

European Integration, Democratic Deficit, and Associations: Normative Concepts and Empirical Findings

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1. Introduction

European economic integration is progressing at an ever more rapid rate. The introduction of the EURO has forced the EMU countries to adopt their policies to the so-called Maastricht criteria. European integration has continuously increased the redistributive powers of the European level over the last decades, and in exercising these powers it has supremacy over national laws. This development clearly also indicates progress in political integration, though it is mainly taking place in the area of economic issues. However, the institutional setting of the European Union is marked by an astonishing autonomy of its institutions from direct democratic control. As opposed to traditional international organizations and confederal systems, European institutions that take part in the policy cycle are *de jure* and to a large degree *de facto* independent of national governments. This implies that 'sovereign' states have to deal with political actors outside their immediate control.

This naturally raises the democratic question of how the system of institutions exercising this power is to be controlled and held accountable. The system is still under construction, but that construction has to take account of problems of legitimacy and democracy. Thus, one of the major challenges for the future of the European Union is to solve the problem of democratic decision-making and political representation. Solutions envisaged range from full-fledged parliamentary system to associational democracy. Based on results from two empirical research projects, the one dealing with parliamentary representation, the other with the role of voluntary associations in the EU, two arguments will be developed here. First, democracy in the EU is only possible and feasible, if the liberal conception of

democratic collectively binding decision-making is supplemented by linkages between electors and elected by collective actors beyond political parties, namely voluntary associations. Second, only a sufficient degree of self-government of subordinate units will be able to increase and sustain democracy in the EU, i.e. the realization of subsidiarity principle achieved by sub-EU level political institutions and associations.

This considerations lead to a model of democracy in which the basic principles of liberal democracy are complemented by strong components of associational democracy but do not replace them. Rather it is argued for a kind of “Verhandlungsdemokratie” (consensus democracy) in which the majority principle of legitimation of the liberal model is supplemented by a negotiation or consensus principle. This concerns the political institutions. Beyond this, democracy has to be based on political community, which in itself is a matter of collectivity not existing without people willing to associate in interest and action. However, making this model work, several preconditions have to be met by political institutions as well as the associational system. Empirical findings allow to evaluate how far away the EU is from such a model and by which likelihood it might emerge.

2. Why Democratic Institutions Cannot Work Without Associations¹

It is consensus that the current institutional order in the EU is far from sufficient to satisfy the democratic demands. Not only the citizens but also elected representatives at national and European level are not particularly satisfied with the existing political order in the European Union. Neither is this the case concerning the policy performance of the EU or the working of democracy in general. Even if there were not a public debate about the quality and form of democracy in the European Union, the situation would demand institutional change.

The political procedures of liberal democracy are designed to ensure the responsiveness of the elected to the electors. Voting rights, freedom of speech and association, equality of information, and the predominance of the electoral decision over intervening decisions are devices to guarantee that elected representatives do in fact carry out public desires. That is, all conceptions of democratic government hinge upon some form of control of leaders by non-leaders. And in the liberal conception legitimacy is primarily based on elections and majority principle. Although this idea may be simple, the practice of political representation is complex. It is an open debate whether nation-state democracy could serve as an appropriate blueprint for the future political order of the European Union. It is obvious however, that, if the emerging European political order is to qualify as democratic in even in the liberal sense, representational linkages, channels of responsiveness, and mechanisms of accountability have to be improved not to say introduced.

Respective models of liberal democracy to get the European level closer to the people on the one hand and to limit its scope of policies on the other hand aim at different means. To limit the scope of competence the general principle agreed upon and going to be applied more and more is subsidiarity. In institutional terms, the proponents of European integration demand for a full-fledged parliamentary order at the European level including a European Parliament electing a government, thus introducing government and opposition in parliament, and a second chamber for regional representation. This is the federal solution in contrast to the confederal, parliamentarism in contrast to inter-governmentalism. Opponents of further political integration rather argue that legitimacy is already guaranteed and that democratic control must stay at the national level and be exercised by national parliaments and governments. Another conception is a Europe of regions which govern themselves according to subsidiarity principle and get more say according to federal principle. However, it is obvious that none of

