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To cite this article: Alvaro Oleart (2023): The political construction of the 'citizen turn' in the EU: disintermediation and depoliticisation in the Conference on the Future of Europe, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14782804.2023.2177837](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2177837)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2177837>



Published online: 14 Feb 2023.



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The political construction of the 'citizen turn' in the EU: disintermediation and depoliticisation in the Conference on the Future of Europe

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ABSTRACT

The EU has recently organised a series of 'citizen-centred' processes that may be indicative of a new pattern in terms of democracy and participation. The article begins with this observation in order to pose the following question: *to what extent the introduction of 'citizen participation' mechanisms in the Conference on the Future of Europe reflects a rupture with the EU's dominant understanding of democracy?* While there are innovative elements in the Conference, which are described in detail, the article develops a normative critique of the underlying philosophy with which it was organised and constructed, as it followed an alternative legitimacy logic that fundamentally deviates from an agonistic public sphere perspective. The Conference illustrates a 'citizen turn' that breaks away from the 'participatory turn' described by Saurugger (2010) in that it decouples 'citizen participation' from civil society and the idea of a European public sphere, both in discursive terms as well as in the ensuing political practices. The article concludes with a wider conceptualisation of what the 'citizen turn' means for EU democracy, and why the disintermediation of European politics is coherent with the preexistent depoliticised EU political dynamics, conceived in the case of the Conference as 'democracy without politics'.

KEYWORDS

Depoliticisation; European public sphere; Conference on the future of Europe; citizen participation; European Union; civil society

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the lack of popular participation in the European project and the normative questions in terms of the democratic legitimacy that arise from it (e.g. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2007). In response to it, the EU developed since the early 2000s an important emphasis on the participation of citizens, civil society and the construction of a European public sphere, which initially is conceived as part of the same process. The 'participatory turn' of the EU conceptualised by Saurugger (2010) emphasised the existing gap between EU institutions and European citizens, and attempted to bridge it by encouraging debate through the participation of European 'civil society' actors. The 'participatory turn' initially focused on the emergence of European civil society actors, many of which became institutionalised and professionalised lobby organisations based in Brussels. EU institutions thus saw civil society actors as a sort of mediators between EU institutions and citizens, being an important bridge between them as intermediary organisations that contribute to expand the debate beyond the *Brussels bubble* and the emergence of a European public sphere, while also shaping EU policies.

Recently, however, the EU has innovated through diverse processes that aim to construct a more 'direct' relation between EU institutions and EU citizens, such as the citizen dialogues, the European Citizen Consultations (ECCs) and especially the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The article begins with the observation that these processes may be indicative of a new 'citizen-centred' pattern, and poses the following research question: *to what extent the introduction of 'citizen participation' mechanisms in the Conference on the Future of Europe reflects a rupture with the EU's dominant understanding of democracy?* The article argues that, far from shaping the traditionally depoliticised dynamics of the EU, these 'citizen-centred' processes reflect, with some nuances, more continuity than change.

After this introduction, the article develops a theoretical framework of agonistic democracy and the public sphere in the EU that will later serve as a normative benchmark. Third, the article describes where the CoFoE comes from, and describes the way in which it took place. Fourth, the article develops a normative critique of the CoFoE on the basis of the framework developed in the second section. It mainly argues that the CoFoE was developed from a disintermediated and depoliticised viewpoint rather than from an agonistic public sphere perspective, and thus failed to establish a micro-macro link. Finally, the conclusion reflects upon what the 'citizen turn' means for EU democracy, and why the disintermediation of European politics is coherent with the preexistent depoliticised EU political dynamics, as well as outlining possible alternatives to integrate democratic innovations in such a way that they contribute to foster an agonistic public sphere.

2. Depoliticised democracy in the EU vs the agonistic public sphere

The emergence of 'participatory democracy' as a 'norm' throughout the 1990s and the 2000s in the EU (Saurugger 2010) influenced not only the mainstream narratives of 'participation' in the EU but also its practices. Whereas the EU's initial architecture was a corporatist one, throughout the 2000s a neopluralist arrangement became increasingly dominant, and a set of Brussels-based network of European civil society actors were established and developed (see García Guitián and Bouza in this special issue).

However, this process has not necessarily facilitated the linkage between national and EU politics nor with 'citizens', since these civil society actors adapted and professionalised to the rather technical and depoliticised EU policy-making process. The mainstream vision of 'participation' at the EU level has been oriented towards technical expertise rather than mass politics, following a consensus-oriented understanding of democratic legitimacy (Crespy 2014; Sternberg 2016). The strong technocratic role of the Brussels-based organisations has meant that European civil society has mostly contributed to reinforce the 'field of Eurocracy' (Georgakakis and Rowell 2013) rather than expanding European debates onto national ones (Bouza and Oleart 2018). The generally technical and depoliticised dynamics of European politics explains why Vivien Schmidt defined EU policy-making as 'policy without politics' (Schmidt 2013), in contrast to 'politics without policy' at the national level.

