Reshaping European Democracy: A Year in Review

Richard Youngs, editor

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About the Project

The Reshaping European Democracy project is an initiative of Carnegie’s Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program and Carnegie Europe that aims to analyze, debate, and help improve the state of European democracy via a series of regular publications and events. Since 2018, the project follows two main streams of activities: It produces a series of evidence-based assessments, prepared by a core team of Carnegie fellows and independent experts based in different countries across Europe, and, together with European Movement International, it regularly convenes a wider European Democracy Group of experts and officials to debate issues related to democracy, with an eye to improving democracy in the European Union.

The Reshaping European Democracy project receives the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the University of Warwick.
Introduction

RICHARD YOUNGS

Reflecting widespread concern over current political trends in Europe, just over a year ago Carnegie launched a project on Reshaping European Democracy. Under the rubric of this project, we assembled a team of experts and asked them to examine a range of critical political issues in Europe, resulting in sixteen articles on different dimensions of European democracy—relating to challenges at the EU, national, and local levels. As debates about the state of democracy intensify even further, those articles have been collected here.

It is an opportune moment to shine a spotlight on democracy, as so much attention has been focused on the May 2019 European Parliament elections. While countless articles home in on these elections’ winners and losers, and the shifts in party blocs inside the parliament, this collection recognizes that these movements are conditioned by a set of deeper-rooted trends and dilemmas. Ephemeral punditry and polling sit atop deeper and more conceptual questions about the future of European democracy that merit more sustained consideration.

The Reshaping European Democracy project has several aims. With so many books, articles, op-eds, and speeches rather breathlessly despairing that European democracy is in terminal decline, in free fall toward wholesale deconsolidation and a return to authoritarian fascism, it’s important to ask whether a more sober sense of proportion might be needed. This project certainly does not downplay the poor state of European democracy. Yet it also examines whether there are more positive developments afoot across Europe that have been somewhat brushed aside in the standard recent analyses. Most deeply, Europeans should be concerned not simply with whether particular parties are rising or falling, but whether healthy renewal is occurring in the way citizens understand and engage with democratic processes.

A sense of proportion and nuance additionally invites readers to question the widespread tendency in recent years to treat democratic erosion in Europe as essentially inseparable from rising nationalism, Euroskepticism, and any number of other ills shaking the continent’s core liberal edifice. Even if all these phenomena are interrelated and of much concern, they are not all coeval with democratic regression. In this sense, the issues pertinent to democratic quality need to be separated out and made the subject of a discrete program of research—rather than unthinkingly conflated with a whole range of other trends.

It is also time to move the analytical dial a few degrees away from the relentless focus on populism. This theme has come to overshadow and often distort debates about democratic quality. Populism is part of the equation of European democracy, but only one part. Much of what is labeled as
European populism has little to do directly with democratic quality; conversely, many (indeed, probably most) of the challenges facing democracy today have little to do with populism. Yet while there are events held and articles written every day on the rise of populism, there is much less debate around the more essential and underlying issue of democratic quality in Europe. The Reshaping European Democracy project offers a corrective to this imbalance by presenting a holistic picture of European democracy.

Understandably, analysts and practitioners tend to focus on one bit of the democracy puzzle. Some are concerned with parties and party systems, invariably immersed in their own national party politics; some monitor EU-level mechanisms relating to the rule of law; some concentrate on the micro-mechanics of deliberative forums; and others are preoccupied with digital issues. This project has aimed to cover all of these different elements and explore the linkages between them, in the conviction that these connections are essential for a truly composite understanding of trends in European democracy.

The articles that follow draw from the expertise of a core team of experts on a number of themes, including democratic trends within member states, the European Parliament elections, new participative initiatives, digital democracy, and the democratic impact of EU policies. This wide array of reflections can help inform debates, as the ebb and flow of democratic quality becomes increasingly important for Europe’s future.

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Is Macron’s Grand Débat a Democratic Dawn for France?

RENAUD THILLAYE

In January 2019, President Emmanuel Macron launched a Grand Débat, or Great Debate, across France. The two-month process quickly assumed herculean proportions, generating nearly 2 million online contributions, 10,000 local meetings, 16,000 complaint books, and a series of citizen assemblies.1 Representing one of Europe’s most significant exercises in democratic consultation, it seems to have got Macron’s presidency back on track. However, despite Macron’s April 25 announcement of the conclusions and next steps, it is still not clear whether the Grand Débat will lead to permanent democratic reforms. Most reforms will require parliamentary approval, patience, trust, and acceptance of the inevitable trade-offs.

UNFULFILLED CAMPAIGN PROMISES ON DEMOCRACY

Ironically, as a presidential candidate in 2017, Macron undertook a mass door-to-door survey—the Grande Marche—that uncovered the very problems that triggered the yellow vests’ protests in late 2018. Many protesters had, in fact, voted for Macron because he seemed to offer new approaches to France’s problems. He promised to help those voters struggling to make ends meet and facing increased transportation, health, and energy costs. He also promised to take a more bottom-up approach to governance.

Once in office, however, Macron’s progressive reform measures—such as incrementally removing an unfair property tax—were quickly offset by other policy changes perceived to benefit the rich, such as a flat tax rate on capital earnings and a narrowing of the wealth tax. And the president’s brash, condescending comments to those struggling to find work caused widespread anger. Macron’s perceived position on the political spectrum (from 0 to 10, left to right) moved to the right from 5.2 to 6.2 between March 2017 and February 2019.

In addition, despite his liberal credentials and grassroots campaign, he did not do away with centralistic and technocratic practices. An early piece of legislation that toughened ethical rules for candidates and elected officials was as far as Macron’s renewal went in improving governance standards. Very early on, Macron’s aim to rapidly implement reforms and improve France’s
European and international standing led to a top-down decisionmaking style and took precedence over democratic innovation and decentralization.

For example, the government reduced the speed limit on roads from 90 to 80 kilometers per hour without any public consultation, angering many citizens, especially in rural communities, and sowing the seeds for the yellow vest protests. The protests were largely triggered by the government’s announcement of a fuel tax increase. And they escalated until, under pressure, Macron put the tax increase and other controversial reforms on hold and offered 10 billion euros in concessions. But perhaps the more dramatic move was his launching of the Grand Débat around four topics: energy transition, taxation and public spending, democracy and citizenship, and the state and public services.

THE GRAND GESTURE
A largely improvised initiative, the Grand Débat got off to a bumpy start. It was supposed to be supervised by the Commission of National Public Debate (CNDP), an independent body that controls how citizens are engaged in the policymaking process, typically on large infrastructure projects. However, the CNDP refused because of disagreements with the government over the commission director’s salary and the proposed debate topics. The government therefore took the reins, casting suspicion on the process’s independence.

Nevertheless, people soon had numerous channels to make their voices heard:

- Town hall and local meetings initiated by mayors, charities, trade unions, or individual citizens
- Complaint books (or cahiers de doléance, literally translated as “register of grievances”) available in town halls
- Mobile desks (or stands de proximité) in train stations and post offices, where people can talk and submit contributions to public agents
- Individual online suggestions submitted on the Débat’s website
- Randomly selected citizen assemblies in each of the thirteen French regions and five overseas territories, and another bringing together young people
- Four national stakeholder conferences in Paris

A webpage available on the Débat’s website provided guides for those wishing to organize debates. All discussions had to respect six fundamental values: transparency, pluralism, inclusion, equality, neutrality, and respect. The Grand Débat’s charter listed organizers’ and participants’ rights and
responsibilities. Five independent guarantors—chosen by the government and parliament for their expertise as political scientists and third sector or societal leaders—oversaw the debates. The French National Library worked to digitize 400,000 pages of lodged complaints. Public opinion institutes will help sort the huge volume of data.

**FLAWED IMPLEMENTATION**

Most political scientists and journalists say the Grand Débat was a success in terms of public involvement and being responsive to an apparent widespread popular aspiration to participate in decisionmaking. Many politicians have suggested that it be done annually.

However, the process suffered from several major shortcomings. First, it did not capture a wide array of viewpoints. In mid-March, SciencesPo’s political research center, CEVIPOF, published the outcomes of a survey on the debate’s sociological and geographical reach. The survey showed that 65 percent of participants were highly educated and 75 percent were home owners. More than two-thirds were above fifty years old, with only 5 percent age twenty-five and under. Finally, most town hall meetings took place in large, urban centers.

Second, the debate’s methodology was not rigorous. The sheer quantity of activity and meetings was impressive, but the quality less so. In most cases, the meetings had an open mic forum, sometimes preceded by small table discussions. Conclusions were rarely reached and documented, with participants endorsing them via signature or proposing amendments.

To support small town mayors, the government hired professional moderators, but there were not nearly enough of them, making it impossible to guarantee that every discussion took place in accordance with the six fundamental values. The independent guarantors are positive about the way the process played out overall, but they only participated in fifty meetings out of thousands.

The government was aware of these limitations and saw the citizen assemblies as a necessary complement. The hope was that nineteen groups of randomly selected citizens—reflecting social diversity and discussing exactly the same issues in parallel—would help identify a coherent set of common priorities and address the generational gap. The assemblies were a step up from the spontaneous meetings and individual contributions and focused on generating concrete, single policy proposals. However, the rushed organization of the assemblies, their limited duration, and the large scope of matters covered leaves one skeptical about their long-term impact. According to media reports, turnout varied across regions and young people were, once again, underrepresented.

Specialists of deliberative democracy warn that, for such forums to be successful, precise questions must be asked, adequate time must be afforded to make an informed and detailed opinion, and assurances must be given on the way conclusions feed into an institutional process. The Grand Débat failed to meet any of these three conditions. Rather than a carefully planned and
systematically structured exercise in deliberative democracy, it was a smart but largely improvised response to a specific and unstable political situation.

A BOOST FOR MACRON OR DEMOCRACY?
One of the most direct effects of the Grand Débat has been Macron’s rebound in opinion polls. Although his approval rating is not back to where it was a year ago (around 40 percent), it has risen from around 20 percent in December 2018 to around 25–30 percent. In a highly fragmented political landscape, this seems like a solid electoral basis. Macron’s En Marche party currently tops EU elections polls, along with Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (RN) party.

Still, as Macron admitted in November 2018, he has failed to address the disconnect between citizens and the political elite. People give him credit for organizing the Grand Débat, but most are skeptical about its outcomes. According to the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP), only 38 percent of French voters think the government will take their comments and demands into account. There is an enormous confidence gap between En Marche members on the one end of the spectrum and RN and Unbowed France party members on the other.

Many people believe Macron had a hidden political agenda behind the Grand Débat. By throwing himself into spectacular hours-long, live-streamed sessions with French mayors, the president impressed and reassured many that France has an able captain at its helm, but the rather tutorial-style meetings also worked against him, reinforcing the widespread dislike of his top-down leadership approach. The government’s stewardship of the whole process seemed to run counter to the idea of handing power back to the people. Macron’s political opponents accused him of using the Grand Débat as a campaign platform for the May 2019 EU elections.

This is why the outcomes of the process matter a lot. Enacting socioeconomic and environmental reforms will likely be difficult—due to vested interests and fiscal constraints—but democratic reforms should, in theory, not cost as much and benefit everyone. Nevertheless, the announcement Macron made on April 25 shows that he will return to the spirit of his 2017 campaign and pursue a democratic shake-up in the second half of his mandate. The president offered a robust defense of representative democracy and ruled out the most radical ideas put forward by the yellow vests.

A stalled constitutional reform provides the government with an opportunity. In 2018, Macron proposed to reduce the number of parliament members, elect 15 percent of members by proportional voting, and ban members from instituting more than three consecutive parliamentary or local executive mandates. Although not particularly far-reaching, the proposals sparked controversy months before the yellow vest crisis began. The political opposition accused the
government of attempting to weaken the parliament. Senators feared that proportional voting would deprive the parliament of its links with rural areas.

In his April 25 press conference, Macron said the government would present a slightly bolder version of the reform. The share of proportional voting could go up to 20 percent. However, Macron bluntly rejected the idea of introducing a citizen-led referendum initiative (known as RIC, or referendum d’initiative citoyenne), a core ask of the yellow vests in late 2018. According to this proposal, a nationwide referendum would be triggered automatically when a petition hits a signature threshold. It could be used to propose a new law or a constitutional change, to remove an existing law, or to let an elected or executive member go. But most experts and commentators believe this idea would seriously threaten political stability.

Earlier this year, Macron’s party, En Marche, and a center-left think tank, Terra Nova, proposed different types of RICs. Both argued that citizen-led initiatives should include a deliberative phase. Terra Nova’s deliberative RIC would bring together a randomly selected citizen assembly and a group of parliament members to discuss a petition for three months before deciding whether it should go to a referendum. Similarly, the citizens’ initiative put forward by En Marche would send a petition with 1 million signatures to a citizen jury before deciding whether it should go to parliament.

If adopted, either of these new channels of citizen participation would mark a significant step forward for French and European democracy. So far, deliberative processes have only been embraced in midsize, prosperous, highly educated democracies, such as Australia, Canada, and Ireland. If France was to institutionalize the participation of randomly selected citizens in policymaking, it would send the signal that democratic norms are shifting.

But Macron does not seem ready to make that step. The president is merely proposing to ease the conditions for a shared-initiative referendum. The RIP (or referendum d’initiative partagée) already exists in French law but has never been triggered. It makes it possible to put a legislative proposal to a referendum if endorsed by one-fifth of parliamentarians and signed by 10 percent of the electorate (approximately 4.7 million voters). The latter threshold could be lowered to 1 million to resemble more common referendums of today, like those in Switzerland.

Other measures announced on April 25 include reinforcing local petition rights, whereby a minimum number of signatures would trigger a debate in a local elected assembly. In addition, about 150 randomly selected citizens will be able to participate in the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, a consultative chamber bringing together social partners and nongovernmental representatives. Finally, a one-off convention of 250 randomly selected citizens will be set up to reflect on climate transition measures by the end of June.
To understand Macron’s caution, it is important to remember that any constitutional reform needs to be approved either by referendum or by a two-thirds majority in parliament. Even if he takes the parliamentary route—as he suggested on April 25—there is no guarantee he will succeed in the adverse political circumstances he is facing. After months of street violence and discussions, during which party politics was put on hold, getting back to normal business feels like a hangover for the government. Debates over pensions, unemployment benefits, and state spending cuts have reopened old rifts. Campaigning around the European Parliament elections indicates a toughening of the political debate.

Even if Macron’s democratic reform is adopted, it will take a long time to produce effects, and more reforms will be required to change France’s confrontational politics. A new culture of compromise and trust will only emerge when the people think the political system delivers for them and when a balance between rights and responsibilities is restored. In other words, it is not enough to blow off some steam. A democratic renaissance will take a modest and patient attitude, which is not quite Macron’s style. At least he is trying.

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NOTES
1 According to the Grand Débat’s official website as of April 7, 2019, https://granddebat.fr/.
2 After garnering enough support in parliament, the French Constitutional Court is now examining an RIP proposal on the privatization of Paris airports.
A Liberal-Centrist Vision for Europe?
RICHARD YOUNGS, CAMINO MORTERA-MARTINEZ

In the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections, centrist parties have reformulated their coordination in an express attempt to push back against illiberal-nativist parties. This has generated much talk of a centrist renewal in European politics that could give a healthy boost to European Union reforms. Yet most attention so far has fallen on the personalities and rivalries involved in this potential renaissance, rather than on what unique substance a centrist alliance might bring to EU integration. While the liberal-centrists style themselves as a pro-European and progressive bulwark against populist-nativism, they have yet to develop a united or distinctive vision for the future of European cooperation.

NEW ALLIANCES
The centrist push is rooted in the meteoric rise of French President Emmanuel Macron. His ascent has catalyzed what might be termed a European liberal-centrism that situates itself between the long-standing dominant center-right and center-left parties and coalitions that have controlled European politics for decades. It has also posed a challenge, as Macron’s La République En Marche! (LREM) remains outside the main grouping of longer established liberal parties, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). Macron has often intimated that he seeks to disrupt and restructure European-level politics in the same way he did in France. In October 2018, Macron and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced a “progressive, pro-EU” alliance for the EP elections. In November, LREM and ALDE confirmed they would present a common platform. This is presented as a united front to dislodge the conservative dominance of top posts in Brussels without LREM having to join ALDE for the moment.

This new alliance is liberal in the sense of setting itself against the self-styled bloc of populist illiberals represented by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, and other right-leaning populists and parties around Europe. Its architects insist that only by bolstering pro-European positions will the EU be able to contain the populists. To undercut the populists, Macron wants to shake up the somewhat cozy mainstream party politics that have dominated EP proceedings for many years. The more established liberal parties are ambivalent on this score but have accepted some of Macron’s discourse in order to bring LREM on board.
The centrist alliance insists that current problems with the EU are partially a result of the much-debated collapse of the center ground in European politics. A persistent concern in debates about European democracy is that the center is weakening, for a complex set of reasons such as growing polarization and the deficient functioning of mainstream coalitions. In most states, both right and left are shifting away from the middle ground and coalition building efforts are becoming more onerous—as seen in recent years in countries as diverse as Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden.

THE PERSONALITIES
In the politics of the new alliance, most of the focus has been on the individuals involved and on tactical questions. A key issue was whether Macron would seek to replicate his LREM movement at the European level or strike partnerships with existing party blocs in the European Parliament. For now he seems to have reined back his initial ambition and is concentrating more on working with existing parties such as Rutte’s VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie) and Spain’s Ciudadanos rather than forging a separate European En Marche.

Yet the French president is still intent on disrupting the long-existing set of party allegiances within the EP and ensuring that the future of European liberal-centrism is not played out solely through the existing liberal bloc, ALDE. Notwithstanding the agreement to present a common platform, it remains unclear exactly how LREM and ALDE will work together after the May EP elections.

Macron has courted an eclectic mix of wider partners. He has on occasion sought rapprochement with the left-wing Partito Democratico in Italy as well as with the center-right Civic Platform in Poland. Most media comment revolves around the precise relationship among Macron, ALDE, and ALDE’s leader in the European Parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, and other such questions. Much of the debate in recent months has focused on whether the liberals will take part in the Spitzenkandidaten process (“top candidates” in German) in the forthcoming EP elections. Largely at Macron’s behest, at the time of writing they have not chosen a single candidate for the elections and—unlike many other liberals—the French president continues to oppose this system.

All this focus on tactics and personal relationships has a crucial effect: it means that the centrists have made relatively little progress on generating shared, innovative policy ideas. In September, the emerging band of centrist brothers penned a joint letter declaring that they were keen to “reinvent Europe,” but they gave no clue what this reinvention might entail. The letter was significant mainly for who signed it: the heads of LREM, the Belgian Mouvement Réformateur, the Dutch Democrats 66, Spain’s Ciudadanos, and also individual figures including Matteo Renzi, the former prime minister of Italy; Joseph Muscat, the prime minister of Malta; and Verhofstadt. Macron’s recently presented plan for a European Renaissance has galvanized debate and contains a plethora of
significant proposals; however, this was not drawn up as a set of shared, distinctively liberal-centrist ideas and rather embodies many specifically French interests and positions.

Whatever precise form it takes, the liberal-centrist alliance is likely to emerge as either the third or fourth force in the new parliament depending on how well a possible alliance of populist-nativists does. Its primary impact may be indirect, as it adds pressure for a realignment of existing party blocs inside the EP. This might be welcome, but it still begs the question of whether there is a liberal-centrist vision for the future of EU that is attractive, genuinely innovative, united, and cogent.

POLICIES
This lack of detail on substance reflects the fact that the liberal-centrist bloc is either still reluctant to nail itself to firm policy positions or is struggling to reconcile internal differences. At the moment it is difficult to detect a liberal-centrist vision for Europe that is genuinely distinctive from that of other groupings, innovative or meaningfully progressive. It doesn’t help that the very term “liberal” is associated with the left in some countries and with the right in others.

The ALDE manifesto for the EP elections calls for more unity in all areas of policy and a generic defense of liberal values, but it does not specify any particularly innovative model of EU integration that is different from today’s template. It contains some speculative, half-formed ideas on new ways forward that will still need to be fully developed. For instance, it calls for moves to “re-negotiate the division of competences between the European Union and its member states.” When the manifesto mentions boosting democracy in the EU, it says this should be achieved through giving more powers to the EP, although the party also put the manifesto through a series of citizen forums.

There are questions relating to the centrists’ aims on a number of issues:

Models of integration. Notwithstanding their routine calls to reinvent Europe, many of the rising centrist parties adhere to fairly traditional federalist views. At the same time, they tend to mix this with more intergovernmental preferences in some areas. Macron’s outline of a European Renaissance calls in grand terms for a major leap forward in integration, centralized powers in many policy areas, and the creation of several new agencies and councils—representing a curious mix of traditional federalism with enhanced intergovernmentalism on issues like migration and foreign policy. While Ciudadanos politicians are enthusiastic about a federal Europe, such talk is anathema to the main Danish or German liberal leaders. Denmark’s Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen, leader of the Venstre (Liberal Party), has recently spoken against ambitious plans for political union and instead urges a “union of nations” that focuses on “down-to-earth solutions.” Compare Ciudadanos leader Albert Rivera’s unabashed “I want a United States of Europe” with Rutte’s rallying cry of “less is more.” While Macron’s European Renaissance template envisages a transnational vanguard pushing forward
with new cooperation if necessary without other states, liberals from many smaller states are staunchly opposed to any such two-tier Europe.

**Economic policy.** While generally in favor of more economic cooperation and relatively open markets, centrist views on Europe’s economic policies differ greatly. Macron’s push for eurozone reform mirrors the notion of “economic governance” that has sat at the heart of French positions—left and right—for three decades. Dutch and other so-called Hanseatic liberals oppose a well-funded, redistributive economic union. Rutte insists a smaller, not larger, budget is the way to relegitimize the EU with citizens. Spanish liberals tend to argue the opposite. Many northern liberals are less statist than Macron or Ciudadanos. These different views are in large measure a result of national positions more than a distinctly centrist vision of European economic policy. Acknowledging the depth and persistence of such differences, the liberals have held a series of internal meetings to contain the damage to their unity.

**Trade and single market.** On broader economic issues, one challenge is that Macron is an enigmatic mix of free-market liberal and traditional French dirigiste. The contradictions in his positions have become even more apparent in his responses to the yellow vest protests. Macron’s protective position on posted workers met with opposition from liberal parties in Southern and Eastern Europe; taking this a step further, his European Renaissance document calls for a “social shield for all workers” and European arrangements for minimum wage levels. Macron’s global trade policy is also hard to pin down: he preaches globalization but also a dose of protectionism—and his focus on protecting jobs is in part French, not European protectionism-lite. Ciudadanos is more open to global markets. It was, for example, in favor of the ill-fated Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and still wants an EU-U.S. free trade agreement. Spain in general is less protectionist than France, including on the center-left.

