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Democracy in the European Parliament

How democratic is the European Parliament, and does it depend on the definition used?

Bacheloroppgave i Europastudier m/ fremmedspråk
Veileder: Pieter De Wilde

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1. Introduction

Every fifth year, elections for the European Parliament are held in all countries of the European Union. Between the 23rd and 26th of May, potentially 751 new representatives will be elected in what is regarded the democratic scrutineer of the European Union.

The European Union (EU) is a political and economic union which currently consists of 28 member states, covering much of the European continent (European Union, 2019c). Its goal is, among others, to promote peace, freedom, sustainable development and to ‘enhance economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among EU countries’ (European Union, 2019c). In short, the EU’s institutional structure consists of the European Council and the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the courts and lastly – the European Parliament, the latter of which is the focus of this thesis (European Union, 2018).

The European Parliament was first established in 1952 as a part of the European Coal and Steel Community, being the Common Assembly of the community, before becoming the European Parliament ten years later (European Union, 2019b). It is the legislative institution of the European Union and also holds supervisory and budgetary responsibilities. Being the legislative institution means that the European Parliament, along with the Council of the European Union, passes laws based on proposals submitted by the European Commission. In addition, it participates on decision making regarding international agreements and potential enlargements of the European Union (European Union, 2019b). Relating to supervisory and budgetary responsibility, the European Parliament elects the Commission President, approves and establishes the EU budget – the latter together with the Council, questions the Commission and Council and overall works as the democratic scrutineer of all EU institutions (European Union, 2019b).

However, the European Union has been receiving, and continues to receive, criticism for having a democratic deficit too great to be justified. With the upcoming election and its relevance, it would thus be interesting to investigate whether what is claimed to be the most democratic institution of the European Union is in fact democratic, or also carrying said deficit, both through function of the European Parliament and the election of its representatives.

As determining whether an institution is democratic or not is difficult, because it would depend on the definition used and the inherent complexity of democracy itself, there is no definite answer as to whether something is democratic or not, i.e. one cannot answer merely ‘yes’ or

'no'. The research question of this thesis will therefore be: *How democratic is the European Parliament, and does it depend on the definition used?*

2. Method

The thesis itself is a descriptive analysis of the European Parliament in light of selected democratic theory, where the goal is to establish – if possible – whether the European Parliament is a democratic institution.

To be able to judge whether the European Parliament carries the democratic principles it ought to, I will present two different democratic models and their measurements. The first model I have chosen is that of liberal democracy, which is the most well-known form of representative democracy we know and use today. I will be presenting the background of democratic development before presenting the measurements I will use as a basis in a table. Secondly, I will be presenting the model of deliberative democracy, with a limited background and theory, before presenting the measurements in the same table as the data for liberal democracy.

Choosing deliberative democracy to compare with liberal democracy may seem like an interesting choice, however, it is convenient to compare the European Parliament to a model which has outspread support and is well regarded, and to one which has great potential but which can be difficult to implement in practice. Although one can argue that deliberative democracy requires a statistical representative group to be fulfilled, one can also argue that the elected representatives indeed fulfil this requirement. Though deliberation does not necessarily play as big part in the Parliament as it should according to the model it is still what the representatives mostly do, and I still regard it as relevant – which will be further explained in the discussion part.

After presenting the two models of democracy, I will analyse the European Parliament through two of the measurements to both respective models and examine if it fulfils the criteria to be classified as democratic regarding both liberal democracy and deliberative democracy, according to the two chosen measurements. I have chosen not to analyse the European Parliament with regards to all the measurements, as both the time-frame and the length of the thesis limits that possibility. In addition, some of the measurements of the two models overlap in content, and although they originate from two separate models, the different aspects of the European Parliament that I will be discussing would be the same regardless of model as the

criteria are so similar. I have thus chosen two completely different measures from each respective model to analyse to avoid repeating aspects.

