Standing Citizen Panels

A proposal for a new citizenship participation method for evidence-informed policymaking in the EU

Summary:

European Citizen Panels are a valuable EU initiative to get citizen input on broad themes, but they remain occasional and detached from the policy cycle. **Standing Citizen Panels (SCPs) would bridge this gap by integrating citizen input directly into the preparation of key politically sensitive policy proposals.** These annually established panels would ensure that policymaking is more inclusive, responsive, and reflective of public concerns. By embedding citizen participation into the policy cycle, Standing Citizen Panels could enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU decision-making.

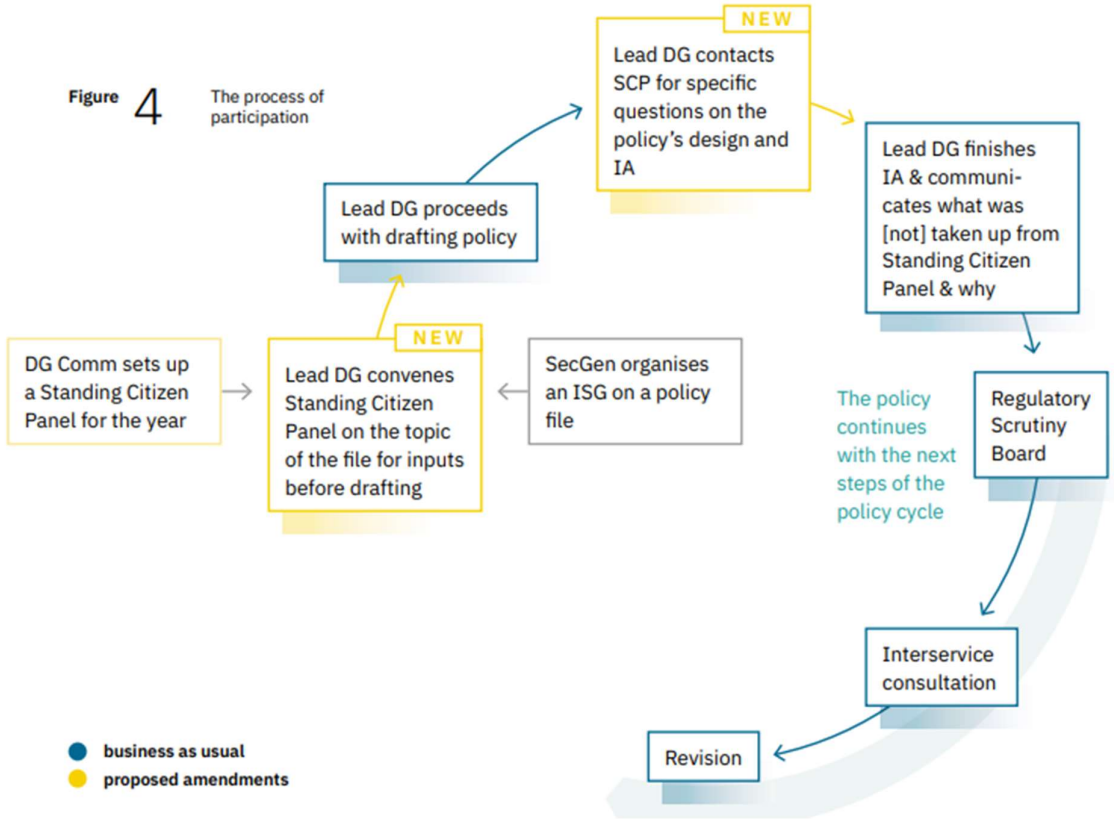


Figure 1 | An illustration of the EU policy cycle including Standing Citizen Panels. From Policy Cycle 2.0.

Context:

This article is part of a series of reports published by ZOE Institute for Future-fit Economies as part of its project 'Rethinking governance in the EU' funded by the Laudes Foundation. This work focuses on making policymaking processes future-fit, participatory, and based on systems thinking. Integrating Standing Citizen Panels into EU policymaking is one of the recommendations in ZOE Institute's broader vision of a 'Policy Cycle 2.0' for the European Commission.

Current experiences with citizen panels in the EU

European Citizen Panels are already organised by the European Commission; there have been five since the end of 2022. They gather 150 randomly selected citizens representing all EU Member States for three weekends to discuss key themes related to incoming proposals of the European Commission and make recommendations. Previous panels reflected on issues such as "How can the EU tackle hatred in society?" or "How can we make opportunities for learning mobility a reality for everyone?"[1].

