

Tips for ECI Campaigns

from An ECI That Works!



Purpose of this document:

The ECI Campaign assembled learning from 16 early European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) campaigns in the publication *An ECI That Works!* (www.ecithatworks.org). Although designed to guide ECI reform, buried within its pages are many practical ECI campaigning ideas. This document synthesises these ideas into concrete tips for future ECI campaigns. It is designed to supplement, not replace, existing ECI guides.

1. Define success for yourself

Before deciding to use the ECI, consider various ways an ECI might help further your goals. Officially, a successful ECI is one that collects one million signatures. For many campaigners, success means a legislative proposal from the Commission. But there are other ways an ECI can succeed. Here are a few:

Demonstrate that an issue is legally within EU competence. ECIs must first pass a legal admissibility check with the European Commission to be registered. While registration does not guarantee future action, it could help prove that an issue is broadly within EU competence.

Build a new EU-wide network or expand your movement. The ECI offers a concrete and motivating goal around which activists across the EU can rally. As an official EU tool, it brings formal recognition and institutional support that informal petitions cannot match.

Draw attention to your issue and policy solution. The ECI can provide an excellent platform to peak interest, build understanding, prove legitimacy and attract support – especially in Brussels. It can also help attract media exposure for your issue throughout the EU.

Alter the political dynamics around your issue. Mobilising significant citizen support for an issue can shift the political dynamic around an issue, resulting in changes in related policies.

Change local laws. Although the ECI was designed to impact EU policies, it has also helped to change laws at local levels. An EU-wide campaign can lend legitimacy and weight to an issue.

2. Plan registration as carefully as the campaign

Registration is potentially one of the riskiest steps in the entire ECI process. It is therefore essential that you select your demand and draft your ECI text very carefully. It's also helpful to plan in advance what you might do should your ECI be refused registration.

The ECI should be written to both satisfy Commission legal staff and improve the likelihood of action if successful. To this end, campaigns should seek the advice of an EU legal expert, ideally one who has studied the Commission's ECI decisions. The choice of legal basis (i.e., treaty article) is especially important. If there is any doubt that an ECI is within EU competence or that the treaty article applies, the Commission will likely reject it. Here are a few ways to minimize this risk:

Submit your ECI to the Commission for a legal pre-check. This is a new service offered via Europe Direct. You may obtain an informal, non-binding opinion on your ECI's likely admissibility. It will not impact the official decision, but could take up to two months.

Register your ECI, withdraw it and resubmit later. This gives campaigns additional time to prepare. Knowing that your ECI will be registered can also help attract partners and funding. While the Commission does not necessarily condone this practice, four campaigns have done it.

Limit your ECI to one simple and uncontroversial demand. Multiple demands increase the likelihood of rejection and complicate future Commission action. Controversial demands have been subjected to extraordinarily stringent legal checks.

Should your ECI be refused registration, you may reword it and resubmit it. Alternatively, you could turn it into an unofficial petition. You may also challenge the Commission's decision either with the European Ombudsman (maladministration) or the European Court of Justice (legal misinterpretation), but not both.

3. Many paths can lead to one million

Many different campaigning structures and strategies can be used successfully with the ECI. The first three ECIs to collect one million signatures were each run in dramatically different ways. One used a hierarchical structure with strong central coordination and clear interim and long-term goals. Another was a loosely managed campaign started by a group of individuals that grew organically to include a diverse group of partners. A third mixed a professional campaigning structure with freedom in messaging. So while you can certainly learn from other ECI campaigns, do not limit yourself to what they've done.

4. Choose your citizens' committee members wisely

Should your ECI succeed, the seven members of your citizens' committee may be the only people allowed to speak on behalf of your campaign in the public hearing. So they should be articulate advocates for your issue. Although each can in theory be held legally liable for activities of your ECI, in practice no ECI committee member has ever faced legal charges related to their ECI. Nevertheless, campaigns should keep good records, especially related to finances and data protection, proving they've done what they could to follow the rules.

5. Hire a campaign coordinator and treat your volunteers well

To maximize your chances for success, you will need at minimum one person working full-time on your campaign. One coordinator for each country where you expect to reach the signature quota is ideal. Make sure you have a media/PR professional on your core team.

Paid staff will help your campaign maintain continuity as volunteers inevitably come and go. Many ECI campaigns hire a full-time coordinator. You may also use partner organisations' staff. However, as with volunteers, their availability may fluctuate depending on their employer's needs.

Many ECI campaigns consider their volunteers to be their most precious resource. They not only contribute time and enthusiasm, but also specialised skills and access to networks. Therefore, it is important to treat them well and work with their real time and financial constraints to avoid burnout. General advice on volunteer management applies also to the ECI, although the ECI offers additional benefits to volunteers -- like getting to know and learn from people in other countries.

Consider different ways to keep activists motivated throughout your year-long campaign. Ideas include collecting pledges of commitment (e.g., "I will collect 100 signatures"), contests for individuals (e.g., who can collect 100 signatures the fastest or the most signatures on a special action day) and competitions for countries (e.g., reaching quota first, getting the most signatures relative to their population). Be sure to provide some easy tasks for supporters with limited time.

