



THE EU BEYOND THE CRISIS

The Unavoidable Challenge of Legitimacy

Richard Youngs



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About the Author

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Summary

The euro crisis has mobilized the masses and unleashed vitally important debates about changing the model of European integration, both economically and politically. Yet, as European governments deepen economic cooperation and the crisis appears to have calmed, European Union (EU) member states feel increasingly confident that fundamental political changes are not necessary. This is a dangerously short-sighted calculation. To build a truly democratic EU, citizens need to have a greater voice in decisionmaking.

Key Themes

- The current debate about integration largely recycles ideas that were put forward two decades ago. It does not acknowledge that with diverse social movements multiplying across Europe, the political dynamics have changed.
- Most suggested political reforms see the EU's democratic mandate to be legitimizing previous steps in institutional integration rather than debating European democracy's core tenets. This walls the democracy debate off from European citizens and is likely to undermine the EU's political stability in the longer term.
- A qualitative rethink of what constitutes democratic legitimacy in terms of European integration is overdue, but EU policies are generally heading away from initiatives that might foster such reflection.
- The EU's degree of formal, institutional centralization is not the primary factor that will determine democratic quality—the degree of open-ended civic engagement is.

Revitalizing European Democracy

Europe needs a culture of consent to underpin deeper integration. Tacit consent must lie behind the political compact Europeans make with the EU. The European project has gone too far to the other extreme, focusing on institutions rather than popular consensus. Institutional change must be the fruit of democratic debate.

Debate about integration should be more open-ended and accommodating of a wide range of views. Remolding democratic quality in the EU requires more vibrant civic debate and consideration of new forms of representation and accountability, even if that means offering critics more space.

The EU should nourish not devitalize representative processes. The stability of European integration depends on a mutually enhancing combination of representative and participative democracy.

The EU should encourage democratic experimentation and innovation. Debates about the future model of integration should tap into new ideas about democracy. Europe needs to determine how to channel grassroots civic efforts into effective, proactive democratic citizenship. The EU should move beyond existing, inadequate initiatives, such as the European Commission's New Narrative for Europe and the European Citizens' Initiative, to create a broader European public space.

Introduction

With the eurozone embroiled in crisis, European governments' main focus in recent years has been on economic and financial decisions. Yet, the crisis has a political component as well. At issue is the European Union's (EU's) democratic legitimacy—the need for citizens to feel they have more influence over and participation in EU decisions.

As the crisis has shifted some economic decisionmaking away from national governments and to the European level, many politicians and analysts have advocated political union as necessary to improve the EU's democratic credibility. Governments and EU institutions have put forward many plans for reforming decisionmaking processes. Ideas for closing an apparently widening democratic deficit have become a staple feature of post-crisis debates. However, these debates are problematic for four reasons.

First, with the financial crisis apparently calmed, governments feel more confident that fundamental political changes are not necessary at all. Thus despite the debates, in practice member states have shied away from moves toward political union. The EU's democracy challenge no longer seems quite so threatening. Governments show few signs of strengthening Europe-wide democracy in any serious fashion, whether through political union or alternative ideas. Whatever the gains made in shoring up the euro, pushing concerns over democratic legitimacy to one side may prove to have been a dangerously short-sighted calculation.

Second, most proposals about reforming EU policy at present still see the “democracy pillar” as being about legitimizing steps toward integration that have already been taken. But focusing on consolidating the current level of integration in Brussels walls the democracy debate off from the citizens of Europe and is the inverse of what democratic choice is about. It is likely to rebound against the EU in the longer term.

Third, contrary to the prevalent assumption in ongoing debates, the EU's degree of formal, institutional centralization is not the sole or even primary factor that will determine democratic quality. Europe requires a form of political debate that is both more open-ended and more accommodating of dispersed and varied local-level deliberation. Democracy must and can be the driving rationale of a looser-fitting model of European integration. Beyond any focus on political union, opportunities exist for thinking more deeply about how to inject new vitality into European democracy.

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Fourth, even if they have some role to play, the well-worn recipes for repairing European democracy fall short in understanding what democratic revitalization today requires. It is not mainly a question of strengthening the European Parliament; nor is it a matter of national parliaments being given more powers of scrutiny over EU legislation. Democratic legitimacy is not best ensured through EU-level “deliberation” that is couched only as a means of underpinning a manufactured “European identity.” These approaches encourage a looking-glass distortion of the EU’s democracy problem.

It is necessary to broaden debates about European democracy far beyond these very traditional concerns with the EU’s democratic deficit. A qualitative rethink is overdue about what constitutes democratic legitimacy within the process of European integration. Deeper debates about remolding democratic quality are to be had, and Europe needs them, more not less urgently.

Democracy Forgotten?

The fundamental dilemma at the root of the eurozone crisis has been the fear that the EU is stranded in a halfway house of partial integration, with national governments working together to make decisions in some areas and EU institutions setting the rules in others. The crisis seemed to reveal that this *sui generis* mix of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism was unsustainable. Either national economies needed to cut loose and disentangle themselves from some aspects of integration, or a qualitative jump forward to full economic and political union was required. Understandably, governments balked at the choice. Unwilling to contemplate either option, they chose a strategy of muddling through. Today, there is a general conviction that this may have sufficed to save the euro and set the European economy on the road to recovery.

