

EU Elections - Democracy's Deep Crisis and the Rise of the Populist Right

To perform rather than live democracy

By [Jan Oberg](#)

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Fears has been expressed in Europe about the recent EU parliament voting pattern. Instead of the fear and denouncing the winners we should ask: What causes such an outcome?

My short answer is this: Democracy itself is in deep crisis. It has become performance or ritual rather than something genuinely lived.

Two things stand out – one, the increase in votes going to nationalist, populist, right-wing and anti-Muslim parties as well as Euro-skeptics – particularly in Denmark, France, Greece and Britain.

Secondly, the voter turnout has fallen from 62 per cent in 1979 to 43% in 2009 and this year it [increased only 0.09%](#) in spite of the EU Commission's [attempt](#) to increase it.

So while people struggle around the world for democracy, only 43% of the EU citizens find it meaningful to go and vote every 4th year. How tragic for an EU that tries to promote democracy everywhere, even by military force.

It is understandable that the two mentioned factors is a combination that make many in Europe – the seat of two world wars, NATO and some of the most armed and two nuclear-weapons states – concerned. Perhaps the rest of the world should be at least as concerned? Other countries such as Hungary and Spain have, on different dimensions, moved in a worrying authoritarian political direction.

However, before we sink deeper into the mood of hysteria and denouncing, we should listen carefully to [William Pfaff](#), eminent U.S. columnist over decades who lives in Paris:

"The outcome of the recently concluded European Parliament elections is described in press and political circles in Europe and North America as a shock or crisis, but the actual reaction is better named hysteria, as if "Europe" is all over, and the rise of the right in these elections resembles the rise of fascism in the 1930s — all of which is sheer nonsense.

What this vote has done is contribute 150 anti-"European" members to a parliamentary body numbering 751 seats in total, which has very little power over the functions of the European Union executive – the appointed Commission and the Council (the governing body, composed of ministers from member-governments, under a rotating presidency). Its

power bears no resemblance to the power of the national parliaments in EU member states.”

Where democracy and economy fails in the eyes of the populace, there is always a risk of turns to the populist right. Because of history, Europeans are extremely concerned about such developments. And we should be.

Now, it is my hypothesis that there may be other reasons for the “hysteria”: By focusing on the populist right gains you get a debate about *that*, the hows and the whys of populism and, say, about neo-Nazism and racism.

That nobly signals that you are very energetically emphasising that “it must never happen again”. But it *also* stigmatises the populist parties and their supporters as “can happen again” and, thus, increase confrontation instead of dialogue.

The debate you then do *not* get is this:

What is so problematic about Western democracy in general and about the democracy inside the EU in particular?

I strongly believe that the problems of democracy *and* the Western neo-liberal capitalist project which it tries – helplessly – to control is the *independent* variable while the right-wing, populist, anti-immigration voting trends is the *dependent* variable.

In other words, it is *because* democracy and the economy is malfunctioning that we get this voting pattern.

This is, however, *a very difficult issue for Western politicians to take up*. Naturally they believe they themselves represent true democracies – even to the extent that it is a commodity they gladly export or impose on everybody who are, from their vantage point, less developed or civilised.

If you want one website that may give you a much larger picture and combines the independent and the dependent variables mentioned above, go to the [Pew Research Global Attitude Project](#).

Its statistics builds on 7 countries only but I would take it to be fairly representative. Its main findings are:

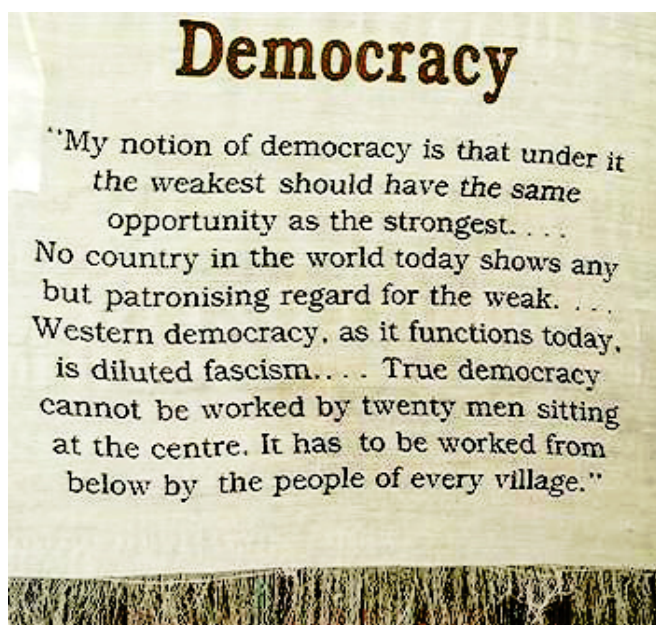
- there is a small increase in favourable sentiments of the EU;
- a remarkably low share, still, who believe that economic integration strengthens the economy (and then we can be sure that the political sacrifices for that integration is considered even more negatively);
- only about one-third have favourable views of the EU institutions;
- most interestingly and sadly: the EU citizens despair about their personal interaction with the EU: 65% say that the EU does not understand their needs, 63% sees it as “intrusive” while 57% see it as inefficient. Thus, for instance, as many as 77% see unemployment as the top worry. This personal interaction has a lot to do with feeling real democracy.
- a median of 55% wants fewer immigrants to come to their country. (Given the media debate, one would have thought this was much higher). And 50% of the

EU citizens have unfavourable views about Roma, 46% about Muslims and 18% about Jews (again, somewhat surprising given the media coverage which tells much more about anti-semitism than about anti-muslim attitudes).

It should be fairly easy to understand from this that all in all the views of the citizens in the EU on a series of issues are much more *diverse* and *complex* than one would believe when reading most EU politicians' reactions and statements as well as the general media coverage.

The answer to this challenge is *not* what many EU leaders say, namely that "we must learn to sell the EU better". That is the answer of *performers* with a marketing mind-set. It is also *not* to denounce those who vote for populism and anti-EU values.

The answer is to take the democratic deficit – or even the absence of *lived* democracy – very very serious.



Mohandas K. Gandhi – Photo © Jan Oberg

So much for the analysis of attitudes inside the EU.

Something *must* be deeply wrong when only 43% feel it is meaningful to express their opinions about an organisation that decides an ever larger part of their lives.

And something *must* be wrong when 65% of Europe's citizens think that the EU, after all these years since the Coal and Steel Community (1951), does not understand what they need.

In a follow-up article – "Democracy needs democratisation" – we shall focus on what is so problematic about democracy in general and in the EU in particular.

[Jan Oberg](#) TFF director, dr. hc.

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