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Empowering Citizens in the Shadow of the European Parliament

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Abstract

In response to the "Brussels bubble" metaphor highlighting the EU's disconnection from its constituents, the EU has adopted the "citizen turn" to enhance citizens' involvement in policy-making. While extensive research examines why political institutions increase citizen participation, this article focuses on the hesitancy to empower citizens at the EU level. Specifically, it explores the European Parliament's (EP) reluctance to systematically connect citizens with members of the European Parliament (MEPs), focusing on political groups' contestation and on ideological and institutional factors beyond Eurosceptic explanations. As the only directly elected EU institution, the EP provides a particularly suitable case for studying this hesitancy. Based on interviews with EP staff, policy advisors, and MEPs, the study identifies three interrelated factors contributing to the reluctance and the deprioritisation of efforts to enhance citizen participation following the 2024 elections. First, changes in the EP's political group composition have reshaped contestation over citizen deliberation, bringing together the European People's Party and far-right groups, thereby breaking the *cordon sanitaire*. Second, the trustee's individual role conception and the socially embedded notion of representative democracy emphasise representatives' mandate to exercise their own judgement and stress the legitimacy and accountability provided by elections, in contrast to randomly selected citizens participating in deliberative processes. Third, structural frustration with the EP's lack of legislative initiative produces a sequencing resembling the logic of trickle-down democracy. Political actors present institutional empowerment as a precondition for making greater citizen participation meaningful and effective, thereby contributing to its ongoing deprioritisation.

Keywords

citizen turn; Conference on the Future of Europe; cordon sanitaire; deliberation; European Parliament; participatory democracy; representative democracy; representative disconnect; trickle-down democracy; trustee role

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1. Introduction

The narrative that Brussels is too far away, and EU institutions and their members live in a "Brussels bubble," detached from ordinary citizens, is used by Eurosceptic political actors to delegitimise the EU. However, unlike other Eurosceptic arguments, the EU's detachment from its citizens is acknowledged by academics as a real concern (e.g., Busby, 2013; Lindellee & Scaramuzzino, 2020). The "Brussels bubble," referring to a "transnational political field with a particular elite habitus" (Busby, 2013, p. 204), manifests in a broader phenomenon also featured in national politics—representative disconnect (Castiglione, 2024). Indeed, citizens feel detached from the representative aspects of politics (Coleman & Moss, 2023). In response to anti-political sentiments among citizens and in order to be more responsive to them, political actors and institutions, including political parties, may establish various participatory mechanisms (such as participatory budgeting, civic juries, and deliberative mini-publics; Spasojević, 2024). At the EU level, participatory initiatives have appeared, termed the "citizen turn" (Kies & Nanz, 2013; Oleart, 2023), with the aim of incorporating citizens into the policy-making process through the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) or through deliberative experiments, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) in 2021. The CoFoE marked the first transnational experiment in deliberative democracy at the EU level, bringing together citizens, EU and national parliamentarians, and other stakeholders to deliberate on the future direction of EU policies. The CoFoE engaged citizens and institutions through four main tools: the Multilingual Digital Platform, national debates, European Citizens' Panels, and the Conference Plenary. Meanwhile, there is comprehensive research studying the motivations to enhance citizens' participation (e.g., Bailly, 2025; Kindermann, 2025); this article shifts attention to the reluctance to give more powers to citizens in the policy-making process at the EU level, in order to address the real or presumed representative disconnect. In particular, this article aims to examine the hesitancy and deprioritisation within the European Parliament (EP) to establish a systematic connection between citizens and representatives, which is a necessary condition for the effectiveness of participatory tools (e.g., Hendriks, 2016; Jäske & Setälä, 2020).

The article's focus on hesitancy and deprioritisation might be surprising to some, as studies treating the EP as a single institution suggest its historical support for increasing citizens' participation in EU decision-making through ECI and deliberative initiatives (Karatzia, 2017; Pittoors & Kotanidis, 2024). In particular, between 2007 and 2013, the EP hosted four "Agoras" (namely "The Future of Europe" in 2007, "Climate Change" in 2008, "The Economic and Financial Crisis and New Forms of Poverty" in 2011, and "Youth Unemployment" in 2013) where civil society organisations had the opportunity to debate particular topics and draw up conclusions for submission to the EU institutions (Corbett et al., 2024, p. 356). Incentives to promote citizens' participation and deliberation intensified during the ninth EP legislative term (2019–2024). In its resolution from 2020, the EP suggested so-called citizens' and even youth Agoras (EP, 2020). Such practices, known as "Citizens' Panels," became a main feature of the CoFoE, inviting citizens to collaboratively deliberate on the future of the EU. The CoFoE's final setup was thus largely shaped by the EP (Pittoors & Kotanidis, 2024). Yet, the EP did not count on the presence of citizens in the CoFoE's plenary, which was originally reserved only for delegates from the EU institutions and "EU-level social partners" (EP, 2020). In the next two resolutions, the EP suggested permanent participatory mechanisms, intended to meet annually to deliberate on the EU's priorities for the year ahead (EP, 2021, 2023). The importance of complementarity between representative and participatory democracy is explicitly emphasised in both resolutions.

