

# SHAPING AND REFORMING EUROPEAN ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP FROM 2019 TO 2024 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

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## *Abstract*

*In a European context, active citizenship refers to the acquisition and exercise of rights for civic and political participation. The current contribution will emphasize the importance of this issue in the 2024 European elections. The study compares official views and papers emphasizing active citizenship from the 2019 European elections to those utilized in the 2024 European elections. In the time frame between the two European elections, the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021), European Democracy Action Plan or Defence of Democracy packages significantly expanded the ideas put forward during the electoral campaign of 2019 in two directions: to enable Europeans to share their ideas on the issues they considered important to build the future of our Union and to seek the views of the hardest to reach, those who rarely engage with politics or perhaps have not voted in previous European elections. They were supplemented by measures that increase understanding and public participation in European decision-making, which are critical to ensuring that EU people believe their voice is heard and that voting counts.*

**Keywords:** active citizenship, democratic participation, 2024 European elections

Active citizenship within the European Union has been a cornerstone of democratic engagement, signifying not just the right to vote, but also a deeper participation in the civic and political life of the Union. Active citizenship has been a fashionable term in the last twenty years for the European Union. Still, the EU has made no substantial progress in offering an easy-to-understand or accepted definition. The concept has evolved notably between the 2019 and 2024 European elections, driven by the EU's efforts to make democratic processes more inclusive, participatory, and transparent.

Without losing sight of the fact that the chosen subject is not new, or lacking interest, this article examines the transformation in the approach to active

citizenship from the 2019 to the 2024 European elections. It delves into how initiatives like the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021) and various EU-driven measures have altered the landscape of political participation, emphasizing the importance of these changes for the 2024 elections and beyond. The research relies on discursive institutionalism to investigate how different actors within the EU, including member states, institutions, and non-governmental organizations, contribute to discourses on active citizenship and analysing power dynamics inherent in the discursive construction of this concept. Based on a qualitative methodology, the present analysis takes into consideration official documents, surveys, and academic articles.

## Active Citizenship: A Fundamental EU Value

Active citizenship encompasses the rights and responsibilities that allow EU citizens to participate in the political process, including voting in European elections, engaging in public debate, and participating in EU consultations. It reflects the broader principles of democracy, inclusivity, and public involvement in shaping the Union's future. Even if active citizenship has generally accepted contours, the concept itself does not yet benefit from a definition recognised by theorists and practitioners alike, much less by the ordinary citizen as the main beneficiary of the approaches in this regard. The European Migration Network refers to active citizenship as an „umbrella term“: *Active citizenship is an umbrella term for the acquisition and exercise of rights for political participation. As such, it includes citizenship and residence, membership in (political) organizations, voting, running for office, volunteering, or participation in political protest. In some cases, it can include subjective indicators such as 'sense of belonging', 'institutional trust', 'awareness of discrimination', and 'public attitudes towards immigration'*<sup>1</sup>. The EC Joint Research Centre, Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen (2009) promotes a broader definition of active citizenship as participation in civil society, community, and/or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

As Paul Magnette (2003) has indisputably argued, civic participation has always been limited, in all types of democracy and at all levels of decision-making. Still, a significant number of European citizens do not feel informed about European issues and do not understand its political system<sup>3</sup>. Most

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, T. Huddleston, J. Tjaden, J. Niessen, (2013), *Using EU indicators of immigrant integration - Final report for Directorate-General for Home Affairs*, Publications Office, p. 70, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2837/34091>, accessed 19.05.2024.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Research Centre, Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen, A. Manca, B. Hoskins, M. Mascherini, (2009), *The characterization of active citizenship in Europe*, Publications Office, p. 10, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2788/35605>, accessed 19.05.2024.

