

Strengthening the role of national parliaments in EU decision-making is not the way to improve the EU's legitimacy

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*Turnout at European Parliament elections has fallen significantly since the first elections in 1979. This has led some politicians and commentators to suggest that integrating national parliaments into the EU's legislative process may be a more effective method for improving the EU's legitimacy. **Jon Worth** argues that the logic underpinning such arguments is undermined by the fact that national elections have also witnessed a substantial drop in turnout over the same period. Moreover, in most EU countries citizens actually trust their own parliament less than the European Parliament, raising doubts over the ability of national parliaments to confer a greater degree of legitimacy.*



With the European Union struggling to overcome the financial crisis, and the knock-on impact on the politics of the European project, national political classes have been grasping for solutions to the EU's perceived legitimacy problem. One of the most commonly cited solutions is to seek a greater role for national parliaments in EU decision making.

The case in favour is that while the European Parliament has enjoyed increasing powers since its first direct elections in 1979, election turnout has consistently declined. This seeming contradiction, proponents of a greater role for national parliaments contend, shows that the European Parliament is not the way to ensure the EU's legitimacy. National parliaments – as opposed to national governments – are by definition democratic, and thanks to higher turnouts are more legitimate than the European Parliament, and hence the EU can become more legitimate through greater involvement of national parliaments.

Arguments of this nature have been proposed on this very blog by [Mats Persson](#), and elsewhere by [David Lidington](#) and [Charles Grant](#), and similar sentiments even appear in the German national [coalition agreement](#). The problem is that none of the aspects of the argument in favour of a greater role for national parliaments hold up to much scrutiny.



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While it cannot be contested that the legislative powers of the European Parliament have increased with every change to the EU's Treaties since 1979, principally through the increasing number of policy areas where the [Ordinary legislative procedure](#) (formerly Co-decision) applies, it nevertheless remains the case that the European Parliament has only very limited scope to change the overall direction of EU integration. A voter can still have no expectation that a more social democratic or more conservative EU, or more or less integrated EU, will emerge as a result of the outcome of a European Parliament election.

The problem, then, is that while the European Parliament's legislative powers have increased, it still fails to meet

Schumpeter's classic definition of a party system: that parties present programmes; voters make an informed choice between competing parties; the successful party puts its programme into practice; and the governing party is judged on its performance at the next election.

So while the European Parliament may wield legislative clout over everything from fishing quotas to food additives to CO2 emissions from cars, the connection between the outcome of the European elections and parties being judged five years later is still missing. The Parliament's additional power is incomprehensible at best and invisible at worst for the voters. The argument that more legislative powers should equate to higher turnout is spurious.

That turnout has been falling in European Parliament elections is also not as clearcut as the headline figures suggest, and ignores the context in which this has been happening. Firstly, the number of countries with compulsory voting skews the European election turnout figures (2 of 9 Member States in 1979, 3 of 10 Member States in 1984, 3 of 27 Member States in 2009). Fewer countries with compulsory voting means a lower average turnout. Secondly, enlargement of the European Union has brought countries into the European Union with traditionally lower turnouts in national elections than in the 'old' member states.

Table 1 below compares election turnout in the three largest Member States – the United Kingdom, France and Germany – between the 1979 and 2009 European elections, and between the Parliamentary elections that took place the least amount of time before or after the EP elections in each country. In section a) the differences in turnout between the 1979 and 2009 EP elections are shown, while section b) shows the differences in turnout between the closest general elections to the 1979 EP vote and the closest general elections to the 2009 EP vote. Section c) illustrates the differences in the gap between general election and European election turnout between 1979 and 2009.

Table 1: Changes in turnout at the European Parliament elections in France, Germany and the UK from around 1979 to around 2009

(a) Turnout at European Parliament elections

| <i>EP Election in</i> | <i>1979 Turnout (%)</i> | <i>2009 Turnout (%)</i> | <i>Change (%)</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Germany | 65.7 | 43.3 | -22.4 |
| France | 60.7 | 40.6 | -20.1 |
| UK | 32.4 | 34.7 | +2.3 |

(b) Turnout at nearest Parliamentary general elections

| <i>Election</i> | <i>Turnout (%)</i> | <i>Election</i> | <i>Turnout (%)</i> | <i>Change (%)</i> |
|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Germany 1980 | 88.6 | Germany 2009 | 70.8 | -17.8 |
| UK 1979 | 76.0 | UK 2010 | 65.8 | -10.2 |
| France 1978 | 71.6 | France 2007 | 60.0 | -11.6 |

(c) The gap between general election and EP turnouts

| Country | National election lead in turnout in 1979 (%) | National election lead in turnout in 2009 (%) | Percentage point change | Gap has: |
|---------|---|---|-------------------------|----------|
| UK | 43.6 | 31.1 | -12.5 | Narrowed |
| Germany | 22.9 | 27.5 | +4.6 | Widened |
| France | 10.9 | 19.4 | +8.5 | Widened |

Note: In (a) The UK European Parliament election in 1979 was held using the **first past the post** electoral system. In (b) The elections contained in the table are the closest national elections to the 1979 European Parliament elections and the 2009 European Parliament elections. **Source:** [European Parliament](#); [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#)

While the declines in France and Germany at European elections are more marked than national declines, the UK shows the opposite trend – with national turnout down and European election turnout up. At the very least turnout in European elections should be seen against the backdrop of declining participation *nationally* as well as at the EU level, with the **second order elections** effect explaining the initial difference in turnout. To put it another way, it is not as if all is healthy at the national level but problematic at the EU level; there are problems at both levels.

The EU's Eurobarometer poll asks European citizens about their trust in political institutions, and here too a comparison between the European Parliament and national parliaments can be made. Across the EU-28, 39 per cent of citizens **trust** the European Parliament, versus 25 per cent that trust their national parliament. In only 5 Member States – the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Finland – is the trust in the national parliament higher than trust in the European Parliament.

Lastly the behaviour of national parliaments when it comes to EU business so far gives no additional argument why their role should be further strengthened. With the notable exception of the Danish and Finnish Parliaments, which have each developed nuanced and strong ways to control national Ministers going to Council meetings, national scrutiny of EU business remains sporadic, poorly resourced, and often reduced to complaining after decisions have been taken in Brussels. That the "**yellow card**" procedure for national parliaments has been used just twice since its introduction is testimony to this.

That national parliaments behave this way is logical from a self-interested point of view: ambitious, hard-working politicians would prefer to deliver changes to schools, hospitals, roads or railways nationally than embroil themselves in the technical matters of EU law. A political party is – rightly – never going to win or lose an election nationally on the basis of its ability to scrutinise EU law.

All things considered, the notion that the European Parliament's greater legislative power should equate to higher election turnout is a spurious argument, and turnout should in any case be seen in the context of declining turnout at national level too. Further, when it comes to trust and the behaviour of national parliamentarians on EU business to date, there is no case for a greater role for national parliaments in EU decision making.

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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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