexity. In the specific case of StopGlobalWarming, such complexity has arguably discouraged large international organizations like Greenpeace and transnational movements like Fridays for Future from joining the initiative. That has inevitably contributed to its failure: in fact, the initiative remained invisible in the very environmentalist networks for which the proposal should have had the greatest appeal. Confined within the capacities of its organizers, most of whom are volunteers, the ECI scored extremely rewarding results from the qualitative view – but not from the quantitative one.

This doesn't intend to suggest that the success of any ECIs is measured by the number of signatures collected and the legislative acts prompted. The experience of Ban Glyphosate and Stop Vivisection demonstrate otherwise. These two ECIs forced the European Commission to execute a thorough review of the knowledge-base that supports the two relevant regulations, and to issue a public statement in regard. As such, these ECIs have put European citizens in the position of monitoring the scientific foundations of two important domains of policy. An extremely valuable result, which leads us to our conclusive remarks.

These consist of one general observation and two distinct recommendations. The general observation is that in a European political landscape characterized by scarce citizens' engagement and dominated by social movements that tend to opt for short-term and informal rather than long-term and formal instruments of participation, the real question is not how to make institutional mechanisms like the ECI more 'user-friendly'; but how complementing such institutions with instruments "through which citizens can be engaged in the *implementation, monitoring* and



evaluation of public policies and processes of government.” (Price, p. 8, *emphasis added*).²¹, by so doing providing to European citizens “permanent participatory mechanisms in the legislative procedure” (Kavrakova, 2021). Several instruments can be thought of. One worth exploring is the appointment of European Citizens Assemblies (e.g. Pal, 2012) that may function as a forum for discussion and soundboard for any other policy-relevant initiatives of European citizens, among which the ECIs.

The first recommendations address future proponents of ECIs. Our qualitative analysis shows how the accessibility of the political objectives articulated through an ECI for citizens at large may be a key-factor for a successful campaign. Involving key-stakeholders and key-allies from the early stage of their conception and articulating them in a simple and direct form is therefore a recommendable practice. A relevant recommendation for future ECIs’ proponents would be reasoning upfront on the trade-off between the *political relevance* of the question raised, and its chances to meet *political consensus* from the side of a large number of European citizens. Here, opting for definite questions that establish or ban new rights and practices whose comprehension does not require field-specific knowledge may be more fruitful than formulating highly politically relevant, but scarcely accessible questions.

Two main residual weaknesses of the ECI process enable us to formulate a last recommendation for the European Commission. This consists of the general lack of attention for active ECIs from the side of the media, and the lack of knowledge from the side of the large majority of European citizens of the existence of the very institution of the ECI. A survey of YouGov commissioned by EUMans in five major European countries showed that only 2.4% of the interviewees knew of the existence of the ECI instrument.²² This striking finding motivated the organization to launch a number of initiatives for sensibilizing the European institutions on the question of publicity of the ECI, which as mentioned multiple times is *de facto* the only instrument of participation of European citizens in their supranational policy-making process. An open letter to the European Commission in the framework of the initiative “Equal dignity for participatory democracy” asked the EU Institutions to balance the level of investments done for the European Elections with the needs of more information on participatory democracy instruments. The concrete proposal, inspired by the model used by the Swiss Federation for its referendum, consists of “Inform[ing] all EU Citizens through a direct mailing action about the ongoing European Citizens Initiative and the right of EU citizens to sign existing European Citizens Initiatives.”²³

We cannot foresee what the impacts of these direct forms of communication between the EU Commission and the citizens of the European Union could be. We can definitely conclude though

²¹ The original statement reads “It can be argued that a valid perspective on defining liberal democratic legitimacy should largely depend on the establishment of institutions through which citizens can be engaged in the implementation, monitoring and evaluating public policies and processes of government.”

²² The survey methodology and its results are accessible at <https://www.eumans.eu/europe-day-yougov-survey-shows-only-24-eu-citizens-are-informed-about-their-democratic-rights> (Last visited: January 2022)

²³ The milestone of the proposal and the outcomes of the communication with the European Commission in regard are accessible here: <https://eumans.eu/equal-dignity-participatory-democracy> (Last visited: January 2022)



that improving the ECI instrument by keeping drawing on studies and experiences like those described in this contribution is fundamental for empowering the democratic participation of European citizens in their supranational policy-making process, and for strengthening its legitimacy.



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