

Making up for the democratic deficit: European identity and political participation

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Making up for the democratic deficit: European identity and political participation

1. The democratic deficit of the European Union

1.1 Introduction

Democracy is one of the most highly cherished values in contemporary European societies, and it appears to be the most suitable form of governance that there is. Or as Winston Churchill put it once: “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”¹ So far, there seems to be agreement in Europe, while there is much less of it on the question what democracy means in a concrete context and where exactly to draw the line between democratic and undemocratic features. The word ‘democracy’ derives from the ancient Greek *dimokratía* (δημοκρατία) and literally means ‘rule by the people’.² Contrary to the classical Athenian democratic system where powers were exercised directly by the people, it is nowadays common to delegate these powers to elected representatives. There are various definitions of democracy, differing in their emphasis on certain constituting elements. At the core there are institutional controls, meaningful legislative representation following competitive elections, accountability to the electorate, and participation of the demos.

This paper aims to evaluate the status quo of democracy within the European Union with a focus on the existence of a European “demos”. My analysis will tackle the question if there are imperatives for action and I will conclude with proposals on how to cure the Union from its deficiency, namely the assumed lack of democracy.

1.2 Democracy in the EU

The EC in its early years, as an elitist project, always rested on an assumed ‘permissive consensus’ among member state citizens, but after the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht new discourses arose around the democratization of the European Union as an answer to the question of its legitimacy. The deficits discussed can be divided into two categories. From an

¹ Sir Winston Churchill, *Hansard*, November 11, 1947

² Cf. Britannica Student Encyclopaedia, online: <http://student.britannica.com/comptons/article-9273962/democracy>, last download: April 24, 2008

institutional perspective there is a need for more democratic power sharing, more power for the European Parliament (EP) or national parliaments and increased accountability of the Council and the Commission. It is criticized that there has been an increase in power of the executive, namely the Council and the Commission that has not been compensated through parliamentary scrutiny.³ Thus, the system of institutional control and accountability appears not to be balanced. We can witness relatively big influence of unelected technocrats on the policy making process, particularly when considering the role of Comitology in the Commission and the Council.⁴ It has been argued that there might occur a deviation of policy outcomes from actual voters' preferences, which has been framed by concepts like "venue shopping" (the pursuance of policy objectives at the European level if they could not be realized at the national level). This line of argumentation has even been elaborated by some scholars to an assumed neo-liberal bias of European policy making.⁵ The second category of critique originates from a socio-psychological perspective and is characterized by the claimed need for a "European demos".⁶ The focus of this paper lies on that part of the assumed Union's deficiency. The concept of a "demos" refers to the idea of a political community with shared values and identity, and is incorporated in most valid definitions of democracy. Its active interest and participation in the political decision making process is viewed as a precondition for a functioning democracy. "We have made Europe, now we have to make Europeans."⁷

2. Political Participation and European Identity – Status Quo and Imperatives for Action

2.1 Lack of political participation and a European social identity

Empirical evidence for a lack of political participation within the European Union can be found easily. The turnout rates of the election of the EP reached their lowest level ever in

³ As has been argued for instance by Andersen & Burns (1996), Raunio (1999), Chryssochoou et al. (2003), Craig & de Bùrca (2003)

⁴ As has been argued for instance by Craig & de Bùrca (2003)

⁵ E.g. Scharpf (1997)

⁶ As has been argued for instance by Chryssochoou (2000)

⁷ Paraphrased, Europeanized form of Massimo d'Azeglio's famous quip "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." In: Cederman (2000), p. 3

2004 with only 45,7%.⁸ In addition, they were fought on national rather than European issues.⁹ There is near-zero knowledge of the functioning of the Union and its institutional workings.¹⁰ Comitology and intransparent, complex decision making processes result in an opaque appearance of the European Union. The political accountability of Commission and Council is indirect and too removed to let them be perceived as possibly influenceable. The difference from familiar national polities prevents citizens from truly understanding and identifying with it.

