

5 Democracy and the EU

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Chapter contents

- Introduction
- Democratic Deficit?
- Representation through National Institutions
- Emerging Supranational Democracy
- Conclusion

Introduction

Many of the countries covered in this book have joined the European Union (EU) in order to benefit from regional integration. But while member states can certainly benefit from EU membership economically and politically, Europe also presents a serious challenge for democracy. A series of reforms to the EU Treaties enacted since the late 1980s have transferred decision-making authority in a broad range of questions to ‘Brussels’ (which is seen as the heart of the EU). Particularly Eurosceptics – those opposed to the EU – are concerned that deepening integration undermines national democracy. Achieving European level democracy is no simple task either. The EU brings together nearly thirty countries and close to half a billion citizens, with the member states having their own official languages and political cultures. Hence it is not surprising that many, not least those in the UK who voted for Brexit, claim that EU decisions are taken by ‘unelected technocrats’ in Brussels. However, for others the solution lies in strengthening democracy in EU institutions, with politicians and scholars advocating for further empowerment of the European Parliament (EP) and more direct democratic accountability of the European Commission, as well as increasing use of majority voting in the Council of Ministers and the European Council to facilitate efficient decision-making.

The dilemma facing Europe is of course not a new one. Among the modern classics in political science is *Size and Democracy* by Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte (1973). Exploring the impact of the size of governmental units on democratic performance, Dahl and Tufte explored that so-called ‘input legitimacy’ - political participation and interest in politics (see subsection ‘Input Legitimacy’). This

was shown to function better in smaller democracies. The history of this line of thinking stretches back to Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, with ancient city-states of Athens or Swiss mountain villages often used as real-world examples of the benefits of small-scale governance. Importantly, Dahl and Tufte also found that larger governmental units were more effective in providing services to the people and in solving societal problems, or what the authors referred to as ‘output legitimacy’ (see ‘Output Legitimacy’). These lessons are highly relevant for understanding the complex relationship between European integration and democracy.

The first section of this chapter discusses the concept of democratic deficit, exploring the process of European Integration. The second examines how citizens can influence EU decision-making through national elections and legislatures, with the subsequent section focusing on supranational democracy. We also pay particular attention to European Parliament elections and the selection of the Commission. While both national and the European channels of democratic participation face serious challenges, European integration has become more democratic over the years. But there is perhaps a trade-off, with stronger input legitimacy posing an obstacle to efficient decision-making.

Democratic Deficit?

The transfer of policy-making powers from member states to the European Union has raised serious concerns about the democratic legitimacy of European governance (Cramme and Hobolt 2015). Indeed, the image of the EU being a technocratic, supranational apparatus beyond democratic control was one of the key arguments of ‘leave’ voters in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

In the context of European integration, the term ‘democratic deficit’ refers broadly to the weak role of citizens in EU decision-making. A narrower definition focuses on parliaments, pointing to the limited powers of domestic legislatures, and the European Parliament. However, there is no consensus among politicians or scholars about how to address the alleged democratic deficit. Referring to the findings of Dahl and Tufte (1973) mentioned in the introductory section, much depends on whether one believes that the legitimacy of European integration flows from the participation of citizens (input) or from delivering policies that are supported by the people (output).

Output Legitimacy

The output legitimacy perspective is often based on the ‘no demos’ argument. According to ‘no demos’, EU citizens do not constitute a single nation – they are seen individually as ‘the French’, ‘the Germans’, ‘the Italians’, ‘the Slovenians’ and so on. While the term ‘nation-state’ may not adequately

reflect the increasingly multicultural nature of most European countries, nonetheless EU citizens lack the kind of common identity and political culture found in individual EU member states (or in federal countries such as the United States). There is no EU-wide language, media or even party system despite the emergence of ‘Europarties’, parties operating at the European level, and there is no single European ‘public sphere’, where politicians and citizens can deliberate on issues. Hence the success of European integration depends on its ability to produce ‘outputs’, public goods (see Chapter 4), or policies that receive support among the public. These could include peace, stability, economic growth, removal of barriers to trade, a counterweight to globalization and ‘excesses of capitalism’, or more detailed laws affecting specific policy sectors or occupational groups.

Perhaps the most famous proponent of this line of thinking is Andrew Moravcsik (2002; see also Majone 2005), according to whom the EU in fact is already quite democratic – and is certainly more democratic than other regional intergovernmental organisations in Africa, Asia, or the Americas (Duina and Lenz 2017). The empowerment of the European Parliament and the central role of national governments in EU decision-making enable citizens to influence decisions, while delegating power to independent central banks, courts, and various regulatory agencies is common also in national politics. Moravcsik also argued that the democratic deficit has facilitated the deepening of integration. More precisely, would people have supported transfers of policy-making powers from their member states to the European Community (EC) and later the EU over the decades had they been given the chance to influence decisions through referendums? As discussed in the next section (input legitimacy), the outcomes of various EU-related referendums, including ‘Brexit’, have been difficult to predict.

