

The European Union: Too much democracy, too little or both?

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In a symbolic gesture toward creating an ever closer Union, the European Union conferred citizenship on everyone who was also a subject of one of its member states. However, the rights of European citizens are more like those of subjects of the pre-1914 German Kaiser than of a 21st century European democracy. Citizens have the right to vote for members of the European Parliament (EP) but this does not make the EU's governors accountable as is the case in a normal parliamentary democracy. The result is a democratic deficit.

The votes that European citizens cast in their national constituency are not counted on the basis of one person, one vote, one value. Instead, EP seats are allocated nationally by a system of disproportional representation. Of the EU's 28 member states, 22 have their citizens over-represented in the European Parliament. A British, French, German or Spanish MEP represents more than ten times as many citizens as an MEP from Malta or Luxembourg.

The rationale for treating citizens so unequally is simple: the EU is a mixture of a few very populous states and many small states. In federal political systems the problem of representing people and states is resolved by having a two-chamber assembly, one consisting of equal electorates and the other having an equal number of representatives for territories unequal in population. MEPs are elected by a compromise system that is much more unequal than that of the US House of Representatives but far more representative than the US Senate.

Once elected, the 751 MEPs do not vote as a national bloc but are divided among eight multi-national Party Groups endorsing trans-national socialist, conservative, liberal, green, nationalist or convenience principles. A Group can have more than three dozen parties from more than two dozen countries. The typical MEP represents a national party that returns only two MEPs. The result is that most MEPs spend their working week conducting politics in a foreign language with foreigners.

Over the years the European Parliament has gained the right to hold the European Council accountable for some though not all of its decisions. This is not democratic accountability but part of a system of elite checks and balances like that the undemocratically elected British Parliament enjoyed in Queen Victoria's time.

The European Council collectively makes decisions binding on all of Europe's citizens. It consists of the heads of the national governments of the EU's member states. While each is democratically elected, the median national government is endorsed by less than half its voters. British governments represent little more than one-third of Britain's voters. Angela Merkel heads a coalition government that received the vote of two-thirds of Germans. However, her own party is a coalition and the response of nominal

supporters to her refugee policy is a reminder that democratically elected leaders ignore voters at their peril.

The European Union has a democratic surplus since at least seven governments in the Council are up for national election each year. The expansion of the EU's powers means that European integration can no longer proceed by stealth. Decisions taken in Brussels are increasingly visible in national politics. People who are dissatisfied with eurozone economic policies or the free movement of peoples across national borders do not need to wait for the 2019 European Parliament election to voice their dissatisfaction. Instead, they can protest by voting in a national election to replace the government that has not been representing their views in the European Council.

Caught by conflicting national and EU pressures, a prime minister can introduce even more democracy, a national referendum on an EU issue. Greek voters have not been able to annul the terms imposed on the country as a result of its national fiscal difficulties. However, the Greek government has yet to fulfill EU conditions fully and may never do so. David Cameron's willingness to put the UK's membership in the EU at risk in order to pacify a group of his euro-sceptic MPs is another example of the priority that national leaders are giving to their national electorate.

Votes count but resources decide. No quantity of national votes will enable a national government to stop the world and turn a country into a self-sufficient island. The peace and rising living standards enjoyed by Europeans for more than half a century has been accompanied by an increase in economic, cultural and security interdependence across national borders. However, this does not mean an end of politics, that is, the articulation and reconciliation of different views about what government ought to do. Instead, it adds a new set of institutions and participants to debates about decisions that were once the preserve of national democracies.

For full details and analysis of the conflicts arising within the multi-level governance of Europe today see the new updated paperback edition of Richard Rose, *Representing Europeans: a Pragmatic Approach* (Oxford University Press, autumn, 2015).