



RETOOL

Strengthening Democratic
Governance For Climate Transitions

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Improving public participation for climate action and resilient democracy in the European Union

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Key Issues

- Meaningful public participation is a powerful means to strengthen climate action and democratic governance as it fosters policy effectiveness, legitimacy, and public support for policymaking. Current turbulent political times underscore the need to harness the full potential of public participation.
- A wide range of mechanisms for public participation in EU decision-making exist at both the EU and Member-State levels. However, these mechanisms are characterised by important gaps and shortcomings, undermining their potential to provide meaningful and high-quality public participation.
- The identified mechanisms face key challenges including imbalanced participation, implementation gaps, limited impact and transparency, low public visibility, and lack of deliberative spaces across governance levels.
- We propose seven pragmatic action points to improve the quality and impact of public participation mechanisms for EU climate governance. These are aligned with the European Commission's strategic priorities, particularly the goal of strengthening democracy.

Why public participation matters

Meaningful and high-quality public participation in climate policymaking promises a two-fold reward: it can strengthen democracy and increase public support for robust climate action.¹ These outcomes are achieved through increased transparency, enhanced trust in democratic processes, heightened legitimacy of policy decisions and processes, and reduced political polarisation.^{2,3} As the EU advances its green transition policies, increasingly directly affecting citizens' daily lives, meaningful public participation is critical to ensure climate action that is effective, legitimate, fair and broadly supported by society.

The European Commission has highlighted the strengthening of public participation in EU decision-making as part of its strategic priority to improve overall democratic governance.⁴ To do so, the Commission is planning to enhance existing mechanisms and introduce new ones, including annual *Youth Policy Dialogues* and a *Youth Advisory Board*. In any case, public participation mechanisms should follow established good practices to ensure inclusive engagement of citizens and stakeholders, and to foster

meaningful discussion and deliberation. Only high-quality public participation can maximise benefits for democracy and climate action and contribute meaningfully to the Commission's goals of simplification and effective implementation.

WHAT IS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION?

We define public participation in decision-making as any process that involves the public (encompassing citizens, stakeholders and civil society) in decision-making throughout the policy cycle, from policy formation to implementation and evaluation. Involvement can take various forms, ranging from providing input to engaging in discussions and deliberation, with deliberation considered to be of particular added value. Depending on the context, meaningful participation may require greater involvement from either stakeholders or citizens. While stakeholder participation is often more organised and structured, the participation of citizens specifically holds benefits for bringing locally grounded knowledge into the discussion and fostering public interest, support and the legitimacy of policy decisions.

The state of public participation in EU decision-making

We assessed the quality of ten participation mechanisms of general EU governance and five mechanisms of EU climate and environmental governance (see Table 1).⁵ Our assessment considered key aspects drawn from the 1998 Aarhus Convention,⁶ human rights law, and academic literature, including who is entitled to participate, the mode of participation, the level of institutionalisation, transparency, accountability of decision-makers, and impact on decision-making. The study shows that a wide variety of public participation mechanisms for EU decision-making operate at both EU and Member-State

levels, highlighting significant variation across the analysed criteria. Overall, these mechanisms display critical gaps and shortcomings. Four key findings stand out.

First, few identified EU public participation mechanisms can be initiated by citizens or stakeholders. Mechanisms such as the *European Citizens' Initiative* and the *Right to Petition the European Parliament* allow citizens and stakeholders to raise issues, but not to engage in discussion or deliberation. The *European Citizens' Initiative* is the only mechanism that allows citizens to independently put an issue on the policy agenda. The recently introduced *Strategic Dialogues*, where the Commission invites

Table 1: Overview of public participation mechanisms in EU decision-making

	MECHANISM	PARTICIPANTS	MODE	INSTITUTIONALISATION	TRANSPARENCY	ACCOUNTABILITY	IMPACT
EU LEVEL	Strategic Dialogues	Stakeholders	Varying	-	-	-	-
	European Citizens' Panels	Citizens	Discussion & deliberation	-	+	+/-	+/-
	COM public consultations	Citizens & stakeholders	Input & some discussion	+/-	+/-	+/-	+/-
	COM Expert Groups	Stakeholders	Input & discussion	+/-	-	-	+
	COM complaint procedure	Citizens & stakeholders	Input	+/-	+	+	+/-
	Bilateral meetings	Stakeholders	Varying	-	+/-	-	?
	European Citizens' Initiative	Citizens	Input	+	+	+	-
	Ombudsman	Citizens & stakeholders	Input	+	+	+	+
	Right to Petition	Citizens & stakeholders	Input	+	+	+	-
	EESC (& CoR)	Citizens & stakeholders	Input	+	+	-	-
MEMBER STATE LEVEL	Roadmaps & dialogues	Stakeholders	Discussion & deliberation	-	-	-	-
	NECPs & LTSs	Citizens & stakeholders	Varying	+/-	~	~	~
	Multilevel Dialogues	Citizens & stakeholders	Varying	+/-	~	~	~
	Social Climate Plans	Stakeholders	Varying	+/-	~	~	~
	EIA & SEA Directives	Citizens & stakeholders	Discussion & deliberation	+/-	~	~	~

Note: *Right to Petition the European Parliament* can address the EU and Member-State levels. All Member State-level mechanisms plus *Roadmaps & Dialogues* are specific to climate governance. The sign ~ denotes variance across Member States. For further details, see the full study (Oberthür et al., 2025)⁵.

selected stakeholders, enable participants to contribute to agenda setting. However, this agenda is largely predetermined by the Commission's framing and limited to the invited stakeholders.