**Identity.** One apparently common and new theme highlighted by many centrist parties is that of national identity. Rutte promised a focus on Dutch identity after winning the 2017 elections. Macron promises the same with regard to French identity. Spain’s Ciudadanos has developed a particularly high-profile focus on national identity because of the Catalan conflict. In mid-2018 it launched a new campaign, Citizen Spain, aimed at fostering national identity and patriotism. The liberal-centrists insist there is no contradiction between their push to strengthen national identity and their support for something that approximates a federal Europe. They stress the identity question as one pillar of their pro-EU agenda explicitly to push back against the nativists’ use of national identity discourses for Euroskeptic aims. While strong national and European identities can coexist, the liberals are having to face up to tensions in this area. At least some centrists worry that the focus on national identity might at some point clash with the ostensible liberal concern with tolerance and inclusiveness. There is lively debate within many liberal parties—including to an increasing degree within Ciudadanos, for example—over what kind of balance needs to be drawn on such questions.
Security. Macron espouses a tough line on security, reflecting a firmly rooted French approach shared in recent years by most points on the political spectrum, and his European Renaissance proposals identify defense integration as a priority. Ciudadanos calls for deeper EU integration on both internal and external security, including counterterrorism and defense. Other members of the liberal alliance argue for greater caution in military deployments and are more ambivalent on security policy. Danish liberals remain unenthusiastic about a more defense-oriented and securitized EU.

DISRUPTORS OR GUARDIANS OF THE STATUS QUO?

There is some work to do if the nascent alliance is to develop a truly pan-European liberal-centrism. Unsurprisingly perhaps, at present there is a mix of common liberal stances and distinctive national positions. Northern members of the alliance would see themselves as generally more liberal in the classical sense on identity, cultural, and social issues but are more orthodox when it comes to EU-level economic policies. In the south, liberalism often works the other way around. At the moment, European centrism’s substantive distinctiveness remains patchy, and it is a creed clearer about what it is against—anti-European populist-nativism—than what it is for.

There is clearly much to welcome in the more assertive defense of European liberalism. And the effort to shake up the existing structure of party politics in the EP is very much needed. However, the new centrist alliance errs in simplistically presenting the upcoming elections as a binary choice between pro- and anti-EU forces. Macron, Rivera, and other liberals often use the terms “nationalist” and “populist” in a questionable and overly expansive fashion that risks foreclosing constructive debate with their political rivals.

Indeed, there are dangers in the liberal-centrists positioning themselves as the bulwark against a populist tide. For all their vaunted newness, this position could make the centrist alliance look like a defender of the status quo—a status quo in which many voters have lost faith. Not only are there major discrepancies between liberals from different member states, but few of the ideas they have so far presented are radically new. While the new centrist alliance defines itself as progressive, it accepts many elements of the current EU template that caused untold damage to large parts of the European population during the past decade of crisis. Most of its nascent policy lines are more right-of-center than progressive.

In fact, since forming the alliance, both Macron and Ciudadanos have struggled to retain the claim that they are centrist-liberals and not rightist—Macron because of the yellow vest protests; and Ciudadanos, among other things, because of its recent arrangement with a rightward-drifting Partido Popular and the far right Vox in Andalusia and its newly announced veto on a coalition with Pedro Sanchez’s Socialist party after the forthcoming April elections. There is now a clear disjuncture between how these parties define themselves and how citizens perceive them.
LREM says the aim is to upend the whole Brussels business-as-usual establishment. But to many of Europe’s newer parties, the liberal-centrists are the ones who want to take control of the process to keep the standard EU template on track. Italy’s Five Star Movement and other organizations are coordinating on an anti-austerity and local democracy platform; this accentuates the risk of the centrists being left defending an unloved status quo, the very opposite of being the vanguard of a reinvented Europe. The centrists will not shake up the EP’s rather insipid consensus machine if they seek to simply replace the old actors without modifying the policy script.

The new centrist alliance should also take care not to overstate the notion that rebuilding the center is in itself the way to shore up European integration. In many member states, the center has not collapsed quite as much as is often suggested—and the EU’s legitimacy is suffering even where the center is holding reasonably strong. In many senses, the center’s decline is more the effect than cause of the EU’s problems. A recent Pew Research Center report shows a mix of left-right and people-elite cleavages across all EU states, and that this applies to centrist voters as well. It is not clear why a reinforced center should be intrinsically superior in redressing the EU’s current problems. Ideas for innovative EU reform are needed and would be welcome whether they come from the far left, center, or conservatives.

It is true that many of the new centrists have shown an interest in qualitatively new forms of democratic politics. They say they are seeking to move in the direction of creating a broader social movement as part of their attack on the dominant parties. They stress their commitment to devolve formal policymaking competences to a more local level as part of their democratization agenda. They have courted input online from nonparty members. And they see themselves as guardians of the European Citizens’ Consultations process—Macron’s European Renaissance proposals call for a set of citizens’ panels to follow on from this.

In practice, however, centrists are at present not gaining ground as pioneers of a new style of participative politics. While LREM and Ciudadanos both espoused a new style of revived, participative politics, they have yet to fulfill this promise nationally, let alone expand democratic innovation outward to the European level. This could and should be their signature identity, at the subnational, national, and EU levels.

At the moment, the leftist movements and even some of the maligned populists are doing more to deepen local-level democratic participation. Polls record voters’ increasing concerns about Macron’s top-down decisionmaking style and aloofness. His recently launched Grand Debat offers considerable promise, but so far this remains carefully choreographed rather than a genuinely open channel of democratic participation. Ciudadanos has lost much of its initial focus on community-level citizen engagement as it seeks to position itself as the staunchest defender of the formal institutional status quo in Spain. Its initially well-deserved image as a democratic innovator is in danger of being lost from sight.
Centrism needs to be recast as a creed capable of linking citizens to the political sphere but without tipping into populists’ simplistic majoritarianism. Bringing forward new ideas to this end, and suggesting ways of looking beyond the EU’s status quo, should be the centrists’ focus in the run-up to the EP elections. In these ways, and not by engineering a gladiatorial contest with the populists, the new alliance could make its most positive contribution to reinventing Europe.

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NOTES
Are Increasing Inequalities Threatening Democracy in Europe?

STAFFAN I. LINDBERG

Economic inequality has risen in Europe gradually but surely since the mid-1980s. With the increased adoption of market-oriented policies in sectors such as education and health, divergences in quality and accessibility of social services have also increased. Concerns over inequalities have further surged in the aftermath of the post-2008 financial crisis. Inequalities have now reached levels where they undermine democracy in Europe.

THE TREND OF RISING INEQUALITY

The latest Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database highlights growing inequality in Europe between 1975 and 2017, both in overall socioeconomic indicators and in access to education and health (see figure 1).

Since 1993, the decline of equality is most marked in socioeconomic conditions, but it is also quite perceptible in health and education compared to the late 1980s, with a noticeable dip in the last five years. For health and educational equality, the average level in Europe is sloping toward a situation where at least 10 percent of citizens have such poor healthcare access and 10 percent of children get such low-quality education that undermines their eventual ability to exercise basic rights as adult citizens. Even though Europe has better indicators than the rest of the world, its declining equality is naturally a serious threat to its democracy.

In terms of socioeconomic equality, the situation worsened much earlier and the degradation has gone much further. From a high of around 3.25, the indicator has recently been approaching 2.5. A value of 2 means “wealthy people have a very strong hold on political power. People of average or poorer income have some degree of influence but only on issues that matter less for wealthy people,” whereas a value of 3 means “wealthy people have more political power than others. But people of average income have almost as much influence and poor people also have a significant degree of political power.” Europe is, on average, somewhere in between these two conditions. It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that people’s sense of loyalty and trust in democracy and their elected leaders responsible for this situation is endangered.
COUNTRY-LEVEL DIFFERENTIALS

Figure 2 shows the changes from 1993 to 2017 for all thirty-four countries in Europe that V-Dem has data on. In nineteen countries (56 percent), educational equality has declined, while it only improved in five countries (15 percent), and remained essentially unchanged in ten countries. Some of the most dramatic falls are found in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden. Taking Sweden as an example, this structural shift prohibiting significantly more children from equal participation in its democracy followed a series of drastic market-oriented reforms. These included mostly unconstrained powers to establish schools—even by investment companies headquartered in the Cayman Islands, allowing them to make unlimited profits off a taxpayer-funded system; a voucher system with complete freedom for parents and their children to choose schools, with strong-performing students congregating in elite-like establishments as early as first grade; and decentralizing responsibility for the school system to municipalities, many of which are too small to have an adequate supply of qualified politicians and administrators to handle education.
FIGURE 2
Inequality Trends Within European Countries, 1993–2017


NOTE: On the Y axis, 0 indicates absolute inequality and 4 indicates moderate equality.
In terms of providing equal health benefits and protections to guarantee citizens’ abilities to exercise their basic rights, the situation has significantly worsened in sixteen countries (47 percent), while only improving in five countries (15 percent) and staying essentially the same in thirteen countries. The worst offenders in terms of making greater numbers of citizens unable to exercise their basic political rights because of inadequate healthcare provision are countries like Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain.

Socioeconomic inequality that results in unequal political power is where things have changed most. Like with educational equality, eighteen countries (53 percent) registered significant worsening of the situation, which leads to wealthy people having significantly more power than poorer people. But, the changes also tend to be of greater magnitude compared to educational equality. Among the countries with the greatest negative changes are Albania, Czech Republic, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, and Spain. At the same time, there are more countries where things have gotten better in this area compared to the others: In ten of the thirty-four countries (29 percent), socioeconomic inequalities have been reduced, even if only slightly so. Notably, the United Kingdom has shown the greatest improvement in Europe on this score, recouping in the 1990s from the economic austerity that prevailed during the 1980s under prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

There seems to be a certain structure to this pattern: countries that have seen increasing inequalities have also registered shrinking democratic space in the last ten years or so (for example, V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index indicates significant downward trends in Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, and Poland) or they have growing protest and populist/nationalist movements (such as in Austria, France, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Sweden). This is supported by a simple correlational analysis of the change in liberal democracy scores from 1993 to 2017 and the corresponding changes in levels of equality across education, health, and power by socioeconomic position (see table 1).

Given the small number of observations (thirty-four), it is noteworthy that there is a relationship between changes in democracy scores and rising inequality, and that at least one of them is statistically significant at around 6 percent. The correlations are also higher between them, with an especially strong relationship between educational and health inequalities. Such a simple analysis does not prove anything, but it seems to suggest what may be going on: average Europeans have been becoming increasingly disconnected from more wealthy and well-off people for many years now. This has possibly created the sense that democracy is not helping them and is possibly even generating fear for the future—both of which have been harnessed by populist-nationalist and antidemocratic leaders. The large influx of immigrants, or just the threat of it, may well be fueling such sentiments.

In Poland, for example, significant increases in inequalities across socioeconomic groups, health, and education have been associated with a large drop in the rating for its democracy, which is down by over 20 percentage points since 1993 according to V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index. In Hungary,
inequalities between socioeconomic groups’ access to political power has increased sharply since 1993, as well as unequal access to healthcare, and this was followed by Viktor Orbán’s ascent to the highest office in 2010. Over this same period, Greece has seen one of the most dramatic increases in healthcare inequality across Europe, the extremist right-wing party Golden Dawn has become a political player, and the country’s rating in the Liberal Democracy Index has fallen by over 10 percentage points. Arguably, even in a country like Sweden where democracy still stands strong, the relatively sharp increases in inequalities are not disconnected from the recent and steep increase in support for the right-wing extremist party Sweden Democrats. Such anecdotal substantiations point in the same direction as the statistical evidence: rising inequalities threaten democracy in Europe.

**TABLE 1. CORRELATIONS AMONG EQUALITIES AND DEMOCRACY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Education Equality</th>
<th>Health Equality</th>
<th>Power by Socioeconomic Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democracy Score</td>
<td>.32 (.061)</td>
<td>.25 (.140)</td>
<td>.13 (.452)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power by Socioeconomic Position</td>
<td>.38 (.025)</td>
<td>.50 (.002)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Equality</td>
<td>.63 (.000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Correlation coefficients with p-values in parentheses. Bold indicates statistically significant. Before doing this calculation, the liberal democracy values for Macedonia and Slovakia were copied to 1993 from their first appearance in 1994, and Montenegro was given the same values as Serbia of which it was part until 1998.*

**DEMOCRACY IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT EQUALITY**

The question of equality holds an important place in discussions of democracy, yet in Europe it seems to have been buried for at least thirty years. While the idea of greater equality in socioeconomic conditions was central to protest movements and many left-wing parties in the 1960s through to the early 1980s, the debate has subsided since. Perhaps it is on the rise again, for good reasons.
The idea that basic resources are necessary to ensure citizens’ abilities to participate can be traced back to Athenian democracy where, as theorist Michael Walzer put it, “the citizens as a body were prepared to lay out large sums” in order to “make it possible for each and every citizen to participate in political life.” Perhaps the Athenians (within their small circle of people who qualified as citizens, admittedly) were the first to recognize that democracy as a system of rule “by the people” requires citizens who are equally capable of participating in the governing process. Where opportunities or abilities to participate are limited, it is neither possible for citizens to adequately understand and formulate opinions on particular issues, nor is it likely that their interests will be adequately represented in decision processes.

It is relatively simple: someone who wants to participate in politics should be able to do so, or, in other words, they should have the capabilities to participate in ways that are necessary to influence governing outcomes. High levels of resource inequality undermine the ability of poorer populations to participate meaningfully. To this end, social or economic inequalities can translate into political inequalities, especially if different areas of inequality, such as economic, health, and education, are overlapping.

For example, individuals and groups with higher levels of education are more likely to comprehend and engage in political debates—a condition that is necessary to make informed choices, to stand for office, to be active in political parties, and so on. Likewise, lack of high-quality basic education impairs an individual’s abilities to be a political equal. It is for this reason that “each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating . . . the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve their interest,” as the scholar Robert A. Dahl put it.

Participation includes, but is not limited to: making informed voting decisions, expressing an opinion, engaging in a public demonstration, running for office, serving in positions of political power, putting issues on the agenda, and otherwise influencing policymaking. Equality in participation lends vital legitimacy to a democratic system.

Regarding legitimacy in particular, equality minimizes the resentments and frustrations of some groups in society, thereby leading to greater overall acceptance of the system in place. As noted by the sociologist Seymour Lipset, if some groups are effectively prohibited from political and governing processes, the legitimacy of the system is likely to remain in question. Empirical studies also support the idea that the decision to participate in the political system expresses legitimacy for that system. Exclusion from democracy can be indirect or informal (such as when suffrage is legally universal) but some groups in society are denied the protections and resources necessary to participate. There are abundant examples of informal limitations: intimidation of particular voter groups, unequal access to justice, and deprivation of resources that make participation possible, such as time, money, healthcare, or education. Access to resources is in focus here. Has rising inequality in
Europe led to the decline in support for democracy and increase in appeal of nationalist-populist leaders?

A FINAL NOTE
The importance of reasonable levels of equality for democracy to function has been emphasized by liberal theorists for centuries, including modern liberal democracy’s foremost acknowledged theorist, the late Robert A. Dahl. Notably, one of his last works was titled On Equality, published by Yale University Press in 2006. For decades, European societies developed, even if gradually so, toward greater equality, giving average people hope a sense that democracy was progressing, and greater political efficacy and fair shares of economic growth. Yet contemporary empirical work demonstrates, and political leaders across established democracies seem to have forgotten, the lesson that democracy’s appeal and legitimacy requires equality in education, healthcare, and how much political power is determined by socioeconomic position. Both scholars and politicians need to pay more attention to this issue if democracy in Europe is to be saved.

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NOTES
2. Ibid.
3. This section draws from a previous publication. See Rachel Sigman and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Democracy for All: Conceptualizing and Measuring Egalitarian Democracy,” Political Science Research and Methods (April 2018).


Democratizing Europe’s Economy

NICCOLÒ MILANESI

Most debates about democracy in the EU overlook a crucial dimension of reform: democratizing the global workplace. The EU’s reform agenda must focus on the underlying political economy of democratic participation.

A SOCIAL BLIND-SPOT?

Since the 2008–2009 economic crisis, many Europeans have asked whether the EU can deal with economic shocks in a democratic way, and whether this response will avoid undermining social policies and protections that benefit the majority of the population.

The interventions by the troika—the European Central Bank, the European Commission, and the IMF—into the Greek economy as part of the European response to the sovereign debt crisis have left serious doubts that either of these questions will receive a positive response. The troika attacked collective bargaining agreements in the private sector and imposed drastic pay cuts in the public sector. Many European citizens perceived these moves as well as the various memoranda and economic adjustment programs as undemocratically imposed. Greece may have exited the adjustment program in August 2018, but its experience weighs heavily in the minds of many Europeans.

Italy’s right-wing government has earned popular support for deliberately questioning the European Commission’s budget guidelines in the name of addressing poverty. This shows how skeptical many Europeans are about the EU’s commitment to social welfare and democracy, and it is precisely this skepticism the Italian right-wing is using to provoke a conflict and further undermine the commission’s popular legitimacy. Such an approach has support beyond Southern Europe, and if the commission does not reconsider, it will find itself increasingly vulnerable to popular backlash.

Starting in 2015, the European Commission attempted to demonstrate its social awareness by resuscitating the long-dormant social pillar of the European Union. The European Pillar of Social Rights was signed by European leaders in 2017. While the document has no legal force, it seeks to better implement existing European law by detailing twenty social rights and principles. They cover “equal opportunities and access to the labour market,” “fair working conditions,” and “social protection and inclusion.” The rights and principles are almost exclusively individual, with collective
bargaining only weakly mentioned in terms of “social dialogue.” There have been other social initiatives led by the commission: the recently completed revision of the Posted Workers Directive, which notably ensures that posted workers—that is, workers temporarily laboring outside of their own country—benefit from collective agreements; the European Labour Authority, announced by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his 2017 State of the Union address, to promote the spread of information; coordination and dispute mediation across borders in the single market; and programs on work-life balance and workplace conditions.

This renewed emphasis on the social dimension is supposed to be connected to the European Semester, which is the commission’s attempt to bring order to European economic governance. Thus the commission ranks the member states according to unemployment rates (especially youth unemployment), reduction in poverty, lifelong learning, access to childcare, and other social indicators. Yet it does not measure the meaningfulness of work. It also fails to assess whether workers have a say over the nature of their work, their relationships at work, their work’s relationship to the greater economy, or their working conditions. In an age when more and more people classify their work as “bullshit jobs,” to use the provocative phrase from the anthropologist David Graeber, something important is being missed.¹

Indeed, there is a huge missing link between economic governance and social issues where “economic democracy” should be. Democratic economic governance in Europe requires more than democratic institutions and procedures;² furthermore, stronger processes of social dialogue and negotiation are needed but also insufficient. Most importantly, deep economic democracy in Europe requires accounting for the changes in the nature of work, what it does to the European system of political representation, and how individual citizens relate to it. The EU has not started this debate, but research suggests that it will be crucial for addressing threats to democracy and the deep causes of populism.

**STRUCTURAL SHIFTS IN POLITICAL VALUES**

A developing strand of sociological research studies the relationships between occupations and political outlooks and preferences, following groundbreaking work by Herbert Kitschelt and Philippe Rehm using the European Social Survey.³ Although sophisticated sociological modeling is required to demonstrate the relationships between occupations and political preferences, there is a basic underlying sense that what a person spends most of their time on conditions their political outlooks. This is too obvious to be ignored by policymakers.

In older class-based politics—which emerged from the Industrial Revolution and continued with the Fordist mode of production—governments and elites were aware of this fact, and a homogeneous working class could more easily be presupposed. Indeed, the alienation of workers from their work by the industrial mode of production was a central concern, not only for Karl Marx but for all early
sociologists, trade unionists, and socialists. Traditionally, in Western European countries at least, trade unions and social democratic or socialist parties have provided intermediary bodies in which these issues could be addressed, promoting political representation for workers and fostering socialization and cooperation among workers. Moreover, the state itself, and in particular the welfare state, provides other areas for socialization: between doctors and patients, for example, or between teachers, students, and parents. During the Cold War, the omnipresence of the state in communist countries made it a primary space for socialization, while civil society played a similar role in the West. As the structures of production, party support, and the state are now shifting, European democracy needs to develop new ways of reflecting such changes in the pattern of workers’ social interactions.

More recently, in post-industrial economies, the membership and political power of trade unions has been declining. The socialist and social democratic parties are finding their traditional bases splintering to the populist right and left, and the state’s capacity to promote open, tolerant, and democratic values has come under strain. No democrat has a long-term interest in significant parts of the European population being inadequately represented – this deficiency calls into question the legitimacy of the entire system.

Studies on the influence of occupations on political attitudes have made distinctions between technical workers (technical experts, technicians, skilled craft workers, and routine industrial and agricultural workers), administrative-organizational workers (managers as well as skilled and unskilled office workers), and interpersonal workers (sociocultural workers, skilled and unskilled service workers). Technical workers focus on engineering, design, and development work—which deals with considerable uncertainty about cause and effect—thus relying on peer review and experimentation. Interpersonal workers are concerned with the perception, development, and well-being of fellow humans. This means they also encounter uncertainty and depend on interpretation. Only the administrative-organizational field privileges authority, obedience, and domination above other aspects.

The studies of Herbert Kitschelt and Philippe Rehm using the European Social Survey show that in post-industrial economies, people involved in administrative-organizational occupations tend to have more authoritarian views, independent of their income status (although those at the top may be less inclined toward redistribution, and those at the bottom more inclined). Those involved in more interpersonal occupations, which involve communication and agreement on norms and objectives, tend to have more liberal views independent of their income status.

These axial changes in workers’ political attitudes cannot be dissociated from the globalizing tendencies that integrate markets while reducing the policy space available for individual governments. At the same time, multinational corporations play governments off each other to undercut labor rights and protections, placing workers in cross-border competition. If
unprecedented numbers of production workers (mechanics, carpenters, assemblers, and so on) are looking to the populist far right, it is not only because of the nature of their work—which may be becoming more rigid and impersonal—but also because their work experience interacts with their perception of the larger political and economic environment and its insecurities. The personal sphere links these workers’ affinity for authoritarianism to a preference for nationalism. It is this nexus of attitudes that Europe has a duty to address.

NEW FORMS OF WORKERS ORGANIZATION

While the economy will continue to require organizational, technical, and interpersonal workers, there are ways of addressing the attitudinal tendencies these occupations promote. Notably, some forms of trade union organizing and cooperative business models can promote interpersonal interactions, mutual recognition, and norm setting among workers, within and among sectors (though these models must genuinely promote horizontal interpersonal activity and not reproduce a hierarchical logic). Moreover, the interrelation of changing labor attitudes and globalization suggests that if these initiatives remain nationalized, they will fail to address the massive macroeconomic changes under way, unless they simply attempt to roll back globalization and break up integrated economies. But this extreme scenario would cause massive economic damage and is beyond the power of any individual government or the EU; in all probability it is impossible given technological change in the means of production.

Although the current European Commission has made social dialogue one of the twenty social rights, it only says this dialogue ought to be held “according to national practices” and has taken no initiative itself. Previous commissions were more enterprising; under Jacques Delors, the commission created European Works Councils in 1994, which aimed to create transnational institutions to oversee employee participation in multinationals. In 2003, Romano Prodi’s commission introduced the legal category of European Cooperative Society, and in 2004 the category of Societas Europaea set requirements for mandatory negotiations on worker participation at company board level as outlined in the 2001 Council Directive on Employee Involvement. These initiatives were ambitious in comparison with many member states’ own efforts, and in comparison with the current commission. Their further development would be desirable for a more democratic economy.