A particularly interesting argument relates to the division of authority between the member states and the EU. Moravcsik emphasizes that issues important to voters – such as taxation and macroeconomic policy, employment, education, or social and health services – remain in the competence of the member states. As a result, the strengthening of supranational democracy (see next section on Input Legitimacy) would not necessarily bring about more active participation, as long as matters decided by the EU are of secondary importance to the citizens. This argument is certainly logical, but one should note that the powers of the Union cover all policy areas from the funding of cultural projects, to the monitoring of national budgets, to the gradual development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (see Chapter 16), not to mention all the internal market, environmental, and external trade legislation. In another key contribution to the debate, Gabel (1998) argued that consensual decision-making between national governments is essential for the legitimacy and survival of European integration for as long as citizens remain primarily attached to their national

identities and cultures. In a nutshell, people across the Union should feel that their interests are taken into account in EU decision-making.

Input Legitimacy

According to the input legitimacy perspective, citizens do not have sufficient possibilities for influencing the direction of European integration or daily EU decisions (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008). Democracy entails the idea of accountability, with decision-makers accountable to the voters. In representative democracies this accountability is based first and foremost on regular and free elections, where citizens can choose between competing political parties or candidates. As the EU already possesses significant policy-making authority, it is argued that the link between citizens' preferences and EU policies should become more direct. Moreover, proponents of supranational democracy have argued that regular EU level elections will over time increase citizens' knowledge of EU issues and may even contribute to the emergence of a European identity – exactly as democracy has strengthened the bond between citizens and the state in countries across the world.

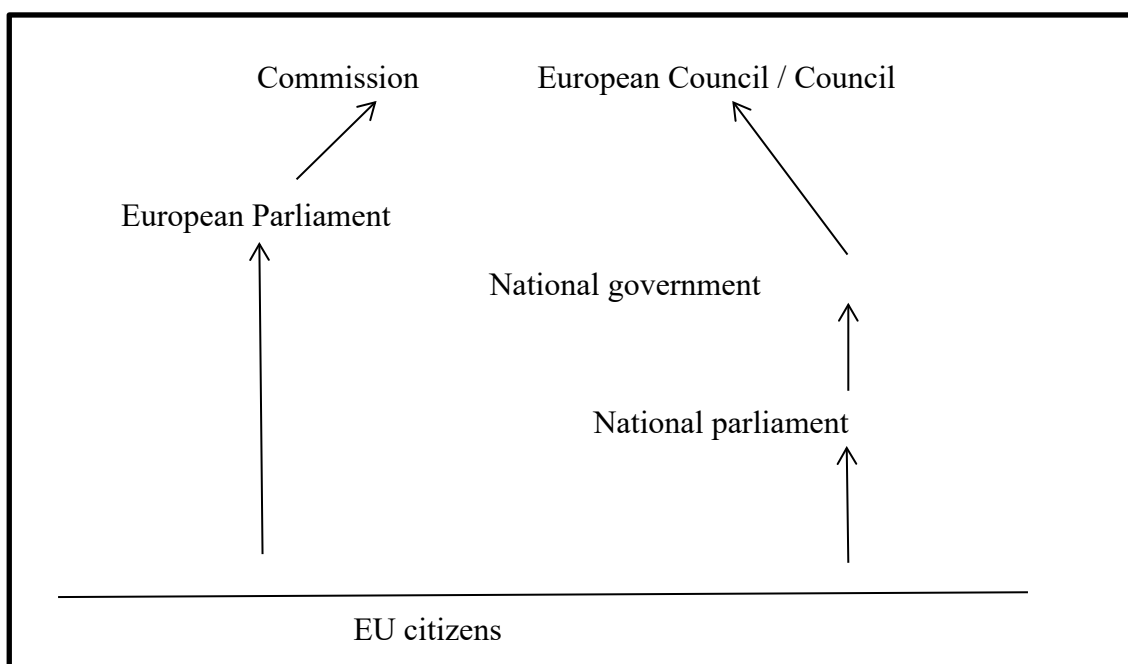
A significant component of democratic deficit is the idea that European integration undermines national democracy (see section National Parliaments). As an increasing share of matters are decided at the European level, national-level institutions, particularly domestic legislatures, simply become less important. Crucially, many scholars have argued that national politicians and political parties should bear much of the blame through their failure to publicly discuss EU matters, and for removing or keeping the EU out of domestic political competition. Indeed, the lack of domestic debates on Europe is often seen as a significant component of the democratic deficit. For example, the late Peter Mair (2007) saw that European integration contributed to the depoliticization or 'hollowing out' of modern European governance and particularly of national democracy. In another key contribution to the literature, Schmidt (2006) claimed that at the level of the member states there is 'politics without policy' (there is heated political competition in elections, but important policy decisions are increasingly being made elsewhere) while at the European level there is in turn 'policy without politics' (important policy decisions are made, but this is not shaped by competitive elections and party politics). The multi-level structure of European governance, and the interdependence between national and European levels of decision-making, leaves thus little room for genuine debates about alternative policy choices.

