

Impact of Citizen Engagement

Making a difference to policy,
institutions and society

Dunlop, T., Kozarev, V., Guimarães Pereira, Â.
and Rosa, P.

2026



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Abstract

Citizen engagement processes can be transformative, especially for participating citizens. However, what impacts do they have on policymaking, democratic systems and the broader public? This report maps a range of impacts across policy, institutions and society. Qualitative interviews and survey data reveal that, once public administrations become engaged in citizen participation, they see improved policymaking, better democratic outcomes, greater legitimacy and increased trust in government, so much so that they go on to conduct other participatory exercises. This study illustrates a number of indirect impact pathways, indicating that the full extent of the policy impact of citizen engagement may be underestimated. Furthermore, citizen engagement drives culture change within institutions and enhances their capacity to engage more directly and more productively with citizens.

Citizen engagement processes foster closer connections between citizens and policymaking. They also create new networks among stakeholders, civil society and policymakers, as well as across the broader public. Key factors in achieving successful citizen engagement processes include the commitment of institutions and policymakers, and public communication about such processes. Importantly, the consideration of potential impacts should be the starting point for citizen engagement processes, not an afterthought, as support may erode if citizens and policymakers cannot see tangible outcomes. Commissioning bodies and organisers should prioritise commitment, legitimacy and integration to ensure meaningful outcomes.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policy context

Democratic institutions worldwide are under increasing pressure. Several countries are seeing a decline in citizen trust in public institutions and increasing disengagement from public discourse. The growth in new ways to engage with citizens is an opportunity to increase trust in democratic institutions and improve policymaking. There have been over 260 deliberative exercises in Europe since 2015. However, these methods will not remain useful unless they produce tangible value. That is, if they are mere window dressing or box-ticking exercises, they could further erode citizen trust in democracy. This report reveals the broad range of impacts that citizen participation and deliberation have had on policy, institutions and society. It uncovers key drivers of impacts and provides guidance for policymakers on how to plan for impacts.

The report is designed for policymakers and public administrations, but is also relevant for researchers, practitioners, stakeholders, civil society and others in the field. The work forms part of the Commission's efforts to build on the [defence of democracy package](#) through the [European democracy shield](#) and supports the implementation of [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836](#) on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil-society organisations in public policymaking processes.

Key takeaways and recommendations

① Citizen engagement works in practice across Europe, not just in theory: public administrations in the EU that have carried out citizen engagement processes would do so again

In a EU survey of EU Member States' public administrations that had conducted a citizen engagement process, **over 97 % said that they would do so again**, confirming the added value that they see in citizen participation. Across 20 Member States, 105 public administration respondents said that they would conduct citizen engagement again **to improve policy quality and legitimacy, better reflect community needs and strengthen democracy**.

A sustainable city cannot be created without the participation of its citizens. 

Local public administration official

However, the survey also revealed capacity gaps. Nearly half (49.5 %) of the respondents indicated that their institution had insufficient skills and competencies to conduct or procure citizen engagement effectively. A significant proportion want more support to enhance citizen engagement skills and capacities (54.3 %), with planning skills (50.5 %) and evaluation skills (43.8 %) being most in demand. The survey also showed that greater impacts were more likely if respondents had the skills and resources required to conduct/procure citizen engagement and when they invested resources in their specific exercises (see [Figure 5](#) for more details).



Recommendation: achieving impacts depends on assembling the right tools, resources and institutional capacities.

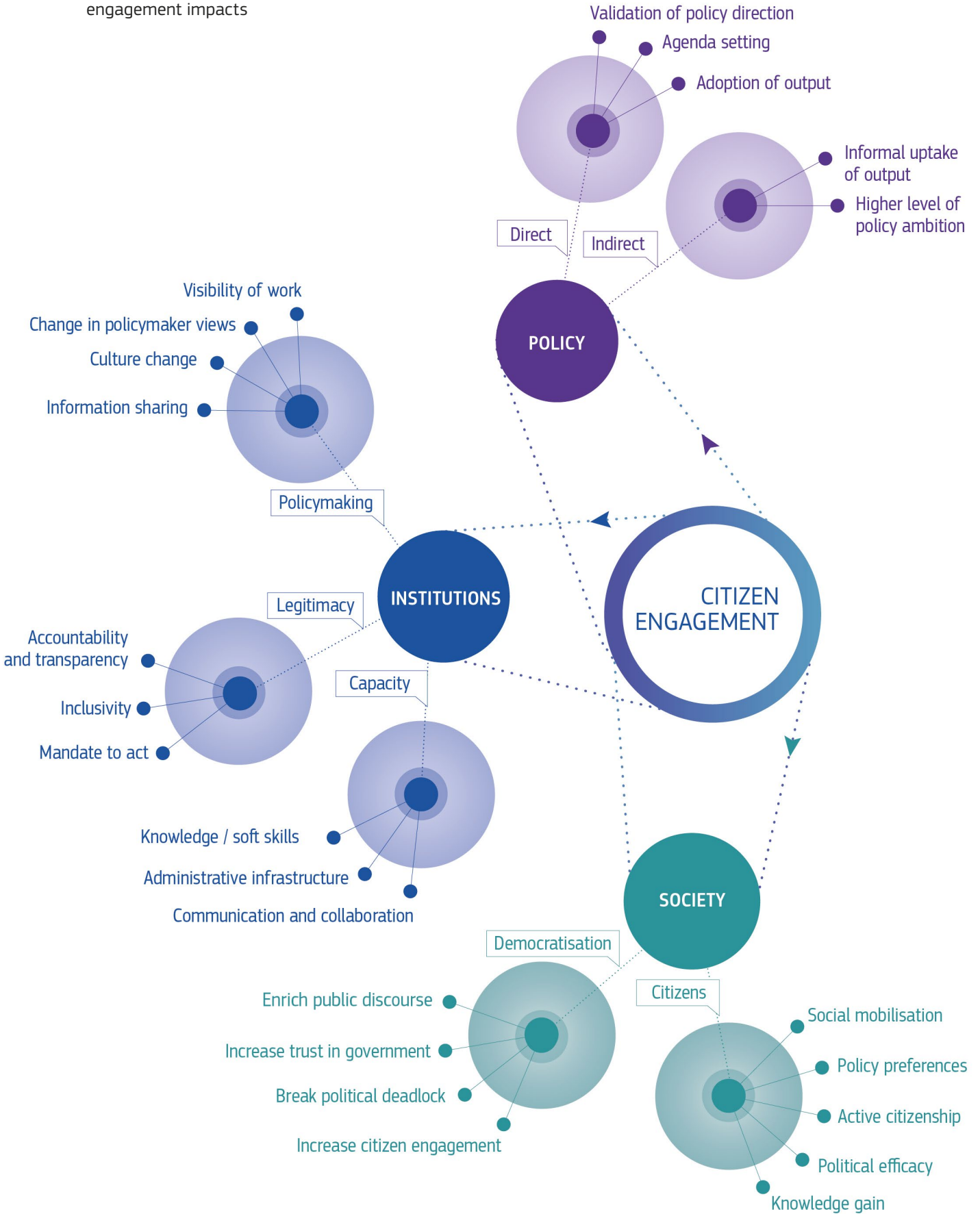
Investing in citizen engagement builds lasting capability and trust in the public sector. Supporting Member States is necessary for impacts to be achieved, and public authorities need to have access to dedicated resources and upskilling opportunities to ensure that they are equipped to listen to citizens

and follow-up on their contributions. This support would be particularly suited to dedicated centres for participatory excellence, which could provide capacity building and be the reference points for any administration or agency that endeavours to implement citizen participation in their policy files. This could include curating and sharing good practices, coordinating access to financial support, evaluating citizen engagement exercises, networking with centres of expertise in the EU and monitoring any actions undertaken as part of the implementation of Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836.

② Citizen engagement not only has impacts on the policy concerned, but also can change the relationships between the administration involved and citizens, thereby also increasing citizens' trust in the administration

Multiple and diverse impacts were identified across policies, institutions and the wider public (see [Figure ES1](#)). However, many of these impacts depend on key drivers, such as policymakers' commitment to following up on citizen outputs.

Figure ES1. Conceptual map of citizen engagement impacts



Sources: Joint Research Centre and Vrydagh (2024).

Policy

Impacts on policy and policymaking may be overlooked and underestimated, especially indirect and long-term impacts. The impacts that may be overlooked include cases where citizen recommendations help to boost the level of ambition in another piece of EU legislation or when citizen insights are informally integrated into policymaking deliberations.

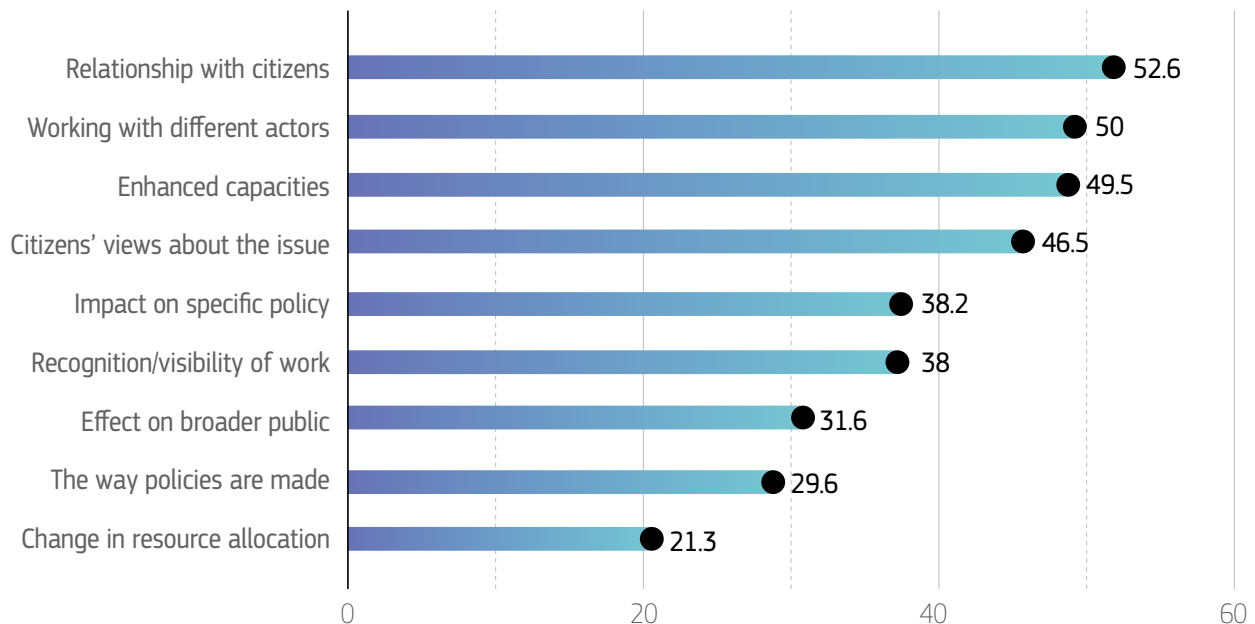
Institutions

Citizen engagement processes are changing institutional culture, for example by triggering increased public servant support for (more) citizen engagement efforts. Following their involvement in citizen engagement processes, public servants

also see their relationship with citizens as stronger. Implementing citizen engagement processes creates new ways of working with a greater variety of stakeholders and changes communication practices to make them more reflective of citizens' needs.

According to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey, the most significant reported impacts were (1) a closer relationship with citizens, (2) working with different actors (new networks) and (3) increased capacity to conduct other citizen engagement exercises (see [Figure ES2](#)).

Figure ES2. Impacts observed in Member States: percentage of respondents who reported a high impact score (4 or 5 on a scale of 0–5) in each area



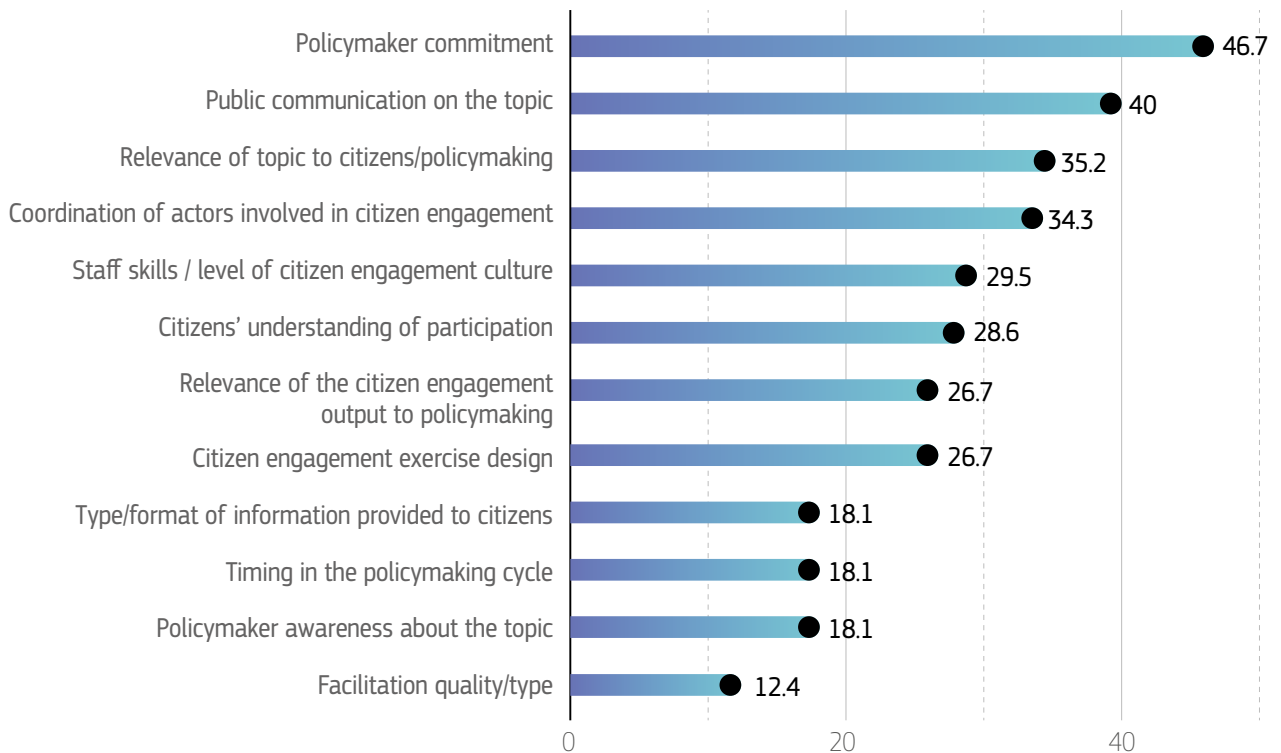
Source: the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.

The public

Citizen engagement processes may increase the appetite for civic involvement and help earn citizen trust in public institutions. They also inform citizens about policy topics and may alter their policy preferences. These effects may occur when people know about citizen engagement processes or have read their recommendations. These broader ‘spillover’ effects, however, depend on mechanisms to include citizens in engagement processes and make them more aware of these processes and their benefits. Finally, new relationships between citizens, stakeholders, practitioners, civil society and policymakers help to increase impacts and create lasting networks.

According to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey, the level of political commitment to the exercise and the level of public communication / media coverage on the topic are the two biggest contributing factors to impacts (Figure ES3). Citizen frustration and dissatisfaction with the lack of policy impacts, in particular the slow implementation of recommendations, was the most significant challenge in achieving the impacts mentioned. This points to the need for transparent and timely follow-up, with clear explanations given about the uptake of recommendations.

Figure ES3. Drivers of impacts: percentage of respondents who chose each



Source: the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.



Recommendation: impacts should be the starting point, not an afterthought.

Impacts are not about what happens once a citizen engagement process is over; they cannot be left to chance. Instead, they should be set as explicit goals. When planning a process, policymakers should

anticipate impacts from the outset by pinpointing specific policy questions and steering the process to deliver on those commitments. Policymakers should continuously gauge the expectations not only of participants, but also of the wider public. Policymakers should uphold their commitments and clearly communicate what happens regarding the

recommendations in a timely manner afterwards. This includes a clear, public explanation of how and why recommendations were, or were not, adopted. Such transparency is required for impacts to be achieved; it is required to ensure accountability, which is essential for earning public trust. A key role is that of the impact owner; this role is taken up, ideally, by the politician who commissioned the exercise or a senior official with a mandate to oversee the progress made in reaching its objectives.



Recommendation: embed citizen engagement in democratic systems for lasting effects.

Citizen engagement processes cannot be isolated from the wider democratic and public governance context, as impact enablers may differ. Effectively embedding citizen engagement into democratic processes is key. This includes institutional safeguards against ignoring the outputs of a process (e.g. equivalent to respecting the results of a referendum or elections) or cherry-picking recommendations. The 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey found that, when citizen engagement was a strategic priority and/or processes had a legal mandate, impacts were greater. Therefore, public administrations should seek clear legal mandates and not proceed without them.

③ More systematically collected data are needed to evaluate the follow-up of the Commission's Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836: building on the EU survey, further data collection and analysis is required



Recommendation: continued systematic data collection from participatory processes would deliver a stronger evidence base to inform policy and practice.

Better data and insights would enable the design of improved impact assessment approaches. Such assessment would demonstrate what makes the difference, highlighting impact enablers, key actors and specific pathways. The 2025 EU Citizen

Engagement Impact Survey provides key data to track impact outcomes across the EU. The ongoing survey remains open for all future exercises that take place in the EU in order to map and identify further impacts.

Related and future Joint Research Centre work

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) works with other Commission services and public administrations in Member States to provide tailored training packages on citizen engagement. It will be supporting a network of national authorities on citizen participation as part of the European Democracy Shield, as well as dedicated centres of participatory excellence. The JRC will continue advising Member States on their evaluations of the impact of their citizen participation exercises ⁽¹⁾, while monitoring the impact of these processes through the Commission's regular EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.

Quick guide

The report comprehensively maps the scope of the impacts identified in citizen engagement research and using JRC data, augmented with case study examples and expert contributions. It is broken down into four main categories:

1. policy impacts,
2. impacts on policymaking institutions,
3. societal impacts,
4. closer connections and new networks.

Taking a forward-looking approach, [Section 7](#) summarises the conceptual and practical challenges of impact assessment and provides guidance on impact planning, focusing on four key themes:

1. commitment,
2. effectiveness,
3. legitimacy,
4. embeddedness.

This is followed by a short conclusion.

⁽¹⁾ See the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy's evaluation guidelines (Kozarev et al., 2025).

