



The State of Democracy in Europe: A comment on four papers

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This is a comment on the Kitchelt, Hooghe and Marks, Gabel and Carrubba, and Krouwel papers. I am going to use these papers as a springboard from which to assess the state of democracy in Europe. Because I have much to say and have only been allocated a few pages, I will refer where possible to past writings of mine that flesh out what I am saying here. Though some of the developments I comment on are quite encouraging, I would say that these papers as a group are rather dispiriting in their implications for democratic governance, and this is the focus of my comment.

Let me start with a development, highlighted by Herbert Kitchelt, which looks on its face quite encouraging: the diversification of party systems to cater to the increasingly complex mix of issues that have become "irreducibly two-dimensional." This development appears to be a response among policy entrepreneurs to the increasing differentiation of issues that, following Tuckel and Tejera (1983), my co-authors and I once called the "particularization" of political concerns (van der Eijk et al. 1992). Not mentioned by Kitchelt, but the focus of the paper by Hooghe and Marks, is the fact that among the new issues is European unification. The increasing diversity of political concerns generates a problem for democratic governance that Kitchelt also documents: a problem of parties doing the splits as they try to cater to groups united on some fronts but divided on others. To the extent that such attempts fail, these failures create opportunities for other sorts of party diversification which has resulted in the widespread fractionalization of party systems that

Kitchelt mentions.

On the face of things, these developments appear encouraging, since what we appear to see are democratic responses to voter concerns; and Kitchelt presents the development in this light, contrasting the flexibility and responsiveness of new parties with the monolithic inflexibility of cartelized old parties; or with the supposedly random links between voters and parties that he associates with political dealignment. I should mention in passing that the scholars who most thoroughly documented this dealignment did not find that it led to random voting. To the contrary, what Kitchelt is describing in his paper appear to be the party-level concomitants of the individual-level developments that are described in Franklin et al. (1992) where the decline of cleavage politics was found to have been matched, more or less, by a rise in issue voting (Franklin et al. 1992: 399-400).

But we should not be too encouraged. Fractionalized party systems that have become irreducibly two-dimensional present major problems for democracy. Kitchelt points out that, in such a space, politicians cannot readily identify equilibrium strategies, but he dismisses this problem by arguing that parties are in any case restricted in their maneuverability by their past policy commitments and legacy partisans. However, the problem cannot so easily be dismissed. Politics in two dimensions are an order of magnitude more complicated than when parties are differentiated purely in left/right terms. In two dimensions there is both more need and more opportunity for obfuscation on the part of

politicians not always eager to clarify the ambiguities inherent in programs that seek support from groups united on some issues but divided on others; and any increase in the number of parties cannot but increase the complexities of choice for voters.

More importantly, increasing fractionalization of party systems along with the reduced sizes of large parties, which is an inevitable concomitant, limits the extent to which voters are presented with clear electoral choices in terms of alternative policy outcomes. My own work suggests that this growing problem of democratic governance is a primary cause of declining electoral turnout where that has taken place (Franklin 2004).

An alternative strategy for dealing with issues that cut across the traditional basis of party support is the focus of the Hooghe and Marks contribution. Instead of risking a split in the party or attempting to paper it over, government party leaders can "unload" the issue for decision by referendum. Hooghe and Marks argue persuasively that this has been a common elite response to the issue of European integration in countries where elites are divided on this issue. But the solution also has undesirable consequences (the subject of the Hooghe and Marks paper) in reducing the relevance of party politics and providing a platform for anti-elite movements on the populist right.

The developments sketched by Kitchelt and by Hooghe and Marks are a bit disturbing in their implications for European governance. The proliferation of issues has clearly made it harder for established parties to incorporate new issues into the ongoing party battle; and the resulting fractionalization of party systems and/or reliance on referendums to decide certain questions weakens party government with uncertain but definitely worrying implications.

If those developments are worrying, however, the developments described by Krouwel and by Gabel and Carrubba are positively frightening. Krouwel sketches a host of ways in which multilevel governance in Europe is undermining traditional checks and balances in the Parliamentary systems of countries that are members of the European Union. Parliamentary government depends on having an elected parliament check the actions of an executive drawn from its own ranks, with the electorate being called upon to adjudicate any irresolvable dispute. The European Union itself is not organized in this manner, and in countries that are members of the European Union today, Krouwel says, "while policy-making has shifted to the supra-national level, the institutions of democratic control and scrutiny have not kept pace." National parliaments cannot check an executive whose major decisions are made in secret at the European level (cf. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1996: 386); and electorates cannot be called upon to adjudicate in matters about which they know nothing. These assessments might sound alarmist, but they echo warnings raised by other scholars over the past fifteen years or so (myself among them).

Krouwel's assertion that the European Parliament is in no position to act as an alternative democratic check on policy-making at the EU level is reinforced by Gabel and Corrua, who document the fact that roll call votes in the European Parliament do not provide a complete record (or even a random sample) of important votes in that body. Even to the extent that the European Parliament might be able to act as a check on the European executive, European citizens would be largely unable to determine what role their representatives were playing in this regard.

Taken together these various developments are quite sobering. Even before the decline of cleavage politics gave rise to the particularization of voting

choice, and even before the Single European Market and Maastricht Treaty permitted large chunks of what used to be national policy-making to move to the European level, there had already been talk of a growing "presidentialization" of parliamentary government. Some commentators were uneasy about the way in which the use of television permitted Prime Ministers to appeal directly to the people, bypassing the checks and balances of parliamentary government. At the same time it was feared that electorates were losing the capacity to assess party promises and performance in regard to increasingly complex issues. Papers in this symposium make it clear that we live in a world where those old fears are as nothing. Prime ministers today have new and far more powerful means for bypassing parliamentary control. Citizens today have far greater complexities to deal with than they did a mere thirty years ago. In this world the small matter of a democratic deficit in the conduct of European Union affairs is not the most important of our worries. The implication of these papers is that we should be much more worried about a growing democratic deficit in the conduct of national politics: a deficit that appears particularly acute in countries that are members of the European Union.

The papers I have been discussing sound an inescapable warning about the parlous state of democracy in Europe today.

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