6. Fundraise before you launch

ECI campaigns can be very resource intensive. Before you start, you should develop a budget. In addition to significant human resources, you'll need legal advice, IT support, translation, printing, postage and travel. A rough cost estimate for a successful ECI is one euro per signature – although some of this could be in volunteer time or donated goods and services.

It is recommended to start with a solid financial base of at least €50,000, although €100,000 is ideal. ECIs have been launched with less than €5,000 by committed volunteers who then raised funds as they went along. However, they often experienced volunteer burnout and couldn't run their campaigns as effectively as they wished. Some still had very positive benefits for their issues, but most struggled just to get their message heard.

You will probably need to create an association or other legal structure to both accept donations and manage finances. This is also important for limiting liability. Fundraising for an ECI can be challenging. Much ECI funding typically comes from organisational partners. Another viable option is to solicit donations from individuals via crowdfunding platforms.

7. Recruit numerous and diverse partners throughout the EU

The most effective ECIs have numerous and diverse partner organisations spread throughout the EU. Consider NGOs that focus on different issues and different demographic groups. Think about getting support from different kinds of organisations such as churches, labour unions, trade associations, companies, municipalities and university-based groups. They will help recruit volunteers, get media coverage, develop targeted messages, etc. If you are serious about collecting one million signatures, strive for an alliance of at least 100 partner organisations in at least eight countries and get advance commitments to collect at least 100,000 signatures.

Pro-actively reach out early to potential supporting organisations before you ever start your campaign. Involve them as much as possible in developing the ECI proposal and text. Consider hiring a campaign organiser to travel to different countries and meet with potential activists and partner organisations. Importantly, do not count on organisations in your field to automatically support and especially devote resources to promoting your ECI. They may have other priorities or prefer different strategies.

8. Communicate early and be prepared to evolve

Pre-campaign communications will help you line up partner organisations and volunteers, as well as build excitement. As soon as possible, develop a campaign name, website, Facebook page, Twitter handle, mailing list, etc. Explain the purpose of your ECI, steps to launch it and its current status. You might consider running a "pre-campaign" to collect emails and build momentum around your issue. However, there is some risk that this might confuse supporters who later don't sign the "real" ECI because they assume they already did.

Make sure that at least one media professional is on your core team and be sure to research the strength and validity of opposing viewpoints and organisations. In addition, invest time in communications training for everyone working on the campaign. Every volunteer should be able to clearly explain both the purpose of your ECI and how the ECI itself works, as well as counter critics.

Use whatever resources you have to get started and don't worry about perfection. A simple free WordPress or Weebly website is better than no website at all or a slick professional website you can't update. Your campaign may attract sufficient resources to upgrade later on. Just make sure that the template or theme you select can be upgraded. One of the most important pieces of data to include is a continuously updated total of signatures collected. This can keep supporters returning to your website and engaged in your campaign.

Social media can be an inexpensive and useful campaigning tool, especially amongst youth and people who share a specialised interest. However, your campaign cannot rely on this alone. Furthermore, ECI rules prevent some of the most effective uses of social media.

9. Prepare your online collection system (OCS) early and consider new options

The online signature collection system (OCS) has an enormous impact on your campaign's success. It must conform to certain standards and be certified before you can begin collecting signatures online. It is therefore something you should prepare several months before your ECI is registered and your 12 month signature collection period begins. Obtaining certification from a national authority can take two full months.

Early ECI campaigns have been critical of the free OCS provided by the Commission. Many experienced costly technical glitches and all complained that it was not user-friendly and prevented the use of the most effective online campaigning techniques. Fortunately the Commission's free hosting services in Luxembourg have been relatively problem free. Unfortunately there is no guarantee this will continue. Should you need to rent your own dedicated server, expect to spend at least €300 per month.

While activists continue to pressure the Commission to improve their OCS, civic-minded coders are developing alternative OCSs and mobile ECI apps that are both user and campaign friendly. This is an area of rapid evolution so contact The ECI Campaign for the latest information.

10. Think creatively about signature collection

You will need to collect signatures both online and face-to-face. No ECI has yet succeeded using only online signatures. Some ECIs have collected the majority of their signatures in person. Unfortunately, both the official online and paper forms can be difficult to use. So you'll need to find ways around their flaws.

If information on paper forms is illegible or missing, the signature may be declared invalid by national authorities. For this reason, campaigns have experimented with different ways to reduce these risks. Since each country creates its own signature collection forms, you must verify with national authorities that your creative solution complies with their rules. Here are a few ideas:

- Have the supporter dictate their information to a volunteer who records it.
- Create your own easy-to-use paper forms and have campaign staff later enter this information online. Supporters may need to sign a form giving you authority to replicate their personal data online.
- Develop support forms for signatures on tablet computers or ipads with internet connections.
- When collecting signatures in tourist areas, print multiple forms from all EU member states and put an extra mark on each form (e.g., AT, BE) to find the right form quickly.

Be aware that each country has its own personal data protection rules that may impact what volunteers need to do to collect ECI support statements. Contact national authorities as soon as possible and stay in touch throughout your campaign. They can provide useful advice on the use of forms and validation. If rules seem inappropriate or excessive, contact ECI staff at the Commission for assistance.

