

**Should a Citizens'  
Assembly Complement the  
European Parliament?**

Edited by I Rainer Bauböck and Kalypso Nicolaidis



**AI Summary : the book's main aims, arguments,  
contested debates, and key takeaways.**

**BOOK: Should a Citizens' Assembly Complement the  
European Parliament? (EUI, 2025), edited by Rainer  
Bauböck and Kalypso Nicolaidis.**

Inspired by the Campaign led by The Democratic  
Odyssey, [here](#).

And its blueprints for a permanent Citizens' Assembly,  
[here](#). And [here](#).

Contacts: [kalypso.nicolaidis@eui.eu](mailto:kalypso.nicolaidis@eui.eu);  
[andrea.gaiba@eui.eu](mailto:andrea.gaiba@eui.eu)

---

## 1. Context, Purpose and Overall Proposal

- The volume emerges from a 2024–2025 forum of the research-policy network GLOBALCIT, during a period of growing democratic frustration across the European Union. The editors suggest that while the EU has a complex set of supranational institutions, these increasingly suffer from a “democratic deficit”: many citizens feel underrepresented, alienated or disconnected. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- In response, the editors propose a radical institutional innovation: a **permanent supranational European Citizens' Assembly (ECA)**. Rather than ad-hoc citizens' assemblies tied to single issues, this would be a standing, rotating, randomly selected, pan-European body. Members would be drawn from across EU member states — and could include non-nationals residing in Europe. The Assembly would not be fixed in Brussels or Strasbourg, but travel (“itinerant”) around Europe, embedding itself in diverse regional contexts. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- The rationale is not to **replace** the European Parliament (EP), but to **complement** it: the ECA would open new, more direct, deliberative, and bottom-up channels for citizen participation — thereby enhancing democratic legitimacy of EU governance and giving ordinary Europeans a stronger sense of “ownership.” [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- The book gathers 23 authors contributing 19 responses — critics, supporters, and modifiers — plus a rejoinder by Nicolaidis, producing an open, cross-political debate about the desirability, design, and feasibility of such an assembly. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

Thus, the book aims to explore deeply: **Can a Citizens' Assembly complement (not replace) the European Parliament — and if so, under what conditions?**

---

## 2. Why a Citizens' Assembly: Democratic Justifications

The case for the ECA rests on three broad normative pillars: holistic democracy, transnationalism (or “demoicracy”), and permanence. These are developed primarily in Nicolaidis’ opening essay. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

## Holistic Democracy

- The authors argue that modern democracy should not be seen as one single model (election + representation), but as a **polycentric system** combining different democratic modalities: **electoral (parliament)**, **deliberative (citizens’ deliberation)**, and **direct participation**. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- A permanent ECA would institutionalize deliberation and random selection (sortition) alongside electoral representation — thereby enriching democratic legitimacy by making “representation” plural and more inclusive. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- This variation acknowledges that in today’s complex societies — with fragmented, plural, and often polarized publics — relying solely on electoral democracy may fail to reflect the range of citizens’ interests, identities and perspectives. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

## Transnationalism / Demoicracy

- At the EU level, national electoral democracy is insufficient: voters may elect MEPs, but many feel distant from the decision-making process, and the sense of a common European demos is weak. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- The ECA is presented as an institutional tool for building a “**demoicratic**” polity: a polity composed of multiple, distinct but interconnected demoi (peoples), managing shared governance through horizontal cooperation, rather than a single homogenous “European people.” [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- This horizontal democratic mechanism — connecting citizens across borders, enabling deliberation among them, and giving them a role in shaping EU-level agenda — could help bridge the gap between national identities and supranational governance, fostering a European public sphere rooted in genuine participatory democracy. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

## Permanence & Institutionalization

- Many existing citizens’ assemblies are temporary and issue-specific. The innovation here is to make the ECA **permanent and rotating**: a standing body that continuously operates, with membership rotating over time, enabling sustained citizen engagement rather than episodic consultation. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
  - The ECA would not be just a symbolic or advisory body; proponents envision giving it **agenda-setting powers** (though not necessarily final legislative authority), or at least a meaningful role in shaping what the European Parliament debates, thereby influencing EU policy in a significant way. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
  - Moreover, its **itinerant** nature — traveling across Europe instead of being fixed in one seat — would help reconnect EU-level politics with local contexts, citizens, and diverse regions, making European governance more tangible, visible and legitimate. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
-

### 3. The Debate — Supportive Arguments and Main Criticisms

Since the proposal is ambitious, the book devotes major space to responses raising critical questions. Below I summarise key threads from the supporting and critical contributions.

