

En Marche l'Europe?

A strategy to implement democratic conventions

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Executive Summary

French President Emmanuel Macron wants to launch so-called 'democratic conventions' in all willing European Union member states, in order to identify the public's priorities, concerns and proposals for the EU's future and help address its unresolved issues of democratic legitimacy. If implemented effectively, this idea, inspired by the 2017 French elections in which Macron and his En Marche movement consulted the French electorate through local meetings, could succeed where previous European reform efforts have failed.

The Assemblée nationale recently produced a report describing how these democratic conventions could be implemented at a European level. However, many aspects of the strategy are still missing or inadequate, and the design and execution of the idea matter a great deal. What is more, the initial ambitions are at risk of being watered down following discussions with other EU leaders, as illustrated by the recent rebranding of the idea as 'citizens' consultations'. The French proposal for a top-down, limited exercise only heightens the need for a different approach that will ensure the idea achieves its full potential.

This Discussion Paper offers just such a model for implementing democratic conventions. It provides a framework upon which other stakeholders can build in the process of defining a fully-fledged strategy. Our design has the overall objective of providing a platform for interaction and exchange between European citizens and their political representatives that is both credible and sustainable.

By credible, we mean that our process offers the possibility for meaningful popular engagement in policymaking, in the spirit of transparency and inclusiveness, on the basis of specific policy proposals. The process we envision includes multiple checks and balances at the EU and national levels, a focus on substantial issues of reform, and a requirement for broad-based cooperation and coordination. Most importantly, it places responsibility squarely in the hands of public volunteers and civil society organisations, creating a genuinely bottom-up programme rather than an elite-driven political exercise. In so doing, it seeks to minimise political biases and increase popular awareness and ownership of the EU project.

By sustainable, we mean that we have developed a method of implementing democratic conventions that is coherent and specific enough to be repeated in the future. Although we envision it to feed into the 2019 European Parliament elections, we have not approached the idea of democratic conventions as a one-off experiment. Rather, this should be seen as a potential new mechanism for political leaders to engage with European citizens: one which can be scaled to include as many member states as are willing to take part, and repeated when desired. As such, we do not pin the success of the democratic conventions on the number of participating member states, especially in the first implementation; if the exercise is effective and well-handled, we are confident that it will draw more interest next time.

Our process is complex and bound to a tight timeline. Nevertheless, we argue that depriving the strategy of the features we describe, in particular its bottom-up character and the interaction and scrutiny between many actors and across many levels, would be the wrong way to go about implementing democratic conventions. If the final strategy neglects such features in favour of simplification, we advise against putting the idea into practice, as it could potentially exacerbate the public-elite divide. What governments and people choose to do, or not do, can make an enormous difference and, over time, will shape European history. At this time of crucial decisions on the future of the EU, will Europeans seize the opportunity to implement democratic conventions, and do so well?

The full report is available on epc.eu.