

POPULISM AND STATE SOVEREIGNTY IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The present paper aims to discuss the problem of declining political participation nowadays in conjunction with the level of state sovereignty in Europe. Is this a phenomenon worth worrying over? If so, for whom? Is the decline of people's interest in politics connected with a potential decline of state sovereignty? The issue of legitimacy in policymaking is the crux of the matter for the democratic future of the European Union. The multi-level analysis aims to link international relations theory and the state sovereignty problematique to the current issues of European party systems and their subsequent interlinkage with the EU structure.

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This paper aims to answer questions regarding the EU structure, modern party politics, the role of populism, and the pressure the international system exerts on state actors. Firstly, the EU legacy is described as: the general trends of Europeanization, the essence of the European institutions' integration, and the idea of "vertical democracy" verified by the historical evolution of the EU integration context in addition to its withstanding organizational and functional context. Secondly, specific issues of democratic legitimacy and representation are presented through the indicative citation of electoral turnout rates, a clarification of terminology, some comments on modernity and a review of the evolution of party politics in modern Europe. Thirdly, an analysis with regard to the role of populism is undertaken; this role has been driven mainly by declining participation and the general disappointment of citizens towards established partitocracies. Finally, the paper will analyze how systemic pressures on the international level affected the formation of domestic politics and the process of the EU integration in the post-Cold War political, economic, and strategic environment.

The EU Legacy

The EU structure provides the "greenhouse" for lobbying, party politics, and inter-state fermentations. Nevertheless, there are two additional questions that must be answered for a more comprehensive understanding: what is the legacy of Europeanization and what is the EU context? The decline of state sovereignty is considered as the subversion of the fact that the EU supranational institutions are subject to the intergovernmental European Council, which checks and balances activities. Essentially, the post-war European balance of power played a decisive role in institutionalization efforts and specifically in the establishment of the European Community of Coal and Steel (ECSC) in 1951 as well as the European Community of Atomic Energy (EAEC or EURATOM) and the European Economic Community in 1957. Moreover, the balance of power in Europe was the basic criterion for relevant developments in the following decades as significant causes of war — thus causes such as hegemonism and uneven growth were kept in check. This means that causes of war were eliminated with the prevention of uneven growth to function as a destabilizing factor. It is worth mentioning that the anti-hegemonic nature of the EU itself has secured its existence over the decades and this legacy is to be remembered.

Historically, the aforementioned hypothesis — that causes of war were eliminated through balance of power — has been exemplified, firstly by the right to and practice of the veto, thereby permitting smaller member-states to counter any decision-making process they consider to run contrary to their interests or desires. Secondly, the supremacy of the intergovernmentalism principle over supranational institutions

has protected the right of the member-states' democratically elected governments to express their views within an inter-state partnership without being supplanted by supranational, non-elected commissioners or fora. Under these principles and the US security umbrella, the bigger powers —foremost the European Great Powers— have been incapable of rendering the Europeanization process a system of predominance and enforcement. In explaining this phenomenon, Hedley Bull referred to the “US parameter” of European integration. He underlined that state interests were not ignored during the Europeanization process of the previous decades, but that they were just put in abeyance behind the need for American protection against the threat posed by the USSR, stating that:

There is no supranational community in Western Europe but only a group of nation-states (moreover, if there were a supranational authority in Western Europe, this would be a source of weakness in defense policy rather than of strength; it is the nation-states of Western Europe - France, Germany, Britain - their capacity to inspire loyalty and to make war - that are the sources of its power). Their history is one of endemic mutual conflict, and if they have recently acquired a habit of collaboration, this has been under the shadow of the American presence and the threat from the East. Even the idea that Western European nations constitute a “security community” or area of peace is mere wishful thinking, if it means that war between them could not happen again, and not simply that it has not happened in recent decades and would not make sense.¹

Under such circumstances, integration was secured as far as the European Great Powers were able to overlook their rivals' activities on the one hand, and faced a common threat (i.e., the USSR) on the other. Thus, in historical terms, a first conclusion is that the EU's nature has been anti-hegemonic for several reasons. This is clearly visible in the idea of “vertical democracy” seen throughout the EU's history, the reasons for its establishment, or even in more technical aspects such as the functions of the European Parliament and the principle of subsidiarity.² The principle of “vertical democracy” implies that the greatest possible participation of state bureaucracies in the EU decision-making processes, even at the lowest level, is to be of paramount concern. This way, the sovereignty of member-states can be recognized and protected, while the legitimization of such developments by citizens is realized through the deep involvement of state and even local authorities in the policy-making processes.

¹ Hedley Bull, “Civilian Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 21, No.2 (1982), p. 163.

² Juliet Lodge, “The European Parliament,” in Svein Andersen and Kjell Eliassen (eds.) *The European Union: How Democratic Is It?* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 192.