Burnham (2001, 128) portrayed depoliticisation as a process by which political decisions are presented as if they are unquestionable, removing 'the political character of decision-making'. Depoliticisation entails framing the political spaces where such political decisions are made as if they were 'neutral' and thus there are no trade-offs. By contrast, politicisation is here defined as 'making collectively binding decisions a matter and/or object of public discussion' (Zürn, Binder, and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012, 74). One mechanism to depoliticise a policy arena is to exclude 'groups which are likely to disagree with the established policy agenda from the policy-making process' (Smith, 1991, 236). This is what tends to happen in the complex EU policy-making process, where a system of 'elite pluralism' (Eising 2009) among strongly institutionalised actors (Greenwood 2011) is in place. The depoliticisation of the EU policy-making process is based on structurally excluding contentious actors, which encourages a highly technical (as opposed to 'politicised') process where actors tend to adapt to the European Commission's framing of issues (Klüver, Mahoney, and Oppen 2015; Kohler-Koch 2010).

2.1. *The match between EU depoliticisation and the antipolitical imaginary in sortition-based deliberative democracy*

This depoliticised understanding of democracy that remains dominant in the EU, characterised by what has been defined as ‘democracy without politics’ (Oleart and Theuns 2022), can be a good match to some experimental approaches to deliberative democracy (see also Cohen and Sabel 1997), particularly those focused on minipublics. James Fishkin (2009), one of the most influential academic-practitioners in the field of deliberative democracy in minipublics, popularised a version of it characterised by a strong sense of depoliticisation through the random selection of a ‘descriptively representative’ group of citizens that deliberate in a bubble-like setting with a tightly controlled ‘external’ input. In this way, deliberative democracy is not viewed from a public sphere systemic perspective, but the public sphere can instead be replaced by small spaces in which ‘ordinary citizens’ randomly selected that are meant to be broadly representative of ‘the people’ are encouraged to deliberate.

Recently, Abbas and Sintomer proposed a helpful typology of political imaginaries upon which sortition-based deliberative democracy exercises may be constructed. One of the imaginaries is that of ‘antipolitical democracy’, which ‘reivindicates the power of the people free from political elites and consequently from domination and conflict’ (Abbas and Sintomer 2021, 40), and that ‘blends easily with a managerial imagination’ (Abbas and Sintomer 2021, 52). In its antipolitical version, deliberative democracy in minipublics tends to have an outright rejection of intermediary actors (mainly political parties) as they are seen as an obstacle for ‘the people’ to reach a consensus on what the ‘general interest’ is, and citizen assemblies offer a ‘neutral’ space where such ‘polarisation’ is avoided.

The traditionally depoliticised understanding of democracy in the EU, as well as the antipolitical imaginary, is fundamentally opposed to an agonistic public sphere approach to democracy. As Chantal Mouffe has long argued, the

[b]elief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track. Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly ‘impartial’ procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted (Mouffe 2005, 3).

The agonistic perspective, however, aligns rather well with the ‘systemic turn’ of the deliberative democracy literature, currently more focused on ‘deliberative systems’ (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012) than on the specific procedures and methods that improve deliberation within minipublics. It is therefore not evident from this perspective that sortition-based minipublics actually have the potential to ‘democratise democracy’ (Talpin 2019). Applied to the EU context, a positive systemic deliberative turn and agonistic democracy would be encouraged through the Europeanisation of public spheres via conflict (e.g. Oleart 2021), taking into account activist civil society (Kutay 2012), and bringing EU debates beyond the ‘Brussels bubble’, which implies a move away from the EU’s depoliticised policy-making and conception of democracy.

This process of Europeanisation of politics from an agonistic perspective requires the mediation of intermediary actors, including the media, social movements, trade unions, civil society or political parties from both the transnational and national levels. In this way, the Europeanisation of politics involves an interaction between the national and the EU level, encouraging both horizontal connections (e.g. between Italian and German trade unions or political parties) as well as vertical ones (e.g. between national and EU-level trade unions). Mediation in the EU plays a double role: first, mediator organisations ought to be a space of political socialisation with EU politics, an open door for actors not previously socialised with EU politics; second, they ought to channel that energy vis-à-vis EU institutions. Intermediary actors are essential for the socialisation of citizens with institutions, and are key to structure political conflict in the public sphere.

To be sure, considering that public spheres in the EU remain nationally anchored (Koopmans and Statham 2010), currently EU-level civil society organisations, as well as Europarties, are not structured

in a way that facilitates the fostering of agonistic dynamics, as there are only a few actors that are able to operate as ‘multi-positional actors’ (Oleart and Bouza 2018). Even though the existing political architecture of the EU does not encourage actors to prioritise European issues in the national public spheres (see Pittoors and Gheyle 2022), that is what an agonistic perspective ought to strive for. In this sense, arguably this process of mediation is central for the democratisation of European politics insofar the political and democratic empowerment of vulnerable social groups at the transnational level requires intermediation through collective organisation. It is difficult to imagine that a factory worker or a refugee fleeing from war as an individual citizen can have as much political weight as a banker that has the relational, cultural, economic, political and symbolic capital to participate and shape EU politics. This is why collective actors such as trade unions, political parties or civil society organisations, both at the national and EU level, ought to play a meaningful role as mediators, who should constitute the infrastructure of an eventually deliberative, agonistic and democratic European public sphere.