Still, it is striking that these initiatives are bureaucratic, hierarchical, and unresponsive forms of worker representation. There is a danger that structures of this type do not promote the kind of self-reflexive, horizontal collaboration that reinforces open and generous political attitudes. Moreover, it is questionable whether workers in such bureaucratic structures can be as nimble and strategic in crossing borders as their employers. Perhaps, worker-led initiatives can inspire different approaches, particularly in parts of the economy most exposed to globalization and technological restructuring.
The annual strikes by Amazon workers on Black Friday and Prime Day (Amazon’s annual sale)—which have now happened for four years running—are a good example of workers organizing for their political agency. The highly alienating, disciplinary working conditions in Amazon distribution centers are widely documented. In 2013, striking German Amazon workers realized that their strikes were not as effective as they could be since Amazon simply reallocated distribution to centers across the border to Poland. By 2015, the established German trade union Verdi and a new trade union in Poland, Inicjatywa Pracowicza, partnered, whereby workers would strike simultaneously or work slowly in support of the strike across the border. Now, Black Friday strikes are coordinated in most European countries. Strikes and other labor actions among food delivery drivers, which have spread across the continent, demonstrate similar transnational organizing. What is more, organizing in the gig economy and the new reactive, fluid, and horizontal trade unions (which are being formed in response to the gig economy) are often spearheaded by migrant workers and women who are finding agency amid a changing workforce. Here is, perhaps, one new example of European integration being led not from the top but horizontally, prizing diversity and collaboration.

The current European Commission has rightly targeted multinational corporations for tax avoidance and monopoly behavior; the next commission could perhaps consider targeting multinational corporations to improve working conditions, pay, and the right to organize. Such actions should be part of a broader strategy to democratize the European economy as a whole, from its governance to the ability of individual workers to organize and make decisions together about their work. For all the new talk of social dialogue and social rights, the overall approach of European economic policy continues to structurally undermine worker representation and gives more rights to companies than to trade unions. The Viking and Laval judgments by the European Court of Justice in 2007 have become totemic symbols of the tendency to severely restrict the right to collective action and prioritize freedom of establishment for companies. Concretely, this means companies have strong rights to establish themselves in any member state of the single market, but workers have limited rights to conduct collective action to influence the practices of these companies. Reversing this dynamic will require both rethinking how workers’ representation should function in a globalized economy and finding a new balance between the right of companies to move across borders and the right of workers to organize across borders.

TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC GLOBALIZED ECONOMY

It is no surprise that the European Commission has not managed to fully connect economic, social, and democratic concerns. Doing so would require the commission to challenge the dogma that economic growth is the basic answer to all social problems, to face up to its own role in undermining social cohesion and democracy simultaneously in the many parts of Europe that have been exposed to austerity programs, and to acknowledge that a technocratic approach exacerbates anti-democratic tendencies and sentiments. With the upcoming European summit in May 2019, the European
Parliament elections, and the new European Commission, the union needs a much deeper and more nuanced appreciation of the changing dynamics of the global economy and its implications for political preferences. In so doing, it should follow the lead set by some of its most politically active working citizens.

Thus, in addition to considering a revised framework for protecting the rule of law and introducing a new European Values Instrument to foster a healthy democracy through civil society organizations, the European Union should set itself a new mission for democratizing the globalized workplace. It has everything to gain by showing it’s on the side of workers, improving their everyday workplace experience, and fostering collaboration with others; by doing this, the European Union would do much to lessen the alienation currently exploited by the populist right. If it is too much to expect the entire union to do this given the balance of political forces, at least the Party of European Socialists needs to help promote economic democracy without borders. It would be returning to its original interests in the context of a new global industrial revolution, and might even find new credibility with its electors.


NOTES

2. This is a discussion Europe has just started. French President Emmanuel Macron’s modest proposals around a European finance minister have already been deemed a step too far. See “Judy Asks: Is Europe Behind Macron?,” *Strategic Europe* (blog), Carnegie Europe, April 26, 2018, [https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/76190](https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/76190).
2019 European Parliament Elections Will Change the EU’s Political Dynamics

STEFAN LEHNE, HEATHER GRABBE

Over the last several decades, a broad alliance of big parties has called the shots in the EU. Politicians from the mainstream center-right and center-left parties have held a comfortable majority in the EU’s principal institutions, including the European Parliament (EP), European Council, and European Commission. However, this era could come to an end with the next EP elections in May 2019, following waning support for mainstream parties, rising populists on both the radical right and left, and emerging new political players.

If the existing power balance changes, a complex constellation of forces could develop with more ad hoc coalitions across traditional party divides. While this might detract from the parliament’s legislative efficiency, a more open decisionmaking process might have a positive effect on public interest in democracy at the EU level. However, if the populist parties gain enough power to block crucial decisions, all the other parties will have to pull together to keep the EU functioning. If they don’t, member governments will start bypassing parliament by doing intergovernmental deals.

A UNIQUE BUT FLAWED EXPERIMENT IN TRANSNATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The EP is the world’s only transnational parliament that is directly elected. It has powers over important decisions such as how public money is spent through the EU’s common budget and how the single market is regulated. However, parliamentary democracy at the EU level has long suffered from a structural deficit. While national governments have given the EP power over far-reaching legislative and budget decisions, the national political elites have been unwilling to create a pan-European democratic space. European parliamentarians are elected from national lists, according to each country’s election laws, and national political parties have kept an iron grip on the electoral process. Thus, EP elections have more resembled twenty-eight national elections than transnational contests.
In the EP, national parties group themselves into party families. The political composition has corresponded roughly to the left-right ideological spectrum found in most member states until recently. The center-right European People’s Party (EPP, 219 MEPs) includes all the Christian Democrat and conservative parties (except the UK Conservatives, which pulled out in 2009). The center-left is covered by the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D, 189 MEPs), while the smaller mainstream parties are grouped under the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR, 71 MEPs), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE, 68 MEPs), the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL, 52 MEPs), and the European Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens, 51 MEPs).

Apart from the ECR, which contains several anti-EU parties, these groups are united by their overall support for European integration (although the EPP includes Hungary’s Fidesz, which has turned anti-EU in recent years). The far-right parties are divided among several party groups: the ECR, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD, 45 MEPs), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF, 35 MEPs).

Beyond the left/right dimension, the EP is divided into promoters and skeptics of European integration. Some parliamentarians (usually on the right) are pro-European because they consider the EU an important force for liberalizing the European economy. Others (mostly on the left) see it as an essential shield to protect European social standards against the negative consequences of globalization. And then there are both left-wing and right-wing groups that are critical of the EU’s supranational powers or nostalgic for the protective role of the sovereign nation-state. The austerity policies that resulted from fiscal discipline measures taken at the EU level during the last financial crisis have reinforced this tendency.

When it comes to substantive decisions, the EP has never had consolidated coalitions with high levels of party discipline. Rather, MEPs join ad hoc alliances on different issues according to party and national and personal preferences. But on running the parliament’s business and the sharing of influential roles, the Christian and Social Democrats have always called the shots.

As more and more anti-EU MEPs have been elected over the past fifteen years, the pro-European mainstream has closed ranks. Nathalie Brack, author of an in-depth study on populists in parliament, explains how the big parties have reduced the maneuvering space of individuals and small groups of parliamentarians and channeled power to the large party groups.

These party groups wield substantial power in EU decisionmaking and lawmaking, but have hardly any visibility or presence in the member states. The lack of transnational parties at the EU level is not a bug in the system but rather a feature of it. National political elites have little incentive to give up some of their power, and this is largely the root of the EP’s weaknesses in legitimacy. For most national parties, the question of who will sit in the next national government will always come first. They consider EP races as second-order elections, so they commit far less time and money to them.
than to national ones. As a result, voters’ choices are determined primarily by feelings about their current national governments rather than by the performances of the EU or individual MEPs.

Many EU parliamentarians play prominent roles in the legislative process and often have greater influence than most of their counterparts in national parliaments. But the legislative process has become complex, technocratic, and opaque, particularly because of the reliance on nonpublic negotiations through trilogues. Consequently, the EP attracts little attention among the media in member states. Political careers are made at the national level. Decisions about who appears on the party lists are motivated primarily by domestic considerations.

Two key elements for genuine parliamentary democracy at the EU level are missing: first, it is almost impossible for voters to assess the performance of individual MEPs, and, second, there has been no change in regime, as the center-right/center-left Grand Coalition has long dominated the EP. The absence of these elements makes it difficult to explain to the public why EP elections matter. Voter turnout has therefore declined from 62 percent in the first elections in 1979 to 42.6 percent in 2014.

**TRANSCONTINENTAL LISTS AND THE SPITZENKANDIDATEN HAVE NOT REVIVED INTEREST**

There have been various attempts to make the European elections more relevant. The most prominent proposal, first presented in 2011, aimed to introduce transnational lists, whereby a number of seats would be reserved for a special electoral district covering all of the EU. The idea was to break the national parties’ grip on the composition of the parliament, but it ran into fierce opposition and repeatedly failed to obtain majority support.

Somewhat more successful was the parliament’s initiative to link its elections with the decision on who should be the next president of the European Commission. Prior to the 2014 elections, all the major party groups agreed to designate Spitzenkandidaten ("top candidates" in German), with the understanding that the candidate of the most successful party group in the elections would then become the commission’s president. Given the key role of the commission in shaping what the EU does, electing its president would give the voter a real say on the union’s future.

The heads of state and government accepted (most of them reluctantly) the EP’s proposal, and, in 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, the candidate of the European People’s Party, which won the most seats, became the commission’s president. But this new procedure did not mobilize voters as hoped. Turnout remained low, and the few public debates between the Spitzenkandidaten did not tangibly affect the election in any country.

Most party groups are committed to repeating this process in 2019 and are currently selecting their lead candidates. However, this time, parliament might be more fragmented, making it difficult to
assemble a majority for a lead candidate. And the European Council, which under the Lisbon Treaty has the right to nominate the candidate, has already rejected the idea of an automatic endorsement.

Moreover, as in 2014, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process will probably not resonate much with the public. National parties still run the campaigns and are unlikely to give sufficient space to the lead European candidates to generate public interest. It would take a major outreach effort to highlight the candidates’ programs and communicate the transnational European dimension of the vote—which is not in the parties’ primary interest as long as they are focused on promoting national politicians and the regional media’s coverage has limited impact.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PARTY POLITICS IS COMING TO BRUSSELS

Rather than through institutional reform, change in the EP’s functioning may come through a deeper structural transformation of European politics. Party politics is undergoing a revolution at the national level, and that revolution will reach Brussels and Strasbourg in 2019.

Many voters have been abandoning traditional mainstream parties over the past decade. Center-left and center-right parties seem to have run out of ideas after six decades of dominance. The parties were established based on identities of faith and class that have largely lost relevance in postindustrial societies. Few Europeans identify themselves as Christian, conservative, or socialist like their parents and grandparents did. In the 1950s and 1960s, industrial workers voted for union representatives, business people for business representatives, and liberal people for each other. People stayed in the same place most of their lives and often knew their local or regional parliamentarians personally. Their affiliations were largely based on social class and geographical location.

These identities are much weaker today, as jobs have changed, societies are more fluid, and people are more mobile. The decline of media coverage of political developments in many countries and the rise of social media have made the links between the representative and the represented even weaker, which also diminishes the trust between them.

The number of disillusioned voters has increased, with many people frustrated about the powerlessness of national governments in a globalized world. Since 2008, Europeans have experienced a major financial and economic crisis that divided EU members and a migration crisis that further damaged voters’ confidence in political elites. Consequently, a much larger number of voters are putting their faith in anti-establishment parties that promise change.

However, as the center parties have started to lose their traditional base, the populists have not been the only winners. President Emmanuel Macron’s victory in France is one example. And the October 2018 elections in Bavaria and Hesse are also cases in point; the far-right Alternative for Germany party did well, but so did the Green and other nonpopulist parties.
Paradoxically, the rise of nationalist parties has created the first real opening for turning the coming EP election campaign into a truly transnational debate about the future of Europe. The leader of the Italian League party, Matteo Salvini, told a rally in 2018, “The European elections next year will be a referendum between the Europe of the elites, of banks, of finance, of immigration and precarious work; and the Europe of people and labour.” Salvini is now even flirting with the idea of presenting himself as a top candidate for the European Commission’s presidency. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also highlighted the importance of these elections: “If we are unable to reach a satisfactory result in negotiations . . . on the issues of migration and the budget, then let us wait for the European people to express their will in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Then what must be, shall be.”

The 2019 election campaign will likely become a debate on Europe’s priorities. The populist radical right will focus almost exclusively on migration, because this is how they can best mobilize their voters. Their opponents need to counter the politics of fear by building electoral platforms based on liberal principles, pointing out the big challenges surrounding technology and climate change, and showing that migration is just one issue among many.

THE 2019 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: SHIFTING COALITIONS AND A TEMPORARY GRAND COALITION ON KEY DECISIONS

It is too early to predict the makeup of the new EP and the effects on other EU institutions, but future political dynamics will likely be dictated by two factors: the end of the duopoly of the Christian and Social Democrats and the enhanced influence of the populist radical right. The European People’s Party will have fewer MEPs but could remain the biggest single party group. If the trend of recent national elections continues, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats will lose many seats. For the first time, these two parties may not be able to establish a majority, which could greatly enhance the clout of other party groups, especially the Liberals and Greens. Macron’s La République En Marche could also be an influential new player, either as the centerpiece of a new alliance or by linking up with the Liberals.

As a result, the EP could look more like the Dutch or Danish parliaments, with more parties and coalition options. Under such a scenario, the EP legislative process might become less efficient, but the overall effect on EU-level democracy could be positive. The opening up of the political process to more, diverse participants could result in a more flexible system of shifting coalitions. Majorities would have to be built across party lines and include some nonestablishment parties. And if MEPs have more vigorous debates, they could elicit more public and media interest.

However, a strong showing of populist radical right parties could change the dynamics. But just how much influence would they have? Claims by Salvini and other nationalist politicians that they will
take over the EU in just a few months lack plausibility. The old establishment still has support and power. While there will be more populist MEPs, they will remain a significant minority.

Historically divided across several party groups, the radical right will aim to unite forces in the new parliament. Salvini has called for the creation of a “League of Leagues.” This is unlikely to happen, however, because most of these parties find each other’s company hard to bear—though some of them could form a larger party group, which would significantly enhance their clout.

On most legislation, the EP needs an absolute majority to amend or reject the position of the Council of Ministers. By themselves, the populists will not achieve such a majority, but they could influence the forming of one. This enhanced influence could also convince more anti-EU MEPs to engage in substantive work of the parliament. So far, most populist MEPs have used their seats largely to fund their domestic political activities or as a platform for anti-EU rhetoric. If they were to start using them to block legislation and important measures, member governments would likely seek to bypass parliament by doing deals among themselves.

On vital issues such as the election of the next president of the European Commission or adoption of the EU budget, a much stronger populist right could join together with anti-EU MEPs on the left to block these decisions. In response, the mainstream liberal parties would then have to join together to counter the populists’ power. However, such a “Super Grand Coalition” of pro-EU forces would not be permanent—only forming in exceptional cases when the functioning of the EU is at risk.

To what extent the division between pro- and anti-EU forces will dominate the work of the future parliament will depend on the relative success of the populist radical right. The influx of a large number of EU-phobic members would make the tone of debates harsher and more confrontational. But that could also encourage mainstream MEPs to speak out more strongly in defense of European values and the benefits of European integration. The dominant dividing line of the new parliament could become a contest between politicians who want to find common EU-level solutions to current challenges and those who favor safeguarding and reaffirming national sovereignty. The parliament could turn into a major battleground between competing visions for the future of Europe.

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NOTES

1 Trilogues are tripartite negotiations between the European Commission, European Council, and European Parliament on legislative proposals.

Beyond Consultations: Reimagining EU Participatory Politics

ALBERTO ALEMANNO

There is a widespread conviction that without greater and more effective involvement from its citizens, the European Union is condemned to fail. The emergence of populist forces claiming to represent the people as a whole has eclipsed such a possibility, rather than accelerated it. The imminent failure of the much-awaited European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs)—the first pan-European participatory project to involve citizens from all twenty-seven member states of the European Union into the debate about the future of the continent\(^1\)—epitomizes the limited commitment to, and imagination for, genuine participation in Europe.

The EU needs to move away from such ad hoc and one-off participatory processes that are designed at the country level and conceived as quick, and often patronizing, fixes to the original democratic deficit of the union. It must instead urgently embrace an entire new participatory paradigm that puts citizens at the forefront of agenda setting and monitoring power.

As the effects of EU policies are increasingly felt on people’s lives across European countries, there is a growing yet unrecognized demand for participation beyond elections. The EU faces a challenge in capturing such a nebulous demand for plural and participatory democracy within its rather rigid and narrow institutional framework. As deep societal transformations and technological developments nurture greater expectations among citizens for political participation, the EU has no choice but to become more participatory and collaborative.

THE ORIGINAL SIN OF EU DEMOCRACY

The EU has always struggled with standard representative democracy due to a combination of its institutional design and history. The union lacks a European-wide party system capable of fostering a genuine transnational space for political debate, in which citizens can participate in decisionmaking that affects their common interests as Europeans. EU citizens cannot push a European government out of power and hold a political party properly to account.
The EU suffered a kind of original democratic sin. As a technocratic project driven by member states, it drew its political legitimacy from the democratic credentials of the delegating countries. The EU found its way through a tacit and permissive consensus. Owing to its very genetic code, the union has been suspicious toward any expression of popular sovereignty. This atavistic hostility toward citizens’ input explains why the EU is particularly vulnerable to political actors speaking on behalf of the people as a whole.

In light of the shortcomings in EU representative democracy, the last decade has witnessed new commitments to participatory democracy. The EU participatory toolbox seems to be quite full. First, it offers avenues for citizens to help set the agenda, such as the European Citizen Initiative (ECI). The ECI is the first transnational participatory democracy instrument, allowing at least seven EU citizens from seven different member states to suggest new policy initiatives in any field where the EU has power to propose legislation after collecting 1 million signatures. Second, the EU offers input mechanisms when creating policies, such as public consultations on new or revised initiatives. It has developed the Lighten the Load process within the REFIT Platform that enables any stakeholder to make a suggestion on how an existing policy can be simplified and improved to be more effective and reduce regulatory burdens. Third, there are administrative and monitoring actions available to citizens, such as requests for access to EU documents, petitions to the European Parliament, and complaints to the EU ombudsman. Fourth, the EU participatory toolbox offers legal options to challenge the EU’s actions.

**DISCONNECTIONS IN THE SOLUTIONS**

As a matter of principle, the EU participatory avenues are open to all stakeholders, whether citizens, grassroots organizations, private companies, or NGOs. However, most of these participatory tools tend be little known, and—no surprise—are only used by a few actors. Two statistics make this plain. First, around 75 percent of meetings between EU decisionmakers and third-parties entail the participation of the corporate sector. Second, in the eight years since the ECI’s introduction, fewer than sixty proposals have been registered and only 9 million signatures have been collected from an EU population over 500 million.

Most of these avenues are not fit for purpose. Public consultations are typically top-down exercises that only involve a few actors and fail to engage the individuals and groups that will be most affected by the policy under discussion. As a result, those individuals and groups are the least represented during the decisionmaking process. When public consultations trigger an exceptional response—as happened during the summer 2018 consultations about the summertime clock change—they prove unmanageable, unrepresentative, and a source of confusion for the public.

More critically, EU participatory channels also tend to be disconnected from day-to-day decisionmaking. The Stop Glyphosate ECI, which demands that the usage of this pesticide cease,
epitomizes such a trend. Despite reaching well above the required 1 million signatures, this ECI could not formally be factored into the ongoing EU decisionmaking process—because the process does not recognize any explicit link between an ECI demand and ongoing EU decisionmaking. The participatory and representative components of EU democracy are like ships that pass in the night.

The current EU institutional participatory mechanisms and practices were not primarily designed for broad participation by citizens. They were crafted instead to receive public input through functional intermediaries, like NGOs, trade associations, and other organized interests, formally representing the various interests affected by a given policy initiative. Yet the representative nature of these organizations has not only weakened but also become contested over time.

In practice, EU participatory channels are not intended to impact directly how decisions are made, but simply to legitimize existing policy approaches. The EU participatory toolbox remains fundamentally misaligned with society’s participatory expectations, and also largely untapped. Such a reductionist vision of the role of citizens in European affairs shows that governments and EU institutions are still skeptical of citizens’ ability to contribute to decisionmaking beyond the ballot box—despite all their rhetoric to the contrary. The original sin of the EU continues to taint its current participatory tools.

CLOSING THE GAP

This outcome appears all the more startling when contrasted with the growing demand for participation beyond elections across European societies and the many democratic innovations taking shape across the continent. A panoply of new, democratic experiments has been taking place, including the G1000 assemblies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain; the citizens’ assemblies in Gdansk; and the Fearless Cities of the municipalist movement, unfolding in different countries.

Yet most of these democratic experiments remain concealed and unmapped, even by the EU institutions themselves. As such, they escape the attention of mainstream media and, more generally, the public. Typically, due to their bottom-up and participatory nature, these initiatives take place outside of formal institutional processes and originate from diverse ecosystems committed to promoting citizen-oriented democratic legitimacy. While these kinds of initiatives may be difficult to scale, they offer a platform for the EU to build on.

The EU needs to do more to draw from alternative, unconventional forms of participation. These may be capable of channeling citizens’ pluralistic and increasingly chaotic input into the political conversation and bring citizens closer to their representatives—and they may be able to do this between elections and across countries.
To unleash EU participatory democracy entails breaking the agenda-setting monopoly enjoyed by the European institutional apparatus, notably the European Commission and the European Council. It will involve supporting unorganized citizens and facilitating their access to participatory opportunities within and outside EU channels. These avenues should also trigger a feedback loop so as to guarantee that input from citizens and grassroots organizations be considered in tangible ways within EU decisionmaking.

To thrive, this streamlined and revamped participatory framework will require a set of positive, supportive measures to level the playing field with other interests so as to build a pan-European civic grid, that is, an infrastructure for local and transnational citizen engagement. To improve civic literacy and build civic capacity, citizens must benefit from a range of supportive actions, such as

1. civic time off, enabling citizens in their working time to focus on civic engagement beyond voting;
2. citizen lobbying aid, a form of advocacy assistance modeled on the system of legal aid;
3. opening up parliamentary research services—such as the European Parliament Research Service—to grassroots campaigners in need of advocacy advice;
4. skill-sharing advocacy platforms, such as the Good Lobby, which provide legal and advocacy pro bono support to citizens, grassroots groups, and NGOs; and
5. lobbying stimuli, enabling citizens to receive tax breaks or subsidies to let them support the causes they deeply care about.