1.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Why this study?

Democratic institutions worldwide are under increasing pressure ⁽²⁾. Several countries are seeing a decline in citizen trust in public institutions and increasing disengagement from public discourse. The global rise in new mechanisms to engage with citizens is an opportunity to rebuild trust and improve policymaking.

However, the sustainability of these processes is likely to be compromised unless they produce tangible, positive outcomes. That is, if they are seen to be mere window dressing or box-ticking exercises, they are likely to exacerbate the erosion of citizen trust. This report reveals the broad range of impacts that citizen participation and deliberation are having on policy, institutions and society, and uncovers the key drivers of such impacts. Importantly, it includes guidance for policymakers on planning for these impacts ⁽³⁾. [Box 1](#) sets out precisely what citizen engagement is.

BOX 1.

What is citizen engagement and why is it important?

Citizen engagement refers to processes whereby citizens are given a say in policy at different stages of the policy cycle, from policy inception up until evaluation and feedback. This includes deliberative exercises, such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting and co-creation exercises. The report distinguishes between institutionally led (i.e. 'invited') forms of citizen engagement, such as the European citizens' panels, and 'invented' forms, such as grassroots collective action or community self-organising ⁽⁴⁾, focusing mainly on the former. **Citizen participation** ⁽⁵⁾ should be seen as a tool that helps politicians do a better job of representing and addressing citizens' concerns and expectations, not as a replacement for representative democracy. The idea is that citizens can – and should – have more say in political decision-making, a space where traditionally only policymakers and selected stakeholders influence how policy issues are framed and what solutions are developed. Integrating citizen perspectives can help generate policy solutions that better reflect the needs and interests of communities and, in so doing, can increase their trust in policies and democracy.

⁽²⁾ Vasilopoulou, S., Almeida, M., Chiva, C., Boda, Z., Santos Campos, A. et al., Scoping report: Future challenges to democracy, ALMEIDA, M. (editor), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2026, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/8819294>, JRC139315.

⁽³⁾ Note that this report does not provide an economic cost-benefit analysis or detail the relative financial costs of various citizen engagement approaches. Costs tend to vary between countries and contexts, making it unlikely that costs can be reliably linked to impacts, especially in comparative terms. The study did, however, explore the degree to which institutional resource commitments and the capacities of public administrations (including institutional/staff expertise and project-specific resources) influence impact-specific results, confirming that the implementation of participatory processes requires adequate financial and human resources (for more details, see [Section 4](#)).

⁽⁴⁾ Different terms are often used to refer to similar and overlapping concepts related to citizen participation (e.g. citizen engagement, democratic innovations, public engagement, and participatory and deliberative democracy). While the field of participatory and deliberative democracy constitutes the academic and practitioner field of 'democratic innovations', the field of citizen engagement can be defined as the concrete processes and mechanisms that draw on citizen participation and deliberation to respond to political problems through a broad range of 'institutional designs'. In this report, we include insights from both fields under the umbrella of 'citizen participation'.

⁽⁵⁾ The terms citizen engagement and citizen participation are used interchangeably in this report.

The report is designed for policymakers and public administrations, but it is also relevant for researchers, practitioners, stakeholders, civil society and others in the field. The work forms part of the European Commission's efforts to build on the [defence of democracy package](#) through the [European democracy shield](#) and supports the implementation of [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836](#) on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil-society organisations in public policymaking processes.

To respond to questions about the impacts of citizen participation, the Commission's Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, hosted by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), undertook a study of the impacts that citizen engagement processes have on policies, institutions and society. One of the main aims of the study was to understand and collect the empirical evidence and stories of impacts from those who have already implemented these processes. The JRC undertook a series of interviews with EU officials and launched an EU-wide survey of public administrations across EU Member States to deliver a thorough account of the added value of the participatory processes implemented.

Public administrations across Europe are engaging more with citizens through structured participatory processes. There have been over 260 deliberative exercises in Europe since 2015 (OECD, 2023). Following the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE), the Commission's commitment to participatory democracy has strengthened through the development of policy mandates and participatory democracy initiatives.

These include a communication ([COM\(2022\) 404](#)), a recommendation to Member States ([Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2023/2836](#)) and the European democracy shield ([COM\(2025\) 791](#)), as well as eight European citizens' panels ⁽⁶⁾ and other citizen engagement participatory processes ⁽⁷⁾.

Successfully implemented processes that engaged citizens in policymaking demonstrated the building of both relationships and trust, increased civic participation and led to a more informed citizenry and overall policies that were more adapted to citizens' needs. Some of these effects, however, have so far been studied only at the individual scale, confined to the participants themselves ⁽⁸⁾. More needs to be understood about the effects of citizen engagement processes on democracy, policymaking and wider society. This is a problem, because, if impacts ⁽⁹⁾ are not being realised and assessed, the democratic value of these processes remains opaque. While the intrinsic value of citizen engagement is its democratic function in bringing citizens closer to policymaking, processes lose relevance if they do not result in meaningful change. This is especially the case if citizens cannot see how their input is making a difference and, conversely, if policymakers themselves fail to recognise the value in engaging with citizens.

⁽⁶⁾ This was the number of citizens' panels at the time of writing. More are planned in 2026 and thereafter.

⁽⁷⁾ These include the Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators, the Citizen Energy Advisory Hub and the EU missions under Horizon Europe.

⁽⁸⁾ For an overview, see People Powered (2026).

⁽⁹⁾ This report distinguishes between 'tangible' impacts that can be seen and assessed (e.g. those that are supported by scientific evidence) and 'intangible' impacts that may incorporate elements of intrinsic and subjective value and are therefore more difficult to objectively assess (i.e. how to measure what 'better' policy or 'stronger' democracy is). This report mainly includes an analysis of tangible impacts, but also includes instances of 'intangible' impacts where pertinent (i.e. in survey responses). For more discussion on the complexity of impact measurement, see [Section 7](#).

With the number of mature citizen engagement processes growing, there is more awareness of their various effects and potential. Recognising and appreciating the impact that citizen participation has, strengthens the understanding of its added value, namely in terms of how policies are shaped as a result of citizen input; how institutional processes, practices and structures are transformed; and the external benefits to societal actors, networks and the wider public.

So far, understanding and demonstrating the broader impacts of citizen engagement has been challenging. These processes are complex, with multiple impact trajectories, and significant resources have not been consistently employed to identify, report on and build on findings with a long-term perspective. This report, therefore, aims to clarify what, how and why impacts emerge and what elements need to be considered in order to have an impact.

1.2. Methods used in the study

This study employed four primary data collection methods to gather insights:

1. semi-structured interviews, namely 20 in-depth interviews with citizen engagement experts at the Commission;
2. an EU-wide survey distributed to Member States' administrations between March and May 2025 (see [Annex 1](#) for details of the methodology);
3. two expert workshops, which were held to facilitate broader discussions on key topics and challenges, exploring the systemic effects of participatory processes and impact pathways;
4. scholarly expert input from six independent experts, who were commissioned to conduct an extensive analysis and review of existing literature and empirical evidence on impact.

An overview is provided in [Table 1](#). Data were predominantly collected from EU-based actors and institutions, given the European focus of the study. However, case studies from outside the EU were included where relevant.

Table 1. Research methodology overview

Method	Participants	Type of participant	Dates / time frame	Geographical coverage
Semi-structured interviews	20	Public sector workers (European Commission staff)	2024–2025	Brussels, Belgium
Survey	105	Public administrations staff	2025	Member States
Two workshops (one online, one in person)	50+	Public sector workers, practitioners and academics	2023–2024	Europe, Oceania, United States
Literature review and empirical research	6	Scholars in the field of participatory and deliberative democracy	2024	Global

Source: JRC own creation.

1.3. Organisation of the report

The report begins with a discussion of impact (what it is), with a mapping of the scope of impacts that have been identified in research ([Section 2](#)). This is followed by sections discussing the impacts on policies and policymaking ([Section 3](#)), on policymaking institutions ([Section 4](#)) and on society as a whole ([Section 5](#)), and another section on closer connections and new networks ([Section 6](#)).

A forward-looking section summarises the conceptual and practical challenges involved in impact assessment and provides guidance on impact planning ([Section 7](#)). This is followed by a short conclusion. Each section includes a summary

of the current state on knowledge of each of the categories, augmented by fresh empirical data from the Commission, Member States and scholars in the field, based on case study examples, interviews and survey responses.

The aim of the report is for the research presented here to both inform readers – whether policymakers, researchers, practitioners or citizens – and inspire them to support and contribute to participatory exercises across Europe and beyond. The objective is to equip readers with a solid grounding in how impacts come about and how to achieve them.

2.

NAVIGATING IMPACTS

2.1. What is citizen engagement impact?

Scholars refer to citizen engagement impact in different ways: 'effects', 'influence', 'uptake' or 'consequentiality' of citizen engagement, to name a few. While different, these terms share the same concept of cause and effect, whereby an 'impact' is a change or consequence that comes about as a result of the citizen engagement exercise. Here, a relationship of causality is assumed. Citizen engagement impact is a change that occurs as a consequence of citizen participation, paying particular attention to long-term policy, governance and societal outcomes.

There is ample research on design processes and the direct impact of citizen engagement on the citizens who participate in these exercises. However, more research is needed on the broader effects that citizen engagement processes have. This includes how and why citizen participation makes a difference over time. To bridge this gap, this study takes a systems approach, enabling the identification of impacts of citizen engagement not only in isolated political systems, but also in the public sphere beyond. This analytical framework can be applied to various types of participatory processes and in different contexts, from the local to the supranational level. Given the multiple, intricate and context-dependent ways in which public engagement produces certain

outcomes, this JRC analysis includes the causal mechanisms and configurations that enable or prevent certain effects.

The JRC distinguishes between 'intended' and 'unintended' impacts. The former represent the 'added value' of citizen engagement for policy, citizens and democratic systems. Intended impacts are defined as the consequences of citizen engagement that either are embedded in the institutional design of a citizen engagement process or can be expected of it based on existing theories and empirical evidence. Unintended outcomes, on the other hand, are the consequences of citizen engagement that are not expected to derive from its design or implementation and are not anticipated by the commissioning bodies, designers or implementers of processes (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023).

A particular risk for citizen participation is when it fails to actually include citizens in policymaking processes (Warren, 2017). This is especially the case when engagement becomes a mere end in itself or a form of window dressing, without giving citizens a real say in policymaking. In these cases, the consequences may be not only ineffective policy and poor implementation, but also a loss of citizens' trust in the political system and therefore of the potential for citizen participation to help improve policymaking (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2023).

Many impacts cannot be easily measured or understood. Impact assessments cannot include only those indicators that can be ‘easily measured’ (e.g. the number of participants or the number of social media impressions) and omit other aspects of meaningful change. To get a full picture of the impacts of any given exercise or group of exercises, robust assessments that take into consideration a variety of data and methods over time are required to understand impact pathways, including the complex and interrelated factors that have resulted in different impacts. Another challenge is that citizen engagement impacts are complex, requiring different lenses to study them. In this report, a mixed-methods approach is used, with the aim being to understand impacts from a policy perspective – including what impacts are known to occur and to what extent – and identify the enablers of and barriers to achieving them. Importantly, the context (e.g. geographical, cultural and political) of individual citizen participation exercises is a key factor that determines impact pathways. Therefore, each case study is situated in its wider context, as impact enablers will not function in the same way in all situations.

2.2. What sort of impact should we aim to achieve and for whom?

There are varying expectations among different actors about what sort of impact should be achieved by citizen engagement exercises. Typically, citizen participants expect that their engagement will have some form of impact (Berner et al., 2011; European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2023). Similarly, some scholars tend to share the view that these processes should be ‘consequential’ in that ‘participants are able to influence different aspects of the decision-making process’ (Smith, 2010, p. 12).

Policymakers, civil-society organisations and public servants may be interested in a range of impacts: in addition to direct policy impacts, they are likely to be focused on agenda setting, information sharing and recognition of their work (Instituto de Estudios Sociales Avanzados, 2019). Furthermore, expectations can vary depending on the participatory process format. Certain citizen engagement instruments, for example participatory budgeting, incorporate high expectations of citizen involvement translating into policy impact. In others, such as focus groups and other forms of social research involving citizens, the expectation may be placed more on informing and supporting policy directions rather than on direct policy impact through co-creation and deliberation. The expected policy impacts of citizens’ assemblies may vary; while those involved in ‘mini-publics’⁽¹⁰⁾ often aim to have an impact on policy directly, others are critical of the idea that they should be consequential if not all citizens are invited to participate (Lafont, 2017). Given these differences of opinion about what impacts should be expected, citizen participation should take place in a meaningful way that satisfies the needs of convenors, the expectations of participants and the political community affected by the policy question. Setting clear standards and expectations early on in citizen engagement processes is therefore essential, as is the nature of the follow-up with citizens; that is, an explicit response from the authority in question should be provided that explains why each of the proposals are (or are not) going to be taken up (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023).

⁽¹⁰⁾ A mini-public is a representative group of individuals from the population assembled to engage in a deliberative process such as a citizens’ assembly.

2.3. Impact framework

The framework presented in this report builds on the work of various scholars who have contributed insights into impact conceptualisations and typologies (see, for example, Demski et al., 2024; Goodin et al., 2006; Michels et al., 2019) ⁽¹¹⁾. Our framing focuses on three main spheres:

1. policy (the policy or policy action itself, including the scope of measures, the type of regulation and long-term policy outcomes);
2. policymaking institutions (the institutional rules and relationships, structuring and resources that are dedicated to the core mission of the institution, that is, to create policies);

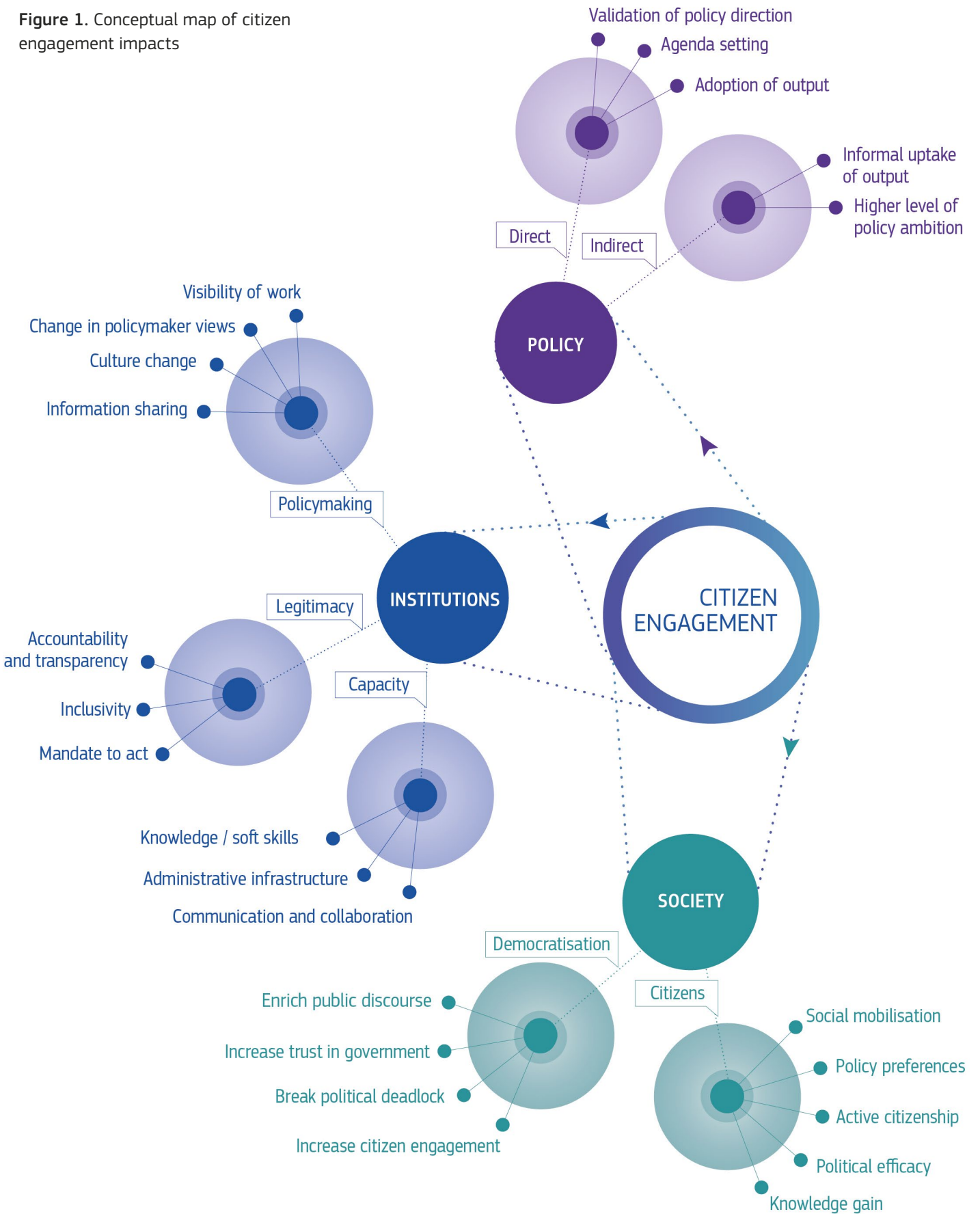
3. society (all of the agents and activities operating within the periphery of the state, such as citizens, social community, business and civil society).

In addition to the three spheres, there are also transversal impacts across all three, such as newly forged relationships and emergent groups of various actors and their interdependencies.

[Figure 1](#) is a conceptual map of evidence-based impacts that fall within these three spheres. This map does not include impacts seen at the individual level on participants who take part in citizen participation exercises.

⁽¹¹⁾ Scholars have also considered a number of additional dimensions of impacts. These include types (e.g. instrumental, conceptual or capacity based (e.g. Demski et al., 2024)), levels (micro, meso or macro), specific actors (e.g. Demski et al., 2024; Jaquet et al., 2023), time frames (short or long term), proximities (direct/indirect (e.g. Michels et al., 2019) or proximate/distant (e.g. Jaquet et al., 2021)) and natures (output or input based (e.g. Rowe et al., 2004; Vrydagh et al., 2020a)), as well as how many variables contributed to the impact (equifinality). These typologies are useful to consider in theory, but are difficult to operationalise in practice given the complexity involved in applying them to impact pathways.