3. The Conference on the Future of Europe

The article is not meant as a primarily empirical contribution, but rather a conceptual critique of the underlying philosophy with which the CoFoE was designed and constructed. For that purpose, however, it is necessary to describe how the CoFoE took place. This section begins with its origins, and goes on to describe the way in which it was organised. The section thus includes purely factual information with observations made throughout the CoFoE, semi-structured interviews and an analysis of the official CoFoE reports, mainly the final CoFoE report and the multilingual digital platform report. I observed first hand the three sessions of the European citizen panel 2 (EU democracy, values, rights, rule of law and security) and panel 4 (EU in the world and migration), which took place in Strasbourg, online, Florence and Maastricht, as well as all the CoFoE plenary sessions in Strasbourg (mostly online, but also in-person the session on 25–26 March 2022), and conducted semi-structured interviews with randomly selected participants of the panels, organisers of the citizen panels, members of the CoFoE Secretariat, moderators of the panels, and parliamentarians and civil society actors participating in the CoFoE plenary sessions. The description detailed below is largely based on the interaction between secondary literature, a document analysis, the semi-structured interviews and my own observations throughout the Conference.

3.1. *Where does the CoFoE come from? The citizen dialogues and the European Citizen Consultations*

While there were earlier attempts to build this ‘direct’ relation between EU institutions and EU citizens, such as with the establishment of the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) (that, however, requires the engagement of strong organisations; see Bouza Garcia 2015), the idea of involving citizens directly was picked up by the European Commission as early as 2012, when the Commission developed the ‘citizen dialogues’. The ‘citizen dialogues’ are ‘town-hall style events’ (see Hierlemann et al. 2022) that were developed ahead of the 2013 ‘European Year of the Citizens’, which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty.

The citizen dialogues mostly consist in a questions and answers format in different cities across the EU, with at least one representative from the European Commission (e.g. a Commissioner or Head of the Commission representation in the member state in question). They progressively evolved from a small-scale communication exercise during the last years of the Barroso Commission towards becoming a permanent feature of the Commission’s outreach work with a substantial increase of events during Juncker’s term (Hierlemann et al. 2022, 151). They were further developed towards a more general discussion about the future of Europe, getting citizens’ ideas about what the priorities in the future should be. The citizens’ dialogues in this way ideationally facilitated the organisation of the European Citizen Consultations (ECCs).¹ However, while the citizen

dialogues remain active and ongoing, the ECCs were a one-off exercise in which a number of events across the EU were organised by member states and put together in a common framework.

Shortly after being elected President of France in May 2017, Emmanuel Macron gave a speech on the Future of Europe at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017, in which he called for involving citizens in the debate about the future of Europe. Macron's proposal was followed up by the ECCs, carried out throughout 2018. In this way, there is a dialectic between the evolution of participatory democracy at the level of member states and at the EU level. With an important influence of Ireland's experiences with citizens' assemblies (Farrell, Suiter, and Harris 2019), and Macron's push also at the national level to respond to the yellow vests movement (Ehs and Mokre 2021), the ECCs were part of a wider trend towards 'listening to citizens directly' without intermediaries – even though, as the article argues later, this implies primarily a replacement by other intermediaries.

The ECCs were conceived as an innovation in comparison to previous exercises at the EU level, providing a space in which citizens could participate in European democracy and the future of European integration. Unlike the citizen dialogues and public consultations carried out by the European Commission, the ECCs were organised by the member states in partnership with national and local organisations, with the idea that the results of the ECCs would be reported to the European Council. While this represented a novelty, member states were given wide flexibility in terms of how they were carried out, and in consequence they followed very different procedures (Stratulat and Butcher 2018). The lack of common processes and concrete goals made the consultations mainly a symbolic mechanism, and its biggest innovation was to situate on the national agenda the future of Europe debate (Butcher and Pronckutė 2019), and to do so in a disintermediated way from a 'citizen' perspective.

The ECCs were not followed by any concrete changes, and the main formal outcome of it were the 13–14 December 2018 European Council summit conclusions, which included a vague hint towards following up with another citizen-centred process. The chronology of the ECCs is interesting, as its ending and concrete outcome took place six months before the May 2019 EU elections, well before the electoral campaign started, which indicates precisely a logic of depoliticisation: there was an unwillingness by EU institutions to politicise the ECCs via the EU elections.

The understanding of the citizens' dialogues and the ECCs is relevant to make sense of the evolving relationship of EU institutions vis-à-vis 'citizens'. Initiated in an experimental way, the citizen dialogues were progressively institutionalised, to the extent that under Juncker it became a widespread practice and it was integrated into the culture of the Commission. Later on, this 'citizen exercise' was expanded with the ECCs. One year later, during the fall of 2019, the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe would emerge.