Opaque crisis management procedures and a centralization of additional areas economic jurisdiction have compounded concerns over the EU’s democratic deficit.

Yet, the question of political integration has not disappeared altogether. Opaque crisis management procedures and a centralization of additional areas of economic jurisdiction have compounded concerns over the EU’s democratic deficit. The formal line has been that at least elements of political union will need to follow in the wake of banking, fiscal, and possibly economic union. Many within national governments and parliaments and within EU institutions have promoted political union as the means of injecting democratic legitimacy into the process of European integration. Debates have advanced over what kind of institutional shape such a union should assume.

However, the linkage of economic and political developments now stands in question. While the worst ravages of the eurozone crisis appear to have abated, pessimists still fear that market turmoil will return, that reforms are too shallow to ensure sustainable calm, and that some states will still need to leave

the euro. In contrast, most policymakers feel that the risk of serious fissure in European integration has passed.

If this is so, it is clearly of immense relief and testament to skillful crisis management by some European institutions. But even this best-case scenario also presents a problem. As governments judge that they can exit the crisis without far-reaching steps forward in integration, the prospect of political union fades. And once again, as in previous moments of challenge to European integration, the need for the process of democratic legitimation to meet the pace of development in other areas of policy cooperation is in danger of being forgotten.

Failure to address the EU's democracy challenge raises questions about the long-term health and sustainability of European integration. Even if the "halfway house" emerges from the crisis standing, it still needs democratizing. Governments and EU institutions risk making a huge strategic error in casually relegating the issue of democracy to an unimportant afterthought—something apparently desirable but never a priority of sufficient weight to command summit agendas or to produce tangible policy change.

Suggestions have of course been made of ways to overcome the democratic deficit. In 2012, the EU's executive body, the European Commission, produced a document explicitly advocating political union based on enhanced powers for the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice. A report produced under the auspices of European Council President Herman Van Rompuy at the end of 2012 also formally laid out plans for a political union.

The suggestions are quite familiar. In this report and in other suggested templates, the main focus for enhancing democratic control has been on bolstering the powers of the European Parliament or adding to it a chamber of national parliamentarians. Most talk is of a new subcommittee in the European Parliament to monitor the process that keeps track of national budgets (called the European semester) and governments' economic policies. Other ideas regularly debated include creating space for an EU economics minister, with a less technocratic profile than the current monetary affairs commissioner; having the European Parliament choose someone to fill a combined post of European Council and Commission president; selecting commissioners from among European Parliament ministers; arranging meetings between the heads of national parliaments' budget committees in a new forum to monitor budget limits; and having commissioners appear at hearings in national parliaments.¹ A report launched by eleven foreign ministers in September 2012 advocated a familiar array of institutional options, such as a directly elected president for the European Commission and a "two-chamber parliament for Europe" based on the present European Parliament and the Council of Ministers.²

Increasingly, politicians and analysts have advocated a combination of European Parliament and national parliament roles. Many analysts have

Failure to address the EU's democracy challenge raises questions about the long-term health and sustainability of European integration.

sensibly proposed that national parliaments cooperate more systematically. National parliaments have stepped up their monitoring of member states in the European Council. Their role has moved to center stage because new initiatives, such as the Fiscal Compact and the European Stability Mechanism created to help stabilize the European economy, fall outside the European Parliament's purview. Some point to the way in which the Lisbon Treaty has empowered national parliaments to play a greater post- and pre-legislative role; and they suggest that the democratic deficit can be closed by better coordination between regional and national parliaments and the EU's legislature. They see such multilevel parliamentarism as the core solution to the EU's democratic shortcomings.³ The creation of some form of body made up of national parliamentarians in Brussels has been touted for many years and is now widely seen as being increasingly necessary. This is particularly pertinent to the economic crisis, as funds for bailouts require approval by national parliaments and fall outside the EU budgetary procedures.⁴

Yet, a full five years into the crisis there remains more prevarication than tangible action on such modest, practical ideas and no action at all on the more daring approaches. Leaders have given the proposal to synchronize national elections even shorter shrift. Angela Merkel's commanding victory in Germany's September 2013 federal election will do little to challenge this minimalist drift, even as the chancellor is forced to search for a new coalition partner. Recent Franco-German planning has focused very much on executive-managed inter-governmentalism as the way forward for economic coordination.⁵

The European Parliament elections due in May 2014 are now held out as the crucial moment of opportunity to revitalize the health of European democracy. It is widely assumed that these elections will help "Europeanize" debate around issues central to the economic crisis. Many argue that the looming vote will nudge the EU's new leadership toward more effectively and openly justifying policy stances to the European electorate. Several European Commission initiatives have commenced with the purported aim of fostering such a "politicization" of these elections. The European Parliament election campaign was launched in early September, with promises of a more personalized campaign and citizen influence over the next president of the European Commission; €16 million (\$22 million) is being spent under the slogan "this time it's different."