How to address the democratic deficit is not an easy question. While those more in favour of European integration typically support the strengthening of EU level democracy, those opposed to the EU argue that the solution lies in improving democratic accountability at the level of the member

states. Referring primarily to the low turnout in European Parliament elections (see section European Parliament Elections) and the lack of a common European identity, leaders of populist parties across Europe argue that European level democracy simply does not work. Instead, one should strengthen the powers of national legislatures in EU governance and make more active use of referendums in key integration decisions such as amendments to EU Treaties.

These two paths towards improving input legitimacy can be viewed in terms of ‘chains of delegation and accountability’ (e.g., Strøm et al. 2003). In the EU context one can separate between the national or intergovernmental chain of delegation and accountability, and the supranational, European chain (Figure 5.1). In the former, citizens (or voters) elect the domestic legislature, which selects and controls the national government that represents the member state in EU institutions. National ministers negotiate on behalf of their countries in the Council of Ministers, while prime ministers – and in some cases such as Cyprus, France, Lithuania and Romania, presidents – represent their member states in the European Council, which also is responsible for Treaty reforms when convening as Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC). In the European chain of delegation and accountability, citizens elect members of the European Parliament (MEPs), which has a role in scrutinising the Commission (which forms part of the EU executive branch). What matters for democratic representation is that citizens are offered choices about EU issues in elections and a mechanism for holding the EU executive to account. The next two sections examine whether and how these two channels – the national and the European – empower citizens in this way.

Figure 5.1. Two channels of representation in EU democracy.



Representation through National Institutions

National Elections

Existing research indicates that parties do a poor job of offering competing visions of Europe to voters in national elections. The main explanatory factor is that the established national parties, such as the centre-right conservative and centre-left social democratic parties, have an interest in sustaining the prevailing structures of party competition. These national parties are mainly based on the traditional social cleavages recognized in political science literature (such as social class), and parties are often internally divided on EU questions (see Chapter 2). Moreover, surveys such as Eurobarometers show that political parties tend to be more representative of their voters on traditional left–right matters than on issues related to European integration, with parties more supportive of integration than the electorate (Mattila and Raunio 2012). Hence mainstream parties have an incentive to contest the elections along the familiar and safer left–right dimension and to down-play contestation over the EU. Indeed, in most member states these mainstream parties have preferred not to engage in debates over the EU – and where such debates have taken place, this contestation has often benefited smaller parties, including the populists, at the expense of mainstream governing parties (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008).

However, the recent politicization (i.e. growing political importance) of European integration has at least partially changed the situation. Already prior to the challenges facing the EU since the start of the euro crisis, Hooghe and Marks (2009: 5) argued that ‘permissive consensus’ (where citizens passively support integration, leaving EU issues to their elected leaders) had given way to ‘constraining dissensus’, where ‘elites, that is, party leaders in positions of authority, must look over their shoulders when negotiating European issues. What they see does not reassure them.’ EU questions became considerably more prominent in national parliamentary elections held in the 2010s, although it might be better to speak of selective politicization as the debates focused on the euro area bailout packages (see Chapter 12), the refugee crisis (Chapter 13) or, in the case of the UK, on Brexit. Much of this politicization has been driven by various nationalist or populist Eurosceptical parties that have shaken the pro-EU consensus of traditional mainstream parties (see Chapter 15). As a result, many national governments have found their freedom of manoeuvre in EU negotiations to be much smaller than before, with the consequence that compromises have been harder to achieve in Brussels. A good example is Finland, where the broad pro-EU partisan consensus was shaken by the populist

and Eurosceptical Finns Party in the 2011 elections, in which the party achieved a major breakthrough to national politics. Until then EU had not featured in election campaigns, but the outbreak of the euro crisis politicized integration, with the Finns Party and the opposition in general attacking the government for its handling of the bailouts. Following the election, the new Finnish cabinet was under strong pressure not to appear too ‘soft’ in EU bargaining, demanding for example bilateral collaterals for its loans to euro area countries.

Box 5.1. Over to you: EU in national elections

It is commonly argued that political parties do not offer citizens meaningful choices over European issues in national parliamentary or presidential elections and that EU does not feature in the campaigns or in the main television debates between party leaders. Yet the recent politicization of integration together with the rise of various Eurosceptical parties has brought about more contestation over European integration. Choose one recent election from any EU member state or compare recent elections in two or more countries and examine (a) whether parties had distinct positions regarding EU questions and (b) whether the parties and particularly their leaders made active use of the EU in their campaigns. Good sources are parties’ election manifestos, the speeches and writings of party leaders or presidential candidates, and the main television debates. (You can find manifestos in the original language on the Manifesto Project Data website <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>. First register, then go to ‘Corpus & Documents’, where you can either download manifestos or browse documents according to a list of subject areas).

