

## The EU doesn't want to be more democratic

The European Union (EU) has had a democratic legitimacy problem for years: Its governing bodies—with the exception of those that consist of national leaders and ministers—are neither particularly responsive nor accountable to ordinary European voters. And, as the latest failed attempt to reform them has shown, they like it this way, for all the rhetoric about the need to overcome the democratic deficit.

Voters have influence on the EU via two channels. One is electing national leaders, who, through the EU Council, set general policy guidelines for the bloc. The leaders also pick ministers who collectively serve as co-legislators with the European Parliament. Directly electing the 751 members of this parliament is the other channel of influence. But few ordinary voters understand what the parliament is about—something that has helped drive election turnout down to 43% in the last two elections from a respectable 62% in 1979, when the EU's predecessor organization was much smaller. Once in Brussels, legislators from national parties form into transnational factions with unfamiliar names and leaders; confusingly, they also can't propose laws—they have to ask the European Commission, the closest the EU has to a government, to introduce legislation. Most parliament members, for example, are opposed to daylight savings time, but they could only vote to ask the commission to conduct a "thorough assessment" of whether it should continue.

The president of the commission is chosen through another baffling process led by the transnational faction with the most votes in the European Parliament. Since voters don't directly choose this group, the appointment doesn't come across as democratic.

Now that the UK is leaving the EU, it's vacating 73 European Parliament seats. So some parliament members and experts came up with the idea of distributing them through a transnational vote. That, they argued, would present the parties as they exist in Brussels to the voters and allow them to campaign on platforms built upon European, not national issues. "At last, people in Europe could vote for whoever they thought would best represent them, rather than having to choose between existing national or regional parties," the proposal's supporters said this week in an open letter. "Citizens who have more in common with their peers across borders than their fellow nationals would finally be more connected and better represented." If the experiment worked, it could be gradually expanded to the entire parliament.

The proposal—backed by French President Emmanuel Macron and his counterparts in Spain and Italy—wouldn't fix the problem of the parliament's paltry powers, which hardly justify its more than \$2 billion annual budget. But at least voters would get a chance to figure out the difference between its political groups. For example, why is Portugal's leftist bloc part of the European United Nordic Green Left? If there's a good explanation, it's not easy enough to find.

If the European parties collected votes throughout Europe, it wouldn't just be clearer to voters what they stand for; they'd have a direct insight, and input, into the election of the commission president.

On Wednesday, however, the parliament voted down the transnational election experiment. Why? It would unduly complicate the election system and contradict the union's mission as a collection of nations, not one of parties spread across them. Instead, the parliament will simply cut the number of seats and redistribute some of the remaining British mandates.

At the same time, the parliament is opposed to abolishing the current selection process for the commission president, as some national leaders have proposed. Apparently, the current procedures appear open and democratic enough to the legislators who feel fine drawing higher

salaries than national legislators do in most of EU member nations while shouldering far less responsibility.

If the EU were serious about making its decision process more transparent and democratic, it might want to recall an old proposal from former UK foreign minister Jack Straw that the European Parliament be abolished altogether. National parliaments could delegate members a couple of times a year to vote on European legislation, or the process could simply be left to the councils of ministers: The nationally elected politicians on them already represent their countries' voters, and any European legislation already goes through them, anyway. The absence of a full-time parliament might even force the European Commission to limit its legislation-drafting activity and focus on a smaller list of priorities.

The transnational election idea actually works best as a mechanism to elect the commission president. Politicians including former German finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, former Polish foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski and the European Parliament's most fervent federalist Guy Verhofstadt have suggested variations on this idea. A political show on the scale of a US presidential election—and with candidates campaigning in every country of the bloc—could add to the EU's democratic legitimacy and give the bloc a public face on a par with superpower leaders, not just a top bureaucrat.

But there's no chance of such radical change with the current EU establishment bent on protecting the status quo even from more timid innovations. It's up to national leaders to move against the vested interests that are so bent on mystifying the voters they are meant to serve. **Bloomberg View**

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