Figure 1. Conceptual map of citizen engagement impacts

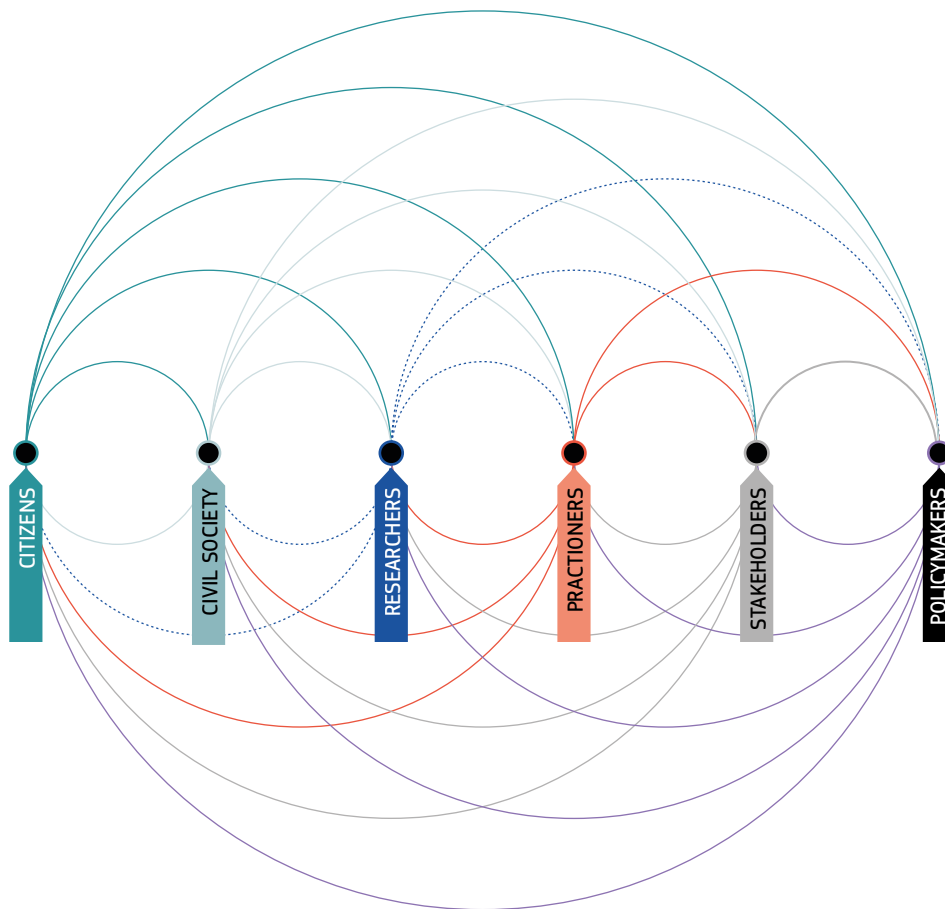


Sources: Joint Research Centre and Vrydagh (2024).

In the conceptualisation of impacts, relational aspects are of the utmost importance (Diani, 2022), given how impacts manifest across the spheres (Figure 2). Taking a relational approach allows for an investigation to be undertaken into the changes in relationships between actors (e.g. between policy

institutions and citizens) and the creation of new networks formed through the shared practice of organising, and being involved in, citizen participation exercises. This includes how these relationships are situated within the wider system and institutional context.

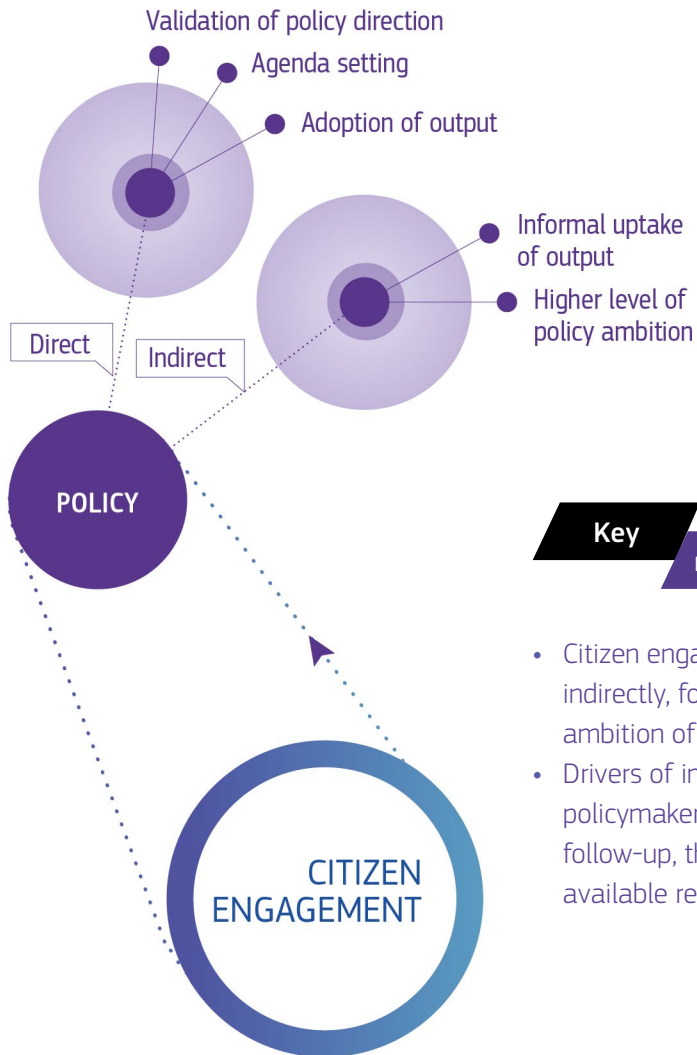
Figure 2. Relational approach to citizen engagement impacts



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3.

POLICY IMPACTS



Key

messages

- Citizen engagement processes influence policy indirectly, for example by helping to increase the ambition of policy targets and agenda setting.
- Drivers of impacts include impact planning, policymaker commitment and effective follow-up, the timing in the policy cycle and available resources.

3.1. Direct policy impacts: when citizen inputs are adopted in policy

Impacts on policy are often considered one of the most important types of impact of citizen participation. They are generally understood in terms of the extent to which the outputs of a citizen engagement exercise are taken up in policy, represented by the number of recommendations that were adopted and to what degree (whether fully, partially or not at all). A crucial factor in the motivation of citizens to participate in deliberative processes is the idea that their input makes a difference in policymaking (European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2023; Le Quan et al., 2024). The difficulty with demonstrating policy impacts, however, is pinpointing the causal mechanisms, due to the complexities involved. As one European Commission public servant explained:

Policymaking is a big bubble with so many forces within it, it's very hard to discern which one actually decided something. Usually, it's an interaction of different forces. You cannot really distinguish which one was there, but that doesn't mean that you don't have a very concrete feeling that impact was there. You just can't quantify it.



European Commission public servant
No 2, 27 June 2024

There are high-profile examples of policy impacts. Participatory budgeting started in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1984, and has since brought about significant changes in the distribution of municipal budgetary resources (Baiocchi, 2005) ⁽¹²⁾ and inspired thousands of other municipalities across the globe.

Danish consensus conferences (Joss, 1998) and Spanish citizen juries (Font et al., 2007) have affected policy significantly. The 2016 Irish Citizens' Assembly, also known as We the Citizens, was celebrated for the impact that it had, especially in overturning restrictions on abortion (Farrell et al., 2019). More recently, in 2026, France's National Parliament has been debating legislation to legalise end-of-life options for adults with incurable diseases, following a 2022–2023 citizens' assembly in which 75.6 % of participants were in favour of legalising assisted dying ⁽¹³⁾. However, not all processes deliver at the same scale. Looking at 150 mini-public cases at the national, regional and European levels, Bächtiger et al. (2024) found that only 41 % resulted in full or partial implementation of recommendations.

Impacts are rarely seen immediately, as it often takes administrations years to implement citizen recommendations. The 2019–2020 French Citizens' Climate Convention (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat) ⁽¹⁴⁾ is often cited as an example of a process that achieved little policy impact, thus failing on its promise to implement citizens' recommendations 'without filters'.

⁽¹²⁾ While there are examples of the impact of participatory budgeting in other locations, some of the most rigorous comparative evidence points to less policy change than expected (Boulding et al., 2009).

⁽¹³⁾ The citizens' assembly in question was the Convention Citoyenne sur la fin de vie (<https://conventioncitoyennesurlafindevie.lecese.fr/>).

⁽¹⁴⁾ The French Citizens' Climate Convention is an emblematic example of a top-down, centralised, politicised and publicised deliberative process. Initiated in October 2019 by the French top executive in response to the 'yellow vests' crisis (a series of protests between 2018 and 2020 fuelled by social and economic inequality), its primary objective was to propose detailed policy measures to reduce France's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 % by 2030 (compared with 1990 levels) across various sectors, including transportation, housing, agriculture and energy, in a manner that respects social justice. Even though it was not embedded into the formal decision-making processes, the President of the French Republic made a political commitment to follow up on all proposals 'without filters'.

Recent research, however, paints a different picture, showing that at least 70 % of recommendations were either fully or partially taken up in policy (Averchenkova et al., 2025) – more than previously thought. Issues that are hampering efforts to better understand impacts include not only a lack of available examples and studies, but also a lack of systematic reporting of data and reporting of impacts.



A citizens' assembly on the topic of senior citizens in 2025 in the German-Speaking Community of Belgium.





Participants in the European citizens' panel on the topic 'A new European budget fit for our ambitions'. As of June 2026, the European Commission had held eight European citizens' panels.



3.2. Indirect policy impacts

3.2.1. Boosting policy ambition

While instances of direct impacts are overall limited, less formal impacts – whereby engagement processes have an impact on policy in indirect ways – may be under-recognised. Indirect impacts can include amplifying the depth and speed of policy actions and influencing long-term policy outcomes. Public servant interviewees reported that citizen engagement sometimes provided extra momentum to policy action, either by providing a mandate to act or by supporting political negotiations in areas where citizens were shown to support a particular idea. During trilogue negotiations between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, for example, the recommendations from a European citizens' panel in support of stronger targets were seen to help boost the ambition of the targets:

[The citizens' views] showed that there is a push for these targets. There was wide support. All citizens felt that we have to act ... So there is no excuses for Member States not to ... set a target for it. So, I think the voice of the citizen does help in this.

European Commission public servant
No 11, 21 November 2024

Public servant interviewees also mentioned instances when citizen recommendations were integrated into the Commission's internal policy processes, such as during meetings between directorates-general, as part of working papers or during other procedural governance activities, which then went on to guide policymakers and influence policy.

As one interviewee stated:

It [at times] gave a push – a push at a very important moment; you know, it is subtle and sometimes the impact is a very long-term, you know, repetitive one ... it's not necessarily an impact the day after, but then you have a civil servant who thinks it is a great proposal and uses it everywhere in all the documents that he or she prepares, and that's an impact.

European Commission public servant
No 5, 24 May 2024

Other interviewees reported that they actively referred policymakers to the citizens' recommendations and planned to include them in future policy files:

For me it's something which was not a one-off so I will go back to the recommendations and whenever I'm going to be working on a second, the next policy deliverable, whatever it might be, I will go back and see to what extent there are recommendations that I can address in this next phase. [The process is] so rich in its recommendations that you can really use it, you know, over time.

European Commission public servant
No 3, 7 November 2024

3.2.2. Legitimacy and validation of policy direction

The engagement of citizens can provide validation, and therefore legitimisation, to existing policy work (Goodin et al., 2006). While it is important that citizen engagement does not become a mere rubber-stamping exercise to legitimise policy actions (Van Dijk et al., 2023) ⁽¹⁵⁾, in many cases citizen input provides meaningful guidance to public servants ⁽¹⁶⁾, helping them to expand work programmes in certain areas:

We have injected a new policy agenda that derives from this sort of external legitimation process, which is, in a way for us, a big boost, because it means that we have the input that comes from outside and that obliges the Commission to take action ... But there is the further legitimacy that derives from the citizens' panel, right? So that was one key element that I think for us has been a big game changer in a way because it adds quite strong legitimacy to part of what we were already doing. So, it's a way to say we were going in the right direction. And secondly, to have additional policy factors to now include in our portfolio of action.



European Commission public servant
No 6, 3 July 2024

3.3. Drivers of policy impact

When considering drivers of policy impact, it is critical to consider the context in each case – including the cultural, political, geographical and societal circumstances within which citizen engagement exercises occur. However, certain factors that determine impact pathways stand out. According to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey, the most significant drivers contributing to the overall impact of citizen engagement include policymaker commitment, public communication on the topic and the relevance of the topic to citizens and policymaking (Figure 3).

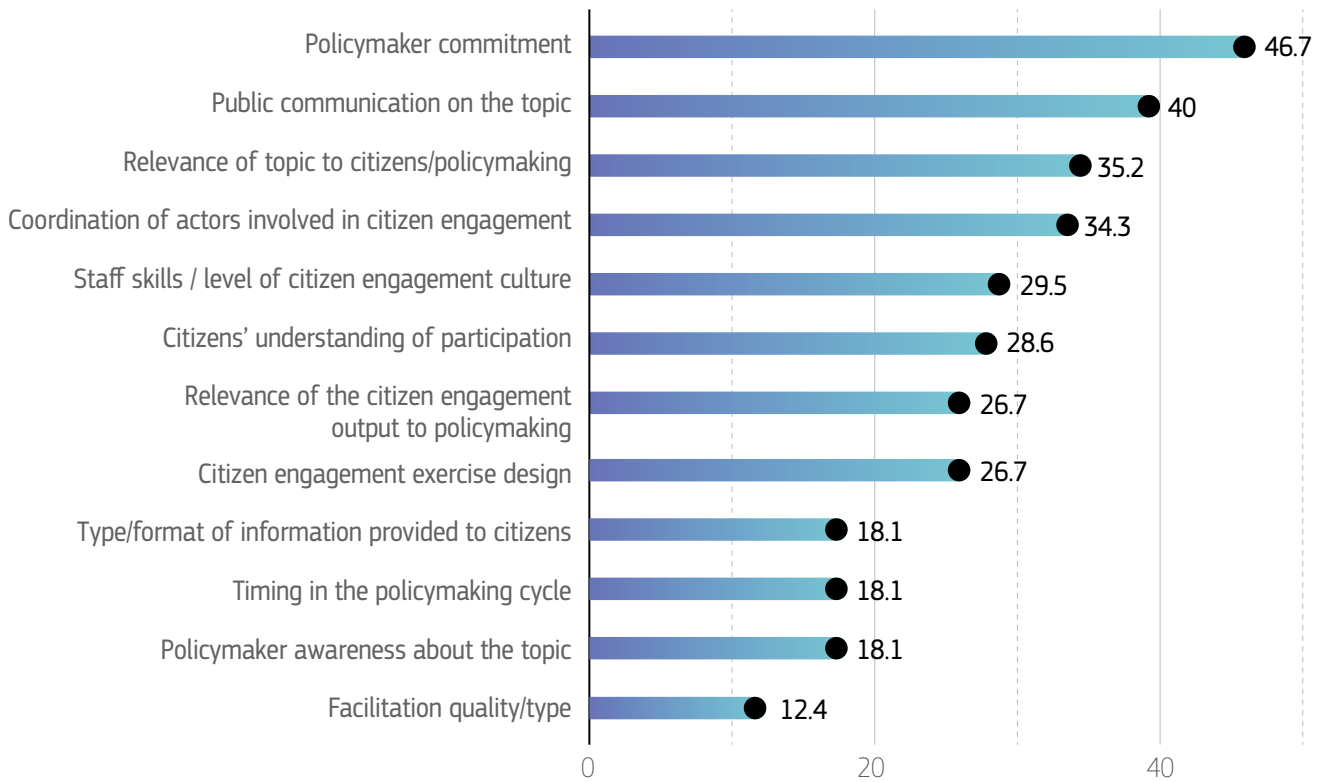
Commitment here implies not just support for the quality of the engagement process itself, but, importantly, a genuine, clearly communicated intention to address citizens' input through follow-up. The nature of the follow-up may differ according to different formats and contexts, but in general a public response and explanation of how citizens' inputs were taken up in policy is strongly desirable. In addition, the way the follow-up is communicated matters (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023) ⁽¹⁷⁾. In Ireland, the country's strong track record of citizens' assemblies has been attributed to the responsiveness of political institutions in following up on recommendations, which means citizens trust that outcomes will be taken seriously (Machani et al., 2025).

⁽¹⁵⁾ State agents can 'borrow legitimacy' from public engagement to support their actions (Lacelle-Webster et al., 2023; Warren, 2009). This effect is, however, contingent on a series of factors, such as the perception that the process is not instrumentalised politically and leads to visible political results (Van Dijk et al., 2023).

⁽¹⁶⁾ This is also referred to as 'market testing' by Goodin et al. (2006).

⁽¹⁷⁾ It is a common practice for state agents, and elected officials in particular, to react publicly to the outputs of public engagement. When doing so, they provide justifications for (absence of) the political uptake. This practice brings public accountability, as state agents justify their previous, ongoing and future actions based on citizens' inputs (Beauvais et al., 2019; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023; Goodin et al., 2006). It is commonly a direct and intentional consequence of the participatory process, as several agents, especially the citizens who are involved and those who expect concrete results to come out of it (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020; Van Dijk et al., 2023), want to hold relevant decision-makers accountable.

Figure 3. Drivers of impacts: percentage of respondents who chose each



Source: the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.

The 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey showed that citizen engagement processes whose outputs were shared with external stakeholders (i.e. citizens / the public) were positively correlated with impacts on policy. Furthermore, instances in which citizen engagement was considered a strategic priority by the institution, and in which it had a legal mandate, were also correlated with policy impacts, indicating that, when citizen engagement is embedded in formal, recurring processes and when it is considered a strategic priority for the institution, it is more likely to influence policy decisions.

3.3.1. Establishing the need for engagement and the suitability of the topic

A key element to take into consideration for impact planning is establishing how and when citizen contributions can best be incorporated into policy (on which topic and at what stage(s), whether inception, implementation, monitoring, evaluation or all these stages) and identifying any barriers to this incorporation.

In the regions of Catalonia in Spain and the German-speaking Community of Belgium, for example, policy teams assess the suitability of certain topics for engagement processes. This involves the identification of any barriers to effective uptake and implementation, such as potential limitations to the government mandate, budget and resources.

Between 2023 and 2024, the Spanish region of Catalonia held the Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia in five cities, involving 100 citizens.

