

## History

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) enables European citizens to make a direct request to the European Commission to propose legislation in an area over which it has competence. Created by the Lisbon Treaty the ECI is a relatively new democratic procedure which was launched at the beginning of 2012. At the time of its unveiling the ECI was widely celebrated as a possible solution to the '**democratic deficit**' seen to plague citizens' perception of the EU; however, its reception has not been without criticism.

## How does European Citizen's Initiative work?

There are a number of rules that have to be met for an ECI to be valid. To launch an initiative, a 'Citizens' Committee' must be established, which must consist of at least seven people from seven different EU member states, all old enough to vote. Once a committee has been set up the initiative needs to be registered on the European Commission's European Citizens' Initiative website in at least one of the official EU languages, where it can then be approved by the Commission and thus judged open for signatures. Each initiative has one year to collect one million signatures of support to qualify for consideration by the Commission.

The one million signatures needed to support the initiative need to come from at least 7 of the 27 member states. Each member state has a minimum number of citizens that need to be involved, which is proportionate to the number of MEPs in each country.

As important as collecting the signatures, the ECI needs to appeal to an area over which the Commission has **competence** otherwise, even if the ECI were to be successful, the Commission would not have power to propose legislation in that area. It has a wide and varied list of competences including, but not limited to, agriculture and fisheries; justice, home affairs and security; free movement of goods, people, services and capital; and environment and climate change.

If the ECI meets the above relevant criteria it is then put before the Commission, however the Commission is under no obligation to take up the initiative and propose legislation in the way the ECI suggests. For example, the first ECI to be submitted to the EU Commission was 'My Vote against Nuclear Power' which proposed phasing out the use of all nuclear energy within the EU. The Commission rejected the initiative, citing the EURATOM Treaty as preventing a citizens' initiative against nuclear energy.

From January to March 2014, a project was run by the European Ombudsman to investigate and improve the effectiveness of the ECI, during which interested parties could give feedback on ECI's performance. The European Commission has been asked to respond.

## Examples of current open initiatives

### 'Stop vivisection' – Deadline 01/11/2013

'Considering clear ethical objections to animal experiments and solid scientific principles that invalidate the "animal model" for predicting human response, we urge the European Commission ... to present a new proposal that does away with animal experimentation and instead makes compulsory the use - in biomedical and toxicological research - of data directly relevant for the human species.'

### 'One of us' – Deadline 10/05/2013

'Juridical protection of the dignity, the right to life and of the integrity of every human being from conception in the areas of EU competence in which such protection is of particular importance.'

### 'Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity!' – Deadline 01/11/2013

'We invite the European Commission to propose legislation implementing the human right to water and sanitation as recognised by the United Nations, and promoting the provision of water and sanitation as essential public services for all.'

## Arguments

### For

- ❖ The ECI encourages citizen participation in the EU legislative process.
- ❖ It gives citizens an important voice and diminishes the idea of a democratic deficit.
- ❖ The necessity for votes to be collected from citizens of different countries means petitions with a more 'European outlook' rather than national, are more likely to gain support.

### Against

- ❖ The rules governing the start-up of an initiative are unduly complex and likely to put people off using it.
- ❖ There has been some suggestion that the process could be hijacked by NGOs and businesses instead of the 'ordinary citizen'.
- ❖ Even if a petition collects the required number of signatures there is no guarantee of change as the Commission is only obliged to 'examine' the area of competence, it does not have to put any amendments forward.

## Technical Terms

- ❖ **Democratic deficit:** the theory that the EU is too distant from - and unaccountable to - the people it governs.
- ❖ **Competence:** areas of legislation over which the EU has authority.

## Links

- ❖ <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative>
- ❖ [http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/?page\\_id=2](http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/?page_id=2)
- ❖ <http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/press/release.faces/en/53306/html.bookmark>