However, in contrast to these initiatives, other studies examining the EP from "within" reveal conflicting perspectives and reluctance to enhance citizens' participation stemming from Eurosceptic positions (Kotýnek Krotký, 2025a, 2025b). While The Left challenged the EU's neoliberal dominance within the CoFoE, right-wing Eurosceptic groups, including Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), opposed efforts for deeper EU integration and expressed concerns about the lack of representativeness in the deliberative process (Kotýnek Krotký, 2025b). As the most recent research shows, EU parliamentarians are generally inclined to support citizens' deliberation, but only for consultative purposes, leaving the final decision in the hands of politicians (Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kotýnek Krotký, 2026). Furthermore, the existing literature has focused on parliamentarians' positions before the 2024 elections, without considering how the post-2024 shift in the EP's political group composition towards the right has reshaped partisan dynamics and contestation (Wax et al., 2024). Therefore, the research question is: What institutional and ideological factors, aside from the Eurosceptic beliefs of political actors, lead to hesitancy and deprioritisation of increasing citizens' involvement in EU decision-making within the EP after the 2024 elections?

Based on interviews with EP staff, policy advisors, and members of the European Parliament (MEPs), this article introduces three interrelated factors contributing to the hesitancy and deprioritisation of granting EU citizens greater powers. First, from a party-political perspective, changes in the EP's political group composition have reshaped contestation over citizen participation, with a majority emerging that brings together the European People's Party (EPP) and Eurosceptic and far-right political groups, thereby breaking the so-called *cordon sanitaire*. Second, the individual trustee role conception, emerging alongside the embedded notion of representative democracy, contributes to the hesitation to increase citizen participation. Whilst the former emphasises representatives' mandate to exercise their own judgement, the latter stresses the legitimacy and accountability provided by elections, in contrast to randomly selected citizens participating in deliberative processes. Third, structural frustration with the EP's institutional constraints produces a sequencing that resembles the logic of trickle-down democracy (see Beetz et al., 2025), contributing to the deprioritisation of increased citizen participation. In this context, the absence of a right of legislative initiative is presented as a constraint on effectively linking citizens with MEPs. Interviewees suggest that the EP should first be institutionally strengthened before greater citizen participation can become fully meaningful and effective.

The next section situates the article within the scholarly debate on representative and participatory models, discussing the points of contention and efforts to couple them. It then introduces three interconnected factors that hinder citizen empowerment following the 2024 EP elections. The methodology section restates the research question, presents the interview data, and describes the thematic analysis. Following this, three empirical sections explore the reluctance towards citizen participation driven by these factors. The final section highlights the article's novelty and discusses the findings in relation to the future participatory-deliberative practices.

2. Converging Representative and Participatory Democracy Amid Struggles Over Legitimacy

EU studies have long focused on the so-called democratic deficit (e.g., Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Majone, 1998). As recently explored, the debate on the democratic deficit dates back to the late 1940s (Bailly, 2026a). Until the

1990s, the debate primarily centred on strengthening the EP as the only EU institution directly representing citizens (Magnette, 2006; Rittberger, 2005). During the 1990s, however, this perspective was complemented by broader discussions on the "crisis of representative democracy," which facilitated a gradual convergence of representative and participatory democratic models (Smismans, 2004). Against this backdrop, a "participatory turn" emerged in the EU and gradually became institutionalised as a norm (Saurugger, 2010), reflecting the growing recognition that empowering the EP alone would not be sufficient to remedy the democratic deficit (Magnette, 2006). Initially, this participatory norm was primarily understood as strengthening civil society and enhancing its involvement in EU policy-making processes (Saurugger, 2010; Smismans, 2006).

Participatory democracy was formally enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, most notably in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). However, the Lisbon Treaty went beyond a civil society-centred approach by also acknowledging the participation of "ordinary" citizens through the establishment of the ECI. This shift towards direct citizen involvement has subsequently been described as a "citizen turn" (Kies & Nanz, 2013; Oleart, 2023). The Commission was named as responsible for driving the deliberations through "broad consultations," according to Article 11 TEU (European Union, 2012, Art. 11(3)). Indeed, beyond the ECI, the Commission has sought to promote citizen participation and deliberation through public online consultations ("Have Your Say"), Citizens' Dialogues, and various deliberative experiments (see Fiket, 2023), which remained weakly connected to wider public debate and political contestation (Olsen & Trenz, 2016). The Commission's role in this process stems from its monopoly over legislative initiatives.