3.2. The Conference on the Future of Europe and the 'neutral' and depoliticised European citizens' panels

Initially pitched by French President Emmanuel Macron, European Commission President candidate Von der Leyen put forward the idea of the CoFoE to the European Parliament in order to gain political support for the parliamentary approval of her Commission in November 2019. Von der Leyen pitched the CoFoE as a two-year participatory democracy exercise that would give recommendations on the future of Europe by 'citizens'. In her speech as President-elect of the European Commission, Von der Leyen suggested that the CoFoE 'should be inclusive for all institutions and citizens and the European Parliament should have a leading role' (European Commission 2019). The Council of the EU argued that the Conference "should build on the successful holding of citizens' dialogues and consultations over the past two years and foresee a broad debate with citizens in the course of the process" (Council of the EU 2020, 4). After many months of negotiations between the European Commission, Council and Parliament (the latter lost its 'leading role' in order to co-lead it), the three EU institutions signed on 10 March 2021 the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, which, entitled 'Engaging with citizens for democracy', stated the following:

We will seize the opportunity to underpin the democratic legitimacy and functioning of the European project as well as to uphold the EU citizens support for our common goals and values, by giving them further opportunities to express themselves. (...) The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union's future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience. (European Commission 2021, 1–2, emphasis added)

On 9 May 2021, in Europe Day, with a one year delay caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 but also by the lack of agreement among EU institutions on the governance of the CoFoE, EU leaders officially launched it. The Conference, cut short to a one-year exercise, is thus an initiative aimed at organising a dialogue between EU institutions and European citizens in order to set both medium- and long-term priorities for the European project. The CoFoE was politically led by a joint presidency and an executive board composed by the three main EU institutions (European Commission, Council and Parliament), and organisationally by a Common Secretariat that comprised officials from all three institutions. The CoFoE leadership divided the initiative in four main spaces: the Digital platform, Decentralised Events, the European Citizens' Panels (and national panels) and the Conference Plenary.

The digital platform is a space in which citizens could put forward their proposals for the future of Europe. While the CoFoE platform reports do not provide specific data on who submitted proposals, the fact that an overwhelming majority of platform participants have tertiary education (a total of 42% out of the 58% that responded to the question) seems to indicate that the platform was ultimately dominated by usual suspects of the 'Brussels bubble' (see CoFoE, 2022, 19). Second, the CoFoE encouraged the self-organisation of events related to the future of Europe. Paradoxically, these events were precisely organised by mediators such as civil society organisations, yet they were not initially integrated into the plenary from a substantive perspective. These events were meant to foster debate on the Conference, but were conceived as 'public outreach' rather than an attempt to meaningfully integrate its ideas into the plenary. Third, the European Citizens' Panels (and also the national citizens' panels,² which were organised by member states, but had to follow a particular criteria set by the CoFoE in order to be officially considered as such) were the most innovative aspect of CoFoE, a set of four panels, the methodology of which was constructed by four external subcontractors³ (in constant cooperation with the CoFoE Secretariat), that touched upon different policy areas in which 200 randomly selected citizens (per panel) from across EU member states deliberated about the actions the EU could take. The CoFoE leadership divided the four European Citizens' Panels in the following policy clusters:

Panel 1: Stronger economy, social justice & jobs/youth, sport, culture and education/digital transformation

Panel 2: EU democracy, values, rights, rule of law, security

Panel 3: Climate change, environment, health

Panel 4: EU in the world, migration

Each of the four panels had three 3-day sessions (Friday, Saturday and Sunday): the first one in Strasbourg at the European Parliament in September–October 2021, the second online in November 2021, and the third one in a different host city between December 2021 and February 2022 (panel 1 ended in Dublin, panel 2 in Florence, panel 3 in Warsaw and panel 4 in Maastricht). During the first session, citizens deliberated on defining the agenda, prioritising a set of concrete issues (called 'streams') within the policy area at stake. During the second session, they undertook a thematic deepening of those issues prioritised in the first weekend, constructing a set of 'orientations', and the third session transitioned from these orientations to concrete recommendations. The deliberation within the panels was moderated by 'neutral' facilitators, informed throughout the sessions by 'neutral' experts that were selected by the CoFoE institutional leadership,⁴ and also created a group of 'fact-checkers' that would correct the 'wrong facts' that could appear in the

debate, as well as potentially provide additional information related to the topic under discussion.⁵ In this way, political conflict was largely neutralised, as the randomly selected citizens were not confronted with the preexisting conflicting views (for instance, the existing proposals or priorities by the different EU political groups) regarding the political issue they were deliberating upon.

Based on interviews with organisers of the panels, the CoFoE Secretariat focus on the 'neutrality' of the process is likely to have been the outcome of a fragile equilibrium between the three leading EU institutions. The three EU institutions were in constant disagreement over the purpose of the CoFoE as a whole and the topics it should cover (hence why almost every policy area was covered by the panels), but also on specific things, such as the names of the 'experts' that would provide 'neutral' input to the citizen panels or even specific procedures. This also led the CoFoE Secretariat towards 'protecting' the participants of the European citizen panels from what they understood to be 'undue influence'. Thus, by design, the European citizen panels were meant to be insulated from the wider societal and political debate. The participant observation of the panels also revealed that this focus on 'neutrality' impeded addressing 'trade-offs' by the participants of the panels on the basis of which social groups or actors would be prioritised over others. Additionally, the all-encompassing policy scope of the CoFoE complicated zooming in on particular dilemmas facing the future of European integration. Ultimately, the recommendations that came out of the panels ended up being a sort of 'wish list' exercise by a very big focus group, rather than a democratic exercise connected to the public sphere and relevant mediators.