Second, at both EU and Member-State levels, mechanisms privilege private economic stakeholders over citizens and civil society groups. General EU-level participation mechanisms involving citizens structured to request their input but provide limited space for them to engage in discussion or deliberation with policymakers. Furthermore, both EU-level and Member State-level deliberative mechanisms prioritise stakeholder involvement over citizens engagement. Overall, participation mechanisms tend to reinforce existing power or financial imbalances, favouring private economic interests over public-interest groups.

Third, transparency, accountability and impact on decision-making – key aspects of meaningful participation – vary widely across participation mechanisms at EU and Member-State levels. EU-level mechanisms score higher on transparency, compared to mechanisms in Member States, with some notable exceptions, such as the *Strategic Dialogues* and the *Commission expert groups*. Scores are even lower on accountability, but the actual impact on decision-making is the biggest problem across both EU and Member-State levels. Even mechanisms that score relatively high on transparency and accountability rate poorly on impact.

Finally, we find that EU participation mechanisms that are institutionalised (i.e., established in the European Treaties and/or other legal instruments) are more likely to score higher on transparency, accountability and impact than those with a lower degree of institutionalisation (e.g., *Strategic Dialogues*).

[1] There is a considerable **imbalance in representation**. Participation tends to favour private economic interests, leaving public-interest civil society organisations and citizens underrepresented.

[2] There are gaps in the **implementation of participation standards**. Turning standards into practice remains a challenge, and this appears particularly true at Member-State level.^{vii,viii}

[3] There is **limited impact, accountability and transparency**. Many mechanisms struggle to meaningfully shape decision-making and often lack transparency and accountability, especially newer mechanisms with weak institutionalisation (e.g. *Strategic Dialogues*).

[4] There is **low public visibility of participation mechanisms**. Most mechanisms are poorly known to the public, which severely limits the possibility for broader engagement.

[5] Existing mechanisms **lack spaces for deliberation**. Opportunities for discussion, deliberation and joint problem-solving are scarce. The EU has yet to effectively promote more deliberative formats like citizens' assemblies across Member States.

An agenda for action to improve public participation

The two-fold promise of strengthened democracy and effective, legitimate and fair climate action can be realised by acting now to improve public participation in decision-making in the EU. To that end, we propose an agenda comprising seven action points, supporting the strategic priorities of the European Commission. Implementing the proposed agenda for action is a means to strengthen public participation that does not require new legislation. It can be pursued through already planned initiatives, including the European Democracy Shield (2025), the EU Civil Society Strategy (2025), the forthcoming review of Commission expert groups, the planned revision of the 2018 Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action ("Governance Regulation") (2026), and in the context of the consideration of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (beginning in 2025).

- [1] **Set robust EU-wide participation standards:** The EU should define robust, EU-wide best-practice standards for public participation to improve the quality and consistency of existing and emerging mechanisms. These standards should promote balanced representation, transparency, and impactful engagement of both stakeholders and citizens depending on whose input is relevant (see Box 1). Standards should be embedded into the Commission's Better Regulation framework and revisions to the Governance Regulation and/or the European Climate Law.
- [2] **Promote national deliberative mechanisms:** The EU should introduce best-practice standards for deliberative processes of citizen engagement, such as mini-publics /citizens' assemblies at national and subnational levels, into the revised Governance Regulation. The Commission should support implementation and capacity building to enhance public engagement in climate policy-making and help embed it in the democratic process.
- [3] **Empower and support civil society participation:** The EU should ensure balanced representation and participation by civil society across participation mechanisms. This means ensuring there are adequate resources for public-interest and marginalised groups to engage effectively with these mechanisms.
- [4] **Mainstream participation in national climate governance:** The EU should facilitate Member-State efforts to systematise and streamline meaningful public participation into national *climate* governance. This requires defining best-practice standards in the Governance Regulation, in line with the Aarhus Convention, including for National Energy and Climate Plans, Long-Term Strategies, and Multilevel Energy and Climate Dialogues. The Commission should support best practices and capacity building to foster public authorities' ownership of meaningful public participation and its outcomes.
- [5] **Improve the quality of existing EU participation mechanisms:** Improvements are especially required to strengthen transparency, balance participation, and ensure integration into decisionmaking. More space for discussion and deliberation is needed in these mechanisms.
- [6] **Increase visibility and public awareness:** The EU should develop a dedicated communication and education strategy to raise visibility and awareness of existing participation mechanisms. Participation can also be enhanced through facilitating access, including by developing a single, multi-lingual central website for all participation channels.
- [7] **Foster debate on public participation:** Public participation should be a subject for debate and review, as part of healthy and inclusive democratic and governance processes, to improve public participation over time. More thorough reviews of public participation in the EU, including public consultations, should be initiated on a regular basis, at least every five years.

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