¹ This section is based on findings presented in: Richard Katz, Bernhard Wessels (eds.), *The European Parliament, National Parliaments, and European Integration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.

these institutional solutions can be sufficient. Liberal democracy faces at least two problems: to develop appropriate means of fair and effective aggregation, and to close the feedback gap between elections. The aggregation problem of representative democracy in nation state context exists even more pronounced at the European level. That is what can be called the “number problem of representation”. Political representation is already quite complex at the national level. But at the European level it is even more so. At the national level, the ratio of elected to electors is 1:67,668 in the worst case (Germany) and 1:3,734 in the best (Luxembourg). On average, one member of a European national parliament has to serve 54,844 electors. For the EP, the worst ratio is one representative per 610,848 electors (Germany), and the best is 1:37,339 (Luxembourg). On average, 429,729 electors are represented by one member of parliament at the European level. The sheer number of people represented by a single member of the EP has important implications for political representation. Larger numbers include a larger variety of interests and a higher complexity of problems. Since the day has only twenty-four hours, larger numbers also mean that the density of contacts as measured with respect to the electorate cannot be as high as in the national contexts. This implies that the flows of communication and information are not sufficient to transmit the whole complexity and variety of interests, demands, and problems. This means that—since individual representation is not feasible—collective representation and channels of communication with collective actors are crucial. In fact, collective linkages probably are the only solution to the aggregation problem in the European Union, given the numbers just reported. Furthermore, given the number problem, associations can be the only means of effective linkage providing the necessary feedback and therefore the necessary soundboard of the acceptable (Resonanzboden des Zumutbaren, Uwe Thaysen) for political decision-making which obviously takes place between elections.

Thus, institutions of liberal democracy need in general and in particular in the EU to be complemented by an associational system which solves the problem of aggregation and provides the necessary conditions for responsive policy-making.

3. Responsiveness and Community

Therefore, in terms of the concept of liberal democracy, the “second circuit” of the “machinery of the democratic representative polity” (Claus Offe) or the “two-tier-system” of political representation (Stein Rokkan) which is provided by associations, seems to be even more important at the European level than at the national level. Thus, in addition to territorial representation *functional representation* must play an important role in the future of the European polity. But there is more than this. Even taking the standpoint of liberal democracy, it is obvious that responsiveness of a polity cannot be based on majority principle alone. Research on democracy makes it obvious that there are clear limits to this principle.

One limit is acceptance and implementation of collectively binding decisions. In particular in periods of critical developments, decisions based on collective negotiations and the possibility to commit collectively to agreements via the ties between associations and its members seem to be of crucial importance. Research on neo-corporatism suggests, that in this type of political setting the production of public goods is more effective than in system primarily based on pure liberal principles. Empirically, this is supported by better socio-economic performance in times of economic stagnation, i.e. less unemployment, less inflation, higher growth rates. Furthermore, the more complex the political setting, the higher the number of institutional veto player, the more pronounced the danger of deadlock in decision-making. Thus, liberal democracy, and in particular the complex setting of the EU needs complements to majority principle.

A second limit is the steering and action capacity of the state. There is no doubt, that if there were no such associations which self-govern their particular arena, these functions would either not be performed or performed poorly by an overloaded state. This applies in particular where political institutions have delegated competencies to associations, i.e. chamber systems (handicrafts, trade, medicine etc.) or where associations govern certain functions in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, i.e. welfare, health, sports. This is true in nation states

but even more for the EU. The more political competencies it gains, the more it must rely on self-governance. This is one reason, why the regional level experience strengthening by EU-politics.