Fourth, the most important pillar of the CoFoE was the Conference Plenary, composed mainly by MEPs, Council representatives, the European Commission and MPs from national parliaments; but also by ambassadors from the European and national citizens' panels, as well as members of civil society, social partners and regional authorities. The Plenary was the main decision-making institutional actor of the CoFoE, as it was the space where all the input gathered through the three spaces described above was discussed and deliberated upon. It was also the most innovative one, since it brought together 'ambassadors' from the citizen panels and representatives from institutions across the multi-level EU polity. The Plenary was itself divided in 9 'Working Groups', each of which was dedicated to a different policy area.⁶ The Working Groups were composed by members from all the different actors that compose the plenary, which included MEPs, national MPs, European Commission and Council representatives, civil society organisations, trade unions and 'citizen ambassadors' (from both the European and national citizen panels). The members of the working groups, each of which was led by a different chair that was in charge of moderating the discussion and including the different views, deliberated on all the input on the particular policy cluster in common, and delivered a concrete set of recommendations to the wider plenary. As for the voting of the final recommendations, there were four institutional components that were required to formally vote (European Parliament, European Commission, national parliaments and the Council), yet there was also a 'citizen component', formed by the 'citizen ambassadors' of the European and national citizens' panel, that gave support to the final report, even if it was not formally binding.

Civil society organisations were initially not embedded within the Conference plenary political architecture. Encouraged by its initial exclusion by EU institutions, an important number of EU civil society founded the 'Civil Society Convention', which aimed at providing input into the Conference plenary (Civil Society Europe, 2021b), because 'it is not clear how European civil society organisations will be involved in a structured manner' (Civil Society Europe, 2021a). After the Civil Society Convention was set in place in January 2021, the CoFoE leadership invited a limited number of representatives of civil society to the plenary – although, based on the interviews, there were not even enough representatives to actually cover all working groups meaningfully. Thus, civil society organisations and trade unions were involved in the CoFoE plenary, but in a limited way and with no meaningful connection to the broader public sphere. Similarly, national parliamentarians formed one of the four 'components' of the plenary, yet they were only involved at a late stage and its involvement was unstructured, insofar it was individual MPs, and mostly those linked to the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC), that were involved rather than

national parliaments as such, as acknowledged by a national parliamentarian that participated in the plenary in an interview. In this way, national parliaments, a central space of the national public spheres and representative democracy, were generally disconnected from the CoFoE.

Therefore, by design the CoFoE was depoliticised and missed a public sphere perspective (see also Crum 2022). The European citizens' panels and events related to it generally sidelined political parties, civil society or trade unions, both at the national and EU level. This was also pointed out by civil society and trade union representatives themselves, who repeatedly throughout the Conference plenary sessions made complaints in their public interventions on the basis of their structural lack of involvement. Additionally, other than a few articles in Euractiv, Politico and other EU-media outlets, the CoFoE did not foster the Europeanisation of public spheres through the media. This limited the reach of the CoFoE-related discussions, and impeded its politicisation.

The Conference formally ended on 9 May 2022 with the delivery of a report with a set of 49 proposals adopted by the CoFoE plenary, and EU institutions promised that they would follow up on them, within their sphere of competences. However, there was also a process-related outcome of the Conference. In the midst of the CoFoE, the European Commission announced on 6 October 2021 the launch of a 'new centre for designing policies with citizens, for citizens', the *Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy*, integrated within their Joint Research Centre. This centre is meant to enrich the EU knowledge base on participatory and deliberative practices and provide guidance to implement them within the European Commission. This is an interesting development insofar it implies the institutionalisation of the 'expertise' on 'participatory and deliberative democracy' post-CoFoE, and hints that further democratic innovations from a 'citizen-centred' perspective are likely to emerge in the EU's near future. In fact, Commission President Von der Leyen announced that the "citizens' panels that were central to the Conference will now become a regular feature of our democratic life" (European Commission 2022a) during her September 2022 State of the Union address. In October 2022, the Commission announced its 2023 work programme, which included a 'new generation' of European citizen panels on the issues of food waste, learning mobility and virtual worlds (European Commission 2022b). The new panels, however, are uniquely organised under the umbrella of the Commission.

4. A normative critique of the Conference on the Future of Europe: reclaiming the public sphere

This section assesses the Conference on the Future of Europe from a normative perspective. The normative critique is developed in two subsections that build on the normative benchmark outlined in the theoretical framework, both oriented towards the disintermediation and depoliticisation of the process.

4.1. The missing micro-macro link: democracy without politics via disintermediated and depoliticised 'citizen participation'

As discussed in the theoretical framework, a key element to assess normatively democratic innovation exercises is how they link up with the 'deliberative system', and to what extent agonistic dynamics are fostered in the public sphere. It is precisely this micro-macro link that is relevant for EU democracy, and why the 'citizen turn' in EU policy-making has an important experimental component that remains problematic. Discussing the role of minipublics, Olsen and Trenz (2016, 663) argued that

the claim for democratic legitimacy of a deliberative mini-public relies on processes of political mediation and public contestation where sufficient degrees of publicity can be generated through which the private (and often experimental) space of small-scale deliberation (the micro) can be meaningfully related to the public spaces of mass democracy (the macro).

