

The European Union must have a closer link to national politics if it is to retain its legitimacy

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*National governments are still involved in negotiations over nominating a candidate for the next President of the European Commission. **Anand Menon** writes that while much of this debate has focused on the merits of individual candidates such as Jean-Claude Juncker, the real issue is a structural one concerning the future of the European Parliament. He argues that, whichever candidate is nominated, the European Parliament is no longer fit for purpose as a mechanism for legitimising the EU. Only by forging a stronger link between the Union and politics at the national level can the EU's democratic legitimacy be ensured.*



Many conclusions can be drawn from the European elections. One, however, stands out as the most significant. When it comes to ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the European Union, the European Parliament is simply not fit for purpose. At a time when the EU more obviously shapes the economic fortunes of its citizens than ever before, this situation is unsustainable. The future of European integration depends on it being linked more directly to national democratic politics.

This time was meant to be different. Because the European elections were to directly affect the choice of European Commission President, its proponents argued they represented the dawn of a new era of 'normal,' partisan EU politics. The European Parliament, as ever, leveraged its powers, nominating candidates for the Commission post in an attempt to foster clear contestation between competing individuals.

Yet nothing changed. As ever, most European voters chose simply not to participate. The vast majority of those who did had no idea about the Presidential candidates their votes were supporting. Many simply chose to use the election to protest against a variety of irritants ranging from mainstream politics to immigration, to the impact of globalisation.

No one has come out of this process well. Not the national governments who, over time, have created this constitutional mess with their willingness to increase the powers of a parliament neither they nor their voters respect. Nor the EP itself, which has used the elections to attempt a naked power grab spuriously legitimised in the name of 'democracy'. The much-vaunted (if little watched) televised debates between the Presidential candidates revealed merely how little they disagree on, united as they are by a desire simply to drive integration forward.

Nor has either side distinguished itself following the elections. To argue that Jean-Claude Juncker enjoys a genuine democratic mandate is to wilfully ignore the intentions of the voters. Yet to claim opposition to him is based on an assessment of his credentials is equally disingenuous. The idea, frequently expressed, that Juncker is too much of a backroom dealmaker loses all credibility when the head of the notoriously secretive and profoundly undemocratic IMF is touted as an alternative.



Martin Schulz and Jean-Claude Juncker, Credit: © European Union 2012 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

We confront a choice between unpalatable alternatives. Member states could accept Juncker, thus appointing a candidate beholden to the Parliament, and creating political problems for David Cameron. Alternatively, they could select an alternative candidate, sparking an angry confrontation with a Parliament whose approval is needed for the European Commission to take office. In so doing, they would underline their contempt for the (albeit imperfect) mechanisms of representative democracy at the EU level.

The nub of the problem is not about this or that candidate. It is structural. In attempting to enhance its own powers, the EP is acting like parliaments have throughout history. In defending their prerogatives, the member states are acting like normal nation states.

The victim of the clash is the legitimacy of the EU system. Absent a European demos, whose emergence national politicians are understandably reluctant to encourage, the EP is incapable of providing such legitimacy. Absent a means of providing accountability for their collective decisions at the European level, so too are national governments.

For many years, this did not matter. The EU dealt largely with trade and regulation and had no competence over those issues that voters really care about – taxation, welfare, health and education. The Eurozone crisis has changed all this. Decisions taken in Brussels shape the fiscal policy of member states to a degree unimaginable only a few years ago. The EU has, in other words, become politically highly salient.

Consequently, the democratic malaise afflicting European governance is unsustainable. Member states rely on the EU to achieve key policy objectives. A gradual erosion of support for the Union threatens their ability to deliver these. Seeking democratic legitimacy via empowerment of the European Parliament has been repeatedly tried and has failed.

The only alternative is to link the EU more closely with national political processes. This is not to say that these latter are perfect. Far from it. But they do engage citizens in debates over partisan politics to a far greater extent than do European elections. Politicians stand or fall on their records in office, and if those records included active participation in generating EU decisions, these too would be the object of greater democratic scrutiny.

Moreover, direct involvement in EU policy making would change the behaviour of national politicians. As things stand, many of these choose simply to carp from the sidelines, blaming the EU for difficult decisions whilst failing to suggest alternatives. Having a direct say over these decisions would mean putting up or shutting up. The cheap shot at Brussels would no longer be a rational political strategy for national parliamentarians directly involved in the EU legislative process.

Redesigning the system to ensure such involvement will not be easy. There are various competing schemes out there, and ultimately, it will involve treaty change, which many governments are currently desperate to avoid. In the interim, greater use of the yellow card procedure introduced by the Lisbon treaty, and more effective scrutiny of EU legislation through the relevant committees in national parliaments would represent a good start.

The crucial point is that something needs to be done. The two levels of European politics are mutually dependent. Member states need the EU to achieve policy outcomes they could not accomplish alone. The Union depends on these member states in order to function. The methods used to ensure democratic legitimacy must reflect this interdependence, linking national politics directly with the EU and engaging national publics in a way the current system simply fails to do. The alternative is to see the Union lose all legitimacy, undermining its ability to act at the very moment when member states need it most.

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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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