<sup>3</sup> P. Magnette (2003), „European Governance and Civic Participation: Beyond Elitist Citizenship?“, *Political Studies*, Vol. 51, p. 5, <https://ecas.issuelab.org/resources/18875/18875.pdf>, accessed 19.05.2024.

citizens try to understand public issues and participate in conventional electoral events. At a general level, EU surveys have traditionally indicated that participation in European elections has been much lower than in national elections. These considerations have become more relevant when considering that the act of voting is compulsory in some of the EU Member States. Most official EU reports dedicated to European civil society and the importance of citizens do not consider it as active citizenship<sup>4</sup>. Back in 2003, Magnette considered that the Commission's pledges included in its White Paper on Governance (2001) did not have the potential to curb this trend.<sup>5</sup>

But the change is near, as we intend to demonstrate in the present research based on the developments that have taken place after the 2019 European Elections. Several initiatives recognize that active citizenship is essential for the legitimacy of European institutions and for fostering a sense of European identity. They are not only designed to stimulate the involvement of active citizens and groups in some precise procedures but also to enhance the general level of civic consciousness and participation.

## **The 2019 European Elections: A Baseline**

The 2019 European elections marked a turning point in terms of voter turnout and political engagement. For the first time in 20 years, voter turnout passed over the 50% threshold across the EU. The record-high turnout in the 2019 European Parliament elections showed an engagement of EU citizens in shaping the future of the EU, especially among its youth. The increase in turnout was driven by young and first-time voters<sup>6</sup>. The last elections were also the most digital European Parliamentary elections<sup>7</sup>. Civic duty and favourable opinions of the EU have gained prominence as reasons to vote. The most common reason for voting was because people felt it was their duty as a citizen (52%)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Voting is compulsory in Belgium, Greece, Bulgaria and Luxembourg.

<sup>5</sup> P. Magnette, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2020), *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. EU Citizenship Report 2020 Empowering citizens and protecting their rights*, No. COM/2020/730 final, Brussels, 15.12.2020, p. 3, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0730>, accessed 20.05.2024

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (2020), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Economic and Social Committee. Report on the 2019 elections to the European Parliament {SWD(2020) 113 final}*, No. COM(2020) 252 final, Brussels, 19.6.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0252>, accessed 20.05.2024.

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament (2019), *EP Special Eurobarometer 91.5 The 2019 European Elections: Have European Elections Entered a New Dimension?* Brussels, European Union, 2019, p. 3, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019/post-election-survey-2019-complete-results/executive-summary/en-post-election-survey-2019-executive-summary.pdf>, accessed 20.05.2024

This resurgence in electoral participation signalled a renewed interest in EU politics and a desire among citizens to have a say in the direction of the Union.

The 2019 European elections turnout shows easily how things work when coherent recommendations are followed. One example is the European Parliament and its *Resolution of 12 February 2019 on the implementation of the Treaty provisions related to EU citizenship*<sup>9</sup>. In simple terms, it encourages the Commission to step up the promotion of democratic participation by intensifying its dialogue with citizens, enhancing citizens' understanding of the role of EU legislation in their daily lives, and underlining their right to vote in and stand for election at local, national and European level. It invites the Commission to exploit, in this regard, social media and digital tools with a special emphasis on increasing the participation of young people and persons with disabilities; calls for the development and implementation of e-democracy tools, such as online platforms, to involve citizens more directly in EU democratic life, thus fostering their engagement. Another recommendation is the emphasis on the quality of civic education for all ages (formal and informal) for the confident exercise of citizens' democratic rights and the proper functioning of a democratic society<sup>10</sup>, which despite the existing EU programmes, does not manage to acquire the right level of importance.

However, the 2019 elections also highlighted certain challenges, such as the uneven engagement across Member States, the growing influence of populist movements, and a general scepticism toward EU institutions. These issues underscored the need for more inclusive and engaging platforms to connect with citizens and involve them in decision-making processes. The political guidelines of the EC President von der Leyen for 2019-2024 set the work of the European institutions around an ambitious headline for Europe on a new push for European democracy. The document signalled from the beginning the importance attached by the new European executive to a better connection with the EU citizens. As the next sections of the present article intend to highlight, several initiatives of the von der Leyen Commission were specifically designed to strengthen the bonds between the European level and the European citizens.