The (missing) micro-macro link in the CoFoE is central insofar the experimental methods developed in it could be interpreted as essentially a communicative effort to reproduce the idea that EU institutions are ‘closing the gap’ with EU citizens, without actually meaningfully doing so. This logic of ‘democratic experimentalism’ that focuses primarily on ‘new’ methods rather than on the way in which they interact with existing political institutions and mediators may in fact reinforce the preexisting dynamics of the depoliticised EU policy-making. Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) described how participatory budgeting has travelled across the world, yet often from a largely depoliticised perspective rather than the much more activist-oriented with which it started in Latin America. By the mid-2000s participatory budgeting had become embedded in ‘good governance’ practices as encouraged by the World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz (2005–07), as mechanisms ‘that enable a government to deliver services to its people efficiently’ (cited in Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014, 42) – thus justified in a technocratic way.

From a public sphere perspective, the focus ought to be on the extent to which participatory mechanisms are embedded in a broader political field of action and interact with existing intermediary actors that play an influential role in the European public spheres, which is mostly missing in the case of the Conference. Additionally, processes such as the citizen dialogues, the ECCs or the CoFoE explicitly exclude activist civil society and political actors, precisely those that have the symbolic, political and communicative capital to politicise EU issues and expand the debate beyond the ‘Brussels bubble’. In consequence, the missing micro-macro link is to a great extent caused by the disintermediation of political participation.

Disintermediation leads towards micro-experiments, such as the citizen panels in the CoFoE, in which the emphasis on deliberation among a small group of randomly selected citizens leads to rather consensual discussions nourished by ‘neutral’ experts selected by EU institutions. Thus, a relevant question is *what is the underlying conception of democracy that EU institutions have when setting up these processes?* Notably, it tends to be a highly depoliticised one, coherent with the conceptualisation of ‘democracy without politics’. The distinction between Vivien Schmidt’s ‘policy without politics’ and the idea of ‘democracy without politics’ in this context is that there is no actual policy (or, rather, very limited) coming out of these exercises, but instead an effort to communicate that EU institutions are democratising its relation to EU citizens, yet following a depoliticised approach to democracy – hence ‘without politics’.

This depoliticised approach to democracy has a demobilising effect, since political parties, trade unions and civil society actors are discouraged to participate. The idea of *democracy without politics* reflects well how EU institutions may actually deepen the hollowing out (Mair 2013) of EU democracy through processes such as the CoFoE. Pluralist democracy politics requires strong collective actors able to put forward their ideas in the public sphere and confront them with alternative ideas and opposing collective actors. Depoliticised and disintermediated citizen participation denies politics by replacing it with ‘neutral’ minipublics whose legitimacy comes from its ‘descriptive representation’. In doing so, it cuts the feedback loop with the public sphere and embeds a strong technocratic component in the political design. Furthermore, as ideational power is inherently related to the capacity of collective structures to champion those ideas in the public sphere, it is unlikely that ideas challenging the EU’s ‘status quo’ emerge out of such processes. Thus, while exercises such as the ECCs or the CoFoE are conceived as ‘innovative experiments’, they remain highly coherent with the traditionally depoliticised EU policy-making. The political advantage of mobilising these initiatives appears to be the broader appeal to ‘citizens’ as opposed to the traditional corporatist or neopluralist approaches towards ‘stakeholders’.

4.2. The neutralisation of conflict via minipublics as a form of (private) mediation vs the public sphere

As mediators are the actors that are key in bridging the different spaces that compose the public spheres, their sidelining throughout the CoFoE poses normative questions. This is especially the case

since the legitimisation narrative of the CoFoE was precisely based on disintermediation. The logic is that by reaching out ‘directly’ to citizens, the EU is reducing the distance between ‘Brussels’ and ‘everyday citizens’. This is well encapsulated by the public intervention of Alexandrina Najmowicz, Secretary General of the European Civic Forum, in the European democracy CoFoE working group session on the morning of 25 March 2022, in which she reinvoked the (limited) role of civil society in the CoFoE:

(Civil society organisations) we do have the feeling that we have been kept away. As if from the beginning this process has been crafted like ‘us’ and ‘them’, whoever the ‘us’ is, it is quite clear that the ‘them’ is the ‘citizens’. It is very confusing and very counter productive to have us in the end of the process like seen in opposition. (European Parliament 2022)

Najmowicz seems to argue that the Conference leadership attempted to situate civil society and ‘citizens’ in a legitimacy competition by sidelining the former, instead of better integrating civil society in the process. In line with this, Civil Society Europe, the main coordinating organisation of established civil society organisations in Brussels, published an evaluation of the CoFoE in which they reclaimed their role, while also supporting the idea of citizen panels (Civil Society Europe 2022). While ultimately civil society groups and trade union representatives collaborated well with ‘citizen ambassadors’ in the CoFoE plenary, the distinction between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ outlined by Najmowicz connects well with the antipolitical imaginary described earlier. In the context of the French *Gilets Jaunes* (and Macron’s response to them), Hayat (2018, 26 December, my translation) put forward the idea of ‘citizenism’:

The people, here, are considered as united, without partisan divisions, without ideologies, an addition of free individuals whose will can be collected by a simple device, by asking them a question, or by drawing lots from among them a certain number of free individuals who will be able to deliberate in conscience.

