

# Does the eu suffer from a democratic deficit? | essay



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The overall goal of EU integration has been to 'create an ever closer union... in which decision are taken as closely as possible to the citizen' (Cini, Michele, Borraran, 2010). However, still the most enthusiastic backers of the EU must accept that it has been more a progression commencing and sustained by elites, than by a popular front for change. The claim that the standard European citizen has virtually no possibility of directly affecting the work of the EU, along with the negative impact of integration on popular support for the EU, has given rise to the term the democratic deficit. Although there is no one single definition, the concept behind the notion of the democratic deficit is that decisions in the EU are 'insufficiently representative of, or accountable to, the nations and the people of Europe' (Lord, C, 2001, p165). It is not merely an 'additional layer of governance, further removed from the peoples of Europe' ... but as a result of such an organisation, 'each Member State can no longer claim to be the source of its own legitimacy' (Eriksen, Fossum, 2002, p401). It is important to make a distinction between two different types of theories behind the democratic deficit. The institutional perspective focuses on the 'institutional power sharing and on institutional reform as a solution to the perceived problems of EU level democracy' (Cini, 2010, p378). The socio-psychological viewpoint, however, places much emphasis on the lack of a 'European civic identity and the absence of a European demos.'

The classical argument, through a socio-psychological point of view, of cases where it can be said that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit is that the nonexistence of representative and direct democracy within the EU. The set up of the EU results in policy-making being dominated at the European level

by executive actors, state based ministers in the Council, and government appointments in the Commission. This does not inevitably lead to democratic deficit; unless, as happens, the decisions taken by the executive departments at the European stage are outside the authority of domestic parliaments. Even with the creation of European Affairs Committees in every national parliament, ministers when conversing and voting in the Council, national representatives when constructing policies in The Council and bureaucrats in the Commission when 'drafting or implementing legislation, are much more isolated from national parliamentary scrutiny and control than are national cabinet ministers or bureaucrats in the domestic policy-making process' (Follesdal, Andreas, Hix, Simon, 2005, p2). As a consequence, governments are able to successfully disregard their parliaments when deciding upon policies at the European level. Therefore, European integration has resulted in a reduction of the influence of national parliaments and an enhancement to the authority of executives.

Perhaps the institution to come in for the heaviest criticism from the Eurosceptics is the Commission which is seen as an 'archetypal undemocratic institution, in that it is a civil service composed of appointed members' (Cini 2010, p381), who contain extensive policy-making powers. In spite of its authority over initiating and developing new European laws, the Commission is 'subject to little direct or even indirect public accountability' (McCormick, John, 2008, p124). Appointments have to be accepted by Parliament, but apart from that they are made lacking reference to the electorate. The President of the Commission is selected as an outcome of behind the scenes bargaining and conciliations directed by the leaders of the

member states. The commission also stands for the views of the EU in numerous international forums devoid of a mandate from the citizens. Moreover, there are very modest openings for people to take part in or contribute to the deliberations of the Commission and only limited occasions for the EP to hold it accountable for its decisions; although this has increased, being seen most clearly by the parliaments new powers under the Lisbon Treaty.

Secondly and associated to the first aspect, the majority of commentators on the democratic deficit claim that the European Parliament authority is insufficient. The movement of legislative powers from national parliaments to the EU institutions has not been 'matched by an equivalent degree of democratic accountability and legislative input on the part of the European Parliament (EP)' (Cini 2010, p380), the solitary directly elected body at EU level. In the 1980s, many analysts argued that 'there was a direct trade-off between the powers of the European Parliament and the powers of national parliaments' (Follesdal, Hix, p 4), where any addition to the authority of the European Parliament would result in a 'concomitant decrease in the powers of national parliaments (Holland, 1980).' However, by the 1990s, such an argument had departed as academics began to understand European integration as a decline in the authority of parliaments at the national level relative to executive powers. The answer, most claimed, was to 'increase the power of the European Parliament relative to the governments in the Council and the Commission (Williams, S. (1991)).'

One of the key the arguments against the claim that authority has moved to the executive, is that national governments are the most directly

accountable politicians in Europe. As Moravcsik claims 'The democratically elected governments of the Member States, dominate the still largely territorial and intergovernmental structure of the EU' (Moravcsik Andre, 2002, p112).' According to this argument, the EU is still principally an intergovernmental institution; where the verdicts at the European Council and the Council of Ministers are as accountable to EU general public as the policies of national cabinets. Furthermore the New Lisbon Treaty has increased the national parliaments' capacity to contribute along with the European institutions in the work of the EU. 'A new clause clearly sets out the rights and duties of the national parliaments within the EU. It deals with their right to information, the way they monitor subsidiarity, and for reforming the treaties'. The EU can be seen to strengthen the state, challenging arguments of a democratic deficit, as the democratically elected national executives play an increasingly dominant role in the EU.