While the European Citizen Panels (ECPs) generate important discussions and recommendations, some of which are considered when developing legislation and designing policies[2], their influence is constrained. The recommendations risk having limited tangible impacts on the design of specific policies. High-level recommendations often require further deliberation to determine how to implement them in practice.

For example, the impact assessment of the EU Waste Framework Directive notes that the ECP results have a "broader scope than the current initiative. It will support the overarching work of the Commission on food waste and serve as a guide to help Member States in achieving their target"[3].

In addition, as the panels tend to address many different topics at once, the final recommendations can lack focus. A more narrow and targeted approach can help produce more detailed, actionable proposals that are harder to ignore.

How are Standing Citizen Panels different?

Standing Citizen Panels (SCPs) would also gather a representative group of citizens, but they would differ from the European Citizens' Panels both in their purpose and format. Instead of dealing with a broad theme, members of SCPs would be selected for one year to provide specific inputs on all relevant sensitive policy proposals during their preparation phase. These SCPs would be an integral (although not mandatory) step of the policy cycle. Their format would also be tailored to this purpose: these panels would be smaller in size compared to the ECPs and would be convened when necessary.

Both ECPs and SCPs could co-exist as they serve different purposes.

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[1] https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/european-citizens-panels_en

[2] Interviews conducted for a citizen panel study by EPC indicate that Commission officials used the outcome of the ECP on food waste, for example, not just for affirmation but also as evidence for internal Commission decisions when choosing policy options for the given files.

[3] EUR-Lex - 52023SC0421 - EN - EUR-Lex

What is the added value of Standing Citizen Panels?

Currently, during the preparation phase of a policy when the impact assessment report is being drafted by the relevant Directorate-Generals (DGs) in charge of that policy, citizen input is gathered through public consultations on the Have Your Say platform. Respondents tend to be stakeholders who work more directly on the topics, for instance businesses or civil society organisations, rather than the general public who respond less frequently. This is especially notable for proposals that are very technical and do not appear to have immediate consequences on EU citizens.

This proposal aims to give EU citizens the opportunity to participate in the policy design of sensitive files, as well as to provide EU policymakers with a different perspective to feed into the impact assessment.

Moreover, this process could also be valuable in crisis contexts where traditional participation mechanisms can be too time consuming to conduct. By having these panels pre-established, the Commission would already have a representative public group that it can call upon quickly for feedback on the planning of the policy response and to feed back on the proposal as it is developed.

How would it work in practice?

These SCPs would be comprised of around 50 people gathered for a term of one year[4]. Participants would receive a stipend for their time and clear limits set for their time commitment, suggested to be capped at 50 hours per person over the year. In an ideal scenario, resources permitting, participants would meet in person a few times, especially at the beginning of their term, to familiarise them with the policy cycle process and with each other to foster engagement. Virtual sessions could then be preferred for reasons of urgency, convenience, efficiency, and cost saving.

Members of Standing Citizen Panels would input on policies flagged as politically sensitive and/or important (following the existing criteria). At the start of the planning phase of a file, the policymakers working on the file in the lead DG would convene the SCP to present the policy proposal, discuss its different design options, and uncover their expected impacts on citizens' lives. This could take the form of a workshop. The lead DG would then take the concerns or recommendations of citizens forward in the design of the policy.

In later stages of the drafting of the policy, policymakers could also reach out to the members of the SCP as a resource for further input on questions that arise on specific elements of the policy.

After the drafting of the policy is complete, for transparency, the Commission could communicate how they used the SCP's inputs to adjust the policy as well as what changes they did not take up and why.

[4] The selection of participants would follow the same criteria and geographical considerations as the ECPs but account for the smaller size of the group.

This process should be designed to follow the principles of stakeholder consultation from the Better Regulation Guidelines:

1. **Participation**: the SCP composition is representative of society.
2. **Openness and accountability**: this process would make citizens more aware of policies and the process behind them, as well as how their own inputs affected the policy.
3. **Effectiveness**: the SCP would be convened early enough in the policy cycle to be able to integrate the inputs in the policy design. Their role should not be one of validation of an already agreed idea.
4. **Coherence**: This would provide a consistent level of citizen participation across files and service.

Example

The Omnibus package published by the European Commission on 26 February 2025 was developed without an impact assessment or a public consultation. This decision was justified by the 'critical urgency' of the issue of competitiveness. Instead, the European Commission opted to organise a 'reality check' with a small selective group of stakeholders (companies, businesses associations, and organisations). A Standing Citizen Panel could have been consulted on these topics at short notice or been included in the 'reality check' with stakeholders, and the impacts of the Omnibus packages on European citizens would have been better understood and incorporated. As citizens were not part of this reality check, their opinion remains a blind spot of the proposal.