

Should a Citizens' Assembly Complement the European Parliament?

Edited by 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](#).

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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](#)
- 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](#)
- 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](#)
- 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](#)

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

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
- 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
- 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

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
- 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
- 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

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
- 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
- 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

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
- 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
- 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

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
- 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

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
- 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

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
- 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
- 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

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
- **Richard Bellamy** examines whether a citizens' assembly could equalize representation and bridge the so-called "democratic 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
- **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
- 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
- **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

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

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 “democratic” 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, iteration, 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. Remedyng 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.