In practice, the polls are unlikely to help restore democratic credibility to European integration any more than they have done in the past. To suggest they can do so is to define democratic quality in extremely narrow terms.

Meanwhile, the level of social protest across Europe seems to have been contained within manageable proportions. Earlier fears of unrest spiraling out of control across a broad swath of the continent have given way to a more sanguine acceptance of a "new normal" of background discontent and social mobilization against austerity reforms. Protests continue and are often brutally put down.

Populist parties have risen in appeal, with vicious ideologies inimical to all the core tenets of European cosmopolitanism, though only in Hungary has such a party gained untrammelled political power and set about reversing key elements of constitutional liberalism. Many mass mobilizations are organized around the specifics of national-level political scandals and machinations, as witnessed recently in Spain and Bulgaria. The European Union, German-led economic decisions, and the European Central Bank continue to attract popular ire; and polls register rising levels of Euroskepticism.

But all this has not (yet) grown into a Europe-wide, bottom-up swell of antipathy that really threatens the European Union's core operations or calls into question democracy's very existence. Those keen to downplay the political ramifications of the crisis point out that initial predictions of the wholesale collapse of European political systems spurred by grassroots agitation today look highly exaggerated. Again, this has weakened calls for any major rethinking of the democratic quality of European integration.

Indeed, the sanguine view is further nourished by a strand of writing that argues the democracy problem is not that serious. Some analysts insist the crisis has actually helped narrow the democratic deficit, as it has opened up economic policy to cross-border deliberation more than ever before. They argue that the crisis has already exposed all of Europe to more democratic scrutiny and that governments' unpopularity is not the same thing as a shortfall in democratic accountability. They insist that all government decisions made in relation to the crisis have been legitimized through national elections or parliamentary debate. To improve transparency, the European Central Bank has even promised to release the reasoning behind its decisions. Indeed, doubters aver that there has almost been too much democratic control, which explains why member states have found it so difficult to reach agreement: they are constrained by the domestic democratic imperative far more now than before the crisis. There is not a new problem of the EU losing legitimacy so much as wider divisions between member states over what to do to dig themselves out of crisis.⁶

Some still believe that the EU can rely on output legitimacy (that is, on beneficial substantive decisions, however arrived at) or on purely domestic debate to hold leaders to account in intergovernmental negotiations. From this perspective, economic recovery will soon dissipate worries over the EU's imagined democratic shortfalls.⁷ One strand of thinking still insists that there is not enough power concentrated at the supranational level to make it necessary to "democratize the EU"; and that constitutional limits to majoritarian pluralism are a more apt measure of democracy than any spurious concern with participation.⁸ Others have pointed out that nation building has usually needed to precede a focus on democratization.⁹

All these different forms of unconcern rest on the ballast of some heroic assumptions about future economic and sociopolitical trends. The danger today

is of not so much a violent, implosion of democracy but rather a misplaced belief that politics can return to business as usual. The risk is that successful euro-crisis management is accompanied by an almost unspoken confidence that the whole model of integration can revert to the status quo ante, simply with a few ad hoc processes of economic coordination added.

Certainly, it is right not to exaggerate democracy's problems. But the democracy challenge is serious, is not fleeting, and is not linked only to fluctuations in economic performance. At the time of writing, governments in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, and Greece are all in precarious positions. Anti-austerity protests unsettled coalition politics even in the Netherlands during the summer of 2013, as European Commission pressure for deficit cuts breathed new life into anti-EU mobilization. In September 2013, violent protests returned to the streets of Athens, with lethal vengeance. A sobering recent warning is that in the United Kingdom, polling shows that those people supporting more cosmopolitan socially liberal values have also veered toward Euroskepticism.¹⁰

The markets may currently be calm, but the European Central Bank's Outright Monetary Transaction mechanism—the bond-purchasing program widely credited with taking most of the heat out of the eurozone crisis—has yet to be seriously tested. If a new government in one of the weaker member states were to opt for a significantly different route in its economic policy, it is not clear that the mechanism would be deployed. Nor is it clear how far the European Central Bank can or will more broadly help governments begin to ramp up bank lending, the paucity of which still reveals Europe's financial system to be in a parlous state and unresponsive to social pressures. It was seen as highly significant that the French and German ambassadors spoke out in favor of Bulgaria's protesters in July 2013. But it was also perhaps ironic, as these two states are seen across Europe as having acted in a way that constricts the openness of genuine policy deliberation.

Momentum has recently gathered behind proposals for an EU mechanism to monitor serious democratic backsliding in member states—a so-called Copenhagen commission. However, while this may provide a useful bulwark in reacting to serious rights abuses, it would not be capable of playing the kind

The original sin committed at the EU's creation was the suppression of democracy by technocracy.

of central role in EU democratic revival that its advocates claim. Indeed, the idea is not without an apparent edge of irony given that democratic shortcomings at the EU level themselves lie at the root of many national political pathologies today in places like Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.