A third aspect is, that democracy cannot exist and survive without a sense of community. Democracy is a fragile collective endeavor, designed for the production of public goods by peaceful means in face of interest differentiation and conflict. Recent research on political culture suggests that the fragility of democracy rather is in the social and political integration than in the political institutions. With respect to political integration, formal democratic rules and procedures play an important role. However, if formal democratic rules are established, the decisive question is how rules are anchored in society. In this respect, the strength and distribution of social capital and sense of community (Coleman, Putnam) play an important role. Associations are the most important opportunity structure in this regard. Being affiliated with an association means being part of a collectivity with at least some identity and some norms and rules about the reciprocity of expectations and actions. Organization lays ground for embeddedness (Granovetter). Different approaches including 'mass society theory', have emphasized the role of associations for social integration. The existence of and interaction in a network of intermediate, secondary relations provide a major bulwark against structural atomization of the individual, alienation, and divided tendencies. The greater the number and variety of associations in a communal group, the more solidarity is likely to be (Stinchcombe). Classic sociologist Emile Durkheim stated, that "a nation can be maintained only if, between the state and the individual, there is intercalated a whole series of secondary groups near enough to the individual to attract them strongly in their sphere of action and drag them in this way, into general torrent social life". The urgent need can be expected to be even higher in transnational democracy, the goal the EU is going for.

4. Empirical Reality of Associations in the European Union²

We have claimed, that associational life and associational self-governance must complement the principles of liberal democracy in order to make a democratic order, in particular a transnational one, work. The empirical question is whether the associational system of the EU is ready for such an option.

As concerns the empirical question, theories and research on collective action and social capital suggest several preconditions that have to be met to make conception of democracy which give associations an important role work. One central concern in this regard is the inequality of different interests in the ability to organize (Offe). With regard to the problem of democracy in the European Union, the obvious question thus is whether associational life and structure are already sufficiently developed to increase the responsiveness of the political order and institutions.

In particular, three questions are essential to evaluate the possible contribution of associations to responsiveness and democracy at the European level. The first question is whether they emerge at the European level and why. The second question is whether association systems are rather selective or encompassive. Taking up Robert A. Dahls dimension of inclusiveness, associational systems can be inclusive or exclusive. This characterizes whether the whole array of existing associations encompasses existing interests and needs. In terms of organizational characteristics the question is whether interests are fragmented or not. These characteristics also reflect the problems of inequality and organizationability. The third question is how associations connect to political processes, in particular how they connect to political actors like political parties as well as to political institutions like the European Parliament and the European Commission. The first question is essential in the sense that something which does not exist can also not contribute. It furthermore reflects the question of motivation. In the concept of associational

² Empirical findings have been first presented by the author at the conference "Dimensions of Contestation in the European Union", Center for European Studies, Chapel Hill, April 30 –May 2, 2000. For more details see Gary Marks and Marco Steenbergen (eds.), *Political Contestation in the European Union*, forthcoming.

democracy, organizations are thought of as initiatives for responsible self-governance rather than reflections of the need of self-defense against the state. The second question points to the problem that association systems characterized by inequality and selectivity cannot contribute to responsiveness and democracy. Thirdly, the question whether associations may contribute to the responsiveness of an existing liberal democratic order depends on their access and alliances with actors in representative institutions.

Reaction – Anticipation – Self-Governance

The history of interest group systems in nation states shows that in many cases the competencies of the state have been the primary motive for founding interest groups. Trade associations, for example, have been founded to protect national capital against foreign capital. Other examples show that the state invited social interests to organize as an interest group in order to have a counterpart to speak to. Many further examples illustrate that increasing competencies of the state have brought about interest groups. In this case, the pattern of interest group formation obviously is reaction. The implication is that only if there is something to be contested a motive for organization arises. But this is obviously just half of the story of democracy. At least of the same substance and relevance have been organized movements fighting for the right to contest and the right to self-govern – the bourgeois and labor movements in the first wave of democratization, civil rights movements in the most recent wave. Another possible pattern is that interest groups form in *anticipation* of increasing competencies of the state or expected regulations by the state. In this case, one motive for organization is to influence scope and intensity of state interference, another to be early prepared to react to policy proposals as outcomes of general competence increase. For this pattern many historical examples exist, too. With regard to the emergence of associations at the European level, two hypotheses compete: Emil Kirchners circle of institutionalization assumes reaction to growing competencies of the European state; Beate Kohler-Koch argues that association formation did not parallel an

increase of political competencies but that anticipation of the European dimension in a rather vague sense stimulated the emergence.

