



# CITIZENS TAKE OVER EUROPE

## OUR VOICES FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

*CTOE Consultation Report, for presentation on Europe Day, May 9th, 2021<sup>1</sup>*

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*In cooperation with Cynefin*

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<sup>1</sup> This report was co-authored by Daniel Davis, Laura Galante, Ulrike Liebert, James Organ, Beth Smith; the data presented draws on a questionnaire that has been developed by the Working Group “Constitutional Question”, for dissemination by the CTOE partners among their members. As a rolling exercise, this consultation is ongoing on, see <https://citizenstakeover.eu/take-action/consultations-survey/>.

## 1. Why this consultation?

Citizens Take Over Europe (CTOE) is a coalition representing 50 + European civil society organisations from across Europe who advocate for citizens' participation in the democratic life of the EU. As part of CTOE, the “**Constitutional Question**” Working Group brings together civil society and the scientific community to work on issues of citizen participation, and to assess whether the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) sticks to its promises of a citizen-centred renewal of how EU democracy works.

On the eve of the ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’, we have asked three sets of questions: Which sentiments prevail among our civil society partners regarding the future of Europe? What visions do we, the actively engaged citizens surveyed from 10 EU Member States, share regarding the future of the EU? And how do we want the EU to enable citizens to participate in shaping our common future?

To answer these questions we conducted a public consultation titled “Your voice on the Future of Europe” with our CTOE partners and active citizens close to them. We used an **innovative qualitative-quantitative consultation method: SenseMaker (link)**. Different from and complementary to conventional quantitative surveys, this methodology enables us to reflect on and better understand the diverse feelings, visions and hopes that civil society, stakeholders and citizens express regarding the future of Europe and CoFoE.

We framed 16 questions about respondents' relationships to the EU, European citizenship and EU leadership, about their hopes and fears for CoFoE, and about their preferences for democratic participation in this endeavour. In January 2021 CTOE's partner organisations started rolling the online-consultation out to their members. On the eve of Europe Day 2021, May 9<sup>th</sup>, this first report draws on the results from 420+ respondents.

## 2. The Sensemaker method<sup>2</sup>

The consultation puts questions in both a qualitative and a quantitative format. The quantitative format, presented through multiple choice questions, centers mainly on variables revolving around demographic information (age, gender, country of residence) and nominal answer types (e.g., choosing a particular emotion to describe sentiments about the future of the EU).

The qualitative format showcases three question types: diads, triads and open answers. These question types purposely avoid answers being relegated to black-or-white responses, but rather encourage a spectrum of opinions characterised by neither one or the other option. Diads do this by allowing the participant to drag a cursor between two polar options (e.g., the European Union a) strengthens/b) weakens democracy). Triads follow the same concept but with three options, visualized in the shape of a triangle in

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<sup>2</sup> For further details, see “SenseMaker Analysis & Template”, by Beth Smith (Nov 2020).

which the participant must drag the cursor (e.g. in order to achieve this vision, leadership must come from a) citizens, residents, and civil society, b) EU member states c) European institutions) (for examples, see appendix). Lastly, open questions ask the participant to answer using their own words.

Content analysis was carried out through an inductive approach to identify emerging themes. Open answers were coded and cross-analyzed with other question types to understand patterns and mindsets. For example, for the question that asked about particular emotions, certain ones were isolated (such as fear, or hope) and analyzed alongside other question types, so as to zoom in on that particular set of answers. The following sections offer a snapshot of the most salient patterns identified in this first analysis.

### **3. Mixed feelings about the future of the EU - for what motives?**

European Union politics and policy making are complex matters that individuals make sense of in highly diverse ways. Therefore, it hardly comes as a surprise that our civil society coalition harbours mixed, even opposed feelings about the future of the European Union. This issue solicits intensely positive as well as strongly negative reactions. On the side of positive emotional attachments, excitement, hopefulness or confidence are widespread. On the other side, however, feelings of confusion and exclusion, concerns, frustrations are pervasive, and disillusionment, even outright fear is being expressed. What meanings do these contrasting emotional attachments have for individuals, which personal experience and ideas do they associate with them?<sup>3</sup>

Active citizens who feel positive about the future of the EU, namely **excited, hopeful or confident** makeup for about 45% of all responses(See Fig. 1 in the Appendix). They thereby slightly prevail over those with negative feelings (36%), but if we add to the latter those who feel “confused”, they would be at a par (45% and 47%). that is respondents who feel **fearful, frustrated or excluded**. The hopefuls as well as the frustrated respondents can be found in all EU member states, and they range across all age groups. Interestingly, the hopefuls and the frustrated differ as regards their **relationship with the EU** and the meanings that European citizenship has to them. This is discussed next.

