

As long as democratic legitimacy stems from national politics, governments will have few incentives to make responsible decisions at the EU level

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When national governments make decisions at the EU level they have to balance policies which are in the national interest of their own state and policies which are in the wider interest of Europe as a whole. Based on the work of Luuk Van Middelaar, [Sonia Alonso](#) and [Juan Rodríguez Teruel](#) discuss the competing responsibilities which national governments face within the European Union. They argue that as long as democratic legitimacy stems primarily from the level of national politics, there will be few incentives for governments to make genuinely responsible decisions at the European level. Ultimately, only a stronger European democracy can solve this dilemma.



One of the central arguments in Luuk Van Middelaar's book, [The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union](#), is that European national governments have a dual role to play in the European Union: as founding member states *severally* and as member states *jointly*. As member states *severally*, national Governments represent – and are accountable to – their respective national publics and their main objective is the defence of national interests; as member states *jointly*, they are accountable to their national publics for the decisions taken by the European Council and they have the responsibility to bring to the joint table the acquiescence of their respective national populations or parliaments to the decisions adopted jointly. In other words, EU national governments wear two hats, one on behalf of their respective states and one on behalf of Europe.



According to Van Middelaar, the Great Recession has shown how difficult it is for national governments to wear these two hats simultaneously in hard times, when national and European interests often run in opposite directions. European decisions are always “a compromise between different views but also some common interests, it is always about bringing together the differences and the similarities”. The implication is that national leaders sometimes have to cross their own “red lines” while at the European Council’s negotiating table. This is why it is so important “that leaders assume this responsibility of saying back home: ‘we have done this because it is good for our own country but also because it is good for Europe as a whole’”.

In this respect we ask ourselves the following: if it is so important that national governments’ leaders assume responsibility before their national publics for the decisions jointly adopted by the European Council, and that they show responsibility when sitting at the joint European table by thinking not just about national interests but also about the interests of the EU as a whole, why are national leaders irresponsible?

During the crisis we have often seen two types of irresponsible behaviour on the part of European national leaders. On the one hand, we have seen them at the European Council acting with their eyes set on national opinion polls and presenting back home the Council’s decisions as national triumphs; on the other hand, we have seen national leaders trying to get exoneration for unpopular decisions at home by claiming that they had no choice but to give in to the pressure coming from Brussels and from the other member states. A good example of the first type of behaviour has been that of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel; a sample of the second is to be found in Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

Van Middelaar himself, in an interview in May, has explained this irresponsible behaviour as a problem of democratic incentives. As he states, national leaders “don’t get enough rewards when they are wearing the European hat... If I look at my own country, for instance, the Netherlands, it is not necessarily the case that the

Dutch voters like it if a Dutch Prime Minister is a great European. They want him to be a good Dutch Prime Minister”.

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National leaders are elected by their respective national publics and it is at the national level where their democratic legitimacy rests. National leaders will be judged by their defence of national interests in the EU’s institutions and not by the extent to which their actions contribute to the European common good. In our opinion, this should lead us to reflect upon the following: as long as democratic representation is located at the national level, and the European political process rests mainly on the shoulders of the European Council, national leaders will have few incentives to be responsible as European leaders.



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Creating a European democracy

A second issue raised by Van Middelaar’s work concerns the following paradox: while the decisions taken during the Eurozone crisis by the European

Council were deeply political in nature, and have clearly benefited some countries more than others, these decisions have been presented to European citizens, and in turn interpreted by them, as technocratic choices imposed by obscure unelected decision-makers in Brussels as the only possible alternative to the crisis. According to Van Middelaar, this is the consequence of the deeply ingrained fear of conflict that exists among European national leaders and that leads them “to hide the politics” that characterise European-level decisions.

Even if we think that the democratic process implies having “an open fight about certain options”, the fear of conflict, present since the origins of the EU after the war, has pushed national leaders towards an emphasis on agreement and consensus: “There is a strong will that no country leaves the negotiation as a loser, because if you have open political fights then it is about who wins and who loses...”

Ultimately, national leaders at the European level defend a formalist and technocratic conception of democracy, protected from the instability caused by political passions. European democracy shies away from an open ideological contest between diverse worldviews and social projects to be decided upon by the majority of the citizens through free and fair elections.

National leaders understand European democracy as consensus, to be reached by national elected representatives through inter-governmental negotiations behind closed doors, and to be presented to the European public as a technocratic decision. Thus, decisions that are clearly political in nature are defended as the only reasonable and appropriate options given the circumstances.

In our opinion, the danger of defending and acting upon this formalist and technocratic conception of democracy, particularly in such hard times as those of the Great Recession, is to empty democracy of all meaning and, consequently, to weaken its legitimacy. European citizens, particularly those from debtor countries, which are suffering most dramatically from the consequences of austerity, do not accept this predicament.

They believe, and with good reason, that, in the absence of alternatives, democracy does not exist. While it is understandable that national leaders want to avoid an open conflict between the winners and losers of the crisis, presenting political choices as unavoidable technocratic decisions is not the way to go if European democracy is to be strengthened. Instead, an open democratic fight between different policy alternatives, and between different visions of what Europe should be like, is more likely to serve that purpose better.

The European elections in May carried the potential to 'politicise' (i.e. democratise) the European decision-making arena. For the first time, European parties put forward candidates for the European Commission President, with political debates among these candidates taking place across Europe. We, as European citizens, should take such moments as opportunities. Let us hope that following the European elections we can make clear that the solution is neither more neoliberal technocracy nor a populist national retrenchment, but a truly *European* democracy.



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