Empirical findings show that meanwhile almost 900 EU-level associations have emerged, most of them umbrellas in which almost 9000 national associations are engaged. Thus associational life at the European level is quite vivid and complex. Eyeballing and systematical analysis by means of regression analyses of the founding patterns show an almost perfect support for the reaction hypothesis. As was often the case in nation states the formation of associations and interest groups can be regarded as a correlate of the growing competence of the „European state“. Supranational interest organizations seem to come into being with the growing power of European political institutions.

The conclusion to draw is quite straight forward: since waves of interest group foundations follow principal institutional changes, the major motive for interests is to have a say with regard to policy proposals in the enlarged area of competencies of the European state. This would mean that demand for specialized functional representation rather than self-governance is the source of associational life.

Inequality - Diversity– Alliances

One central problem of a democratic order based on associations is concerned with the limitations of feasibility of collective action and its resulting inequalities. In addition to the well-known problem of inequality and asymmetry between different interests, sectors and domains, at the European level exist also the problem of inequalities between nations. Whereas differences in organizational density between nation states, ranging from a low 20 percent in Spain to more than 80 percent in Sweden may be not important to internal politics this is different at the European level. If different sizes of societies or economies do result in different participation rates this would mean inequality between interests under the assumption that there is no justification that one and the same interest should have a different chance of articulation depending on the country where it comes from. Indeed, empirical findings show a quite strong correlation of the number of associations that countries are represented by and population size, an even

stronger one for size of the economy measured by GNP and again stronger for size of export. However, the scope of interests in smaller societies and economies might be smaller. Some interests just might not exist. This is supported by the finding that the relationship between trade-dependency and associational strength of a nation at the European level washes out the differences caused by size, be it population, GDP, or exports.

Concerning the question of scope and character of the EU organizational system findings show that associations of economic interests in a broader sense are the largest segment with industry being the largest among them. Public interest groups and those concerned with more general interest representation make up not more than about one fifth of all associations. Although the scope as such encompasses even so-called weak interests like consumers', environmentalists', women's etc., in quantitative terms inequality in favor of economic interests seems to prevail. But degree of functional specialization and European scope suggest that economic interests are much more fragmented. The economic sphere thus is characterized by pluralistic structures, the sphere of public interests in contrast by concentration and encompassive associations. In this arena the potential for solving the aggregation and responsiveness problems as well as the chance for self-governance are much higher.

In terms of representation, empirical results show that associations form alliances with political parties not only at the national level but also at the EU level. In a typical way, the structure of alliances can be seen as based on cleavage structures which exist in modern democracies. Access patterns to elected representatives show that there is what one might call a "labor alliance" between left parties and labor unions, a "bourgeois alliance" between liberal to conservative parties and economic interests, and an "alliance of the weak" between green-libertarian parties and public interest associations namely consumers and environmentalists. Thus, channels of representation providing some compensation of the number problem of representation in liberal democracy exist.

5. Associations and the Future of European Democracy

The empirical findings on the overall pattern of structure, scope, and alliances of voluntary associations and interest groups at the European level indeed support the notion that also a transnational polity cannot exist without an important role of associations in the policy process. Even more, one can argue that associations are even more important than at the national level. However, the self-governing capacities seems still rather limited, associations rather a watchdog of European policy making. Only a small segment of existing associations aim at self-governance and are encompassing enough to do so. The support for the foundation and participation of associations by the European Parliament and the European Commission will help to develop the associational system further. In conjunction with the trend of institutional change toward parliamentarization this will help to develop mechanisms of “Verhandlungsdemokratie”, complementing liberal principles. However, already now the number, scope and structure of associations suggest that a second tier which serves as a supplement to majority rule has emerged. A pattern of consensus orientated policy-making in which associations play a crucial role is not unlikely and in some areas (for example labor) already emerging.

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