The original sin committed at the EU's creation was the suppression of democracy by technocracy. Much that is vexing about this union flows from that foundational Faustian bargain. The crisis reveals the inadequacy of output legitimacy: with technical matters it may be possible objectively to determine the best way to maximize output, but when integration

touches upon deeper values, this is no longer likely. In that case, differences exist precisely over what is needed to advance output gains. The method of the precooked, extra-democratic *fait accompli* put forward by founding father Jean Monnet is now the EU's Achilles' heel rather than its cleverly surreptitious driving force.

At this point, something akin to a “European rescue of national democracy” might be vital to a reinvention of the integration model. It is no rejoinder to say that deeper democracy would be nice but that it is an expendable luxury when the “correct” emergency economic measures must adroitly be adopted. Early in the crisis, Luxembourg's Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker quipped to the effect that governments knew what measures needed to be taken but not how to get reelected after taking those steps. This became one of the most cited phrases of the crisis, portrayed as a pearl of wisdom that reflected the essential impasse at the root of Europe's troubles. In fact, it embodies the very attitude of the political class that is so damaging to European integration: the notion that it has access to objectively right policy decisions, to which citizens are a mere encumbrance.

National governments are today beset by the worst of two worlds. Their crisis-related decisionmaking is more opaque and less transparently accountable; but they are also less able to get things done because their *de facto* power is evaporating as the number of actors involved in modern economic and political choices multiplies. Input and output legitimacy are not trade-offs; they have diminished in unison.

Democratic Instrumentalism

The envisioned templates for institutional reform contain ideas that are valuable and may be part of any future plan to reverse the slide in European democracy. But they are insufficient and too narrow.

In part this stems from a prevalent fear that some irreducible trade-off exists between cooperative economic solutions and democracy.¹¹ Princeton economist Dani Rodrik's influential schema holds that deep economic interdependence, nation-state autonomy, and democracy cannot all coexist: at least one must be sacrificed.¹² A common view is that a much-centralized executive autonomy will be necessary to preserve the euro, even if modest “flanking measures” should be sought to generate some bounded political debate at both the national and the European level.¹³

Indeed, in line with this, the approach that most proposals adopt toward democracy revolves in large part around economic-crisis management. Proposals for political union talk about slotting into place the final “democracy” piece of the EU jigsaw, but they conceptualize such democracy in an extremely sanitized fashion. They seem set to foreclose meaningful debate about the core choices in economic policy, the substance. Policymakers and analysts tend to

talk of parliaments “transmitting” new EU powers and decisions to national audiences or “organising more democratic support of the . . . progress recently made in EMU [economic and monetary union] governance.”¹⁴

The various approaches to political union discussed to date in effect seek to replicate the template of the nation-state at the EU level. They forward a formal, constitutional organization of politics at the European level, in what constitutes a highly republican conception of democracy that has moved beyond the nation-state. They have focused on rearranging the relative powers of existing EU institutions and strengthening their reporting requirements to the European Parliament and national parliaments.¹⁵ Centralized rules are seen as crucial to legitimacy. Liberal democracy consists of two parts: rules-based limits on the exercise of power and popular participation. In much thinking on (full or partial) political union, far more emphasis has been placed on developing the limits. Democracy’s constitutionalist element has expanded to the detriment of its popular element.

These approaches are consistent with a view in democratic theory that the sectional interests of the people render popular deliberation for the common good impossible so certain issues need to be taken out of the public realm.¹⁶ That is, some issues must be reserved for bodies that are independent of the whims of the electorate or political jockeying. This echoes the concept of what political scientist Robert A. Dahl called guardian institutions, which are typically regulatory bodies that operate in a democracy beyond the scope of competitive politics. One expert observes that the approach reflects a long-standing continental tradition of conceiving democratic politics as a means to a particular end rather than embracing the “untidiness” of liberalism as an ethos in and of itself.¹⁷ An exhaustive review notes that the many recent books that are scathingly critical of democracy-weakening austerity still advocate more of the same kind of institutional centralization.¹⁸

The implication is that many politicians and policymakers see in the euro-zone crisis a Weberian moment, requiring a larger-scale polity and tighter, more bureaucratized rules, legitimized by common leadership. The debate over how to move forward has been unsatisfactory because people advocate democratic

accountability with a particular desired economic policy outcome in mind. One camp envisions firm market and austerity rules, backed up by means of democratic scrutiny to ensure respect for and buy-in to such rules. Another camp wants to instill democracy with the end goal of limiting austerity and the primacy of markets.

Both sides of the austerity-versus-growth debate risk being guilty of an overly instrumental view of how to democratize the EU. Both sides see the issue of democratic legitimacy through the lens of their preferred substantive policy outcomes rather than as something

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inherently necessary in its own right. They seem to minimize the importance of vibrant political processes as fundamental to the EU.

The German approach to the crisis has been indicative of this tendency. Germany's view of political union is not about enhancing the participation of citizens in the democratic polity but increasing (northern) governments' control over EU budgets. In return for a transfer union or fiscal federalism, the German parliament must have a stronger say, possibly through a chamber of national parliaments in Brussels; political union would merely pander to the Bundestag's desire to control new fiscal transfers.¹⁹ Germany is widely seen as wanting EU-level rules to facilitate yet also mask its own *de facto* power.