National Parliaments

Concerns about the democratic deficit of European integration were a key driver behind the increased powers of the European Parliament. The same logic explains also the attention given to the role of national legislatures in EU governance (Rittberger 2005). It is common to argue that domestic legislatures such as the Irish Oireachtas are the cornerstones of European representative democracy, and given their close links with citizens, national MPs more than MEPs can contribute to narrowing the gap between ‘Brussels’ and European voters. However, according to the so-called ‘deparliamentarization’ thesis, the gradual deepening of European integration has led to the erosion of parliamentary control over the executive branch. The argument about deparliamentarization is based on constitutional rules and on the dynamics of EU policy-making (Raunio and Hix 2000). The EU member states have transferred policy-making powers to the European level in a significant number of policy areas, and as a result, national parliaments have directly lost influence. After all, it

is national governments (not parliaments) that represent their countries in EU negotiations. Domestic legislatures become involved in EU affairs primarily through scrutinizing the Commission's initiatives and through influencing the government that represents the country at the European level, but it can be difficult for national parliaments to force governments to make detailed commitments before taking decisions in Brussels. Considering the dominance of this deparliamentarization thesis in both academic literature and political debate, it is not surprising that national legislatures were often labelled as the main 'losers' or 'victims' of European integration.

Domestic legislatures throughout the Union have nonetheless gradually gained stronger rights in EU governance, both in the context of their own national polities and at the EU level (Jančić 2017). All national parliaments have a European Affairs Committee (EAC), the main function of which is to coordinate parliamentary handling of EU matters. These committees have been strengthened over time in response to the empowerment of the EU. Other parliamentary committees, such as those dealing with agriculture, environment, or social affairs, have also become more involved in EU affairs, which utilize the policy expertise of a wider range of MPs. There are, however, significant differences between countries in terms of the power of national parliaments vis-à-vis the executive and the strength of the committee system (see Chapter 9), and this shapes the role of national parliaments in EU affairs. For instance, some legislatures such as the Danish Folketinget require ministers to appear before the EAC in advance of attending Council meetings, while others focus more on the scrutiny of draft legislative documents (Heffler et al. 2015).

However, the real novelty is the 'early warning mechanism' (EWM) introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, with the national parliaments assigned the right to monitor the compliance of proposed EU laws with the principle of *subsidiarity*. According to this principle, the Commission should only introduce legislation when EU level action is more effective than national measures. The subsidiarity principle applies to policy areas where decision-making powers are shared between the EU and its member states. If national parliaments feel that an initiative for a new EU law violates the subsidiarity principle, they can submit reasoned opinions to the Commission. If one-third of national legislatures submit opinions (so-called 'yellow card'), the Commission must review the proposal. For example, in October 2013 a yellow card was triggered on the proposal to establish the European Public Prosecutor's Office, but in the end the Commission decided to maintain the proposal. The real 'added value' of the EWM is difficult to measure, but clearly many legislatures view it as a worthwhile instrument and appreciate the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with EU institutions. EWM provides national parliaments with at least some measure of control over EU legislation. It can also improve the quality of EU legislation by forcing the Commission to be more detailed in its justification for new legislative proposals and in general more sensitive to national

concerns. Beyond EWM, we must not lose sight of the fact that national legislatures are in a sense the gatekeepers of further integration and upholders of national sovereignty, as each member state and its domestic parliament holds veto power over reforms to the EU Treaties.

Scrutiny of EU laws or holding veto power over Treaty amendments may not be the most effective way for national parliaments to contribute to the legitimacy of European governance. Parliamentary debates are a very important means of holding governments to account. While discussions of EU issues are mainly confined to committees, more salient issues such as EU Treaty reforms are also debated by parliaments in plenary, and the recent politicization of integration triggered lively public debates in legislatures across the Union. These debates can help to inform the public about the European political agenda (Rauh and De Wilde 2018). There is considerable variation between the legislatures, with some such as the German Bundestag debating EU matters frequently on the floor while others like the Nordic parliaments and the British House of Commons until the Brexit process preferred to discuss European issues more in the committees.

