

## Democracy and Accountability in the Enlarged European Union

### Democracy-Building in the EU: Preconditions, Achievements and Instruments for Reform

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*DRAFT!!! DO NOT EVEN THINK OF QUOTING!!!*

Contribution for the Joint Conference

Democracy and Accountability in the Enlarged European Union

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin  
Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych, Warsaw  
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften / Research Unit for Institutional Change and European Integration, Wien

In cooperation with

Arbeitskreis Europäische Integration e.V.

Tagung im Rahmen des von der Europäischen Kommission geförderten Programms

CONVEU-30  
From the Convention to the IGC:  
Mapping Cross-National Views towards an EU-30



7 – 8 March 2003  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
D – 10719 Berlin

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## I. Introduction

A lot of European citizens find themselves in an awkward situation: On the one hand the comparisons of democratic quality between the EU's political system and memberstates systems (Coultrap 1999, Moravscik 2002, Zweifel 2002) show that the EU is at least as democratic as its memberstates. Of course, this is hardly satisfying – it only turns our attention to the democratic deficiencies of the nationstate. The perceived loss of parliamentary control over European decision-making, the image of Brussels symbolizing a faceless and homeless technocracy contributes to the increasing alienation with the integration project. On the other hand the EU's problem-solving capacity provides a major source of its legitimacy. But replacing representativity and responsiveness with effectiveness would lead to what F. Scharpf has called the 'benevolent diffusion of responsibility' (Scharpf 1985, p.349) and bring us back to the discussions of early liberalism and even 'enlightened absolutism'. The legitimacy of political systems is normally dependent upon an acceptable mixture between representativity and effectiveness. These two dimensions may be mutually supportive, but there are also elements of conflict (Anderson/Eliassen 1996). The tendency to emphasize effectiveness at the expense of parliamentary control is a constant danger – embodied for instance in the practice of national parliamentary power in European politics. They may have strong formal rights to scrutinize their government's European policy but in praxi they resemble toothless tigers (Pollak/Slominski 2003).

The title of this conference talks one into believing that we have a problem with democracy in Europe's complex multi-level system of governance characterised by pluri-centric hubs of decision-making. Since the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty at the latest the "democratic deficit" of the EC has been a key-term of political science literature. This term has been used to describe various – perceived and/or real – deficiencies of the European integration process. It might be a good idea to start by asking what we mean by democracy. In a general sense denotes a method by which society exercises influence on the process of governmental decision-making. Democratic deficiency then generally signifies that the flow of influence from the people to government is impeded in some way (Coultrap 1999). According to Craig (1999, 23f) different but interwoven features can be distinguished:

- (a) the 'distance issue': The extension of the Community competences has involved the transfer of authority to Brussels and thus away of the nation state. This has meant that matters are further removed from the citizens thereby questioning the Community's legitimacy. A remote, faceless European technocracy decides about the fate of the citizenry without the possibility to be called to account.
- (b) the 'executive dominance issue': The integration process enhances the power of the executive bodies (Council and Commission) at the expense of parliamentary bodies. This is because of the dominance of the Council as well as the European Council in the decision-making process of the EC. The national parliament's power to scrutinize their governments is hampered by their incapability to keep pace with the European legislative process. The European Parliament due to its rather limited powers, lack of voters interest and absence of any developed party systems does not remove the problem.

- (c) the ‘bypassing of democracy argument’. The “underworld” (Weiler 1999) of the complex committee structure, known as Comitology, serves as the most prominent example of this argument. Technocrats and interest groups dominate the policy-making excluding more regular channels of democratic governance.
- (d) the ‘transparency and complexity issue’. The very complexity of the legislative procedures mean that it is virtually impossible for even experts to understand them. In addition much of the decision-making of the Union takes place behind closed doors.
- (e) the ‘substantive imbalance issue’. It is argued that the most important element in a democratic polity is to maintain the balance between market liberalisation and social protection (Scharpf 1999). The EU cannot maintain this balance despite overwhelming support for the maintenance of welfare systems because of a mere liberal bias in the constitutional structure of the EU and the rhetoric that surrounds it which favours market liberalisation over social protection (Scharpf 1999; see also Moravcsik 2002, 617).
- (f) the ‘weakening of judicial control issue’. A number of legal systems possess courts which have powers, either ex-ante or ex-post, over constitutionality of primary legislation. The transfer of competence to the Community means that such powers are thereby reduced in scope.

In customary representative democracy this is equated with a loss of parliamentary control over governmental decision-making. As a solution the democratic deficit critique of the EU assumes that the transformation of societal preferences into governmental action at the supranational level ought to take place through the same types of institutional mechanisms as those found at the national level – i.e. elections, parties and a parliament to strengthen ‘input legitimacy’. But is the blueprint of parliamentary democracy as we know it from the memberstates the right model?

