

A European representative democracy?

How novel, how stable, how coherent and how democratic are the European Union's representative institutions?

The EU is based on a compound form of representation. As the Lisbon Treaty puts it, 'citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament' whilst 'Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their Governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments or their citizens'. On top of that, the Treaty also emphasises the role of political parties at the European level and of dialogue with representative associations and civil society.

Many arguments can be made for desiring a compound form of representation at the Union level, such as the sheer social complexity of the Union, the pluralism of political values affected by its decisions, and the importance of avoiding excessive concentrations of power in single institutions. Yet, *desirable* does not mean *possible*. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that combining different modes of representation will automatically add up to good representation. To the contrary, the lumping together of different approaches to representation may amount to little more than a fallacy of composition. The components of any one 'system of representation' may be individually desirable. Yet they may combine in unsatisfactory ways.

RECON has made several contributions to the investigation of compound forms of representation in the European arena. Through a *Democratic Audit of the EU* and the introduction of the concept of *multilevel parliamentary field*, RECON has also contributed to the development of new conceptual tools for analysis of this field.

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Selected findings

- **The quality of the debates in the European Parliament compare favourably with those in national parliaments**
- **Informal party networks are important for interactions between parliaments at the European and national levels**
- **The behaviour of Members of the European Parliament affect their chances of re-election**
- **The diffusion of specialised European Union agencies testifies to changes in the Union's executive order and its relationship to political representation**
- **The representation of individuals and of whole democratic *peoples* (member states) in the European Parliament are best reconciled by decision rules that require double majorities**



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Read more on the findings in the following pages

More details and publications from the research field 'Representation and Institutional Make-up', including all RECON reports and working papers mentioned in the below, are available at: www.reconproject.eu

Measuring democratic qualities

RECON has developed a framework for evaluating the democratic qualities of EU institutions, through a so-called *Democratic Audit of the European Union*.

RECON has used democratic auditing – first developed by David Beetham and Stuart Weir – to develop a framework for evaluating how the elements of the Union’s compound form of representation interact to produce good representation. The EU Democratic Audit develops criteria for the assessment of the Union’s democratic performance by deriving generic tests from democratic theory and then operationalising these using the RECON models. The overall result is a series of tests that allows the Union’s democratic performance to be evaluated against three different models of how representative democracy should work beyond the state.

A **Democratic Audit Website** has been set up with the aim to provoke discussion about indicators and data sources which might be used to assess how democratic the EU is (*see more on p. 39*).

Read more

‘A democratic audit framework’, Christopher Lord, in *Rethinking democracy and the European Union*, Eriksen/Fossum (eds), 2011

‘Some indicators of the democratic performance of the European Union and how they might relate to the RECON models’, Christopher Lord, *RECON Online Working Paper 2008/11*

A redistribution of seats?

RECON has participated in a study of the political equality of the apportionment of seats in the European Parliament (EP).

The study examines the tension between the equal representation of each individual in the Union institutions and the equal representation of each member state, or democratic people. The conclusion is that the claims of both kinds of equality may be best reconciled by decision rules that require double majorities. The study also suggests a limited reapportionment of seats, which would offer an improved trade-off of the two principles.



Read more

‘Unequal representation in the European Parliament’, Christopher Lord/Johannes Pollak, in *Strengthening democracy in the European Union*, Evas/Liebert/Lord (eds), Nomos, 2012



Deliberations in the European Parliament

The ‘quality’ of the European Parliament as a deliberative organ is good.

The Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) deliberate in a supranational and multilingual setting. In spite of this challenge, findings from a study which applies the ‘discourse quality index’ to the EP suggest that the quality of the parliamentary debates compares well with that in national parliaments. Another study on the behaviour of MEPs finds that the level of activity in the EP affects their chances of re-election.

Read more

‘The politics of justification?’, Christopher Lord/Dionysia Tamvaki, *RECON Online Working Paper 2011/03*

‘When quantity matters: Activity levels and re-election prospects of members of the EP’, Emmanuel Sigalas, *RECON Online Working Paper 2011/17*

The interplay of two levels

RECON has investigated how far the European Parliament and national parliaments have cooperated and adapted their practices and norms to one another. Informal party networks turn out to be important in this regard.

European citizens are represented in their national parliaments, in so far as the latter control the decisions their governments take on EU issues in the Council. They are also represented directly in the EP, which increasingly serves as a co-legislator on a par with the Council. This challenges the traditional assumption that any given polity is to be represented by a single institution. Instead, democratic representation in the EU should be conceived as the result of the *interplay* of two representation channels: the national and the European.

RECON's research has expanded knowledge of informal contacts between parliaments at the two levels, and demonstrated the importance of informal party networks. Decision making in this EU 'multilevel parliamentary field' is of a highly consensus-oriented and inclusive character. The EP can play a leading role as a political clearinghouse. Differences in voting weights and formal institutions are of limited effect in the playing out of political relations. The ability of national parliaments to control the positions of their government representatives in the Council varies depending on the formal provisions in place and the public attention EU legislative proposals receive.

Read more

'The multilevel parliamentary field', Ben Crum/John Erik Fossum, *European Political Science Review*, 2009

'Inter-parliamentary contacts of Members of the European Parliament', Eric Miklin/Ben Crum, *RECON Online Working Paper 2011/08*

Read more

'The EU's many representative modes: Colliding? Cohering?', Christopher Lord/Johannes Pollak, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2010

'On political representation: myths and challenges', Johannes Pollak/Jozef Bátora/Monika Mokre/Emmanuel Sigalas/Peter Slominski, *RECON Online Working Paper 2009/03*

'Reconstituting political representation in the EU', Emmanuel Sigalas/Monika Mokre/Johannes Pollak/Jozef Bátora/Peter Slominski, *RECON Online Working Paper 2009/16*

Complex representation

The multiplication of structures and opportunities for representation in the EU results in dazzling complexity, which blurs accountability structures.

The EU's compound form of representation allows a wide-ranging spectrum of actors to claim to be representative, resulting in a striking complexity. RECON has demonstrated that existing theories of political representation no longer provide an adequate framework in the modern political context. The emergence of new and powerful actors and fora, the increasing trend towards informalisation of decision making and the rising importance of expert committees significantly shape the hitherto nation-based systems of representation.

Agency governance

The delegation of policy-making tasks to EU agencies and their remarkable growth in number over the past 15 years mark a striking new development in the EU's institutional make-up.

RECON researchers have collected a comprehensive dataset covering all currently operating EU-level agencies, providing information on their respective levels of formal institutional independence. Findings suggest that regulatory content and level of political uncertainty can to a certain extent explain agencies' relative independence. Research also reveals how the EP has responded to the rise of agencies by innovating new procedures of scrutiny and control.

Read more

'Credibility, complexity and uncertainty', Arndt Wonka/Berthold Rittberger, *West European Politics*, 2010

'Agency governance in the European Union', Arndt Wonka/Berthold Rittberger (eds), *Journal of European Public Policy*, special issue, 2011