What Can We Learn from Social Science about Democracy in Europe?

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Crisply reasoned argumentation, even when it is dead wrong, is always welcome in the debate on the alleged crisis of democracy in the European Union. Andrew Moravcsik's recent contribution is certainly well argued, and we agree wholeheartedly with his dismissal of the recent European Constitution as a legally unnecessary project driven primarily by public relations motives. His lessons for what we can learn from that debacle, however, are questionable. We question two central elements in particular: its basis in empirical political science and the implications of those findings for questions of democracy.

Moravcsik's concise argument unfolds in five tightly connected steps. First, most of what the EU does is technical: its domain includes areas such as trade, industrial regulation, agricultural policy, and foreign policy (p. 225). These issues are the natural province of experts. Nation-states are just as likely as the EU to govern such issue areas through the delegation of authority to technical bodies, such as central banks for monetary policy. Second, EU policy-making is reasonably effective and legitimate; it is "more transparent than national policy-making, less corrupt, and at least as accountable" (p. 236). Third, greater democratic participation and deliberation is infeasible. Even if opportunities for citizen engagement increased, citizens would not substantially participate because the EU addresses issues that "are far less salient" to voters than the issues that arise in national politics (p. 225). Fourth, if citizens did participate, EU policy would be become less effective because citizens would lack the incentives to become knowledgeable, again because "everyday voters view the matters handled by the EU as relatively obscure, [so] they have little incentive to debate or decide them" (p. 226). Finally, even if it were possible, increased public participation and deliberation would not enhance the democratic legitimacy or popular trust of EU institutions. Moravcsik points out that public trust in low-participation institutions such as armies and police forces is higher than in political parties (p. 234).

We address these points in order, starting with the claim that the issues dealt with by the EU are simply technical affairs. To say that trade and foreign policy are technical and therefore apolitical is curious and debatable, especially in light of large literatures in empirical political science that point to sharp political divisions over these policy areas. We dispense with that cavil to address the central concerns of European voters, which as Moravcsik correctly observes, center around the economy: unemployment, the "economic situation," and inflation. Although monetary policy, set by the European Central Bank, may have something to do with these outcomes, Moravcsik notes that fiscal and labor market policies, which are in his view the "most policy-relevant instruments for influencing employment and growth," are beyond the EU's brief (p. 226).

This perspective ignores the familiar charge that some of the problems of European economies may be tied to the lack of coordination between fiscal and monetary policy (cf. Begg et al. 2003). It similarly neglects to mention that the EU has not only been active in the area of macroeconomics, but also in microeconomics, with its project for opening the market in goods and services across European member states. This EU initiative has allowed national politicians in some countries — and the French case comes to mind here — to liberalize markets (which creates losers as well as winners) while blaming the liberalization on Brussels (Culpepper et al. 2006). Market liberalization creates social dislocation, which in turn creates public unease with the European Union at which national politicians have been quick to point the finger of blame for unpopular liberalization programs.

So what? For Moravcsik, this is no problem, because the governments who made these policies have to face their voters in periodic national elections. What could be more democratic than that? Two uncomfortable but robust empirical findings contradict this view. First, the EU is a construction of the mainstream right and left, and those parties support it; the parties who tend to oppose the EU most stridently stand on the margins of national politics across the EU. Second, there is an enormous gap between elites and the general public with respect to the desirability and advantages of membership in the European Union (Hooghe et al. 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2006; Marks et al. 2006). This dynamic has, in many member states, led to a situation where the mainstream left and right are not competing over issues of deregulation which, though decided collectively by national governments, often appear to come from Brussels. The most pressing democratic deficit of the European Union lies in this failure of representation at the national level, in which parties of the center-left and center-right no longer develop alternative visions of the appropriate role of markets and solidarity in national politics (cf. Balme 2006)[1]. This disconnect between the action of liberalization and the failure of mainstream parties to represent it is problematic for the Schumpeterian view of democracy that Moravcsik espouses, and we suggest it is at least party to blame for the low trust EU publics generally express toward political parties.

