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Europe's defective democracies

Declining voter turnout and the rise of populist parties: the EU elections are a litmus test for the resilience of European democracy and cohesion

The level of democracy across the world, according to recent data, has fallen back to the same level as in 1989. This pretty much wipes out the past 30 years of democratic progress. And while democracy has been on the retreat, 33 countries (with 36 per cent of the world population) have turned towards autocracy. A similar process can be observed in a fifth of the EU member states, with Hungary and Poland leading the way, followed by Bulgaria and Romania. This applies in particular to the lack of institutional balance between the judicial, executive and legislative branches.

Many EU member states are also characterised by significant government turnover. In 21 states, there has been at least one change of government over the past two scheduled terms of office. Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, there have been four, in Austria six and in Italy and Romania seven. In five EU states, the government lacks a parliamentary majority. And if that wasn't enough, the Franco-German axis is no longer the engine driving major European issues. Even other alliances such as 'Visegrad' or the 'Frugal Four' are currently incapacitated. This disarray within the framework of the European Council appears to have made it easier to block decision-making.

A trend towards exclusive democracy

The European Commission is the winner in all this. Even more than in previous crises, it has been able to use new mechanisms (Troika, European Semester, deficit procedure) to acquire new competences or have them bestowed by the European Council. Following the blueprint of the Communitised vaccine rollout, this model has been extended to other sectors and products. Examples include the raw materials strategy, arms and the procurement of energy sources. This represents an alarming transformation towards expertocracy.

The coming two years will provide an even bigger stress test for the EU system. The world is currently in a 'geopolitical depression' as a result of escalating rivalries between economic and military blocs. This has led to a global rearmament even on the part of countries such as Japan, which hitherto pursued a peace-oriented policy. In the face of ever-increasing energy costs and inflation, a strengthening of radical forces at the expense of the democratic centre is not out of the question. In light of this development and in relation to the European Parliament elections in 2024, the question arises of how Europe can maintain democratic unity.

The decrease of voter turnout and the success of populist parties is striking. It is an indication of how unimportant political participation has become for most citizens.

Although in May 2022, Emmanuel Macron managed to prevail over right-wing populist Marine Le Pen in the presidential run-off in France, democratic support for his mandate is at a low point, with a turnout of only 60 per cent – last seen in 1969. Macron, being well aware of this problem, expressly addresses non-voters: 'your lack of enthusiasm indicates a reluctance to come down one way or the other. We need to do something about that.' In Germany, Chancellor Scholz has also come under criticism, because his democratic legitimacy depends on a mere 25 per cent of voters. In contrast to France and Germany, a right-wing populist party, the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*), was elected to government in Italy with the lowest turnout in the country's history (at only 64 per cent). The trend is thus towards 'exclusive democracy', in which substantial parts of civil society decline to exercise their right to vote.

The same picture presents itself in Europe as a whole. In Western Europe, turnout fell from an average of 82 per cent in 1975 to 75 per cent in 2012. In Eastern Europe, developments are even more dramatic, with a fall in turnout from 72 per cent in 1991 to 57 per cent in 2012. Electoral turnout at the European elections fell from 62 per cent in 1979 to 51 per cent in 2019.

In all elections, the decrease of voter turnout and the success of populist parties is striking. It is an indication of how unimportant political participation in 'res publica' has become for most citizens. Are we facing the collapse of democracy or are mature democracies nevertheless doing better than 50 years ago?

Social divisions

On one hand, the situations of women, minorities and liberal rights have improved significantly. On the other hand, the privileged have become all too well-entrenched in their two-thirds democracy. The bottom third has fallen behind economically, socially and culturally. This is the broken promise of democracy, which, besides freedom, must also be based on equality. In the absence of that, it can accurately be described as defective democracy.

A recent survey showed that Europeans strongly approve of democracy as an idea. By contrast, satisfaction with how it actually works is much lower. People who are dissatisfied with democratic institutions are not necessarily hostile to the system but rather disappointed with its performance. The real problem here is not the level of voter turnout but the social selectivity that goes hand in hand with it. It can be accepted as an empirical rule of thumb that social exclusion rises as turnout falls.

The economic division of society is mirrored in public debate, which is shaped by cosmopolitan elites and the educated middle classes.

The combination of globalisation and market deregulation has exacerbated social divisions in developed societies: into rich and poor, educated and uneducated, mobile and immobile. The distribution of life chances is not based primarily on individual achievements but is subject above all to the accident of birth. The lower strata have every reason to be sceptical of our democracy's promise of equality.

The economic division of society is mirrored in public debate, which is shaped by cosmopolitan elites and the educated middle classes. They advocate open borders for goods, services, capital and people, whether workers or refugees. They are willing to give up national sovereignty in order to be able to solve transnational, sometimes even supranational problems at the European or global level. Amidst such uncertainty, dependent workers become increasingly attracted to communitarian positions. They are characterised by traditional values, embeddedness in an easily imaginable or tractable community and trust in the nation-state, while at the same time distrusting supranational governance such as in the EU. Right-wing populist parties thrive on such lines of conflict, projecting cultural prejudices onto them.

From a trade union standpoint, economic inequality is the cause of the crisis of democracy. Over the past 20 years, the financialisation of the world economy, with simultaneous income and wealth inequality, has accelerated dramatically. In Europe, for example, 10 per cent of the most

affluent households own 50 per cent of the wealth, while the 40 per cent least affluent own a mere 3 per cent (OECD 2017). This economic inequality could be offset by redistribution, but government impotence and the sway of financial elites have thwarted this. Political disparities are evident in the fact that in the OECD overall, the average share of the working class in the national parliament is 5 per cent, compared with a share of 58 per cent in the population as a whole.

The European elections – a litmus test for democracy

In recent decades, political inequality has also been tipped in favour of asset owners by the depoliticisation of economic and fiscal policy. Decision-making in these areas is in the hands of institutions with no direct responsibility to the electorate. Deregulated global capitalism has been hollowing out nation-states' democratic capabilities. One example among others is the case of central banks, whose influence has been enhanced by their efforts to cope with financial crises. This has been described as 'authoritarian liberalism'.

Political 'street fighting' triggered by the renunciation of social dialogue and social partnership, as in France and the United Kingdom, cannot provide a model for Europe. Trade unions and company codetermination are a key democratic element when it comes to shaping transformation processes in a socially acceptable way. The European elections coming up in 2024 are thus a litmus test for the resilience of European democracy and its powers of mobilisation, but also for European cohesion.

In other words: politics from the bottom up, not imposed from the top down.

Turnout at the European elections of 2019 varied greatly, ranging from 60 per cent in Germany to 29 per cent in Slovakia. In 2020, as a first step, the European Parliament launched an electoral law reform aimed at strengthening the *Spitzenkandidat* principle, as well as introducing a second vote with which European candidates can be elected via transnational election lists. These reforms, as well as the strengthening of the European Parliament as EU legislator, are key to getting the democratic sovereign involved, namely European citizens.

But that is not enough to win back voters. The dialogue format within the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe could

represent a second step towards bringing the voters' real issues into the political debate. Bolstering social partnership and company codetermination in the member states would be a further step towards bringing the needs and concerns of a wide range of occupational groups and social strata to the attention of policymakers. Politics, in other words, from the bottom up, not imposed from the top down.



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