Article 11 TEU reminds that all EU institutions "shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action" (European Union, 2012, Art. 11(1)), which applies also to the EP. Yet, citizens' participation through the EP is limited to non-systemic or individual actions by MEPs, such as activities in local constituency offices (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023) and online communication (Daniel et al., 2019; Obholzer & Daniel, 2016). Although the right to petition the EP offers a more systemic form of citizen participation, this tool is even less visible than the ECI (Vogiatzis, 2021). Therefore, existing tools do not address the genuine or perceived disconnect between representatives and their constituencies. Further, the EP has promoted and hosted various deliberative events, as described above, including the most recent and ambitious deliberative initiative, the CoFoE. Although not a permanent tool, the CoFoE was a promising step towards closing the gap between representatives and constituents, as it brought together various actors, including citizens, MEPs, and members of national parliaments (MPs).

Similar attempts to bridge the representative disconnect through deliberation have also emerged at the (sub)national level. Prominent examples include the Irish Convention on the Constitution 2013–2014, a mixed-member deliberative setting composed of an independent chair, 33 Irish politicians, and 66 randomly selected citizens, and the Citizens' Assembly 2016–2018, composed of 99 randomly selected citizens and an independent chair. Some of the recommendations from these assemblies were acted upon through referenda, resulting in major political shifts and social change, including the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the right to abortion. The first permanent citizens' assembly, working in collaboration with the parliament, has been in operation since 2019 in Östbelgie, the German-speaking federal entity of Belgium (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). Other examples include deliberative committees of MPs and elected citizens in the two parliaments of the Brussels-Capital Region and the parliament of the Walloon Region ("Way clear for," 2023), as well as a permanent citizens' assembly on climate in the Brussels-Capital Region (Knowledge

Network on Climate Assemblies, 2022). These initiatives blend citizens' deliberation with the presence of official decision-makers, allowing representatives to engage directly with citizens and aiming to bridge the disconnect between them. However, there is no unified understanding of the purpose of such encounters.

While citizen deliberation is often seen as a consensual way to legitimise the EU, Bailly (2025) argues that it actually reveals power struggles among various EU institutions that do not share the same interests or understanding of what citizen deliberation entails. Bailly's study identifies four distinct conceptions of citizen deliberation at the EU level: the neo-managerial logic, which aims to strengthen the effectiveness of governance; the identity-building logic, as a means of creating a European *demos*; the civic conception, which focuses on strengthening representative democracy; and the instrumental logic, using citizen participation to legitimise other purposes. For instance, EU institutions like the Commission, the European Committee of the Regions, and the EP selectively chose CoFoE recommendations to justify positions they had already adopted before CoFoE (Bailly, 2026b). In the case of the EP, while it hosted the CoFoE and was one of its main supporters, it viewed the CoFoE as a means to reinforce its position and to advocate for amendments to the EU Treaties that would expand its legislative powers or bolster its budgetary authority, although these proposals did not originate from the citizens' panels (Bailly, 2026b; Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kotýnek Krotký, 2025). These suggestions were mainly voiced by the federalist Spinelli Group (Bailly, 2025), an informal, cross-party intergroup of MEPs dedicated to advancing European integration in a federal direction. Such a position corresponds with the civic (strengthening representative democracy) and instrumental (legitimising the EU Treaties reforms) conceptions of citizen deliberation. Scholars also see citizen deliberation as a way to counter the power of member states, prompting action on issues raised by the EP in collaboration with the potential European Citizens' Assembly (Nicolaidis, 2025). Indeed, the ongoing effort to enhance citizens' deliberation is overshadowed by the historical conflicts over increasing legitimacy and institutional authority. The next section specifically discusses three interconnected factors arising from this struggle for power and institutional influence.

3. The Institutional and Ideological Factors Leading to Hesitancy and Deprioritisation of Citizen Deliberation

While EU parliamentarians generally support citizens' participation in deliberation, they tend to hesitate to grant them greater decision-making authority, preferring to retain ultimate decision-making power for politicians (Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kotýnek Krotký, 2026). What are the institutional and ideological factors behind hesitancy and deprioritisation? This article identifies three key institutional and ideological barriers that hinder the use of participatory-deliberative practices at the EU level, in addition to Euroscepticism. These barriers are observed among pro-European actors, particularly the EPP, and within the EP's bureaucracy after the 2024 elections. They include changes in the EP's political group composition and shifting partisan dynamics; the trustees' role and the embedded notion of representative democracy; and frustration with the EP's limited institutional power, resembling trickle-down democracy.

First, although the 2024 election results allowed integrationist groups like EPP, Renew, and Socialists and Democrats (S&D) to form a "super grand" coalition, the EP shifted more to the right. Right-wing and far-right groups, particularly the re-labelled Patriots for Europe (PfE; former ID), became the third-largest political group, and ECR gained seats. Meanwhile, Renew and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) faced significant losses. Despite assurances from EPP chief Manfred Weber that the EPP would not

collaborate with far-right groups (Georgian, 2023), there were occasions when the EPP breached the *cordon sanitaire*. The most notable instance was in September 2024, when the EPP co-signed and approved a resolution on Venezuela's controversial elections alongside ECR and PfE. This right-wing coalition has since been dubbed the "Venezuelan majority" (Wax et al., 2024). As shown in the empirical section below, the alternative right-wing coalition was also created to restrict new deliberative initiatives proposed by MEPs from centre-left groups. Indeed, the traditional left–right divide as a factor explaining the EP's position on participatory-deliberative practices became more prominent in the post-2024 period.