Referendums

A more direct national channel for citizens to influence European integration, bypassing legislatures and governments, is direct democracy. In two member states, Denmark and Ireland, it is compulsory to hold a referendum when power is transferred to the European level. In other member states referendums are essentially called by national governments, and they have been held only in connection with major integration questions – EC / EU membership, joining the euro area, and some Treaty reforms. One lesson learned from past EU referendums is their unpredictability: voters across Europe have produced major upheavals for both their own governments and for the EU as a whole, and in many cases major embarrassment for political scientists and polling agencies that failed to predict the outcomes. Norwegians have twice rejected EC / EU membership, in 1972 and 1994, while the Danes (2000) and Swedes (2003) voted against their countries' adopting the euro currency. Danes voted against the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, only to approve the Treaty a year later in another referendum after Denmark had negotiated significant opt-outs from the Treaty. Similarly, the Irish voted twice against Treaty reforms, in 2001 and 2008, but like Danes changed their minds after Ireland had received promises that the EU would not touch select issues salient to the Irish voters. The Dutch and the French voted in 2005 against the Constitutional Treaty, and in 2016 Britain chose to exit the EU after the 'leave' side had achieved a narrow victory in the Brexit referendum.

It is thus no surprise that particularly Eurosceptical political forces have called for more active use of referendums in key EU decisions. Direct democracy has its pros and cons (see Chapter 6) that

also apply to these EU referendums. On the one hand, as the 48.1% of the population who voted ‘remain’ in the Brexit referendum understand, referendums genuinely hand the power to the people. On the other hand, referendum campaigns have often been plagued by exaggerated claims and even outright lies – a situation no doubt facilitated by citizens’ low level of knowledge about European integration. (Hobolt 2009; Mendez et al. 2014)

Emerging Supranational Democracy

Given the lack of contestation over Europe in national politics, advocates of supranational democracy have in turn argued that the solution lies in offering citizens genuine choices at the European level. Elections to the European Parliament are the most obvious way in which citizens can have their say. However, for proponents of supranational democracy this is not enough: European voters should have more say about who wields executive power at the EU level. The main executive arms of the EU are the European Commission and the European Council.

According to Eurobarometers and other public opinion surveys, citizens’ knowledge of EU decision-making is very limited – and the current institutional set-up of the EU is certainly complicated. National governments often get the spotlight through taking key decisions in the European Council, the Commission is responsible for initiating new legislation and as the ‘guardian of the Treaties’ oversees the implementation of the EU’s laws and budget, with legislative powers shared between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. In most member states the political system is much more straightforward, with the government ruling with the support of the legislature. It is no wonder that citizens find it difficult to grasp where power lies in the EU, and particularly how their vote affects decisions taken at the European level. There is also the widely-shared perception of EU decisions being unduly influenced by the thousands of lobbyists working in Brussels. Particularly companies and interest groups with better resources have active contacts with EU institutions, but at the same time lobbying is also strongly present in national politics and it provides an avenue for various stakeholders to have their voice heard in European decision-making (Greenwood 2017).

European Parliament Elections

Among the various EU institutions, the European Parliament is without a doubt the one that has changed most over the decades (Hix and Scully 2003; Ripoll Servent 2018). It has evolved from a purely consultative body with members seconded from national parliaments to a directly elected chamber vested with significant legislative, scrutiny and budgetary powers. The Parliament plays a

central role in shaping EU laws and budgets and is involved in the appointment and oversight of the Commission. The thrust of legislative work is done in parliamentary committees, in which individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) draft reports that form the basis for Parliament's resolutions. Importantly, committees and the plenary meet in public and inject much-needed transparency to EU decision-making.

The Parliament has been directly elected since 1979, with 705 seats following the UK's formal exit from the EU in 2020. The literature on Euro-elections has largely been based on the 'second-order' election model, first developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980). According to this analytical framework, second-order elections are less important than first-order elections, with the latter referring primarily to domestic parliamentary or presidential elections. Hence citizens' voting behaviour is more affected by the national first-order context than by factors related to the European Parliament or the EU. The model thus suggests that the EP elections do not really provide an effective link between citizens and EU policy-making.

Turnout is substantially lower than in national parliamentary elections, but it increased up to 51% across EU countries in the 2019 elections. In the previous three elections held after the turn of the millennium (2004, 2009, and 2014), turnout had been between 43 and 46%. Lack of common European identity, low awareness of EU issues, and in general the feeling of 'distance' between voters and Brussels influence turnout, although turnout is also declining in national parliamentary elections across most European countries. Particularly Central and Eastern European member states characterized by lower electoral participation (see Chapter 4, 'subsection' in this volume). Turnout in EP elections varies significantly between member states: it is high in Belgium and Luxembourg where voting is compulsory, and the all-time low was in Slovakia in the 2014 elections, where only 13 % cast their votes. In 2019 turnout was below 30 % in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Turnout has also varied quite strongly over time within individual member states, depending on the particular political context and whether national first-order elections are held simultaneously with the EP elections. As in national elections, highly educated, politically knowledgeable and pro-European voters are more likely to turn out to vote.