- **Excited, hopeful and confident feelings about the future of the EU, and what the EU and European citizenship mean to them**

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<sup>3</sup> The following responses refer to items 1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Question 1.1 asks „Overall, how do you feel about the future of the EU“. To understand the ideas that respondents associate with their feelings, we have used the SenseMaker-platform to link the responses about feelings to question 1.2 “What does European citizenship mean to you?” and to question 1.3 “Describe your relationship to the EU”, to understand the ideas that people associate with their feelings.

To the excited and to the hopeful respondents, their **relationship to the EU** means a lot. To them, the EU feels like their “cultural home” or simply “home”. They describe it as “a bigger room we can all fit in to talk about things that affect us all”. The EU to them is “a mother who keeps her children together”, “the predecessor to a unified world”, “the greatest project that we have” , “the biggest entity with high standards of living and forward-looking agenda”, “a work in progress and good example for what our societies can achieve when they work together”; “an open book”, or “a big container where the big differences between the nationalities can be turned into richness”.

At the core of this hopeful mind-set, **European citizenship** is understood as “a set of privileges and solidarity”, for instance as “freedom and fundamental rights”. It means “being part of a multicultural continent with a shared, not always so bright past”. It means “cultural enrichment” as well as “sharing responsibility”. It entails “the duty to guard democratic values for future generations”. It means “belonging to a common cultural and political area”. It means “being part of a union, able to benefit from a common set of rights, with a common vision”. It means “choice and the opportunity to practice a range of valuable rights that extend beyond national borders”. In sum, European citizenship constitutes the “common denominator that holds together people’s different identities”, and it provides the “preconditions for European democracy to develop”.

- **Feelings of frustration, fear and exclusion, what European citizenship and the European Union mean to them**

Towards the other end of the spectrum respondents voice detachment from the EU such as **confusion** and **exclusion**, and also negative feelings, such as outright **frustration and fear**.

For the frustrated among the respondents, **European citizenship** carries extremely positive connotations, while the current European Union does not. There is a wide variety of ways these frustrations of high hopes are voiced. For instance, European citizenship is valued as an ideal, whereas the EU is described “*as a very distant relative, one who I know little about yet who claims to be close to me*”. European citizenship is understood as an ideal and “a value to fight for, a felt connection to other European citizens, acting in responsibility, taking part in finding good processes and solutions”. Some feel it as *part of their identity, together with their local and national ones*. To others it means “*shaping Europe’s future together with all the different backgrounds and cultures we have, because they are valid information pieces to solve the puzzle, to be a role model for others*”. Union citizenship offers “choice and opportunity, and a sense of moving on from the old limitations of nation states”. It makes respondents feel like they “have ownership in the EU”, which is “the only and first transnational union in the world”. European citizenship provides people with “*the right to move freely among EU countries and to live and work where I choose to*”, and there to benefit from the same rights as the nationals of the EU Member State where one resides. European citizenship is expected to bestow on people “*the right to decide on the EU's priorities and actions*”, including “*the right to decide on the future of the EU*”. More specifically, EU citizenship is associated with “*a bundle of citizen rights that are non negotiable, freedom*

*to roam, to live in different countries under the same framework, and most of all, peace for the last 70 years.”* Those among the respondents who have travelled worldwide acknowledge that “this is not a given”, and they would not give up EU citizenship even if that were required. Another respondent describes “*European citizenship in its most ideal form*” as “*synonymous for critical thinking and engagement within the borders of our liberal society and its shared values*”. In political terms, European citizenship is expected to entitle people “*to more than just being consulted: active European citizenship means active participation, with a sense of community, working together to solve problems*”. European citizenship is conceived as “*freedom, unity with people of other nationalities with whom we have more in common than what differentiates us*”, arguably “*our approach to shared security and prosperity, solidarity, respect for others no matter what their beliefs, and that people are treated equally.*”

Yet, such ideal visions of European citizenship are frequently associated with a sense of frustration. In some cases, such feelings come with the perception that “*the complexity and bureaucracy of the institution and the ethnocentric structures of the member states and collective trauma (like communism and social nationalism) block the true evolution of a felt sense of European identity*”. In another, the respondent critically notes “*the slow and hesitant discourse about the need of an intelligent redesign and recovery of Europe within this decade*”, emphasising the need for strengthening European citizenship. A third one wants Europeans “*to be unified with common goals and mutual support*”. At the same time, respondents want to “*devolve power and give people more power to decide on their local issues like Switzerland does*”.

