

Where is European democracy heading?

Democracy has historically developed at a national level, but with increasing internationalisation of politics, does the concept need reworking?

Having established three ideal type models of European democracy, RECON evaluates their viability as possible options for the EU – with the aim of identifying strategies to strengthen democracy and rectify deficits. This is undertaken by considering how the models would establish democracy institutionally as well as through detailed analysis of a range of important EU policy areas.

Constitutional issues

The EU has a material constitution, meaning that in social practice it works as a constitution. RECON research highlights the political contestation over the many efforts to make this material constitution democratic. The Lisbon Treaty ratification process contained clearer traits of the first model than had the far more open Constitutional Treaty process. But in substantive terms, the Lisbon Treaty promises to move the EU closer to the third model. This means that, despite Lisbon, the EU continues to confront the intellectual and political challenge of devising a democratic constitution for a non-state entity.

Representation

EU citizens have two channels of democratic representation: through national parliaments, and more directly, through MEPs in the European Parliament. The European Parliament is most at home in RECON model 3. This also applies to the overall structure of representation in the EU. National parliaments are linked in with the European Parliament and are increasingly involved in EU decision-making. This structure injects a distinct deliberative dimension but also brings up new and thorny questions of accountability.

Obviously the co-decision procedure (where both the EP and the Council decide on legislation) is more inclusive than consultation (where the Council only consults the Parliament on legislation), and it also provides more space for consultation with stakeholders. Involvement of civil society representatives in the early stages



of legislation ensures greater inclusion of those concerned and assists political equality.

Democracy from below

Civil society and a public sphere is an inherent part of any democratic order. RECON has conducted, among other empirical studies in this field, research on the role of the mass media – an important while far from unique actor in the ‘public sphere’. A media survey on the EU constitutional debate indicates that the patterns of mass media debate tend to follow model 1, with its focus on national government actors and intergovernmental institutions. However, there are also traits of model 3 in terms of overlapping public discourses. The media survey finds little empirical evidence for an unfolding European public sphere that would support a democratic order along the lines of model 2, which would

Read more

Rethinking democracy and the European Union, Erik O. Eriksen/John Erik Fossum (eds), Routledge, 2011

The unfinished democratization of Europe, Erik O. Eriksen, Oxford University Press, 2009

Political legitimacy and democracy in transnational Perspective, Rainer Forst and Rainer Schmalz-Bruns (eds), RECON Report 13, 2011

‘Bringing European democracy back in - or how to read the German Constitutional Court’s Lisbon Treaty ruling’, Erik O. Eriksen/John Erik Fossum, *European Law Journal*, 2011

require that the same issues would be debated at the same time under the same criteria of relevance.

Beyond a regulatory regime

RECON finds that the institutional, as well as the civic conditions, for a legitimate public justification process in the EU are not fully compatible with any single model. But the EU

has been moving beyond model 1, and towards model 3 in some important areas. The EU is clearly more than a regulatory regime but less than a federation. European democracy remains an unrealised promise. The system of representation is incomplete, although it also contains novel democratic possibilities, and the requirement of a European public sphere has not been met.

Three models of European democracy

Each of the three RECON models represents a possible solution to the democratic challenges facing Europe.

Audit democracy

Model 1 entails reframing the EU as a functional regulatory regime. Democracy is here directly associated with the nation state, assuming it is only at a national level that trust and solidarity can be fostered, and that the member states delegate certain tasks to the EU level. As such, the EU is accountable to the member states, which can both authorise and confine EU operations.

Multinational federal democracy

Model 2 entails establishing the EU as a multinational federal state with a sense of common identity and collective values among European citizens. With democratic procedures and a common identity, decision making and legislation would be legitimate at the federal European level.

Post-national democracy

Model 3 entails developing a post-national union with an explicit cosmopolitan orientation; a European subsystem of a larger cosmopolitan order where citizen sovereignty has replaced state sovereignty. This is a model for democracy beyond the state as democratic rule is configured in a multilevel structure of government.

Taken together, the models offer a comprehensive framework for assessing Europe's democratic challenges, which has formed a common ground for RECON's research. These models yield assessment standards and tools to analyse and integrate research on the developments and conditions for democracy from a range of different thematic angles.



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WP 1 leads the work on concretising the three models, establishing indicators and linking them to the particular research challenges raised in the policy fields and issue areas addressed. Overall coherence and integration of the project is ensured and an overarching theoretical approach to the study of European democracy is developed.

More details from the research field 'Theoretical Framework' are available at: www.reconproject.eu