It is a process that is integrated into policymaking, and the citizens want this to be useful. And so, policymakers also should identify where exactly they need help.



European Commission public servant No 5,
24 May 2025



3.3.2. Coordinating citizen outputs with policy mandates and capacities

It is important that citizens are clearly informed about the policy mandate and scope of the institution(s) that will implement the expected recommendations – as well as any possible limitations to these – early in the process. If citizens are not properly informed about the mandate of the institution that sponsors the participatory process, and the resulting recommendations are not actionable due to the institution's mandate, the follow-up could be seen as ineffective by participants and other actors, for example when governing bodies are unable to implement recommendations due to legal, budgetary or other institutional limitations.

Sometimes the premises are not completely understood in terms of the existing framework, including your treaties et cetera, and it's not always easy to provide follow-up. You know, if citizens [are] engaged, which is something which is extremely nice, they obviously expect that we will do something about it, and it's not always so easy.



European Commission public servant No 12,
3 June 2024

Another related challenge is when governing institutions are seen to prioritise the adoption of recommendations that were already planned or those that are easier, quicker or cheaper to implement. This tendency has been criticised in the research as 'cherry-picking' (see, for example,

Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023; Font et al., 2018; Vrydagh, 2023), because it can undermine legitimacy if governing institutions are seen to adopt only those recommendations that suit them. In this context, a fine balance must be struck between the expectations of governing institutions, citizens and organisers as regards what policy impacts should be sought, on the one hand, and what is achievable, on the other. In addition, policy plans should be communicated to citizens to avoid the formulation of citizen recommendations on

actions that were already planned in the first place. Research shows that a transparent justification of why recommendations were or were not taken up is extremely important for the legitimacy of the process (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2023). Excluding certain policy options a priori is entirely legitimate, but this should be clearly communicated to participating citizens, along with the corresponding justification for the exclusion of such options on, for example, legality, mandate or resource grounds. [Box 2](#) sets out an example of such limitations.

BOX 2.

Citizens' assemblies in Gdańsk, Poland

Between 2016 and 2017, three citizens' assemblies were organised in the city of Gdańsk, Poland, to tackle issues related to the local response to floods, air quality and empowering civil society. They were generally considered a success⁽¹⁸⁾. Despite the municipal government's commitment to the process, however, the jurisdictional context and capacity limitations meant that some recommendations could not be easily implemented. For example, a recommendation of the second citizens' assembly on air quality and pollution, 'banning all coal-fired furnaces in private homes by 2020 with an estimated cost of up to 50 million euros' was a particular challenge, given the significant budget resources and planning needs it would entail. One public official said: 'Sometimes the recommendations take years to implement, such as building a retention pond or replacing the furnace, which need to be budgeted for'⁽¹⁹⁾. Additionally, some participants viewed the process as a tool for legitimising the decisions made by public officials, because some recommendations covered solutions

that were planned or even implemented before the organisation of the assemblies. Some interviewees also claimed that the assembly recommendations helped to speed up the process of making or implementing public decisions that would have been made and implemented anyway, but at different times. To avoid such problems, the scope of the citizen engagement exercise should be clear from the start, as should any possible constraints on the administrative, political and/or budgetary capacity to implement certain recommendations. In Gdańsk, for instance, public servants proposed that they be more involved in the information and learning stage, to be able to weigh in as recommendations were developed and ensure that proposals would be feasible and practicable. A further barrier was seen as the extra coordination effort needed between different government officials and departments, because the more agencies and interest groups were involved, the more complex it became for assembly members to determine what could be done, by whom and with what resources.

Source: Ross, 2024.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Overall, the intended direct policy outcomes of Gdańsk's assemblies were largely achieved and, by 2021, public officials estimated that around 80 % of the three assemblies' recommendations had been enacted.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Based on interviews with public servants by Melisa Ross.

3.3.3. Positioning of policymakers in the process

The degree of involvement of policymakers in the engagement process is likely to contribute to its overall policy impact, notwithstanding the fact that designs may vary according to their objectives ⁽²⁰⁾. Direct communication between citizens and policymakers throughout the process promotes mutual understanding and facilitates effective follow-up on recommendations. The in-person attendance of elected or appointed public officials who are responsible for the relevant policy during the invited testimonies and deliberations of the citizen engagement exercise has been a crucial aspect in many cases. Direct listening, without intermediaries, enables institutional actors to empathise with citizens and reconsider their own assumptions by being exposed to a diverse array of lived experiences. One public servant saw this involvement as having to strike the right balance:

If you want an impact on policymaking, you need to find the right place for the policymaker in the process. Not too much, but not too little either.



European Commission public servant
No 5, 24 May 2025

This points to the need to ensure a sufficient level of policymaker presence, with policymakers being actively involved without being disruptive or exerting undue control. There may also be enormous value to be gained by politicians or public servants themselves from their participation. There is some evidence that the current information environment is providing a distorted picture of the policy preferences of the public to decision-makers (see [Section 4.3](#)). Exposure to a representative sample of the public may allow policymakers to adjust the scale of their ambition and their view on the possible consensus.

⁽²⁰⁾ The level of involvement and who is involved can differ depending on the nature of the exercise. In mini-publics, for example, those involved can be technical sectoral experts or representatives of stakeholders (including political parties).

3.3.4. Complementing other democratic practices

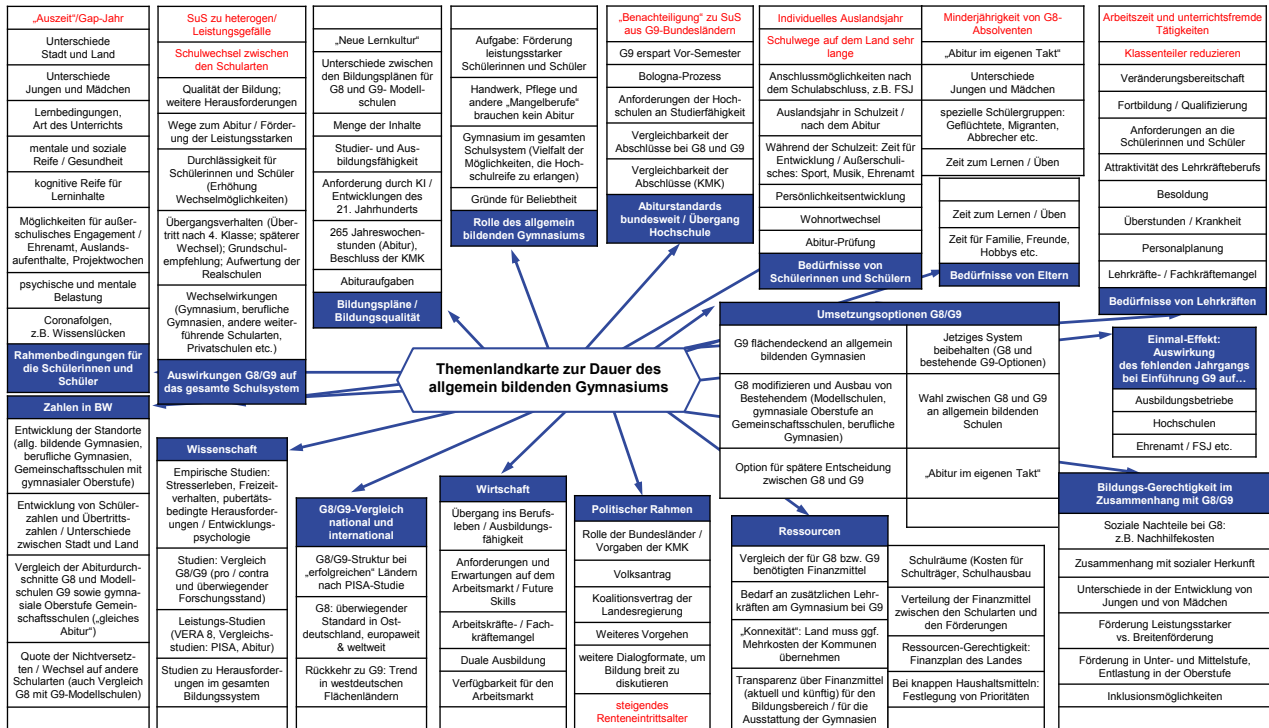
Citizen engagement can boost the impact of other democratic practices and mechanisms. For example, a well-run citizens' assembly that meets before a referendum may help shape the debate, while grassroots initiatives that are linked with government-led processes can reinforce the decisions those institutions make. Research supports the view that including both deliberative and plebiscitary elements may result in a greater overall impact on decision-making (Ettlinger et al., 2025). [Box 3](#) sets out an example of a thorough public consultation contributing to policy impact.

BOX 3.

High-school education reform in Baden-Württemberg, Germany

A citizens' forum on high-school education in the German region of Baden-Württemberg in 2023 provides an example of a thorough public consultation on a topic (both online and in person) – together with a policy commitment to tackle the issue expeditiously – contributing to policy impact. In this case, the issue was already high on the public agenda, and the regional authority was legally obliged to respond to a petition of at least 10 000 signatures calling for the government to address high-school education legislation. This action, together with the citizens' forum, resulted in major education reform in 2025 in line with the citizen recommendations. As part of the forum, time was dedicated to exploring the relevant framing of high-school education reform with citizens and stakeholders, helping to define a scope that was aligned with the interests and concerns of citizens ([Figure 4](#)). Furthermore, this case is an example of direct democracy, coupled with deliberative democracy, resulting in impact, with grassroots action helping to trigger an effective government response.

Figure 4. Mapping the topic of the education system during the 2023 citizens' forum in Baden-Württemberg, Germany



Source: State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg.

NB: the topic of the citizens' forum (the education system) was explored in depth in a mapping exercise during a dedicated session with various stakeholder groups and an online discussion that aimed to ensure the relevance of the topic and that no important aspects were missed.



3.3.5. Timing in relation to electoral cycles

A change of government can affect political commitment to an ongoing citizen engagement process and its outcomes. For example, in the case of Decide Madrid, launched by Madrid City Council in 2015, the political commitment of the then Mayor was key to setting up the platform and its initial success, but it suffered when a new government took power (Royo et al., 2020). Holding a citizen engagement exercise at the beginning of a political mandate may be advisable, as policymakers will have more time to prepare the findings for upcoming policy proposals. In the case of the European Citizens' Panel on Tackling Hatred in Society, the fact that the panel was held in the same year as the first year of the European Commission's 2024–2029 political mandate helped to provide ample time for the recommendations to be thoughtfully integrated into various policy files, including the adoption of a new EU code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online and dedicated research funding for topics on the impact of social inequalities on hatred, polarisation and radicalisation.

3.4. How does citizen engagement affect long-term policy outcomes?

Integrating a recommendation into public decision-making represents the immediate, short-term impact. However, impact ambitions should not stop there – well-implemented processes could help achieve long-term policy objectives as well. For example, the main objective of many public engagement exercises dealing with climate change is to produce more sustainable policies that ultimately contribute to the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions (Demski et al., 2024; Jager, 2023). These effects are not readily demonstrable because multiple other factors contribute to the outcome ⁽²¹⁾. Public servant interviewees and respondents to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey, however, stated that policies that include citizen inputs are intrinsically of better quality because they are better attuned to societal problems and needs.

It's the richness not only of the input, but also in terms of action ... So for me, clearly, if I had not done the citizens' panel, I would have a quite, you know, traditional kind of strategy which does not take [into account] this whole dimension that the citizens brought in.



European Commission public servant
No 3, 11 July 2024

⁽²¹⁾ For instance, Newig et al. (2018) identified 19 mechanisms that were internal and external to participatory and collaborative governance that accounted for the better environmental outcomes of decision-making.

The public administration staff surveyed viewed the range of viewpoints brought in by citizen engagement as being particularly important for better policy:

Conducting another citizen engagement exercise would be highly valuable, as collecting ideas and feedback is essential when implementing such complex [policy] projects. Also, including more viewpoints fosters collaborative problem-solving and helps to address everyday challenges related to the built environment more effectively.



National civil servant from Greece

The city ... is interested in involving a wider group of people and entire communities in the planning, decision-making and implementation of major projects and activities. This has proven to be a good way and approach for solving major projects and selecting suitable investment plans, which we implement through public tenders or by involving various entities operating in the city.



Local official from Slovakia

On a more practical level, public servants shared instances in which citizen engagement has helped to create more equitable policy outcomes endorsed by a wider range of stakeholders, thus avoiding societal backlash in future. For example, the inclusion of citizens in the planning stages of climate adaptation measures may help to channel political debates down the line into constructive outcomes.

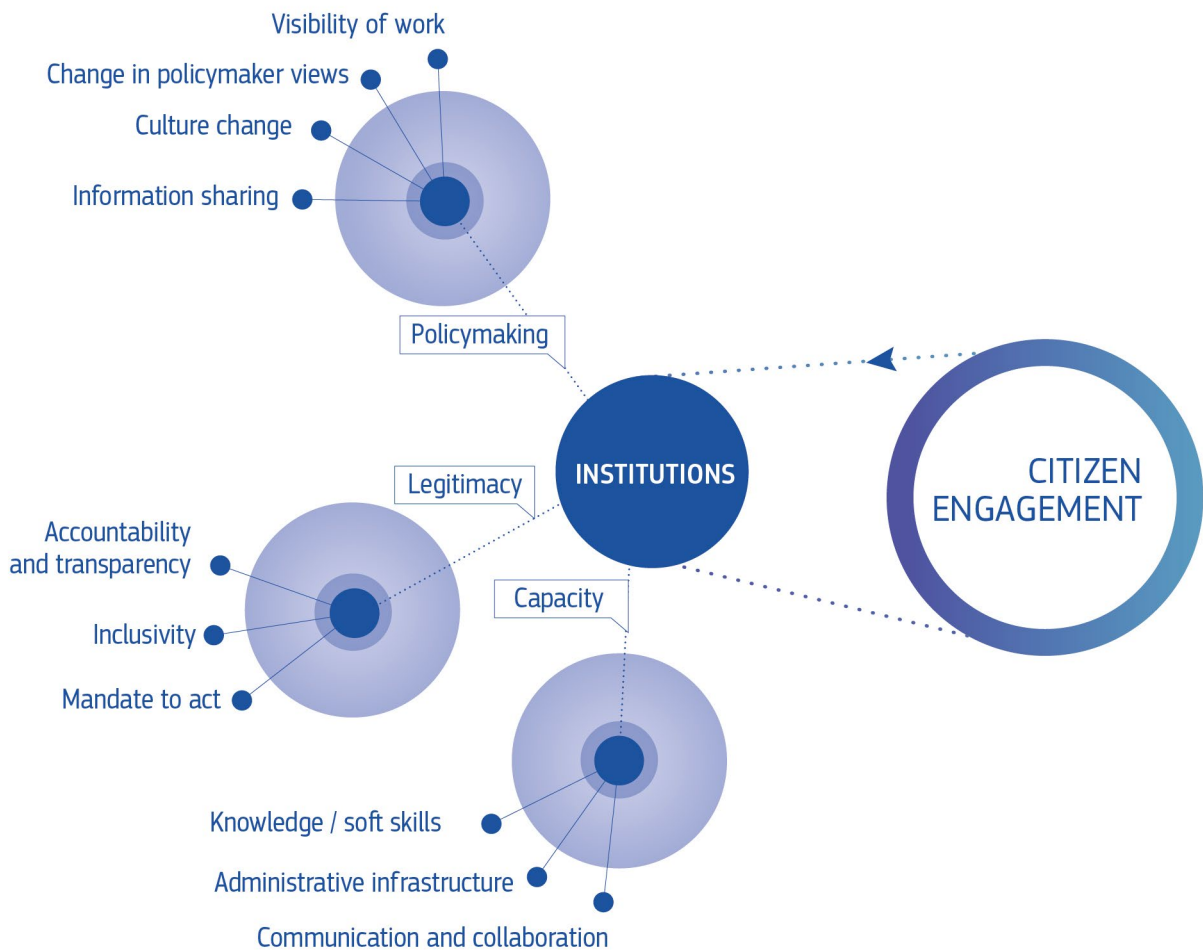
We believe that is easier and they can advance faster if they engage the citizens in the definition of the plans and then absolutely in the execution of those measures, rather than designing a plan, for instance, of migrating people out of a certain area and reclaiming that area for the river without the people having been involved, because what happens is after the plan is opposed, they are brought to court and then this requires much more time to execute the plan.



European Commission public servant No 7,
9 January 2025

4.

POLICYMAKING INSTITUTIONS




Key messages

- Citizen engagement processes are driving transformational change within institutions and enhancing their capacity to bring citizens closer to policymaking and decision-making.
- New ways of working with citizens are helping to contribute to more collaborative policymaking inside government.


4.1. Institutional change: more support for citizen engagement

Being involved in citizen engagement processes can be transformational for public servants. Evidence shows that public servants tend to change their mindsets with regard to the capacity of citizens to play a role in policymaking and decision-making after conducting citizen engagement (Bächtiger et al., 2019; Bottin et al., 2023; Dryzek, 2010), especially if they themselves were involved in the process (Hendriks, 2016). Moreover, this effect can lead to a transformation of institutional culture that results in greater support for citizen involvement in policymaking. Bottin et al. (2023), Cabannes (2015) and Jacquet et al. (2021) have observed that public servants acknowledge the positive contributions to policymaking of public engagement and, furthermore, either ask for or implement more participatory processes. These impacts are significant, given that one of the main barriers to citizen engagement is a lack of trust of public bodies in citizen capacities (Yang et al., 2011). The EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey further corroborated this shift in institutional readiness to engage with citizens, highlighting the recognition of the added value of participatory processes. Among the 105 local, regional and national governments across the 20 Member States surveyed by the JRC, over 97 % said that they would do it again, as they believe that citizen engagement helps improve policy quality and legitimacy, better reflects community needs and, ultimately, strengthens democracy.


The benefits they saw in these exercises included improved policy quality, policies that better reflected citizens' views, and stronger and more inclusive democracies:

Citizen engagement fosters transparency, strengthens trust in institutions, and ensures policies reflect real community needs. Our previous exercise generated valuable insights and built stronger relationships with local stakeholders. 

National civil servant from Romania


We believe we need deliberative methods to support the general democratic elections/system and for the survival of the democratic institutions. 

National civil servant from Sweden

The experience demonstrated the value of involving citizens in decision-making processes, both in terms of building trust and generating more widely accepted and relevant outcomes. 