Issues of Democratic Legitimacy and Representation

Accepting that the EU's nature has been anti-hegemonic leads to questions regarding the relation between the citizens' will and the pragmatic policy-making process practiced in EU institutions. Is this policy-making process adequately legitimized by citizens? Are state bureaucracies at their lowest levels compatible with the will of people? The current concept of parliamentary democracy has shown that representation through any part of the political body —such as the legislature— is an adequate framework for people to legitimate decisionmaking.³ However, modernity has implied the limitation of popular sovereignty, and consequently, improved the participation of citizens in policymaking. Individuals are remote from de facto governance insofar as they have only an electoral right. The pillars of “the concept of representation”, such as “the right to adjustment, audit and abrogation of the representative”, are fully undermined by state systems which function as manipulators, and not as proxies of citizens.⁴ For this reason, firstly, it is underlined that declining political participation is a warning against the way democracy is perceived in modern Europe. Secondly, it must be kept in mind that, due to the distance between governing elites and social demands, declining political participation is a warning that nevertheless does not shake this system in the slightest.

Empirically, declining political participation is registered either by observing turnout rates in elections or by looking at citizens' daily occupation with politics. This low daily occupation is considered troublesome as far as the weakening pattern of traditional democratic parties often results to the reinforcement of populist movements. For this reason, such democratic parties appear to be the most vulnerable, emerging as “the losers” of relevant proceedings. In contemporary societies, the goal of equal participation has proven to be an illusion. The citizens of European countries seem to distance themselves from governance as democracies have failed to “fulfil their promises.”⁵ Thus, declining participation arises as a result of this failure; the ideal of popular sovereignty has turned out to be modelled on the unified sovereignty of the prince, while representation has not reflected the interests and opinions of collectives but rather those of organized groups.⁶

Democracies worldwide, and of course in Europe, have failed to eliminate oligarchic power and expand the spaces within which decisions are made democratically, especially into the spheres of bureaucracy and big businesses. They have not eliminated several “invisible powers” within bureaucracies that elude public accountability

³ Andrzej Rapaczynski, “Popular Sovereignty and the Concept of Representation: The Relevance of American Constitutionalism in Eastern Europe,” *International Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1997), p. 7.

⁴ Giorgos Contogiorgis, *Modernity and Progress: The Hellenic Example* [in Greek] (Athens: Cactus, 2001), p. 24.

⁵ Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 8.

⁶ Bobbio (1987), p. 28.

and thereby render the system non-representative.⁷ This oxymoron works towards the persistence of the problem, since citizens have considered themselves excluded from the democratic process and, consequently, have begun to consider their participation insignificant and not beneficial to their own interests.

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Therefore, the problem of declining participation is connected with “political motivation”, the incentives and reasons which should be provided to citizens in order for them to become interested in politics. It is obvious that traditional democratic parties can no longer play this role, and for this reason, political antagonisms have been exacerbated. At the same time, current democratic parties seem to be unable to channel political passions. In other words, they are incapable of providing distinct forms of identification around possible alternatives.⁸ The basic consequence of this situation seems to be the increasing pattern of right-wing populism; movements representing such ideas in several European countries have seen a continual increase in their power as a result of the failure of traditional parties to express themselves in such a seductive way. A significant example is seen with social democratic parties, which have identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle classes in most countries and have stopped representing the interests of the popular sectors whose demands are considered “archaic” and “retrograde.”⁹

This growing distance between citizens and politics is exactly the problem, since “there are many tendencies in modern democracies which strengthen the separation of a political class from its basis, such as public financing of parties, monopolization of political activities and the cooperation of government and opposition.”¹⁰ The latter is emphasized within the discourse and it depicts the process of cartelization within European party systems. It is true that important differences of the past

⁷ Bobbio (1987), pp. 27-36.

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, “The ‘End of Politics’ and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism,” in Fransisco Panizza (ed.) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 55.

⁹ Mouffe (2005), p. 55.

¹⁰ Klaus Von Beyme, “The Concept of Political Class: A New Dimension of Research on Elites?” *West European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1996), p. 84.

no longer exist and people cannot find a place to express different ideas/notions. Politicians of all parties have become more similar sociologically (i.e., middle class) and politically (i.e., moderate), a trend that is also reflected in the electorate, though to a somewhat lesser extent.¹¹

More contradictory analyses of declining political participation are worth noting. One feature of declining participation concerns the changing role of media. It is a well-known fact that media affects — to a large extent — people’s perceptions, and many times, can determine their roles in society. Politics is covered very negatively, while more focus is placed on sensationalist stories and events. Independence and commercialization are considered the main reasons for this change.¹² Chronologically speaking, the beginning of this decline in participation in the 1960s has not necessarily followed several changes taking place in the media, but coincided with them, such as with the clear distinction between most media and political parties, and the challenge to public media by private media.¹³ “Profit hunting” has led to the presentation of the most ambiguous aspects of politics, which in turn has led to the devaluation of politicians and their practices.