3. Theory

3.1 Development of modern democracy

Many factors played a part in the development of liberal democracy. Among the historical changes that contributed to the emergence, one could see the struggles between different actors for authority; rebellions against taxes; the spread of trade and market relations; the challenge against Catholicism – which in turn became the immense struggle between church and state (Held, 1996:70). Although the Reformation played a certain part in the development of political thought, one could also argue that the conception of the person as ‘an individual’ and ‘master of his destiny’ lay down the basis of later political reflection (Held, 1996:72-3).

According to John Locke, the government rules and its legitimacy is sustained, by the ‘consent’ of individuals (Held, 1996:81). However, the definition of ‘consent’ is ambiguous in Locke’s writing. Held suggests that it can be interpreted that there needs to exist a continuous personal agreement of individuals to ensure a government’s authority and legitimacy. At the same time, however, Held is also of the perception that this consent, according to Locke, is only necessary in the initial inauguration of the government, and not as an on-going agreement between the people and the state (Held, 1996:81). Although the state ought to follow the concepts of ‘life, liberty and estate’ of the original contracts between the people and state, there is nothing stopping them from acting tyrannical, with the risk of political rebellion being the only consequence.

Held mentions a few of the directions that Locke’s writings are pointing to, which can be viewed as the most important basics of a legitimate democracy, as can be seen in the later development of the democratic state. These points include: the importance of securing the rights of individuals; popular sovereignty; majority rule; a division of powers within the state; constitutional monarchy and a representative system of parliamentary government (Held, 1996:81-2). However, these points cannot be viewed as anything but elementary points, as Locke could not foresee the factors that would bias democracy in the modern day.

3.2 Liberal Democracy

‘English liberalists’ of the nineteenth-century, Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, are important figures in the development of liberal democracy – and more specifically the protective democracy (Held, 1996: 84, 95). For them, according to Held, ‘[...] liberal democracy was associated with a political apparatus that would ensure the accountability of the governors to the governed’ (Held, 1996:95).

As with every model of democracy, liberal democracy has various definitions. According to David Beetham, a liberal democracy is based on two main principles: ‘popular control of public decisions and decisions makers, and equality between citizens in relation to those citizens’ (Beetham, 2004). This means, for instance, that participation and accountability, representation, information transparency and availability, as well as overall equality in the political system are core values that are necessities for it to be called a liberal democracy (Joshi, 2013). The table below is gathered from Joshi’s article about liberal democracy and describes, among other things, the measures necessary for a political system to qualify as liberal democratic.

Table 1. Liberal democracy and democratic depth

Essential attributes of democracy	Democratic depth (objective measures)
(1) Participation	More opportunities for all to participate in political groups and activities (voting accessibility, registration and turnout, number of effective parties)
(2) Representation	All (not just some) groups of people represented in the composition of legislative bodies
(3) Political equality	All (not just some) people have equal opportunity to be involved in politics (equal appointment, openness/access to voting for/running for office)

(4) Information transparency	More opportunities for political expression (access to broadcast media, print media, non-censorship)
(5) Accountability	Holding of periodic elections, rule by majority, transparency of government activity

Table 1. Liberal democracy and democratic depth (Joshi, 2013).

These five features: participation, representation, political equality, information transparency and accountability lay the framework for liberal democracy and are the measurements to be used to evaluate the European Parliament, with the focus being on representation and accountability.

3.3 Deliberative Democracy

The other democratic perspective I will be using is, as previously mentioned, the deliberative democracy. This democratic theory attempts, according to Fishkin (2009), to combine deliberation by the people with political equality. This would mean that the people through participation and deliberation have an equal say in political outcomes (Fishkin, 2009:80). To achieve political equality through deliberation would require that said deliberation would take place on a human scale, so-called face-to-face democracy. The optimal course of deliberative democracy, Fishkin argues, is that of the microcosmic deliberation, which would work as a representative group of ordinary citizens; preferably based on random sampling (Fishkin, 2009:80-1). This could potentially cover even the European Union and its 500 million people if done correctly.

