Preface

European Democracy in 2019

Christopher Huggins

Abstract

This special section examines the theme on democracy in Europe. In this preface, the section editor, Christopher Huggins, briefly introduces the contributions and places them in the context of debate surrounding contemporary European democracy.

Keywords

Last year's special section in the Journal of Contemporary European Research (JCER) reflected on the 100th anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War One, noting that Europe had undergone a remarkable transformation over the last 100 years, but nevertheless still faced an uncertain future (McDonagh 2018). This uncertainty has been reflected in other reviews on the state of Europe, with the editors of this year's Journal of Common Market Studies' Annual Review highlighting that 'It is clear that Europe is now moving through very troubled waters, where the final destination remains unclear' (Exadaktylos, Guerrina and Massetti 2019: 5).

One of themes identified in last year's special section was the durability of democracy, and in particular how liberal democracy in Europe is perhaps more fragile than is commonly assumed (McDonagh 2018: 292). Indeed, the recent rhetoric of scholars examining the state of liberal democracy across the globe has become increasingly negative, with many pointing to, amongst others, 'crises of democracy' (Przeworski 2019), 'democratic decay' (Daly 2019) and 'democracy under threat' (van Beek 2019). Questions about the quality of democracy in Europe are not new. Indeed, debates surrounding the European Union's (EU) 'democratic deficit' have been a feature of European Studies scholarship since the 1990s (see Bellamy and Lord 2016). But recent trends in European politics bring the question of democracy into sharp focus. This includes ongoing legitimation concerns following the EU's responses to the financial crisis (for example Hobolt 2018), the ongoing prevalence of Eurosceptic, nativist and populist parties together with their electoral successes (for example Pirro, Taggart and van Kessel 2019), and illiberal democratic reforms in several EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (for example Sitter and Bakke 2019).

Reflecting on the state of democracy in Europe in 2019, it is possible on the one hand to paint a positive picture. In May 2019, European citizens voted in the ninth European Parliament elections. The turnout of 50.66 per cent, while still below levels seen in national elections, reversed a long-term trend of ever decreasing participation in European elections. Results from the latest Eurobarometer research also suggest European democracy is in a healthy state. 59 per cent of Europeans are satisfied with democracy at the national level (versus 39 per cent who are not satisfied), while 55 per cent are satisfied with democracy at the European level (versus 36 per cent who are not satisfied). Both of these figures represent the highest levels since 2004. Furthermore, for the first time since 2004, a majority (56 per cent versus 39 per cent) feel their voice counts in the EU, while trust in the EU (44 per cent)

continues to outpace trust in national governments and parliaments (34 per cent) (European Commission 2019).

Nevertheless, there remain concerns about the quality of democracy in Europe. One key example of this is reflected in ongoing concerns about democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. This is particularly the case in Hungary and Poland, where in the latter judicial reforms and their impact on the independence and impartiality of judges have led the European Commission to launch infringement proceedings, which have now been referred to the Court of Justice of the EU (European Commission 2019b). Overall, however, the EU's effectiveness to respond to illiberal democratic trends within its member states has been mixed at best (Sitter and Bakker 2019; Colsa 2018).

It is in this mixed and uncertain context that the five contributions in this special section seek to explore various aspects surrounding the contemporary state of European democracy.

In the first commentary, Ariadna Ripoll-Servent examines the results of the 2019 European Parliament elections and what the outcome means for parliamentary arithmetic and coalition building in the EU. She finds that, while Eurosceptic and populist parties have failed to make substantial gains and continue to be subject to a 'cordon sanitaire' by mainstream political parties, greater fragmentation and polarisation presents new challenges which will make it difficult to build coalitions and be effective in inter-institutional negotiations. This has implications for representative democracy in the EU. On the one hand, the continued exclusion of Eurosceptic and populist parties from mainstream coalitions will only serve to reinforce their underlying argument that European integration remains an elitist concern not willing to address non-mainstream voices. On the other hand, greater polarisation may lead to inter-institutional deadlock impacting the EU's effectiveness in highly politicised policy areas. This is exacerbated by the fact that Eurosceptic and populist parties are no longer confined to the European Parliament and are now represented in the European Council.

In the second commentary, Ben Stanley undertakes a comparative analysis of the quality of democracy in Central and Eastern European countries. Using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset he finds that Central and Eastern European countries can be categorised into three broad groups based on recent trends in the quality of their democracy: stable democracies, backsliding democracies and arrested developers. This mixed picture challenges a number of assumptions often made about the state of democracy in the region. Firstly, de-democratisation is not a trend which can be observed across the whole region and the quality of democracies in several countries remains relatively stable. Secondly, where democracy has been backsliding, different factors often account for this in different countries. Thirdly, the case of arrested developers challenges the assumption that the region as a whole has made great strides in democracies and pauses us to reflect on whether the process of democratic consolidation may be incomplete. These variations aside, the findings add weight to the arguments that the quality and durability of democracy in the region is more fragile than commonly assumed.

In their research article Lukáš Hamřík and Petr Kaniok examine the emergence of one recent democratic innovation in European Parliament elections: the Spitzenkandidaten procedure. By drawing on a qualitative analysis of 152 documents produced by political parties and EU institutions, they find that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure has been in development since the 1990s and has been driven by the European Parliament, the European Commission and four European political parties. By exploring the motivations held by these actors, they find that addressing criticisms of a democratic deficit and enhancing the quality of European democracy were central. However, actors' own self-interests were also key as many saw the Spitzenkandidaten process as a way to increase their influence in EU politics vis-à-vis other actors.

In the first of two video interviews, JCER editor Kenneth McDonagh speaks to Emmanuelle Schön-Quinlivan about the role of education in fostering political knowledge of the EU. The discussion focuses in particular on Dr Schon-Quinlivan's Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Action funded programme 'My Big Friendly Guide to the European Union', which is aimed at developing knowledge, curiosity and debate about Ireland and the EU among primary school children. In the second video interview JCER editor Christopher Huggins talks to blogger Jon Worth about his experience in using social media to communicate European politics and the opportunities and challenges social media presented to the quality of democracy and political debate in Europe.

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