To sum up: feelings of frustration are frequently rooted in unfulfilled ideals: “*European citizenship is an empty slogan*”.

#### **4. Which visions for the future of the EU?**

In order to reflect our own views as civil society on the future of the EU and inform the CoFoE on citizen expectations, we asked our members about their vision for the future of the EU. The answers reflect their diverse feelings and perceptions of the Union. While some favor more integration and a centralization of decision-making processes, others advocate for a decentralization of decision-making with more common framing of policies and goals at the EU level. Most responses, though, converge on a general vision for the future of the EU: they demand more citizen participation in decision-making and a more democratic European Union.

But what are the specific visions that our members hold for a future European Union and what do these entail? To answer both questions we asked participants of the consultation what a future EU needs “less” or “more” of in order to fulfil their personal EU vision. The answers to questions are organised below into categories that contain different responses which are connected by a specific theme.

- ***The EU needs less bureaucracy, nationalism, member state power and lobbying***

Despite their diversity, most respondents converge on the idea that the future EU needs less **“bureaucracy”**. They view the current system as too bureaucratic and characterized by “non-transparent decisions”, “elitist decision procedures” and “top-down decision-making”. Reflected by these answers is the general sentiment of survey participants to make the EU more democratic, citizen-oriented and participatory. The centralization of decision-making powers onto executive actors can thus be viewed as the antithesis of a more democratic EU with strong participatory instruments and an empowered European Parliament.

A future EU also needs less **“nationalism”**, **“national egoism”** and **“national thinking lenses”** to fulfil the personal vision of respondents. These “narrow-minded national interests”, the “infighting between national interests” and “member state competition” are perceived as the main reasons why the EU oftentimes does not pursue the European common good, and progressive solutions are stymied. Consequently, in order to achieve the vision of an EU oriented toward the common good the “national egoisms” of member states must be curtailed.

In light of this perception of the EU, respondents want to see **less power for member states** in the future. This entails less power to national governments and their influence on EU policies as well as to the European Council and its unanimous decision-making rule. The responses seem to be causally connected to the perception that “national egoisms” and “thinking lenses” are responsible for progressive policies being stymied and the European common good not being pursued.

In order to pursue the European common good, the EU also needs less **“lobbyism”** and **“corruption”** according to respondents. They call for less “influence of big business on decision-making”, “influence by rich people” and “corporate lobbyists” that are mainly concerned with their own self-interest. Lobbyism is mostly seen as connected to „big business“ and in some statements member states are viewed as facilitators of this undue influence by corporations on EU decision-making. This undermines the pursuit of the European common good which in contrast benefits all EU citizens.

These perceptions on the shortcomings of the current system then strongly inform the views of survey participants on what a future EU needs more of in order to fulfil their vision (See Fig. 2 in the Appendix)

- ***The EU needs more citizen participation, democracy, transparency and education***

Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents state that the EU needs more **“citizen participation”** in the future (See Fig. 2 in the Appendix). Survey participants generally want “more opportunities for citizens to get involved” and “mechanisms to involve citizens in decisions”. This participation should be “meaningful” and include citizens “across all regions and categories of the population”. This demand for more citizen participation in EU decision-making can be seen as serving multiple purposes: as an alternative vision to a centralized and bureaucratic EU as well as a counterweight to the power of member states and corporate influence.

Strongly connected to the demand for more citizen participation is the widely shared view that a future EU needs more **“democracy”**, for some more specifically “European representative democracy”, “direct democracy” or “deliberative democracy”. This is in view of the shared belief that the EU tends to strengthen democracy rather than weaken it (Fig. 3). Important for achieving this is a “stronger European Parliament” as the “common representation of [the] people”. Democratization is thus an instrument to counter bureaucratic decision-making, curtail the power of member states and strengthen citizen participation. Interestingly, the views clearly diverge on the future institutional arrangement of the EU: while some want more “EU level competencies” (after its democratization) and centralization, others call for “decentralization”, “regard for regional differences” and “just the framework from [the] EU”.

