

Strengthening the role of citizens and national parliaments in decision-making is key to solving the EU's democratic deficit

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The European Union has often been accused of having a 'democratic deficit'. Ahead of the European elections on 22-25 May, [Chris Terry](#) outlines proposals put forward by the Electoral Reform Society in the UK for improving EU democracy. Among other reforms, he suggests that improving the representativeness of MEPs by using open-list voting systems, increasing the accountability of the European Commission, and strengthening the role of EU citizens and national parliaments in decision-making would go some way toward solving the problem.



The financial crisis of 2008-9 and the subsequent Eurozone crisis have not been good for the European Union's democratic image. The EU, which has always been accused of lacking democratic legitimacy, has seen its democratic credentials questioned owing to its attempts to grapple with these crises. Partly as a result, this year's European parliamentary elections are likely to see the rise of a diverse series of Eurosceptic challengers.

At the [Electoral Reform Society](#), we set out to examine the EU's historic problems with democracy, and to set out what we think can be done to improve the situation. One of our first commitments was to accept the status quo of the UK's membership of the EU and look at ways of democratising the current situation. This was driven by recognition that the two extreme solutions to the problem – withdrawal from the EU or the creation of a more politically integrated Federal Europe – could in fact have significant negative effects in democratic terms.

If the UK had an agreement with the EU similar to that of Switzerland or [Norway](#), it would create a situation where laws and policies affecting the UK are made with even less engagement (direct or indirect) from UK citizens than currently. The option of total withdrawal would leave a situation where the UK was potentially at risk from the declining problem-solving capability of the modern nation-state in a rapidly globalising world.



European Parliament chamber in Strasbourg, Credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC-BY-SA-ND-NC-3.0)

A Federal Europe is also problematic. Europe lacks a clear 'demos', and there is a lack of support for federalism amongst EU citizens. It might be asked if a Federal Europe can be democratic if its very existence is not supported by its own citizens. At the present time, therefore, a Federal Europe seems an unlikely prospect. The best course, therefore, seems to be to attempt to democratise the existing structures of the EU. This week we published a report, [Close the Gap: Tackling Europe's democratic deficit](#), which sets out 12 practical steps towards doing so.

Solving the democratic deficit

A more representative and better functioning European Parliament (EP) is, of course, a key element. The monthly

decampment of the entire EP to Strasbourg is not just expensive, but is also an administrative burden which makes it more difficult for journalists and MEPs alike to do their jobs. And the Parliament should be elected by open-list systems so as to give MEPs more visibility.

Parties should try to stand candidates which are more representative of society demographically. But the EP is perhaps most unrepresentative in the way it consists of a majority of highly pro-European MEPs and a minority of highly anti-European MEPs. Parties should attempt to recruit candidates which are more representative of the public, who tend to hold much less strong opinions on the merits or otherwise of the EU.

The Commission should also be made more accountable. The European Council should back the choice of the European Parliament for the President of the Commission, but rules should be made clearer in future elections as to what happens in the case of a tight result. In the long term the Commission should be made smaller.

Most importantly of all, national parliaments should be empowered. Parliaments should be given the right of initiative on legislation, and the capability to stop EU legislation that violates national sovereignty. In this respect we have proposed the adoption of a 'green card', which would allow national parliaments to come together to instigate European legislation; and a 'red card', giving national parliaments the power to block legislation.

The UK Parliament should also reform its own structures and procedures in order to guarantee the best possible scrutiny. It should be able to scrutinise government positions on the EU *before* the relevant minister goes to Brussels, as well as after. And EU legislation should be 'mainstreamed' – i.e. sent to the relevant committee for scrutiny, so that agriculture legislation is analysed by the agriculture committee and so on.

Devolved parliaments should be able to question UK ministers on EU negotiations, and devolved ministers should hold the right to participate in Council meetings, as in Germany. Parliament and the UK Government should also put into place a system of participative democracy to give UK citizens a say in contentious or highly salient areas. To begin the reform process, we suggest that Westminster should organise a 'Speaker's Conference' on strengthening Parliament's role in EU democracy, and take proposals forward to a pan-European conference of parliaments.

Taken together, these changes could lead to a much more democratic and accountable European Union. These suggestions are not either/or propositions. A stronger, more representative European Parliament and stronger national parliaments can and should work together to ensure the maximum voice for European citizens.

And we should seek to involve the largest number of people possible in EU policy and law-making. The EU has multiple levels and multiple identities. The capability to influence it should be instilled at all those levels so that EU policy best matches the priorities and desires of EU citizens.

For a longer description of the reforms suggested by the Electoral Reform Society see the full report, [Close the Gap: Tackling Europe's democratic deficit](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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