Secondly, the literature on parliamentarians' views on participatory and deliberative practices points to the significance of representatives' perceptions of their role (Junius et al., 2020; Rangoni et al., 2023). Indeed, representatives who see themselves as trustees (believing that representatives should make decisions based on their own judgment) tend to be less supportive of both referendum and deliberative practices than those who act as delegates (believing that representatives should closely follow the preferences of their constituents; Junius et al., 2020). Within a trustee position, representatives view elections as the only legitimate mechanism for ensuring representation and accountability (Rangoni et al., 2023), reflecting what is termed here the embedded notion of representative democracy: a socialised norm. Meanwhile, the trustee role, reflecting confidence in the capacity of representatives to make informed decisions, is an individualistic conception; the embedded notion of representative democracy extends the individual perspective to the institutional level. The empirical data and literature suggest that the trustee role and embedded notion of representative democracy offer another explanation for hesitancy towards participatory-deliberative tools.

Third, from an institutional perspective, MEPs and EP staff are trapped in a trickle-down logic (Beetz et al., 2025), which posits that enhancing EU governance by mirroring national representative democracy will eventually trickle down to the citizens, boosting their support for the EU. Whilst the trustee role mainly fosters hesitation in promoting citizen deliberation, trickle-down democracy acts more as a deprioritisation of citizen involvement, since the EP primarily aims to strengthen itself. Indeed, the EP's historical support for citizen participation was primarily intended to enhance the representative element of EU democracy (Pittoors & Kotanidis, 2024). This factor thus explains the prevalence of the instrumental and civic concepts of citizen deliberation, in which deliberative mini-publics are used for other purposes, such as strengthening the EP.

4. Research Question and Data

Since the arguments for empowering citizens have already been discussed (Bailly, 2025), this research shifts the focus to examining the hesitancy and deprioritisation surrounding citizens' participation within the EP. In particular, it examines the embedded reluctance of actors who are expected to support citizens' participation. If these actors express reluctance or disillusionment for various reasons, including institutional incentives to defend the EP's representative role, future reforms or steps to enhance citizens' participation through the EP may be difficult. Thus, the article poses the following research question: What institutional and ideological factors, aside from the Eurosceptic beliefs of political actors, lead to hesitancy and deprioritisation of increasing citizens' involvement in EU decision-making within the EP after the 2024 elections?

To answer this question, the study mainly draws on interviews with EP staff and policy advisors. A key criterion for selecting the research participants was that they possessed unique insights into the EP's

institutional position and the attitudes of political groups and individual MEPs towards citizen participation ($N = 14$). These research participants represented a diverse ideological-institutional spectrum across the EP, and some were part of the CoFoE preparation, while others followed the CoFoE closely or had citizen participation in their portfolio, working, for example, in the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) or the Committee on Petitions (PETI). Additionally, four interviews with MEPs from the Greens/EFA and EPP were conducted. These MEPs were key actors in the field of citizen participation and were active in, or closely followed, the CoFoE, enabling the mapping of the EP's changing positions between the 9th and 10th terms (see Table 1). The semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2025 and April 2026. All participants signed consent forms to ensure their anonymity, which is why their specific positions are not disclosed. The research received ethical approval from the ethical committee of Masaryk University under the code EKV-2024-050. All EP delegates to the CoFoE were asked for interviews; however, the response rate was very low, a limitation of the research. To triangulate the interview findings, the data corpus also includes communication with the offices of two MEPs from the S&D group, focusing on enhancing citizen participation. Moreover, the EP's resolutions and tabled suggestions on citizen participation were reviewed.

Table 1. Research participants.

Code	Role	Unit (additional information)	Date of interview
S1	EP senior staff	CoFoE Secretariat	23 June 2025
S2	EP senior staff	Research unit	3 July 2025
S3	EP senior staff	Communication and campaign	9 July 2025
S4	Policy advisor (ECR)	ECR secretary	25 August 2025
S5	Policy advisor (Renew)	Committee level	17 September 2025
S6	EP senior staff	CoFoE Secretariat	26 September 2025
S7	Accredited assistant (The Greens/EFA)	Followed the CoFoE	29 September 2025
S8	Policy advisor (The Greens/EFA)	Committee level	3 October 2025
S9	Policy advisor (The Left)	Committee level	13 October 2025
S10	Policy advisor (EPP)	Committee level	4 November 2025
S11	Policy advisor (Renew)	Committee level	21 April 2026
S12	Policy advisor (ECR)	Committee level	21 April 2026
S13	Policy advisor (PfE)	Committee level	22 April 2026
S14	Policy advisor (S&D)	Committee level	28 April 2026
MEP1	The Greens/EFA	Delegate to CoFoE	16 April 2025
MEP2	The Greens/EFA	Delegate to CoFoE	20 November 2025
MEP3	EPP	Followed the CoFoE	26 November 2025
MEP4	EPP	Delegate to CoFoE	21 April 2026