The notion of social identity (as opposed to individual identity) is defined as the way that individuals regard themselves as members of particular groups. Within the EU, 91% of all citizens feel attached to their own country, while only 53% feel attached to the European Union. And despite great popularity of the European flag that is known by 95% of all Europeans, only 54% identify with this flag.¹¹

2.2 Why we need enhanced participation and a European identity

In the years after the founding of the EC, its policies had a rather regulatory character. It was primarily economic measures that were dealt with and Pareto-efficient outcomes led to the conclusion that there was no need for politicizing and more democratic decision-making. There was a lack of saliency of the issues for the citizens which were rather non-controversial. The low level of participation is from that perspective the consequence of rational behaviour by political parties and citizens.¹² But looking at European policies today, it becomes clear that most of them are de facto (re-)distributive and we can see identifiable tendencies towards more European social legislation.¹³ So I argue that in order to maintain legitimacy more democratic citizen involvement is needed because they actually have something at stake here. Social policy is particularly salient to European citizens and the development of EC social legislation has increased since the late 1950s, with the 1990s being the most active period.¹⁴ And from my point of view, the low level of participation is not caused or justified by a lack of saliency for the citizens but – there is no room for an opposition. Without democratical

⁸ Official website of the EP: Turnout trends at European elections. online: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-election/sites/en/results1306/turnout_ep/turnout_table.html, last download: April 24, 2008

⁹ Cf. Semetko & Banducci (2003), p. 2

¹⁰ European Commission, DG General Communication (ed.) (2006), pp. 57-60

¹¹ European Commission, DG General Communication (ed.) (2007), pp. 79-86

¹² Cf. Moravcsik (2002), pp. 615-617

¹³ Cf. Follesdal & Hix (2005), pp. 13-15

¹⁴ Cf. Falkner (2007), pp. 276-278

contestation and articulation of different positions, there will be no political debate and participation.¹⁵ Aligning with Schattschneider's "mobilization of bias", there will only be saliency of an issue and a public debate if different positions on that issue are actually articulated and democratically contested.¹⁶ I conclude that there is a need to promote contestation among policy platforms on a European level in order to enhance political participation.

Furthermore, in order to legitimate and make further European policies possible, we need a European social or civic identity. As long as there is no "political community" the individual European will continue to act as homo oeconomicus. There must be a reason to accept political measures unfavourable to oneself as individual. Legal enforcement cannot be the only answer; it must be the pursuance of the "common good" which creates loyalties among Europeans.¹⁷ A lack of political community will hinder the EU from achieving its goal of an 'ever closer union' and is opposing trends towards the expansion of EU policies into social politics. There will not be a European democracy. Social identities are terribly important for people, they matter. We have seen many democratic institutions in Africa collapse, where the state encompasses citizens that identify themselves primarily as members of a tribe. At the same time, there is a fear of loss of national identity,¹⁸ so the focus of European politicians has to be on managing diversity. The big challenge is to integrate widely differing cultures into the EU's polity. A European identity has to be compatible with other (e.g. national) identities.

3. How to enhance participation and foster identity

In the last chapter, we have seen that there is a need to promote an opposition on the European level, and to foster a European identity. I will now evaluate political measures to promote these objectives, let changes in the institutional structure of the Union aside.

The role of the media is crucial with regard to informing European citizens. Currently European news and media presentation takes place rather in terms of national interests, or is characterized by reports about what has been done. Europe is then presented as having one voice. Generally speaking those news and information are not perceived by the broad public.

¹⁵ Cf. Follesdal & Hix (2005), pp. 23-26

¹⁶ Introduced in: Schattschneider, E.E. (1960): *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York.

¹⁷ Cf. Fuhse (2005), pp. 49-51

¹⁸ McLaren (2007), p. 383-385

They are considered as being boring and “zapped away”. On the other hand, there is a tendency of citizens to express the wish to be better informed and more involved.¹⁹ Thus, a different content of the news appears crucial, not necessarily increased presence in terms of time. There should be no fear of negative reports. Non-positive news coverage of the EU does not necessarily demobilize EU citizens, rather, up to a point unfavourable news coverage appears to be related to a more interested and engaged citizenry and one that is more likely to vote.²⁰ European Elections might serve as a starting point for an emerging European public sphere. Citizens should have the right to decide according to broad political orientations. They must be able to choose between the right and left of the political spectrum instead of national candidates. Competitive elections are crucial to make policies and elected officials responsive to the preferences of citizens.

