

The legitimacy of the EU

During the European referendum campaign, Boris Johnson described the EU as ‘a dysfunctional bureaucracy that has no proper oversight’, while Jeremy Corbyn has argued that the EU has always suffered from ‘a serious democratic deficit’. How fair are these criticisms?

European Commission: a democratic deficit?

None of the members of the European Commission are elected — they are nominated by member states. Nigel Farage has argued that the commission, supported by a formidable bureaucracy of civil servants, lacks both legitimacy and accountability, as it remains in power regardless of EU parliamentary results. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, there are two sides to this argument.

Table 1 Arguments for and against a democratic deficit

For	Against
None of the five presidents of the EU are directly elected by EU voters.	All the presidents are either elected by the EU Parliament or the leaders of the 28 member states. Professor Menon of the London School of Economics argues that the EU states prefer the existing system and would oppose direct election of an EU president or presidents as this would undermine national leaders.
There are 28 commissioners who make up the European Commission. These commissioners form the EU cabinet. They are <i>nominated</i> and are <i>not elected</i> by member states.	The US cabinet operates in a similar way. Cabinet members are nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. Likewise, in the UK, although cabinet members are elected members of Parliament, they are chosen for their executive role by the prime minister. No one has ever voted for someone to be a chancellor, foreign secretary, prime minister or any other cabinet role. The EU system is therefore not really much different from what is happening in the USA or the UK.
The EU has 33,000 civil servants who underpin this unelected bureaucracy.	The British government employs over 400,000 civil servants.
Michael Barnier, the EU’s lead Brexit negotiator, is unelected.	Although former Brexit secretaries David Davies and Dominic Raab are both elected MPs, they were appointed by Theresa May to be the UK’s Brexit negotiator. Similarly, the vast majority of negotiators who perform such roles as Barnier on the global stage are appointed specialists.
Very few people understand how the EU and the European Commission work or which groupings within the European Parliament their national parties belong to. This, some argue, exacerbates the democratic deficit.	This is as much the fault of nation states within the EU as the EU itself. Nation states could do a better job of educating their citizens about how the EU works. The UK for example does not have a compulsory civic programme to teach school children the relationship between the EU and itself.

European parliamentary election turnout

European parliamentary election turnout has consistently trailed national general election turnout (Table 2). There is no consensus of agreement for why this is.

- Some argue that it is because Europeans are more fixated on national politics than EU politics.
- Low turnout reflects a lack of trust in the European Parliament and the European project generally. Additionally, a number of European states have a eurosceptic presence within the European Parliament.

Table 2 EU parliamentary election turnout vs UK general election turnout since 1979

EU Parliament election	Turnout (%)	UK general election	Turnout (%)
1979	62	1979	76
1984	59	1983	73
1989	58	1987	75
1994	56	1992	78
1999	50	1997	71
2004	45	2001	59
2009	43	2005	61
2014	43	2010	65
		2015	66
		2017	69

The future

These are two worrying trends for the EU. Democratic deficit and legitimacy issues will need to be rectified if the European project is to flourish post-Brexit.

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