In terms of how parties perform, government parties and larger parties have, in line with the second-order model, suffered losses in EP elections. Voters may experiment with new parties in European Parliament elections, since they know that the elections will not result in major societal changes – at least not in their home country. Consequently, citizens may vote for parties that are a closer match to their own preferences. For example, left-leaning voters that in national elections vote for social democratic parties may vote for Greens in EP elections. Alternatively, citizens might use EP elections to protest against established mainstream parties. Interestingly, these effects have spilled

over into national elections and have contributed to the rise of various smaller parties, notably the Greens and several populist or nationalist parties across the EU. European elections have therefore contributed to the fragmentation of national party systems (Dinas and Riera 2018).

As the second-order model suggests, voting decisions in Euro-elections are heavily influenced by the national party-political environment. The primacy of domestic factors results in part from the strategies of the national parties that control candidate selection and conduct the electoral campaigns. Political parties are often internally divided over the EU, and hence have an incentive to focus on safer domestic themes in their campaigns. However, there is evidence of the increasing importance of the EU as an issue in explaining citizens' voting behaviour. For instance, in the 2014 elections the euro crisis featured prominently in the campaigns in several member states, with Eurosceptical parties benefitting from the problems facing the EU (Hassing Nielsen and Franklin 2017). Also, in the 2019 elections various cross-national themes – climate change, immigration, Brexit, authoritarian or nationalist tendencies in Europe and beyond – received a lot of attention across the Union (see Box 5.2). Nonetheless, media coverage of the elections and more broadly of what the European Parliament does between the elections tends to be scarce (Maier and Strömbäck 2011). As a result, Europeans are not really exposed to information about what MEPs do and where parties stand on various issues on the agenda of EU institutions.

Box 5.2. The 2019 European Parliament elections in selected member states.

Finland: Turnout was 40.7%. Expectations were low ahead of the European elections, as national legislative elections had taken place in mid-April and government formation negotiations coincided with the EP election campaign. However, the campaign revolved around a variety of European issues, not least climate change, and this no doubt benefited the Green League that achieved its best-ever performance in elections with 16.0 % of the vote. The winner, however, was the centre-right National Coalition with 20.8%. The Eurosceptical Finns Party captured 2 seats.

France: Turnout was 50.1 %. The nationalist and Eurosceptical National Rally (23.3%) finished first just ahead of liberal, pro-European coalition led by President Macron's La République En Marche (22.4%). The Greens achieved a very solid result with 13.5% of the vote. The vote was depicted as a choice between pro-Europeanism and rejection of Europe, but opposition to the EU was probably only one reason why people voted for the National Rally. The French party system has gone through various changes in recent years (see Chapter 2), and these elections produced another poor result for the traditional large parties, the Gaullists and the socialists.

Lithuania: Turnout was 52.9%. The leading opposition party, the centre-right Homeland Union (19.7%), sneaked ahead of the two governing parties, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union

(12.6%) and the Social Democrats (15.9%). Eurosceptic parties won only one of the 11 seats. The EP elections were completely overshadowed by the second round of presidential elections, also held on 26 May, won by the independent candidate Gitanas Nausėda. The simultaneity of the elections probably also explains the higher turnout.

Poland: Turnout was 45.7%, a significant increase from 2014 when only 23.8% cast their votes. The election was basically a contest between the ruling nationalistic Law and Justice Party that has attained international media attention – and is facing sanctions from the EU – on account of violating EU’s rules concerning the impartiality of courts and media, and the European Coalition that brought together various liberal, pro-EU political forces. The former captured 45.4% and the pro-EU coalition 38.5% of the vote. The campaign was dominated by a conservative-liberal cleavage, a cleavage that will no doubt continue to feature strongly in the Polish elections.

United Kingdom: Turnout was 36.9%. A strange affair, as the elections were held only on account of Brexit being delayed. Hence Nigel Farage, the main force behind the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), established a new party, the Brexit Party, with the sole goal of making sure that the UK really leaves the Union. Farage’s party won the election with a comfortable margin (30.7%). This also galvanized the pro-EU camp, with the Liberal Democrats ending second with 19.8% and the Green Party winning 11.8% of the vote. The result was a blow to the ruling Conservatives that only managed 8.8% of the vote (although the party bounced back to win the national elections held later that year). The other traditionally large party, Labour, did not fare much better with 13.7%.

European Party Groups

Lack of media coverage and limited knowledge of EU decision-making also means that most citizens probably do not understand how the European Parliament and its party system operate. The EP party system has throughout the history of the directly-elected Parliament been in practice dominated by the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) and the centre-left Party of the European Socialists (PES; the official group name has been Socialists & Democrats (S&D) after the 2009 elections). Other groupings include the liberals (currently called Renew Europe), the greens (including the regionalists), the radical left, the conservatives, and the Eurosceptics - although particularly the conservative and the Eurosceptical groups have been much less stable in terms of their composition and party names. While the number of Eurosceptic MEPs has grown over time, they remain very much in the minority in the Parliament (Brack 2018).