Still, it is not only this much-criticized German position that is guilty of being so highly instrumental. A stream of opinion pieces from southern Europe insists that the EU can only become more democratic through an easing of pressures for austerity—again, apparently conflating democracy with a particular desired substantive outcome. Just as much as the German policy, this perspective also comes dangerously close to a contradiction: it advocates open-ended civic vibrancy to reimagine polity and economy, but it seems to have already concluded that the urgent need is to replace neoliberalism—this may be a correct call but it is a position on end goals not democratic process.²⁰

These templates for closing the democratic deficit focus on the participation of one institution in the meetings of other institutions—or representatives of one institution appearing before those of another institution.²¹ Multilevel governance is the vogueish concept routinely advocated as the solution to the EU's democratic deficit. But it cannot be a panacea for rebooting European democracy. It may ensure that each institution consults and cooperates with every other institution. Yet this may simply produce a profusion of set-piece dialogues and formalized consultations, soundproofed from the tumultuous noise of the "Europe" that still clamors outside the windows. If pursued in this fashion, multilevel governance risks disconnecting the citizen even further from a murky world of opaque and overlapping institutional competences.

Much thinking about the European-level political space and identity has similar problems. Many have suggested that a set of "European" values be articulated as the basis from which to propel the integration project forward. Deepening legitimacy has most commonly been seen as a matter of empowering supranational institutions so they can engage in deliberative construction of a stronger EU identity. The assumption is that European-level deliberation is a means of chiseling out a common identity from currently disparate national interests. This again conceives democracy on the basis of collectivist understandings of nationhood more than the cosmopolitan notion of rights facilitation.

Too much can be made of the need for a common demos. There may be common debate in Europe, but the problem is that institutions do not respond to those debates because the lines of accountability are very weak.²² Politicians increasingly say "European values" are the essential basis for enhancing

democratic legitimacy. The values ritually listed—peace, justice, reconciliation, democracy—are either so platitudinous and general as to be operationally meaningless in determining how integration actually proceeds or are not especially “European.” Speeches on “European values” follow a uniform script that sometimes has the feel of undeviating Orwellian Newspeak. Vibrant democracy requires competing notions of rights to be argued out, rather than emasculated by an overly heavy focus on consensual collectivism. After all, the EU’s very genesis was a repudiation of all-encompassing utopian visions based on rigid rules in the name of collective perfectibility.

The climb to broadly agreed European rules of the game must surely be steeper after the antipathies on display during the crisis. Young people in different member states have grown into political maturity with perspectives that are fundamentally different from one another on what the EU means for their own interests. If anything, most citizen-based initiatives that have sprung up during the crisis are even more firmly rooted within nationally specific debates.

Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter

So, what is the way forward? The foundation for deeper integration must be diversity, not an imposed standardization of values. There is simply too much variety within Europe to be shoehorned into a single European identity. Vibrant democratic process is what should bind, not manufactured prescriptions.²³ A diversity of goals must inform debates over democratic legitimacy.²⁴ The much-lauded Charlemagne is a bad role model: he united Europe but on the basis of a ruthless imposition of religious orthodoxy and uniformity; of course, his experiment did not endure.

The tendency to let the ends dictate policy proposals must be held in check. European integration must clothe itself in a looser fitting garment, not a pre-designed tighter straitjacket. The crisis has revealed just how deeply interdependent member states are, which necessitates more effective cooperation and political space to deliberate alternative ways forward for policy coordination. Member states must not end up doing the equivalent of killing a good relationship through suffocating overkill.

Political scientist Sandra Lavenex conceptualizes the way forward well: the intergovernmental camp believes legitimacy lies in national processes; the federalist camp sees it as requiring full political union. The desirable, third way seeks to make a fluid governance model more democratic. Crucially, this requires a broader revitalization of national democracies not just a spurious engineering of politicized EU-level debate.²⁵

What Europe really needs is a culture of consent to underpin deeper integration. Far more pertinent than which bodies have sovereignty over which issues is how to strengthen the spirit of a self-governing Europe. The gradual

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nourishing of a more active citizenship must take priority.²⁶ John Locke's original point of political philosophy was that tacit consent must lie behind the compact the citizen makes with political authorities to cede his natural rights and freedoms; the "European project" has gone too far to the other (Hegelian) extreme of attributing institutions value as ends in themselves.

None of this is to condone febrile, reflexive Euroskepticism or to argue that no deeper, institutional integration is needed; rather, it is to suggest that such institutional change must be the fruit of democratic debate not an economic emergency measure onto which superficial elements of parliamentary scrutiny are disingenuously bolted. The argument is also not meant to imply that prudent fiscal stabilization is not important over the long term; it is to caution against short-term measures that in their implementation preempt properly democratic debates about economic models.