These groups of representatives would ideally be large enough so that one could sample statistical evaluation, but concurrently small enough so that the participants may speak and hold discussions. This form of microcosmic deliberation would realize political equality through random sampling in the choice of participants/representatives, with an equal counting of their views (Fishkin, 2009:81-2).

Another alternative option to the governing institution basing on deliberative democratic principles, are the concept of voter juries. Since realising the idea of an entire government based on Fishkin's microcosmic deliberation is difficult in reality, one could have smaller groups of

statistically representative people discussing the matter at hands, either on national or local level (Held, 1996:321). Held suggests that these juries should, at first instance, merely be created with an advisory status, with the possibility of changing this status is not too unrealistic. Depending on the number of people being represented, the voter jury should consist of between 20 to 100 members, with 100 still being ‘small’ enough to allow free deliberation if performed under the right circumstances. ‘Final judgements could not only be discussed in a wider public arena but also channelled into key policy-making communities’ (Held, 1996:321). This would ideally be where the European Parliament – and perhaps the remaining institutions of the EU as well – would come in.

Fishkin also presents certain criteria for quality deliberation, regarding *information*, *substantive balance*, *diversity* (of viewpoints), *conscientiousness* and *equal consideration* (of the arguments offered) (Fishkin, 2009:84-5). I have chosen, for practical reasons, to present these criteria in a table that somewhat resemblances that of Joshi’s table on liberal democracy.

Table 2. Deliberative democracy.

Essential attributes of democracy	Democratic depth (objective measurement)
(1) Information	Information transparency and availability
(2) Substantive balance	Balance between competing sides of an argument; all options on the table
(3) Diversity	Diversity of viewpoints in the positions represented; all ‘sides’ participating
(4) Conscientiousness	Participants acting conscientiously; having the desire to reach a correct decision not merely based on strategy or disruption of others’ deliberation
(5) Equal consideration	Arguments are considered regardless of who they were

presented by; viewpoints
should not be discounted

Table 2. Deliberative democracy. (Based on: Fishkin, 2009).

Substantive balance and diversity of viewpoints are tightly connected, as the lack of viewpoints represented would also harm the substantive balance of the argument (Fishkin, 2009:84).

One could naturally argue that the measurements of deliberative democracy is irrelevant, as the European Parliament does not consist of randomly sampled representatives, as according to Fishkin would be ideal. However, these criteria are still relevant to the European Parliament due to the concept of deliberative democracy itself and that the debates in the European Parliament are mostly done through deliberation, a method which is most commonly used by politicians/representatives to ‘launder their preferences’ by justifying them one to another’ (Lord & Tamvaki, 2013). One could thus ask why deliberation can serve the purpose where other methods are insufficient. Several reasons as of why deliberation help actors overcome dilemmas are listed by Lord and Tamvaki in their article on the European Parliament and Discourse Quality Index:

‘[deliberation helps] a) removing disagreements that are simply based on misapprehensions; b) identifying how far their disagreements are of fact or value; c) clarifying the dimensionality of disagreement; d) testing the sincerity; and e) intensity of contrasting positions’ (Lord & Tamvaki, 2013).

Even if the reasons of aggregation and deliberation between representatives themselves were not necessary, Lord and Tamvaki argue that it is necessary due to the people being represented. Although the citizens of the European Union may trust their representatives in making the best decisions on their behalf, it should be available to them the reasons of why their representatives acted as they did: how did they come to vote what they voted? It is thus not merely the struggle to overcome differences in opinions that is the basic principle of deliberation, but also the course of legislation itself.

Therefore, as seen in the table, I will be using these five measurements of deliberative democracy, with information and diversity in focus, to analyse the European Parliament as a democratic institution.

4. Discussion

4.1 The EP in liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is, as mentioned, the model of democracy most affiliated with the western world and the national governments there, as well as on transnational level in the European Union. Although perhaps viewed as the most democratic of the democracy models, there exist certain issues with this model as well. This section will briefly mention the criteria of the liberal democracy model and their relevance to the European Parliament, before exploring two of these measurements further, which I regard as the most important and relevant, in depth: representation and accountability.