#### Supportive Perspectives

- Some contributors argue that an ECA could **re-energize civic participation** in the EU: offering a way to overcome disillusionment with traditional parties, counter populist alienation, and give citizens a concrete stake in transnational governance. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- Others note that a well-designed ECA could especially benefit issues that are hard to represent through national electoral channels — e.g., long-term challenges, cross-border policies, climate change, migration, social justice — where deliberation and representativeness beyond narrow national constituencies matter. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- Some suggest that by institutionalising deliberative democracy at EU level, the ECA could help form a **European public sphere**, facilitating cross-national citizen dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding — an important asset for solidarity in a plural Europe. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

#### Main Criticisms & Concerns

On the other hand, many raise serious objections, which fall along several lines:

##### Legitimacy, Accountability & Blind Deference

- Critics warn that sortition (random selection) can lead to a lack of accountability: unlike elected politicians, randomly selected citizens do not face reelection or political responsibility. This raises concerns about **who holds the Assembly to account**, and whether its decisions would enjoy democratic legitimacy. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- Some argue that there is a risk of **public disengagement or ignorance**: a permanent ECA may be ignored by the wider public, especially if its powers are limited — so that, in effect, it becomes another elite forum rather than a genuinely representative body. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

##### Undermining Electoral Politics, Expert Knowledge & Civil Society

- There is concern that a citizens' assembly may distort the role of electoral politics, undermining the legitimacy of elected representatives — i.e., a rivalry between “lottocracy” and representational democracy. Critics warn this could erode the value of party politics and organised civil society, which play important roles in representation, accountability, and interest aggregation. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- Others suggest that forming decisions through deliberation risks sidelining expert knowledge — potentially yielding simplistic or populist demands, lacking the technical depth or long-term perspective needed for complex EU policymaking. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

##### Practical and Institutional Challenges — Cost, Composition, Impact

- A permanent ECA would be expensive and resource-intensive: rotating membership, itineration, translation and logistic costs, staffing, and continuous operation. Some contributors warn that limited budget could undermine the quality of deliberation. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
  - There is also the issue of selection and composition: how to ensure the Assembly is not biased (e.g., overrepresentation of certain socio-economic groups), how to define eligibility pools, how often to rotate, how to ensure inclusion of underrepresented or marginalized communities — all difficult technical and normative decisions. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
  - Even if the Assembly deliberates well, there is a risk that its proposals will have **no real political impact**: if decision-making power remains with the EU institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council), the ECA could end up powerless, becoming symbolic rather than transformative. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- 

## 4. Detailed Contributions — Key Highlights from Selected Chapters

Because the book is a multi-author debate, here are some of the most significant contributions and arguments from specific chapters — illustrating the breadth and depth of the discussion.

- In **Cristina Lafont & Nadia Urbinati**'s chapter "*Why Citizens' Assemblies should not have Decision-making Power*", the authors reject giving decision-making power to a randomly selected assembly. They argue that such power challenges accountability, and that electoral mechanisms provide essential legitimacy. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- **Richard Bellamy** examines whether a citizens' assembly could equalize representation and bridge the so-called "demoicratic disconnect." He questions how "equal and empowering" representation by sortition really is, compared to electoral democracy — and whether such representation can sustain trust, legitimacy, and responsiveness in a complex polity like the EU. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- **Yves Sintomer** builds a normative-theoretical case in "*Democracy 3.0 in the 21st Century*", arguing that democratic innovations like the ECA reflect a new "systemic turn" in democratic theory — not as replacement of traditional democracy, but as an extension of democratic forms to address contemporary challenges. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- On more pragmatic grounds, **Daniel Freund** proposes the idea of **issue-specific citizens' panels** attached to key proposals by the European Commission: a partial, more feasible alternative to a full, permanent ECA. His vision is more modest but possibly more immediately workable: panels that deliberate on concrete issues, with institutional support and transparent follow-up. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)
- **Jelena Džankić** reflects on the practicalities: selection, rotation, cost, legitimacy, and the complexity of embedding an ECA into existing EU structures. She warns that without careful design, the Assembly could remain marginal, ineffective, or even undermining existing institutions. [cadmus.eui.eu](https://cadmus.eui.eu)

Finally, in her rejoinder, Nicolaidis does not dismiss the criticisms — instead she uses them to **refine** the proposal: acknowledging trade-offs, exploring "hybrid" models (e.g., stronger agenda-setting instead of full legislative power), emphasizing the need for institutional and

civic “ecosystem-building,” and arguing for cautious, experimental implementation rather than immediate overhaul. [cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)

