

Democracy in the EU

The concept of 'democracy' refers to the involvement of the citizens in political decision-making. In practice, this is usually achieved through general elections, whereby all citizens are able to elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf in the national parliament. Another important aspect of democracy is the ability of the citizens to hold their representatives to account. Often this is also through elections, when the citizens are able to reflect on the decisions that have been made by their representatives and decide whether or not to re-elect them. Governments are usually held accountable to national parliaments, so the citizens can encourage their representatives to criticise any decisions that have been made by the government that they do not agree with.

The Debate about Democracy in the EU

The EU impacts upon the everyday life of all of its citizens. Many national laws originate in the EU, and the range of areas in which the EU can make laws is already large and increasing. In addition, laws made by the EU have **supremacy** over national laws. Because of this, it is important that EU citizens are involved in the decision-making process and that the EU is democratic. There are a number of ways through which the EU claims to be democratic; however, just how democratic its decision-making really is is the subject of debate.

How the EU is Democratic

The most obvious way in which the EU is democratic is that the European Parliament (EP) is composed of MEPs who are directly elected by the EU citizens. Since 1979, every five years elections are held in which EU citizens are able to elect MEPs to represent their views in the EU. A system of **proportional representation** is used to elect MEPs in all member states. The UK currently has 72 MEPs, and the last elections were held in 2009. Being able to elect MEPs also means that they are accountable to the people and citizens can choose not to re-elect them if they are unhappy with their performance.

Another way in which the opinions and interests of the citizens are represented in the EU is in the European Council and the Council of the European Union (also known as the Council of Ministers). Both of these institutions are made up of people from the national governments of the member states. As most national governments are elected by the people directly (the President of France is directly elected) or indirectly (the UK government is created from the political party that wins the majority of the seats in a general election), they are indirectly representing their citizens at the EU level. By voting to change the national government, citizens are also changing the way their views are represented in the EU, and so these institutions are also indirectly accountable to European citizens.

Thirdly, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) contained a section on improving democracy in the EU – Title II Provisions on Democratic Principles. Included in this is the introduction of a procedure called the 'Citizens' Initiative' whereby citizens of the EU can invite the European Commission to initiate a piece of legislation. At least one million citizens from a majority of the member states need to sign an initiative for it to be considered by the European Commission. In this way the citizens are able to become directly involved with decision-making at the EU level.

The Lisbon Treaty also increased the powers of the European Parliament, so that the elected representatives of the citizens get a greater say in decision-making, and increased the role of national parliaments in law-making. National parliaments now have the power to consider and to challenge any EU laws that they think should be made at a national rather than an EU level: thereby enforcing the **subsidiarity** principle.

Where the EU fails to be Democratic

The idea that the EU suffers from a **democratic deficit** is widely supported in academic circles. One cause of this complaint is that the EU appears too distant from its citizens. It is considered too complicated for the citizens to be sufficiently involved in its decision-making and a lack of transparency and education prevents them from understanding the nature of the EU and how they can influence it. Although the Lisbon Treaty improves transparency, the introduction of the Citizens' Initiative is not expected to be effective enough to improve the relationship between the EU and its citizens, as it is unlikely that many citizens will be aware of the opportunity that it provides.

Secondly, the powers of the EP, as the only directly elected EU institution, are weaker than those of other institutions. The EP is unable to propose legislation and only has the power to propose amendments to laws. Elections for the EP also suffer from a low turnout (in the UK only 34.7% of people voted in the 2009 EP election), so many citizens are not accepting the opportunity to influence decision-making. In addition, those who do vote tend to vote more on the basis of their opinions on national issues rather than European issues, due in part to a feeling of distance from the workings of the EU.

Thirdly, the European Commission is an entirely appointed institution, not democratically elected, and it has the monopoly of proposing laws: there is no competition over who has political authority and sets the agenda at the European level. EU citizens do not get a choice over who is part of this powerful body, and the Commission is only accountable to the European Parliament in its entirety: individual Commissioners who are performing badly cannot be sacked. The Commission lacks legitimacy: it is much too powerful for an institution that is not democratically representative of the EU citizens or accountable to them.

Quotes

'The resulting 'democratic deficit' would not be acceptable in a Community committed to democratic principles. Yet such a deficit would be inevitable unless the gap were somehow to be filled by the European Parliament.' Labour Politician David Marquand, 1979: the first recorded use of the term 'democratic deficit' in relation to European Economic Community, precursor to the EU.

'The functioning of the Union shall be founded on the principle of representative democracy.' Treaty of Lisbon, 2007, Title II Article 8A.1

'Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.' Treaty of Lisbon, 2007, Title II Article 8A.3

Technical Terms

Supremacy the principle that EU law is superior to national laws when the European Court of Justice has jurisdiction.

Subsidiarity the principle that decisions should be made at the lowest level and as close to the citizens as possible.

Democratic Deficit the idea that the EU is deficient in democracy and lacks democratic principles such as representation and accountability.

Proportional representation an electoral system whereby the number of votes a party receives is directly proportional to the number of seats they are given in the parliament.

Links

- http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/glossary/democratic_deficit_en.htm
- http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/glance/democracy/index_en.htm