The first measurement mentioned in Joshi's table is participation, which includes 'More opportunities for all to participate in political groups and activities (voting accessibility, registration and turnout, number of effective parties)' (Joshi, 2013). The relevance to the European Parliament speaks for itself, as these factors are the basics of the politics in the European Parliament. I have, however, chosen to not fully explore this matter here, as it is overlapping the criterion of diversity and participation within deliberative democracy, and the European Parliament will thus be analysed in light of similar factors there. I also regard the closely connected concept of representation as more relevant, which is the second measurement mentioned in Joshi's table. The third measurement, political equality – 'All (not just some) people have equal opportunity to be involved in politics (equal appointment, openness/access to voting' (Joshi, 2013) – can naturally be seen as quite important in regard of the European Parliament, but the aspects are – as with representation – covered in later paragraphs. The fourth measurement presented by Joshi (2013) is that of information transparency, which includes 'More opportunities for political expression (access to broadcast media, print media, non-censorship)', which is relevant due to the (lack of) information during European elections. This is also explored further later in the thesis. The last measurement mentioned in the table is that of accountability, which is the measurement I regard as the most important along with representation, which will be explored fully in this chapter.

4.1.1 Representation

The second aspect of the liberal democracy criteria is representation, which build upon the idea that 'all (not just some) groups of people represented in the composition of legislative bodies' (Joshi, 2013). This would ideally mean that all groups, regardless of nationality, gender, sexual preferences, income, etc., should be represented in the European Parliament.

The European Parliament consists of 751 representatives, referred to as MEPs, or Members of the European Parliament. These representatives are distributed between member states based on proportional population in said member states. For instance, a big country like Germany, in 2014, had 96 MEPs, whereas the smaller Estonia only had 8 (European Union, 2019b). The maximum number a member state can have is 96, and the minimum is 6 representatives. In total there can be a maximum of 750 representatives (excluding the President), as it is today, but should the United Kingdom leave the EU, the total number would go down to 705, including the president. It is also important to note that although representatives are elected on a national basis, they still represent a national political party and will join with their fellow representatives with the same political view in the Parliament, in transnational political groups (European Union, 2019a). Therefore, one candidate could be representing one point of view on national level but might have to compromise when bargaining with fellow transnational colleagues, which potentially can result in not representing the beliefs upon in which they were elected.

Although the number of member states representatives should be distributed proportionally, the smaller states tend to have more seats than strict proportionality would imply (European Union, 2019a). The electoral system is also somewhat proportional, meaning that the representation should be based on the outcome of the votes. According to the European Union's own website, a party which receives 20 % of the votes in the election should, according to the system, also have 20 % of the seats in the European Parliament. However, member states are free to decide upon many of the important aspects of the electoral procedure, e.g. if there are many or just one electoral district, which means that the overall electoral procedure is not the same in all of the European Union (European Union, 2019a). This can of course affect representation merely because the procedure of voters differs, which can potentially change the outcomes. For instance, since the representatives tend to gather in transnational political groups, where the representatives have been voted in from different member states, the size of said political group could vary due to the proportional differences in electoral regions. Another aspect of this is that certain member states have compulsory voting in EU elections (European Union, 2019a), meaning that voter turn-out likely would be greater in these countries compared to others, which of course rises the discussion of whether that is an overall democratic concept, as the political trends in countries with compulsory voting surely will be reflected in the political groups of the European Parliament due to the otherwise low election turn-out.

Besides nationality, it is however difficult to determine whether this criterion is fulfilled, as there are 751 representatives and details about all of these are not available to the public.

Nonetheless, one could be certain when concluding that all nationalities are indeed represented, as the proportional model of MEPs from each member states assure that. At the same time, one could naturally argue that since there exist a minimum and maximum limit for how many representatives one member state can have, these number might not be 100 % accurate and the level of representation may, after all, vary. One could also mention here that most people, regardless of ‘group’ or affiliation would have the possibility of standing as a candidate in these elections, although actually winning and becoming a representative is a different matter. It does, however, underscore the fact that all groups have the *potential* of being represented, it is just – probably – not *de facto*, merely due to the outcome of elections.