There has been an increase of democracy within EU institutions in terms of trans-national alignments and coalitions along left-right lines but there is a lack of connection between internal democratizing tendencies and the public opinion.²¹ What the people want, and what the media will pick up are controversies and fights about political issues. And those debates should concern political differences instead of national ones. Parties and associations have the important role to formulate policy offers which they submit to the vote of citizens and which they have to stand in for. To facilitate this process the electoral law for the European Parliament should be unified across the European Union. National polities are complex and partly intransparent as well but it is possible to translate those and the EU into simple language and present it in the form of basic political choices understood by ordinary citizens. Interest will be mobilized as soon as an opposition becomes visible. Furthermore, political competition is an essential vehicle for opinion formation. Competition fosters political debate, which in turn promotes the formation of public opinion on different policy options. Electoral contestation thus has a powerful formative effect, promoting a gradual evolution of political identities.²²

A European identity cannot be constructed artificially from one day to the other. It is a development process that needs time to evolve. The early years of personal development and education play a particularly important role. But the process of identity formation is also inextricably linked to political participation. According to a constructivist view, both are mutually influencing each other.²³ Hence, enhanced participation will contribute to the

¹⁹ European Commission, DG General Communication (ed.) (2006), pp. 63-65

²⁰ Cf. Semetko & Banducci (2003), p. 3

²¹ Follesdal & Hix (2005), pp. 27-29

²² Cf. Follesdal & Hix (2005), p. 24

²³ Cf. Cederman (2000), pp. 4-7

emergence of European identity and vice versa. In addition, there are numerous political measures that can support the emergence of a new, additional identity. The EU is in a favourable position because mass media and mobility facilitate the integration process. They should be recognized and used as opportunities to emphasize common features and values. The theoretical framework of identity formation (relationism or phenomenological network formation) points to the importance of boundaries.²⁴ A network establishes its own unity and structures through the symbolic construction of symbolic boundaries and identity. Hence, the need for a clear defined boundary which implies to define the own identity and ‘the other’, exclusion appears as important as inclusion. European law and regulations serve as sort of a code of conduct within the network and a higher amount of control (power transfer to European level) facilitates network building. Control and identity rely on each other. This raises the question of further enlargement and delegation of power. Possibly, identity formation can only take place when the enlargement process is finished. But as important seems the need to infuse geo-political boundaries with meaning. The relevance of clear cut geo-political boundaries can be reduced by emphasising other symbolic boundaries such as religion or general common values. Culture can serve as a tool-kit to establish these boundaries. Not only mass media and mobility play an important role, but also cultural transfer within education on all levels influences this process.

4. Conclusion

The democratic deficit of the European Union has, as illustrated above, multiple dimensions. It is not appropriate to deny its existence since the perception itself represents a deficit. Nevertheless, it has to be differentiated:

Compared to European advanced industrial democracies there is a low degree of direct accountability to the electorate. I agree that Pareto-efficient policies may be developed by experts who are not necessarily directly accountable to the electorate. These are policies that do not have a distributive character and hence do not produce identifiable winners or losers. Most such areas are still either subject to intergovernmental cooperation or they rest in the national sphere. But in recent years we have witnessed fundamental shifts of intergovernmental cooperation towards supranational governing in many policy areas. The borders of pure economic cooperation are blurred and EU-policies are no longer merely regulatory. The declared objective to become ‘an ever closer union’ indicates that more policy

²⁴ Cf. Fuhse (2005), pp. 51-57

areas will be included, thus, there is an imperative to ensure effective democratic accountability.

The extension of powers of the electorate in influencing EU-decision making by institutional amendments alone will not yield the desired result. First, it seems necessary to elaborate existing election opportunities. The European citizens are given the chance to control the Council via the election of their national government, and the EP is even elected directly. But as long as there is no European element to be found neither in national (government) elections, nor in European (EP) elections, these elections are not likely to sufficiently express voters' preferences for European policy and hence effectively influence decision-making processes on the European level. Up to now, the EU is still a rather elitist approach, too distant from European citizens to let them perceive their involvement. Instead there is a feeling that the EU is too complex and quite independent which finally yields the image of a democratic deficit. The issue of intransparency of decision-making has to be tackled by better informing European citizen during election campaigns and by establishing institutional room for contradictory alternative policy proposals to be expressed and discussed by an opposition. The emergence of a European identity cannot be viewed as a prerequisite for a European political public debate and participation since both are mutually enforcing each other.

European politics should support the emergence of a European civic identity by all means available. Closing the gap between the EU and its citizens will eliminate the perception of a democratic deficit, and ultimately contribute to solving the issue.

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