

# Five minutes with Robert O. Keohane: “We shouldn’t fool ourselves by believing that global governance will soon be made democratic”

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*Can global governance through organisations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization ever be made properly democratic? In an interview with EUOPP’s editor Stuart Brown, [Robert O. Keohane](#) discusses the problems with establishing global democratic governance, the distinction between liberal constitutionalist achievements and democracy, and why we should be sceptical of claims that a global democracy is just around the corner.*



**You’ve written on the problems associated with implementing democratic principles in global governance. What specifically prevents us from creating proper democratic structures at the global level?**

It’s important to distinguish between liberal constitutionalism and democracy. There has in fact been a lot of progress made in global governance on the legal side. There are more regular adjudication arrangements – most notably in the World Trade Organization, but also in a number of other areas such as human rights – than there were 30 or 40 years ago, providing better ways to settle disputes. Strengthening the rule of law in this way is the liberal side of global governance and there has been remarkable progress in this respect over recent decades.

However the democratic side involves people having an effective voice and feeling connected to their representatives. This is hard enough in any big country because bureaucracies are strong, there are millions of people and there’s therefore a remote connection between citizens and their government. We see this around the world in democracies: in the US, in the UK and with the rise of populist movements in Europe.

These problems are magnified immensely at the global level. This is partly a result of the sheer size of the polity, but it also occurs because there is no national or global identity. The emotional connection that nationalism represents is entirely lacking. As [Robert Putnam](#) has shown, democracy requires a degree of civic association: people who interact with each other on a social basis, rather than specifically in the polity. That is not the case cross-nationally. Very few people have these kinds of ties with people in other countries.

So the sociological base and the emotional base for a global democracy simply don’t exist. When you combine that with the huge size of any constituency which would be required, it’s clear that anything paralleling a ‘global parliament’ just isn’t going to happen, at least not for a long time. It’s safe to say the academics who talk about creating such a system haven’t really thought it through.

**One of the specific examples you’ve mentioned of the tension between the aims of global governance and democracy is climate change. How does democracy influence attempts to solve climate change?**

Climate change is one of the hardest issues to deal with. It’s a hard issue even for national governments to address. In solving climate change by cutting emissions, you pay for your actions but you get almost no benefit individually. Everybody benefits unconditionally from a cut in emissions, so the incentive for any given actor to actually do something about it is very small.

Now it’s not so much that democracy undermines efforts to tackle climate change – autocracy isn’t the answer to the problem either – it’s simply that democracies have been unable to make progress on the issue, with the partial exception of Europe. The main reason for this is that people are not willing to pay the costs on a global basis. They

think about immediate concerns such as paying higher fuel prices rather than some far off distant gain for other people in the future. Moreover, these are people spread all across the world who they have no affinity with and have no association with.

The standard way in which national governments deal with public goods issues, such as paying for defence, is by summoning national solidarity, particularly through the emotion of nationalism. This is powerful enough that people will die for their country in wars, which is also a public good. But that kind of sentiment is completely absent at the global level. You're helping everyone around the world, as opposed to just your own compatriots, and there's no emotional or sociological base for doing that.

So there are three main reasons why democratic global governance is unlikely to emerge in the near future. The problems associated with solving climate change are an example of an 'interest-public goods' gap. The contributor is not receiving any specific benefit from their contribution because it's watered down over billions of people – which is even more of a problem than if it's watered down over 60 million people, as occurs in a nation state like the UK or France.

Climate change also illustrates the 'emotional' gap in global governance by highlighting the lack of any mobilising sentiment analogous to nationalism at the global level. Perhaps if there were an attack by extra-terrestrials we might have a different feeling about this! But short of that scenario happening, the symbolism isn't there. There is no global national anthem – and indeed the European national anthem, Ode to Joy, has no words, given that any single language would be divisive.