In sum, the EU needs to increase access and multiply the opportunities for citizens to participate in problem-solving. To this purpose, public input must be allowed during the entire policy process, from agenda setting through to monitoring and evaluation of existing policies. While there exists embryonic forms of citizen participation at virtually every stage of the policy cycle, they remain unknown, scattered, and underused by average European citizens.

A NEW PARTICIPATORY PARADIGM

Given the complexity of the EU institutional apparatus, it is unrealistic to expect EU citizens to understand it and be fluent in its workings before they have a chance to voice their opinions. Therefore, any meaningful attempt to make participatory democracy work in Europe requires drastically simplifying the institutional operations in the eyes of the public. Yet doing so does not necessarily entail embarking on complex institutional reforms. A new EU participatory agenda could instead be established through inter-institutional decisionmaking to integrate existing avenues of participation and amplify their collective power.
The three major institutions—the European Commission, Council, and Parliament—involved in decisionmaking should commit to creating an informal participatory framework aimed at embedding public input into their day-to-day operations. This could take the name and form of a European Question Time, after the British institution, but adapted to the EU context. In its simplest form, this might consist of a trilogue-type, informal committee charged with receiving and publicly discussing, on a monthly basis, preselected input presented by citizens living and residing in the union.

This input—be it informal letters on a specific issue, observations about an ongoing public consultation, comments on a registered ECI, a complaint to the EU ombudsman, a petition to the European Parliament, or an informal call for action or inaction directed to the EU as a whole—would have to be submitted through a dedicated, user-friendly, comprehensive website. Each submission would be shareable and would organically attract visitors who would be able to vote for the most relevant items.

To be discussed publicly during European Question Time, each public item would have to meet one of the following requirements: collect a given number of votes (well below the amount of signatures required for an ECI) from the general public; be voted for by one-fifth of members of the European Parliament; or be proposed and/or selected by a majority of members in a European Peoples’ Assembly (consisting of EU citizens randomly selected from across Europe every six months).

Regardless of and beyond the institutional engineering needed to set it up, this new participatory framework could overcome the currently inaccessible and fragmented EU institutional apparatus by creating a space for all citizens to have a say in the union. It would force EU policymakers to be exposed on a regular basis to public input from all corners of Europe. This would in turn foster a Europeanized debate on matters of common interest across the continent. More critically—given the resulting public salience of the issues debated—this European Question Time would strengthen the incentives for the EU institutions and European representatives to respond thoughtfully to public input.

Ultimately, the aim pursued by this participatory and performative framework would be to grasp the most relevant and promising proposals coming from the citizens and then have them slowly influence the daily work of each institution. How this will occur depends on the competences as well as political sensibilities of each institution and their respective roles within the policy cycle. Thus, the European Commission might incorporate some inputs into its own working program, or it might even drop or accelerate some pending initiatives. The members of parliament—who since 2009 represent both their electors and all EU citizens—might turn some of these grassroots inputs into own-initiative reports or, should there be a majority within the European Parliament, into a legislative initiative under Article 255 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Also, the members of the Council of the EU might flag some of these citizen-driven inputs, which
might also influence their voting behavior and ultimately might also feed into the European Council debates.

CONCLUSION

Europe will not find its democratic soul in a large-scale, stand-alone, and pre-framed deliberation exercise, such as the European Citizens’ Consultations. Only an accessible, intuitive, and safe space accommodating public input on a daily basis will bring the EU to terms with its original democratic sin. By centralizing all public input entailing the participation of all EU institutions, a European Question Time might crystalize and eventually connect the daily realities of Europeans with the day-to-day operation of their institutions. A European Peoples’ Assembly of randomly selected citizens from all over the union would further contribute to such an objective by humanizing and transnationalizing EU decisionmaking.

While this participatory framework would not magically fix the European accountability deficit, it may compensate by making the system responsive to citizen-driven issues and eventually making the system more intelligible and accessible to the many. More immediately, its implementation would mark a change in the EU institutional attitude toward the role of citizens in the union.

The clock is ticking: either the EU institutions provide meaningful participatory, user-friendly opportunities to their citizens or the EU as it exists now could soon all be over. There is no better incentive for current and future EU political leaders than to be forced to listen their electorate through a pan-European, informal framework animated by citizens.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the way to solve the challenges of the twenty-first century, as nations across the world become more interconnected, is by involving the people in shaping the policies that affect their lives. Europe could and should become a leader in promoting and realizing such a citizen-driven model of governance to renew itself and set the standard for other nations.

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NOTES

Since 1992, European citizens have been entitled to address, individually or in association with other citizens or persons, a petition to the European Parliament on a matter that comes within the union’s fields of activity and that affects him, her, or it directly. See Article 227 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and Rule 215 of the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament.


For an authoritative analysis, see, for example, Joana Mendes, Participation in European Union Rulemaking: A Rights-Based Approach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The G1000 emerged as a Belgian crowd-funded citizens’ assembly initiative, founded as a result of a manifesto published in five national newspapers in 2011, and run by volunteers. It took a multi-level—local, regional, and national—approach to citizen assemblies, with the aim of providing recommendations on economic and sociopolitical themes in Belgium during the government crisis (2011–2012). The assembly’s final report listed a number of recommendations aimed at various audiences, including parliamentary commissions, local and provincial governments, regional and federal parliaments and governments, political parties, social partners, citizens, the European Union, and the Council of Europe.


Harnessing Digital Tools to Revitalize European Democracy

ELISA LIRONI

As digital technologies become increasingly ubiquitous and important parts of daily life, their downsides have become more apparent. Tech giants, including Google, Amazon, and Facebook, offer digital tools only in exchange for people’s personal data. Digital service providers are becoming overly powerful monopolies. And digital technologies are exerting an unhealthy influence over the media.

In recent months, the EU has moved its efforts to tackle the negative aspects of the digital sphere up a gear and has taken a stand against the tech giants. Brussels has generated some of this year’s biggest headlines by focusing on tech regulation, heavily fining Google over its Android operating system, investigating how Amazon uses its merchant data, questioning Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in the European Parliament after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and rolling out the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The EU is also closely monitoring how tech companies handle content that appears on their platforms. It has developed a code of conduct for countering illegal hate speech online, issued a communication on securing free and fair European Parliament elections as part of an increasingly concerted effort across Europe to protect the integrity of elections from cyber threats, and produced a Code of Practice on Disinformation for managing online fake news.

Policymakers in Brussels have recently been overwhelmingly focused on constraining the negative forces of the digital world. The EU’s approach appears to be driven increasingly by a fear of digital tools and their disruptive or destructive potential.

However, European policymakers should avoid taking an overly negative tack and not overlook the huge potential of digital solutions to drive positive change in society—and especially to improve European democracy. Brussels can and should be doing more to harness digital innovation and channel it in a positive, pro-democratic direction. While the EU is absolutely right to be taking steps to limit the power of the tech giants, it is remiss in neglecting the benefits of digital democracy.
DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

There are many examples of digital democracy working well across Europe. Tools are increasingly being used to reinvigorate and improve citizen participation in democratic decisionmaking. As voter turnout rates decline and party membership drops, citizens are switching to online political engagement. Far from being apathetic, many European citizens are taking advantage of new ways to make their voices heard. Digital participation is easy, affordable, and can reach a wide audience. Some of the best-known initiatives across Europe have been introduced by city administrations. Other initiatives have come from national governments or civil society.

Information and communication technology (ICT) can be used to implement more participatory mechanisms and foster democratic processes. Often referred to as e-democracy, there is a large range of very different possibilities for online engagement, including e-initiatives, e-consultations, crowdsourcing, participatory budgeting, and e-voting. Many European countries have started exploring ICT’s potential to reach more citizens at a lower cost and to tap into the so-called wisdom of the crowd, as governments attempt to earn citizens’ trust and revitalize European democracy by developing more responsive, transparent, and participatory decisionmaking processes.

For instance, when Anne Hidalgo was elected mayor of Paris in May 2014, one of her priorities was to make the city more collaborative by allowing Parisians to propose policy and develop projects together. In order to build a stronger relationship with the citizens, she immediately started to implement a citywide participatory budgeting project for the whole of Paris, including all types of policy issues. It started as a small pilot, with the city of Paris putting forward fifteen projects that could be funded with up to about 20 million euros and letting citizens vote on which projects to invest in, via ballot box or online. Parisians and local authorities deemed this experiment successful, so Hidalgo decided it was worth taking further, with more ideas and a bigger pot of money. Within two years, the level of participation grew significantly—from 40,000 voters in 2014 to 92,809 in 2016, representing 5 percent of the total urban population. Today, Paris Budget Participatif is an official platform that lets Parisians decide how to spend 5 percent of the investment budget from 2014 to 2020, amounting to around 500 million euros. In addition, the mayor also introduced two e-democracy platforms—Paris Petitions, for e-petitions, and Idée Paris, for e-consultations. Citizens in the French capital now have multiple channels to express their opinions and contribute to the development of their city.

In Latvia, civil society has played a significant role in changing how legislative procedures are organized. ManaBalss (My Voice) is a grassroots NGO that creates tools for better civic participation in decisionmaking processes. Its online platform, ManaBalss.lv, is a public e-participation website that lets Latvian citizens propose, submit, and sign legislative initiatives to improve policies at both the national and municipal level. Once an initiative gets 10,000 signatures online, it is submitted to elected representatives for a hearing. Since the creation of ManaBalss.lv in late 2010, 314 citizens’ initiatives have been launched—thirty-seven of these have been submitted to the parliament and
twenty-five have been officially approved (and thirteen more initiatives are currently in the discussion process). In other words, over 68 percent of submitted initiatives have been adopted into law. ManaBalss.lv has been recognized around the world as an open government success story; it was mentioned by then U.S. president Barack Obama, featured in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, and lauded by organizations like the OECD.

In Finland, the government itself introduced an element of direct democracy into the Finnish political system, through the 2012 Citizens’ Initiative Act (CI-Act) that allows citizens to submit initiatives to the parliament. The rules are simple: any citizen of voting age can propose an initiative that either changes existing legislation or constitutes a completely new bill. Initiatives must receive 50,000 signatures in six months, in paper or online, before the parliament will discuss it. Although it is mandatory for members of parliament to consider successful initiatives, they can decide to amend or reject the proposals.

Civil society has also played an important role in Finland. Shortly after adoption of the CI-Act, a Helsinki-based NGO called Open Ministry, or Avoin Ministerio, was founded specifically to support CI-Act legislation and campaign for a more open government and democracy. Open Ministry created an online platform, Avoinministerio.fi, where citizens’ initiatives could be discussed, promoted, and voted for, in order to facilitate the process of collecting the requisite 50,000 signatures. Subsequently, the Finnish Ministry of Justice opened an official online system (www.kansalaisaloite.fi) to collect statements of support.

Other civic tech NGOs across Europe have been developing and experimenting with a variety of digital tools to reinvigorate democracy. These include initiatives like *Science For You* (SCiFY) in Greece, *Netwerk Democratie* in the Netherlands, and the *Citizens Foundation* in Iceland, which got its start when citizens were asked to crowdsource their constitution in 2010.

Outside of civil society, several private tech companies are developing digital platforms for democratic participation, mainly at the local government level. One example is the Belgian start-up CitizenLab, an online participation platform that has been used by more than seventy-five municipalities around the world. The young founders of CitizenLab have used technology to innovate the democratic process by listening to what politicians need and including a variety of functions, such as crowdsourcing mechanisms, consultation processes, and participatory budgeting. Numerous other European civic tech companies have been working on similar concepts—*Cap Collectif* in France, *Delib* in the UK, and *Discuto* in Austria, to name just a few. Many of these digital tools have proven useful to elected local or national representatives.
HARNESSING DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

While these initiatives are making a real impact on the quality of European democracy, most of the EU’s formal policy focus is on constraining the power of the tech giants rather than positively aiding digital participation.

In the last five years, only three EU programs have funded work directly related to digital democracy: a 700,000-euro package under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) program (2016); 1.6 million euros under Erasmus+ Forward Looking Cooperation Projects (2015); and 5 million euros for academic research under the Horizon 2020 Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies program (2014). These investments are a drop in the ocean of the EU’s total budget of more than 1 trillion euros. The European Commission has been more focused on enhancing the Digital Single Market, especially access to e-government services, e-health, telecommunications, and e-infrastructure, and on funding more traditional forms of civic engagement under the Europe for Citizens and REC programs.

Looking ahead, the European Commission has proposed a 9.2-billion-euro Digital Europe program, with five priorities for 2021–2027: supercomputers, AI, cybersecurity, digital skills, and the wider use of digital technologies, mainly for public administration and services. Digital democracy is conspicuously absent from the proposal. Policymakers are increasingly nervous to utilize the digital space, particularly because discourse around digital tools and the innovation of democratic processes has been widely co-opted by populist movements in Europe. It is also strongly associated with distrusted instruments of direct democracy like referendums—which have, of course, delivered several shocks to the European system in the last decade.

EU officials give the impression that concern over threats now associated with the digital space can obscure the opportunities. Asked whether digital technologies could alleviate people’s frustration with traditional politics by supporting participation and collaboration between decisionmakers and citizens, a European Commission official vigorously questioned the notion that technology can strengthen democracy, referring to social media as the genesis of modern disinformation and arguing that technology undermines personal freedom rather than empowering individuals. This anecdote, among many similar stories, is indicative of the now disproportionate focus on the negative aspects of digital tools within EU institutions.

Policymakers’ concerns are somewhat justified, and they are right to look critically at the practice of digital democracy. Digital tools are not without their flaws. Evidence shows that digital participation may backfire if tools are implemented poorly, citizens’ expectations are not adequately managed, and decisionmakers do not act upon the results of digital consultations in a meaningful way. Implementation is key—otherwise, digital tools can damage, rather than invigorate, democratic practice. But the aforementioned examples—in France, Latvia, and Finland, among others—show that when e-participation platforms are used to complement, rather than replace, existing democratic
processes and when decisionmakers follow up on the outcomes, digital tools can be highly successful and strengthen democratic participation.

Ultimately, policymakers must understand that their resistance to digital democracy is an anachronism that will lead to missed opportunities and risks frustrating engaged citizens. The reality is that digital democracy is already here, whether governments are ready or not. The question for policymakers is whether they can and will harness its power to reinvigorate Europe’s ailing democratic institutions and processes—or whether, as at present, they will fail to realize the potential of ICT, or even let it erode European democracy.

NEXT STEPS
There are three main ways for the EU to start exploring the potential of digital tools for reshaping European democracy.

- First, the EU should foster grassroots and national initiatives for digital democracy. It could start by mainstreaming the concept across European civil society.

- Second, the EU should work on developing its own tools for e-participation. The European Citizens’ Initiative and the European Commission’s online consultation processes are a good start, but they are far from allowing citizens to effectively collaborate with EU policymakers.

- Third, EU policymakers need to include tech companies and NGOs in their discussions, and create public policy and public governance mechanisms that channel the power of the technology sector. A closer partnership with the tech giants could unlock vast knowledge and insight into the further potential of these approaches.

Some tech companies may be ready to collaborate. Uber’s chief executive, Dara Khosrowshahi, stated in an interview with Politico earlier this year that tech companies realize they will need to take greater responsibility or risk facing more regulation. Similarly, Apple CEO Tim Cook, at the fortieth International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners in Brussels, praised the “successful implementation” of GDPR as an example that should be followed worldwide. Facebook recently hired Nick Clegg, a former European Commission trade negotiator and member of the European Parliament, as its head of global policy. These examples demonstrate willingness in the tech sector to build a better relationship with Brussels and work more closely with EU public institutions on frameworks and policies to govern the digital sphere.

Broadly, the EU needs a change of attitude. Policymakers at all levels need to resist succumbing to their fear of disruptive digital technologies and acknowledge that digital democracy is here to stay—and will only grow in importance. The key challenge policymakers face is not only to constrain tech
giants—however much certain elements of their conduct demand stricter control—but also to harness their potential for democratic innovation in Europe.

Moves to mitigate the negative effects of the digital sphere are welcome and necessary. But the EU must not stray too far away from policies that try positively and proactively to shape the future of digital democracy. The power of digital technology needs to be channeled in the right direction—toward reviving European democracy.

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**NOTES**

1. Data collected until December 10, 2018, from https://manabalss.lv/.
2. In 2012, Obama mentioned ManaBalss.lv in the Open Government Partnership initiative launch event as one of the top examples of open government.
Getting Europe’s Direct Democracy Right

Debates about how to revive European democracy involve starkly contrasting views on direct democracy. For some, a greater use of direct democracy is vital to successful democratic innovation. For sceptics, the very concept is dubious; the direct democracy tools that have been used in recent years have proved profoundly damaging.

Getting European direct democracy right is fundamental. Currently, both support for direct democracy and resistance to it are growing. On the one hand, analysts routinely point to the increasingly evident shortcomings of representative democracy and to the burgeoning possibilities that digital technology gives citizens to exercise more direct forms of accountability. Enthusiasts see direct democracy as an inevitable and desirable pillar of an impending post-representative politics that moves channels of accountability and participation away from parliaments and political parties.

On the other hand, EU-related referenda in Denmark, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands and the UK have clearly been polarizing experiences that have unduly simplified policy choices. They have failed in practice to engender high quality democratic deliberation. Particularly in the wake of the Brexit referendum, many writers have advocated more circumscribed forms of popular engagement and a tighter curtailment of direct democracy. As citizens make what experts consider ‘wrong’ populist-fuelled choices, sympathy has resurfaced for the classical concept of epistocracy or elite-mediated governance.¹

There is some merit to both sides of this argument. Many recent European referenda have indeed distorted accountability rather than improve democratic quality. Yet bottom-up citizen interest in more direct forms of political control has been growing for at least a decade and is a genie that cannot easily be put back into a bottle of elite-crafted, managerial democracy. Across Europe, direct democracy needs to be improved rather than suppressed.
DIRECT DEMOCRACY EVOLVING

Direct democracy has become more widespread around the world over the last decade. Polls suggest that demand for direct democracy is on the rise across Europe. Our ‘Towards a Citizens Union’ project has shown that people’s interest in exploring direct democracy has increased in the wake of the EU’s poly-crisis of recent years – although this trend is far from overwhelming and not present in all countries. In Germany, traditionally one of the countries most sceptical about national-level direct democracy, polls now show some support for its use. In June 2018, the new Italian coalition government came to power promising more direct democratic voting, in what may become the most significant test yet of whether direct democracy helps revive European democracy, undermines it or proves to be an over-hyped, unrealizable promise.

In terms of definitions, a standard distinction is between mandatory referenda, plebiscites called at governments’ behest and bottom-up citizens’ initiatives. A further distinction is that different varieties of citizen’s initiatives entail differing degrees of direct democracy. Some argue that petitions and citizen consultations are not full direct democracy where they do not lead to a competitive vote; they are sometimes referred to as ‘agenda initiatives’ that get issues onto government or parliamentary agendas without leading to a popular vote. In our project we adopted a broad definition to include these various different types of direct democracy and explore their competing merits.

An important change is underway in the balance between the different types of direct democracy. Until recently, debates were almost exclusively focused on governments calling referendums, especially on determinant and exceptional questions like EU accession. In recent years, this has been supplemented by a focus on the large number of citizens’ initiatives that have been introduced across Europe. Even if it is an exaggeration to talk of a groundswell of popular engagement, these initiatives have begun to inject direct democracy with a much more bottom-up, locally rooted ethos. Some of these emerging initiatives are ‘agenda initiatives’, some offer direct democratic votes.

Finland introduced enhanced citizens’ initiative provisions at the national level in 2012 and the municipal level in 2015, and Denmark followed suit by creating a similar tool in early 2018; these are widely used in both countries. The current Czech government is reforming the country’s restrictive provisions to make it easier for citizens to trigger national referenda. Similar changes have been made in 2018 in Austria to foster greater use of citizens’ instruments – which, apart from petitions, include randomly selected ‘wisdom councils’ at a local level.

In Romania, a push for less restrictive conditions for the use of direct democracy is one result of the on-going mass protests against corruption. Latvia’s Manabalss.lv online petitioning platform has become a widely emulated leader in the field. Estonia has similar provisions and is the country that has inserted such direct citizen engagement most notably into formal decision-making processes. A number of local-level referenda have been organised in Bulgaria in recent years.
The UK government introduced an e-petition provision in 2015. The UK government is also piloting online polls and citizen juries for local decision-making in six local councils. In recent years over 500 local referendums have been held in the UK on planning-related decisions. While Spain has seen debates over referendums become unhelpfully embroiled in the heated polarization of the Catalan conflict, municipalities across the country have pioneered direct engagement tools within local decision-making.

This momentum at the local level contrasts with the relative atrophy of the EU-level European Citizen’s Initiative (ECI). While the ECI is normally presented as the EU’s main direct democracy tool, it is a device for petitioning, not for direct popular votes. The virtues and shortcomings of the ECI have been exhaustively covered and are not the subject of this article; suffice it to say here that the ECI’s limited impact is one among many factors that have galvanized pressure for direct democracy at the national level. The growth of citizens’ initiatives at the national and local levels across Europe is in part related to the absence of well-developed and accessible forms of EU-level direct democratic accountability.

The utility of direct democracy in Europe is likely to hinge most crucially on the wave of new citizens’ initiatives. Many studies have focused on the case for EU-wide referenda, to be invoked through EU-level legal triggers. However, a focus on harnessing the faint stirrings of momentum that now exist at local level may prove more productive. While in many EU states concerns have grown over governments using referendums for political advantage, a more benign and citizen-led interest in democratic engagement may open the way to a more organic form of direct democracy across Europe.

**ONLY FOR POPULISTS?**

A familiar critique is that citizens use referendums simply to gainsay and punish elites for reasons unrelated to the subject matter ostensibly under consideration. In recent years in Europe, EU-related referenda in the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark and elsewhere have unleashed such contrarian dynamics more than they have promoted better-informed and well-reasoned debate. Some experts even fear that national referendums are the instruments most likely to sink the European project.

It is undoubtedly the case that anti-EU and populist parties have recently been the strongest advocates of direct democracy – even if most referendums have not been related to EU affairs. Italy’s Five Star Movement has been an emblematic innovator of online tools for democratic participation and voting. In Denmark, the rise of the Danish People’s Party has been the main factor in pushing politicians to widen the use of direct popular votes. In Germany it is the AfD that is questioning the country’s historically rooted distrust of referenda the most, while in Austria it is the Freedom Party that presses most strongly for direct democracy.
In the Czech Republic, populist parties explicitly focus on direct democracy as an absolute priority and one part of the far-right has even named itself the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party. The Polish Law and Order government has touted the use of referendums expressly as a means to help it fight back against EU criticism of rule of law infringements. In Romania, conservative groups pushed for a referendum to enshrine a ‘traditional’ definition of the family in the constitution, against EU liberal norms.

Our project charts how most European governments have put obstacles in the way of referendums proposed by citizens under constitutional procedures. Often, this seems to have backfired, adding to the list of factors fuelling populism. Two illustrative examples can be given. In Germany, the constitutional court has more than once generated public frustration by decreeing that European integration is still not deep enough to warrant a referendum. In Italy, the rate of failure of citizens’ initiatives is especially dramatic, indeed almost absolute. Then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi lost the 2016 referendum on constitutional change partly because many voters saw this as a cynical attempt to disadvantage the new populists. In both countries, for a variety of reasons the populist challenge has intensified, not abated.