Complementary to the demands for citizen participation and democracy, respondents want more **“transparency in decision-making”**, **education of citizens** “on what the EU is and how it works” and a **European public sphere**. In their view, transparency is necessary for stronger citizen participation and scrutiny of political actors, education to curtail nationalism and a European public sphere for transnational debates on the European public good.

## **5. What do we expect from citizen participation and the CoFoE specifically?**

In recent decades, frustration has increased with representative democracy and periodic voting as a citizen’s means of participating in and/or influencing law and policy decision-making. This change in attitude towards democracy is strongly reflected in the responses to the survey that demand participation, engagement, deliberation and democratic change, as indicated above, and also in the responses to questions focussed on participation and the CoFoE.<sup>4</sup>

- **Early policy agenda influence wanted**

When asked specifically, using the dyad format, about the relative value of participating in decision-making through influencing the agenda or voting, the desire to participate early in the agenda setting stage was strongly emphasised (See Fig. 5 in the Appendix). Just 27% of people indicated that voting was their preferred means of participating. 73% indicated that they preferred to shape the agenda, with more than 10% expressing an extreme preference for early agenda influence (98-100% on the dyadic scale) as their preferred way of political participation. This is a surprising number of people that almost completely reject the value of voting as a means of influencing decisions. This shows frustration with voting as a means of influence in the EU in general and probably for the European Parliament in particular. This is supported by the fact that only a small number of people in the survey mentioned a desire for an increase in powers for the European Parliament or other institutions (just 10 in response to the ‘hopes from the CoFoE’ question). This is

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<sup>4</sup> See the five questions in section 3 of the questionnaire.

despite strengthening the European Parliament being a long-term aim of the EU and central to democratic changes in the Lisbon Treaty.

- ***We want ambitious change***

Respondents see the CoFoE as an opportunity to make important changes in the EU: “I hope that the "Conference on the Future of Europe" will constitute a quantum leap for bringing the EU closer to the citizens, by fostering citizens' participation in EU politics in ways that lead to the establishment of democratic innovations for the EU polity”. There is a sense of ambition and desire for change. Almost a quarter of respondents specifically stated that they hope that the CoFoE will deal with big issues, such as climate change, a health union and fundamental rights, and lead to treaty/institutional change or an EU constitution. This is in addition to those that want the CoFoE to lead to democratic change (another 10%).

This ambition though is tempered by low expectations; for a few respondents very low: “I have no hopes. I am 100% sure that nothing will come of the conference”. Many just stated that they hope that it will have some impact. The greatest fear, stated by almost half of participations, was simply that the CoFoE would be a cosmetic exercise, “just lip service” to citizen participation, a ‘smokescreen’ and that it would have no actual impact on short or long term decision-making. As one participant said, “that it will end up like a tiger jumping but landing as a bedside rug”. Citizens appear to value the potential of the CoFoE and want it to lead to impact, but cannot see it happening. One of the most common reasons given was that the debate would be captured by specific interest groups. These ranged from fears about pro market/corporation lobbies to specific Member State interests to political interests. A number of respondents specifically expressed the fear of “the rise of right wing politics” and extremist parties.

In terms of where the CoFoE should focus, we asked respondents to prioritise between setting common goals, connecting people across the EU, and generating propositions for solving the big challenges of our time. The ambition for the CoFoE is reflected by the high percentage of people that wanted the CoFoE to focus on all three. Where preference is expressed it tends towards prioritising the big issues of our time. This could perhaps be influenced by the sense of failure of the EU during the Covid19 pandemic, which has showcased both the potential benefit and shortcomings of the EU. But it also reflects that people want the EU to do more in relation to the big issues that cross borders, as indicated by the responses to earlier survey questions.

