

Empowering Citizens in Shaping Europe's Energy Future

Op-Ed by Vice-President for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica

Friday 23 February is a landmark day as we launch another European Citizens' Panel, this time on Energy Efficiency. It is another important step in this unique voyage we have embarked on together with people from every corner of Europe, a journey that began with the Conference on the Future of Europe. Ever since, we have been working towards the building of an innovative democratic ecosystem. We started with the three Citizens' Panels last year: on Food Waste, Virtual Worlds, and Learning Mobility, each of which had a determining impact on policy initiatives. This path has not just been about fostering deliberation and bringing institutions closer to citizens, but about genuinely embedding citizens' voices into the fabric of our policymaking.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a groundbreaking exercise in participative and deliberative democracy. It engaged thousands of Europeans in meaningful discussions about their hopes and dreams for the EU. The insights gathered have been invaluable, shaping our understanding and approach towards a more cohesive, resilient, and forward-looking Europe. It is in this spirit of continued engagement and collaboration that we launch the European Citizens' Panel on Energy Efficiency.

But what exactly are these panels, and how do they function? At their core, European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) are innovative safe and transparent spaces for deliberative democracy. They bring together Europeans of all generations, from diverse backgrounds to discuss, debate, and contribute ideas on specific policy areas. The Panels are not consultative bodies; they are forums for empowerment, where citizens very quickly get up to speed on the topic at hand, deliberate on it and then submit their thoughts and proposals. It is in this concrete way that citizens can influence the direction of EU policies. We are making the most of that dynamic space between elections. We are strengthening our representative democracy. Because while voting is important, and I urge everyone to vote in the upcoming European elections, we should not reduce our democracy to this single act once every few years.

Participants are chosen through a rigorous process of random selection that ensures a broad demographic representation, including age, geographic location (all member states and urban/rural), socio-economic background, and educational level. This diversity is crucial, as it ensures a wealth of perspectives and experiences, enriching the discussions and the outcomes. We do however introduce a slight over-representation of younger people. As we did in the Conference, at least one-third of each panel is composed of young people aged 16 to 25.

The ECP on Energy Efficiency is particularly timely. Europe must address the dual challenges of climate change and energy security, so the need for innovative, sustainable solutions has never been more urgent. This panel will provide a platform for citizens to voice their ideas, concerns, and visions for a more energy-efficient Europe. Their contributions will be instrumental in guiding the EU's efforts to reduce energy consumption, transition to clean energy sources, and ensure a sustainable future for all.

This new democratic ecosystem that we are building is a testament to our commitment to not only listen, but to act on the proposals of our citizens. It reflects our belief in the power of collective, intergenerational intelligence and the role of participative democracy in shaping policies that are more inclusive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse aspirations of the European populace. We hear a lot about the need for citizens to trust politicians. As a former mayor, I believe that we politicians must also trust citizens. So I urge everyone to keep an eye on us as well, because the dialogue goes both ways.

As we launch the Citizens' Panel on Energy Efficiency, I would reiterate that this is far more than just a forum for discussion or a focus group. We must show that democracy can deliver for citizens, not only by acting on the outcome but also through our robust feedback mechanism. The citizens who are giving their time to provide precious input to our policy-making deserve that we also come back to them and convey what we have done with their proposals.

Citizens' panels are a bold step towards a more open, democratic, participatory, and citizen-focused European Union. They are about empowering every individual to play an active role in our common future, ensuring that the Europe of tomorrow is built not just for the people, but with the people. And especially including people who ordinarily would not necessarily participate in such a process, hence the importance of random selection.

In the weeks ahead, as we delve into the work of the panel, let us carry forward the spirit of collaboration and engagement that has been the hallmark of our journey so far. Together, we can forge a path towards a more sustainable, energy-efficient, and resilient Europe. And there will be more panels to come!