This means that when EU-related referenda do take place, they tend to be framed around frustration with the Union and ‘the elite’ rather than enthusiasm for new ideas about European integration. A vicious circle thus forms: political parties and state institutions increasingly try to reach deals on EU issues that avoid having to call a referendum, each time deepening citizens’ feelings of democratic disenfranchisement and dissatisfaction with EU and national elites.

A key question is whether direct democracy can be ‘reclaimed’ from populists. There is no logical reason why calls for more direct democracy should be the preserve of anti-EU populists. Considering the fears about these emergent forces, it is easy to be sneering and dismissive of direct democracy. Elites can readily denigrate citizens as too ignorant to understand the complexities of EU issues. In practice, the evidence is mixed on this. The UK’s experience unquestionably provides some stark warnings. Yet the Danes are both the best informed of all European populations and the people most likely to vote critically in EU-related referenda; in Denmark negative voters come from the educated middle class, which means that it is too easy to dismiss referendums as simply a chance for uneducated voters to vent their spleen.

PARTICIPATORY FUSION

These two trends – the burgeoning of local citizens’ initiatives and the populist surge – set the parameters for improving European direct democracy. The key link is with the quality of democratic participation.
Many experts make what is now the fairly widely-accepted point that direct and representative democracy should be seen as complementary. They lament that in practice most direct democracy initiatives try to circumvent not nurture representative channels. And they worry that direct democracy has worked at odds with good quality deliberative democracy.\textsuperscript{8}

The fusing of the direct and the representative needs to be taken further: the imperative is to fashion a prudent use of direct democracy that flows from more meaningful citizen participation. More influential citizen participation is the catalyst needed to revive both indirect and direct democracy. Good direct democracy is not just about allowing citizens to trigger a referendum. It is about the quality and inclusiveness of the process that shadows direct popular votes. This is the qualitative change that is needed to get European direct democracy right.

The key relationship is not just direct-versus-indirect democracy, but between direct democracy and the incipient growth of citizen consultations or mini-publics. Many say that randomly selected groups of citizens are the key to reviving democracy as these allow for a deeper and more sustained form of democratic deliberation than one-off votes.\textsuperscript{9} In practice, they are often conceived as an alternative to high-level referendums. While there is much debate about high-profile cases of plebiscites held at governments’ behest, there are many more unreported examples of the inverse problem: governments refusing to hold votes on matters previously deliberated in detail in citizens assemblies – denials that disillusion citizens who have given up time to participate in such forums yet see no change. There could be more benefit to be had from a tighter tandem of citizen participation and other levels and forms of direct democratic voting.

To move beyond being a heavily instrumental wrecking-ball, direct democracy would need to meet certain participatory preconditions. The Irish referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion are normally cited as best practice in this sense. This is not to say that direct democracy should be suppressed simply to exclude EU-critical voices – these have as much right to be heard as any other positions. But it does mean that direct democracy should grow more organically out of current efforts across Europe to strengthen citizen participation around practical, day-to-day matters. Direct democracy is a responsibility that citizens need to learn incrementally – a lesson that emerges from the most successful case of Switzerland.

This would entail citizen participation initiatives leading into more decisive popular voting – the challenge is to develop these new instruments for petitions and consultations into a direct form of democracy with more bite. It would see a more tailored use of deliberative-participatory forums to prepare the ground for popular votes, as has happened in places like Oregon in the United States. Such developments would help structure direct democracy around citizen engagement in pursuit of positive and constructive policy options. They may also help to ensure that votes come from a more representative cross-section of the population. Our project reveals that referendum campaigns have so far failed to include all sections of the electorate equally.
The challenge is to fashion a direct democracy that stresses its positive and generic contribution to democratic process – and move away from it being used for predetermined political agendas, especially in EU debates. While anti-EU populists see direct democracy as the best way to break through the elite-consensus upheld through the indirect representative channels of current parliamentary procedures, it is the overall quality of democracy per se that is most likely to address populism’s underlying causes. Direct democracy needs to work as a means of incentivizing on-going and constructive citizen participation, not simply as an occasional means for giving national and EU elites a figurative kicking.\textsuperscript{10}

Alongside participation, one other precondition is crucial to getting direct democracy right. Amidst Europe’s wave of populism, direct democracy must categorically distinguish itself from unrestrained majoritarianism. The use of direct democracy must not allow a majority to infringe core liberal protection of minorities – this is a key part of breaking the link with populism.\textsuperscript{11} Where this condition is met, direct democracy need be no more dangerous than representative democracy. Indeed, recent illiberal trends show that the protection of liberal rights is a challenge for representative democracy as much as direct democracy. In fact, where basic rights are ring-fenced, direct democracy tools can actually work in favour of minorities, as it allows them to get issues onto the agenda despite the existence of quasi-permanent majorities in representative institutions.\textsuperscript{12}

**CONCLUSION**

Getting European direct democracy right will involve difficult balancing acts. Events in recent years have both strengthened the case for direct democracy and heightened its risks. The challenge of populism begs for several areas of democratic improvement, including more direct democracy. Yet it also renders more acute the danger that it could produce deeply disruptive and illiberal outcomes. Many citizens do seem to want more rather than less direct influence over decisions that affect their lives, even as many experts have pushed in the opposite direction of warning that EU integration must not be held ransom to the ‘passions of the rabble’.

Direct democracy is neither a panacea nor an unmitigated ill to be shunned. At most, it merits a modestly widened usage if used in the right way and if combined with other areas of democratic reform. Each dynamic – indirect representation, direct popular influence and deliberative citizen participation – has its rightful place in democratic renewal. On this basis, the policy dilemma will be whether a denser web of direct democracy at the local level could be extended upwards to have more constructive relevance for EU-level matters.
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NOTES

6 One good example of such a plea is F. Chevenal, “European Union and Direct Democracy: A Possible Combination?” BEUCitizen project, 2016
7 I. Krastev, “After Europe,” University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017
10 The recommendations of the UK Independent Commission on Referendums that reported in July 2018 point in a similar direction. “Independent Commission on Referendums, Report of the Independent Commission on Referendums,” Constitution Unit, UCL, London, 2018
New Approaches to Upholding Democratic Values in Poland

AGATA GOSTYŃSKA-JAKUBOWSKA

For almost three years, EU institutions and member states have debated how to address backtracking on the rule of law in Poland. This discussion has focused on deploying punitive measures against the Polish government, a course that could ultimately lead to suspending not only EU funds to Poland but also Poland’s voting rights in the Council of the European Union. Yet in order to talk Warsaw out of its defiance, the EU will need to develop a comprehensive strategy to help make the Polish public more resilient to the government’s populist narrative.

BEYOND PUNITIVE LEGAL MEASURES

Since the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS) came to power in Poland in 2015, it has increased its control over public media and the courts. Recently, the party made headlines when it attempted to change the makeup of the Polish Supreme Court, which among other things adjudicates on the validity of parliamentary, presidential, and European elections. PiS claims that the public does not hold judges in high regard because many of them allegedly adjudicated in communist times, and it argues that its reforms will help draw a line under Poland’s murky past and rebuild public trust in the Polish judiciary. The EU, however, has not accepted this narrative and is concerned that the PiS judicial reforms are part of a wider attempt to weaken democratic checks and balances. Indeed, the Economist Democracy Index, which has looked into the state of democracy worldwide since 2006, has pointed to the deterioration of democratic indicators such as media freedom in Poland.

The European Commission has tried to talk the Polish government out of taking steps that are widely seen as undermining the rule of law, and which violate the EU values that Poland accepted upon its accession in 2004. At the start of 2016, the commission launched a dialogue with the Polish government to assess the situation. When these negotiations failed, the commission triggered Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (Article 7 TEU), which allows the EU to suspend certain rights from a member state that violates the EU’s founding values, including the rule of law. This act could potentially lead to the suspension of Poland’s voting rights in the Council of
the European Union. It is unlikely, however, that the other EU member states will unanimously back the commission’s efforts to punish Warsaw. The commission therefore decided to launch infringement procedures against the Polish government, hoping that legal pressure would help bring PiS to heel. The EU also has considered using financial pressure to counter the present negative trends in Poland. The country is a net beneficiary of the EU budget, and it could be in trouble if member states support the commission’s proposal from May 2018, which provides that from 2021 onward the commission would be able to suspend EU payments to member states that undermine judicial independence (unless a qualified majority of member states explicitly reject this decision).

Nevertheless, the commission will fail to restore the rule of law in Poland if it sticks only to these punitive instruments. It will have to complement them with a positive set of measures to ensure that the Polish public understands the EU’s motives for intervening. Poles are pro-European, but they are vulnerable to the PiS narrative that Brussels has no right to tell Warsaw what to do. After the commission launched Article 7 TEU, 43 percent of Poles thought that triggering it was unjustified, 38 percent thought that it was justified, and 19 percent were undecided. Poles also are split on whether the European Court of Justice (ECJ) should weigh in. Fifty-four percent of Poles think that the ECJ should stop judicial reforms if it concludes that Warsaw has violated EU law, but more than 40 percent disagree—even though Polish courts are considered to be EU courts when they apply EU law, and so member states are obliged to ensure the independence of their national judiciary.

If the commission does not help to increase public awareness of Poland’s obligations as an EU member state, its actions against Warsaw risk provoking a public backlash. After Poland joined the EU, political elites portrayed membership mainly as a source of endless benefits for Poles—including free movement of workers to other EU countries, passport-free travel within the EU, and EU funds for infrastructure development—rather than as a community of law and values. Poland’s own commitments to the EU were pushed into the background in public discourse. This messaging has played into PiS’s hands; for example, the party claimed that the commission’s intervention in Poland is driven by its willingness to punish Warsaw for refusing to accept refugees. The EU will have to counter this toxic domestic political narrative if it is to have any hope of asserting its authority in the eyes of the Polish electorate.

**CIVIL SOCIETY NEGLECTED**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Poland have tried to set the record straight and support the rule of law. One group, Wolne Sądy (Free Courts), which is run pro bono by a handful of lawyers, has distributed short videos in which Polish celebrities explain the importance of upholding the Polish constitution and EU law. Such videos are more likely to reach and attract younger and less-educated Poles—groups that are attracted by PiS’s populist narrative.
Other CSOs, such as Akcja Demokracja (Action Democracy), have encouraged public debate about the rule of law by organizing and coordinating public protests against controversial legal changes. Akcja Demokracja also has provided an internet platform for citizens who want to express dissent online, rather than take to the streets. The online platform hosted a petition that urged the commission to launch legal action against changes to Poland’s Supreme Court law. Other long-established CSOs, such as the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the Stefan Batory Foundation, have held public debates and written extensively about the government’s democratic backsliding.

The Polish government, meanwhile, has found subtle ways of stifling CSOs’ influence. For instance, it has reduced the time for public consultations over its legislative process, making it difficult for CSOs to submit feedback on drafting laws or monitor law-making. Between November 2017 and May 2018, the Polish government allocated on average only thirteen days for consultations over draft legislation. This is often insufficient time for smaller organizations to study draft legislation and formulate comments. At times, the government has even bypassed the obligation to hold consultations by pushing through its reforms as private members’ bills.

The Polish government has also cut funding for CSO activities that go against the PiS’s narrative or policies. It has, for example, nullified a tendering process for projects to support the integration of migrants and refugees; and abruptly terminated cooperation with a foundation that fights discrimination and violence based on gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. In 2017, the ruling party also centralized management of government (and potentially EU) funds in the hands of the newly established National Institute of Freedom—Centre for the Development of Civil Society, which in practice will be overseen by the Polish deputy prime minister. As the institute is still new, there is little evidence as to whether it will favor some nongovernmental organizations over others.

But in light of the Polish government’s track record of following Hungary’s example, this risk cannot be excluded. Under conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government, Hungary established the National Cooperation Fund to financially support CSOs; however, this fund is reported to have primarily supported organizations broadly sympathetic to the government’s thinking. In a similar fashion, PiS has used Polish public media to discredit nongovernmental organizations that have been vocal about the government’s democratic backsliding.

Despite the challenges ahead for Poland’s CSOs, the European Commission has focused almost exclusively on the issue of independent courts in its dispute with Warsaw. This is disappointing: together with independent courts and media, CSOs perform an important role in holding EU governments to account. The commission may think that it does not have a strong legal basis to pick another fight with Warsaw. In 2017, after Hungary imposed special registration and tax hurdles on CSOs that receive foreign funding, the commission took legal action against Budapest for undermining the free movement of EU capital—one of the four freedoms of the single market. But
it cannot take similar steps against Warsaw; PiS’s actions against CSOs may be a point of concern for the commission, but to date the Polish government does not seem to be violating any specific EU directive or regulation.

The EU as a whole, however, needs to understand that democratic backsliding by one of its own members might be one of the greatest challenges to the European project. Populists are not only thriving in Central Europe but are now in power in Italy and Austria, and breathing down the necks of mainstream parties in northern member states. The anti-EU rhetoric that these populist parties often employ will only intensify in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. A purely legalistic approach to democratic backsliding will not make the problem go away; populists have learned how to comply with ECJ verdicts without conceding the main gist of their policies. When the ECJ ruled that Hungary violated EU law by forcing its judges into early retirement, Viktor Orbán settled the case by compensating the affected judges, rather than reinstating them.

To increase support for its position, the EU needs to change its tactics and complement its toolkit with greater support for CSOs that promote democratic values and increase public knowledge about the European project on the ground. According to the EU treaties, member states have control over their own education policies, and the EU can only support member states in their endeavors. But for domestic reasons, some governments may be reluctant to develop policies that improve public understanding of the EU. The European Commission should take steps that could make the public more resilient in the face of anti-EU populist narratives, encourage more support for the EU, and make defiant governments reconsider actions that violate the letter and spirit of the EU’s collective values.

A BETTER CIVIL SOCIETY STRATEGY

First, the EU needs to spend more money on supporting democracy within the EU. As part of a recent democracy-promoting initiative, the European Commission wants to set up a Rights and Values Programme that would spend around €642 million to protect and promote EU values in the period 2021–2027. However, this effort falls far short of addressing the populist challenge. In its opinion on the program, the Stefan Batory Foundation pointed out that the funding proposed for the program over a seven-year period is a fraction of the amount that the EU spends on democracy promotion abroad (approximately €2 billion in the current multiannual financial perspective, according to the foundation). Moreover, according to the commission’s proposal, EU-based CSOs will have to compete for program funding with a wide range of actors, including for-profit organizations and nongovernmental organizations from outside the EU.

The commission may think that a more generous program would not pass the scrutiny of member states, which together with the European Parliament have the final say on the EU budget for 2021–2027. EU capitals that currently have their own problems with the rule of law will be reluctant to
spend more money on CSOs that challenge their policies. Other member states, such as the EU’s net contributors, might also be inclined to make further cuts to the Rights and Values Programme, redirecting the budget to their own priorities.

Yet the long-term implications of democratic backsliding by one of the EU’s own members would cost the EU more than the money recouped from cuts. Failure to respect the rule of law threatens the integrity of the single market, which is estimated to have produced a €233 billion increase in the EU’s gross domestic product between 1992 and 2006. Over the years, single market cooperation has relied on mutual trust in the member states’ ability and willingness to apply and enforce the EU’s rulebook. A member state that undermines the independence of its own courts damages this trust and challenges the entire arrangement.

Second, the EU needs to be more strategic about which activities it funds and make sure that its money does not fall into the wrong hands. Current EU programs designed to promote EU values and democratic civil society focus on the values outlined in Article 2 TEU. Yet even though these programs cover some activities implementing EU legislation and policy in alignment with the EU’s values, they do little to directly uphold these core values. In the words of Israel Butler from the Civil Liberties Union for Europe, this is because the commission treats CSOs promoting EU values merely as its “subcontractors,” helping to implement EU law or policy on a project-to-project basis. He also points out that the EU’s programs do not focus on such activities as capacity building or public education, and they are not available for local- or national-level organizations that advocate for Article 2 TEU values. Unless the commission adopts a more flexible interpretation in the next financial perspective, some local CSOs would have to rely more heavily on private donors. At the moment, the Polish government’s rhetoric against foreign donors is not as aggressive as it is in Hungary, but the ongoing smear campaigns in both countries may discourage CSOs from applying for private funding.

Currently, national governments are in charge of allocating some EU funds, such as the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund. This funding structure creates a potential risk that governments could award EU money to “loyal” organizations. Other EU funds, such as those earmarked for the Rights, Equality, and Citizenship Program, are administered by the commission, which in itself is a stumbling block for grassroots organizations that have little experience or capacity to deal with the EU’s administrative machinery when applying for funding. CSOs have long urged the commission to look to Norway for inspiration, and replace the EU’s existing funds with one instrument that would rely on an independent body or bodies distributing EU money on the local level. European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway grants are managed and distributed among CSOs by fund operators that are selected in the tender process and are independent of national authorities.
By changing the channels for distributing EU money to promote EU values, the commission could mitigate the risks of awarding funding to CSOs that are overly sympathetic to existing governments and their potentially antidemocratic policies. It would also make the funding more accessible for grassroots organizations that operate in smaller towns or more rural areas, where fewer people may understand the broader implications of the EU and its values. Fund operators along the lines of the Norwegian model likely will have more experience in working with CSOs, and so they may find it easier to communicate EU program objectives to these CSOs. Furthermore, by taking on the burden of some of the EU’s project requirements with regard to eligibility criteria and reporting, fund operators may make it easier for smaller organizations to obtain funding.

Third, the European Commission could make better use of CSOs in its own work. Its current rule-of-law framework provides that when the commission investigates threats to the rule of law in a member state, it can draw on the expertise of recognized organizations such as the Council of Europe and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. However, this framework does not give CSOs a prominent role, even though these same organizations often make heroic efforts to uphold the rule of law. Indeed, the commission met with rule-of-law experts and CSO representatives during its recent trips to Warsaw, but some felt that the meetings were symbolic and did not go beyond fact-checking and discussions about judicial independence. The commission worries that developing closer partnerships with CSOs would open it up to claims from the Polish government that Brussels is taking sides in the ongoing spat over the rule of law in Poland. Indeed, PiS has treated CSOs that promote liberal values as its political rivals. Yet CSOs could provide the commission with a holistic view of what needs to be done to change Poles’ minds, especially if the EU listens to the full ideological range of CSOs and think tanks. The commission should not give up this opportunity out of fear that it might be accused of being biased.

The commission has promised to come up with a new initiative to strengthen the enforcement of the rule of law in the EU. This is the opportunity to give civil society a stronger role in monitoring government restrictions and building a broader societal resilience in favor of democratic values.

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NOTES

1 On December 20, 2017, the European Commission launched an infringement procedure against changes to the law on the ordinary courts. On July 2, 2018, it repeated this procedure against changes to the law on the Supreme Court. On September 28, the European Commission also decided to move to the next stage of its infringement procedure against changes to the law on the Supreme Court, refer Poland to the ECJ, and ask the court to order the interim measures that would help restore the situation in the Supreme Court to the pre-reform process until a final verdict is reached.

2 Article 2 TEU reads: “the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

After the Hungary Vote, EU Needs a Broader Approach to Halt Illiberal Slide

RICHARD YOUNGS

The European Parliament’s vote to trigger Article 7 proceedings against Hungary is a hugely significant step. But an important question is whether this will prompt the EU to develop a more comprehensive democracy strategy within its own borders. With the prospect of far-reaching action against the Hungarian government still uncertain—it is not clear that the European Council will move expeditiously to address the issue, let alone vote to suspend Hungary’s voting rights—the union is only in the foothills of designing a full-spectrum response to the surge in illiberal politics across Europe.

The EP’s Article 7 move may be justified and overdue; yet evidence from academic studies is that punitive measures are not usually effective in prompting governments to redemocratize in any deep-rooted fashion. They work insofar as they dovetail with strategies to boost internal constituencies in favor of reform. To date, pro-reform mobilizations have been relatively modest inside Hungary—certainly in comparison to the protests and resistance against illiberal and corrupt governments seen in many other European countries. While most press attention has been on the Article 7 question, the EU will need to develop a far wider democracy-support program in Hungary if it is to have any effect in reversing Viktor Orbán’s authoritarian slide. If experiences elsewhere in the world are anything to go by, this will need to involve strong and positive practical engagement with democratic actors on the ground across the full range of reforms needed to resurrect democratic quality.

Moreover, a more critical and serious debate might finally ensue about Hungary’s authoritarian turn—and this will open the question of other member states’ illiberal trends too. Hungary may have slipped furthest away from democracy, but other EU countries appear to be on the same path. If this week’s vote does unblock policy debates on Europe’s anti-democratic trends, the EU will need to carefully draw up criteria to justify where and when it engages in other member states besides Hungary. As democratic challenges become more pervasive across Europe—and certainly cannot be reduced to one or two errant leaders—the EU will need to map out a much more consistent policy.
Efforts to defend democratic values cannot depend on expedient or chance shifts in EP voting arithmetic or the high profile of one or two particular policy issues. Rather, the EU will need well-reasoned grounds for explaining why certain actions are to be taken in one state but not another, or at one moment in time but not another.

And as the wider picture comes into focus, the EU will need to be ready to address the deeper root causes of democracy’s increasing precariousness across Europe. One lesson from democracy support across the globe is that a narrow focus on self-contained, formal institutional changes is rarely enough to achieve meaningful democratic advances. Indeed, experience shows that this is generally where such policies fail—and can even be counterproductive. EU leaders have repeated the mantra that populists often express legitimate grievances, even if their illiberal politics are unacceptable. And yet so far there is no sign of a sustained response to rejig Europe’s understanding of liberal values in a way that gets to the core of the illiberal surge.

Curiously the EU deploys a wide toolbox in support of democracy outside its borders, but does not do the same within member states. The EU needs an internal democracy strategy that looks more like its external policies. This week’s vote in the EP does not in itself ensure this will be given serious consideration; in fact, the obstacles to moving in this direction remain considerable. Even if the EU’s external democracy support itself is not in particularly good health, there are still many lessons from the EU’s global policies that could be usefully applied within Europe. A more balanced focus between internal and external democracy challenges is needed.

In Hungary the long process of (re)empowering a more democratic civil society will need serious resources and long term, and patient work on the ground. Similar engagement with civil society is needed in Poland, Romania, and elsewhere too. Efforts to protect democratic standards cannot rely primarily on legal, punitive EU processes—even if these are on occasion appropriate. The EU must think seriously about what it can and should be doing to preempt such serious measures being necessary at all. The European Commission has proposed a new “Rights and Values” fund under the EU’s new budget, but only in very modest form. This will need to be beefed up with more resources than is currently envisaged and allow the program to support a wide range of civil society voices—including genuinely autonomous democratic voices—in a way that at present is not the case.

In short, this week’s momentous vote against Hungary will only have real meaning in shoring up European democracy if it triggers a sustained and far wider series of policy commitments.