## **The Conference on the Future of Europe: A Turning Point**

The 2019-2024 can be described as a period where the European Commission has acknowledged EU citizenship as a key component in the next step towards active citizenship. As already mentioned, the main incentive had been the conduct of the 2019 European elections and the desire to prove that the EU citizens mattered, and their voices were heard. The Commission acknowledged the duty to improve the role of democratic participation through various inspiring

<sup>9</sup> European Parliament (2020), *Implementation of the Treaty provisions related to EU Citizenship. European Parliament resolution of 12 February 2019 on the implementation of the Treaty provisions related to EU citizenship*, No. 2018/2111(INI), *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 449/6, 23.12.2020, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2020.449.01.0006.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2020.449.01.0006.01.ENG), accessed 19.05.2024.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

legislative acts since the number of loopholes in the electoral process was still high although the overall turnout was satisfying.

Among the most representative initiatives of the von der Leyen Commission immediately after assuming office in 2019 was the launch of the preparations for a landmark Conference on the Future of Europe aimed at deepening citizen engagement in EU governance and providing a platform for Europeans to discuss the issues that mattered most to them and to offer their input on the future direction of the EU. The Conference had two key intentions:

1. Inclusivity: It sought to reach out to all segments of society, including those who had previously shown little interest in EU politics or who had never voted in European elections.
2. Transparency: It aimed to create a transparent and open dialogue between citizens and EU institutions, with a focus on ensuring that citizen voices were heard and valued.

The Conference took place from April 2021 to May 2022 and enabled people from different backgrounds and regions from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape Europe's common future through a combination of online platforms, citizens' panels, and broader consultations. The result was a *Report on the Final Outcome* published in May 2022 containing 49 proposals and 326 specific measures on nine main themes: climate change and the environment; health; economy, social justice, and jobs; the EU in the world; values and rights, rule of law, security; digital transformation; European democracy; migration; education, culture, youth, and sport<sup>11</sup>. The chapter on *European Democracy* included broad proposals on citizens' information, participation and youth (e.g. to increase citizens' participation and youth involvement in the democracy at the European Union level to develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective); democracy and elections (e.g. to strengthen European democracy by bolstering its foundations, boosting participation in European Parliament elections and ensuring a strong link between citizens and their elected representatives); EU decision-making process (e.g. to improve the EU's decision-making process to ensure the EU's capability to act, while taking into account the interest of all Member States and guaranteeing a transparent and understandable process for the citizens). The Conference proposals, set out in the final report handed over to the Presidents of the European Parliament, Council and European Commission were wide-ranging, ambitious, and forward-looking<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission (2024), *Conference of the European Union*, [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en), accessed 20.05.2024.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2022), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Conference on the Future of Europe. Putting Vision into Concrete Action*, No. COM(2022) 404 final, Brussels, 17.6.2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0404>, accessed 20.05.2024.

They added strength to the legislative act on EU Citizenship and the European Union's Youth Strategy (2019-2027) and gave momentum to other early initiatives of the von der Leyen Commission for instance the 2020 Citizenship Report and the European Democracy Action Plan package, with an increased interest in promoting active citizenship and participatory democracy.

The 2020 Citizenship Report set out several concrete actions and priorities around main themes like strengthening democratic participation, citizens' empowerment, and fostering inclusion of citizens in the EU or protecting and promoting EU citizenship<sup>13</sup>. The proposed actions included updating directives on voting rights to clarify the situation of mobile EU citizens in municipal and European elections, continuing to collaborate with member States through the European Cooperation Network on Elections, and appealing to independent election observation, including monitoring by citizens<sup>14</sup>. Empowered citizens should have the tools, the channels, and the skills to make their voices heard in the public arena so they can contribute directly to shaping public policies at all levels. The Report made special reference to the Conference on the Future of Europe, seen as a major pan-European deliberative democracy exercise, a new public forum for an open, inclusive, transparent, and structured debate with citizens around some key priorities and challenges. The European Parliament offered its full support for the 2020 Citizenship Report. The voting rights and the Commission's declaration that it would work with Member States and Parliament to guarantee the political rights of disadvantaged groups of citizens (such as LGBTIQ people, migrants and refugees, people from low-income households, racial, ethnic or linguistic minorities, and persons with disabilities)<sup>15</sup> to increase their participation in the 2024 European elections represented the main actions that attracted attention.