Local official from Greece

Commission staff who were actively involved in citizen engagement processes spoke of the impact on themselves, including the development of a greater appreciation for, and understanding of, citizen engagement:

Here, for the institution, it is a huge learning exercise in being more attentive to citizens, to their understanding, to their concerns, because here when you speak about, in my case of topics, citizens came up, they were extremely open, much more than what I expected. So, for me it was a super, it was a wonderful surprise, you know, because the way they grasp the topic was fantastic ... they nail down the issues. 


European Commission public servant No 3,
7 November 2024

For others, the experience of witnessing the process of citizens deliberating on complex policy topics was emotional:

For us, one of the main takeaways, at least personally, was the fact that citizens really had a good grasp and understanding of the issue ... and that showed in the recommendations and how they structured them, what they put forward. They really had a comprehensive overview and we were very, I mean personally, I was very surprised by that ... it changed us personally because it was very, very emotional. 

European Commission public servant No 4,
21 November 2024

Interviewees expressed the view that the citizen engagement processes they were involved in had contributed to a change in institutional culture that was more supportive of, and willing to conduct, citizen engagement:

It means they will never look at that kind of endeavour in a sceptical way any more. They will be more open to using that kind of tool. 

European Commission public servant No 5,
24 May 2024

In some cases, public servants took a reflexive approach to their public communication activities by adapting language to better meet the needs and concerns of citizens, such as explaining technical jargon or using more concise language. However, future research should investigate more sustainable approaches to sharing knowledge with citizens, namely approaches that transparently convey the big picture, including uncertainties and unknowns. By doing so, institutions can avoid predefining what citizens need to know and, instead, empower them to choose the level of complexity and detail of the relevant knowledge that they need to engage meaningfully in the process.

4.2. New ways of working

The research undertaken for this report shows that increased citizen engagement has brought about new ways of working with a broader range of actors, both internal and external to the Commission. For example, some interviewees said that the European citizens' panels had spurred departments to work together, resulting in more collaborative policymaking on specific topics:

It actually gave us an opportunity to connect with colleagues [in other departments] that were maybe working on the file but didn't have this much motivation to do so, because they didn't have a political directive to do so, but by the citizens saying, listen guys, this is important, then they actually had to contribute to the file, more than maybe they would have done before, so they had to prioritise an area because the citizen told them to.



European Commission public servant
No 4, 21 November 2024

The cross-directorate collaboration through the panels sometimes helped them to gain new perspectives and work through policy blockages:

We were able to find sort of a common approach that was bringing in knowledge, but at the same time, perhaps a bit of salt and pepper to the whole thing that was adding an element of novelty that we did not have before, or ways of seeing things that we did not look ourselves at.



European Commission public servant No 6, 3 July 2024

These descriptions echo the findings of Setälä (2017), namely that the outputs of citizen engagement can serve as a resource enabling elected officials to engage in debate, negotiation or deliberation regarding recommendations or a public judgement they have received.

4.3. Changes to the way decision-makers see policy issues

The outputs of citizen engagement, in the form of recommendations or a vote, can persuade decision-makers to change their preferences, values and opinions regarding a policy or public issue (Vrydagh et al., 2020a) ⁽²²⁾. In altering preferences and opinions, public engagement can give public servants new ideas for policymaking or help reframe an issue (Agger et al., 2018; Calvert et al., 2014; Vrydagh, 2022) and give them a more balanced view ([Box 4](#)).



The 2023 Østerbro Citizens' Assembly, Copenhagen, Denmark. Based on the question 'What should the Østerbro of the future look like in terms of cars, urban spaces and urban nature?', the citizens of Østerbro participated in a neighbourhood citizens' assembly and made recommendations to the city council.

⁽²²⁾ It should be noted, however, that research also casts doubt on whether citizen engagement changes the values and beliefs of state agents, as these are constrained by core beliefs and bounded rationality (Braun, 1999; Dowding, 2018; Lakatos, 1978).

BOX 4.**Citizen engagement gives politicians a more balanced view**

Policymakers have been confronted with an information environment that is increasingly focused on polarisation (Barberá et al., 2017), while research shows that policymakers have systematically biased views of, and often misperceive, public opinion (Broockman et al., 2018; Kertzer et al., 2019; Pereira, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2022). Politicians consult only a limited number of sources when they form their ideas about public opinion. For example, to cope with constant information overload, ministers and party leaders in Belgium were shown to regularly use heuristics and information shortcuts (Walgrave et al., 2017). When policymakers do consult citizens, in most cases it is not a representative sample of the population. Citizens who attend town hall meetings and who interact with politicians, for example, are often socio-demographically different from and hold more extreme views than the wider population. This tends to give politicians a skewed view of citizens' concerns, leading to a conservative bias, even among left-leaning politicians (Walgrave et al., 2017). Participatory and deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies provide a more representative sample of the population, therefore providing a more balanced, robust and plural exchange of information between citizens and policymakers.

This democratic function can therefore give policymakers a better understanding of the policies that citizens would support. For example, citizens' views on mobility and parking spaces in the city of Copenhagen, Denmark, were notably different in four citizens' assemblies that covered the topic ⁽²³⁾ (for which citizens were drawn by lot) compared with town hall meetings on the matter (at which citizens attend at random through their own volition). In the four citizens' assemblies, recommendations for less parking spaces for cars achieved significant support, sometimes calling for up to an 80 % reduction in parking spaces ⁽²⁴⁾. However, the opinions gathered by politicians from citizens in separate town hall meetings were notably different; many were against a reduction in parking spaces, as they did not want to lose 'their' parking spot ⁽²⁵⁾. Without an alternative information source in the form of another group of citizens from their constituency (in this case the citizens' assemblies), a politician might tend to think that the citizens attending a town hall meeting are expressing a more widely held public opinion. As it turned out, the recommendations of the four citizens' assemblies took precedence, given unanimous support for reducing parking, and, in much of the central old town district, a large number of parking spaces were removed (see We Do Democracy, n.d.).

Source: Dejaeghere, 2024.

⁽²³⁾ These were the Citizens' Assembly on the Medieval City Centre (2019), the Citizens' Assembly on a Green Future for inner Østerbro (2023), the Citizens' Assembly on Lynetteholm (2022–2023) and the Permanent Climate Assembly of the City of Copenhagen (2023– present). All case descriptions can be found online (<https://www.wedodemocracy.com/cases/>).

⁽²⁴⁾ For example, at the Citizens' Assembly on the Medieval City Centre, citizens' recommendations went as far as to suggest reductions of 80–90 % of on-street parking spaces in their neighbourhood, while the Permanent Climate Assembly of the City in Copenhagen called for more 'car-free zones'.

⁽²⁵⁾ An article was published in 2024 on this type of recurrent interaction during a town hall meeting in a town just north of Copenhagen (Munch Nielsen, 2024).

EU Member States' response to the question "Why would you conduct citizen engagement again?"



A sustainable city cannot be created without the participation of its citizens.

Because it helps in life quality and decision-making processes.

It is necessary for certain processes to gain public trust and support to achieve successful implementation.

To make citizens more involved in creating the environment they live in.

It makes sense - only through engagement can we get input on what the needs are, priorities and also to build trust with the public.

It improves our policymaking process.

These initiatives strengthen the relationship of trust between citizens and the municipal authority, contributing substantially to the engagement of the community, the highlighting of the real needs of the citizens, as well as the achievement of more effective and sustainable solutions.

It increases transparency and conflict prevention.

It enhances democratic legitimacy, ensures that actions reflect diverse needs, fosters trust and democracy.

The local authority needs to hear as many voices as possible in order to make the best decisions for the best interest of the community.

In citizen engagement lies the future in our polarised debates since they allow for an informed and factual debate.

Better results for the implementation of projects.

Final policy decisions are much better & broader accepted amongst relevant stakeholders - although the whole process might take longer.

It shows us the possible needs of citizens, it inspires us and it is an easy way to show that we care.

I would conduct as many citizen engagement exercises as possible whilst holding up a minimum standard of quality. If we fail to improve democracy tyranny will eventually come. And I don't want my (or anybody's) children to live under it.

The policy serves to citizens, therefore it's important to know their opinion.

That is how it should almost always work for policy.

We need deliberative methods to support the general democratic elections/system and for the survival of the democratic institutions.

It is just a natural process of policy preparation.



4.4. Enhanced political visibility

Some interviewees stated that they benefited from conducting citizen engagement because of the visibility it gave to their work, which in turn focused more attention on certain policy files:

It gave us, for my work, a lot of visibility, also in-house. So, I think if we're talking about impacts, it's also very real impacts on, internally on the processes ... it gained much more interest and visibility, which of course helps also you know in speeding up some processes.



European Commission public servant No 8, 6 November 2024

[I]t showed our hierarchy ... the great work that we are doing and the fact that this is a very important topic for citizens. So, it did have very positive impacts, I think, in terms of more visibility ...



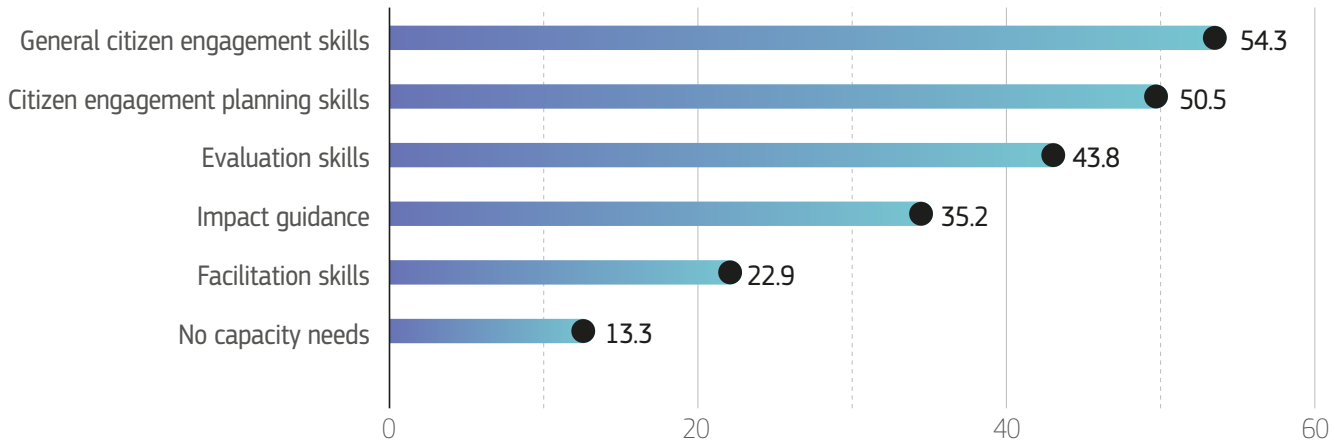
European Commission public servant No 4, 21 November 2024

4.5. Increased institutional capacity required for impactful outcomes

One major impact of conducting citizen engagement is that institutions and groups develop a range of experiences and capacities to conduct citizen engagement in the future. This is essential for ongoing impacts, as institutional and staff competencies are correlated with more impactful outcomes. According to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey, over 75 % of respondents observed moderate to high impacts in terms of increased technical and organisational capacities. This finding was reflected among the Commission public servants interviewed, who reported that there had been an increase in tangible institutional infrastructure to support the permanence of more citizen engagement processes following COFE in 2021–2022 and the introduction of the European citizens' panels. This includes a virtual citizen engagement platform and an interservice group for the strategic implementation of citizen engagement within the organisation.

The survey also found that having resources and know-how supports greater impact: public administrations that stated that they had dedicated staff and skills to conduct or procure citizen engagement showed greater impact scores, particularly on impacts on specific policy and change in the way policies are made. Crucially, however, the survey found that public institutions often lack, but need, guidance and adequate capacities to conduct citizen engagement. Only half (50.5 %) of respondents said that their institution had adequate skills and resources to conduct or procure citizen engagement, while a significant proportion wanted more support to do so – including to enhance general citizen engagement capacities (54.3 %) and planning skills (50.5 %) ([Figure 5](#)).

Figure 5. Skills and capacities required for citizen engagement: percentage of ‘yes’ responses to each



Source: the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, public administration staff found a lack of capacity and resources to be a challenge when conducting citizen engagement. As one public servant working on citizen engagement with local and regional authorities stated:

The limiting factor is the time and the capacity of the region and the local authority to spend time with this contractor [to conduct citizen engagement]. Sometimes it's the same person to work with many different projects ... It's a lot of effort and then that is overwhelming.

EU public servant No 7,
9 January 2025

These findings point to an overall need to increase the support given to and the capacity of public administrations to ensure more impactful outcomes of citizen engagement, including, but not limited to, foundational areas and planning, as well as evaluation and impact guidance, and embedding these processes within legal frameworks⁽²⁶⁾.

⁽²⁶⁾ The joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – European democracy shield: empowering strong and resilient democracy, JOIN(2025) 791 final of 12 November 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JCO791>, includes provisions on building capacity in public administrations through dedicated multilingual training packages on citizen engagement.

4.6. Integrating citizen engagement into the policymaking cycle

Institutionalisation is a key aspect for ensuring policy impacts, as it establishes the effective alignment of citizen engagement exercises within existing policymaking processes. In effect, institutionalisation provides a legal basis establishing the context in which citizen participation occurs in the policy and planning cycle. Such governance arrangements allow public decision-makers to make hard decisions more effectively, thus enhancing public trust, making representative deliberative processes easier and less expensive and saving costs and resources over the long term (OECD, 2021). [Box 5](#) sets out various models for institutionalisation.

A number of notable examples of governments that have integrated institutionalisation models into their existing policymaking processes include the German-speaking Community of Belgium, the city of Paris and the Brussels Region in Belgium. In 2024, for example, the Paris city council adopted a citizen bill on homelessness drafted by the permanent Paris Citizens' Assembly (l'Assemblée citoyenne de Paris) – which has in effect become a permanent process whereby citizens and public officials co-create policy together ⁽²⁷⁾. It should be noted, however, that, while the effective 'coupling' of citizens' assemblies through institutional mechanisms to the wider political system, such as the Irish Parliament (Hendriks, 2016), arguably results in significant policy impact (e.g. in the case of Ireland on climate change policy), it needs to be ensured that institutions do not exert inappropriate control over the exercise to the extent that outcomes are distorted, for example in the skewed framing of the remit or terms of the exercise (Harris, 2021).

BOX 5.

Models for institutionalisation

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) lists eight models for institutionalising citizen participation, with a focus on citizens' assemblies. Each model has its strengths and weaknesses, and contextual factors should be considered when choosing a model:

- combining a permanent citizens' assembly with one-off citizens' panels;
- connecting representative public deliberation to parliamentary committees;
- combining deliberative and direct democracy through the citizens' initiative review model;
- establishing standing citizens' advisory panels;
- establishing sequenced representative deliberative processes throughout the policy cycle;
- giving people the right to demand a representative deliberative process;
- requiring representative public deliberation before certain types of public decisions;
- embedding representative deliberative processes in local strategic planning.

⁽²⁷⁾ Délibération de l'Assemblée citoyenne relative à la prévention et à l'accompagnement des personnes en situation de rue (Le Conseil de Paris, Séance des 26, 27 et 28 juin 2024), https://a06-v7.apps.paris.fr/a06/jsp/site/plugins/odjcp/DoDownload.jsp?id_entite=62292&id_type_entite=6.

Having the legal basis and an agreed model for citizen engagement, however, does not in and of itself ensure policy impacts. Possible solutions to help guarantee impactful processes in policymaking include interparty commissions that take an overview of citizen engagement processes themselves – particularly to ensure that recommendations survive electoral cycles. Several citizen engagement pilot processes have tried to formalise an institution in charge of multipartisan management of its mandate, rules and functioning. The general idea is that citizen engagement becomes not exclusively a government policy, but an administration policy guided by non-partisan views. The benefits of such bodies include more transparent and predictable outcomes for participants, civil society and elected members of opposition parties. Currently, two primary institutional models have been implemented: (1) political advisory boards that oversee the functioning of citizen engagement processes, particularly citizens' assemblies, and (2) permanent institutional bodies that develop deliberative processes (Bherer et al., 2021), such as the French Commission Nationale du Débat Public ⁽²⁸⁾ or the permanent citizens' dialogue in the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Niessen et al., 2022). The way these bodies function in practice and their limitations is still being explored, but nevertheless they are promising and worth pursuing.

The Commission's Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy is currently exploring a third possible model for institutionalisation, which is centred on establishing a trusted connection between an authority and an independent, self-governing body. Its primary mission would be to strengthen the deliberative democratic infrastructure by fostering quality and institutionalised citizen participation that directly informs policymaking at the Member State level, including the regional and local levels. Such a model underscores the close connection between capacities, continuous learning and knowledge sharing, supports participatory practices in producing a coherent framework of participatory excellence and is in full compliance with Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836.

The German-Speaking Community of Belgium is one example of citizen engagement being institutionalised in existing policymaking processes.