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The Nature of Democratic Backsliding in Europe

STAFFAN I. LINDBERG

In Europe, as in most other parts of the world, democracy is retreating and autocracy is gaining. Yet Europe’s challenges are particularly noteworthy. Although it is commonly assumed that democratic backsliding starts with electoral problems, other political elements—such as the infringement of individual rights and the freedom of expression—are at the core of Europe’s democratic woes.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) index, a signature product of the V-Dem Institute based at the University of Gothenburg, examines the state of global democracy through a distinctive focus on seven different democratic types. V-Dem recently released its 2017 data and annual “Democracy Report 2018,” using over 400 detailed indicators of the particulars of democracy, human rights, civil liberties, and freedoms aggregated from ratings provided by over 3,200 scholars in 180 countries; almost fifty indices capturing components of democracy such as accountability, women’s empowerment, freedom of expression, clean elections, and so on; and five main indices of democracy (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy) to give new insights into the state of global democracy and the shape of European democracy, in particular.

V-Dem’s data show that a global wave of autocratization—a reduction in democratic qualities that can lead to the breakdown of democracy—is manifesting itself less than thirty years after communism’s collapse and democracy’s global spread generated tremendous hopes for a twenty-first century dominated by liberal democracy. The rise of authoritarianism in Honduras, Nicaragua, Russia, Venezuela, Turkey, and Ukraine, accompanied by substantial backsliding in countries like Brazil, India, Israel, and now the United States, over the past decade testifies to the erroneousness of the optimism expressed in the 1990s. Should the world be genuinely alarmed about the future of democracy in Europe?

A SOBERING GLOBAL PICTURE

The third global wave of democratization started in the mid-1970s and gained momentum across the 1980s and 1990s, peaking between 1993 and 1999. In that period, seventy countries made significant advances on V-Dem’s liberal democracy index every year, while only four to six countries...
backslid on an annual basis. This dominance of democratic advances over deterioration actually continued from 1978 until around 2010. Since then, a downward trend in democratic progress has become obvious, while the count of nations relapsing has increased. In 2017, the number of countries backsliding matched the count of countries making progress for the first time in forty years.

The overall level of democracy in the world from 1972 to 2017, based on V-Dem’s 2018 data, can be viewed from the perspective of two complementary metrics (see figure 1): conventional averages across countries (the left panel) or averages weighted by each country’s population size (the right panel). There are some noticeable differences, both in levels and the trends over time.

![Figure 1. World and Regional Averages of Liberal Democracy, 1972-2017](image)

**Note:** The data comes from V-Dem version 8, and this graphic has been adapted from Democracy Report 2018: Democracy For All?.
Significantly, overall levels are markedly lower when population size is taken into account, meaning that large countries are worse at delivering democracy. This also holds true for several regions of the world, including the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. It does not hold in the former Soviet republics, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa. Africa is also the only region bucking the contemporary trend of autocratization in both measures.

This means that the gathering trend toward autocratization is much more demonstrable when population sizes are considered. The global level of democracy calculated by conventional country-averages dips slightly after 2010 but is well within confidence intervals. Using population weights, the fall is more pronounced: by this measure, the world has receded to a level of democracy last recorded some twenty-five years ago in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s breakup. One-third of the world’s population—2.5 billion people—lives in countries that are now part of the global autocratization trend.

Many countries have experienced major changes in their democracy scores over the last ten years (see figure 2). Several large and populous countries have registered substantial declines in recent years, including Brazil, India, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Notably, all of these are or used to be democracies.

While there are also countries making progress on democracy, they tend to have small populations, such as Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Fiji, Sri Lanka, or Vanuatu. Nigeria is the only country with a large population that has made substantial progress in terms of liberal democracy in the last ten years.

**EUROPE’S SITUATION**

Democracy in Europe is in decline, even by the more conventional measure. When weighted by population, the trend is again much more apparent. By the latter measure, the level of democracy in Europe has fallen back forty years, to where it was in 1978. This decline is just as steep as the backslide seen in several other regions of the world.

Europe is often portrayed as a bastion of democracy that is more advanced than the rest of the world, perhaps with the exception of the United States and Canada. But while the average level of democracy in Europe is still the second highest in the world, it is only by a slim margin. When weighted for population size, democracy in Latin America is clearly comparable to Europe.

Another important perspective is the qualitative transition from one type of regime to another among European countries, in particular when such transitions cross the democracy-autocracy divide (see table 1).
Figure 2. Countries’ Progress and Backsliding on Liberal Democracy, 2007–2017

Note: The data comes from V-Dem version 8, and this graphic has been adapted from Democracy Report 2018: Democracy for All?

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<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
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Europe has seen six shifts in regime classification over the past ten years. Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia lost their status as liberal democracies and transitioned downward to be electoral democracies. Several of these transitions have been drawn out over several years, but the autocratization of Poland is notably picking up speed and most of the changes in Warsaw have occurred between 2015 and 2017.

Fortuitously, only one full democratic breakdown has occurred so far. In Serbia, autocratization has gone so far that democracy is no longer upheld, even in its most limited sense of electoral only. In another instance of slow-moving developments where the government changed its nature in an incremental fashion over many years, Serbia has become an electoral authoritarian state.

Only Albania has transitioned to a better state of affairs, now qualifying as a liberal democracy. Overall, the evidence points in the direction of democracy losing significant ground in Europe.

**WHAT IS CHANGING IN EUROPE?**

V-Dem’s data can also help identify which aspects of democracy are diminishing and which are holding up more strongly. The index for liberal democracy consists of the index for electoral democracy and three indices capturing more specific liberal concerns: the protection of civil liberties by the rule of law and both judicial and legislative constraints on the executive.

The index driving most of the downward trend in recent years is the measure of electoral democracy (see figure 3), which has registered the largest drop between the various indices.

Plotting the twenty-five indicators that go into V-Dem’s index of electoral democracy shows the number of countries in Europe that have significantly improved or declined on each indicator between 2007 and 2017 (see table 2).

Notably, the indicators measuring the freedom of expression and alternative sources of information have declined significantly in many countries while improving in very few—just one country has seen improved media self-censorship and two have seen less media bias in favor of the government. In addition, indicators from the clean elections index that measure civil society’s ability to organize freely without being repressed or prevented from existing also suggest democratic backsliding.

At the same time, almost all indicators that measure purely electoral aspects in the clean elections index show improvement. In particular, the extent to which the elections are free and fair in procedural terms and the quality of the voters’ registry—two of the most fundamental indicators related to elections—record more countries improving than declining.
This gives a detailed depiction of the current trend of democratic backsliding in Europe. Some ruling elites are clearly on an undemocratic quest, but the electoral institutions that most observers think of as representative of democracy have so far been robust or even improving.
In contrast, democracies are backsliding by way of less conspicuous violations. The freedom of expression and government- and self-censorship of the media, academia, civil society organizations, and cultural institutions can be affected negatively by relatively obscure means, such as inducements, intimidations, and co-optation. Incrementally, governments are constraining autonomous actors to impair their abilities to function as pro-democratic actors, while skillfully engineering an increasing level of acceptance for such measures. On its own, each step can appear relatively inconsequential. Yet the outcomes add up and are now evident—as shown in table 2. Critically, this is weakening those liberal rights and institutions that make electoral practices consequential and effective instruments of democracy. This is a problematic development that presents a clear test for the future of democracy in Europe.

Europe is also not exceptional in this regard. As noted in the V-Dem Institute’s “Democracy Report 2018,” the exact same pattern of autocratization is found in countries across the world today. This should not be a comfort to Europe or a reason to relax. On the contrary, the undermining and weakening of media, civil society, and freedom of expression has been followed by more dramatic turns to autocracy in a diverse set of countries including Russia, Turkey, and Nicaragua—and is an uncomfortable reminder of Europe’s political tumult in the 1930s.

**CONCLUSION**

The level of democracy in Europe remains close to its highest level ever recorded. Albania, for example, recently transitioned into a liberal democracy. Yet, as in other parts of the globe, substantial autocratization over the last ten years may threaten the future viability of democracy in Europe. Several countries have recently backslid from liberal to electoral democracies, and authoritarian rule is increasingly recorded in others. This backsliding occurs primarily in media and civil society—non-electoral soft spots of democracy where governments can limit democratic space with less immediate scrutiny.

The subtlety and variation across different components of democracy needs to be fully understood to correctly address the challenge to democracy in Europe. Electoral institutions and practices remain robust (or are even improving). It is media freedom, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, and the rule of law that are being undermined in a significant number of countries.

These disquieting conclusions fit political scientist Nancy Bermeo’s observation that “the most blatant forms of backsliding” are disappearing while surreptitious tactics such as harassment of the opposition and subversion of horizontal accountability are on the rise: “Elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one . . . [and] hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences.”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\]
Table 2. **Number of Advancing and Backsliding Countries in Indicators in Electoral Democracy Index, 2007–2017**

![Diagram showing number of advancing and backsliding countries in indicators of electoral democracy index, 2007–2017.](image)

**Note:** The data comes from V-Dem version 8, and this graphic has been adapted to focus on Europe from *Democracy Report 2018: Democracy For All?* [https://www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/annual-report/](https://www.v-dem.net/en/news-publications/annual-report/).

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Both negative and positive trends are observed at the same time. It is important to recognize that the “democraticness” of European society is under strain. Placed in the wider sweep of time, the current situation is not yet as bad as previous moments of crisis; European democracy still scores well across most indicators compared to the 1970s. Tremulous times are nothing new. Yet recent developments most certainly give room for pause.

V-Dem’s 2017 democracy report concluded that democracy still seems relatively resilient. This year, the assessment is more pessimistic. Democracy is being rolled back. A trend of autocratization is evident. The starkest difference from last year is the number of very large and powerful nations that are now part of the autocratization wave, affecting billions of people and sending a very strong signal to the rest of the world.

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NOTES

1 Color codes are by regions of the world, and only countries with significant changes outside of the confidence intervals are labeled. The term “confidence intervals” is used here to denote credible regions in which the Bayesian highest posterior densities would place the equivalent of one standard deviation within. For details on the V-Dem measurement model and the calculation of the confidence intervals, see Daniel Pemstein et al., “The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data,” Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg, April 2018, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/5a/23/5a231d27-8f14-4b87-9a27-1536d6a2e482/v-dem_working_paper_2018_21_3.pdf.


3 Orange bars indicate the number of countries that are backsliding on a particular indicator, while blue bars indicate the number of countries advancing. The indicators are ordered so that placement to the left indicates that more countries have improved than have declined, and the reverse is true for those appearing to the right in the table.


Europe Up for Grabs: The Looming Battle Lines of the 2019 European Parliament Elections

ALBERTO ALEMANNO

The EU political landscape will be on the cusp of a profound shake-up when the European Parliament holds its next elections in May 2019. Not only are long-time populists poised to disrupt the parliament, but a new wave of little-noticed transnational parties is also emerging from the bottom up. Both threaten the mainstream political parties that have historically held a monopoly on the European project. Europe may be on the verge of a more transnational form of democracy—one that is polarized around very basic pro- and anti-EU positions.

EUROPE’S OUT-OF-SYNC POLITICAL SYSTEM

The EU’s political system has never caught up with the impact European integration has had on citizens’ daily lives. EU citizens still vote in the European Parliament elections on different dates, according to different electoral laws, and in support of candidates selected by national parties and on the basis of domestic agendas. These national parties belong to European political parties that have been given institutional recognition and financial resources over time. Despite their name (Europarties), they consist of weak, extra-parliamentary federations of national parties from several EU member states, united by thin political affinity and driven by financial rewards. The largest political group in the European Parliament is the right-leaning European People’s Party (EPP), which holds 217 of the 751 seats, followed by the left-leaning Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), which currently holds 189 seats. The parliament also includes the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the European Conservatives and Reformists, and several other smaller coalitions.

Europarties have historically remained irrelevant in the European electoral competition. German citizens vote for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) rather than the EPP, and Spaniards pull for the Socialist Party instead of the S&D. As a result, after more than sixty years in existence, the
EU lacks a Europe-wide party system capable of fostering a genuine transnational space for political debate and dialogue, in which citizens can understand, influence, and participate in decisionmaking that affects their common interests as Europeans.

The absence of an authentic pan-European party system heavily conditions the electoral game and partisan competition, which remain largely national. This absence also militates against the emergence of pan-European public opinion. Despite states’ interdependence in matters concerning their citizens’ daily lives—ranging from economic and environmental policy to EU-enacted data protection regulations—Europeans are exposed exclusively to domestic accounts of EU developments. These accounts are inevitably partial, often misinformed, and generally misleading, in part because national politicians pass the buck and scapegoat the EU. Unsurprisingly, turnout for European Parliament elections is typically low, and citizens’ perceptions of Europe are largely misaligned with reality. The EU is more important to the average EU citizen than voters realize.

The primary institutional incentive for developing a genuine transnational party system is that offered by a common structure of competition. That is the rationale behind the so-called Spitzenkandidaten (or lead-candidate) process, whereby each pan-European party is expected to select a lead candidate for its electoral campaign, who might then become the president of the European Commission. Yet the Spitzenkandidaten mechanism—which was first used in 2014 in the election of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker—falls short. It is overly complex and opaque, insofar as transnational parties compete for control of a transnational political executive, all at a distance from European voters themselves.

Consequently, there have been various calls in the past decade for the EU to move toward a more genuine election process that allows political parties to present transnational candidate lists. French President Emmanuel Macron recently revamped this idea; it was endorsed by Juncker (against his own political party) and was publicly supported by Belgium, Italy, and Spain. However, in February 2018, the European Parliament rejected a proposal to apportion forty-six of the seventy-three seats that will be left vacant by the UK after Brexit to a new class of members (MEPs) representing one pan-European constituency. The established Europarties do not want to risk losing their own political influence in the European Parliament. Some MEPs argued that only individuals from larger member states would stand any chance of securing spots atop a transnational list, given that only the domestic (news) markets of such countries would be large enough to gain traction with the media and the higher number of electors entitled to vote for them. Yet without transnational lists and candidates, the EU lacks a counterfactual to prove the veracity of such a statement empirically.
THE POTENTIAL EMERGENCE OF EUROPEAN TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS

Despite the limited incentives for political parties to Europeanize the electoral contest, a growing number of domestic political parties have been connecting—over time—with one another across the political spectrum. The increasing salience of the effects of EU policies on citizens’ lives, growing economic and political interdependence, and Brexit have accelerated this process, which in turn has led to the emergence of a timid, yet evolving, common European debate. National elections—whether in Hungary, Italy, or the Netherlands—have never drawn the level of attention and public scrutiny that they do today; these contests feed into a pan-European form of public discourse structured around a few key resonating issues, ranging from migration to economic policies.

Paradoxically, this incremental Europeanization of the political discourse has initially occurred at the fringes and has been driven by radical populist parties, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly the National Front), Geert Wilders’s Party for Freedom, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini’s League, and Alternative for Germany. These political forces are the only ones that have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the EU (to beat the establishment) over the last decade. By developing one common political language across their pan-European electorate and identifying some key major issues common to the continent, they have succeeded in doing what mainstream political parties have never even tried. Indeed, the latter, by failing to identify and position themselves on EU terms, have manifestly contributed to the emergence and success of these fringe parties.

This lack of engagement by mainstream parties—such as the EPP and the S&D—on the subject of Europe, within and beyond its boundaries, has created a political vacuum. A plethora of new parties and grassroots movements across the political spectrum, as well as emerging alliances between them, seems ready to fill this vacuum. Being progressively more inclined to privilege the supranational level of government, several of these actors are at the forefront of today’s incipient Europeanization of politics. One important example is the left-leaning coalition called European Spring (originally referred to as DiEM25). It is led by former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and former French presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, and it has drawn support from a Polish political party called Razem (the Together Party), a Danish party known as Alternativet (the Alternative), and a Portuguese party called Livre (Free). Other examples include the Left led by the Spanish party Podemos (We Can) and a Portuguese party called O Bloco (the Bloc), a more youthful pro-EU movement known as Volt, and an anti-EU movement named Generation Identity.

Emerging from a hodgepodge of movements, associations, and grassroots organizations led by old and/or new political leaders and activists, these pan-European movements—whether on the left, center, or right of the political spectrum—represent a further challenge to mainstream political parties. Indeed, what makes them stand out from traditional political parties is not only their ability to position themselves in relation to major pan-European issues—such as migration or the economy—but also to take action and successfully mobilize their supporters on these issues.
transnationally. The latter feature also differentiates them from previous attempts to build pan-EU political offers, such as those pioneered by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, the National Front, and Italian comedian Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. These earlier efforts never turned into meaningful pan-EU parties—not even political groups within the European Parliament; they are reminiscent instead of the pioneering attempts to build genuine transnational alliances, such as those led by the European Greens.

A glance at the websites of the new transnational movements shows how these emerging political forces reflect the vivacity that the dominant political discourse on Europe has been hiding for so long. These new pan-European organizations are as transnational as the lives and mind-sets of their members. Counterintuitively, this is true even of movements that oppose cosmopolitanism—like Generation Identity—and instead defend a supposed European ethnocultural identity. In other words, these rising transnational movements embody a new way of feeling, understanding, and energizing the European political space. They look increasingly capable of disrupting traditional parties’ approach to Europe. They typically identify a limited set of policy issues—including migration, unemployment, and the environment—that are locally relevant but common to most European countries. They then campaign on these common pan-European issues using very locally and citizen-driven community-organizing methods. Interestingly enough, they all seem to draw inspiration from the methods famously developed by Marshall Ganz at Harvard University and put to the test by Barack Obama’s 2012 U.S. presidential campaign.

These efforts may be gaining traction. Interestingly, a majority of Europeans seem to perceive the emergence of new parties and movements rather positively, based on recent polling. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, 56 percent of Europeans believe that new parties and movements can bring real change, while 53 percent contend that they could find new solutions more readily than the political establishment.

**TRANSNATIONAL VERSUS MAINSTREAM EUROPEAN PARTIES**

While traditional Europarties already were challenged in the previous 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections, they are much more vulnerable now. They are at risk of losing their monopoly on Europe. The emergence of this new wave of self-proclaimed pan-EU movements shows that Europe is no longer the exclusive patrimony of German Chancellor Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron, on the one hand, nor that of Marine Le Pen or Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the usual anti-EU fringe rhetoric, on the other.

Many more visions of Europe exist besides those that long-standing Europarties have been presenting for the past several years. These competing visions will likely confront one another in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. Macron’s grand plan to reunite pro-European forces may feed the populist rhetoric of neo-liberal Europe—all the more so since it has gained
support from the Spanish liberal party Ciudadanos (Citizens). Yet movements such as European Spring or Volt may show that it is possible to put forward an alternative model of what it means to be pro-European. Likewise, while Orbán’s announced anti-migrant posture and his attempt to unite populist forces—from Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to Italy’s Matteo Salvini—may lead to an explosion of the EPP, new forces such as Generation Identity may offer an alternative model of what it is like to be anti-EU.

The implications are far-reaching: a political European demos is sprouting at the fringes, not at the core. It is likely to cannibalize mainstream forces’ political capital on European issues. Europe continues to evolve as a political and human space that is shared and lively. Against this backdrop, the next European Parliament elections could mark a turning point and constitute the first genuinely European political competition, a prospect that may pave the way for the emergence of an incipient transnational European democracy.

Yet there is still a risk that some of these emerging voices could be silenced. Given that the electoral law governing the EU elections—having merely established some basic common principles, such as proportional representation—is European only in name, some voices might never be heard in the new European Parliament. To cite just one example, the minimum number of signatures required for individual candidates to appear on the ballot ranges from 35,000 in Italy to 5,000 in Belgium, to say nothing of residence requirements. If emerging transnational movements decide to have candidates run in countries where they are not citizens, these aspiring candidates would face a further layer of eligibility requirements. (Luxembourg, for instance, requires ten years of residence for non-nationals to run.) Moreover, if they succeed in running, they would still have to reach—at least in some member states—the 5-percent minimum vote threshold that the European Council is currently discussing in connection with a new EU electoral law.

To overcome these high barriers to entry, some of these new movements may be drawn to join hands with traditional parties or with each other. Thus, Macron’s Grande Marche pour l’Europe (Great March for Europe), the master plan for 2019 the French president put forward to revitalize Europe, would require him to forge alliances with like-minded parties from other countries to overcome the current dominance of the EPP and the S&D and to challenge ALDE. The relationship between Macron’s Great March for Europe and ALDE remains unclear. Yet in the absence of a rapid deployment by the French president, it will be the latter political group that will eventually take advantage of its well-established, pro-EU track record. Varoufakis’s European Spring could exercise a power of attraction similar to that of Macron’s platform. This pan-European movement is pursuing a democratic, ecological, egalitarian Europe, and it might also draw some pro-EU and progressive movements across Europe.
THE PROSPECT OF GREATER POLARIZATION TO COME

As a result, all these political forces—whether they are new or pre-existing entities, and whether they are acting along transnational or national lines—are set to position themselves in a far more polarized European political debate in the run-up to the European Parliament elections. Even as the EU elections may start to matter to more citizens, they are poised to become a battlefield for “a European civil war,” as Macron recently put it. According to this prevailing narrative, such a war is currently being fought between the supporters of deeper EU integration and liberal values, on the one hand, and those who intend to pursue an EU of independent, illiberal nations, on the other.

In other words, due to the fluidity ushered in by Europe’s new transnational movements, the 2019 elections may be deeply polarizing. Both mainstream and new parties will need to seek alliances, and both groups will be pushed to do so on the basis of a dichotomy pitting pro-EU elements against radical alternatives. While this will likely engender citizen interest and increase electoral turnout, this engagement will not center on the subtle, nuanced debates about reforming the union that are so needed. There is, therefore, a real risk that this unprecedented, embryonic pan-European political debate will not be about what kind of Europe is wanted, but whether the EU should exist at all.

Regardless of the outcome, the manifestation of transnational movements appears to be one of the major novelties ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections. Their mere presence may eventually nudge all political parties to compete for ideas, votes, and seats on a pan-EU scale. As such, their continuation must be encouraged. Transnational parties are the fertilizer for a truly European polity.

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Countless news reports and analytical commentaries suggest that Europe is experiencing a rise of illiberal democracy. According to them, populist parties are espousing a highly majoritarian form of democracy, while chipping away at liberal checks and balances. However, in countries like Hungary and Poland, governments are not really forging an illiberal or hyper-majoritarian democracy so much as undermining democracy altogether. If the opposition was to win a future election, the incumbent ruling parties would undoubtedly leverage their control of state institutions to work against the majority will. Their so-called majoritarianism is a temporary illusion.

The Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has drastically altered the country’s constitutional framework since the party’s electoral victory in 2010. Among other measures, it has changed Hungary’s constitution six times; replaced many judges with its own appointees; taken control of the state media; enacted repressive NGO laws; and enshrined policies in constitutional law, which makes it difficult to reverse them even if the government changes.

Similarly, Poland’s ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has—over a period of just two years—adopted thirteen laws that completely change the structure of the justice system. The European Commission has noted that these laws “put at serious risk the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers in Poland.” The party’s current leader and former prime minister, Jarosław Kaczyński, claims that these measures address what he calls “legal impossibilism”—the belief that governments have little margin of manoeuvre in making policy due to legal constraints. Therefore, courts need to be brought under control of the government and parliament.