Against the claims that the executives are outside the power of elected institutions, the most noteworthy institutional progress in the EU from the 1980's, has been the enlarged influence of the EP in the legislative progression and in the appointment of the Commission. The EP now has veto-power over the choice of the Commission and is progressively more prepared to employ its muscle 'against heavy lobbying from national governments, as was seen with the Parliament's veto of the first proposed line-up of the Barroso Commission in October 2004' (Follesdal, Hix, p 20). Also, the alterations in the use of the co-decision procedure which started under the Maastricht Treaty of 1996 and has only been increased by the last three treaties, has developed from the idea of merely cooperation first

commencing under the SEA in 1986, 'legislation cannot be passed under the co-decision procedure without majority support in both the Council and the European Parliament (Follesdal, Hix, p 22). The extension of the co-decision procedure can be seen in the areas including 'legal immigration, penal judicial cooperation (Eurojust, crime prevention, alignment of prison standards, offences and penalties), police cooperation (Europol) and some aspects of trade policy and agriculture'. It can therefore be argued that the EU has addressed the democratic deficit by significantly increasing the powers of the EP and in giving it a role in almost all lawmaking, in turn weakening the powers of the less representative institutions. Despite the extension of the co-decision procedure under The Lisbon Treaty it remains true that the EP does not possess several of the powers of a 'real' legislature. For one it is unable to increase revenues or initiate novel laws and has a highly restricted ability to keep the Commission accountable for its judgments. While the EP may have the ability to veto national governments' selection for the Commission President and the group of the Commissioners, the governments remain the agenda-setters with regards to the appointments of the Commission and in any new policy implemented in the EU.

The trouble with the institutional approaches to the democratic deficit is that they ignore the equally significant socio-psychological viewpoints of this uncharted occurrence. The bigger dilemma is the connection, or lack of it, between the rising democratic politics inside the EU institutions and the opinions of the public. In spite of the rising influence of the EP, 'there are no European' elections, largely as a result of there being no European demos.

EU citizens vote for their governments, who represent them in the Council and nominate Commissioners. EU citizens also elect the EP. Nevertheless, none of the domestic elections neither the EP elections are actually 'European; elections: they are not fought over 'the personalities and parties at the European level or the direction of the EU policy agenda' (Follesdal, Hix, p 4). State based elections are about national as opposed to European concerns, as 'parties collude to keep the issue of Europe off the domestic agenda' (Hix, S, 1999, p78). EP elections also tend to be decided on issues unrelated to Europe, as 'parties and the media treat them as mid-term national contests' (Follesdal, Hix, p7), this can be shown recently by the success of many radical fringe parties in the 2009 election as a sign of discontent with the political elite and the failures of many government parties, notably the Labour party in the UK. Protest votes as a way of voicing displeasure with parties in government and increasingly failing turnout at European elections signify that as described of the first EP elections as 'second-order national contests' (Reif K, Schmitt H, 1980, p44), is increasingly relevant.

Although many national states have also endured their own form of democratic deficit, the perception remains that the trouble is considerably stronger in the EU, which has given way to a disturbing detachment between the EU institutions and its citizens. Psychologically, the EU is so unlike the national democratic bodies that citizens struggle to identify with it. As a result the institutions often appear distant and mysterious, meaning it is certainly not unexpected that anti-European media are capable of engendering public suspicion and resentment towards the EU. The Lisbon

Treaty has attempted to give a more influential voice to its citizens; 'thanks to the Citizens' Initiative, one million citizens from a number of Member States have the possibility to call on the Commission to bring forward new policy proposals'. Only time will tell if this policy has the desired effect, but if it would have to be an unexpectedly successful policy for it to make any real impact with regards to voter enthusiasm for the EU.

In conclusion, whether there is a democratic deficit depends partly on how the EU is understood. If it is viewed as a Federation, or has a desire to turn into one, in that case the 'necessary links between citizens and the EU institutions are indeed weak. But if it is viewed as a confederation, then the links are unusually strong' (McCormick, 2008, p126). Indispensable links connecting citizens and EU institutions are certainly too frail; however, if understood as a confederation then the links are remarkably tight; where they are only expected to be indirect with national governments representing their citizens at the central authority. There may well be a persuasive case to claim that the EU is not deficient with regards to democratic practices or formal legitimacy, but a question mark does linger over the union's social capacity. 'Democratic or not, the EU doesn't yet seem to have won over the hearts and minds of its citizens' (Smith, Julia, 2003, p3); meaning that no new constitution will on its own solve the problem of a democratic deficit within the EU.