---

## 5. Key Takeaways, Open Questions, and Relevance

### What the book shows:

- The proposal for a permanent transnational citizens’ assembly is bold, theoretically grounded, and deeply normative: it reimagines EU democracy not as strictly representative, but as **multi-modal and participatory**, integrating deliberation, sortition, and rotation along with electoral mechanisms.
- It articulates a clear theoretical framework: combining the ideals of **popular sovereignty (equal representation)**, **democratic governance (integrity, deliberation)**, and **civic culture (epistemic diversity, transnational solidarity)**. This aligns with a longer-term vision of a “demoicratic” Europe — a Europe of many peoples cooperating through horizontal mechanisms.
- The book does not present the ECA as a silver bullet; rather, it situates it as an **experimental institutional innovation**. Its usefulness lies as much in its symbolic and normative potential (changing how citizens relate to EU institutions) as in practical policy impact.

### Key challenges and unresolved questions:

- Legitimacy and accountability: How to ensure that a randomly selected body remains accountable to citizens? How to prevent a new “elite” of deliberation from forming?
- Effectiveness: Can an assembly lacking formal decision-making power still influence EU policies meaningfully? Or will it be ignored, co-opted, or sidelined?
- Inclusivity and representation: How to design sortition and selection to reflect social, economic, cultural, and regional diversity — avoiding overrepresentation of privileged citizens and ensuring marginalized voices are heard?
- Institutional integration: How would the Assembly function alongside existing institutions (EP, Commission, Council)? What powers, resources, and procedural links would it require? What safeguards against conflict or deadlock?
- Practical feasibility: Costs, logistics, translation, rotation, itineration, public engagement — can a permanent ECA be sustained long-term, both financially and politically?

### Relevance for today (and future):

- In a time of growing democratic disaffection, polarization, and rise of populism in Europe, a proposal like the ECA offers a **creative rethinking of democratic legitimacy** — potentially renewing citizens’ faith in the EU as a truly transnational democratic project.
- It aligns with broader global trends of democratic innovation: deliberative mini-publics, citizens’ assemblies on climate, participatory budgeting, etc. The book thus connects EU institutional reform to wider worldwide movements for democratic renewal.

- Even if a full ECA never materializes, the debates in this book can inform **incremental reforms** — such as issue-specific citizens’ panels, improved participatory mechanisms in the EU institutions, or more structured citizen consultation. These could strengthen democratic legitimacy and inclusion without the huge institutional overhaul a permanent ECA would require.
- 

## 6. My Evaluation — Strengths and Limits

### Strengths:

- The book is comprehensive: it brings together a wide range of perspectives — normative theory, institutional design, political realism — enabling a serious, multidimensional debate rather than a one-sided proposal.
- It situates the ECA proposal within both democratic theory and real-world democratic crises: the argument is not ideological, but responsive to current democratic deficits (alienation, lack of representation, technocracy).
- It balances ambition with caution: rather than presenting a utopia, it highlights trade-offs, design challenges, and the need for experimentation, adaptation, and co-creation.

### Limits / Reservations:

- The central normative appeal — deliberation + sortition + rotation — may appeal mainly to political theorists; its democratic legitimacy in practice remains uncertain, especially for a large and diverse polity like the EU.
  - The lack of concrete mechanisms for accountability, follow-up, and enforcement means that even well-intentioned assemblies might produce deliberative outcomes with limited political impact.
  - Implementation feasibility — logistics, cost, translation, sustaining public attention — is uncertain; the proposal might remain more a theoretical aspiration than a viable institutional reform.
- 

## Conclusion

“Should a Citizens’ Assembly Complement the European Parliament?” is a landmark contribution to debates about EU democracy. It reframes the question not merely as “How to fix the European Parliament?” but as “What would a truly democratic, inclusive, transnational European polity look like?” By envisioning a permanent, pan-European, randomly selected Citizens’ Assembly — embedded in local contexts, rotating, deliberative, and connected to citizens across borders — the contributors ask us to reimagine representation, participation, and belonging.

While the proposal faces significant normative, practical, and institutional challenges, the book’s value lies in opening a credible, well-argued path for democratic innovation at the EU level. Even if a full ECA is never realized, the debate helps clarify what is at stake —

legitimacy, inclusion, public ownership of Europe — and why transforming European democracy may require more than electoral reforms.