The Hungarian and Polish governments insist that their reforms adhere to democratic standards. Orbán asserted in his 2014 speech that “a democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy.” This line of thinking is attractive in offering basic oppositions—“democracy” puts a premium on executing the majority will through a powerful,
unhindered executive branch of government and “liberalism” puts a premium on checking the power of the executive through, for example, judicial protections enacted by independent courts.

Many analysts have adopted a similar conceptual frame. In the words of the researcher and writer Jacques Rupnik, “Illiberal democracy . . . seeks a strong executive power and sees checks and balances, constitutional courts, and other presumably politically neutral institutions as imposing undue constraints on the sovereignty of the people. ‘Legal impossibilism,’ to use Kaczynski’s phrase, is the enemy.” In a similar vein, Ivan Krastev, a well-known commentator on European affairs, states that “the new populists are not fascists. . . . But they are indifferent to liberal checks and balances and do not see the need for constitutional constraints on the power of the majority.”

But the idea of separating checks and balances (liberalism) and majority will (democracy) as two completely distinct concepts creates a false choice that actually undermines democracy. The discussion distracts from what is at its core an undemocratic trend and weakens the resolve to resist anti-democratic parties; after all, it is difficult for democrats to take issue with democratic parties. The debate over illiberal democracy presents what is essentially an autocratic power grab as a genuinely ideological struggle. The concept of democracy is certainly not static, but there are red lines that, if overstepped, move a country toward authoritarianism.

VOTES VS. RIGHTS

Yascha Mounk’s widely discussed book, The People vs. Democracy, is structured around a separation of democracy and liberalism. The book has gained significant traction with the claim that states today tend to be characterized either by illiberal democracy or nondemocratic liberalism. According to Mounk, even core political rights like freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of the media are expressions of liberalism, not of democracy. He claims that democracy is possible without them and that it is enough to have “a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy” through free and fair elections.

But the problem is this: How can elections be free and fair without free speech, a free media, and freedom of association? If the media do not allow a debate and voters and candidates cannot express themselves freely and organize into parties, how can popular views be translated into public policy? Communists and Nazis have held elections without guaranteeing these rights, but they are characterized as dictators, not illiberals.

In Hungary, the OSCE has stressed that elections are far from being entirely free and fair. Its mission to the 2018 parliamentary elections pointed out that, among other shortcomings, there was a “pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, undermining contestants’ ability to compete on an equal basis” and the public broadcaster’s “newscasts and editorial outputs clearly favoured the ruling coalition, at odds with international standards.” If these subtler shortcomings are
considered democracy concerns, then it does not make sense to consider more obvious violations, such as imprisoning journalists or opposition candidates, as matters pertaining to liberalism only.

**LIBERALISM VS. MAJORITARIANISM**

Other authors, such as Cas Mudde and Takis Pappas, take more nuanced positions. They do not believe that democracy, even in its illiberal variant, can dispense with core political rights. For them, a democracy is liberal when it has checks and balances, such as independent courts, and illiberal when it does not. Takis Pappas, a leading scholar on populism, says that illiberal parties are “inclined toward raw majoritarianism”—they participate “in competitive elections” and “offer allegiance to [a] representative pluralist democracy” but are “impatient with institutional legalities.”

It is possible to conceive of a raw majoritarian democracy with a governance system that translates a majority’s electoral preferences into policies with as little distortion as possible. Some democracies indeed give more margin of manoeuvre to the elected executive than others, such as the United Kingdom. But such executives do not act in purely majoritarian ways. They commonly enact policies that are unpopular or that they did not announce before the elections.

It is also possible to imagine a raw majoritarian democracy that employs a simple electoral system to represent majorities without distortion. For example, the Netherlands uses a proportional system, in which the whole country is one electoral district. A party that gains 15 percent of the votes will get 15 percent of the seats. But on this criterion, Hungary and Poland are certainly not raw majoritarian democracies. Hungary’s electoral system produces the least proportional results in the entire EU. In the last elections, Fidesz won 49 percent of the votes but gained 67 percent of the seats in parliament. And Poland’s system produces the third least proportional results. In the last elections, PiS won 38 percent of the votes but gained 51 percent of the seats in parliament.

Referenda could also conceivably be a main feature of raw majoritarianism. Indeed, Swiss referenda have resulted in hard clashes between the majority will and human rights guarantees—as exhibited by the 2009 vote to ban the construction of new mosque minarets (towers) in the country. It is noteworthy, however, that the Swiss system contains one of the most complex systems of checks and balances as a counterweight.

In theory, the above features could be combined to create a system that has no constitutional court, a straightforward proportional electoral system, and a strong, centralized executive that holds regular referenda. Such a system would not obviously violate the assumptions of a “minimalistic” democracy if it held regular free and fair elections (or a “competitive struggle for the people’s vote” in the words of Joseph Schumpeter). However, such a concentration of power is likely to corrupt the government, creating many temptations to undermine the idea of democratic elections in order to rule
perpetually. Such a system cannot uphold a democracy for long, if it is not underpinned by legally enshrined rights and checks and balances.

**MAJORITARIANISM VS. AUTHORITARIANISM**

Even if raw majoritarianism is theoretically possible, this is not where Hungary and Poland are headed. The developments in these countries rather indicate a slide toward authoritarianism under the guise of majoritarianism. Contrary to what is widely claimed, Fidesz and PiS are not removing checks and balances to create political systems in which the majority will is represented with few constraints. They are pretending to apply a majoritarian logic while they colonize the institutions of checks and balances and try to control them as much as possible. For now, it means the majority can rule without constraints. Tomorrow, it means they can thwart another majority by using their control of the judiciary and state media.

In Poland, the previous parliament made an illegal attempt to appoint two new judges to the country’s constitutional court quickly before losing the 2015 elections. The constitutional court annulled that decision. The rule of law worked. But after the elections, PiS replaced not only these two judges but three properly appointed ones as well. By June 2017, the ruling party had managed to pack the court of fifteen judges with nine of its appointees. Under a normal process, it could have only appointed a majority of the judges toward the end of its term in 2019. It wanted complete control of the court instantly and ignored the court’s judgements in order to install its own judges. PiS won a peaceful election in a functioning democracy, but it talks and acts like a revolutionary movement that needs to take over all institutions.

Neither Poland nor Hungary have started allowing more referenda. Indeed, the supposedly majoritarian Fidesz did not even put its 2011 constitution to a public vote. The Fidesz government has only held one referendum since being elected (on the EU’s asylum quotas), and it posed a question that was more about building political momentum than giving people a voice.

The strongest indicator that Fidesz is not actually promoting raw majoritarianism is the constitutional framework it has created. Many matters that parliaments usually decide with a simple majority are regulated in cardinal laws that require a two-thirds majority to be adopted or changed. The Council of Europe’s Venice Commission noted,

“The more policy issues are transferred beyond the powers of simple majority, the less significance will future elections have and the more possibilities does a two-third majority have of cementing its political preferences and the country’s legal order. Elections . . . would become meaningless if the legislator would not be able to change important aspects of the legislation that should have been enacted with a simple majority. When not only the
fundamental principles but also very specific and ‘detailed rules’ on certain issues will be enacted in cardinal laws, the principle of democracy itself is at risk.”

In other words, Fidesz is creating real “legal impossibilism” for any future government that may have another program. Rhetorically, Orbán professes to be a robust democrat who fights in the market place of public opinion. In reality, he has barricaded himself behind a dense network of unchangeable laws, pliant courts, and tax-funded public media channels that are spreading propaganda instead of pluralistic information.

The supposed majoritarian agenda of Fidesz or PiS is a temporary optical illusion that will end the moment that another party gains power with a different majority. PiS and Fidesz would use the institutions that they control to thwart the new government’s agenda. If accepting the frame of “illiberal democracy,” one should anticipate that these parties would become staunch liberals overnight by insisting on the checks and balances that they erected.

The real story here is the damaging of democracy, not the building of some sort of illiberal majoritarian system. Various democracy indexes all indicate that Hungary and Poland are sliding downward in core areas of democracy, such as electoral integrity and political participation. Further, the European body most intimately involved in watching over the legal arrangements that should safeguard democracy—the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission—has consistently warned of serious risks to democracy in Hungary and Poland and to a lesser degree in Romania. It has not issued such serious warnings about other EU member states.

IMPLICATIONS OF A WRONG NARRATIVE
How political arrangements are defined and characterized matters for the general debate and for policy. As the political scientist and leading populism scholar Jan-Werner Müller observed, “The designation ‘democracy’ still remains the most coveted political prize around the world.” If experts describe governments that concentrate power as illiberal or majoritarian, they risk transforming a debate that should be about the damage to democracy into a debate about party programs.

The dominance of the illiberalism discussion in relation to Hungary and Poland has been problematic for actual policymaking. In response to the developments in Poland, the EU has only insisted that the ruling government uphold the rule of law, without mentioning the other core values under Article 2 of the EU treaty, namely democracy and human rights. There is a logic in insisting on the rule of law. As long as independent courts function, one can assume that they will stop governments’ attempts to dismantle the democratic state. It is no coincidence that the PiS government, once sworn in, instantly started attacking the country’s constitutional court. But by prioritizing only one of the three core values of Article 2, the EU implied that the rule of law is the primary line of defense when democracy and human rights are attacked. This is a miscalculation.
because, especially in Hungary, the rule of law battle has already been lost. Fidesz has appointed almost all of Hungary’s constitutional judges, and its overtaking of democratic institutions has gone unchecked.

The problem with focusing only on the rule of law will become more apparent if the opposition wins a future election. The European Commission would have trouble dealing with the inevitable situation: one in which a democratically elected government faces a legal system that is completely stacked in favor of the previous government. Suddenly, Fidesz would talk about defending the rule of law, while the EU would be rightly pressed into defending the new government’s ability to effectively determine policy. The EU would then need a democracy instrument, rather than a rule of law instrument, to address the issue. The Venice Commission consistently, and rightly, points out that the policies in Hungary and Poland endanger all three values at once: democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The EU should follow this holistic approach.

Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law represent a triangle that is not identical in all democracies. Some emphasize one side more than the other. Indeed, in all democracies, the rules of the game are constantly assessed and often changed. Sometimes they become less democratic, and sometimes they enhance democracy. However, the ebb and flow of democratic rules cannot be equated with the attempt of one party to appropriate the state apparatus. The red lines of democracy are manifestly overstepped when one party takes over all institutions and merges party and state interests.

The misuse of terms has a real impact: defending democracy is becoming more difficult because in public discourse being liberal is associated with liberal social or economic policies and less with a form of government. Many people believe in democracy, but some do not like liberal social or economic policies, and they do not have to. Focusing on supposed illiberalism rather than the attack on democracy means losing these constituencies.

Clearly, democracy faces many challenges across all EU member states, not just in Poland or Hungary. But it is important to maintain clarity where democracy’s red lines are crossed—and, in that regard, these two countries for the moment stand apart.

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**NOTES**

1 Consequently, scholars like Yascha Mounk believe there is a dilemma; see Yascha Mounk, “The Undemocratic Dilemma,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 98.

One of several examples would be the Venice Commission’s conclusion on Hungary’s fourth constitutional amendment of 2013: “The limitation of the role of the Constitutional Court leads to a risk that it may negatively affect all three pillars of the Council of Europe: the separation of powers as an essential tenet of democracy, the protection of human rights and the rule of law,” 32, http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2013)012-e.
How Citizens Can Hack EU Democracy

STEPHEN BOUCHER

Buried in the millions of webpages informing citizens of the European Commission’s activities is a single page entitled “Have your say on EU policies.” Citizens need clear paths to engagement if they are to have a real say and meaningful influence over the future of the European Union—and yet this particular path, however useful for democratic accountability, is so deeply hidden that it may as well be a proverbial needle in a haystack. Whatever the analytical debates over Europe’s democratic deficiencies, citizens certainly feel that EU decisionmaking is remote and often impenetrable. Unless some tangible and high-profile initiatives are forthcoming, the EU will remain more remote and complex for the average citizen than public authorities closer to home. Busy citizens will not engage with broader European politics unless they feel that their voices have a good chance of being heard.

The endless aim to “communicate Europe better” is one facet of this predicament. Despite the EU’s focus on glitzy communication gimmicks, dedicated television channels, enticing Facebook pages, and the promise of Citizens’ Dialogues in which EU commissioners meet with citizens around the member states, many Europeans frequently feel that they have little to no influence over this particular level of international governance. Nonetheless, the EU does offer democratic tools for citizen influence and democratic accountability. EU citizens today may try to initiate a European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI), petition the European Parliament, take part in consultations on draft legislation, attend the aforementioned Citizens’ Dialogues, lodge formal complaints, or sign up to the transparency register to lobby EU institutions in a professional capacity. These mechanisms are all meaningful and welcome, but they have not been able to significantly improve EU democracy. Even though the ECI has generated many initiatives, none has led the commission to bring forward new legislation. Petitions to the European Parliament and formal complaints may help redress specific grievances, but these tools are not about proactive democratic participation. Similarly, legislative consultations are used predominantly by specialist lobby groups, and Citizens’ Dialogues are dialogues only in name.

This is not to demean these necessary and useful mechanisms in and of themselves. In fact, many EU member states would be well advised to implement similar innovations. However, they tend to attract people who are already engaged in EU matters, and they are unlikely to motivate the wider
public to get excited about EU developments. The ECI in particular was watered down because EU
governments and institutions feared citizens’ intrusion into the decisionmaking process. Although
the ECI is being improved to increase its user-friendliness and potential to have real impact,
revisions of its format and process will take time and are unlikely to produce dramatic change.

Meanwhile, most of the focus in democracy-related debates has been on the Spitzenkandidat (top
candidate) process for nominating the president of the European Commission and the possibility of
transnational lists for the European Parliament elections. Since 2014, the pan-European party that
wins the most seats in the European Parliament elections has the right to put forward its selected
candidate as the commission’s president. This process replaced the less-democratic selection method
of informal consensus among the European Council, but the selection of the Spitzenkandidaten still
operates primarily within party circles, without citizen involvement. The push for transnational lists,
meanwhile, seeks to broaden citizen participation in the EU by enabling Europeans to cast votes for
parliamentary representatives of Europe-wide constituencies instead of purely national ones.
Although these options may have a solid foundation in broader democratic thinking, governments
and the European Parliament currently approach them on the basis of self-serving political
calculations. Moreover, even though they may make some citizens slightly more interested in the
European Parliament elections, they will not change citizens’ relationship with the EU in between
elections.

HOW TO HACK THE EU
To connect citizens with the EU’s decisionmaking center, European politicians will need to provide
ways to effectively hack this complex system. These democratic hacks need to be visible and
accessible, easily and immediately implementable, viable without requiring changes to existing
European treaties, and capable of having a traceable impact on policy. Many such devices could be
imagined around these principles. Here are three ideas to spur debate.

HACK 1: A CITIZENS’ COMMITTEE FOR THE FUTURE IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
The European Parliament has proposed that twenty-seven of the seventy-three seats left vacant by
Brexit should be redistributed among the remaining member states. According to one concept, the
other forty-six unassigned seats could be used to recruit a contingent of ordinary citizens from
around the EU to examine legislation from the long-term perspective of future generations. Such a
“Committee for the Future” could be given the power to draft a response to a yearly report on the
future produced by the president of the European Parliament, initiate debates on important political
themes of their own choosing, make submissions on future-related issues to other committees, and
be consulted by members of the European Parliament (MEPs) on longer-term matters.

MEPs could decide to use these forty-six vacant seats to invite this Committee for the Future to sit,
at least on a trial basis, with yearly evaluations. This arrangement would have real benefits for EU
politics, acting as an antidote to the union’s existential angst and helping the EU think systemically and for the longer term on matters such as artificial intelligence, biodiversity, climate concerns, demography, mobility, and energy.

**HACK 2: AN EU PARTICIPATORY BUDGET**
In 1989, the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, decided to cede control of a share of its annual budget for citizens to decide upon. This practice, known as participatory budgets, has since spread globally. As of 2015, over 1,500 instances of participatory budgets have been implemented across five continents. These processes generally have had a positive impact, with people proving that they take public spending matters seriously.

To replicate these experiences at the European level, the complex realities of EU budgeting would require specific features. First, participative spending probably would need to be both local and related to wider EU priorities in order to ensure that citizens see its relevance and its wider European implications. Second, significant resources would need to be allocated to help citizens come up with and promote projects. For instance, the city of Paris has ensured that each suggested project that meets the eligibility requirements has a desk officer within its administration to liaise with the idea’s promoters. It dedicates significant resources to reach out to citizens, in particular in the poorer neighborhoods of Paris, both online and face-to-face. Similar efforts would need to be deployed across Europe. And third, in order to overcome institutional complexities, the European Parliament would need to work with citizens as part of its role in negotiating the budget with the European Council.

**HACK 3: AN EU COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE FORUM**
Many ideas have been put forward to address popular dissatisfaction with representative democracy by developing new forums such as policy labs, consensus conferences, and stakeholder facilitation groups. Yet many citizens still feel disenchanted with representative democracy, including at the EU level, where they also strongly distrust lobby groups. They need to be involved more purposefully in policy discussions.

A yearly Deliberative Poll could be run on a matter of significance, ahead of key EU summits and possibly around the president of the commission’s State of the Union address. On the model of the first EU-wide Deliberative Poll, *Tomorrow’s Europe*, this event would bring together in Brussels a random sample of citizens from all twenty-seven EU member states, and enable them to discuss various social, economic, and foreign policy issues affecting the EU and its member states. This concept would have a number of advantages in terms of promoting democratic participation in EU affairs. By inviting a truly representative sample of citizens to deliberate on complex EU matters over a weekend, within the premises of the European Parliament, the European Parliament would be the focus of a high-profile event that would draw media attention. This would be especially beneficial if—unlike Tomorrow’s Europe—the poll was not held at arm’s length by EU policymakers, but
with high-level national officials attending to witness good-quality deliberation remolding citizens’ views.

Such a format would not be heavily prescriptive, yet it would be helpful to policymakers. It would not generate a set of recommendations that politicians feel they have to adopt or reject. Rather, it would provide a snapshot of what people really think is achievable with collaborative effort. This is qualitatively different from a simple survey. By comparing the opinions expressed in a poll taken at the outset of the Deliberative Poll and a second poll at the end of the event, policymakers could gain a sense of how citizens’ preferences may change when they have had a chance to come together, compare views, and access the full range of opinions on a given matter.

The commission, the parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, and member states should pool interpretation, logistical, and some financial resources to organize such a yearly moment of collective intelligence. Tomorrow’s Europe and subsequent Deliberative Polls show that this format can be done well and put to good use.

CONCLUSION

These ideas’ time has come. The Finnish Parliament has long had a Committee for the Future, and the Scottish Parliament has a Futures Forum to counter politics’ short-termism or “NIMTOO—ism”—Not in My Term of Office. French President Emmanuel Macron has talked of setting up an Assembly of the Future, while Sweden briefly had a minister for the future.

The notion of more active citizen involvement in public affairs is also widely encouraged. Countless surveys highlight how greater citizen participation is a popular proposed remedy to insufficiently representative democracies.² Although it undoubtedly would be complex to set up an EU participatory budget, there is no reason why it should not have similarly positive impacts as at the local level. Going beyond mere talk of involving random samples of citizens in policymaking, Ireland’s Citizens Assembly and other successful experiments, notably in Canada and Australia, have shown that action along these lines is possible. When conducted well—in particular by respecting key deliberation principles³—such undertakings improve policies, facilitate decisionmaking, and increase public support for democratic institutions.⁴

The proposed hacks raise many important technical and political issues. Imagine, however, that all three, or even just one or two of them, were to be implemented: suddenly, citizens would perceive differently the say that they have in European policy. Citizens could watch others like them defending their thoughts for the future—rather than just watching MEPs debate on television—and entertain the possibility that they might be able to do so themselves next year. People would know that their neighborhood is part of a network seeking funds to refurbish abandoned buildings to house refugees, rather than simply pass by a plaque stating that the EU has funded a local
regeneration project without ever having consulted the existing local population. European citizens could be asked what future they want in a given policy area, as opposed to answering a generic Eurobarometer survey. Through moments like these, and many others, people’s interest in the EU could then be regenerated, and the long but necessary process of democratic change could begin.

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NOTES
2 See, for instance, the latest World Values Survey from the Institute for Comparative Survey Research (Vienna) and the Institute for Future Studies (Stockholm).
3 Set out, for instance, by James S. Fishkin, When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation (Oxford University Press, 2009), 160: “Information: The extent to which participants are given access to reasonably accurate information that they believe to be relevant to the issue . . . Substantive balance: The extent to which arguments offered by one side or from one perspective are answered by considerations offered by those who hold other perspectives . . . Diversity: The extent to which the major positions in the public are represented by participants in the discussion . . . Conscientiousness: The extent to which participants sincerely weigh the merits of the arguments . . . Equal consideration: The extent to which arguments offered by all participants are considered on the merits regardless of which participants offer them.”
En Marche: From a Movement to a Government
CLAUDIA CHWALISZ

In recent years, Europe has seen the rise of ideologically diverse political forces that brand themselves as movements more than as parties. In Italy, the Five Star Movement finished first in the March 2018 parliamentary elections. Podemos has established itself as one of Spain’s main political actors. Sebastian Kurz won Austria’s October 2017 elections and became chancellor. Even the UK’s Labor Party now stresses its movement-like qualities. Most successful has been French President Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche, which swept to power only a year after its launch. But Macron’s creation, since renamed La République En Marche (LREM), is a new type of party-movement hybrid; it was founded without the institutional support of a previous party or protest movement, or the appeal of a well-known public figure.

LREM does not fit the trend of traditional political parties rebranding themselves as movements or being reshaped as broader political movements. Jeremy Corbyn’s takeover of the Labor Party and Kurz’s co-optation of the Austrian People’s Party are notable examples. In these cases, change began before the new leaders took over and started taking advantage of their respective parties’ long-standing structures and solid funding arrangements to rebrand them as movements and radically alter their political agendas.

Yet neither is LREM the product of bottom-up activism emerging organically out of protest movements. While sometimes likened to Podemos and the Five Star Movement due to its movement qualities, anti-establishment rhetoric, and “neither left nor right” positioning, LREM has different characteristics. Both Podemos and the Five Star Movement grew out of grassroots anti-establishment mobilization, but then government minister Emmanuel Macron launched LREM in 2016 specifically to help him run for France’s presidency.

Domestically, Macron’s LREM has some similarities to Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s party, La France Insoumise (LFI), with its mobilization tactics and its informal organizational structure led by a strong leader. The key difference is that at the time of LFI’s launch, also in 2016, Mélenchon was already a well-known public figure—a veteran of French politics since the mid-1980s who could draw on the institutional support of various far-left political parties, including the Left Party that he
had previously founded. By contrast, Macron was the first candidate in a French presidential election to be genuinely competitive without a party and without a long-established public profile. It is easy to forget that when he announced his candidacy, very few people other than political wonks knew who he was.