- ***Trust citizens and facilitate ‘real participation’***

Respondents want this change to come about through trusting citizens and giving more and impactful participation opportunities (See Fig. 4 in Appendix). As stated earlier in the report there is a very clear desire for a more democratic EU that facilitates stronger citizen participation. This is also reflected specifically in relation to the conference on the future of Europe. Over a hundred respondents specifically state that their hope for the CoFoE was that citizens would be listened to and trusted: “that the EU will really listen to its citizens”; “The conference should show how citizens are an active part of the EU, how they



can contribute, how they are being listened to”, “that true to their word they let Europeans build the future of the Union by listening more to The People and less to the politicians”. Respondents wanted the CoFoE to involve “meaningful citizen engagement and participation” and they often talked about ‘real’ engagement and participation, which reflects a feeling that they have engaged before but not been listened to: “I fear that [EU] citizen participation ... is merely a kind of citizen hearing”. There are very few specific suggestions though for how this should happen – 8 people asking for citizens assemblies was an exception. This perhaps reflects the low expectations for the CoFoE, and that for many people they are willing to try any new form of participation as long as it has an impact. It might also reflect that people are not yet aware of the numerous opportunities for citizen participation that have been tested in recent years.

- ***Common transnational goals wanted from participation***

People want to work together, they want ‘unity’, ‘togetherness’, ‘a shared community’. They want a more social Europe with less focus on economic and market values. They want citizen participation to lead to these high level outcomes. They see the value of the EU as a means of facilitating this (if the participation has an impact) and almost 10% specifically referenced Member States and national interests as a block on achieving them and that they wanted national borders to end. “I hope that Europe becomes an area without national borders but only functional borders.” Surprisingly though there were only a handful of respondents that referred to a federal outcome as their hope from the CoFoE. It seems that it is not the political or institutional structure that concerns them so much as achieving common goals through more direct citizen participation. Setting new institutional means of listening to citizens inclusively and equally is the primary means to reach common goals. The triad 3.3 confirms this desire to seek common goals.

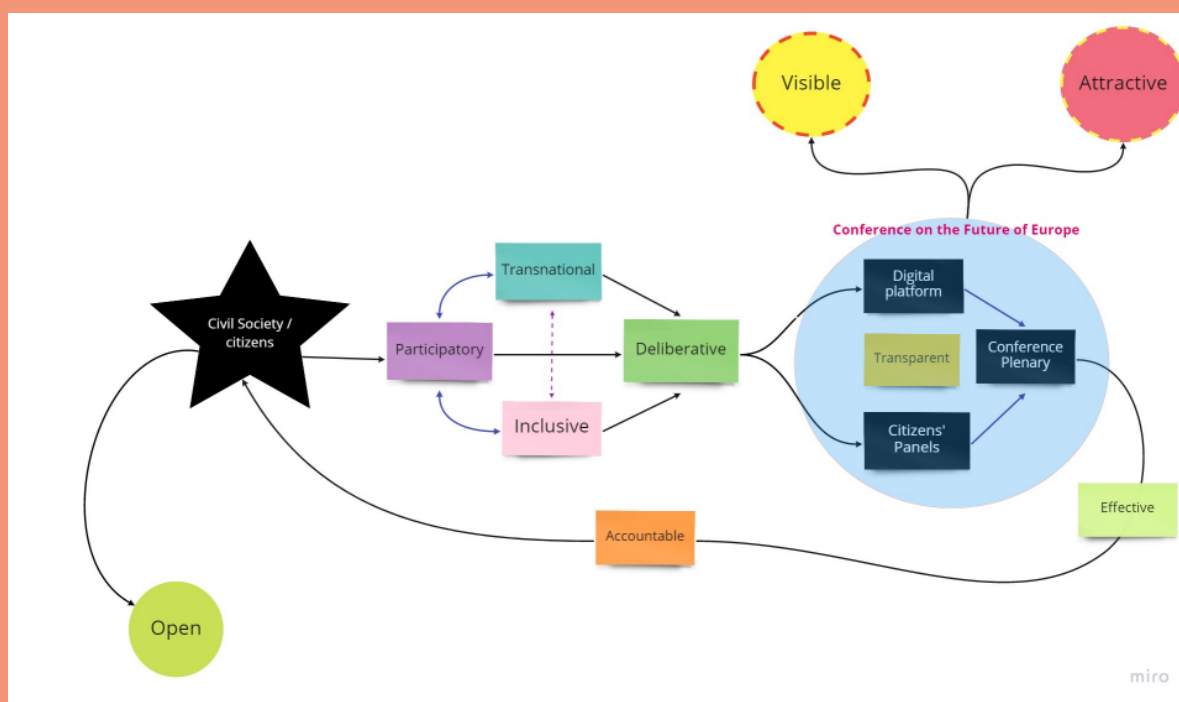
## ***6. Summary and preliminary conclusions – what European civil society wants from CoFoE***