Some others have also highlighted the progress of individuals. According to this argumentation, nowadays, people are better educated and this makes them more “critical citizens” or perhaps “disenchanted democrats.”¹⁴ For this reason, they can better and more strictly judge politicians’ negative practices — as presented by the media — and be turned off to the point of having no interest in politics since this behavior is identified with governance. It is significant that individuals reject the whole political process when they are disillusioned with high politics or, in other words, the core of state affairs. This “cognitive mobilization” has led citizens to stop trusting that the elites think for them, and instead, to no longer follow what the elites tell them.¹⁵ Non-participation in the democratic process, then, becomes an “instrument of rejection” and this rejection often leads to the emergence of populist sentiments throughout society.

With regard to party politics, “as populists are reformist rather than revolutionary, they do not oppose political parties per se. Rather, they oppose the established parties, and call for or claim to be a new kind of party; that is, “they express populist

¹¹ Richard Katz, “Party Organizations and Finance,” in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard Niemi, and Pippa Norris (eds.) *Comparing Democracies, Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), p. 132.

¹² See: Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹³ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2004), p. 553.

¹⁴ Pippa Norris, “Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens?” in Pippa Norris (ed.) *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 27.

¹⁵ Mudde (2004), p. 554.

anti-party sentiments rather than extremist anti-party sentiments.”¹⁶ Populists usually express specific ingratiating notions considering political situations, however, without proposing realistic counter solutions. In this way, they exploit people’s disappointment — resulting from higher education, the media etc. — in order to increase their power. The absence of a political agenda characterizes Europe today. Parties assume power and positions in governmental schemes without representing any clear ideology; this makes populist ideas more penetrating, and of course, more powerful as their exponents present themselves as “defenders of political dialogue.” As Cas Mudde has pointed out, “contemporary populists favor output over input and leadership over participation. Consequently, these reactions are not just flawed, they can become counter-productive, i.e. strengthening the populist challenge rather than weakening it.”¹⁷

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The Role of Populism

Populism arises as a result of declining participation and epitomizes this phenomenon. Fransisco Panizza has referred to three basic situations furthering the emergence of populism in a society: a) a breakdown of social order and loss of confidence in the political system’s ability to restore it; b) exhaustion of political traditions and the discrediting of political parties; and c) changes in the field of the economy, culture, society, or shifts in the demographic balance between social classes.¹⁸ It is a serious matter that all these three criteria are interlinked — directly or indirectly — with the problems of declining participation and the emergence of populism. Significant historical examples would be the economic depression of the 1930s, which provoked the emergence of populist-fascist regimes in Europe or the recent devaluation of politics in several countries of Southern Europe. The emergence of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy was a remarkable example, as corruption scandals had effectively finished off first the Christian Democrat and then the Socialist Parties’ political machines.¹⁹ In Greece, the people’s mistrust of the big parties is depicted in several Gallup polls while populist

¹⁶ Mudde (2004), p. 546.

¹⁷ Mudde (2004), p. 563.

¹⁸ Fransisco Panizza, “Introduction” in Fransisco Panizza (ed.) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 11-3.

¹⁹ Panizza (2005), p. 12.

parties representing the extreme left and extreme right seem to steadily increase in power. Ideas of populism have arisen in European countries, but today, populists are opposed neither to parties as institutions nor to technocrats. They even trust the latter, arguing that “the experts do not alter the wishes of the people; they should just ensure that the people’s wishes are implemented in the best way,” with contemporary populists—such as Silvio Berlusconi—having also expressed similar ideas.²⁰

So, it is obvious that declining participation may benefit demagogues, who come up as “saviors” from the deadlock that established parties have led citizens and country into. Another historical example concerns Jörg Haider in Austria. Haider constructed a divide between citizens — such as workers, nationalists — and parties in power, foreigners, trade union bureaucrats, and intellectuals. It is telling that he declared, “people have the right to actively participate.”²¹ With such ideas, he gained a great say in between the Austrian electorate. Haider’s example in Austria seems to be the precursor of populist movements throughout Europe, in other words, a premature emergence of a phenomenon spreading in most European democracies today as a result of people’s disappointment with established parties and the relevant declaration of this via declining participation.