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[1] Internally, mainstream parties are quite divided in their attitudes toward the European Union, even if they maintain pro-EU positions overall (Gabel and Scheve forthcoming).

Moravcsik's claim that EU issues and institutions cannot draw substantial popular participation is too blunt. To infer this from the dismally low turnout in European Parliament (EP) elections, as he does, is only to underline the failure of the EP to be real center of decision-making for issues that are important to citizens of the EU. He is certainly correct that salience is necessary for participation, but we have shown that some EU issues are both important and salient. Whether or not the citizens of Europe participate in EU decisions also depends upon the character of their opportunities for participation. If public engagement mechanisms consist principally of interminable consultations that EU policy-makers then ignore, participation will be understandably low. If, on the other hand, the methods of public engagement address urgent issues such as economic and social policy, visibly influencing decisions in those arenas, citizens may well find it worth their while to participate.

Similarly, the character of public deliberation largely depends upon the quality of institutions that support and facilitate it. We do not doubt, and indeed we have written elsewhere, that there was not much worthwhile public deliberation in the lead up to the Constitutional referendums in France and the Netherlands. This is unsurprising; plebiscites and referendums do not generate public deliberation unless they are supported by politicians, civic organizations, and media outlets that articulate reasons and arguments from relevant perspectives. But public deliberation also occurs in many other contexts, such as the ongoing deliberative projects hosted under the auspices of the European Commission's Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate. Euro-democracy skeptics scoff at such initiatives as just more public relations, and they may be right. If these initiatives are poorly designed or executed, then they will indeed produce little of value. If these initiatives are well done, however, they may well articulate worthwhile insights and public perspectives as similar initiatives in deliberative polling, participatory planning, and electoral reform have done around the world (Lang Forthcoming; Fung 2006). But this criticism will become a self-fulfilling prophecy if EU political and social institutions are committed to ignoring the results of these dialogues no matter what their content.

Constructive opportunities for engagement that produce substantial participation and deliberation would likely enhance the legitimacy of EU institutions. When contrasting the approval of low-participation organizations such as the army to the public dismay with national political parties, Moravcsik compares apples to oranges. The question is not whether armies enjoy more or less trust than political parties, but whether political parties (or armies or non-governmental organizations) that afford more participation and deliberation enjoy more trust from their members and constituents than oligarchic parties (or armies or NGOs). Especially when their actions are unpopular or suspect — and the gap between elite and popular opinion shows that EU institutions are both — organizations frequently turn to and benefit from increased transparency and public participation. This impulse is especially strong in the contemporary period when trust for public authorities has declined across the industrialized countries (Dalton 2005). In an earlier era, individuals simply trusted hospitals and doctors, teachers and parents, and often even corporations to do the right thing. Now, we see the proliferation of informed consent requirements, patient oversight boards, parent councils, and consumer advisory groups. Whereas many citizens once seemed to accept the invitation of politicians and other authorities to "trust us," individuals and organizations now operate according to a "trust but

verify" dictum. Though the regional transnational arrangements of the EU are *sui generis*, we doubt they are immune from these pressures and demands.

We cannot refute Moravcsik's argument with a recipe for popular participation. No one knows how precisely to create transnational institutions that elicit popular participation and deliberation, and attempts to create such institutions may fail. We do not even know whether efforts should be directed to reforming national political arrangements, enhancing links between national and EU institutions, or creating novel arrangements such as citizen consultations and civic stakeholder negotiations. But defenders of national parties and parliaments cannot admonish us to leave well enough alone when so much is unwell. More than forty percent of European citizens are currently dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their own countries (Eurobarometer 2006), and that is no ringing endorsement of national democracies in Europe.

Instead of closing their eyes to this problem, those who defend an intergovernmental model must recognize the deficits of legitimacy and problems with governance at the national and EU levels. They should offer proposals for how their favored mechanisms can align the views of political elites with those whom they claim to represent, and how to educate each side in the process. Even as they do so, other democratic reformers will say that the party structures of old Europe are too moribund to meet the new challenges. It is similarly incumbent upon them to show how they can do better through direct citizen participation or other mechanisms. Let the games begin.

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