Our consultation among civil society and active citizens reveals an extraordinary diversity of emotional attachments regarding the future of the EU. This is unsurprising perhaps in view of the pandemic, climate, financial, economic and social emergencies European societies are confronted with. Yet, surprisingly, our results also highlight the amazingly unanimous vision and determination shared by civil society and active citizens that they want to become part and parcel of shaping the future of the EU. The question is how to translate these feelings, visions and expectations expressed by active citizens in European civil society into legal principles and possible political action?

This is a question which conventional survey data has difficulties to come to terms with. We have chosen the qualitative SenseMaker because it allows us to draw some preliminary answers from the results of the first 420 respondents as to what they feel, think and want.

In view of the findings from this consultation we conclude: It is time to bring in new participatory opportunities for European citizens that build on the EU's existing, but underdeveloped participatory democracy. The EU institutions and the EU treaties have promised citizen participation for many years, and its value for the EU's democratic legitimacy is clear.

To that aim, CTOE advocates an upgrade of European citizenship, for a renewal of European democracy. In particular, we propose [“10 principles for a citizen led Conference on the Future of Europe”](#) and, moreover, [“10 + 1 guidelines for EU citizens' assemblies”](#), established as permanent bodies that would complement representative democratic institutions. Our “10 principles” should serve the EU citizens, parties, institutions and leaders as a yardstick for shaping processes of renewal that live up to the standards for a democracy of the 21<sup>st</sup>, that is openness, participation and inclusivity, transnationality and deliberation, transparency, effectiveness and accountability, visibility and attractiveness (see graph).



But we need more innovative ideas for upgrading citizen participation in democratic Europe. We therefore conclude this report with some specific ideas for increased and more impactful citizen participation that will move the EU towards fulfilling its promises to citizens. By way of example, we argue that many participatory innovations are possible, even without treaty changes:

- In the short term, the “gamification” of the CoFoE commitment to citizens’ participation, particularly on the recently launched platform, would increase the strength and inclusiveness of citizen engagement;
- In the medium term, “legislative crowdsourcing”, and “mini-publics” to develop the Commission’s consultation regime could be implemented;

- Last but not least, the European Citizen Initiative - thus far a trigger of high hopes and deep frustrations - could be improved by linking the legislative follow-up on it to the deliberations and recommendations of a Citizens Assembly that should be established (with changing membership) on a permanent basis.

Explanations for these three - and a host of other innovative ideas for European citizen participation - can be found in a recent book, co-edited by one of the co-authors of the present report.<sup>5</sup> What makes these ideas not only desirable but realistic is that they are well tested and understood on the ground, in diverse national contexts. All that is lacking now is the political courage and will by European leaders to implement them for the benefit of citizens and the future EU.