The transcribed interviews went through multiple rounds of open coding in Atlas.ti, utilising the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, the analysis followed a six-phase approach: (a) familiarising with data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes (factors in this case); (d) reviewing factors; (e) defining and naming factors; and (f) producing the report. From this open coding and an abductive connection to the literature review (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024), three broad factors emerged as influencing reluctance to increase citizen participation in EU decision-making within the EP:

(a) the shift in the EP's political group composition and contestation in the 10th EP parliament; (b) individual perceptions of the trustee role, reflecting confidence in representatives' capacity to make informed decisions (Rangoni et al., 2023) and the embedded notion of representative democracy, treating elections as the only acceptable basis for political legitimacy and accountability; and (c) trickle-down democracy logic (Beetz et al., 2025). The following sections interpret the evidence for these three factors, beginning with changes in the EP's political group composition and shifting party-political dynamics, which led to the breaking of the *cordon sanitaire*.

5. Right-Wing Majority and Breaking the *Cordon Sanitaire*

In March 2026, email correspondence was conducted with the office of a prominent S&D MEP who participated in the CoFoE, because the MEP did not have time for an interview. The MEP's office responded to questions about citizens' deliberation, saying, "[The MEP] was part of the CoFoE where citizens engaged in the policy process. The experience from this conference was very positive, showing that it is a good instrument." Further, the MEP was asked to give their perspective on current efforts in the EP on citizen engagement similar to that in the CoFoE. The MEP's office replied, "At the moment, unfortunately, there is no majority in the EP for this, as there is not enough political support." What explains the lack of political support? As many interviews suggest, the limited support for empowering citizens stems from changes in the EP's political group composition (S1, S2, S6, S7, S8, S11, S14, MEP2).

In particular, gathered data show that the breach of the *cordon sanitaire* had implications for citizen participation and deliberation. This can be demonstrated in the most recent votes in the AFCO committee in March 2026. Sandro Gozi (Renew) and Juan Fernando López Aguilar (S&D) proposed suggestions for pilot projects and preparatory actions (PP/PAs). These are EU annual budget tools that enable testing innovative policy ideas and preparing future EU initiatives before a formal legal framework is in place (Mazur, 2024). Sandro Gozi suggested establishing a permanent, horizontal citizens' panel to inform the work of the European Commission, the EP, and the Council of the EU with a commitment of 6,000,000 EUR. This aligns with the EP position outlined in resolutions from the previous legislative term (EP, 2021, 2023). Juan Fernando López Aguilar even proposed "Citizens' Participation in the EU Enlargement Process," inviting EU citizens and participants from candidate countries to discuss topics such as democratic standards, rule of law, institutional reforms for a larger Union, and social and economic convergence, with a commitment of 950,000 EUR. The proposal also noted that the results of citizens' deliberation should be linked to the EP's own-initiative legislative report. Both initiatives are based on the experience from the CoFoE's testing of transnational citizen participation. However, these PP/PAs were rejected by the AFCO committee. Although the voting records are not publicly available, as confirmed in interviews (S11, S14) and email conversations, a right-wing majority comprising EPP, PfE, ECR, and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) rejected both projects.

This was not a one-off, as EP senior staff (S6) argue, since the majority of the AFCO committee has shifted, and the committee no longer drives EU integration as it used to:

> Because the majority now in the AFCO committee is different from what it used to be. The Patriots, the ECR, and the ESN are doing as they do in the whole parliament. They are now professionalising themselves; they're present, they take part in the meetings, and they vote. Ten years ago, Nigel Farage was in the pub on the Place du Luxembourg. He came once a month to make a speech, and then did a

> couple of interviews, and he was in the pub. These guys [Eurosceptics] don't go to the pubs anymore, they are here [in the EP], they are working, they're in the committees, they're doing their job, so it's completely different. So, the AFCO committee is no longer a driver of integration as it used to be, and therefore also not a source of novel ideas. (S6)

According to S6, the change is evident in the shifting behaviour of Eurosceptic actors. The literature (Brack, 2018) identifies four types of Eurosceptic actors, distinguished by their level and logic of participation in EP work: public orator, absentee, pragmatist, and participant. According to S6, previously, Eurosceptic actors, such as Nigel Farage, mainly acted as public orators, engaging only discursively to delegitimise the EU, or as absentees who avoided participation in EU legislation. Currently, Eurosceptic MEPs are increasingly taking on roles as pragmatists or participants, becoming more actively involved in legislative work. Another research participant (S5) highlighted Eurosceptic MEPs' proactive involvement, while also emphasising the shift in the EPP's role, which is typically seen as an integrationist political group:

> I mean, there's now a different potential majority. The [far-]right is no longer fringe. They are active players in the legislative process and have the ability to influence the EPP in a way that they weren't able to before, because the EPP was forced to work with us [Renew] and the S&D group in order to enact policy. And now, of course, they can go either way. They are the kingmakers in their own right and can decide which direction the policy-making goes….Citizen engagement takes the sideline completely, as a result, so it's a sad aspect. (S5)

The EPP is characterised as a "kingmaker" influenced by the rest of the right-wing Eurosceptic groups, putting citizens' empowerment on the "sidelines." The EPP's changing attitudes towards citizen participation were discussed further in the interview with S14, who described it as a "180-degree change":

> [Manfred] Weber was chairing one of the working groups [in the CoFoE, he chaired the Plenary Working Group on European Democracy], and they [EPP] seemed to be supportive back then. And now it's completely changed. I would say 180 degrees. One of the most evident examples for me was indeed when we dealt with the report on the Draghi report. When the rapporteur from our group [S&D] proposed the references to the CoFoE, they even wanted to delete this reference from the citations. And you know, it's a fact. It happened so, we're really on different sides of the barricade here. (S14)

The barricade against increased citizen participation is built around two blocks. On the one hand, traditional integrationist groups such as Greens/EFA, S&D, and Renew continue to advocate for citizen empowerment within the current EP, as stated in the proposed suggestions for PP/PAs. On the other side, right-wing groups oppose these initiatives. The Left's position is not so straightforward. This group overall advocates for stronger tools for citizen engagement, echoing the slogan "the voice of the street," as declared by interviewee S9. However, S9 also admitted that The Left was divided over the CoFoE, with some of its members viewing it as unlikely to bring significant reform to EU institutions. Their stance is often explained by their perceived lack of coherence and criticism of EU neoliberal policies (Kotýnek Krotký, 2025b). In the following sections, the analysis further explores the EPP's stance, which cannot be easily explained by Eurosceptic viewpoints, unlike that of other right-wing groups.

6. The Trustee Role and the Embedded Notion of Representative Democracy

Policy advisors (S4, S12, S13) from Eurosceptic groups (ECR, PfE) confirmed the previous findings regarding their critical stances towards empowering citizens through participatory-deliberative practices, grounded in Eurosceptic attitudes, arguing that these instruments (namely CoFoE) are instrumentalised in order to implement the EU treaty in order to achieve change in a federalist direction (Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kotýnek Krotký, 2025). Even some pro-European MEPs were sceptical of the participatory-deliberative practices as well, perceiving citizens as unqualified and viewing elections as the sole legitimate source of authority (Borońska-Hryniewiecka & Kotýnek Krotký, 2026). As one policy coordinator (S7) revealed, there are "many" MEPs, especially within the EPP, who disagree with the nature of participatory-deliberative practices. Their position reflects their personal ideological views on power distribution in politics, according to which (a) they see themselves as trustees rather than delegates, and (b) consider representative democracy as the only valid democratic model, a view which can be termed the embedded notion of representative democracy. For example, a member of the EPP (MEP3) explicitly supported the traditional trustee model of representation:

> They [citizens] elected representatives, members of the parliament, to represent them, to be their voice, and to adopt legislation on their behalf, and vote on their behalf, so that means the mandate, which is a full and free mandate, basically, *it cannot be replaced*….They [parliamentarians] should be aware of what they are doing, they should be able to contribute, to change the original proposals, and there is an entire democratic process, and that is linked to representative democracy. (MEP3, emphasis added)

According to MEP3, citizens express their preferences through elections and entrust their representatives to represent them. This is a fundamental aspect of representative democracy, which is taken for granted. Representatives see themselves as equipped with special competencies that derive from their engagement in politics, as also mentioned by another EPP member (MEP4): "Politicians in parliament usually work for quite a time in a certain policy field, they have a kind of expertise. They wage and balance. They have common goods in mind." The preferences associated with the trustee role make MEPs less inclined to accept greater citizens' participation in the EU.

The trustee logic was validated by senior staff of the EP (S6), who even argued that among the EPP MEPs, the participatory mechanism of the CoFoE was perceived as a threat to representative democracy:

> But it was one which was strongly felt in the EPP, this concept that we don't need these citizen consultations, we are the citizens, yes, and that this could be perceived as *a threat to representative democracy*. It was a strong feeling, so it was not easy to overcome. (S6, emphasis added)

The connection between the logic of the trustee role and perceived threat was well explained by a policy coordinator from the EPP (S10):

> So, we [EPP] are not very favourable to what was the CoFoE because we think it doesn't work in practice. We think that citizens, once they become public in the sense that they are the ones who have to participate in a certain group, can be targeted very easily by certain parts of the political spectrum. And those people, maybe they don't have that many political tools to protect themselves. It's much

> easier to be influenced than someone like a politician who knows how to stand firm on his position and how to negotiate….But feedback is one thing, and then providing or empowering them [citizens], coming with clear proposals….I think this is another thing. This is a very *dangerous path*, basically. (S10, emphasis added)

Despite the EPP's initial support for the CoFoE (Johansson & Raunio, 2022), the interviews revealed that the EPP was ultimately dissatisfied with its functioning, especially with the role of citizens proposing policy recommendations within the CoFoE. While citizens' feedback was seen as legitimate, their increased involvement in decision-making was considered a "dangerous path" that could weaken informed choices. Moreover, citizens' agency is susceptible to lobbying and external pressures. Conversely, MEPs are regarded as professionals resistant to these influences, reflecting the trustee role.