It may be desirable to take a step back and think how fuller democratic debate can be fostered before certain types of economic and social identities are adopted, not simply as a means of locking in such choices after the fact. Taking such a step back may then help solidify the foundations upon which European integration rests in a way that makes deeper cooperation more sustainable over the longer term.

A more open-ended democratic regeneration would have to allow for the fact that deeper citizen engagement might not always bolster elites' preferences. A paradox might take shape: to restore credibility to the EU, it might be necessary to offer more space to differing interpretations of integration. After all, democracy does not immunize against economic crisis, but its rationale is to allow choices to be made in responses to crisis. While debt reduction might be unavoidable given global structural constraints, it should be driven and monitored by domestic opinion.

For many, the less formal means of injecting democratic vitality are insubstantial froth without the formal institutional attributes of federalism. However, political union would at best be a partial solution, not a cure-all. And the erstwhile necessary ambiguity in the economic integration project—defined as both extending and controlling markets to satisfy different member states—will reach a breaking point if democratization is understood in overly tight, formal institutional terms. Calls for political union look like a simple displacement of the EU's democracy problem.

While additional powers may well need to be transferred away from governments to the European level, this should not be proposed as a means to circumvent the problems that currently beset national democratic institutions. Many politicians still advocate centralized political union as a solution to the fact that local democracy has lost its vitality—rather than focusing on restoring that vitality. Repairing the effects of crisis requires trust to be (re-)Europeanized even more than it needs rule conformity. Efficiency in economic matters must grow from this, not precede it.

Connecting to Deeper Democracy Debates

Beyond the need for flexibility and less instrumental approaches, debates about the future model of EU integration would benefit from tapping more systematically into new conceptual ideas about democracy. At present, discussion of the EU's democratic deficit tends to be unduly divorced from a rich vein of efforts to rethink democracy. This disconnect leads to a static EU debate; largely the same ideas that were put forward two decades ago are still being recycled. Meanwhile, political dynamics—the whole nature of the relationship between citizen, society, and the state—have undergone a profound transformation. Now states must concern themselves with ensuring that an explosion of amorphous and often unfocused social mobilization is channeled toward more effective and proactive democratic citizenship. That effort is of far greater importance than the question of whether the European Parliament sets up new subcommittees or national parliamentarians meet slightly more frequently in Brussels.

While policymakers have focused mainly on options for particular institutional reforms, another level of debate has unfolded that approaches the democratic deficit from a very different perspective. A large number of preeminent theorists insist that injecting “democracy” into the EU is not just about replicating nation-state institutions—rather, such EU-level democracy must be predicated on looser, cosmopolitan networks of popular participation.²⁷ They urge a more pluralistic process of deliberative dynamism—one that is able to embrace the growing diversity over the problem of legitimacy. While civic engagement must be fostered at a European level, the diversity revealed by the crisis means that the legitimacy of national-level process, rights, and values must be taken seriously.²⁸ Debate has long raged about the lack of a European political space; Boston University's Vivien Schmidt called attention to the phenomenon of “policy without politics” before the crisis.²⁹ It is now even more urgent to contemplate how and in what form a politics of European integration can and should be fostered.

The two suggested routes—institutional and participative—reflect different understandings of what constitutes effective democracy. The two ways forward are not, of course, mutually exclusive. But the way that politicians and thinkers stress one or the other reflects a fundamental divide over what is most needed to relegitimize European democracy: more effective representative processes at the institutional level or more lively, inclusive, and influential participative dynamics.

The two routes rest on a broader difference of opinion that has run through debates over European integration for many years. This difference hinges on the issue of whether a common demos is needed before political union or whether political integration will, and does already, shape a common demos. Does political culture condition institutions or vice versa?

Current proposals for political union or even more minor institutional reform compound market functionality, which means that the limits to effective economic choice have become very palpable in recent years.³⁰ Jürgen Habermas lambasts the “executive federalism of a self-authorizing European Council . . . [as] . . . the template for a post-democratic exercise of political authority.” He argues that Europe does not need so much a federal state as it needs a “new mode of politics” to allow a “transnational will formation.” Purely national legitimation is not possible because states have become interdependent and citizens have already begun to define themselves as both national and European citizens.³¹ The point about genuinely open deliberation is that it remolds preferences rather than simply collating preexisting, self-regarding interests.

The dilemma is determining how to take steps that are capable of solving the economic crisis while also crafting the democratic legitimacy of the EU through widened spaces for the European citizenry.³² Parliaments have, arguably, become part of the problem, to the extent that they are disconnected from popular debate. Parliamentary parties today often act in way akin to closed guilds.

Some advocates of standard, federalizing institutional reform now also recognize that the key to making political union work is to change the form of politics, not simply institutions: what is needed is not simply “more Europe” in the sense of centralized integration that replicates existing failures, but political platforms aimed at choices that favor justice. It is about embedding the norm of democracy in a novel, noninstitutionalized fashion.³³

These challenges must be approached as part of a need to rethink effective democracy across the globe, not as an issue unique to the European Union. A union of tighter and more centralized rules is not sufficient.³⁴ Europe needs a post-postpolitics.

