

Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Politics. By Vivien A. Schmidt.

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With Ireland the latest member state to derail a constitutional settlement for the European Union, The EU's "democratic deficit" remains high on the European political agenda. Vivien Schmidt's contribution to this debate falls into a category familiar among its leading experts, from Fritz Scharpf and Giandomenico Majone to Joseph Weiler and Andrew Moravcsik, who have all argued that the problem doesn't lie with the EU – such as it exists legally and institutionally – but that the still highly nationalized European public and media have basically got it all wrong. The EU works, they argue, as a remarkable, *sui generis* political and legal order, delivering peace, prosperity and power to European member states; it is just that its unique political structures and multi-headed dynamics do not map onto classical notions of democracy, founded on the liberal democratic nation state. These authors are in many ways right, and the continuing failure of European public opinion to accept, understand and celebrate the qualities and achievements of the extraordinary political beast that its politicians created out of the rubble of the mid twentieth century, is one of contemporary liberal democracy's most perplexing dilemmas. In many ways, it suggests a nostalgia in Europe for the populist past: seen in the continual quasi-fascistic calls for plebiscitary referenda, as well as the seduction of flashy, American-style presidential politics. The EU, meanwhile, craves love from somebody other than the small band of dedicated scholars who make their careers studying it. But these authors have not yet answered the deeper Tocquevillian question:

about how such European citizens – who will trust, identify and believe in the EU – could ever be created?

As Schmidt argues, democratic politics in Europe today is fatally flawed. A multi-leveled and functional “regional state” at the EU institutional level offers enlightened and pluralist “policy without politics”, while national level polities, stripped by the EU of much of their sovereign legal power and policy making competencies, offer declamatory “politics without policy” for the masses—blaming the EU for everything that goes wrong at the national level. The book’s central message, repeated throughout, is that the fault lies in the inability of national politicians to conceive of a political discourse that represents the European political system adequately as a democratic construction. Her major contribution is to detail comparatively across West European states the degree of “fit” between European institutions and policy styles and the national political systems that interlock and engage with it. The politics of highly centralized, unitary states such as the UK and France mould far less well on to the consensual, dispersed structures of multi-leveled EU governance, than others such as Germany or Italy, whose routine federal and regional politics are much more complimentary.

Comparative sociologists of the state will appreciate Schmidt’s reliable, synthetic summaries of the institutional structures and patterns of policy making in these four leading member states. Her analysis of their electoral politics as such is less convincing. A somewhat simplistic, post hoc “discourse analysis” of familiar political events and figures, with a nod towards “political culture” as determinate, it often engages in

essentializing political styles and attitudes that are the stock of European political news coverage: that the proud “French” are obsessed with *grandeur* and universalistic Republican values; or that ineffective “Italian” politics is drowned in a cacophony of political voices, and so forth. The book does, though, in its breadth of references, represent a good state-of-the-art of conventional EU studies today, including its “soft” political science tendencies to rely on eclectic institutionalist explanations and qualitative methods.

The overweening focus on large countries in the EU has its limitations. The awkward, arrogant and sometimes destructive poses that these large players sometimes take, helps explain many of the diplomatic blockages and crises the EU encounters. But more often than not, the solutions to these wrangles have come from smaller, marginal and newer member states, who are able to play brokers, and who have fewer strategic alternatives. An original European Community without the mediating role of the Benelux countries would have never been created. Nowadays, Portuguese, Finnish, Polish or Cypriot representatives enjoy bargaining power that would never materialize in a strictly intergovernmental horse trade. The role of smaller countries in the polity thus accounts for some of the EU’s democratic legitimacy. For these are countries whose armies never marched across the continent in search of national glory or power.

In the end, we are no nearer a Tocquevillian answer to the Tocquevillian question the book’s title poses. It might be suggested we need to go outside of politics itself: beyond political institutions, political actors or political discourse, to genuinely look at European

citizens from the bottom up—as living, working, thinking, and sometimes voting, in an emergent European space. This sociology of European Union is now being pioneered by scholars such as Neil Fligstein and Juan Díez Medrano, and it is a pity this book continues to take such a narrow view of what “Europeanization” might mean, limited essentially to policy making and institutional dynamics. Without this, EU studies will continue to puzzle, in circular fashion, over utopian questions of democratic design. What kind of EU constitution would satisfy the democratic cravings of a European public socialized into believing that they already live in the finest, most civilized, democratic national societies on the planet? Perhaps the question needs reversing. What kind of ideal European citizen would need to be created to populate the *sui generis* institutional and legal structures that its elite politicians, judges and bureaucrats have created? Such “Europeans” do exist, but they are in fact very few in number: whether measured in terms of those who self-identify in these terms (around 12%), or those with some extensive experience of living and working outside their home country (a measly 4%). It is hardly any surprise that so many other European citizens remain locked – politically at least – in deeply nationalized worlds, that resemble the preoccupations of 19th century nation state building more than a 21st century of global interconnections. One suspects that the European public has the national democratic systems and the European democratic deficit that it deserves.

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