Inspired by an antipolitical perspective, ‘citizenism’ renders political conflict invisible, since mediators are seen as the main obstacles for ‘citizens’ to find common ground. However, the ‘citizenist’ discourse in the context of experimental exercises such as the CoFoE is not matched with an actual disintermediation of the political debate. Rather, what is happening is that there are new forms of mediation emerging, in this case through the appearance of deliberative democracy entrepreneurs that are ‘selling’ a new form of mediation to EU institutions (see Lee 2014, for a critique of the rise of the ‘public engagement industry’). This redefinition of mediation at the EU level is done, however, on the (discursive) grounds of disintermediation, and is a type of mediation that is disconnected from the public sphere and mass politics.

The European citizen panels of the CoFoE were organised by four consultancies, the leading of which was the French Missions Publiques, which has a long experience in organising these sort of exercises, including ‘Le Grand Débat’ and the ‘Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat’, both of which took place in France in 2019. In an institutional post by Missions Publiques in response to a growing debate in France related to the ‘private consulting firms’ (such as themselves) on the conduction of public policies, they expanded on their philosophy to defend their own involvement in such citizen processes, arguing that it is important ‘to have neutral third parties and qualified professionals’ (Missions Publiques 2022). The emphasis on ‘neutrality’ reveals the depoliticised underpinning principles with which some of these actors see deliberation. In practice, these actors tend to facilitate the neutralisation of political conflict.

There is much enthusiasm about citizen assemblies not only by practitioners and in the recent academic literature (e.g. Landmore 2020), but also by international intergovernmental organisations such as the OECD (2020). Claudia Chwalisz, during her time as ‘Innovative Citizen Participation Lead’ at the OECD, published an article entitled ‘A Movement That’s *Quietly* Reshaping Democracy For The Better’ championing citizens’ assemblies because they ‘create *the democratic spaces for everyday people* to grapple with the complexity of policy issues, listen to one another and find common ground’ (Chwalisz 2022, emphasis added). Chwalisz’s article, which relates closely to the

CoFoE's underlying philosophy, illustrates the two main normatively problematic aspects of the Conference. First, the idea that democracy can be improved in a 'quiet' way – thus sidelining a public sphere perspective –, and second, the outright rejection of intermediary actors, that are seen as self-serving and 'partisan', in contrast to a 'representative' group of 'everyday people'. The mobilisation of the concept of 'everyday people', itself a discursive political construction from outside (there is no self-evident criteria to distinguish who is part of this group and who is not), is itself problematic insofar it connects to the antipolitical imaginary, as it operates as a rhetorical device to situate 'the people' against intermediary organisations.

The antipolitical imaginary of the CoFoE need not apply to the idea of citizen assemblies by themselves, as it is certainly possible to imagine them organised in a way in which there is a feedback loop with the (European) public spheres and integrate mediators in their design. Yet taking into account the underlying (depoliticised and disintermediated) philosophy with which the CoFoE was designed, EU political actors (and particularly the European Commission) seem to increasingly be turning towards minipublics and (randomly selected) 'everyday citizens' as a sort of replacement to the European public sphere in terms of legitimacy. This political path misses a systemic view of deliberation. By organising the European citizen panels within the CoFoE in the way in which it did, the EU seems to be looking for 'pure citizens' that should not be mediated by political intermediary bodies, and the emphasis and focus is on depoliticising the process of deliberation in order to avoid the 'bias' or 'partisanship' that political mediators may introduce. Through these mechanisms the goal is to generate 'fact-based' and 'neutral' deliberation that 'represents' the views of 'everyday citizens'. In this way, much of the focus is put on the fairness of the micro process, and only later it is attempted to make a connection with the macro level (through the Plenary in the case of the CoFoE). The logical outcome is the depoliticisation of the process, discouraging (agonistic) conflict and the involvement of a wide range of actors to provide input for the panels, cutting the feedback loop between democratic innovation and the public sphere.

The missing link between the micro (the citizen panels) and the macro (the European public spheres) levels in the CoFoE conceptually reveals also the (mis)use of deliberative democracy. While deliberation is at the core of the citizen panels, it contradicts Habermas (2006, 415) understanding of the public sphere as 'an intermediary system of communication between formally organized and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas at both the top and the bottom of the political system'. Habermas' public sphere is meant to connect the different spaces of a polity through deliberation, which goes in line with the idea of building a European public sphere, a space of transnational political contestation rather than a micro 'representative sample' (see also Hammond 2019, for an understanding of deliberative democracy as a 'critical theory'). There are differences between the conceptualisation of democracy and the public sphere of Habermas and Mouffe, but both see the public sphere as a space of vibrant ideological conflict in which political alternatives ought to be confronted (politicisation), and in which intermediary bodies ought to play a leading role in structuring such conflict (mediation). The Conference missed the mark on both dimensions.

