

The growing importance of the EU in national politics means that political union can only succeed with the public's support

by Blog Admin

The continuing crisis in the eurozone has strengthened calls for greater economic, fiscal and political union in the EU. But what is political union, and is it even feasible given that Europe's citizens do not seem to favour deeper political integration? [Sara Hobolt](#) and [Olaf Cramme](#) argue that European leaders face a dilemma: the crisis demands more centralised powers, but there are also growing concerns about the EU's "democratic deficit". They propose that Europe's leaders must find ways to channel divergent policy preferences across member states, overcome demands for more sovereignty and more democracy, and reform national political systems so that they incorporate a European dimension.



The survival of the European project is nowadays summarised by a sequence of unions. Monetary union is judged to be unsustainable without fiscal union. Fiscal union requires banking union and economic union. And to top it all off, the icing on the cake has to be political union. But what exactly is political union? And can it work?



For a start, the concept is used for two different purposes. First, it serves as shorthand for the incremental federalisation of the EU; it is an attempt to outline Europe's *finalité*, less in terms of geography but rather in relation to its governing functions. In this debate, the term itself remains strikingly ill-defined as different visions co-exist. While the French speak of "*intégration solidaire*" and the idea of Europe as a collective insurance mechanism against economic shocks and social risks, the Germans think of the EU as the ultimate guardian of responsible policymaking reaching above ideological extremes. As such, political union seeks to reconcile different notions and conceptions of deeper European integration.



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Second, the debate about political union attempts to identify the conditions under which a strengthened and reinforced EMU can enjoy greater democratic legitimacy. This discussion tends to take the formation of fiscal and economic union for granted, focusing predominantly on institutional changes at EU level to bolster accountability. The objectives of political union are defined in terms of efficiency and representation.

In a recent [report](#) issued by the Future of Europe Group, led by Germany's Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, these two lines of reasoning are fused but it is the second dimension which stands out. According to the eleven foreign ministers who signed the report, what Europe needs is a clearer separation of power and greater democratic control by the European Parliament. For some members of the Group, this should entail a Commission which takes on the role of a "European government" headed by a directly elected Commission President; a European Parliament with real powers to initiate legislation; and a second chamber that represents the views of member states.

Regardless of the merits of such proposals, there are considerable problems with the way in which the idea of political union is understood and championed. The central weakness is that it is regarded as an end point – the destination in a federalist journey. Instead, political union must form the basis from which greater integration is sought. It must be a critical companion in the process of seeking unification, rather than constitute its idealised finality.

The fact is that European integration differs from any other successful example of voluntary political union. History shows that without a lasting and real security threat (nation) states are unlikely to embark on permanent unification. Gone are also the days when elites could pursue closer integration with no regard for public opinion. The increased salience of EU issues in national electoral politics means that future European integration hinges upon public support. There has been a move away from the “permissive consensus” of the early period of integration, where insulated leaders could make decisions without public consultation.

This presents a dilemma for European leaders. On the one hand, the imperatives of the market and euro crisis demand centralised powers of fiscal oversight using the regulatory mode of governance – decisions in effect isolated from the noisy and unpredictable arena of democratic politics. In the Fiscal Compact, as well as the “six-pack” legislation, the move towards fiscal union is presented as regulatory politics with pre-defined rules imposed by technocrats.

On the other hand, “full democratic control” – as demanded by the foreign ministers – would create far less certainty about economic governance, possibly to the detriment of stability in the eurozone. The recent Greek elections are just one example of how electoral involvement can upset plans of austerity and macro-economic stability. This trade-off between the efficiency and stability of a regulatory mode of governance and the inherent unpredictability of democratic politics is so far completely absent in the debate about political union. Indeed, polls suggest that citizens are far less likely than their governments to favour the sort of deeper political integration envisaged by recent reforms.

European policymakers can no longer ignore this dilemma and at the same time pin their hopes on economic benefits and results through which deeper integration will be legitimised. Working backwards from an idealised federalist vision is no sufficient substitute either, in particular if the European Parliament is presented as the principal solution to concerns about Europe’s democratic deficit. Although there is a good case for further strengthening its role, there is little evidence that the parliament is capable of ensuring what is desperately needed: citizens to confer greater legitimacy upon the European Union.

Any debate about the feasibility of political union should therefore start from here and pursue the following three objectives: First, find better ways for aggregating, channelling and responding to divergent policy preferences across Europe; second, outline constitutional and institutional innovations which can overcome the often conflicting demands for more sovereignty and more democracy; third, propose serious and far-reaching reforms to our national political systems so that they truly integrate a European dimension.

If political union is to succeed, it must be the means and not the end of deeper integration.

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