The perspective of the individual trustee role emerged in connection with the socially embedded notion of representative democracy, which assumes that representative democracy is the best model for gaining legitimacy and accountability. As an EPP member (MEP4) explained, elected representatives can be held accountable through elections, unlike randomly selected citizens:

> You can vote members or vote them out of office. And this makes democracy usually strong, more accepted. And the legitimisation is higher than if you were to choose randomly selected people, citizens in a panel, in whatever. There is no one you can hold accountable after the decision was made. (MEP4)

Representative democracy as a socially and institutionally embedded notion was well described by the EP senior staff (S1, S3). First, the research participant (S3) explained that the EP's self-perception as a "pillar" of representative democracy prevented it from fully engaging with the public through power-sharing democratic innovations:

> The EP clearly sees itself as the main tool of representative democracy on the European level. For that reason, I would say, there is still a little challenge, for example, in convincing committees, various committees, to open up to participatory democracy, in opening up to getting citizens….There is still a certain gap in the way the Parliament sees itself as a pillar of representative democracy and opening up to participatory democracy. Yes, on a voluntary basis, on a non-binding basis, as a tool to exchange information, ideas, positions with citizens, yes, but the structured way of saying, this is part of the, let's say, binding or structural part of the process, that's not where we are yet. (S3)

The research participant acknowledged that the EP and its members were only open to using participatory-deliberative tools to exchange ideas. Making participation legally binding was seen as a "dangerous path," as previously discussed, because it could undermine the core principles of representative democracy. A similar view appeared in another interview with a senior EP staff member (S1), who responded to the challenges of empowering citizens:

> Well, I think it's a mandate, especially the mandate of the EP being a co-legislator. And this legislative work should be the main focus for the MEPs. So this is the main cause….As enshrined in the treaties, the EP is a representative democracy, right? And any other measures that could serve as complementary are more than welcome. But still, the EP should be concentrating on legislative work for citizens. (S1)

In other words, although the EP and its members generally welcome any measures that complement the EP's representative functions, the EP should focus on its legislative mandate. Engaging with citizens through participatory-deliberative tools and promoting their use does not necessarily fall within the EP function, according to the interviews. Expanding citizens' roles and granting them greater decision-making powers, and coupling participatory democracy with representative democracy as the literature suggests (e.g., Hendriks, 2016; Jäske & Setälä, 2020), remain unthinkable at this stage, despite the growing practice of such coupling at the local and national levels. This is due to the ingrained notion of representative democracy, complemented by the logic of trickle-down democracy, as elaborated in the final empirical section.

7. Trickle-Down Democracy

Trickle-down democracy posits that enhancing EU governance by mirroring domestic representative democracy will gradually impact ordinary citizens and boost support for the EU (Beetz et al., 2025). Trickle-down democracy is related to but distinct from the trustee role and the embedded notion of representative democracy for at least two reasons. First, trickle-down democracy has historically been encouraged by inter-institutional power dynamics aimed at strengthening the EP's powers. Second, while the trustee role primarily encourages hesitation in promoting citizen deliberation, trickle-down democracy prioritises empowering the EP first.

Although the interviews centred on attitudes towards participatory democracy at the EU level, various participants (S5, MEP1, MEP2, MEP3) referred to conditions that some authors have labelled as trickle-down democracy (Beetz et al., 2025). They notably highlighted the significance of the absence of legislative initiative—unlike in national parliaments—which limited their ability to fully empower citizens' participation. An EPP member (MEP3) even argued that, as a result, the EP was not "a real parliament":

> Also, here in the parliament, if we were a real parliament, which the EP is not, but in the national parliament, even one MP can start legislation, and it can become a law. Of course, his opinion is only for himself and for his voters maybe, but it can lead to legislation because the legal requirements are fulfilled. (MEP3)

MEP3 lamented that the EP's representative function was limited because it could not propose legislation. Empowering legislative initiative and the expansion of the EP's role are especially important for linking MEPs with citizens through participatory-deliberative practices, as highlighted by a policy advisor from Renew (S5):

> We are a reactive body politic. We can only react to what is proposed to us by the Commission, and as such, we are left [from the agenda-setting phase], you know, and it's incredibly frustrating….We say we're going to bring your [citizens'] perspectives forth, as much as possible, but in the end, we can't because, you know, we're hindered by the fact that we don't have the power to propose legislation on our own. (S5)

A policy advisor stated that enhancing citizen participation could create false expectations among citizens, since the EP cannot introduce legislation. Likewise, the Greens/EFA (MEP1) claimed that MEPs, as citizens, were in a similarly limited position to initiate legislation, thereby minimising their role. Another Greens/EFA member (MEP2) even asserted that without legislative initiative, the EP is unable to strengthen citizen participation:

"I mean with the caveat that we don't have the right of initiative, so even if we really want to increase citizen participation, we can't, really, because we don't have the right to initiative." However, as discussed above, the EP in the past supported and hosted deliberative events, despite lacking legislative initiative.