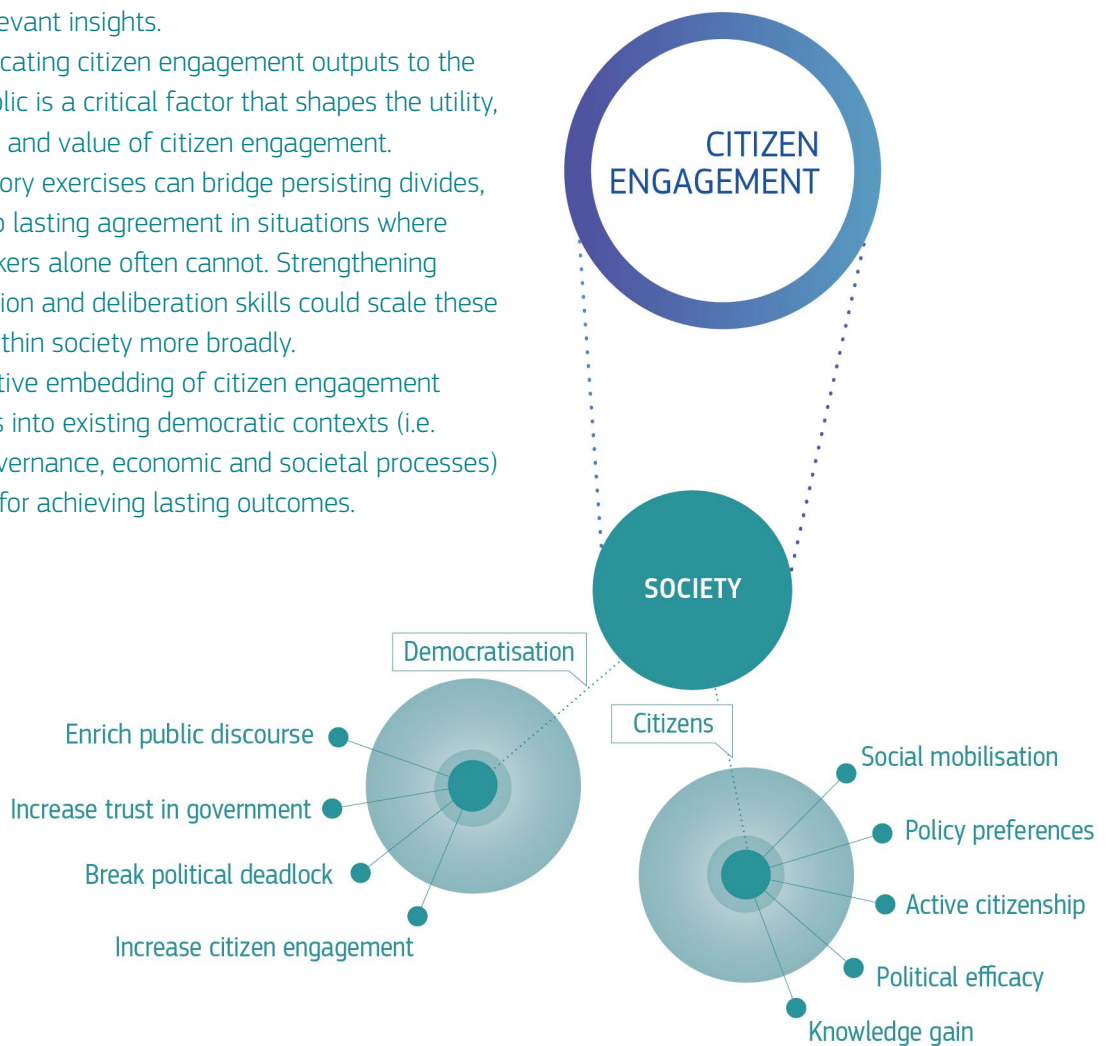
⁽²⁸⁾ <https://www.debatpublic.fr/>.

5.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Key
messages

- Participatory processes may expand the public agenda by providing diverse and policy-relevant insights.
- Communicating citizen engagement outputs to the wider public is a critical factor that shapes the utility, credibility and value of citizen engagement.
- Participatory exercises can bridge persisting divides, leading to lasting agreement in situations where policymakers alone often cannot. Strengthening participation and deliberation skills could scale these effects within society more broadly.
- The effective embedding of citizen engagement processes into existing democratic contexts (i.e. within governance, economic and societal processes) is critical for achieving lasting outcomes.



5.1. Impact on the broader public

The impacts of citizen engagement on wider society, including on citizens who did not take part in citizen engagement processes themselves, are particularly difficult to assess, and the related impact pathways are hard to demonstrate. Research, however, does point to various effects when deliberated public judgement is communicated by the media and when citizens know about a specific participatory process taking place.

Reading citizen recommendations from deliberative mini-publics provides the public with knowledge and helps them to obtain information about an issue (Gastil et al., 2018; Már et al., 2020; Suiter et al., 2020). Such outputs help people to make sense of the underlying issues and to debunk fake news or mis-/disinformation (Goodin et al., 2006; MacKenzie et al., 2012; Niemeyer, 2014; Niemeyer et al., 2018).

Deliberative public engagement may also contribute to shaping citizens' policy preferences. Experimental research on deliberative mini-publics shows that they can contribute to shifting how people think about a policy issue (Boulianne, 2018; Ingham et al., 2017, 2018). For example, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in 2004 engaged members of the wider public outside the assembly itself on the issue of electoral reform, thus informing and shaping citizens' views on options for electoral systems ahead of a statewide referendum on the issue (Ratner, 2005). A study from the US state of Oregon (Gastil et al., 2020) indicated that citizens were 40 % more likely to vote after reading the citizens' statement of the Citizens' Initiative Review ⁽²⁹⁾. In the case of the 2025 Dutch Climate Citizens' Assembly Nationaal Burgerberaad Klimaat, the public was invited to take part in an online public consultation asking respondents what the assembly members should take into account in their recommendations and what the most important issues to consider were. In doing so, the process engaged with the broader public; 32 532 people took part in the process, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and relevance of the exercise for citizens.



The 2025 Dutch Climate Citizens' Assembly included 175 citizens.

⁽²⁹⁾ If recommendations are not automatically sent to citizens, the extent to which the public is informed depends on the public awareness of the participatory process. Citizens must first have heard or be aware of the process before being able to read its recommendations. In the case of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review, the study reported that around 43 % of the voters who received the recommendations consulted them (Gastil et al., 2023).

Public engagement can stimulate active citizenship and political self-efficacy, that is, citizens believing that they can influence government and that the government cares about their opinions (Boulianne, 2018), self-confidence and empathy (Suiter et al., 2020). Participating in deliberation can strengthen social mobilisation, such as through community mobilisation on budgetary decisions (Smith, 2010) or taking part in public debates (Goodin et al., 2006). Deliberative exercises have also been shown to initiate interpersonal discussions beyond the content of the exercises (Lazer et al., 2015). In Mozambique, links between a climate assembly and the local community helped to deepen community connection and supported practical outcomes for climate change adaptation on the ground (Curato et al., 2025). [Section 6](#) of this report discusses in more depth the effects of participants' engagement with their wider social networks and politics.

The results of citizen engagement exercises may also support the work of civil-society organisations. In the case of the French and Irish climate assemblies, for example, the citizens' output helped civil-society organisations by demonstrating public support for their policy demands. The strong recommendations from citizens to take firmer climate action helped civil-society organisations to gauge citizens' views on the topic across the broader population. However, research on the European citizens' panels shows that civil-society organisations and other civil-society actors tend to consider process design in assessing the legitimacy of the panels before they accept their outcomes (Donné, 2023).

Deliberative public engagement can also transform views about the role of these initiatives in a democratic system (Rinke et al., 2013; Rountree et al., 2023). For instance, the G1000 citizens' assembly in Belgium triggered a broad public reflection and debate about the role and place of citizens in the political system (Caluwaerts et al., 2018; Vrydagh et al., 2021). Studies have shown that, in general, citizens tend to be supportive of participatory exercises such as citizens' assemblies (Bedock et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2023; Jacquet et al., 2022; Pilet et al., 2023). In a 2025 survey in France, 67 % of respondents said that citizens' assemblies are a 'good thing', stating that they valued them because of their distance from partisan politics and the opportunity for ordinary citizens to influence important decisions, among other factors (see SciencesPo, 2025). When given a choice of political reform ideas in Australia, citizens' assemblies were the most popular choice among the citizens surveyed (Cameron et al., 2025). Disaffected citizens in particular, namely those who are dissatisfied with democracy or distrustful of government, tend to support these processes, giving them an alternative route to connect to policy outcomes (Pilet et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2025). However, citizen support may depend on certain provisos in design, such as limiting citizen engagement processes to advisory roles and complying with certain provisions (e.g. large sizes and clear majorities for recommendations) (Goldberg et al., 2023, 2025).

5.2. Public communication is key for wider impacts

The most important caveat for the impact that these processes can have on citizens who are not participants is that this can take place only if they know enough about them to have an informed opinion. Communication to the public is therefore crucial for any participatory process to have a broader impact (Goodin et al., 2006), as people do not usually follow participatory processes on their own (Rountree et al., 2023). The organisers of many deliberative processes, however, find connecting to the public a challenge (Rovers et al., 2022), especially given the slow nature of citizen engagement exercises and a media environment that is increasingly focused on personalisation and polarisation (Barberá et al., 2017). Citizens' assemblies have been criticised for being detached from the public at large, who often remain unaware of the existence of such assemblies (Devillers et al., 2021; Goldberg, 2023). Notable exceptions that have gained broad media exposure include the French Citizens' Climate Convention and the Irish citizens' assemblies. Another way to reach the broader public is to consult them on the recommendations.

A key aspect to address going forward is how the organising institution can effectively reach out to the broader public through various mechanisms, including both traditional and social media. In practice, organisers of citizen engagement processes often lack the time or resources to plan and execute an effective media strategy. There is also a lack of clear guidance on communication strategies for citizen engagement and/or the knowledge and awareness required by journalists to report on them (see Dobler (2026) for guidance on communication strategies for climate assemblies). For example, what part of the exercise should organisers communicate about (is it the process, the issue or the outcomes)? With whom should they be communicating (policymakers, the broader citizenry or stakeholders and multipliers)? And in what formats should they be communicating? What is already clear for many practitioners is that media coverage must be planned to amplify the impact of the deliberations, while ensuring balance between the need for participant privacy and the requirement for transparency. Factors to consider in risk assessments include the fact that media coverage may not always be favourable and can therefore undermine public deliberation, even in instances of high internal quality (Curato et al., 2016; Rountree et al., 2023), and the fact that broader public discussions may be more prone to external influence and mis-/disinformation than the closed discursive environments of mini-publics (Curato et al., 2025).



A citizen takes a photo on their phone during the third session of the European Citizens' Panel on Climate Change, Environment and Health at COFE in Poland.

5.3. Democratisation

A key question regarding the impact of citizen engagement is whether it contributes to democratic resilience. When considering the potential of these processes to strengthen democracy, it should be noted that most evidence on ‘spillover’ effects is based on a limited number of studies (van der Does et al., 2023). A few key areas that are noteworthy include the capacity of citizen engagement to enrich the public discourse and inform citizens about policy issues that affect them and to increase public trust in governing institutions, as well as its potential to reduce disputes and dissent and help resolve political deadlock. Curato et al. (2020) have suggested that the democratic role that citizen engagement may play is not automatic. Certain conditions must be met for it to produce democratic ‘goods’. Key dependencies include the role of the process – to either inform citizens or change policy directly – the nature of the issue and the level of consensus among citizen participants.

5.3.1. Enriching and balancing public discourse

Citizen engagement processes hold significant potential to bring issues up for public discussion that otherwise may not receive attention (Lafont, 2017; Niemeyer, 2014). They can also help mitigate misperceptions in the broader public sphere (Muradova et al., 2023). The Swedish Citizens’ Assembly on Climate of 2024 (Medborgarråd om Klimatet), for example, demonstrated that, contrary to mainstream narratives, citizens in Sweden do care about climate change and are willing to contribute to finding solutions, thereby demonstrating where public support actually lay in terms of ambition and policy solutions (Machani et al., 2025).



Participants in the 2024 Swedish Citizens’ Assembly on Climate.

Similarly, in the case of the We, the Internet citizens' dialogues, which entailed a bottom-up engagement process in 80 countries, the media were instrumental in informing public debate on the issue of internet governance in Bangladesh and Yemen. In those two countries, where internet access remains a challenge for a significant proportion of the population, the debate was an opportunity to put the question of internet governance and inclusive access on the political agenda:

Internet governance, and awareness of this issue, and talking about the internet has become more popular. And I can say that we pioneered something back then, we have planted the seed, and it has become much more mainstreamed here to talk about disinformation, violence against women online, how citizens can have a say on internet governance. Especially amongst civil-society organisations.



We, the Internet – Yemen local organiser ⁽³⁰⁾

Participants in We, the Internet (Bangladesh).



Participants in We, the Internet (Yemen).

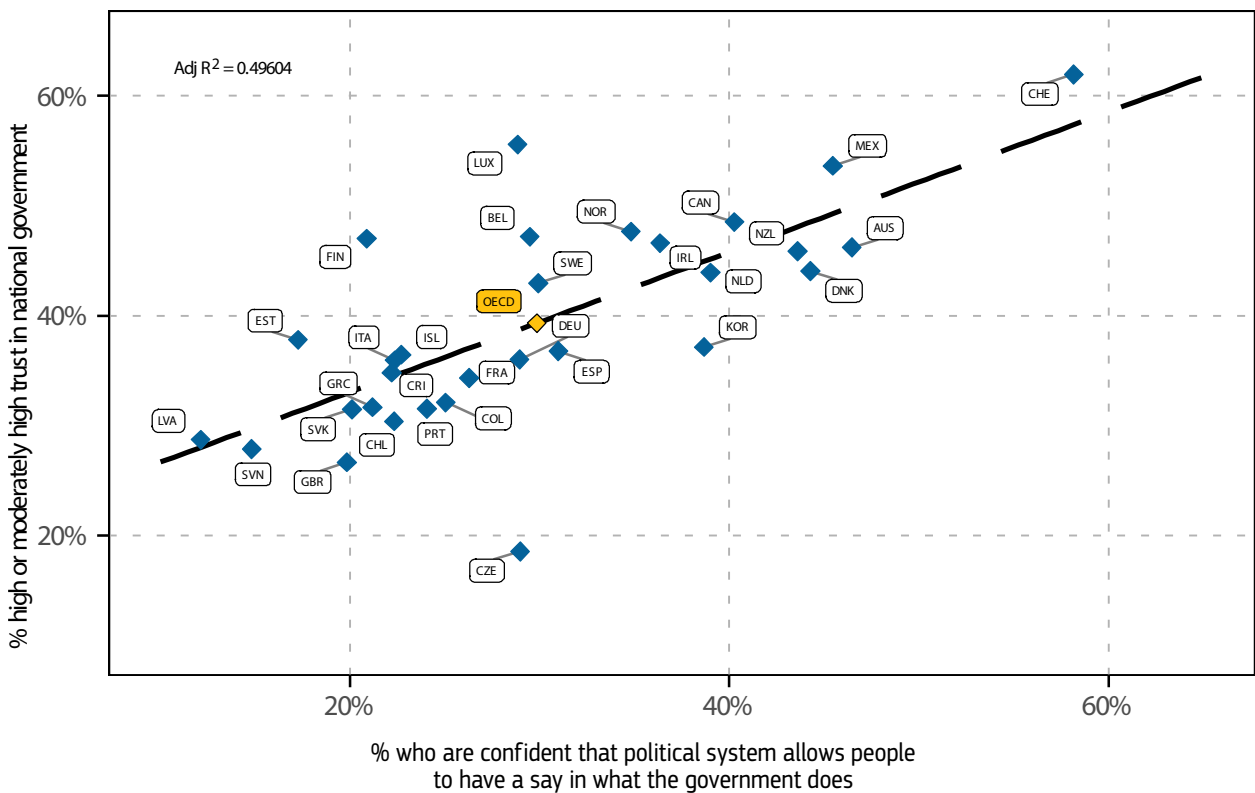
⁽³⁰⁾ Interview conducted by Camille Dobler, Missions Publiques.

5.3.2. Greater trust between citizens and institutions

Increasing public trust involves the expectation that citizen involvement will lead citizens to view public decisions and policies as more legitimate (Beauvais et al., 2019; Goodin et al., 2006; Hendriks, 2009; Papadopoulos et al., 2007; Setälä et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2015) ⁽³¹⁾. According to the OECD

(2024b), when citizens feel like they have a say at the country level, they are much more likely to trust the government (Figure 6). In Canada, for example, trust in government is significantly higher among Canadians who feel they have a say in what the government does (79 %, compared with 21 % who do not) ⁽³²⁾. The same OECD survey shows that a key driver of trust in national governments is citizen participation (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Correlation between those who have high or moderately high trust in the national government and those who feel that citizens have a say in what the government does: percentage of population in country, 2023 ⁽³³⁾



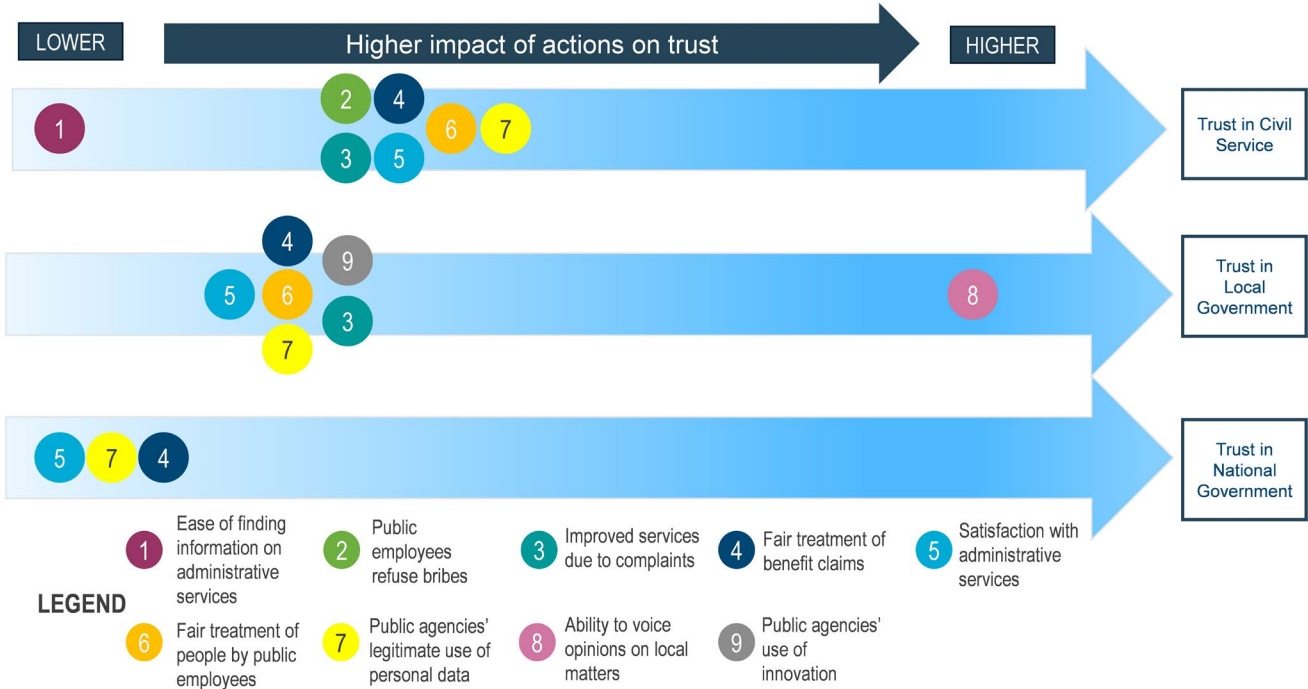
Source: OECD (2024 b).

⁽³¹⁾ Perceived legitimacy is about whether citizens support the idea of citizen engagement as a practice (Richards et al., 2015). However, its perceived value depends on citizens knowing about and recognising these practices (Estlund, 2008).

