

Working Group 1 Report: Is There a Choice Between Democracy and Efficiency?

The working group explored whether democracy and efficiency should be seen as competing objectives. Participants largely agreed that democratic participation can strengthen, rather than hinder, effective governance by creating ownership, trust, and more sustainable policy outcomes.

Discussions emphasized that democracy in Europe should be understood as a network of interconnected local, national, and European communities. Since democratic life remains rooted primarily at the local and national levels, European integration should rely on cooperation across borders rather than on simple majority rule. Building these horizontal connections was seen as essential for a resilient and legitimate Union.

A key theme was the need to rethink efficiency. Fast, top-down decisions may appear effective in the short term, but policies lacking public ownership often face resistance during implementation. Deliberative processes may require more time, yet they can produce more durable and widely accepted outcomes. In this sense, citizens' assemblies were seen as valuable mechanisms for connecting citizens' preferences to institutional agendas, provided that they are accompanied by clear accountability and meaningful follow-up.

Several participants proposed the creation of a digital EU-level citizens' assembly inspired by Taiwan's Pol.is platform. Citizens could submit proposals and complaints online, while AI-supported tools would identify areas of consensus rather than amplify polarization. Proposals reaching a certain threshold would require a response from EU institutions. Rather than creating new bodies, these mechanisms could build on structures established after the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Another recurring theme was decentralization. Participants argued that greater responsibility should be given to regions, cities, and local communities. Energy policy was highlighted as a successful example of this approach. Experiences from Germany, Italy, France, and Ireland show how energy communities and community-owned infrastructure can increase citizen involvement, strengthen local ownership, and improve policy implementation. However, participants stressed that decentralization should not lead to isolated local initiatives. Local communities should be connected across borders to foster exchange and avoid fragmentation.

Education was also identified as a key element in strengthening European democracy. A lack of understanding of the EU contributes to distrust and low participation. Participants therefore proposed stronger civic education, greater cultural and linguistic exchange, and wider use of digital tools to facilitate communication across languages and generations. These measures were viewed as important steps toward creating a stronger sense of European awareness without replacing national identities.

Finally, the group discussed how expertise and democratic participation can complement one another. Technical issues, such as nuclear energy, should be communicated in a clear and accessible way, allowing citizens to engage with evidence-based proposals through public consultations and deliberative forums.

Overall, the working group concluded that democracy and efficiency are not mutually exclusive. Effective governance requires citizen ownership, accountability, and stronger connections between local communities and European institutions. Democracy should therefore be understood not as an obstacle to efficiency, but as a means of producing more legitimate, resilient, and lasting solutions.

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