A different body of literature, however, claims that the assumption of a democratic deficit of the EU is based on a superficial knowledge of the EU and an idealized understanding of democracy, which evaluates the EU’s democratic quality against ideal criteria of national systems. As Moravcsik (2002) and Zweifel (2002) maintain the EU does not fare badly when compared with the daily practice of national parliamentary and representative democracies. They therefore call for a more detailed analysis of the EU as well as realistic models of democracy, which should take the institutionalised means for establishing various constraints of political systems more into account.

Renaud Dehousse (1998, 2001) has pointed out, that the current institutional arrangement of Europe’s multi-level system of governance is dominated by two different paradigms. First, the existence of two parliamentary levels, namely the European Parliament as well as the fifteen national parliaments, indicate that Europe’s multi-level system of governance still work as a traditional parliamentary oriented political system. Secondly, another branch of literature principally views the European Community as a special purpose organization (*funktionaler Zweckverband*, Ipsen 1972), whose primary task is to achieve certain policy goals in a more efficient way than the member states acting alone.

The legitimacy of the parliamentarian-representative model is based on the general election of a legislative assembly whose purpose is to meet, talk and pass laws. Especially the last function grants a leading role to parliaments vis-à-vis the other two governmental branches (executive, judiciary) – at least in formal terms. Democratically elected representatives are making political assessments and concrete decisions for which they are – after a given period of time – responsible to the electorate. As the well-known Brunner-Case by the German Constitutional Court (BVerfGE 89, 155) shows it is this model of democracy that still serves

as the normative point of reference assessing the democratic quality of the EC. According to this, decisions made by the institutions of the EC derive their legitimacy primarily from the national parliaments and to a lesser extent from the European Parliament.

The regulatory model conceives the Community as a special purpose organization whose activities are confined to certain policy fields. “Highly political” decisions, especially in the sensitive area of (re-)distributive politics, cannot be made by supranational institutions such as the European Parliament or the European Commission. Decisions of that kind still have to be made by the member states. Regulatory politics can only work when it is based on (a) expertise and (b) when it proves to be resistant towards “political” influence (Joerges 2002, 27). On the European level several institutions have so far been created to fulfil both criteria such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank, the European Court of Justice and a bunch of so-called regulatory agencies.

Due to their institutional structure, it is widely undisputed that regulatory agencies are able to pursue policy goals in a more coherent, consistent and efficient way than traditional institutions which are subject to political influence in their day-to-day operation. Conversely, these institutions appear normatively questionable just because of this independence from politics. How can it be ensured that the decision-makers within these institutions act responsive? An adequate system has to meet the following two criteria: First, due to the fact that the main reason of establishing agencies is their immunity from political influence any responsive system has to respect the independence of the regulatory decision making process. By doing so, any institutional setting has to make sure that not a single institution – let alone a politically dominated one – controls the decision making process. Secondly, given that direct political influence is no longer possible, we have to turn our attention to more indirect measures like transparency, due process, contestability of decisions, clear legal objectives, budgetary measures and rules of appointment etc.

The two models are not mutually exclusive, they co-exist in the highly complex system of the EU and in the memberstates too. Additionally, the perception of a democratic deficit of the EU result from ‘division of labour’ between the memberstates and the Union, the former specializing in functions that “tend to involve less direct political participation” (Moravcsik 2002, 606).

Despite the increase of power of the European Parliament since 1979 the complex multi-level system of the EU is still dominated by non-majoritarian institutions such as European Commission, European Court of Justice, European Central Bank, the dense web of expert committees and independent agencies. But this dominance does not constitute a democratic deficit per se because, as said above, representation (election) has to be complemented by responsiveness. Consequently, a mere transfer of decision-making power from the Council to the EP cannot guarantee a proper democratic system representing the multiple interests, cultures, regions feelings etc. of contemporary societies. Instead we have to focus on a more process-oriented approach comprising fair procedures and transparency. This makes the emergence of a political public, receptive for the European agenda, possible. Such a public is a necessary pre-condition for the exchange of rational arguments in order to control and scrutinize the performance of the representatives. The fiction of *one* deliberative assembly materialising the will of the ‘people’ and *one* public which controls, acclaims or rebels belongs to the early history of democratic theory (Benhabib 1996, 74; Peters 1994, 56). The plurality of associations such as parties, grass-roots organisations, lobbies, NGOs etc. builds the reality of complex societies. This network of publics also fulfills the task of information and provides a “problem solving capacity (Bohman 1996, 240). Additionally, it allows for

reasonable, well-founded and critically assessed insights, solutions and the setting of public objectives which transcend the egoistic individual horizon of interest (Peters 1994, 47).