There are, on the contrary, some issues arising, as the European Parliament is not the only EU institution regarded as legislative. According to Beetham (2004), the representation of the people should involve having, at minimum ‘all public institutions representative of the social composition of the electorate’, upon which one can argue already here that all the public institutions of the European Union are indeed not representatives of the people. That is mainly, however, a separate discussion as we are focusing on the European Parliament, but it is still important to note. On the other hand, it is the European Parliament that elects the Commission President – ideally one of the Spitzenkandidaten (Europe Elects, 2019) – and that does give the Commission *some* ground, although one could still argue that only having one of the institutions being (ideally) representative of the people is problematic.

Representation is among the most important factors when discussing the matter of European Parliament and the election to stand as representatives. As Joshi (2013) suggests, ideal representation is, ‘due to logical limitations of enabling millions of citizens in a modern state to be intimately involved in every step of the political process’ of the greatest importance. As the European Parliament consist of representatives from all member states, there are also multiple languages in use at once, which can be viewed as problematic. As of 2009, there were 23 working languages present in the European Parliament, with over 253 language combinations (Eriksen, 2009:137). As linguistic equality is an aspect highly valued by the EU, there are constantly multiple translators working to interpret and communicate to the representatives. As some languages may be tougher to interpret than others and cannot be translated directly, some translations may be ‘routed’ via English, German or French (Eriksen, 2009:137). The strive to strengthen the multilingualism is of course a positive feature, but it would also mean that certain aspects of a discussion potentially could be ‘lost in translation’,

which naturally could have severe consequences if a representative's opinion is disregarded due to translation failure, as the citizens represented by this person will not have their voice heard.

Another facet of representation is that there should exist a link between the MEPs and the EU citizens. According to Eriksen (2009), '[political parties is] a link between strong publics and the general public sphere', but in the case of the European Union and the European Parliament, this link is rather weak, as politics in the EP are dominated by the transnational political groups, whereas the election to the European Parliament is dominated by the same political parties that participate in election on national level. In addition, the elections on national level are mostly about national executive offices and national policies, rather than the European versions of them, even though European politics affect the member states greatly (Hix, 2008:78). For instance, Hix argues, the politicians competing for the offices never say who they would support as Commission President, which can be regarded as one of the most important decisions the representatives in the European Parliament make on the citizens' behalf, but generally is an issue national politicians do not care about. Secondly, less than two percent of the manifestos of national parties are devoted to policy issues regarding the European Union, which – as previously mentioned – makes even the European elections more national than European. Hix argues that this is understandable because what is at stake at the European level is lower than the national – 'in terms of who gets to control national policy-making and public spending' (Hix, 2008:78), but it also means that domestic government never can be a substitute for a genuine contest of power in the European Union. This is problematic as the European election tends to resemble the national elections, as it potentially puts national politics above the European, distancing the voters from what is important in both elections.

Concluding remarks for representation within liberal democracy is that the European Parliament certainly strives to achieve a varied and well-distributed set of representatives. All member states within the European Union are indeed represented, as well as all sides of the political spectre. However, the system itself prevents an optimal form of representation, for instance as representatives are often elected based on national issues and that the bases of voting can differ from member states to member states. One could thus conclude that the European Parliament are indeed following the liberal democratic principles of representation in theory but upon looking into specifics, the situation is not ideal in practice.

4.1.2 Accountability

The last measure given for liberal democracy is accountability – perhaps the most important aspect of democracy, which I regard it as important to investigate. According to Joshi (2013), accountability should mean ‘[the] holding of periodic elections, rule by majority, transparency of government activity’.