Systemic Pressures

In the international sphere, two phenomena have affected EU countries’ domestic agendas concerning the aforementioned political homogenization. The first concerns the fall of the USSR and the resultant decline of the Soviet bloc ideology that had been the basic “enemy” of democracies. Ever since, democracies have tended to be trapped in an internal discussion without any relevant motivation on theoretical issues concerning systemic functionality, all the while lacking any ideological framework but still believing their power to be unchallengeable. The second phenomenon deals with the partial infringement of the above-mentioned EU principle of intergovernmentalism, which results in a kind of “deficit”, leading to the marginalization of states or interest groups’ particularities. A point to recall is that the principle of intergovernmentalism has secured small member-states’ voices within the EU. Andrew Moravcsik has heretically concluded that “the democratic deficit is not a problem; it is a dilemma. While democratization may be useful, even necessary, as a means of maintaining the sentimental support for European publics, it may simultaneously make the [then] EC less effective at serving their interests.”²² What Moravcsik calls “insulation from particularistic interests,” believing that it is

²⁰ Mudde (2004), p. 547.

²¹ Mouffe (2005), p. 63.

²² Andrew Moravcsik, “Why the European Union Strengthens the State: Domestic Politics and International Cooperation,” *Center for European Studies Working Paper Series*, No. 52 (1994), p. 55.

“a major comparative advantage of the [then] EC,”²³ is often considered a problem of democracy affecting sovereignty, and consequently, the European interstate order.

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Referring to sovereignty and state-centrism, it is worth underlining that post-war Europeanization and the — not always harmonious — institutionalization in Europe can be described through the Westphalian international system and its basis in state sovereignty. The Westphalian foundation of the modern international system has been identified with the diachrony of basic principles even when subjected to extensive changes as profound as the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR. This common basis is the state-centric international system under circumstances of international anarchy. This means that state sovereignty and heterogeneity of agents are valued above all and determine the distribution of power on both global and regional levels. In the anarchically structured international arena, where no supreme power offers security to anyone, each actor makes efforts to survive, and thus, while under circumstances of security dilemmas, the right to empowerment is established. In the same line of thought, the right to self-defense and state sovereignty become preconditions for implementation of strategy through the need for survival. In other words, every rational actor cares for its survival through self-help in order to maintain its independent status.

It is true that there has never been a “golden period” for the Westphalian state system due to territorial violations or imposition of principles, including “human rights, minority rights, democracy, communism, and fiscal responsibility.”²⁴ Nevertheless, post-war European integration mostly approached this ideal in comparison to experiences of other international institutions, and recognizing the scarcity of respect for sovereignty. Phenomena of “dominance” or potential hegemonism have been present in many cases. Furthermore, state sovereignty and the will for self-determination do not mean or presuppose that there is no inter-state order. On the contrary, such core principles represent the right of decision-making autonomy as well as the free expression and implementation of the national interest. In this sense, the units are unequal in terms of their capabilities, but they are alike referring to their *modus vivendi*.²⁵

²³ Moravcsik (1994), p. 56.

²⁴ Stephen Krasner, “Compromising Westphalia,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1996), p. 115.

²⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 97.

The term “state sovereignty” has been conceptualized by Stephen Krasner in four different ways: international legal, Westphalian, domestic, and interdependence sovereignty.²⁶ Thus, it represents a principle consolidating collectivities’ right to self-determination and freedom in all the aspects and functions of their organization. The EU’s most important legacy has dealt mainly with Westphalian sovereignty, since this concerns “political organization based on the exclusion of external actors from authority structures within a given territory.”²⁷ In these terms, Westphalian sovereignty represents the principle securing member-states’ autonomy as well as their right to self-determination even in the light of an international regime. Thus, a second conclusion refers to the EU integration historically with respect to the principles of Westphalia on an anti-hegemonic basis.

What to Expect

The Westphalian state-centric tradition constitutes the ontology of the historical European integration having represented, in this sense, its legacy. The dissolution of the USSR and the defeat of communism, as well as the “democratic deficit” created by the continuous reinforcement of supranational institutions at the expense of the above-mentioned legacy have led, finally, to a homogenization of the political spectrum and high turnout electoral rates. Under such circumstances, the subversion of Westphalian sovereignty has been identified with the decline of popular sovereignty. Declining political participation is like a canary in a coal mine, since the people’s reaction points out the problem of a “democratic deficit” and the distance between the decisionmakers and the electorate. Citizens become disillusioned with the chaotic EU structure leading to a “democratic deficit” by reacting with non-participation. In these terms, popular sovereignty is subverted and states’ equal participation in the EU international regime’s functionalities is influenced at its core. All these are symptoms representing a vicious cycle leading to a vortex of decline. Intense demographic decline related to economic collapse, the Brexit procedure, the destabilization of the European periphery, and the subsequent migration-refugee crisis constitute a shady political gamble. The decline of state sovereignty is surely both a cause and an effect of this situation, as declining political participation, high turnout rates, and the rise of populism are pathogenies related exactly to this decline.

²⁶ Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 3.

²⁷ Krasner (1999), pp. 3-4.