These accounts should not, however, be understood as evidence that the interviewees explicitly endorsed trickle-down democracy as a normative ideal (cf. Beetz et al., 2025). The interviews primarily expressed frustration with a structural constraint. Nevertheless, this structural frustration produces a sequencing that resembles the logic of trickle-down democracy. Institutional empowerment is presented as something that must occur first, before further citizen empowerment can become meaningful or effective. This distinction is particularly important because the absence of legislative initiative does not in itself prevent the EP from promoting deliberative participation. In this sense, the interviews reveal not necessarily an active normative belief that institutional strengthening will automatically "trickle down" to citizens, but a structural frustration that reproduces a trickle-down logic in practice and leads to deprioritisation of citizen participation.

8. Conclusion

To bridge the representative disconnect, some national and regional parliaments enhance participatory-deliberative practices to systematically involve citizens in decision-making processes. Similarly, EU institutions and scholars, through initiatives such as the CoFoE and a prototype of a permanent European Citizens' Assembly, have sought to challenge the real or apparent "Brussels bubble" (Nicolaidis, 2025). The current article investigated possible reluctance to increase citizen participation through these deliberative practices and to integrate them into the EP's work. As scholars emphasise (e.g., Hendriks, 2016; Jäske & Setälä, 2020), to fulfil demands for, and sustain the effectiveness of, participatory democracy, it is essential to couple participatory practices with the broader institutional design of the decision-making process. This study built upon recent studies of citizen participation in the EU, especially through the CoFoE, and explored how institutional and ideological factors can lead to hesitancy and a lower priority for increasing citizen involvement in EU politics. To explore these factors, EP staff and MEPs focused on citizen participation were interviewed. The concerns they expressed may be spread across political groups, hindering reforms to establish a systematic link between citizens and MEPs.

This research is particularly novel in three aspects. First, it examined the EP's role in the post-2024 period, illustrating how shifts in the balance of power among political groups reshaped contestation over citizen deliberation within the EP. It observed that the *cordon sanitaire* was breached when the EPP voted alongside Eurosceptic MEPs from the ECR, PfE, and ESN against proposals for transnational deliberative PP/PAs tabled by S&D and Renew MEPs. Breaking the *cordon sanitaire* was also possible because Eurosceptic actors were seen as more active and aiming to influence EU policy, compared with Eurosceptic actors in previous periods, who were often absent or used the EP forum as a discursive space to delegitimise the EU (see Brack, 2018). This is an important finding to probe in regard to other policy areas.

Second, previous research linked this reluctance primarily to attitudes towards the EU, noting that Eurosceptic MEPs viewed citizen participation as manipulation and a step towards EU federalisation (see Kotýnek Krotký, 2025a, 2025b). This article demonstrates that such hesitancy also stems from a preference for the trustee role and an embedded notion of representative democracy. Whilst the former emphasises representatives' independent judgement and political expertise, the latter takes elections as the best means

for achieving legitimacy and accountability. These views were also detected among integrationist EPP MEPs, suggesting that scepticism towards citizen deliberation cannot be explained solely by Euroscepticism. Moreover, the embedded notion of representative democracy extends the understanding of the position of individual MEPs to a broader institutional perception. This sedimented perception is why the EP and its political actors argued that the EP should focus on legislative work, without extensive citizen engagement.

Third, the findings identified a mechanism through which structural frustration can reproduce a logic of trickle-down democracy (see Beetz et al., 2025). The absence of a general right of legislative initiative leads MEPs to sequence institutional and citizen empowerment: The EP must first acquire powers comparable to those of national parliaments before greater citizen participation can become fully meaningful or effective. This perceived structural constraint thereby contributed to the deprioritisation of participatory and deliberative reforms, even though the EP has previously supported such initiatives whilst lacking legislative initiative.

Indeed, this research found an interesting paradox: Despite the EP's historical efforts to support citizens' participation, its post-2024 hesitancy to grant citizens greater powers was evident and not limited to Eurosceptic actors. Nonetheless, some interviewees concurred that involving citizens through non-binding consultation could enrich the EU's representative democracy. This method signifies a gradual reform, making it the most practical choice. However, it also risks frustrating participants if their ideas and suggestions are not effectively considered in such a non-binding consultation process (Muradova & Suiter, 2022). Furthermore, it is crucial to view citizens as valuable partners in politics if the participatory-deliberative forms are to play a meaningful role. Some interviewees saw citizen agency as vulnerable to lobbying and external pressures, a view which undermines the sense of such interfaces and also the trust between representatives and their constituencies.

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