Brexit pushes European lawmakers to reform the EU

Brexit has pushed European lawmakers to seriously talk about rebuilding the EU. In December 2016, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament endorsed a report on adjustments to the institutional set-up of the EU, which was then ratified by the full house. This article argues that calls for democratising the EU political system have to be addressed immediately, and that priority should be given to reforms of the European elections. **Miriam Sorace** *advocates for a uniform Open-List Proportional Representation System with small constituencies and the possibility for national parties to run all over Europe as the 'ideal- type'. She then outlines its beneficial effects in terms of accountability and the formation of a European public sphere.*

Members of the European Parliament take part in a voting session, in the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Credits: FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP/Getty Images

One of the essential flaws in EU democracy relates to European Parliament (EP) elections. All scholars looking into the EU democratic deficit variously mention a missing 'public sphere', an absent 'EU demos', and low 'political contestation' (Hix & Follesdal 2006; Hix 2008). To cut a long story short, EU scholars doubt that the interests of EU voters on EU policies can be appropriately voiced or that they can be appropriately translated into EU policy outputs under the current institutional framework. This situation needs to change, and it needs to change soon, if the populist resurgence of recent years is of any indication. Many scholars indicate that to help EU voters have more control over EP politicians – and to create a European public sphere – it is important to redress flaws in EP elections (Hix & Hagemann 2009, Hobolt 2012, Hobolt & Spoon 2012). Establishing a common electoral law incentivising EU-specific political contestation is often seen as a necessary step.

The current system: a series of domestic 'mid-term' elections.

Currently, our representatives to the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected in a series of 'parallel' elections, run and regulated by the sovereign member states, and, as a result, dominated by national parties and their 'domestic squabbles'. The EU Treaties do not specify an EU-wide electoral rule: article 14 TEU and articles 20 and 223 TFEU mainly record an aspiration to 'uniform procedures' or 'principles' and simply demand five year terms, direct universal suffrage and free and secret ballots. The Treaties grant the EP the opportunity to draft reform proposals to regulate EP elections, but the final word on this matter belongs to the Council of Ministers. The difficulties in finding an agreement among all members meant that the only concrete translation of these aspirations for uniformity has been the baseline requirement of proportional representation (PR) with maximum 5% thresholds, enshrined in Council Decision 2002/772/EC.

Throughout the EU, therefore, we are currently using *national* elections to fill *supranational* positions. This has resulted in an incoherent and fragmented party system, which is not an ideal situation for multilevel polities like the EU, as it hurts the legitimacy and consequent application of policy outputs (Filipov and Ordershook 2004). This flaw, according to prominent EU scholars, is what leads to low turnouts and high instances of protest voting in EP elections (Hix & Marsh 2010; Hobolt 2012), winning them the title of 'second-order' elections. Studies have indeed demonstrated that substantive discussion of EU policy-making is mostly absent during EP elections (Davidson-Schmich & Vladescu 2012), and that European voters do not know what stance political parties have on EU issues (McElroy & Kritzinger 2012). We, therefore, cannot say to have full control over our MEPs: we can aspire, at most, to 'indirect' monitoring via the national party leadership.

How can we improve EU elections?

The Politics and Institutions focus group of the 1989 Generation Initiative is currently working at a courageous proposal that would substantially change the way we elect our MEPs. The proposal advocates a uniform electoral law blending supranational and local control, as it envisages an EU-wide system of proportional representation with open lists and small constituencies. According to the proposal, each member state will retain the number of EP seats it currently has but each political party can compete in other member states as well, and it will be incentivised to do so if it wants to win more seats in the EP. The option to run across several member states will encourage the formation of an EU-wide party system. Parties will be obliged to pick a list of 'local' candidates in all the constituencies of the EU in which they wish to compete, to facilitate contacts and communication with constituents. Studies by academics (e.g Hix and Hagemann (2009), Bright et al (2016)) have already made similar proposals and identified similar elements of an EU-wide electoral rule as necessary to redress the EU democratic deficit.

Open list proportional electoral rules have beneficial effects on turnout, satisfaction with democracy and contacts with representatives (Blais & Aarts 2006; Farrell & McAllister 2006). They foster intra-party competition (Farrell & Shugart 2012), and, with it, superior incentives to politicians to share information, and to be in close contact with voters (Hix & Hagemann 2009; Farrell & Scully 2010). Studies of electoral rules in addition find that open lists should be coupled with small (4-10 seater) constituencies to be effective, as small district magnitudes would avoid that open list competition reduces to country-level personality contests among top party politicians (Carey and Shugart 1995; Hix & Hagemann 2009). An analysis of the 2004 European election demonstrated that voters in open-list with small district electoral systems were in closer contact with MEPs and were better informed about the 2004 EP election (Hix & Hagemann 2009). Applying this electoral rule uniformly across the EU territory – and allowing political parties to run in all EU constituencies – would boost knowledge of EU issues and policy-making, increase satisfaction with EU democracy, improve participation in EP elections, enhance contacts between voters and MEPs, and potentially help to quench popular frustration with the EU.

It is heartening that leading European politicians, emboldened by Brexit, are currently talking about [converting the 73 UK seats in the European Parliament](#) into 'supranational' seats in 2019. This indicates some political willingness to viscerally transform the EP electoral system. Let's hope the impetus for EP elections reform will grow, together with a desire for truly European elections, so that citizens can take back control (actually and constructively, this time).

This article first appeared on [EUROPP](#) and it gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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