5. Conclusion: 'citizen participation' without democratisation in the EU, and its alternatives

The EU has introduced disintermediated citizen participation mechanisms throughout the past decade, primarily through the citizen dialogues and the ECCs, and most recently through the CoFoE. This process, conceived in this article as the 'citizen turn' of the EU, is based on the 'direct' involvement of 'everyday citizens' through democratic innovations, yet from a largely depoliticised perspective that excludes by design intermediary and activist actors. The 'citizen turn' may be then understood as the political attempt to build a new source of legitimacy that presents an alternative to the traditional conception of the European public sphere, replacing it with 'neutral' minipublics such as the European citizens' panels in the CoFoE that touched directly only several hundred citizens. The insulation of European citizen panels from the European public spheres reminds us that

'the linkages between democracy and deliberation are contingent rather than necessary' (He and Warren 2011, 270), and thus not all forms of deliberation have a democratising potential, particularly when conceived in such a narrow way.

While there are good reasons for expanding citizen participation in EU policy-making as a way to foster transnational democracy, the Conference has not necessarily contributed to democratise the EU. Furthermore, the discourse and political practice based on the 'disintermediation' between EU institutions and EU citizens is not matched with an actual disintermediation of the political debate. Instead, new forms of mediation are emerging, in this case through the appearance of deliberative democracy entrepreneurs that are 'selling' a new form of mediation to EU institutions. This is not to say that citizens' assemblies are inherently a depoliticising and disintermediating tool, but rather that the underlying philosophy with which the EU has deployed them in the case of the CoFoE poses fundamental normative problems. As Curato and Böker (2016, 185) have argued, a systemic conception of deliberative democracy 'underscores that mini-publics do not play a constitutive but rather an auxiliary role in deliberative democratisation'. In this way, we ought to break away from the antipolitical imaginary with which the CoFoE was conceived, and focus on embedding democratic innovations in order to foster an agonistic public sphere, connecting with relevant mediators such as political parties (both at the national and EU level), civil society, trade unions, social movements or the media. This is not to say that current mediation structures are functioning well in the EU, but that does not mean that they should be bypassed altogether. While the 'citizen turn' described does not replace EU civil society with minipublics completely, the emphasis of EU institutions is increasingly oriented towards individualised 'ordinary citizens' that are 'protected' from mass politics intermediary actors.

There are alternatives to this approach, as there are ways to include democratic innovations in a way that are coherent with an agonistic democracy logic (see Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2020). While there is a tension between making such exercises oriented towards political institutions or to the public sphere, the Irish citizen assemblies that meaningfully influenced the discourse on abortion and same sex marriage in the public sphere (and the assembly itself was influenced by the broader public debate) provide a good example of how the micro-macro link may be established (Farrell, Suiter, and Harris 2019), as well as the 'Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat', which heavily contributed to shaping public discourse on climate change in France. Similarly, the 'Bürgerrat Demokratie' exercise in Germany offers some interesting lessons, as it was initiated, funded and run by civil society organisations (see Dean et al. 2022), rather than by executive actors. Unlike the way in which the citizen panels post-CoFoE are planned (organised uniquely by the European Commission), a key lesson is to have parliaments or other non-executive actors organise these exercises. This will facilitate fostering political pluralism within the micro process, but, most importantly, a clearer connection between the citizen assembly and the public sphere, including a wide range of mediators in the process. Thus, 'policy responsiveness' should not be the main indicator of 'success' of democratic innovations, but rather its embedding in the democratic system and the public sphere.

Overall, the 'citizen turn' slightly modifies the EU's conception of democracy, in that it breaks away from the 'participatory turn' insofar it decouples 'citizen participation' from the idea of the European public sphere. However, in doing so, it tends to reinforce the preexistent depoliticised EU political dynamics, and sidelines agonistic alternatives. The CoFoE is therefore an innovative yet coherent step forward that maintains the logic of 'democracy without politics' that is already hegemonic in the EU.

Notes

1. EU institutions did not agree on a common title for this exercise, but following the European Policy Centre and particularly Butcher and Pronckuté (2019), they will be also named in this article as European Citizens' Consultations.

2. Six EU member states organised national citizens' panels that followed the CoFoE criteria: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands.
3. The leading organisation of the deliberative democracy consortium was Missions Publiques (France), in cooperation with the Danish Board of Technology (Denmark), ifok (Germany) and Deliberativa (Spain). The company Kantar Public was in charge of the selection of the European citizen panel participants, and the communication agency VO Europe also played a relevant role in the practical organisation and implementation of the panels.
4. The input provided by the 'experts' diverged widely, in spite of the fact that they were asked by the organisers to provide 'neutral' input. While the majority of 'experts' were academics, among them there were also former politicians, civil society representatives, think tank members, trade unionists or current and former EU officials.
5. The 'fact-checkers' were introduced as of the second session of the panels.
6. The nine Working Groups covered in the CoFoE plenary were the following: Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Digital transformation; European Democracy; Migration; and Education, culture, Youth, Sport.

Acknowledgments

The publication of this paper has been possible thanks to the exceptional guidance of Luis Bouza García and Elena García Guitián, the editors of the JCES special issue to which this article belongs. I thank as well Constantin Schäfer, Vivien Schmidt, Max Steuer, Hans-Jörg Trenz, the JCES editorial office and the two anonymous reviewers, for their constructive comments, which have heavily contributed to improving the paper. I am also grateful for the support of the Belgian French-speaking National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), and the Jean Monnet network 'OpenEUdebate: Matching politics with policy'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency [600465-EPP-1-2018-1-ES-EPPJMO-NETWORK]

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