



**Jean
Monnet**



Robert Schuman



European Union Center/ Jean Monnet Chair

Upholding Democracy in the European Union

Sarah Burns

**UNIVERSITY
OF MIAMI**



**Vol. 17, No. 2
Junior Paper Series**

February 2017

Published with the support of the European Commission

The Jean Monnet/ Robert Schuman Paper Series

The Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series is produced by the Jean Monnet Chair and the European Union Center of the University of Miami.

These monographic papers analyze ongoing developments within the European Union as well as recent trends which influence the EU's relationship with the rest of the world. Broad themes include, but are not limited to:

- The Lisbon Treaty
- The Euro zone crisis
- Immigration and cultural challenges
- Security threats and responses
- The EU's neighborhood policy
- The EU and Latin America
- The EU as a model and reference in the world
- Relations with the United States
- Consequences of Brexit

These topics form part of the pressing agenda of the EU and represent the multifaceted and complex nature of the European integration process. These papers also seek to highlight the internal and external dynamics which influence the workings of the EU and its relationship with the rest the world.

European Union Center

University of Miami
1300 Campo Sano Building, 220C
Coral Gables, FL 33124-2231
Phone: 305-284-3266
Fax: (305) 284 4406
Web: www.miami.edu/eucenter

Jean Monnet Chair Staff

Joaquín Roy (Director)
Beverly Barrett (Associate Editor)
Melanie Goergmaier (Assistant Editor)
Maxime Larivé (Research Associate)
María Lorca (Research Associate)

Florida International University
Markus Thiel (Director, FIU)

International Jean Monnet Editorial Advisors:

Philippe de Lombaerde, UNU/CRIS, Brugge, Belgium
Carlos Hakansson, Universidad de Piura, Perú
Kurt Hübner, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
Finn Laursen, University of Southern Denmark
John McCormick, Indiana University, Purdue
Félix Peña, Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Beatriz Pérez de las Heras, Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao
Manuel Porto, University of Coimbra, Portugal
Lorena Ruano, CIDE, Mexico
Eric Tremolada, Universidad del Externado de Colombia, Bogotá, Colombia
Roberto Domínguez, Suffolk University, Boston
Francesc Granell, University of Barcelona

Upholding Democracy in the European Union

Sarah Burns¹

The dispute over democratic legitimacy has recently plagued rhetoric regarding European Union efficacy. Although the issue is strongly rooted in EU history, it has recently been magnified due to the withdrawal of Britain from the EU in June 2016. The so-called ‘Brexit’ has thus far precipitated a number of consequences, including invigorating Eurosceptics’ claim that the EU lacks democratic processes and institutions that accurately represent EU citizens. The most formidable argument against this claim is presented through an analysis of two primary embodiments of democracy within the EU: The European Parliament and the European Citizens’ Initiative. Despite claims of elitism, the European Union upholds democratic tendencies as shown through the European Parliament’s primary facets of democracy: elections as well as checks and balances. In addition to these integral manifestations of democracy, the EU ensures citizens a commitment to democracy through the European Citizens’ Initiative. These two factors serve as a solid foundation in combatting presumptuous allegations of an EU democratic deficit.

¹ *About the author: Sarah Burns is a senior at the University of Miami studying International Relations and Spanish. She works as a program associate with Global Ties Miami, a non-profit organization which aims to increase international collaboration through exchange programs that connect leaders from around the world. She also contributes to Latin American News Digest, a publication that expands and fortifies news coverage of the Latin American region. She aspires to pursue a career path that allows her to combine her passions for public diplomacy, governance, and international exchange.*

The European Parliament (EP), what is now the largest trans-national democratic electorate in the world, began as the 78-member Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 (Palayret, Bardi, Beligh, Lopez, 61-63). From that point on, the EP has augmented its membership, power, and prestige, ultimately taking its modern form of a 751 member proportionally structured and directly elected legislature (McCormick, 194). Although it is often criticized for low voter turnout and structural weaknesses, the EP plays a crucial role in the legislative arena and in monitoring other EU institutions, ultimately functioning as an indispensable institution with powers and structure that repel claims of a democratic deficit.

The European Parliament serves as a catalyst for combatting the supposed democratic deficit in the EU by two primary means — elections as well as checks and balances. Firstly, the MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) are elected for 5-year terms via direct suffrage. The EP is the only directly elected institution, a clear embodiment of the most crucial element of democracy—the right to vote. By electing their MEPs, citizens have the potential to influence the overall direction of the EP by electing members who they resonate with. These MEPs may thus act on behalf of their constituents to pursue policy that was the root cause of their election into the Parliament.