The European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), put forward in 2020, benefitted considerably from the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The plan set out a reinforced EU policy framework and specific measures to promote free and fair elections and strong democratic participation; support free and independent media; and counter disinformation. It acknowledged that maintaining democracy required more determined action to protect electoral processes, preserve open democratic debate, and update safeguards

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<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2020), *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. EU Citizenship Report 2020 Empowering citizens and protecting their rights*, No. COM/2020/730 final, Brussels, 15.12.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0730>, accessed 20.05.2024.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> European Parliament (2022), *EU Citizenship Report 2020. European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2022 on the EU Citizenship Report 2020: empowering citizens and protecting their rights*, No. 2021/2099(INI)), *Official Journal of the European Union C347*, 9.9.2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0081>, Accessed 20.05.2024.

in the light of new digital realities<sup>16</sup>. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) mainly supports the proposed measures in the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) but draws attention to the fact that more should be done on the importance of active citizenship exercised through the involvement of civil society. The EESC considered that the EDAP should include a large-scale initiative to foster education on democracy and fundamental rights, which is instrumental for safeguarding democratic values and active citizenship, in particular concerning young people<sup>17</sup>.

To complement and deepen this action, the Commission continued with the Defence of Democracy package in December 2023. Taking stock of the state of implementation of the actions under EDAP, the Defence of Democracy package contained a legislative proposal that would enhance transparency and democratic accountability of interest representation activities on behalf of third countries which aimed at influencing policies, decision-making, and the democratic space. It also included two recommendations that aim to promote free, fair, and resilient elections and the participation of citizens and civil society organizations in policymaking.

All the above documents and initiatives contained recommendations dedicated to active citizenship, free and fair elections, democratic participation, EU citizenship, and quality civic education for all ages that were promised to be brought about before the 2024 European elections, 6-9 June. The last part of the present contribution will attempt to take stock of the degree to which the intentions of the von der Leyen Commission came to bear fruit and add to a transformed relationship with European citizens.

## Active Citizenship and the 2024 European Elections

As already discussed in the previous section, the lessons learned from the Conference on the Future of Europe have had a significant impact on the lead-up to the 2024 European elections. The increased focus on active citizenship has led to a greater emphasis on public participation, with a range of initiatives designed to engage a wider audience. Key developments include:

- enhanced communication: the need to invest in better communication strategies to reach a broader audience, using social media and other platforms to engage with citizens.
- youth engagement: the necessity of encouraging young people to participate in the political process, recognizing their role in shaping the EU's future.

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission (2020), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan*, No. COM(2020) 790 final, Brussels, 03.12.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0790>, Accessed 20.05.2024.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

- localized engagement: efforts to engage with citizens at a local level, emphasizing the importance of EU policies on daily life and addressing the „democratic deficit“ often cited in EU critiques.

In the context of the present research, a simple search of EUR-LEX for „active citizenship“ in EU law, covering the period 2019-2024, showed that the European Commission, European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union harnessed the term in an impressive number of documents prepared by them. There is still no commonly agreed definition of active citizenship, although the term was employed no less than 233 times, mainly in preparatory documents.