⁽³²⁾ In this survey, 49 % of Canadians reported high or moderately high trust in the federal government, which is above the OECD average of 39 % (OECD, 2024a). Canada has a comparatively strong track record in deliberative democracy, with over 50 deliberative processes held in the past two decades (MASSLB, 2025).

⁽³³⁾ Share of population in country with high or moderately high trust in the national government (y-axis) and who find it likely that political system allows people to have a say in what the government does (x-axis). The chart illustrates the percentage of respondents reporting “likely” to the question: “How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?” or answering “high or moderately high trust” to the question: “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, how much do you trust national government?”. The “likely” or “high or moderately high trust” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale. “OECD” presents the unweighted average of responses across countries. (OECD (2024 b).

Figure 7. Degree of impact of drivers of trust in the civil service, local government and national government ⁽³⁴⁾



Source: OECD (2024b).

Respondents to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey also reported that increasing trust between citizens and policy institutions was both an impact of, and a key motivation for, conducting citizen engagement exercises:

Our experience has shown that these initiatives strengthen the relationship of trust between citizens and the municipal authority, contributing substantially to the engagement of the community, the highlighting of the real needs of the citizens.

Respondent

Only through engagement can we get input on what the needs are, priorities and also to build trust with the public; trust built now through reflecting the needs of people, communicating the process transparently, will translate into the future time of crises.

Respondent


Citizen engagement has proven valuable in building trust, improving the quality of policy decisions and aligning projects with the real needs of the community.

Local administrator

⁽³⁴⁾ The figure shows the statistically significant determinants of trust in the national government, civil service and local government, obtained through logistic regressions of trust in the respective institutions on the public governance drivers. The analyses control for individual characteristics, including whether people voted or would have voted for one of the current parties in power, self-reported levels of interpersonal trust, and country fixed effects. All variables depicted are statistically significant at the 1% significance level (OECD 2024 b).


Looking more, specifically at mini-publics, research shows that, when citizens know about citizen engagement initiatives, it helps to enhance the overall legitimacy of the political system (Boulianne, 2018). Citizen trust can increase for those who are dissatisfied with the current political system (Goldberg et al., 2023) and for those who read the recommendations (Gastil et al., 2023). The research shows that citizens value the inclusiveness of citizen engagement and especially of deliberative engagement practices (Jäske, 2019). The realisation of this effect is, however, contingent on a myriad of external factors, as external elements can affect public trust in the process. One such factor is the necessity for the transparent uptake of the outputs of citizen engagement in public decisions and policies (Van Dijk et al., 2023). Without any follow-up on the work of the participating citizens, citizen participation backfires, increases public distrust and reduces legitimacy. Citizens who have invested their time will feel ‘duped’, and this will have a negative effect on their trust in the system (Nielsen et al., 2023; Swaner, 2017). For example, a consultative referendum introduced at the local level in the Flemish Region of Belgium in the 1990s, which experienced a strong uptake, was largely abandoned after citizens observed that city officials were often disregarding the citizens’ contributions (Dewachter et al., 2002). Similarly, the 2025 European Commission Citizen Engagement Impact Survey found that, of the respondents who reported challenges in achieving impacts from citizen participation exercises, citizen dissatisfaction on account of a lack of policy impact and/or follow-up was the most cited problem. Respondents mentioned citizen frustration or disengagement on account of unmet expectations due to delays in visible outcomes and a lack of clear follow-up mechanisms, which was sometimes aggravated by unclear procedures, limited feedback or insufficient transparency about institutional constraints.

For example, one respondent highlighted the problem of institutional inertia:

Citizens want more impact and their role implemented faster, but a big city with 15 000 civil servants moves slowly. 

Respondent

In order to avoid these problems, several respondents emphasised the importance of managing expectations, communicating limitations clearly and maintaining continuity to mitigate these risks and sustain public trust in participatory processes:

Some citizens expected immediate changes, and the timeline for implementation caused frustration. Managing expectations and maintaining transparent communication became essential to avoid disengagement or scepticism in future participatory processes. 

Respondent

This underscores what practitioners, researchers and policymakers have been saying for some time: resources need to be committed to the institutional response delivered to citizens through the follow-up on recommendations. Those commissioning a participatory process must ensure that there is a clear upfront commitment from the political authorities to concrete follow-up measures, including necessary resources. If the authorities are not in a position to make such a commitment, for example due to a limited mandate or lack of resources, the exercise should not proceed or the limitations should be explicitly communicated before the event takes place. The damage done to public trust due to backtracking on promises is likely to outweigh any democratic ‘goods’ achieved through conducting the process alone.


5.3.3. Bridging divided societies

Deliberation can help to bridge societies that are divided along religious, national, racial or ethnic lines (Curato et al., 2017). Deliberative formats have shown how conversations in the public sphere can help find consensus on divisive topics, through the promotion of recognition, mutual understanding and social learning across divides. For example, a citizens' assembly in the city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2021 on public cleanliness (Skupština građana Mostara) proved that ethnic divisions could be overcome through citizen deliberation. Following 12 years without elections due to a dispute over electoral districts, ethnic political polarisation affected many policy areas, giving it the reputation of a city that was hard to govern (Carabelli et al., 2019). Through the proportional representation of the city's ethnic groups, the assembly proceeded in a peaceful way without acrimony, showing that citizen cooperation is possible despite ethnic division.

In this way, scholars argue, citizen engagement itself can serve as a novel 'way to do democracy', which

can have powerful implications for democracy as a whole, by providing an example of how democracy should be and could be improved (Dejaeghere et al., 2017). Just by occurring, it shows that existing narratives of what is possible can be changed and that seemingly insurmountable divisions can be addressed through citizens' deliberation.

Deliberative processes have been effective in resolving political deadlock when politicians have not been able to do so, thus providing a new governance tool. For example, during the longest political crisis in Belgium's history in 2011, the G1000 citizens' assembly demonstrated that citizens could find consensus on several policy topics where political parties had failed to do so. Various parties had claimed that differences of opinion, often along Flemish-/French-speaking lines, were insurmountable. Nevertheless, the assembly showed that the citizens could reach consensus effectively and speedily on challenging political topics, including immigration and social security, dispelling the claim that this divide made the country 'unworkable' (Caluwaerts et al., 2018).



The 2021 Mostar Citizens' Assembly showed that citizens could effectively reach consensus on divisive topics despite ethnic divisions.

While deliberative formats have been shown to reduce polarisation among citizen participants on politically divisive topics (Lindell et al., 2017; Luskin et al., 2022), more research is needed to understand whether this effect can be scaled up to the wider population. Some scholars suggest that large-scale deliberation has the potential to mitigate polarisation of political views in society, leading to less polarised electoral outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2002; Fishkin et al., 2021; Gastil et al., 2018); however, this hypothesis needs further empirical examination. A key challenge with regard to polarisation reduction more broadly, however, is fostering communication and connection across societal divides. A suggested idea of how to do this is through the development of deliberative skills more widely to help establish more reflective and inclusive forms of reasoning among citizens, showing ways to support processes of mutual justification across social cleavages, while also taking into consideration political systems and social factors that may be exacerbating polarisation in the first place (Setälä et al., 2025).

5.4. Engagement must be effectively embedded in democratic systems

The more participatory processes that are implemented, the more consideration needs to be given to their effective embeddedness within their democratic systems (Box 6). While institutionalisation refers to the process by which citizen engagement is integrated into a governance system, embeddedness is the outcome of this integration, suggesting that engagement with citizens becomes ‘integral, normalized, and rooted within democratic systems’ (Unegbu et al., 2026). As Bussu et al. (2022) describe: ‘[Embedded] forms of participation have attained the status of a common sense of democratic organisation – they are not continuously requested to prove their cost-effectiveness, for instance. Incumbents cannot simply ignore or abolish elections when they produce inconvenient results.’ Embeddedness thus guarantees that the outputs of participatory processes are not dismissed (e.g. contesting the results of a referendum or elections reflects a legitimacy crisis) and ensures that following up only on recommendations that fit convenient political narratives is not possible. Embedding participatory exercises is important for the continued sustenance of civil society and public spaces, as well as for community- and activist-led networks. A failure on the side of policy institutions to recognise that may result in adverse effects for the entire ecosystem (Howlett et al., 2020). In addition, the inconsistent (i.e. ad hoc) use of participatory processes can marginalise stakeholders from policymaking, thereby worsening relations and generating distrust (Hendriks, 2002; Niessen, 2019; Vrydagh et al., 2020b).

BOX 6.**More citizen engagement does not necessarily equal more inclusive democracy**

In the German city of Berlin, multiple engagement channels offer residents different opportunities for participation. However, the multiplicity of hyper-local and one-off opportunities may have created an overload of channels for participation, making engagement processes uncoordinated and bureaucratic. This has displaced community-led initiatives and made it challenging for civil society to get involved (Ross, 2022). Furthermore, bureaucratic complexity and decentralisation of participatory channels has made engagement for citizens challenging and often disconnected. The public is largely unaware of most of these opportunities, which inadvertently fosters the ‘usual suspects’ effect ⁽³⁵⁾. Moreover, because most participation and citizen consultation processes are informal and

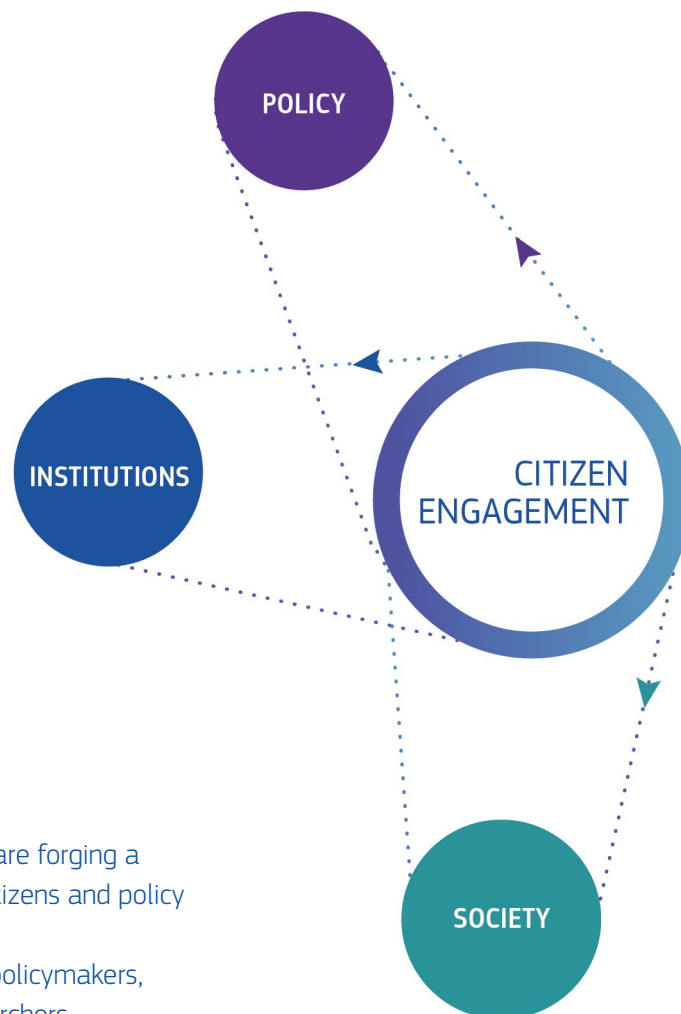
voluntary, policy action is often reliant on political will. The voluntary uptake of citizen input, demands and recommendations creates inequality among residents, that is, their suggestions will be heard, or not, depending on where they live, which government level they approach and who the public officials in charge are. To avoid such problems when introducing citizen engagement processes, policymakers should first map existing channels and institutions for citizen engagement and consider whether those existing channels could be redeployed. Resources should be further directed to make existing and new channels for citizen engagement better known across the population through targeted information campaigns. To effectively support the engagement of different groups, barriers to participation need to be analysed and solutions incorporated into highly complex administrative systems. For example, public agencies could sometimes delegate decision-making and implementation to citizen initiatives, simplifying and accelerating action on already approved projects.

Source: Ross., 2024.

⁽³⁵⁾ This term refers to participants who are most likely to or most frequently take part in these processes, such as educated, middle-aged, well-off and already mobilised citizens (see, for instance, Pape et al., 2019).

6.

CLOSER CONNECTIONS AND NEW NETWORKS

**Key**

messages

- Citizen engagement processes are forging a stronger connection between citizens and policy institutions.
- New networks emerge among policymakers, civil society, stakeholders, researchers, practitioners and citizens, leveraging the impact of citizen engagement beyond policymaking.

6.1. A stronger relationship between citizens and policymaking institutions

Citizen engagement brings policies and decisions closer to the public, as institutional actors discover, learn and consider citizens' perspectives on policymaking and decision-making (Chambers, 2003; Estlund et al., 2018; Fung, 2006; Papadopoulos et al., 2007; Setälä, 2017; Setälä et al., 2018). An important element of the relationship between citizens and policymaking institutions is bidirectional confidence building, whereby government agencies, stakeholders and bureaucrats are more confident in the public's capacity for deliberation, on the one hand, and public confidence in the government increases, on the other (Parry et al., 2023).

Participants in the G1000, a deliberative mini-public, described it as 'a space of expression between electoral campaigns' (Jacquet, 2019, p. 650). A stronger relationship between institutional actors and citizens was the most significant impact observed by respondents surveyed in the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey ([Figure 8](#)).

'It is important to build a strong relationship between the community, citizens, public finance and the places where we live', said one local official in Slovakia. Another official, from Greece, explained that they conducted citizen engagement 'to improve the communication between our organisation and citizens'.

Interviewees from the Commission, too, point to a closer relationship, especially with regard to the importance of face-to-face interaction:

I think this effect of being there physically, it also showed to the platform members, who are, like we civil servants, we are far away from the reality of the policies we are making, and then, by having the people right in front of you, I think it was giving an incentive for also the platform members to understand that this is actually important for citizens. This directness ... the connection was stronger.

European Commission public servant No 11,
21 November 2024

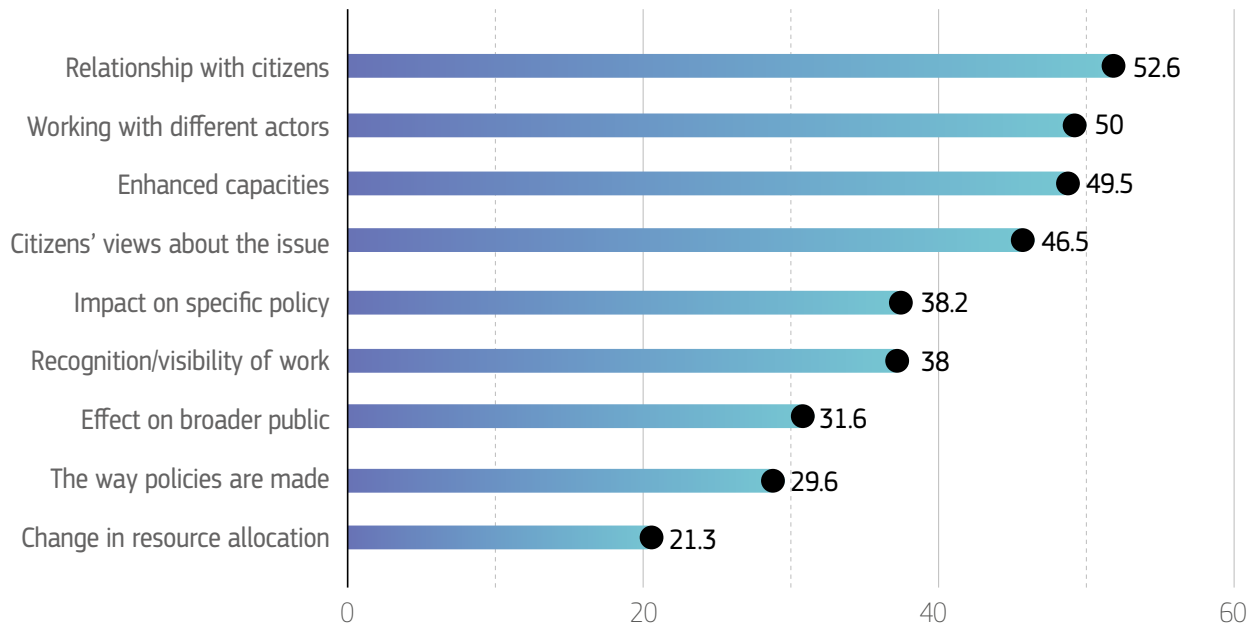
Working at such a high level you very rarely have access to citizens and what they think about what you are doing ... So we had a duty to listen to what they have to say about this issue, and of course just hearing their backgrounds and [about] their motivations to be there in the panel was moving on a personal level, you know, because you could identify with them. So yeah, on a very human level.

European Commission public servant No 4,
21 November 2024



A citizen shakes hands with the Director-General of the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, Maciej Popowski, during the European Citizens' Panel on Preparedness in 2026.

Figure 8. Impacts observed in Member States: percentage of respondents who reported a high impact score (4 or 5 on a scale of 0–5) in each area



Source: the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey.

6.2. A multiplier effect: participants engaging in public and political life

Research has shown lasting effects of deliberative exercises on participants, including undertaking interpersonal political discussions with their friends, family and acquaintances (Christensen et al., 2017; van der Does et al., 2023). Many participants also go on to join political debates and advocacy groups on particular topics. The Commission's ambassador programme, made up of 490 people from all Member States who have participated in the European citizens' panels and COFE), aims to foster engagement continuity and an engagement with political life.

The ambassadors, for example, collaborate with European authorities and the media to spread the word about their experience and encourage other citizens to take part in online deliberations linked to the panels.

Through a 2025 survey undertaken after their involvement in the panels, one ambassador said that they felt like a more active and aware citizen since participating ⁽³⁶⁾:

⁽³⁶⁾ The 2025 survey 'Share your story as a citizen engagement ambassador!', conducted by the Directorate-General for Communication.

It made me realise how important it is to speak up, stay informed, and take initiative – not just on a European level, but also in my local community. For example, after the panel, I joined a local youth organisation where we work on promoting civic education and encouraging other young people to vote and participate in community projects. It's empowering to know that even small actions can lead to real change.



Alumni of European citizens' panels and COFE taking part in ambassador programme activities in 2025.