---

ChatGPT said:

Below is a **crisp, high-level, debate-ready list** of the **15 most important “pros and cons”** distilled from the book *Should a Citizens’ Assembly Complement the European Parliament?* (EUI, 2025).

I divide them into **10 key PRO arguments** and **5 major CON arguments**, mirroring the balance in the volume.

---

# Top 15 Arguments on a Permanent European Citizens’ Assembly (ECA)

*(10 Pros – 5 Cons)*

---

## I. The 10 Strongest Arguments *For* a European Citizens’ Assembly

### 1. Remedying the EU’s Democratic Disconnect

A permanent ECA gives ordinary citizens a structured voice at the EU level, reducing alienation from remote, technocratic decision-making.

### 2. Complementing, Not Competing with, the European Parliament

The ECA adds deliberative, inclusive representation to electoral representation. It is an institutional **addition**, not a threat to parliamentary sovereignty.

### 3. Enhancing Legitimacy Through Sortition and Deliberation

Random selection yields **descriptive representation** of Europe’s social diversity; structured deliberation improves the quality of decisions and public trust.

### 4. Strengthening a Transnational Public Sphere

Bringing citizens from all member states into direct conversation builds empathy, understanding, and a shared sense of European belonging.

## **5. Addressing Policy Areas Poorly Handled by Electoral Politics**

An ECA is well-suited to long-term, cross-border issues (climate, digital governance, migration, future generations), less distorted by party cycles or national politics.

## **6. Overcoming Populism and Polarisation**

Mini-publics often show depolarising effects: citizens revise extreme views when exposed to evidence and plural perspectives.

## **7. Democratizing Agenda-Setting**

By giving the ECA the power to introduce topics to the EP or European Council, citizens gain meaningful influence at the front end of policy cycles.

## **8. Permanent Innovation vs. Ad-Hoc Consultations**

Unlike temporary panels, the ECA becomes a **standing democratic infrastructure**—institutional memory, stable capacity, continuous learning, continuous public input.

## **9. Itinerant Operation Reconnects EU Politics to Local Europe**

By rotating through cities and regions, the ECA “brings Europe home,” engaging communities and producing visibility beyond Brussels.

## **10. Aligning with Global Democratic Innovation Trends**

Citizens’ assemblies are proliferating worldwide. The EU could become a global leader in institutionalizing deliberation at a supranational scale.

---

# **II. The 5 Strongest Arguments *Against* a European Citizens’ Assembly**

## **1. Weak or Ambiguous Democratic Legitimacy**



Unlike elected officials, randomly selected citizens lack electoral accountability. Who are they answerable to? Who do they represent? This is the single biggest criticism in the volume.

## **2. Risk of Undermining Representative Democracy & Parties**

Creating a powerful new body may further weaken political parties — already fragile — and confuse citizens about who really governs.

## **3. Doubts About Public Visibility and Impact**

There is a danger the ECA becomes an expensive, symbolic exercise with little influence: another “Brussels bubble” without mass resonance.

## **4. Institutional Complexity and Potential Conflict**

Embedding the ECA into the EU’s already complex architecture risks creating overlapping mandates, procedural confusion, and inter-institutional rivalry.

## **5. Practical Challenges: Cost, Logistics, Selection Bias**

- Multi-language interpretation
  - Rotating locations
  - Recruitment challenges
  - Inclusivity of marginalized populations
- All complicate implementation and risk compromising representativeness.

---

# **III. Cross-Cutting Trade-Offs the Book Emphasizes**

These are neither pro nor con, but **structural dilemmas** that must be resolved:

### **A. Deliberative Quality vs. Scale**

Large assemblies become unwieldy; small assemblies risk insufficient diversity.

### **B. Permanence vs. Flexibility**

Permanent bodies build expertise but risk bureaucratization or co-optation.

### **C. Agenda-Setting Power vs. Democratic Accountability**

More power increases relevance but amplifies legitimacy objections.

#### **D. Transnational Representation vs. National Sensibilities**

How to balance demographic proportionality with geographic equality?

#### **E. Experimentalism vs. Institutionalization**

Should the EU start with pilots? Or go directly to a formal ECA?  
Many contributors argue for gradualism.

---

## **IV. Overall Synthesis (2 sentences)**

The strongest case **for** a permanent ECA is that it would enrich Europe's democracy by integrating deliberative, inclusive, transnational citizen input into a system currently dominated by elites and parties.

The strongest case **against** is that without clear accountability, defined powers, and strong public anchoring, such an assembly may generate confusion, institutional friction, and symbolic participation rather than real democratic empowerment.