The condensed classical formulation of democratic 'control' principles is to be found in Rousseau's *Contrat Social*: According to Rousseau the sovereign must always have the opportunity to ask two questions: The first should be 'Does it please the Sovereign to preserve the present form of government?' And the second: 'Does it please the people to leave the administration with those who are at present charged with it?' Bagehot formulated it a bit less prosaic by saying that democracy is a system which, according to a set of established rules, allows to 'throw the scoundrels out'. Is this possible in the institutional arrangement of the multi-level system European Union?

## II. What are the Preconditions of Democracy?

340 BC Aristotle answered this question by constructing the model of the *spoudaios*, the mature man capable of keeping his emotions and desires in check executing a social order based on written laws and a strong middle class. A model which returns some 1600 years later in the Italian Renaissance in the new clothes of humanism – accumulated by early English Liberalism which clearly repeated Aristotle's scepticism that only the few are capable of knowledge. Today, our answers do not seem to have advanced very far: we still refer to social stability in terms of cleavages which can be bridged, to the rule of law and to the *spoudaios* nowadays called the expert. And we traded the visualization of power (e.g. in monumental symbols) for transparency in the visibility of the decision-making systems. Or at least, that is what we tend to pretend. All these elements might be found in the EU too.

1) The rule of law: there is hardly any doubt that we can call the EU a product of integration by law, nobody questions the important role of the ECJ. But as soon as one delves among what is called the micro-physics of power one will find a slightly more complex picture. In the daily business of applying EC law law officers and judges find it quite difficult to say farewell to positivism and the hierarchy of norms resulting in a rather slack implementation. At least this is what we found out in a comprehensive study about the implementation of EC-law in Austria<sup>1</sup>.

2) The second issue, transparency, is tightly knit to education: a certain amount of which is needed to follow the process of public deliberation, to understand the scope and possible solutions for a given problem. Still, we have an incredible amount of people simply absolutely ignorant about the policy-making mechanisms at the European level prone to fall victim to the Siren songs of national politicians. At the national level it appears that we have grown accustomed to the increasing indifference towards politics – how many citizens understand how laws are enacted in their countries? At the supranational level enthusiasm still prevails: common curricula, master courses, and soon networks of excellence boom all over Europe. Though we still have (as a heritage stemming from the stabilization of the nation state) extremely national, if not to say nationalistic educational systems moves into a European direction can be seen.

3) The third precondition is normally called collective identity, a sufficiently homogenous people, a *demos*. What this homogeneity consists of is highly unclear. Nevertheless, such a dubious thing might be necessary to a certain degree for majoritarian democracy – but as Hix

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<sup>1</sup> B. Bapuly/G. Kohlegger, *The Implementation of Community Law – The Judiciary*, Vienna: Manz, ed. by M. Schweitzer/S. Puntischer Riekmann (forthcoming)

and Lord have so impressively shown, we have an extreme consensus democracy at the supranational level. All the major reforms required unanimous amendment of the Treaty of Rome, i.e. consent by today 15 governments, followed by subsequent parliamentary ratification. Even everyday legislation must secure approximately 70% of the weighted votes of national ministers sitting in the Council of the EU.<sup>2</sup> The whole model is based on the convergence of interests, on the rational and public exchange of arguments and on shared objectives. I would like to call that participatory identity: it is only by participating in common political procedures that a kind of solidarity develops. Therefore, the European taxpayers need to understand where their money is going and why as Romano Prodi has formulated it.<sup>3</sup>

### III. Achievements

Again I am starting with my favourite Aristotle. What do we gain by using a certain kind of democracy as the means to decide political issues? Aristotle would answer this question with conviction and enthusiasm: we come closer to fulfill our human nature by reaching *eudaimonia*, happiness! Unfortunately, this answer seems a bit oldfashioned today since political philosophy has long ago decided to separate ethics from politics. Thus, we have to search for new answers.

Economists will tell us that democracy is good for reducing transaction costs. The more people involved in decision-making the lower the costs to implement a decision. This of course, is also a matter of the scope of the problem we want to solve. Being, for a long time an out-put oriented Leviathan, the EU has obviously been perceived as a quite efficient mechanism for the solution of inter- and transnational problems. Calls for democratisation of the Community increased throughout the 1980s, resulting in a series of changes, ranging from the Single European Act to the Amsterdam Treaty. In terms of institutional achievement the EU has certainly managed to widen the scope of people participating in a decision: from the assent to the co-decision procedure, from paternalism to subsidiarity, the EP's right of approval of the Commission president, access to the minutes of Council when acting in legislative capacity, together with the votes and an explanation for them etc. We have certainly arrived at a sophisticated balance of power.

