

# **The impact of national democratic representation on decision-making in the European Union**

**Mareike Kleine, Javier Arregui and Robert Thomson**

## **Introduction**

The research presented in this special issue examines the extent to which decision-making in the European Union (EU) is responsive to national democratic representation. Responsiveness lies at the core of mainstream democratic theory (Mansbridge 2003; Powell 2019), and consequently the work presented here has important implications for understanding how the EU political system works as well as for normative assessments of the EU. The articles in this issue examine a range of linkages between national democratic representation and EU decision-making, including but going far beyond linkages between citizens' policy preferences and EU policies. National democratic representation and EU-level decision-making refer to the inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes of each of these political systems at their respective levels. With respect to the national level, we examine a selection of these including public opinion, the party-political and ideological makeup of national governments, and the timing and dynamics of national elections. At the EU level, we examine the positions taken by key decision-makers, including representatives in the Council of Ministers, the European Commission and the European Parliament, with respect to specific controversial issues. The contributions also include analyses of the cooperative relationships among member states' permanent representations in the Council of Ministers the EU and, crucially, the contents of EU laws that emerge from these processes.

It is widely accepted that the EU is no longer insulated from national politics. The rise of Euroscepticism in many member states has brought the impact of national

politics on EU decision-making into stark relief. Nonetheless, as recent reviews of the research literature have observed, beyond generalities and anecdotes we know remarkably little about how national democratic representation affects EU decision-making (Kleine and Pollack 2018; Zhelyazkova et al. 2019). The relevant research questions addressed here direct our attention toward specific linkages. For example: To what extent and how are national governments responsive to public opinion when they formulate their policy position on controversial issues in EU negotiations? To what extent are the negotiating positions of the EU's supranational institutions shaped by national politics? When do governments accommodate their counterparts in intergovernmental negotiations when they are under political pressure at home? Answers to questions like these cannot be found in abstract deliberations. They require the formulation of pointed theoretical propositions and the assessment of these propositions with comparable evidence.

Answers to these questions enrich our collective understanding of how the EU functions, and also inform debates on the EU's alleged democratic deficit. Critics of the EU's democratic legitimacy allege that the system does not respond effectively to citizens' (changing) demands for EU action (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Scharpf 1999). Others caution against a Union that is too responsive to citizens' input, not least because the EU is supposed to commit governments to policies where their positions would otherwise prove too ephemeral to permit cooperation (Majone 1994, Moravcsik 2002). Whether, when, and to what extent the EU is responsive to national democratic politics are therefore questions whose answers are critical to advance this normative debate.

The nexus between national democratic representation and international cooperation is also highly salient from a public policy perspective. In an interconnected region like the EU, where the actions of one country inevitably affect other countries,

there is a need for robust international cooperation to serve European citizens' interests. The global financial and sovereign debt crisis, the migration crisis, climate change, and the Covid pandemic all highlight failures to manage the risks that stem from our complex interconnectedness. However, while a series of crises reinforce the importance of coherent, authoritative, and legitimate EU policies to address common challenges, public support for the EU has fractured. As the European political landscape is realigning along a traditional economic dimension (left versus right) and an identity dimension (Green-Alternative-Liberal versus Traditional-Authoritarian-National values), and as new parties politicize these fault lines, Euroscepticism is growing and EU politics is increasingly the subject of polarized debates (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Hutter and Kriesi 2019). The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU is one of the starkest examples of this (Hobolt 2016), but it exemplifies a wider malaise. There is a risk that national democratic processes may impede European and global approaches to some of the most pressing problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Although such realignments of the domestic political landscape are not limited to the Europe (Walter 2021), some suggest that they are a backlash to the EU's own overreach (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The Eurozone crisis is often cited as a prime example in ways that echo debates about the EU's democratic quality. In the South, critics of the Eurozone consider its rules too rigid as they constrain both the monetary and fiscal autonomy of democratically elected governments to borrow and spend on things citizens want, such as welfare, education, or law and order. In the North, proponents of the design hold that common and democratically agreed-upon rules, a golden straightjacket, is necessary to prevent moral hazard and discipline national governments' potentially irresponsible spending. Both perspectives infused the subsequent intergovernmental bargaining and escalated to a point at which many feared

that this confrontation would spell the end of EMU, if not the EU itself. Eurosceptic parties in the South and North capitalized on the crisis by politicizing EU membership from their respective vantage points (Kriesi 2020). Emboldened by the public outcry at home, creditor countries managed to impose the burden of adjustment to macroeconomic imbalances within the eurozone almost entirely on debtor countries (Schimmelfennig 2018), adding yet more fuel to the public outcry in the South.