Finally, there is also an 'infrastructure' gap. This is the lack of any global civil society of the kind Putnam refers to. The associations that operate not politically, but on a social basis in healthy democratic societies are missing at the global level. Even at the national level there are problems with these associations, as Putnam points out, but globally they are non-existent. As a result there simply isn't the necessary democratic infrastructure present to have a global democracy.

**Some academics and politicians in Europe might argue that while what you're saying is true globally, the European Union has shown that on a regional basis something approaching a supranational democracy can be created. How would you respond to this?**

The European Union has done a number of wonderful things. First, it has created a Europe which is whole and free, and it has provided incentives for formerly peripheral countries to join it. It's a voluntary association which almost every independent and democratic state wants to be part of. That's a tremendous accomplishment.

Second, the EU has achieved its early purpose of creating economic union and trade integration. It has done so in a way which has omitted fiscal and banking policies, which has caused some very serious economic problems, but it has nevertheless created a free trade area with free movement of services and people. Third, it has a very well developed legalised structure. It includes the European Court of Justice, which wasn't really contemplated in the original treaties, but is now a strong defender of civil liberties and liberal values in Europe. These are also enormous accomplishments.

So the European Union is a very successful, liberal constitutional entity. However it is not a successful democratic entity. It has a European Parliament, but the number of people who vote in European elections has fallen substantially. There is an extremely weak connection between individuals and their parliamentary representatives, and there is still a much closer attachment between citizens and their nation state than there is between citizens and Europe. So Europe's great successes are not in democracy, but in liberal constitutionalism.

In fact the trouble with EU democracy – the fact that it's seen as an impersonal bureaucracy in countries like the UK, and the weakness of the European Parliament in terms of the ties between parliamentarians and their constituents – illustrates the difficulties in making democracy work at a supranational level. It also adds weight to my point that you

have to distinguish between democracy and liberalism.

You have to isolate the huge successes of European governance and the modest but real successes of global governance on the liberal side, and make a distinction with the much more modest European successes and non-existent global successes in terms of establishing genuine democracy. A genuine democracy requires close connections between the people and their representatives who are actually making decisions. That doesn't exist at the global level.

**Given the points you've raised, is it actively damaging to consider global governance democratic?**

I think the consequence is essentially hypocrisy: the perpetuation of the belief that there is democracy at some level where it is not actually operating. Now we can live with a fair amount of hypocrisy. There are worse things than hypocrisy, such as cruelty and destroying other human beings. I don't think the consequences of our 'nominal democracy' at the global level are pressingly terrible.

But we as analysts and intellectuals shouldn't fool ourselves into believing that global governance will soon be made democratic or that global democratic governance has been attained by any serious measure. There are some academics who have left that impression or who have proposed things like a world parliament, which would be entirely unrealistic.

Despite this, I would end on a much more positive note. I think it's important to be clear-eyed about democracy and we shouldn't pretend there is democracy where there isn't. But I think making the world more democratic is a noble cause. It's a cause that's worthy of attention. It would be a long process and it's not going to happen quickly, but if it's pursued realistically with a long-term agenda then I applaud it.

However it's not going to be achieved simply by rationalising the problem. It can only be achieved with institutional, legal and social infrastructure built up patiently over the years. It has to be achieved by people identifying more emotionally with other human beings, as opposed to just their nations. And it's going to require leadership which is willing to progress step by step and which is willing to be held to account, rather than just to talk about accountability.

We can't think that global democracy is here or that it's about to arrive, but we shouldn't give up on it or stop considering it a worthy ideal. It is a worthy ideal, but it's a lifetime's work for people who are now in their 20s. It's not something that can be achieved in ten years, it will have to be worked at throughout these people's lives and when they're at the age I am now hopefully we'll have made substantial progress toward that goal. Although I don't think we'll be there yet, even then.

*For more on this topic, a video of Robert O. Keohane's recent lecture at LSE is available [here](#)*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: View during of the 25th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Credit: [UN Geneva](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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**About the interviewee**

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