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Participation

## How Belgium is Giving Citizens a Say on AI

Does the public have a role to play in shaping the vision behind European AI policy? Within the scope of its ongoing Presidency of the European Council, Belgium has convened a citizens' assembly on AI, with the aim of giving a representative group of citizens a say. The organisers hope it will be just one of many such ventures in future. We spoke to some of the team behind the assembly.

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by Innovation in Politics Institute

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A few weeks before the European Parliament's final debate on the AI Act, 60 randomly selected members of the Belgian public convened in Brussels for a discussion of their own. The aim was not to debate a particular piece of legislation, but to help shape a European vision on the future of AI, drawing on the views, concerns, and ideas of the public.

They were taking part in a citizens' assembly on AI, held as part of Belgium's presidency of the European Council. When Belgium assumed the presidency for six months beginning in January 2024, they [announced](#) they would be placing "special focus" on citizens' participation. The [citizen panel on AI](#) is the largest of the scheduled participation projects. Over a total of three weekends, participants are deliberating on a range of topics including the impact of AI on work, education, and democracy.

The assembly comes at a point in time with rising calls for more public inputs on the topic of AI. Some big tech firms have begun to respond with [participation projects](#) of their own. But this is the first time an EU institution has launched a consultation on the topic. The organisers hope it will pave the way for more to come.

## The EU's first citizens' assembly on AI

Over the last two decades, the EU has been shaping a distinctively European response to the regulation of digital technology. It has established an international reputation for [striking a balance](#) between strong individual privacy rights and

this to AI. Yet as the AI rollout continues, it is clear that this alone will not be enough. The technology is already having a direct impact on the lives of millions of people across Europe, and the long-term impact is hard to predict. A citizens' assembly is one way of ensuring that future legislation is anchored in the concerns and needs of the public.

The assembly has already met twice, on the weekends of 24 & 25 February and 23 & 24 March. The organisers left the scope of the discussion open, so that the participants could raise the topics they deemed important. In the first meeting, they established 6 areas of focus concerning the impact of AI: Environment, Defence and Security, Health, the place of the EU in the World, Work and Education, Democracy and Media.

## High levels of interest

The organisers report an enthusiastic response among the participants. Already at the planning stage, there were signs of high levels of public interest. Of the 16,200 people initially invited, over 1,000 registered an interest – a  large proportion for a [sortition process](). A group of 60 participants was then selected using stratified sampling to ensure that the final group was representative of the population as a whole.

Beginning with the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT in November 2022, there has been an explosion of public interest in the topic of generative AI. International polls [suggest]() that alongside curiosity for the topic, there is also growing

is one of the reasons why involving the public in the decision-making process is crucial.

Inès da Câmara Santa Clara Gomes, Attaché to the Belgian EU Presidency 2024, is one of the organisers of the citizens' panel. She believes it is crucially important to include the public in discussions of AI.

"AI is a complex topic, of course, but it is on a lot of people's minds", she told *Democracy Technologies*. "It's already everywhere, it really impacts our daily lives. We have seen that the topic raises a lot of emotions. A lot of people expressed their fears relating to AI. Listening to these fears is important, as it helps to understand people's social concerns about AI."

## "Nothing is too complex for citizens to have a say on"

Citizens' assemblies and other forms of mini-public are often used to address controversial or complex topics which require an intensive engagement with a topic. Experience with deliberative formats has shown that the public do well discussing complex topics – whether it is [soil quality](#) in Ireland or laws on [mitochondrial donation](#) in Australia. Typically, a range of topic experts are invited to provide guidance. Yet the participants are encouraged to pose critical questions, and reach their own conclusions.

For Jonathan Moskovic, Advisor on democratic innovation for the president of the French-speaking Brussels Parliament, and a member of the oversight committee for the citizens' panel on AI, this is a the format.

enough time, and use inclusive methods, it's possible for everyone to have their say in a process like this one."

## Aims of the assembly

The use of citizens' assemblies has grown substantially over the past two decades, with various countries in Europe and beyond using them on a regular basis. While the events themselves generally receive positive feedback from the participants, the question of what comes next remains tricky. Typically, they end by issuing a set of recommendations for their governments to follow. But the impact of these recommendations varies greatly.

This is further complicated by a small yet growing backlash against the format. Various critics have suggested that citizens' assemblies take power away from democratically elected representatives, putting major decisions in the hand of a small group of citizens. Arguments like these contributed to the British Labour Party's reversal of their decision to introduce the format if they win the next general election.

Yet this hinges on a misunderstanding of the role citizens' assemblies typically play. In most cases, including Belgium's assembly on AI, they are not designed to feed directly into legislation. Instead, they issue a set of recommendations that provides guidance to legislators, and helps shape a broader conversation.

Maarten Demarsin, Attaché to the Belgian EU and one of the organisers of the

European Council launches a citizens assembly of its own, this would be an amazing success, because it would show the consultation is really being taken seriously."

## Youth participation: from 16 up

Aside from being the first EU-level citizens' assembly to address the topic of AI, the assembly also has another distinctive feature: a focus on youth inclusion.

Following a recent change in law, 2024 will be the first time that all Belgian citizens aged 16 and over will be able to vote in EU elections. In doing so, Belgium joins Germany, Austria, and Malta as one of the countries with the lowest voting age for EU elections.

The organisers of the assembly decided this should be reflected in the format, so they invited citizens from aged 16 up to take part. Furthermore, inspired by the Conference on the Future of Europe, one third of the participants are young people, especially since they will be affected most by AI. In total, a third of the participants are aged between 16 and 24, including three under 18s.

## More public consultations on AI to come?

The participants will meet for the third and final weekend of deliberations on 20 & 21 April. At a ceremony on 25 May, they will share their conclusions with an audience of Belgian and European policymakers, press, private sector and civil society

countries will follow Belgium's leading in applying the method to AI remains to be seen.

During the final plenary debate on the AI Act, the Internal Market Committee co-rapporteur Brando Benifei (S&D, Italy) praised the legislation, saying: "We ensured that human beings and European values are at the very centre of AI's development".

Legislation may be one way of achieving this goal. But going forward, it will be crucial for lawmakers to listen to the public, to ensure their concerns are heard and views are reflected.

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