Yet, and perhaps surprisingly, a full-blown backlash against the Euro failed to materialize. As Hobolt and Wratil (2015) show, an increased salience went hand in hand with a shift in public opinion from identitarian to more utilitarian considerations which, as citizens weighted the costs and benefits of the Eurozone, resulted in steady support for the Euro. A series of reforms to Eurozone governance ultimately culminated in “one of the most rapid of deepening and integration in European history” (Jones et al. 2016). In the wake of the pandemic recovery, public support for the Euro increased even further (European Commission 2021).

This example of the Eurozone crisis illustrates that the causal links between changes in the domestic political landscapes and European decision-making are far more complex than a simple overreach-backlash model would suggest. It still remains an open question how and under what conditions greater public contestation of EU policies increases broad public opposition to the EU, and whether the politicization of EU politics ultimately leads to an obstruction, if not the full arrest, of EU politics.

This special issue brings together researchers who hold a shared conviction that to understand the impact of national democratic representation on the international level, analyses must be informed by testable theories and examine a broad range of cases in a comparative research design. The theories formulated are rational-choice institutionalist theories in the sense that their main elements include purposeful actors

operating within institutional constraints. However, such labels can be misleading caricatures. For instance, while it is sometimes (wrongly) asserted that rational-choice theories take policy preferences as given, are overly fixated on formal procedures and are not concerned with the role of ideas, many of the analyses examine the factors, including national partisan ideologies, that account for EU actors' policy positions and uncoded relationships. The comparative research design consists of a common dataset, which has been constructed by successive teams of researchers over the past 20 years (Thomson et al. 2006; 2012). Arregui and Perarnaud (2021, this issue) describe the details of this common dataset, which has been updated with recent cases for this special issue. The dataset describes a broad range of cases of EU decision-making, based on the same concepts and measures of key variables. The core of the dataset consists of stylized representations of actors' negotiating positions on key issues and the importance that each actor attaches to each issue. These "variables" are relevant to a broad range of theories of how decisions are taken in the EU, which is the main reason why previous versions of the dataset have been used in many studies. The authors of each of the articles to this special issue have also added to this common dataset in important ways, partly by adding relevant information on national and EU-level politics that are specific to their analyses. This collaborative approach enables researchers to evaluate systematically hypotheses about the linkages between elements of national democratic representation and EU decision-making.

### **Insights from the Contributions**

Here, we briefly set out what we consider to be the most important cross-cutting insights that emerge from the articles in this special issue, while hastening to

acknowledge that each of the contributions contain many more nuanced and specific findings and draw out the implications of these findings extensively

**Continuity rather than radical change.** The picture that emerges from this exercise is one of continuity rather than of radical change, which is surprising given the enormous changes that have taken place at the national and international levels over the past two decades. While the authors find evidence for the responsiveness of European governments to a range of domestic demands, the EU is relatively insulated from national politics in a number of ways. Responsiveness is conditional on the competitiveness of national elections (Franchino et al. 2021, this issue), national coalition politics (Costello 2021, this issue; Kostatinova and Kreppel 2021, this issue), and the nature of public opinion (Mariano and Schneider 2021, this issue). Furthermore, the Council of Ministers, and the EU institutions more broadly, emerge as a well-oiled decision-making machinery that is based on cooperation (Mariano and Schneider 2021, this issue), attention to technical detail (Huhe et al. 2021, this issue) and the administrative capacity to coordinate effectively (Perarnaud and Arregui 2021, this issue). Eurosceptic and populist governments are neither immune to the dynamics in the Council, nor do they appear to disrupt them.