Given its distinctiveness, it is important to ask what LREM’s rise means for democracy in Europe. Is the combination of Macron’s strong leadership and grassroots consultation sustainable? Could this model work in other countries, or is it a product of particular French characteristics?

FORGING A NEW PATH

Rather than launching his party in a top-down fashion by laying out a set of predetermined policy propositions, Macron decided that LREM should start with a large-scale conversation with citizens. This exercise, labeled the Grande Marche, involved over 5,000 volunteers conducting in-depth interviews of around forty-five minutes with 25,000 people across the country about how they saw France; what problems they, their families, and their communities faced; and what kind of future they would like to see. All this information was subsequently filtered back to circles of policy experts within the movement.

No other leader in Europe has carried out a similar public exercise before founding a party or movement. Nearly all parties conduct opinion polling or hold focus groups to get a sense of what policy positions are popular with the public, but this is usually done on a smaller scale and behind closed doors. The LREM process of carrying out interviews and publishing the resulting analysis in a 176-page diagnosis of France’s problems was unprecedented. The language Macron used while campaigning and the issues on which he chose to focus truly resonated with many voters; these efforts were backed by a thorough understanding of why people were happy or unhappy and of what change they wanted to see. Arguably Macron was also successful because people felt they were given a genuine voice in the new political project.

From the start, LREM was open to anyone interested, regardless of party affiliation. It represents a shift from a membership model to a follower model—a change some other movements and parties in Europe are also introducing. Official adherents of LREM submit their contact information and agree to adhere to its charter, but they do not have to make monetary donations, unlike the members of most parties. According to the latest figures (from October 2017), almost 400,000 people are now official adherents, a number far higher than the membership of any other French party. As well as being a low-cost way of garnering data about its supporters and potential target voters, LREM’s open online follower model also enabled the movement to harvest small-scale donations to fund Macron’s presidential campaign. Besides taking out a loan of around 8 million euros (about $9.8 million), his campaign raised 6.5 million euros (about $8.0 million) through such donations, which averaged 250 euros (approximately $300). While Macron did not invent this approach—the U.S.
Democratic Party raised a great deal of money through small donations during former president Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign, for instance—he used it successfully on a scale never before seen in Europe.

Independence from the bureaucracy and internal politics of established party structures and from the strings attached to traditional funding streams meant that LREM could make quicker, more fluid campaign decisions. As Bruno Bonnell, LREM’s coordinator in the city of Lyon, said in a media interview, “We’re much more guerilla style. We’re fluid, we’re about fast action and a swift decision-making process. We’re surprisingly organised for what is essentially a huge . . . [upswell] of emotion.” Rather than having his campaign run by local party offices, Macron’s presidential battle was fought by thousands of unpaid volunteers like Bonnell, who operated largely from their homes, cars, apartments, and communal spaces, such as bars, restaurants, and community centers.

Macron’s approach meant that his central claim of wanting to renew the political class could be taken seriously. Part of the appeal of LREM in the presidential and subsequent parliamentary elections was that its anti-establishment rhetoric was supported by action. Half of its candidates were female and half of them came from civil society rather than the political world. Three-quarters of the National Assembly now consists of members who had never before been elected, resulting in a younger, more diverse makeup than ever before. Critics, however, belittle this development as an elitist renewal, as most of those newly elected under the LREM banner are highly educated, with a greater proportion coming from business and managerial backgrounds.

REPLICATING AND SUSTAINING THE MOVEMENT

The unexpected and unprecedented success of Macron and LREM has led to questions about whether this approach might be replicated in other European countries and how sustainable this model is in France. Are there lessons for political entrepreneurs about how to found a new party movement? Can initial public enthusiasm be maintained until France’s next election cycle in 2022 and beyond?

It is hard to imagine where in Europe the approach Macron adopted could work quite as well as it did in France. The country’s semi-presidential system, with its unique two-round voting arrangement, means that the personality and profile of presidential candidates are incredibly important. As France essentially elects a powerful executive, it is possible to build a movement around one leader in a way that would be more difficult in other European countries. The same dynamic plays an outsized role in determining the result of the parliamentary elections, which normally take place a few weeks after the presidential vote. However, that is not to say that a similar electoral feat could not happen elsewhere. At least part of the LREM experience might resonate elsewhere.
What is certainly replicable in other countries is the genuine listening exercise that Macron and his supporters organized. Given that many voters today are less likely to think along traditional party lines than in the past, LREM was able to formulate a fresh, interesting electoral agenda and policy platform with some elements from both the left and the right, and this permitted Macron to tread on the traditional ground of other parties. There is nothing uniquely French about conducting in-depth consultations that result in original, convincing policy platforms with popular appeal—such an approach should be readily transferable.

Furthermore, LREM did not just take a few ideas from other parties, but rather transcended party divisions to create a new voter coalition in a previously unoccupied political space—one for voters who are pro-European, economically liberal, committed to social protection, and strongly opposed to the populist, far-right National Front. This was appealing because French voters are increasingly tired of stale party divisions. As voters in other European countries express the same sentiments, this kind of coalition that goes beyond distinctions between the left and the right might gain traction beyond France.

With regard to sustainability, current polling for the 2019 European Parliament election shows LREM well ahead of the other parties. This suggests the movement may well maintain its momentum in the short term, while the French give Macron a chance to reform the country as promised, despite there being no precedent in France or elsewhere on which to base this judgment. Austria’s Sebastian Kurz has been in power for an even shorter time than Macron, while Italy’s Five Star Movement is only starting to contemplate how to form a national government. Winning on a platform that emphasizes doing politics differently is possible when one is new to the scene, but maintaining such an approach tends to be hard once one has won power. Things could just as easily peter out for Macron and his party-movement in the longer term.

Since France’s presidential and parliamentary elections, LREM has retained its adherents’ membership model but is developing a more traditional party structure in terms of its bureaucracy and local offices. This is a natural development, as local supporters come together in more organized ways now that LREM receives significant funds from the state due to its parliamentary representation.

The impact of this change on LREM’s future electoral prospects is uncertain. It may lead to a similar problem faced by other parties: if individuals with political ambitions join local groups to work their way up in the party and to get chosen to stand for elections, then the more open selection process that ensured LREM had a good gender balance and diversity of candidates in 2017 might not be welcomed in the future by those who feel they should have a greater chance of selection based on their commitment of time and effort to the party. There was a small wave of resignations over the unopposed election of Christophe Castaner as the new head of LREM last November; adherents wanted more of a say. This was a sign of LREM becoming a less open, bottom-up movement.
At the same time, however, LREM remains a fluid, volunteer-driven movement that has kept some aspects of its campaign mode. Local groups can be created and can run themselves easily. Volunteers will form a large segment of the human capital behind another Grande Marche—a follow-up mass LREM-facilitated consultation starting in April 2018 to develop a manifesto for the 2019 European Parliament elections; the party is seeking to recreate the success of its presidential campaign. The circles of experts that crowdsourced ideas for the LREM manifesto seem to be active still, with a longer-term view toward competing in future elections and maintaining an ongoing conversation with the wider public. Whether these groups have any tangible impact on policy remains to be seen, however.

These challenges of sustainability will be highly relevant to other movements and politicians across Europe who are looking closely at LREM. These issues suggest that high-level political success needs to be complemented by constant efforts to replenish a movement’s grassroots support and participatory processes.

**RECONCILING STRONG LEADERSHIP WITH MOVEMENT-STYLE POLITICS**

The tension between Macron’s style of governing from above (like the Roman god Jupiter) and his party’s emphasis on grassroots consultation has received increasing attention. Can the two be reconciled? Is the consultative method a way for Macron to achieve bottom-up legitimacy for his government’s actions as well as to develop a campaign program? Or will citizens, galvanized by the opportunity to participate, be disappointed by the time France’s 2022 elections occur?

There seems to be a calculated sequence of events in the evolution of LREM. After the bottom-up consultation and campaign, which relied on public participation and the energy of the movement, Macron has switched to a more traditionally French, top-down style since gaining power. Surely, this is partly because France has one of the most centralized, top-down systems of government and one of the most powerful presidencies around. This reality sets up a tension between traditional French political culture and the movement’s bottom-up mentality. However, such a governing style is arguably required to achieve strong progress in several areas, notably re-energizing the economy. But this might not necessarily remain the case throughout Marcon’s term; in a second phase of his presidency, there may be more innovation in governance that would allow LREM to prepare for the next elections.

The tension between campaigning and governing styles ultimately reflects the conflicting desires of the electorate, which simultaneously wants fast policy results and deep changes in governing style. It seems that Macron’s approach aims to balance these goals, as he moves between consulting, campaigning, implementing, and renewal.
So far, it appears to be working. Early evidence suggests that Macron may be reshaping French political orientations, particularly the balance between the center and center-left. In one November 2017 poll, more respondents described themselves as centrists (38 percent) than in March 2017 (34 percent). However, the biggest shift is among those who describe themselves as left-wing (15 percent, down from 23 percent), while those who identify with the right remained stable (36 percent). In another poll from last November, 49 percent of respondents said that Macron was overcoming political cleavages, and 53 percent said that he is doing politics differently. Notably, two-thirds of those who voted for him in the second round of the presidential election agreed that he has been overcoming existing divisions and approaching politics differently, and this seems to indicate that most of his voters think he is keeping his promises so far.

The key question is whether this level of political realignment and voter satisfaction can last if the two main parties of the center-left and center-right adapt in the aftermath of their 2017 defeats. The biggest threat to LREM is on the right, where the new leader of the Republicans, Laurent Wauquiez, is strategically attempting to weaken the National Front by presenting a more acceptable face for rightist policies. If this works, Macron will face a stronger opposition from the conservatives. On the center-left, the Socialist Party is dealing with an existential crisis and looks unlikely to pose a serious challenge, at least in the near future. At the moment, Mélenchon and his LFI occupy the far-left opposition space using a movement approach similar to Macron’s.

In sum, the sustainability of Macron’s centrist political realignment will depend on whether he and his LREM can keep moving its contrasting styles. His declared drive to restructure the French ideological landscape is still in its preliminary stages, though at some point this will end. By the time of the next elections, opponents will be targeting Macron more explicitly. The challenge of definitively containing the National Front extends well beyond the LREM’s particular features, and expectations will need to be kept realistic. LREM will be less of a movement in all senses of the word, even if it keeps calling itself one. It will inevitably become more of a structured party with a more rigid organization. The 2022 elections will be the true test of Macron’s approach. Other aspiring party-movements across Europe will need to carefully assess both the positive and negative lessons from the LREM experience in the intervening years.

Recession and Renewal in European Democracy

RICHARD YOUNGS AND SARAH MANNEY

There is widespread agreement that liberal democracy is in fragile health in its European heartlands. Freedom House’s recently published 2018 report, “Democracy in Crisis,” suggests liberal democratic values are now at serious risk in Europe. Some survey data suggest that Europeans seem increasingly ambivalent about basic democratic values, leading some scholars even to fear an incipient “democratic deconsolidation.” Clearly illiberal trends are afoot in countries like Hungary and Poland, while political analysts have expressed concerns over the rise of nativist-populist parties in numerous European countries.

Yet disaggregated data from recent surveys reveal a more mixed picture of democracy’s health. Although many democracy-related indicators are heading in a negative direction, others, especially those relating to citizens’ general political participation, show a more positive trajectory. Crucially, the negative and positive trends are deeply entwined, often feeding each other. Rather than undifferentiated gloom, a more accurate picture of Europe’s current democratic situation is one of interactive elements of crisis and renewal.

INSIDIOUS BACKSLIDING

Several recent surveys reveal declines in measures of democratic quality. Most of these falls are not dramatic, but they have undone some of the democratic gains made by European countries since the end of the Cold War. For instance, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database, an international collaborative dataset, shows that in the past decade a modest degree of backsliding has occurred in five component areas of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian (see figure 1).
Another frequently cited measure of democratic performance, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index, shows a decline in the European Union’s (EU) average democracy score from 8.13 to 7.89 between 2006 and 2016—an overall descent from “full” to “flawed” democracy (see figure 2). The EIU’s recently published 2017 index confirms the downward trend: Western European democracy scores declined very slightly in 2017; while seven European countries’ scores improved, no flawed democracy in the region became a full democracy; France, Malta, and Spain
suffered relatively significant declines; and Eastern European scores once again worsened to their lowest-ever levels.

On a more granular level, the worst-hit areas have been civil liberties and rule of law. Freedom of expression and freedom of association scores from V-Dem have fallen by about 3 percent since their 2012 peaks. Between 2015 and 2016, thirteen of twenty-eight EU states registered declines in civil liberties scores; only Germany improved on this marker.\(^4\)
Comparing indices is illustrative in this sense. The Center for Systemic Peace’s Polity IV scores, which focus on patterns of institutional authority, record a virtual plateau among EU member states over the past decade since 2006. In contrast, Freedom House scores for political rights and civil liberties have worsened significantly in Europe during the past ten years; the graph here shows upward trending lines, with higher scores being worse for democracy (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Political Rights and Civil Liberties in Europe (2006–2016)**

![Graph showing political rights and civil liberties trends in Europe from 2006 to 2016](image)

**Note:** 1 indicates most free, while 7 indicates least free.

**Source:** Data for overall political rights and civil liberties scores from the years 2006–2016 have been drawn from “Freedom in the World,” Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

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This comparison suggests that much of the decline in overall European democracy scores may be accounted for by a pushback against civil liberties.
Some Eastern European countries have experienced a particularly acute erosion of democratic safeguards. The situations in Poland and Hungary are well known and widely covered, but these are not the only countries beset by illiberal trends. The European Commission’s 2016 Justice Scoreboard shows that in fourteen member states, less than half the population has confidence in the independence of their country’s judiciary. This low-confidence group is made up of Central and Eastern European states but also includes Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Media freedoms have narrowed dramatically in Poland but are also in a precarious state in many other parts of Europe, as shown by the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Sustainable Governance Indicators (see figure 4).

**Figure 4: Media Freedom in Poland and the Rest of Europe**

![Graph showing media freedom in Poland and the rest of Europe](image)


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As many governments narrow the democratic space, recent surveys confirm well-known trends related to citizens’ apparent ambivalence about standard democratic channels. Election turnout has been declining on average over the past twenty years, from a midpoint of approximately 70 percent in 1996 to just over 60 percent in 2016. The World Values Survey confirms a long-running decline in EU citizens’ trust of political parties. Yet other evidence suggests that many Europeans, especially young people, seem to be questioning the very essence of democratic values. Some analysts highlight World Values Survey data showing that in some European countries, fewer young people believe democracy to be “essential” than do older voters, and an increasing number of young people are critical of democracy as a way of organizing political power. An October 2016 YouGov poll found that around half the population across twelve EU states now subscribe to a set of illiberal principles that includes opposition to migration, dislike of human rights laws, and support for more nationalist identities.

Overall, in many places the situation is so deeply preoccupying because democracy appears to be menaced from above and from below. The top-down threat comes from governments that have been constricting liberal practices, and the bottom-up threat stems from the illiberal preferences that seem to have taken root among many citizens.

FORGING NEW PARTICIPATION

Many articles have homed in on these negative signals, and more figures point in a similar direction. Less attention has been given to the data that run counter to these trends and in some senses suggest a slightly more encouraging scenario for European democracy.

Governments’ illiberal and antidemocratic measures have often sparked public outcries. In Poland, thousands marched on the Supreme Court over the summer of 2017 to protest changes to the judiciary. Similarly, more than 4,000 Romanians took to the streets of Bucharest in late 2017 against the government’s efforts to curtail judicial independence. Over the past decade, according to Freedom House, the subindicator of political participation has improved across Europe (see figure 5). The EIU confirms this trend over the recent 2015–2016 period (see figure 6).
Figure 5: Changes in Rights and Freedoms Across Europe (Freedom House, 2006-2016)

Source: Data for subcategory indicators from the years 2006-2016 have been drawn from “Freedom in the World,” Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

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Importantly, evidence shows that this participation manifests in broader forms of civic engagement outside formal parliamentary and party channels. The V-Dem data confirm an improvement in the
intensity of civic activity and civil society bandwidth in Europe over the past two decades (see figure 7), even though election turnout has remained steady or declined slightly (see figure 8).

Figure 7: EU Average Environment for Civil Society Participation (1996–2016)

Note: Scores on a scale from 0 to 3 (total state control to full, open participation) have been normalized to a scale of 0 to 1.

The World Values Survey data from a sample of EU countries show that from the period 2005–2009 to the period 2010–2014, the share of citizens who participated in demonstrations increased more than threefold from 12.6 percent to 42.1 percent. Similar trends are visible for the proportion of individuals taking part in boycotts, pursuing issue-based campaigns, and signing petitions (see figure 9).
Recent Eurobarometer surveys show that young people in particular are moving their political engagement outside of established political structures toward more immediate, issue-specific forms of expression. The most common reason that young people cite for not voting or otherwise taking part in traditional politics is their lack of affinity with the candidates on offer in elections. Such alienation may explain why young people are roughly two-thirds more likely to participate in civil society organizations than to join political groups, according to recent Eurobarometer survey data.
A new wave of engagement centers around community politics, with the percentage of youth engaged in local initiatives jumping 15 percentage points across the EU between 2011 and 2014. This shift toward more impact-oriented engagement may signal that young people are demanding more from politics, rather than sliding into democratic apathy. As the European Commission’s 2015 European youth survey states, “[Young people] are keen to participate, but their interests are shifting; they ask for more channels of participation.” Experts allude to the emergence of “citizen lobbyists,” with committed individuals becoming more active in pressing for change on issues about which they feel especially passionate.10

Although democracy-building initiatives tend to focus on youth participation, the most serious problem arguably lies with the older population, which has disengaged from traditional politics but not reengaged through the emerging forms of participation. Age groups over fifty have the lowest levels of overall participation in politically related activities.

An October 2017 Pew survey found that support for democracy in Europe is generally strong. Small but meaningful numbers express positive attitudes toward options like “rule by experts” or “rule by strong leaders” that, though not antidemocratic as such, could be interpreted as an uncomfortable fit with liberal values. Nonetheless, citizens who express deep dissatisfaction with democracy most often express their discontent on partisan rather than deeply structural lines—that is, people are happier with democracy when their preferred party is in power. Voters may not be questioning democracy as an organizing principle so much as its personification in leaders seen as out of touch or unresponsive. This sentiment seems equally to be driving support for new kinds of democracy. In EU states, 70 percent want more direct democracy. Support for direct democracy is slightly higher among those who support populist parties but is a majority preference for those hostile to these parties as well. The Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Sustainable Governance Indicators encapsulate these trends. Although most of its indicators have been falling, the index actually shows rising levels of popular engagement in decisionmaking (see figure 10).
One result of such targeted participation is that governments have effectively come under pressure in relation to certain democratic pathologies. For instance, levels of political corruption in the EU have actually decreased. V-Dem’s political corruption index has dropped 5 points over the past twenty years, from 0.22 in 1996 to 0.17 in 2016 (see figure 11). Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index has improved by an average of 2 percent for EU countries.
What then is the meaning of these mixed trends and in particular the discrepancy between rising participation scores and the worsening of other democracy indicators? These negative and positive developments coexist as a sign that democratic crisis and renewal are two sides of the same coin in today’s European politics.

There are causes and effects on both sides of this equation. Governments’ illiberalism is galvanizing citizens into action and encouraging them to search for more effective channels of political pressure and accountability. The heavy executive hand and tightening civic restrictions further push citizens into extraformal avenues of participation outside of traditional electoral politics, including protests and petitions. Governments that push back against democratic norms awaken new forms of political
participation and protest. In turn, more assertive and suppler forms of political expression have put governments on the defensive. If these new forms were really so inconsequential and citizen participation so democratically lackluster and torpid, governments would not be so intent on finding ways to restrict the civic and political space.

In short, democratic retrenchment and incipient democratic renewal not only coexist but may be driving each other. A cycle of reaction and counterreaction between governments and the civic sphere has taken root in many European countries. Most debate about European democracy seeks to shed light on the balance between positive and negative trends, with a clear assumption that the latter have now gained the ascendancy. But this may be the wrong way to conceive the state of play in European democracy, to the extent that each side of the equation seems to be nourishing the other.

This cycle generates both malign and benign dynamics. On the one hand, as it perpetuates itself, it presents clear dangers to democratic quality: chain reactions of illiberalism and protest threaten to circumvent the institutions that have long been considered integral to democracy. On the other hand, the fact that citizens are going out of their way to create alternative forms of expression need not denote a crisis for democracy; on the contrary, it may help renew party structures that no longer represent real political cleavages. (In future articles, the Reshaping European Democracy team will examine how this pressure is changing democratic politics across the EU.)

There are some grounds for arguing that the strains and tensions of current European politics show that democratic systems are responding well to the illiberal menace—certainly not in all cases, but at least in some instances. Citizens are not so much losing their democratic verve but are searching for new forms of political participation against mounting obstacles to effective accountability. Some widely cited indices are not structured in a way that fully captures this. Citizens no longer want to be passive observers within mass membership organizations but rather want to shape outcomes. The situation in many European countries is deeply worrying; but to some extent, current political tensions reflect democratic resistance kicking in rather than support for political pluralism withering on the vine. The situation is not one of uniform or pervasive indifference to democracy in Europe, but rather of a sharper normative battle over what practices and values democracy should encompass.

It is true that many citizens are giving replies to survey questions that suggest a rather blasé indifference to democratic norms or even a preference for the kind of illiberal values normally associated with wholly or partially undemocratic governance. These replies certainly should not be dismissed lightly. At the same time, however, European citizens’ own behavior does not necessarily tally with widely presumed indifference. Citizens may complain about democracy in the abstract but then also assert that they want more say over political decisions—and have actually become less indulgent toward the kind of cossetted, unresponsive polities that characterize non- or limited democracy. This is not to say that strong and stirring democratic renewal is appearing everywhere.
But there is a difference between the problem of governments threatening democracy and that of citizens becoming less committed to basic democratic norms. If democracy is wobbling, sometimes it is because both of these changes are occurring. Often, however, the former is far more evident than the latter, with political elites plotting constricted forms of democracy against citizens’ increasingly strident calls for more meaningfully inclusive and responsive democracy.

Whether the growth of participation outside the formal political sphere ultimately helps or harms democracy will depend on both governments’ response and civic strategies. It will depend on whether civil society organizations can be enticed back into the policymaking process, serving as channels between the government and citizens, or whether they crystallize into parallel structures. If new forms of participation are properly recognized, they could yet catalyze a period of democratic renewal. “

Although Europe faces some alarming democratic problems, care must be taken not to paint an overly uniform picture. The real challenge is to appreciate which aspects of democracy are functioning poorly and which are actually improving, and to use this knowledge to extrapolate how a different form of democracy is likely to flourish in the future. Young people who prefer more hands-on engagement will place pressure on calcified political systems for more meaningful participation and policy responsiveness. But will the current systems bend or break? Europe’s democratic sands are certainly shifting; the direction these changes will take is all to play for.

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NOTES

Foa and Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation.”


Cammaerts, “The Myth of Youth Apathy.”