A second embodiment of democracy within the European Parliament is its power of checks and balances of other institutions. Both, the Council and the Commission, must submit reports regarding legislation, budget, and overall plans to the EP, so that it can ensure the institutions are upholding treaties and EU law. The EP retains the power to question the acts in said reports, even with the potential to take treaty infringement accusations to the European Court of Justice (McCormick, 205). The EP may additionally utilize its ‘nuclear option’ of forcing

the resignation of the College of Commissioners, although it has never been successfully implemented. Lastly, the EP has the power to confirm or deny the nominee of the President of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Palavret et al., 211). In summary, checks and balances of power within the EU system are clear evidence of the democratic dynamism emanating from the European Parliament, and ultimately within the European Union.

An additional illustration of the democratic propensity of the EU is a mechanism called the European Citizens' Initiative. Introduced in April 2012, the initiative increases direct democracy by allowing EU citizens to invite the European Commission to propose legislation regarding a certain issue area. It must have varied public support, and more specifically, it must be "backed by at least one million EU citizens, coming from at least 7 out of the 28 member states" (European Commission, 2016). This first successful initiative was proposed by the organisation Right2Water in 2014 and urged the Commission "to ensure that all EU citizens enjoy the right to water and sanitation, to exclude water supply and management of water resources from internal market rules and liberalisation, and to increase its efforts to achieve universal access to water and sanitation around the world" (EU Commission Press Release, 2014). With the approval of this initiative, the Commission set forth a list of concrete steps to address the concern of water security. The European Citizens' Initiative allows the public to call the Commission to action on a policy issue of their choice and to influence potential new legislation—a true instance of democracy and citizens' power within the EU.

Faith in the democratic processes of the EU is crucial now more than ever. The rise of populist extremism presents one of the most urgent challenges to democracy within the EU (Goodwin, 2016). Populist parties such as the National

Front in France and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands not only threaten EU democracy, but the EU as a whole. For example, the National Front right-wing populist Marine Le Pen is quoted in an interview saying “The EU is deeply harmful, it is an anti-democratic monster. I want to prevent it from becoming fatter, from continuing to breathe, from grabbing everything with its paws and from extending its tentacles into all areas of our legislation” (von Rohr, 2014). The growing support for notions such as these from extremist parties is enhanced by inflated assertions of a democratic deficit. In order to oppose this harmful populist rhetoric, full-scale public backing of the democratic model of the EU is dire.

To conclude, the notion of a democratic deficit has recently been wrongfully perpetuated by the knowledge gap that exists between EU citizens and the government. There exists a belief that the EU is run solely by terms of elitism, and these self-serving elites do not represent the interests of the citizens. These notions are not only erroneous, but also inhibit the capability of EU decision making. Explicit and conscious recognition of the framework of the European Parliament as well as a focus on the European Citizens’ Initiative are essential in combating the perception of a democratic deficit, ultimately increasing public participation and thus empowering the EU to serve citizens’ interests. Whoever takes on the role as the new President of the Parliament this upcoming January is obligated to emphasize that the EU is poised to uphold European values of democracy, freedom, and solidarity.

Works Cited

- “Commission says yes to first successful European Citizens' Initiative”. *European Commission Press Release Database*. 19 March, 2014.
http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-277_en.htm
- “Council of the European Union.” *Europa*, April 2016.
https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies/council-eu_en
- Goodwin, Matthew. “New Report: The Rise of Populist Extremism in Europe.” *Chatham House*. 2016. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/news/view/178303#>
- “How the EP Works.” *Toute l'Europe*, 2011.
<http://europaparlament.touteleurope.eu/understanding/how-the-ep-works.html>
- Majone, Giandomenico. “Europe’s ‘Democratic Deficit’: The Question of Standards.” *European Law Journal*, Vol. 4, March 1998: Blackwell Publishers.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0386.00040/epdf>
- McCormick, John. *European Union Politics*, 2nd ed. NY: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.
- Palayret, Jean-Marie; Bardi, Luciano; Beligh, Nabli; Sio Lopez, Cristina. “Building Parliament: 50 Years of European Parliament History.” *European Communities*, 2009.
http://www.ab.gov.tr/files/ardb/evt/1_avrupa_birligi/1_1_tarihce/50_years_of_european_parliament_history.pdf
- Priess, Omri. “THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S POWERS OF INITIATIVE.” *Julie Ward MEP*, 12 May 2016.
http://www.juliewardmep.eu/european_parliament_s_powers_of_initiative
- “The European Citizens’ Initiative.” *European Commission*, 2016.
<http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/basic-facts#top>
- Von Rohr, Mathieu. “Interview with Marine Le Pen ‘I Don't Want this European Soviet Union.’” *Spiegel International*. 3 June, 2014.
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/interview-with-french-front-national-leader-marine-le-pen-a-972925.html>
- Vos, Sebastian F.A. “The Week Ahead in the European Parliament.” *National Law Review*. 5 November 2016.