**The policy positions of member states in the Council are shaped by national democratic politics, but these effects are conditioned by national coalition and electoral politics.** The first two substantive articles in this special issue examine the relationship between national factors and member states' policy positions. Petia Kostadinova and Amie Kreppel study how ideological diversity within national coalition governments, which account for over half of member states' governments, affects their positions in the Council of Ministers. The authors find some levels of policy drift by partisan ministers, relative to the (weighted) mean position of the

government coalition. This drift is however mitigated by institutional constraints that avoid excessive preference dispersion. In light of these findings, the authors recommend that we move away from traditionally monolithic interpretations of national interests and pay attention to potential ideological diversity inside state delegations.

Fabio Franchino, Mark Kayser and Christopher Wratil examine the conditions under which member states' policy positions in EU negotiations are responsive to their national public opinion. The authors develop an established measure of the competitiveness of national elections, which calibrates the likelihood that incumbents will lose (Kayser and Lindstädt 2015). They find that national governments are most responsive to their citizens when they are exposed to medium levels of risk of losing upcoming elections. In other words, governments are less responsive to public opinion when they are certain that they will either lose or win the election. It is only when national governments are truly competing for votes at the national level that the positions they take in EU negotiations responds to public opinion. Sudden domestic political instability in the form of snap elections does not make national governments more responsive in terms of their positions in EU negotiations.

**To the extent that the processes and decision outcomes of EU-level politics are shaped by national democratic politics, these effects are conditioned by the degree of public Euroscepticism and national representations' administrative capacities.** The next three articles turn their attention to the impact of national factors on cooperation processes and decision outcomes at the EU level. Nathan Mariano and Christina Schneider examine the impact of Euroscepticism on Council negotiations. Given that Euroscepticism is a cleavage that often cuts across partisan alignment, they want to know how pro-European governments facing Eurosceptic publics fare in Council negotiations. They find evidence that Euroscepticism at home leads to better

negotiation outcomes for pro-European governments. The authors suggest that the Council's informal bargaining culture encourages the accommodation of pro-European governments with the goal of preventing public backlash or even electoral losses to Eurosceptic challengers.

Narison Huhe, Robert Thomson, Javier Arregui, and Daniel Naurin explore the dynamics of intergovernmental cooperation networks in the Council. Combining the dataset with the recently updated data on cooperation networks from the Negotiations in the Council of the European Union Dataset (NCEU; Naurin et al. 2020), they assess the impact of policy positions, ideology and the presence of Eurosceptic parties on cooperation networks. Their results indicate the primacy of policy positions on specific controversies in shaping EU Council cooperation, with member states that tend to agree on specific negotiating issues being more likely to maintain cooperative relations. Differences between national governments in their partisan ideologies only seen to reduce cooperation marginally. Perhaps surprisingly, populist governments on the left and the right are neither excluded from Council dynamics, nor are they able to form blocking transnational coalitions.

Clement Perarnaud and Javier Arregui set out to explore the extent to which national administrative capabilities, understood as effective systems for the coordination with internal and external actors, increase member states' bargaining success. They find clear variation in the member states' capability to shape and defend positions at EU level. Moreover, under certain conditions, efficient coordination capabilities can provide an additional advantage in the bargaining process. What they lack in voting power, small states can make up in terms of efficient coordination with relevant actors.

**The supranational Commission and European Parliament remain relatively insulated from national democratic representation.** The final two articles focus on



how domestic factors shape the positions of the supranational institutions. Rory Costello examines whether the ideological composition of the European Parliament (EP), which is a consequence of direct elections, shapes the positions it takes in legislative decision-making. In other words, are the EP's positions representative of the EP as a whole? The analyses reveal that this is not unequivocally the case. The EP's positions are slightly more in line with the ideological profile of the 'grand coalition' between the three main party groups (the EPP, S&D and ALDE) than with the position of its median member. At the same time, the EP's positions tend to be slightly more liberal than that of its median member. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the analyses do not reveal a systematic pro-integrationist bias in the EP's stance.

Lastly, Robert Thomson and Patrick Dumont examine the so-called "Commissioner dividend," that is, the tendency for the Commission's policies to be more in line with the policy positions of the responsible Commissioner's home state than with other positions. The main findings support the predominant view of the Commission as the engine of integration that quite consistently takes pro-integration positions. However, the authors also find that the nationalities of Commissioners significantly shape the legislative proposals for which they are responsible. The analysis therefore reveals a very differentiated picture of the Commission as a strategic actor that is neither above the fray of national politics nor beholden to national interests.