## APPENDIX

Fig.1

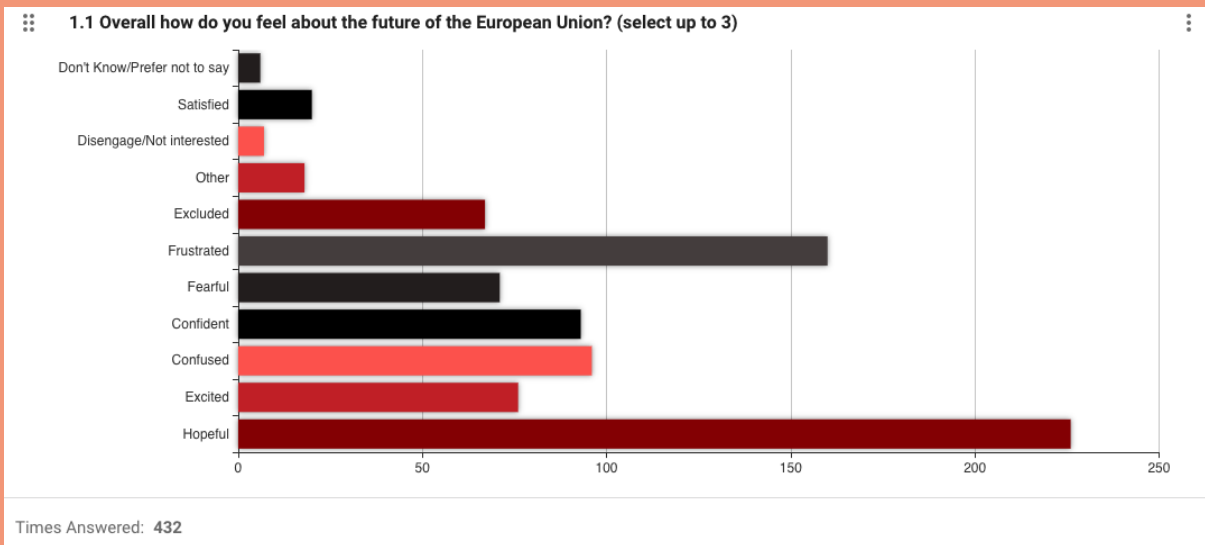
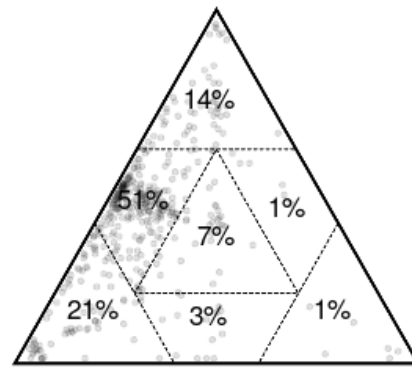


Fig.2

<sup>5</sup> James Organ, Alberto Alemanno eds, *Citizen Participation in Democratic Europe. What Next for the EU?* (2021 ECPR Press).

### 2.3 Going forward, the European Union needs more...

Shared values, goals and commitments



Democracy and citizen participation

National autonomy for member states

Fig.3

### 1.6 I think that the European Union...

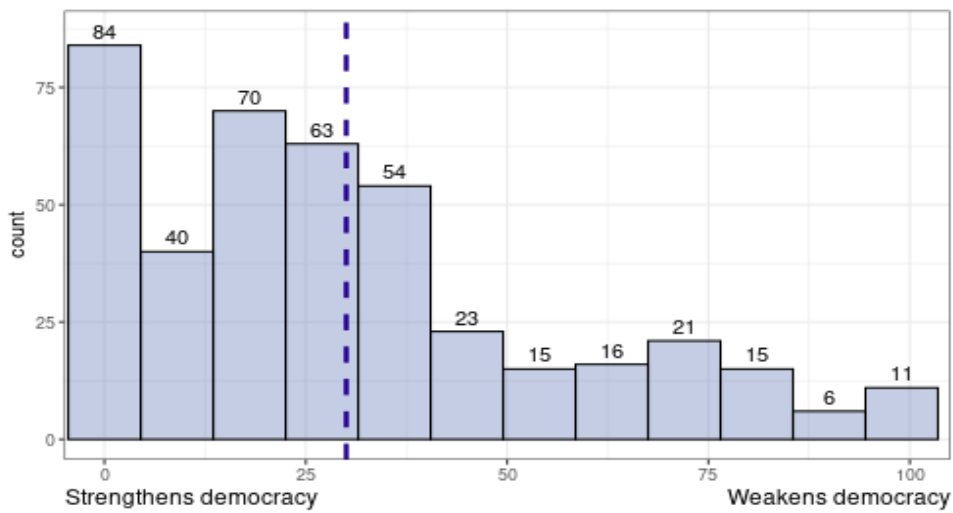
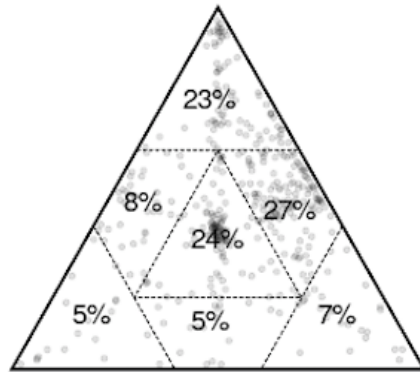


Fig.4

**2.4 To strengthen democracy in the EU, the EU needs to ...**

Involve citizens more directly in EU decision making



Strengthen the role and influence of elected representatives

Increase and improve deliberation among citizens and with decision-makers

Fig.5

**3.5 My preferred way to participate in decision making is...**

