

# Solving the EU's democratic deficit would help revive democracy at the national level

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*The European Union has often been accused of having a 'democratic deficit', but what measures would actually improve EU democracy? [William Outhwaite](#) writes on theoretical models of democracy and how they might be applied to EU politics. He notes that while the democratic problems associated with the EU policy process are very real, strong leadership from within the EU's institutions could help bring about a revival of democracy at both the national and European levels.*



To paraphrase [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#), the EU is born free yet is everywhere in chains. Its member states have by law to be democratic (Hungary is currently pushing this particular envelope), but there is a discussion of principle about whether the Union itself needs democracy which it would be hard (and disturbing) to find in any member state. This uncertainty exists among both experts and the public. Citizens are [prone](#) to feel decisions ought to be made at the national level, while criticising the EU for its lack of democracy.

## Europe's 'democratic deficit'

The 'democratic deficit' in the EU has been a topic since the 1980s; a good source of an explanation is the '[gridlock](#)' model, in which an initially successful organisational model becomes an obstacle to further change. The tension between the Council, made up of (often, though not always, elected) politicians from member states on the one hand and the directly elected Parliament on the other is a structural feature of the EU; so is the tension between its formal decision-making structures and intergovernmental deals between (usually the larger) member states.

Jürgen Habermas, following Philipp Dann and Stefan Oeter, has called the latter 'executive federalism' and [Anthony Giddens](#) calls it EU-2, where EU-1 is the [formal decision-making machinery](#). Most readers are probably sympathetic in principle to dialogical or deliberative democracy; the paradox is that in EU governance there seems to be a roughly inverse relation between deliberation and democracy. Unelected committees may (with luck) deliberate in an exemplary fashion, but the Parliament remains marginalised and unloved if not unknown.

The process which led to the election of Jean-Claude Juncker as the new Commission president could transform this situation. Whether or not it turns out to be the kiss which woke the sleeping beauty of European democracy, it brought to the EU something like electoral competition of the kind we are used to in our national states. The hustings debates between the candidates in Maastricht, Florence and Brussels were no worse, if maybe no better, than those in national or local politics. I voted for Schulz and got Juncker and, unlike my prime minister (and member of parliament), I was reasonably content with the result. Others, such as [Christian Joerges](#), have been more sceptical.



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I continue to believe that, even if the Juncker presidency turns out disappointingly, the system is here to stay and will have beneficial consequences. At worst, the election of the Commission president may turn out to be little more than cosmetic, at least in the short term. But parliaments tend to grow over time, with whatever fits and starts. The Reichstag, once a 'fig-leaf for absolutism' and for nearly 30 years surrounded by barbed wire, is now the seat of an effective, if not terribly exciting, parliament. Unless one believes that the Commission should not be politicised and/or that the European Parliament should not have a say in its composition I see little to object to in the new arrangement. For the moment, I am inclined to go on, in a British politician's memorable phrase, 'stirring up complacency'. Europe has more serious problems to deal with.

Can we democratise EU governance without exacerbating the problems of democracy in member states? Here I would simply recall the analyses of Vivien Schmidt, Claus Offe and others. Habermas boldly suggested a *Flucht nach vorn*, as Joschka Fischer had done in 2000, replacing the Council with a European Senate or Bundesrat. Giddens explicitly advocates federalism. At the other extreme, David Cameron is presently flirting dangerously with a Norwegian solution (without the benefit of Statoil), but binding oneself to obey laws which one does not participate in making hardly seems a recipe for strengthening national democracy.

### **'Spectatorial' democracy?**

Clutching at straws, we might consider the 'spectatorial' model of democracy outlined by Jeffrey Green, focused on the regular exposure of political leaders to forms of interrogation which they do not control and manipulate. Modern publics have neither the time nor the inclination to engage substantially with political issues, but as more or less informed spectators they can exercise an important supervisory function. Theories of representative democracy put too much stress on the electoral process, and those of direct and deliberative democracy raise unrealistic expectations, while a modified version of plebiscitary democracy can enforce what he calls 'candour' on political leaders. In an argument which resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of political exclusion and Colin Crouch's [discussion](#) of post-democracy, Green in a sense sets a spectatorial thief to catch the post-democratic media-manipulative thief (Berlusconi *e tutti quanti*), recognising that we now have an essentially mediated relationship to political debate.

How might this approach illuminate European politics? Green urges us to turn our attention to political *leaders* rather than legislative *outputs* – an approach which seems at best inappropriate to the EU and at worst to reinforce the current emphasis on 'EU2' and Merkel's charisma of office. On the other hand, theories of the EU as a regulatory and audit-based state do capture an important aspect of its operations, and of the more effective areas of activity of the European Parliament. In national politics too, at least in that of the UK, there has been a notable shift of emphasis in the recent past from the show in the Chamber to the investigatory role of parliamentary committees.

The EU's current political leaders might not stand up well to spectatorial democracy, but the politics of the Union, though for geographical reasons inevitably remote from most citizens, are a good deal more open to scrutiny than those of most member states, and its representatives relatively open to public attention – where they can attract it. This is clearly open to the charge of 'paternalism' but there is perhaps the possibility of a virtuous spiral in which upgraded EU presidents, high representatives and commissioners begin to look and act like representatives of a serious political entity. A European Union which addressed these internal issues, as well as questions of social policy and the overarching global crisis of capitalism, might do much to revive democracy at the national and the European level.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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