6.3. Expanding the ecosystem of participatory and deliberative democracy practice

Citizen engagement processes not only foster relationships between citizens and institutional actors, but also forge new connections among policymakers, civil society, stakeholders and citizens on specific topics (Box 7). Respondents to the 2025 EU Citizen Engagement Impact Survey cited various instances of stronger relationships between different actors and groups:

It promotes collaboration among citizens, local authorities and other organisations, creating a stronger support network.



Respondent

It's a good and structured way of gathering different experience-experts to develop solutions or recommendations to a complex subject and can work as a learning-track on other ways of involving both citizens, civil society and other organisations or people with knowledge on a specific topic.



Respondent

BOX 7.

Multistakeholder organisation and citizen engagement ecosystems

Networks of various stakeholder groups have created wider societal impact through coalition-building and advocacy efforts. Today, the field of participatory and deliberative democracy is made up of hundreds of organisations specialising in citizen engagement and scholars, activists and networks dedicated to the design, implementation, study and advocacy of these processes. Each actor brings unique perspectives, resources and networks that can prove invaluable in broadening the impact of participatory exercises.

Practitioners, advocates and others seek impacts through the potential ripple effect of each process, to broaden the reach of citizen engagement. This ambition, referred to as 'scaling out', focuses on extending the reach of citizen engagement to a larger number of people, communities and contexts (i.e. to mainstream the experience of citizen deliberation beyond the process itself and the community of practice). To many in the community, this wide-reaching impact is fundamental to building sustainable and inclusive citizen engagement ecosystems, as citizen engagement does not belong to public authorities or practitioners, but extends to the daily practices of all societal actors. Such a leveraging effect was exploited by the organisers of the Citizens' Climate Convention in France as an indirect channel to secure societal impact.

The convention was designed to be more than just a process to produce policy recommendations; it also served as a unique ecosystem for exchanges and relationship building across different stakeholders and fields of practices. This ecosystem included members of academia, activists, civil-society actors, members of the media, public officials, practitioners and citizens, in a spirit that some observers have described as close to co-creation (Giraudet et al., 2022). In the convention, experts and advocates often worked closely with the 150 members in the process of deliberating on and drafting the recommendations. The collaborative environment helped build networks and relationships, facilitating the acculturation of conventional civil-society actors, social partners and actors from the private sector to the methods, added value and beliefs underpinning citizen deliberation (Gaborit, 2022).

The dissemination of information, peer-to-peer support, networking, the involvement of stakeholders in the governance committee and advisory boards, and the gradual development of trust between all these different actors over time have been critical and an important success of the convention. All these intangible impacts arise in the long-term, and are hard to grasp, but they are one of the biggest successes of the CCC [Citizens' Climate Convention].



Convention practitioner

Many environmental non-governmental organisations and climate policy experts who have been engaged in the convention, as members of the governance committee or advisory board or as experts or observers, were largely unfamiliar with the practices and principles of deliberative democracy and, in particular, of deliberative mini-publics. However, they played a crucial democratic function in the accountability and credibility of the process. Today, many are actively researching, championing and scrutinising sortition-based forms of citizen engagement across Europe. Another dimension of scaling out is the diffusion of the methods of citizen deliberation per se and the building of capacities of new actors to support the development of the citizen engagement ecosystem in new contexts. The convention highlighted how diverse stakeholder involvement can transform a citizen engagement process into a significant public catalyst that influences broader public discourse and policy.

6.4. Legacy of participatory exercises: replicating and expanding citizen engagement

A commonly overlooked form of impact are 'legacy' impacts – namely when citizen engagement exercises themselves inspire more instances of citizen engagement, thereby creating a ripple effect whereby new processes take place that would not otherwise have existed had it not been for the initial 'flagship' event. In the case of the G1000, for example, the significant visibility it received made it a catalyst for a lively debate on deliberative methods in Belgium, so much so that, 10 years after the assembly, Belgium had become a global frontrunner in the field.



The G1000 citizens assembly inspired many future processes in Belgium, including the 2023 We Need To Talk citizens' assembly on party funding reform.

In the EU, COFE was seen as a catalyst that led to the now regular citizens' panels:

If you're looking at the way citizens' panels are now an accepted way of engaging with citizens, I think that would not have been possible without COFE ... without COFE, I don't think it would have been that easy to have these accepted, also in [the] Commission as an institution, so I think that the panels are part of the legacy, definitely part of the legacy of COFE.

European Commission public servant
No 10, 15 November 2024

Additionally, in many cases, citizens make specific recommendations to increase citizen participation during a citizens' assembly or engagement process itself. COFE, for example, resulted in several recommendations on the working of the EU, such as proposal 36.7, which recommended that the EU initiate the periodic use of citizens' assemblies, which then led to the European citizens' panels.

Even if a citizen engagement process has relatively little tangible policy impact, the effect of organising and holding a citizen engagement exercise not only may inspire others to do the same, but also equips a range of stakeholders and institutions to be able to conduct future events, providing them with the know-how and resources to improve on the processes for next time.

Other public servants saw knock-on effects of citizen engagement exercises when they travelled outside Europe:

We share that experience with other countries, telling them 'involve your citizens'. So in a way, maybe it does have a longer effect. Maybe other countries will take it up ... this idea of involving the citizens in their policymaking, outside of the EU. So, I think we're trying to promote the idea as well.

European Commission public servant
No 4, 21 November 2024



General view of the fourth European Citizens' Panel at COFE in Strasbourg.

7.

TOWARDS AN IMPACT FRAMEWORK: HOW CAN WE ENSURE IMPACTFUL OUTCOMES?

Key

messages

- The consideration of impacts should begin during the design of the participatory process, not when it ends.
- Planning for impacts engages policymakers and process planners around four key elements: (1) commitment, (2) effectiveness, (3) legitimacy and (4) embeddedness.
- The JRC will continue to collect data through its Citizen Engagement Impact Survey to take stock of drivers, achievements and lessons learned from citizen engagement initiatives in the EU.

7.1. Conceptual and practical challenges of impact evaluation

Assessing impacts is complex. Impact pathways may traverse various spheres (policy, institutions and society) at different times and in a non-linear way. There is no established baseline from which a desired impact can be quantified, and multiple causal factors are often at play. For this reason, many of the impacts described earlier in this report cannot be expressed meaningfully in quantitative terms. First, the different designs used – which vary in terms of format, length, size and governance level – and the various political, social and geographical contexts

mean that it is difficult to standardise impact evaluation. Different citizen engagement processes will have different objectives and, hence, different impacts. No two participatory processes are exactly alike, even if they follow the same methodological guidelines and are run by the same team of practitioners. For example, the European citizens' panels are processes that share much of the same methodological approach. However, each contributes to a different policy objective, requiring specific expertise, and they occur at distinct moments, while, in the meantime, contexts, knowledge and institutional awareness are changing. This underlines the importance of resisting generalisation in impact evaluation and highlights the need to differentiate methodologies based on the type of impacts being pursued.

The more straightforward aspects of participatory processes to measure include the demographic representativeness of citizens who participated, the (number of) recommendations that were adopted and/or the number of social media impressions garnered. However, if only the more easily quantifiable indicators are included in impact assessments, there is a risk that critical results are omitted, such as the effect on policy

outcomes, on public discourse and on the wider participatory ecosystem. The reporting of impacts requires deliberate data gathering and synthesis over an extended period of time. However, public administrations may not have the time and resources to do so. Indeed, a lack of, or inconsistent, reporting and transparent evaluation of impacts is commonplace ⁽³⁷⁾. Impact evaluation needs to start by identifying possible barriers to and drivers of impacts during the planning phase and factoring in long-term outcomes.

These conceptual and practical challenges pose a dilemma. On the one hand, a one-size-fits-all approach fails to accommodate the diversity of designs, contexts and objectives of various processes. On the other, **there is a need to develop a coherent understanding of how to plan for impacts**.

7.2. Planning for impacts

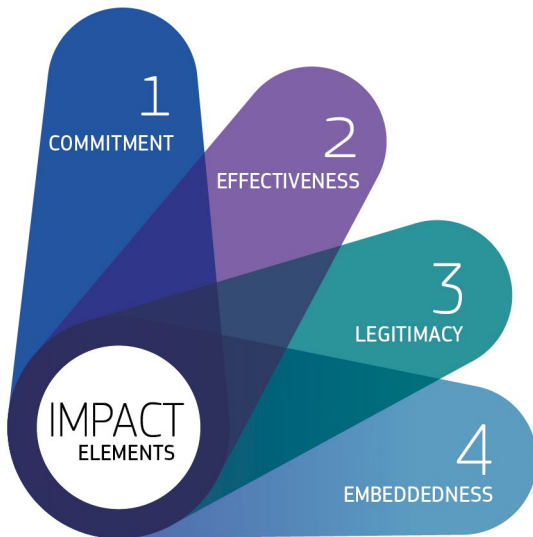
Ensuring that impacts are achieved requires planning. The request for citizen participation should come from the institution that will follow up on the outcomes. The consideration of impacts should be integrated into the planning of the exercise (see, for example, European Commission: Directorate-General for Communication, 2023). This includes ensuring that there is an institutional mandate, that sufficient resources and capacities are available to carry out the process and that there is timely, predictable and adequate follow-up on the outcomes of the process. Thorough impact planning requires clarification of the specific policy need, the process objectives and the feasibility of the exercise's scope.

In terms of **objectives**, the following questions should be considered. What impacts are being sought? What are the expectations of impact of various groups (e.g. citizens, stakeholders, civil society and policymakers)?

- **Topic.** How is the topic being chosen? Who proposed it? Have stakeholders and experts been consulted about the topic choice and framing, and what was the result?
- **Mandate.** What is the mandate and specific policy need(s) for conducting a citizen engagement exercise on this topic now? To which specific policy file(s) is the topic relevant (and under whose responsibilities)? How will those responsible be involved?
- **Feasibility.** What are the potential constraints on implementation (e.g. could parts of the topic contravene existing laws)? In what areas does the topic fit into the governing body's mandate? What political and budget constraints are there? How will citizen recommendations be taken up within the policymaking process?
- **Data collection and reporting.** What data need to be collected to allow analysis of impacts to be undertaken? Who will be responsible for gathering information and reporting on impacts? How will data be gathered? What resources are required? For what purposes will the data be utilised, and what form will they take?

⁽³⁷⁾ The 2025 European Commission Citizen Engagement Impact Survey showed that formal evaluation of citizen engagement processes is not consistently performed across geographies and levels of governance, which is an indication that data gathering and reporting is also unlikely to be consistently applied. Among respondents, 29.5 % confirmed that an evaluation was conducted, while a majority either reported no evaluation (35.2 %) or said that they did not know if an evaluation took place (35.2 %).

The following are the four key elements for organisers to consider when planning for and evaluating impacts:



7.2.1. Commitment

Commitment means not only having the political will and mandate to follow through with the process and its outcomes, but also employing the required resources and capacities. Key capacity considerations include the organisation's expertise in citizen engagement and its administrative capabilities to coordinate across various departments and different groups of experts. Ensuring that there are enough resources for the implementation of policy changes and for a timely and adequate follow-up on citizen proposals is essential, as are resources for communication to raise public awareness about the event. Having an appropriate budget is a critical supporting factor, which affects the scope and ambition of the participatory exercise.

Dedicating an assigned role – an 'impact owner' – to ensuring that impacts are achieved is an important part of commitment. This role would ideally be performed by the politician who commissioned the exercise or a senior official with a mandate to oversee how the process progresses towards predefined impact objectives and who actively

coordinates between the different actors involved in the process to ensure every actor's contribution. The role of an impact owner does not expire with the formal end of the participatory exercise, as they need to continue to observe impacts, act as an advocate and share these results with relevant policymakers, stakeholders and citizens more broadly after the event has concluded. At the Member State level, such a role would be particularly suited to a formalised centre for participatory excellence as a key institutional body overseeing and scaling up impacts from participatory processes to other areas across society and policymaking. Without this type of strategic commitment and action, the impacts of engagement processes may remain obscured, contestable and ultimately lost, while citizens – participants and others alike – grow more distrustful of policymaking and institutions.

7.2.2. Effectiveness

An impactful process needs to be run effectively. However, effectiveness is not only about the use of available resources for the achievement of outcomes, but is also about proactive coordination between the groups involved in organisation and discussing impacts and the uptake of results in policy at the earliest possible stage. This should ideally include preparing for what outputs may be expected and delegating a representative to oversee the progress made towards impacts from the outset. Another important issue is to strike a balance between key stakeholders, to ensure that a wide range of perspectives and experiences are included. Furthermore, effectiveness is about choosing the right timing and about anticipating effects on and from emergent public discourse on the topic.

7.2.3. Legitimacy

The integrity of the governance processes and infrastructure that support a citizen engagement process is critical to the degree of impacts that can be achieved. The backbone of this is the institutional legitimacy of the process, namely whether it is anchored in the policymaking process through a legal

basis or existing governance framework. Another element contributing to legitimacy is the nature of the methods used to select participants and whether the diversity of their views reflects those of the broader public. Furthermore, crucially, as stated above, how the outputs of the exercise are dealt with by representatives and policymakers determines the impacts achieved. Legitimate processes therefore include (1) accountability, to ensure that citizens' views are properly acknowledged and explanations are given as to why they were, or were not, taken up; (2) transparency, in that follow-up is clearly communicated to citizens and citizens know about these processes so that they can make informed judgements about them; and (3) inclusivity, to balance the diversity of voices taken into consideration, especially in the choice of the topic and what impacts are being sought.

7.2.4. Embeddedness

The outcomes of participatory exercises are more likely to have an impact when they are integrated into an existing participatory ecosystem (i.e. they are embedded in a wider democratic process, are bound by a legal basis and are implemented on a routine, rather than an ad hoc, basis). This also includes properly scoping out existing engagement channels or governance contexts to establish the best way to introduce new engagement processes or adapt and support existing processes. Similarly, purposeful collaboration with extended governance networks, civil society and the private sector – including at the local level – are key predictors of lasting impacts.

7.3. Understanding and demonstrating impacts

What impacts can participatory processes have that can be reliably observed, demonstrated and scaled up? One obvious challenge mentioned above is the absence of an established baseline that impact evaluators could use to build a (quantitative) reference framework. Conclusions cannot be

derived in the same way as one would do for a policy intervention, the impacts of which are more straightforward, and assessments cannot be made in purely quantitative terms. Evaluation requires a different approach to gather reliable and usable data from various sources linked to the participatory exercise. An external or in-house evaluator would be well suited to such a role. Streamlining the systematic collection of data and insights would enable the design of more robust impact assessment approaches. Such assessment would demonstrate how the process(es) has/have made a difference, highlighting impact enablers, key actors and specific pathways, while taking stock of the context, policy landscape and purposes of organising a given process. An important element is collecting data from various sources and utilising mixed methods, including surveys of participants, organisers and the wider public, interviews and gathering key metrics (e.g. mentions of public participation exercises in the media). Longitudinal data collection is also necessary, including before and after the event, to establish causality, and also some months or years afterwards to observe long-term impact. The responsibility to ensure adequate and systematic data collection throughout could rest on the impact owner, whose task is to ensure that processes result in meaningful outcomes for policy and for citizens.

The European Commission's ongoing Citizen Engagement Impact Survey aims to track what impacts participatory processes produce across the EU. It asks respondents from local, regional and national administrations who have been actively involved in citizen participation processes to describe the impacts that these processes have had. Data will be reported on an annual basis to observe any trends in participatory process implementation and to collect evidence of impacts directly from process organisers. This survey has been designed to help EU institutions and public administrations in Europe stay informed about what impacts participatory processes deliver and under what circumstances, as well as how their outputs link to democracy and democratic governance.

8.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPACTS SHOULD BE THE STARTING POINT, NOT AN AFTERTHOUGHT

The engagement of citizens in policymaking and decision-making is a cornerstone of democracy and democratic governance. Citizen engagement makes governance systems more inclusive and accountable. Participatory processes have impacts well beyond the processes themselves and well beyond the direct adoption of citizen outputs, such as policy recommendations. Citizen engagement impacts also develop over time. While policy uptake is a key impact indicator, it is essential to recognise the many benefits that these processes offer to the different institutions involved. The roles of practitioners, the design choices they make and the strategies they pursue significantly shape the outcomes and the impacts of citizen engagement. Through greater participant empowerment that shapes public institutional culture, enhances participatory ecosystems and enriches public debates, citizen participation and deliberation contribute to a more resilient democracy.

Impacts are often an afterthought for organisers and bodies commissioning citizen engagement exercises, but they need to be the starting point. The strategic commitment to impacts is crucial if processes are to be consequential, and key conditions help to determine these outcomes: strategic planning for impacts means ascertaining where citizens' insights can be best utilised to strengthen policymaking and choosing a topic that is relevant to both citizens and policymakers.

Achieving impacts requires four interdependent elements: (1) commitment, (2) effectiveness, (3) legitimacy and (4) embeddedness. Conceptual and practical complexities regarding the impact of citizen engagement make its assessment and reporting challenging. The JRC has introduced a permanent survey mechanism that targets public administrations to streamline the collection of relevant data and enhance the tracking of participatory process outcomes and impacts at the EU level. This survey can help with gauging the uptake of Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2836 on citizen participation in Member States.

While the field's understanding of the desired level of impact is still evolving, a priority should be ensuring that citizen engagement exercises have some degree of impact across the dimensions proposed by this study. Therefore, in the governance of each participatory process, the role of the impact owner is important for ensuring that citizen inputs are meaningfully integrated into policymaking and that the impacts that processes have are assessed, recognised and taken stock of. Demonstrable impacts are a driver of trust in participatory and deliberative democracy itself. It is every institution's responsibility, therefore, to prepare for and curate impacts on policy, institutions and society from every participatory process that they commission.

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Annex 1. Methodology for the European Commission Citizen Engagement Impact Survey

The JRC piloted an impact survey from 10 March to 16 May 2025. It was administered via the EUSurvey platform and disseminated through multiple distribution channels (e.g. the OECD, the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy and the European Committee of the Regions) to target public administrations at the local, regional and national levels. The aim of the survey was to understand respondents' perceptions of the impacts of citizen engagement exercises and the factors that influence such impacts (see [Section 7](#) for a discussion of the limitations to impact data gathering and assessment). Data from 105 responses were analysed using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative analysis included several steps, ranging from descriptive statistics and bivariate tests to more advanced inferential methods, such as random forest and logistic regression models. The qualitative analysis included a text analysis of the open-ended questions and a more in-depth analysis of one question related to participants' willingness to repeat citizen engagement exercises in the future.

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