### **Implications for democracy in the EU**

The implications of these key findings for normative assessments depend on which model of democracy we consider most appropriate for the EU. Students of the EU clearly hold different views on the appropriate model, and these different views also

loom large in debates about the quality of national democracy. They can be usefully characterized as the distinction between the promissory model of democratic representation and the liberal model (c.f. Riker 1982; Mansbridge 2003; Achen and Bartels 2016).<sup>1</sup> The promissory model of representation contends that democracies produce policies that are responsive to public opinion. One of the main mechanisms through which this is achieved is by political parties, the main mediators between the public and government, making promises to voters during election campaigns and then keeping those promises if they hold government office after the elections. Promissory representation demands a lot of citizens, parties and governments. Among other things, citizens must be capable of making informed choices between parties that offer meaningful policy alternatives, and once in power, governing parties must be able to enact what they promised. Traces of this expansive conception of democracy are on display when the EU's critics lament its democratic deficit and call for more politicization of European-level policymaking (e.g. Follesdal and Hix 2006; Scharpf 1999). By contrast, according to the liberal model, the essence of democracy is that the power of rulers is constrained. Power is constrained by the rule of law, by a balance of power between different government institutions, and by citizens through elections at which they can hold rulers to account for their performance. The EU's democratic deficit is less significant if viewed from this version of democracy (e.g. Keohane et al. 2009).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Different labels have been used to identify these perspectives. Notably, Riker (1982; see also Achen and Bartels 2016) uses the term “populist” to identify the perspective according to which democracies produce policies that respond to public opinion. We find it misleading to use this term in the present context.

<sup>2</sup> Some observers contend that this more limited conception of democracy “no longer applies,” because the EU has since expanded its remit to more electorally salient areas of policy. This is not a compelling argument. All of the electorally salient areas of policy – welfare, income tax, healthcare, education, law and order – remain firmly primarily at the national level. The fact that members of the Eurozone agree not to run

Judged by the standards of promissory representation, the key findings from this special issue indicate that the EU falls woefully short. The EU does not respond at all, or only to a limited extent, to the outcomes of national democratic politics when it is appropriate to do so. For instance, the promissory model of representation would arguably lead us to want to see governments' policy positions in EU negotiations being clearly and consistently informed by national governing parties' ideologies and by national public opinion. The research presented here indicates that any such responsiveness is patchy at best (Kostadinova and Kreppel 2021; Franchino et al. 2021). Furthermore, the EU does respond to the outcomes of national democratic politics when there is little democratic justification for doing so. For instance, we should arguably want to see EU decision outcomes responding in a balanced way to governments' policy positions regardless of national governments and publics' general support for European integration. However, Mariano and Schneider (2021) find that decision outcomes are biased toward governments that are broadly pro-European, especially those with Eurosceptic publics. There is no compelling normative reason to want the Commission's policy positions to be biased toward the national governments of whichever Commissioner happens to be responsible for the issue in question, which is what Thomson and Dumont (2021) find.

On the other hand, from the standpoint of liberal democratic theory, the EU compares favorably with other democratic systems. The modest and conditional effects of national electoral politics on EU policymaking are strengths of the system. Such relative insulation has enabled European policymakers to make long-term commitments that do not waver in response to temporary fluctuations in public opinion or national partisan politics (Majone 1994, Moravcsik 2002). Such commitments are the foundation

---

up large deficits does not prevent national governments from raising the taxes required to spend responsibly on these areas of policy.

of the single market, which has provided Europeans with unprecedented wealth and a range of related opportunities, and are also required to address the international challenges from climate change to security, to which we referred earlier. The ongoing necessity of the European Union makes it essential that political scientists continue to deepen our understanding of how the system works, with the kind of rigorous comparative research presented in the following studies, and that we assess these findings in the light of appropriate normative theories.