<b>Keyword:</b> <b>ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>
<b>EUROPEAN COMMISSION</b>  <b>Total: 90</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>8</b>
	4 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	19 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	16 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	22 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	18 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	8 <i>Preparatory documents</i>
	1 <i>Announcement</i>	2 <i>Legal acts</i>				
<b>EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT</b>  <b>Total: 39</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
	9 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	3 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	10 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	4 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	3 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	
	1 <i>Legal act</i>	1 <i>Minutes</i>	6 <i>Legal acts</i>	1 <i>Legal acts</i>	1 <i>Legal acts</i>	
<b>COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION</b>  <b>Total: 104</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>
	30 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	16 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	43 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	10 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	14 <i>Preparatory documents</i>	3 <i>Preparatory documents</i>
	3 <i>Legal acts</i>	2 <i>Legal acts</i>	9 <i>Legal acts</i>	2 <i>Legal acts</i>	2 <i>Legal acts</i>	

**Source:** Research on EUR-LEX, Access to European Union Law, based on keyword: „active citizenship“ ([https://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?textScope0=te&lang=en&text=%22active+citizenship%22&qid=1715622896348&type=quick&sortOne=LEGAL\\_RELEVANCE\\_SORT&quickSearch=true&scope=EURLEX&sortOneOrder=desc&andText0=%22active+citizenship%22](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/search.html?textScope0=te&lang=en&text=%22active+citizenship%22&qid=1715622896348&type=quick&sortOne=LEGAL_RELEVANCE_SORT&quickSearch=true&scope=EURLEX&sortOneOrder=desc&andText0=%22active+citizenship%22), accessed 19.05.2024).

In general, the Commission hoped for the full engagement of the European Parliament and the Council to make decisive progress on all legislative proposals in the democracy area before the 2024 European parliamentary elections; and for the wide circle of national actors involved, public and private, to ensure the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan and the new Defence

of Democracy package<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, time remains the main enemy for the effective implementation of the recommendations by the Member States.

## Conclusion

The journey from the 2019 to the 2024 European elections has been marked by a renewed emphasis on active citizenship and public participation in EU governance. The Conference on the Future of Europe and subsequent initiatives have set the stage for a more inclusive and transparent democratic process. As the EU prepares for the 2024 elections, the focus on active citizenship is crucial in ensuring a vibrant and representative political landscape, where every voice counts and every vote matters.

The above-mentioned considerations have managed to raise awareness on mandatory issues:

- It is important to strengthen active citizenship and effective citizens' participation at the EU level through the acquisition of specific knowledge about the EU and the European dimension of the topics under discussion. EU needs to address the lack of familiarity with EU policies and decision-making among the general public through better education about the EU in schools<sup>19</sup>.
- Participation in elections is an essential component of a vibrant democracy. This goes beyond the right to vote and includes the possibility to stand as a candidate, to join a political party, to join the electoral process as an election official or election observer, and to access electoral information to support the free and fair expression of electoral preferences. All citizens should be able to participate effectively in the political life in the European Union<sup>20</sup>.

The European Parliament's Spring 2024 Eurobarometer survey reveals that Europeans are increasingly willing to vote in this year's European elections, with issues such as fighting poverty, supporting public health, strengthening the economy, and the EU defence and security at the top of their minds. For

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<sup>18</sup> European Commission (2023), „Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Defence of Democracy“, *COM(2023) 630 final*, Strasbourg, 12.12.2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0630>, Accessed 19.05.2024.

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament (2024), „European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2023 on Parliamentarism, European citizenship and democracy (2023/2017(INI)“, *Official Journal of the European Union C/2024/1769*, 22.3.2024, p. 7, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C\\_202401769](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202401769), accessed 19.05.2024.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission (2023), *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Under Article 25 TFEU. On progress towards effective EU citizenship 2020-2023*, *COM(2023) 931 final*, Brussels, 6.12.2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0931>, accessed 20.05.2024.

the new legislature of the European Parliament, a majority of citizens would like to see the institution play a more significant role with values such as peace and democracy the prime ones to defend<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> European Parliament (2024), *EP Spring 2024 Survey: Use your vote - Countdown to the European elections*, DG COMM | PUBLIC OPINION MONITORING UNIT, SPRING 2024, p. 5, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=91776>, accessed 20.05.2024.

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