Debates in the EU can usefully tap into broader reflections on what makes democracy effective and sustainable. In particular, there is a need for more varied and horizontal channels through which citizens can more effectively hold public decisionmaking accountable, and for these to be predicated on strong bonds of civic trust not the mere enjoyment of protective rights.³⁵ Absent this, Cambridge University’s John Dunn senses a return to the (classically rooted) notion of democracy being a “partially elective aristocracy.”³⁶

Civic engagement needs to be not just more widespread but also of a better quality than it is presently. The crisis-induced explosion of street protests and civic forums understandably opposes harsh austerity measures but appears to be somewhat dispersed antipolitics, focused on opposition rather than feeding positive suggestions into the system through representative institutions.³⁷

There is a need for more varied and horizontal channels through which citizens can more effectively hold public decisionmaking accountable.

The crisis has revealed a sobering degree of popular distance from democratic institutions and atomization.

“Generation Y” is looking to overcome the crisis through innovative start-ups, based on nonhierarchical patterns of leadership, and it sees traditional political processes as hopelessly atrophied and increasingly redundant. The challenge is to ensure that this generation does not choose to express its entirely justified frustrations in a manner that is antipolitical—which is a real and growing danger at present. The social glue provided by small-group civic organization must be combined with a more effective Europeanization of the political sphere. To think that the European Parliament or national parliament subcommittees on banking union can do the job is ludicrous.

At the same time, deliberative democracy should not be encouraged as an alternative to strengthening representative mechanisms or merely as a convenient route to a preconceived common European identity. It should nourish not devitalize representative democracy. Historian Paul Ginsborg argues eloquently for an intertwining of representative and participatory dynamics, “a theory of combined democracy.”³⁸ The challenge is to combine representative and participative dynamics and to ensure they do not undermine each other as mutually exclusive alternatives. This will require EU institutions and governments to link civic and political society initiatives more dynamically. Competition must still be built into representative institutions; there is a real danger that extraparliamentary ways of engaging citizens in politics will weaken parliaments and parties that are still needed to aggregate preferences and strike compromises across policy areas.³⁹ Civic engagement cannot replace electoral accountability but can improve the social climate underpinning EU policies.⁴⁰

The late Tony Judt’s broader historical sweep insists that after a twentieth century of grand narratives and transnational ideologies, people are turning back to the national state as an essential political theater and vehicle for legitimacy.⁴¹ The crisis renders the long-standing notion of “demoicracy” even more pertinent. Demoicracy means dealing with individuals as both citizens of the EU and of states. Deeper integration must be based on intersocietal and not only intergovernmental bargains.⁴² Princeton’s Jan-Werner Mueller points out that the right debate is not just about the centralization-decentralization balance but a need for qualitative change. The concept of demoicracy, which has often been applied to the EU in recent years to denote the need for mutual recognition between diverse peoples, needs to prove itself different from a rehashed confederalism. It must do so by building in a much wider array of “fora and institutional footholds” and “novel forms of group representation.”⁴³

Much work in democratic theory has increasingly focused on non-electoral forms of representation. Writers have explored how representation is likely to be based more on performance and dynamic interaction between representatives and the represented. Standard and rather static electoral representation is

no longer seen as necessarily providing the absolute, singular bedrock of representative accountability. This is particularly relevant to the EU, as non-electoral representation involves delinking the territorial unit of the represented and the area over which representatives' decisions have an influence. New avenues of performance-based representation are said to offer the prospect of bridging representative and direct-participative democracy, to the extent that they offer the represented a greater degree of policy involvement and include a wider range of participants.⁴⁴

In practical terms, this line of reasoning calls for the EU to support a wider range of programs. There may not be an easy institutional panacea that is currently obvious, and the EU should not be afraid of democratic experimentation. It should encourage local-level initiatives based on ideas such as the dense networks of so-called contact democracy, and the Greek-style system of selecting representatives by lot (sortition). The EU could usefully support alternative finance initiatives that seek community ownership of credit. It could encourage some form of "citizens' summits" to accompany European Councils. It needs to move away from its focus on the formal-legal status of EU citizenship to supporting a more active, bottom-up assertion of citizenry outside the EU's formal institutional avenues.⁴⁵ To ensure that EU debates do not only revolve around fiscal discipline, it should broaden its array of dialogues to include a wider range of social partners and ensure that they broach issues of employment, social protection, and ecology. Such forums do exist but so far have remained low profile and have not been mobilized to stir European debate.⁴⁶

EU institutions and national politicians frequently insist they are committed to fomenting such participative dynamics. In practice, little concrete follow-through can be detected. Some academics feel that there has been considerable progress and that convergent values and cross-border communication mean that the bases of a common European public sphere are already in place.⁴⁷ The Lisbon Treaty mentions all the core tenets of vibrant participative democracy. Some insist the treaty advanced the principle of the European "citizen" with rights beyond those attached to a particular nationality, this being the essential foundation for a transnational and distinctive form of democracy.⁴⁸ However, the euro crisis militates against any complacent beliefs that enough progress had been made in this direction.