## References

Achen, C.H. & Bartels, L.M. (2016). *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Arregui, J. & Perarnaud, C. (2021). A New Dataset on Legislative Decision-Making in the European Union: The DEU III Dataset (1999-2019). *Journal of European Public Policy*. [This issue.](#)

Costello, R. (2021). How does the composition of the European Parliament shape its role in EU decision-making? *Journal of European Public Policy*. [This issue.](#)

European Commission. (2021). Standard Eurobarometer 94: Winter 2020-21. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355>

Follesdal, A & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: a response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44(3), 533-562.

Franchino, F., Kayser, M.A. & Wrátil, C. (2021). Electoral Competitiveness and responsiveness: Rational anticipation in the EU Council. *Journal of European Public Policy*. [This issue.](#)

Hobolt, S. B. (2016). The Brexit vote: a divided nation, a divided continent. *Journal of European Public Policy* 23(9), 1259-1277.

Hobolt, S. B. & Wrátil, C. (2015). Public opinion and the crisis: the dynamics of support for the Euro. *Journal of European Public Policy* 22(2), 238-256.

Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. (2009). A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. *British Journal of Political Science* 39(1), 1-23.

Huhe, N., Thomson, R., Arregui, J. & Naurin, D. (2021). Intergovernmental cooperation networks, national policy positions and partisan ideologies: Longitudinal evidence from the Council of the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*. **This issue.**

Hutter, S. & Kriesi, H. (2019). Politicizing Europe in times of crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(7), 996-1017.

Jones, E., Kelemen, R.D. & Meunier, S. (2016). Failing forward? The Euro crisis and the incomplete nature of European integration. *Comparative Political Studies* 49(7), 1010-1034.

Kayser, M. & Lindstädt, R. (2015). A cross-national measure of electoral competitiveness. *Political Analysis* 23(2), 242-253.

Keohane, R.O., Macedo, S. & Moravcsik, A. (2009). Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism. *International Organization* 63: 1-31.

Kleine, M. & Pollack, M. (2018). Liberal Intergovernmentalism and its critics. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56(7), 1493-1509.

Kostadinova, P. & Kreppel, A. (2021). Loyal agent or shirking partner: Understanding the policy goals of national ministers in the Council of the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*. **This issue.**

Kriesi, H. (2020). Backlash politics against European integration. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4), 692-701.

Majone, G. (1994). The rise of the regulatory state in Europe. *West European Politics* 17(3), 77-101.

Mariano, N. & Schneider C.J. (2021). Euroscepticism and Bargaining Success in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*. **This issue.**

Mansbridge, J. (2003). Rethinking Representation. *American Political Science Review* 97(4): 515–28.

Moravcsik, A. (2002). In defence of the democratic deficit: reassessing legitimacy in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(4), 603-624.

Naurin, D., Johansson M., & Lindahl R. (2020). *The Negotiations in the Council of the European Union Dataset* (Version 1.0) [Data set]. University of Gothenburg. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.5878/cfsv-k581>

Perarnaud, C. & Arregui, J. (2021). Do Member States' Permanent Representations matter for their bargaining success? Evidence from the EU Council of Ministers. *Journal of European Public Policy*. **This issue.**

Powell, G.B. (2019). *Ideological Representation Achieved and Astray: Elections, Institutions and the Breakdown of Ideological Congruence in Parliamentary Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Riker, W.H. (1982). *Liberalism Against Populism: A Confrontation Between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. San Francisco, CA: Freeman and Co.

Scharpf, F. (1999). *Governing in Europe: effective and democratic?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schimmelfennig, F. (2018). Liberal intergovernmentalism and the crises of the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56(7), 1578-1594.

Thomson R., Arregui J., Leuffen D., Costello R., Cross J., Hertz R., & Jensen T. (2012). A new dataset on decision-making in the European Union before and after the 2004 and 2007 enlargements (DEUII). *Journal of European Public Policy* 19(4), 604-622.

Thomson, R. & Dumont, P. (2021). A comparison of two views on the European Commission: Engine of integration and conduit of national interests. *Journal of European Public Policy*. **This issue.**

Thomson R., Stokman F., Achen C. & König, T. (eds.) (2006). *The European Union Decides*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walter, Stefanie. (2021). The backlash against globalization. *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, 421-442.

Zhelyazkova, A., Bølstad, J. & Meijers, M.J. (2019). Understanding responsiveness in European Union politics: introducing the debate. *Journal of European Public Policy* 26(11): 1715-23.