In Elections We Trust: The State of European Democracy after the European Elections

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Elections are regarded as a yardstick for democracy. Thus, for many commentators the fact that populist parties such as the Front National, UKIP or the Five Star Movement gained over 20 per cent of votes in this election for the European parliament and that voter turnout overall was well below 50 per cent allows only one conclusion: European integration, and along with it all attempts to democratize the EU, have entered a deep, possibly hopeless crisis. Against this crisis diagnosis, I would argue that those who draw conclusions for the development of democratic structures from the conspicuous features of these election results are issuing a premature death sentence. The structures of European government may be laden with contradictions, which may explain the populist election successes or at least have favoured them, but the election campaign itself showed that the EU is becoming increasingly politicized.

The crisis diagnosis generally begins with one of two ideal typical ideas of democracy. The first implies that democracy is to be understood as self-government of a collective. The EU is then regarded as insufficiently integrated in society to claim the competences of political regulation in a legitimate manner. According to this understanding, Europe's citizens lack self-identification as a community and the associated intrinsic willingness to stand up for one another. In stronger terms: the EU is analysed as too abstract, too far removed from its citizens to be able to build such a relationship even in the medium term. The second line of criticism is more sober, albeit no less fundamental. Its argument is based on institutional quality and is expressed in the phrase 'democracy deficit'. From this perspective, democratic quality is measured by whether it is certain that politics is always aligned to the citizens' interests. The complex negotiation structure of supranational and intergovernmental elements in Europe, these critics maintain, prevents the EU from achieving the same measure of participation as in established national mechanisms.

At first glance, the results of the most recent European elections confirm both diagnoses. Even more, they appear to prove that all attempts to react to critique with reforms only intensify the problem, as Europe continues to grow and transform. Even those citizens who support the European idea in principle feel impotent in the face of the restructuring from above, it would appear, and turn away. This is the general explanation for the rise of the populists, a rise seen as corroding national and European democracy.

Yet those who make such a judgement overlook two developments; firstly, that the confrontation with European policy has become not only more polarized, but also more comprehensive, and secondly that the European institutions have changed over time in their confrontation with the opposition, in such a way that ascribes more and more significance to this confrontation. The fact that conflicts are staged on the European level and the broad interest spectrum is increasingly well represented is in itself a democratic achievement.

To understand this development, it is helpful to mask out the established value parameters for a moment and think of democracy not in relation to collective identities or the ballot's influence on policy. In their place, I suggest a republican understanding of democracy: it is not simply the

realization of a majority or common will that expresses democratic quality, but primarily the emergence, the openness and the dynamic of a political process itself. Only if political confrontation is sought and spaces are available in which a dialogue about political change is possible, does the opportunity arise for citizens to appropriate politics.

And in this respect, a number of balls have been set rolling in the EU. It is, after all, a relatively young idea that the European Union is regarded as an entity requiring democratic legitimation. The idea was not spread until after the controversy of the Maastricht Treaty, and has its cause in the competence growth of European policy and in the fading of the original foundation narratives (the peace narrative, which lost significance through the end of the Cold War, and the prosperity narrative, which lost persuasiveness when it became clear that the single market will always entail risks and losers). In the 1990s, the initial political reaction to this development was a re-balancing of European institutions. When these changes were felt to be inadequate, as they did not bring the desired effect of a return to the permissive consensus of earlier times, the European constitutional process was initiated from above. There was a brief hope that this process would reap approval from the electorate, yet its failure and the resort to the Treaty of Lisbon seemed to prove once and for all that European integration would only be achieved at the price of technocracy. A thought that intensified when, in reaction to the economic and financial crisis, the united executives of European politics shifted largely to legitimating governing on grounds of constraints.

The European elections mean a reversal of this style of politics and show that the politicization of European politics cannot be turned back. Although overshadowed in the media by the sharp polarization of the populist parties, this European election campaign was accompanied by debates on alternatives to the lack of alternatives, from many directions. The governing of Europe is taken more seriously, ideas and individuals are linked more strongly and the debates are no longer constricted to national issues and the economic climate. Rather, new issues are emerging that promise an autonomous profile for European election campaigns – data protection and internet policy being prominent examples. The perception of European elites as elusive and unreachable is fading, and those who dare to go into the offensive over European issues can indeed achieve results, as shown above all by Matteo Renzi in Italy, but also by the very refreshing experiment with the European parties' prime candidates.

Politicization can only be the first step in this process. It does not necessarily result in democratization, as the discussion of alternatives also has to impact institutions. This is something different to parroting those forces that have shouted the loudest, an activity of which there are now initial signs among the political elite. It is precisely here, however, that the complicated European system with its dual legitimation and mutually dependent institutions forms its strengths. The European parliament, for instance, has worked its way out of the role of a double for national parliaments and legitimatory fig leaf, and taken on its own identity as a controlling body and agenda-setter. It may not have the dominant position of the sole legislator, but it is capable of forcing political discourses and restricting dominance. Initial confrontations with the European Council in the wake of the election raise hopes that this will not only be further cultivated by the parliament, but will also gain more public attention.

It remains to be seen whether the status of democracy in Europe improves through the increasing politicization and more active control of dominance. The strength of the opposing

forces is just as obvious from the republican perspective. Nevertheless, during the long crisis of the European structures possibilities have emerged for political confrontation with the EU. Its success will depend on the extent to which we citizens are still willing, after the election, to insist on our voices being heard, to question the structures of European politics, and to make further changes.

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