And here lies the most worrying trend: if anything, EU policies seem to be heading away from, not toward, support for the type of initiatives that might foster any kind of qualitative rethink. Experts note that little has been done to foster the conditions for creating a broader European public space through generating media awareness and framing EU issues at the national level.⁴⁹ In countries like Germany and the Netherlands the most traditional, mainstream parties have clawed back support from new political movements.

Research shows that, despite some legislation on the matter, EU agencies are still strikingly closed to formal civic participation and consultation.⁵⁰ Civic

networks active in union decisionmaking are still blighted by selective membership and skewed influence, and crisis-induced social movements tend to see the EU as a problem rather than a site of potential solution.⁵¹ Analysts point out that for civic engagement to have genuinely representational legitimacy, it needs to be extended well beyond the circle of “insider” professional non-governmental organizations that have essentially been co-opted into consultative forums by the various European institutions.⁵² The Council of Europe and European Fundamental Rights Agency—both with formal mandates to strengthen core rights—have done little that is related to the economic crisis. EU representatives and regional bodies complain that the crisis has been used instrumentally by national governments to squeeze local administrations and weaken opposition coming from devolved sources.

The European Commission’s New Narrative for Europe initiative and its series of citizens’ dialogues across Europe show a promising acknowledgement of the problem and an overdue get-out-and-engage spirit. Yet these efforts tend to be couched in somewhat didactic terms; the commission looks for new ways to present alternative routes to what appears to be the same envisaged destination. Many protest leaders dismiss these initiatives as well as the commission’s proposals to politicize European Parliament election campaigning as a self-serving gimmick.

The new European Citizens’ Initiative is also a step in the right direction, but it only provides an avenue for petitioning on single issues, not a wholesale rethink. Member states expressly limited its scope. Of seventeen initiatives that have been launched, only one (on water rights) has gathered the requisite million signatures to begin a formal consultation process. An initiative can only proceed if it has an identifiable EU legal base and if it is related to existing union powers. Even when a million signatures are collected, member states are not obliged to respond in any particularly tangible way in terms of actual policy change. A seven-person coordination committee must be formed across seven member states in order to advance a petition. Only well-funded professional campaigning organizations can, in practice, take up the challenge of moving an initiative forward; this raises questions about the European Citizens’ Initiative’s own claims to democratic legitimacy.

Those involved in the European Citizens’ Initiative acknowledge that the EU institutions still define “citizenship” in a very particular and narrow legal fashion; that is, it consists of formal EU legal rights that are made more transferrable between member states. Polls show that three-quarters of European citizens have not heard of the initiative. It is far from being an instrument for broad, participatory deliberation on the big political issues of the day. One idea would be to ensure that European Citizens’ Initiative petitions feed into a broader set of open EU public consultations, involving a wide range of civic actors. Yet, the eurozone crisis appears to have done nothing to spur governments into broadening the initiative’s scope.

Conclusion

Even if the EU has indeed navigated the worst turbulence of the euro crisis, it has not shown resolve on the political contours of a future model of integration. Governments once again seem to be tempted into believing that proactive democratic legitimation is expendable. Not only has political urgency diminished, but the ideas for democratic revitalization raised in recent years have also fallen short of addressing the underlying causes of increasingly insipid accountability. Democracy's current malaise comes not just from the familiar democratic deficit. It is the result of a profound disjuncture between the promise of new social mobilization and the peril of disengagement from representative channels. The EU requires a mutually enhancing combination of representative and participative democracy—something conspicuously missing from economic management a full five years into the crisis.

Democratic process struggles with the challenge of how to respond to a shift from tightly organized, membership-based political activity to broader social movements. A more loosely structured EU would be well placed to move with the grain of reshaped political activity. This is not simply a matter of debating whether the European Parliament or national parliaments should have more powers, or of adding even more ineffectual committees and discussion forums into bodies disconnected from broader social mobilization. It should also not be about manufacturing a single, common identity, supposedly to underpin a “single politics” at the European level. Member states will buy into European integration on the basis of very different narratives in an integrative space that emerges after the euro crisis. Horizontal accountability needs to be built from the ground up, through citizens sharing in the fate of each other's democracy. Harmony cannot simply be conjured from the pan-European political air.

All this requires policy innovation that extends beyond the kind of institutional reform proposals that have been present for more than two decades—ideas that are apparently impervious to the fundamental shift under way in the relationship between individual citizens and organized politics. The EU confronts an existential challenge: can it deepen cooperation in the economic sphere while the issues of identity, belonging, community, and control are dealt with in a more flexible and less statist fashion?

The evidence is at present not encouraging. The apparent calming of the euro crisis offers more space to think through a deeper way to make the European Union democratically legitimate in the eyes of European citizens. But too many politicians, officials, and analysts think no major political change is now required.

The EU requires a mutually enhancing combination of representative and participative democracy—something conspicuously missing from economic management a full five years into the crisis.

EU politics needs better-quality democratic accountability. That need will certainly remain at the level of aspirational rhetoric. Yet, for the moment, it also looks likely to remain bereft of any tangible resolution.

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