If you intend to collect one million validated signatures, you will need to collect at least 1,250,000 signatures in total. This is because up to 20% of signatures may be invalidated by national authorities. Rejection rates tend to be much higher for signatures collected on paper vs. those online. Since signatures for each country must be sent to the correct national authority for validation, create a signature management system from the very beginning. If signature forms are sent to the wrong country, they will be discarded.

The Commission's OCS currently does not allow campaigns to collect email addresses within the ECI support form. You may collect email addresses on your campaign website, run an online pre-campaign or a parallel campaign on a transnational petitions website or multiple national petitions websites. However, all of these options may confuse supporters and lead to lost signatures for the official ECI online form.

11. Campaign nationally and in local languages

You must campaign in national languages and ideally with national or regional messages. It's best to have country-specific written materials, websites, social media, PR strategy, etc. A national partner may help with translation, messaging, media relations and perhaps even attract local celebrity endorsements.

Some ECI campaigns have found a communications approach similar to that outlined in the book *Swarmwise* by Rick Falkvinge to be effective for EU-wide campaigns. While the central campaign sets the goal and vision, it allows its partners significant freedom in crafting the best message for their context.

Although you submit your ECI for registration in just one language, the Commission must approve all language versions of your ECI. This can take time and multiple attempts. While they provide no translation assistance, they may reject a language version for lack of clarity. Therefore, to avoid time pressure, it is best to translate your ECI into all relevant languages before your campaign launches.

12. Develop an effective internal campaign communications structure

You'll need an internal communications plan that allows both horizontal and vertical communications – i.e., central coordinator talks to everyone and national coordinators talk amongst themselves. Weekly update emails sent to everyone with country-specific signature numbers and news can help create a sense of progress. Campaigners can celebrate successes, learn from and be inspired by those in other countries. On some issues, cross-country sharing of news related to your issue can be of great value in and of itself.

Although most internal communication will likely be virtual, occasional face-to-face meetings of country coordinators help build relationships and make virtual communications more effective. Meeting in different cities can enhance cross-border learning and spread responsibility throughout the campaign. This might even lead to later cooperation on other projects.

13. Remember that EU institutions can be your friends

The European Commission is required to provide information and informal advice to citizens on the ECI. This includes assistance with technical issues such as the online collection system and working with national ECI coordinators. Commission staffers have generally received high marks from past campaigns for helpfulness and professionalism. However, due to their heavy workloads, at times you may need to proactively and insistently reach out to them.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) can provide ECI campaigns with some practical forms of campaigning assistance, such as free meeting rooms and potentially translation. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) may provide similar assistance, especially to organise meetings and promote your issue. The European Ombudsman's office can intervene in cases of maladministration by the EU institutions, such as not respecting ECI rules or responding in a timely manner to requests.

Some activities indirectly related to your ECI campaign may qualify for EU co-funding from programs such as Europe for Citizens and Youth in Action, although this is difficult to obtain.

Although effective EU campaigns are really run in the member states, it is also important to have a Brussels-based strategy that includes lobbying EU officials and promoting your issue in Brussels.

14. Build a strong campaign base in at least one large country

To collect one million signatures, you'll need a strong organisational base in at least one of the largest EU countries: Germany, France, UK, Italy, Spain or Poland. Germans and Italians have been the most likely to support an ECI, British citizens the least. Extensive personal data requirements have limited ECI support from the French and Poles.

Collecting signatures from citizens of Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, France and Italy has been especially challenging because of these countries' requirements of personal identity card or social security numbers. These requirements could change at any time. However, while they remain, you might plan for high refusal rates in these countries or prioritise campaigning in other countries.

Due to conflicting national data requirements, some EU citizens living outside of their country of nationality have been unable to support any ECI. Therefore, ECIs that target expatriate EU citizens might wish to postpone launching an ECI until these problems have been resolved. Contact The ECI Campaign for additional ideas and resources on this issue.

15. Be prepared to explain both the ECI and your issue

The ECI is not yet well-known by the public and often misunderstood by the press. So you will probably need to explain how it works to both potential supporters and media. To this end, it is helpful for your campaign to develop an ECI media kit to share with journalists and volunteers.

16. Make use of free ECI guides and resources

There are several free "how to" guides and resources available to groups considering launching an ECI. Past ECI campaigns have lauded the usefulness especially of The European Citizens' Initiative Pocket Guide by Bruno Kaufmann (available at www.europeancitizensinitiative.eu) and the European Commission's ECI website (www.ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative).

17. Help improve the ECI while you prepare your campaign!

ECI campaigns have sought not only to advance their issue, but also to build participatory democracy at EU level. They believe that citizens must have a greater say in EU policy. The ECI has shown tremendous potential to do just that. But it is also much harder to use than it needs to be. The ECI implementing regulation will be up for review in 2015. Join other future and past ECI campaigners and democracy advocates in The ECI Campaign as we lobby for a user-friendly ECI. While working with us to improve the ECI, you can both build your own campaign and increase its chances of success. It's a win-win for everyone!

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