But this system has also dispersed and disguised responsibility. The Eurobarometer data show a constant decrease in permissive consensus - a necessary precondition for a benevolent dictatorship or enlightened absolutism. So, we have an efficient system but nevertheless people are not happy. It might even be worth then to start wondering why we do not have revolutions in Europe? Is it because the *spoudaiou* in its liberal version has become the role model so far? Is it simply because people do not care what is going on at the supranational level? Because they are kept in the dark on purpose therefore providing their governments with a comfortable free hand? This would mean that the EU has a certain public relations deficit but this cannot be the only answer.

One of Europe's political slogans is bringing the Union closer to its citizens – by this the Council seems to understand a kind of public relations campaign launched to win back the

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2 Statistically speaking, it is harder to pass an everyday piece of legislation in the EU than to amend the American or German Constitution (Moravcsik 2003).

3 Speech by President of the European Commission Romano Prodi to the European Parliament, "2000-2005: Shaping the New Europe", Speech/00/41, 15 February 2000

diffuse permissive consens. Commission President Prodi wants to win back the hearts by “addressing the issues that really matter to people’s everyday lives”. Thus the predominant objective seems to be to act in the interest of the citizens **but not** to invent and introduce procedures which enable those citizens to influence the political decision making process according to their self defined interests.

We also need to take the national level into account since we have reached a degree of fusion which does not allow to regard only one side of the coin. National parliaments have been rather slow in adapting to the new policy-making procedures. Some of them, like Austria or Denmark have introduced quite strong provision to control what their governments are doing at the European stage. Unfortunately, the development of the cartel party and party government have rendered a lot of the new instruments useless (see Pollak/Slominski 2003). What is needed is a reform of national parliamentary EU committees – increasing the rights of the opposition, making explanatory memoranda obligatory etc. and first and foremost providing parliaments with adequate financial and personnel resources.

Another reason for the increasing number of uninterested citizens might be that the the EU does not deal with salient issues suitable to attract the interest of a larger public. Andrew Moravcsik talks about the technical character of EU matters and Phillipe Schmitter proposes as a remedy to grant the Commission the right to start a massive re-distribution of wealth by replacing the agricultural support and the structural funds by a guaranteed minimum income for the poorest one third of Europeans. A nice but utopian solution. What remains as the core achievement of the integration process is an unprecedented period of wealth and peace on this continent.

#### **IV. Instruments for Reform**

##### *Ex-Post Control*

A plethora of good ideas are on the table and most of them are already applied to a certain degree. It is not that we do not have enough Madisons in Europe – on the contrary, it is quite difficult enough to keep track with the tons of ink spent on reform suggestions. Opening up the Council for more transparency, increasing the role for the EP, introducing double majority, a re-distribution of seats in the EP to reach a more proportional representation, a simplification of the Treaties, reform of the Comitology by granting the Commission a greater say etc. We are too often exclusively concentrating on the Council as such but only 15% are decided by the ministers, the large majority of issues is settled by national civil servants bargaining within the Council’s technocracy. How can we make **them** accountable? Only by transparency and ex-post control.<sup>4</sup> By statutory objectives for performance standards, reasoning and transparency requirements facilitating judicial and parliamentary review, due process revisions etc. And therefore we need stronger national parliaments.

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4 One could also think of P. Schmitter (2001) ideas for controlling what he calls “European Governance Arrangements”. Schmitter describes several principles which would make the supranational level more legitimate: 1. the principle of mandated authority, i.e. a clear and circumscribed mandate for EGAs is necessary; 2. the sunset principle: EGAs should not be chartered for an indefinite period, a pre-established date at which it should expire is needed (renewal possible); 3. the principle of functional separability: no EGA should be chartered to accomplish a task that is not sufficiently differentiated from tasks already being accomplished by others; 4. the principle of supplementarity: no duplication, no displacement of existing institutions; 5. the principle of requisite variety: each EGA should be free to establish the internal procedures that its participants deem appropriate for accomplishing the task assigned to it; 6. the high rim or anti-spill-over principle: no committee should be allowed by its mandating institution to exceed the tasks originally delegated to it.