Party groups are generally quite cohesive when it comes to voting in the European Parliament, and they are generally much more cohesive than national delegations (that is, all MEPs elected from the same member state). Party cohesion is necessary for the achievement of a group's objectives, and cooperative behaviour inside groups helps individual MEPs in pursuing their own policy goals. As no group has ever held a majority of seats in the parliament, coalitions among different groups are needed to pass legislation. Often, coalitions form along left-right lines, although pro/anti-European integration alignments are also common. While party groups dominate decision-making in the parliament, national interests do nonetheless matter. When an MEP's national party does not agree with the position adopted by the wider EP party group, research shows that the MEP is more likely to follow the voting instructions of the national party (Hix et al. 2007). Moreover, MEPs can use their committee assignments or other tools such as parliamentary questions for advancing the interests of their constituencies (Whitaker 2011).

Box 5.3. Over to you: campaign themes in EP elections

The European Parliament brings together over 700 MEPs across the Union, with these parliamentarians representing almost 200 different national parties. It is commonly argued that domestic politics dominate EP elections, but there are also cross-national issues – such as climate change, immigration, or the future of European integration – that can feature in the campaigns. Choose one or more member states and study (a) to what extent parties campaigned on EU or national issues and (b) to what extent the various EP party group affiliations were featured in the campaigns of the national parties and in the media coverage. Particularly interesting would be to compare Eurosceptic parties with more mainstream pro-EU parties, and to see how their campaigns differed. Good sources are parties' election manifestos, the speeches and writings of party leaders or leading candidates, and news coverage in leading newspapers or social media channels. You can find out more about the 2019 campaign in various countries in the 'Euroreflections' report (<http://www.euroreflections.se/>) and in the volume edited by De Sio, Franklin and Russo (2019).

The main party groups in the Parliament constitute the parliamentary wings of the federations of national parties known as Europarties. National party leaders typically meet under the umbrella of their Europarties in advance of European Council summits, in order to coordinate their positions. In this way, Europarties have influenced many important EU policy decisions. Europarties have also introduced membership for individuals, but the drafting of manifestos and selection of leaders and candidates in EP elections remain in the hands of national party elites (e.g. Hanley 2008; Hertner 2018).

Europarties, their European Parliament party groups, and more broadly EU institutions remain distant to most Europeans. To enhance democracy in the EU, some have argued that the European Parliament should become more like a normal parliament that elects a government and holds it to account (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008). This could involve linking the appointment of the Commission president to the outcome of European Parliament elections, with Europarties playing a much more direct role in contesting the elections and putting forward candidates for Commission presidency. Alternatively, direct elections could be held for the Commission president, with candidates selected by the Europarties (Decker and Sonnicksen 2011). This would be more akin to a ‘presidential’ model (such as exists in the United States) than the parliamentary model found in most European countries.

The 2014 European Parliament elections did see some reforms aimed at linking the Commission presidency with the outcome of the elections. Europarties and their EP groups put forward ‘lead candidates’, or Spitzenkandidaten, for the position of Commission president. The EPP won the most seats in the elections, and its Spitzenkandidat (Jean-Claude Juncker) was duly appointed as the next Commission president. In the 2019 elections the Europarties again put forward their own lead candidates, who toured across Europe and took part in various public debates. While studies suggest that Europeans remained largely unaware of the lead candidates, the Spitzenkandidaten procedure has the potential to give voters more control (Schmitt et al. 2015; Braun and Popa 2018). However, the Spitzenkandidaten initiative was criticized heavily by Eurosceptics. For example, the British Prime Minister David Cameron describe it as ‘a power grab’ by the European Parliament. Ultimately, these critical voices prevailed, as in 2019 the European Council effectively ignored the Spitzenkandidaten system and nominated Ursula von der Leyen – who was not the lead candidate of any party group – as the new Commission president.

Conclusion

How can the EU and European integration become more democratic? The answer depends on what kind of Europe one wants: intergovernmental, supranational, or something in between. For example, increased use of majority voting in the Council facilitates EU decision-making, but for some it simply means further erosion of national sovereignty as their government might be outvoted in Brussels. This chapter has shown that national parliaments are paying more attention to European matters, subjecting their governments to tighter scrutiny, and this is good news in terms of the accountability of the Council and European Council. Most citizens may continue to be unaware of what MEPs do, but

successive Treaty reforms have turned the European Parliament from a ‘talking shop’ to a powerful legislature that injects democracy and transparency to EU decision-making. And perhaps most importantly, questions related to European integration feature more in public discussions, parliamentary debates, and election campaigns than before.

Yet for a lot of Europeans these developments do not really matter. For them, political power has drifted beyond democratic control – to market forces, central banks, multinational companies, or to ‘Brussels’. These people feel that the opening of borders threatens their way of life and national independence (De Vries 2018). They tend to vote for populist or radical right parties that oppose the expansion of international authority or the deepening of European integration and – as shown by the Brexit referendum – are not afraid to vote against Europe when given the possibility. In fact, it is quite logical that Eurosceptical parties focus on national politics. Reforming the EU is difficult, as all key decisions, including Treaty amendments, require unanimity among the member states, whereas achieving victory in national parliamentary or presidential elections can result in significant changes to national integration policy. As Mair (2007: 7) concluded, ‘once we cannot organize opposition *in* the EU, we are then almost forced to organize opposition *to* the EU.’

Modern European governance is also characterized by increasing interaction and power-sharing between multiple levels of political authority – from local councils and regions to the national and EU levels to various international organizations (see Chapter 11 in this volume). Even for informed, politically active citizens, this means blurred lines of accountability, opaque decision-making procedures, and difficulties in identifying who is responsible for the decisions (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). This can also be seen as a trade-off between output efficiency and democratic participation. Intergovernmental cooperation and more broadly EU governance enable member states to collectively address important societal challenges from youth unemployment to migration to questions of international trade and security, and successful bargaining may necessitate confidential exchanges between national governments and EU institutions. Too much democracy or openness can thus be harmful to efficient problem-solving. The multi-level nature of the EU polity also provides multiple access points for influencing politics, and this arguably favours interest groups and companies with better resources.

However, the alternative perspective stresses the importance of public debates and contestation about European integration. The EU with its plethora of languages and national media and political cultures may never constitute a real ‘public sphere’, and the distance between citizens and Brussels will not go away anytime soon. This implies that the key to addressing the democratic deficit lies at the national level. EU decision-making requires compromises, but this does not mean that domestic debates would be meaningless - quite the contrary. Political parties may have good

reasons for avoiding EU debates, but the more politicians discuss and disagree about European issues in public the better – particularly if these debates are covered by the media. As the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis demonstrate, in the short run these debates and increasing contestation over Europe may produce problems for the EU, but in the long run such debates will create the basis for a more democratic Europe.

Discussion questions

1. Citizens across Europe possess limited knowledge of how the EU functions. What would in your opinion be the most effective way of improving citizens' understanding of European integration?
2. Some believe EU governance would become more democratic through further empowerment of the European Parliament, whereas others are in favour of transferring powers back to the member states. What is in your opinion the best way to overcome the EU's democratic deficit?
3. Do you think the selection of the President of the European Commission should become more democratic, for instance by linking it more directly to the outcome of the European Parliament elections or by having separate elections for the position? What are the potential downsides of doing this?
4. Eurosceptical parties have recently increased their presence in European politics, gaining significant victories in both national and European elections. How do you see the impact of such parties on the legitimacy of European and national governance?
5. Do you believe that referendums should be used more actively in EU decision-making? Should such referendums be organized in individual member states or could there also be EU-wide referendums?
6. Each national legislature controls its government that represents the member state in EU decision-making. How does the parliament in your country (or a country of your choosing) become involved in EU affairs? Are EU issues debated in the plenary or are they handled mainly in the committees?

Thinking comparatively

According to the second-order election model, first developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), the European Parliament elections are less important than national parliamentary or presidential elections. The model is based on three main arguments: turnout is lower in EP elections than in national elections; government parties suffer losses in Euroelections; and larger parties do worse and smaller parties perform better in EP elections. Focusing on the 2014 elections and including all 28

member states in their analysis, Schmitt and Toygür (2016) ask whether the model still provides a valid framework for understanding voting behaviour in EP elections. They confirm that turnout remains significantly lower in European elections, with also considerable variation between member countries. Governing parties lost votes in comparison with previous national elections, particularly if EP elections took place roughly halfway through the national electoral cycle. Small parties performed better than in national elections in almost all member states. However, Schmitt and Toygür also point out that there are exceptions to these general patterns, with much depending on the particular political context within individual countries.

Guide to further reading

Heffler, C., Neuhold, C., Rozenberg, O., and Smith, J. (2015) (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments and the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

This collection shows how each national legislature handles European questions.

Hix, S., Noury, A.G., and Roland, G. (2007), *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Based on a large data set of roll-call votes since the 1979 elections, this book examines how EP party groups vote in the chamber, with particular focus on voting cohesion and coalition formation.

Ripoll Servent, A. (2018), *The European Parliament* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

This book provides an accessible yet analytical introduction to the European Parliament.

van der Brug, W., and de Vreese, C.H. (eds.) (2016), *(Un)intended Consequences of European Parliamentary Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

This volume covers a lot of ground from actual voting behaviour in EP elections to public opinion about European politics, media coverage, and the impact of European elections on national party systems.

Winzen, T. (2017), *Constitutional preferences and parliamentary reform: Explaining national parliaments' adaptation to European integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

This book examines how national parliaments have over time become more involved in EU affairs.

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