### *Mechanism for Revision or nothing is for good in a democracy*

What I do not share is the sudden love for Conventions: conventions have only been successful when they overstepped their mandate, the best example being Philadelphia. Its participants might reflect the daily decision-making procedures of the EU but it is surely no representative body – a fact also recognized by Giscard d’Estaing. A body of 105 people (haunted by the creeping advance of foreign ministers) supposed to represent more than 400 million European citizens – a relation not really statistically significant. The European Convention would doubtless be more representative if it included more of the almost 50% of EU citizens who, according to the EU’s own polls, would be either ‘indifferent’ or indeed very ‘very relieved’ if the EU were to be scrapped. If this sounds too dangerous an idea we should dismiss majoritarian, representative democracy.

Then, how can we justify the Convention? Normally we differentiate between three sources of representation – not all of them can be found in the case of the European Convention: first, authorisation and democratic accountability: As such authorisation is tied to the accountability of the representative to the represented, a feature absent in Hobbes’ account of authorisation. No participant in the Convention has been explicitly authorised for his/her role –and it is highly doubtful that the participants actions in the Convention will play a role in the next respective national elections. Second, presence or shared identity: That someone shares an identity with me under some description does not entail they can legitimately represent me in the absence of my authorisation. And finally epistemic values: it is better knowledge, expertise or judgement which is taken to allow an individual to speak or act on behalf of some group. So we are back to Aristotles again.

Nevertheless, the Convention and the Forum have sparked a fascinating debate reflecting a dazzling variety of suggestions. Among the most interesting things, at least from the point of enhancing democracy is the idea of European-wide referenda to ratify the future Constitution. De Villepain has already spoken about the importance of a “foundational act” that would allow the citizens to endorse the constitution. Having a referendum at the same time as the European elections in June 2004 was already proposed by Giscard d’Estaing. Denmark and Ireland are sure to organise referenda, Portugal is sympathetic, Austria rather reluctant. The constitutionally necessary changes are not likely to occur in Germany. But what to do with those electorates who reject the constitution? From a legal point of view such a rejection means the end of the Constitution and not the automatic withdrawal from the Union. Politically it would just confirm today’s reality: the Europe of different speeds.

### *Competences*

I am also not that sceptical as some of my colleagues when it comes to what is always portrayed as the wish of the German Länder: to draw up a comprehensive list of competences. Article 12 of the the Prasediums draft is quite bold. It does not matter if we cannot draw up an unambiguous list – in the end we even nowadays leave it to the ECJ to decide. We should simply think about better ressources for the Court. E.g. the amendment of the Statute of the ECJ by qualified majority Council decision instead of unanimity as is currently the case.

### *The Public*

It might be a bold step to have the Commission president selected by direct elections – this would have the advantage of bringing Europe closer to the people instead of having the EP

decide – a body perceived as being quite remote by the majority of citizens. Imagine the possible mobilisation effect: candidates touring the memberstates with a competitive programme. Up to now the apathy of large parts of the EU citizens would not allow for such bold measures since it is very likely that more participation encourages informationally impoverished and unstructured deliberation which in turn encourages unstable plebiscitary politics in which individuals have no incentive to reconcile their concrete interests with their immediate choices (Moravcsik 2003) as was the case in the 2001 Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty.

One could also argue that such a procedure – be it direct election or election by the EP – just further complicates the already incomprehensible institutional arrangement. In a federation where the chambers share legislative authority at federal level but do not have executive authority at that level either separately or jointly, a third party is required. This has led some to suppose, by analogy to the US, that the EU similarly requires a third party to supply executive functions – the Commission being the obvious candidate for such a ‘presidential’ function. But the EU does not suffer an executive vacuum. The Council has sole executive authority, and it presides over a divided administration to which authority is delegated, part of which is supranational – the Commission – and the larger part of which is transnational – COREPER. Furthermore, would the Council permit the electorate much say about which candidates be put up for election (Dobson 2003)? Moreover, this would imply a substantial re-orientation of European democracy: from consensus oriented towards competitive Europe.

### *Simplification*

The final product of the Convention – given the Iraq crisis it might be useful not to stick to the ambitious schedule but rather to finish in autumn 2003 – should be considered - as the ‘Penelope document’ seems to advocate – as a new constitutional treaty which replaces and repeals the current treaties. The terms of enforcement, e.g. by Europe-wide referenda still need to be defined. But again this sounds a bit of futuristic – we will rather end up with a draft constitution leaving it to the IGC to ensure that a treaty is drafted for replacement. Simplification does not only consist in a re-organisation of the Treaties but also in institutional fine-tuning ranging from e.g. a reduction in the number of Commissioners to having the Council Secretary General presiding the Council meetings. What should also be enshrined in the new constitution is the right of withdrawal – this is simply a basic democratic principle. Democracy always entails the danger of having the electorate saying no. And as Dahl (1998) has said “democracy can be independently invented and reinvented whenever appropriate conditions exist”.

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