The seats in the European Parliament are elected every 5 years, with the upcoming election taking place between the 23rd and 26th of May 2019. Member states are free to pick their election day from these days, although most member states tend to hold the election day on the Sunday (European Union, 2019a). Firstly, one can safely say that the European Parliament fulfils the criterion of holding periodic elections due to it being vindicated that these are held twice a decade. One could, however, argue whether five years between each election is too long for it to be considered regular. Five years can be considered a long time, and a lot can happen during these years. For instance, voter behaviour and opinions could potentially change due to e.g. unforeseeable issues arising. This could potentially distance the MEPs’ views from those they are representing, which of course could weaken the accountability of the representatives. Still, having a certain consistency is usually a positive trend and five years is not much longer than the average office period of national rulers.

Rule by majority is also well-established within the European Parliament; checking another one of the liberal democracy boxes. However, there are different types of majority required for different things, e.g. if the European Parliament would wish to dismiss the Commission – in which they do have the right to – they would need double majority, meaning two-thirds of thirds of voting representatives and an absolute majority in the European Parliament itself (Eriksen, 2009:136). This can be seen as difficult to obtain, considering there are all of 751 representatives and achieving absolute majority would be hard, but on the other hand, dismissing the Commission is not something that should be easily obtainable and only in extraordinary situations. In ordinary decision-making, it is merely the two-third rule that is used, which by many can be seen as the ideal rule by majority system. If one assumes that the representatives indeed are correctly representing the people, one could argue that the system of voting is indeed working accordingly. On the other hand, one could argue that although the rule by majority can be said to be working, it also requires consequentially broad coalitions to be adapted (Hix, 2008:75). Hix also argues, that due to the system and the constant checks-and-balances the European Union performs, most policy outcomes tend to be quite centrist, as this would be the only achievable outcome when majority is required. This naturally supports the concept of ruling by majority, but one could question whether it as a consequence weakens the

accountability of the European Parliament if policies tend to be ‘one-sided’ due to the struggle of achieving majority.

Transparency is arguably one of the most important factors of accountability, and thus liberal democracy. The citizens of the European Union should always be informed of the matter at hand in the European Union and the European Parliament, however this is also where the EU has received most of its criticism (Hix, 2008:73-4). Although a lot of this criticism is directed at the European Union as a whole, which includes its other institutions, one can not disregard the fact that it is difficult to obtain information on what exactly the European Parliament is doing. However, one could argue that the EU being almost too paranoid on the transparency issue has resulted in it becoming less distant in recent years (Hix, 2008:74). Hix argues that, although subject of constant criticism, the EU policy-making is more transparent than in most domestic systems of government, but that the Council still has a long way to go. The problem is, according to Hix, that the politicians in the EU lack incentives for the elites in, among others, the European Parliament, to compete more openly. More openness would result in the media, domestic politicians and citizens becoming better at and able to identify the members, their values and what they stand for (Hix, 2008:137-8).

Although transparency is an issue in the European Union, there is a positive potential in the European Parliament and the accountability of the institution, due to the transparency of government activity often being greater than in domestic governments. Besides, although one could argue that the office period for representatives could be too long considering how the political landscape may change, it vouches for consistency and continuity, which can be said to outweigh the potential issues of long office periods. Regarding the ‘rule by majority’ system, the European Parliament acts ideal and in terms with what is expected in liberal democracy, regardless of how policy-making can be affected by political tendencies.

In total, one could argue that according to liberal democracy – at least in light of the measurements explored – the European Parliament has a great potential of being a democratic institution. However, there are certain aspects that limit this potential. One could though argue that this is merely because the member states cannot give up their full sovereignty, i.e. they need to be able to decide their own principles of voting to achieve *domestic democracy*. In other words, the European Parliament strives to be democratic in theory, but the reality complicates the process of achieving full democracy and there might not be another way around it.

4.2 The EP in deliberative democracy

Decision-making and discussions in the European Parliament is mostly based on deliberation, which is already a valuable asset to fulfil the criteria of deliberative democracy. However, when looking into the specifics, a few issues do arise, although the European Parliament tend to keep in line according to deliberative democracy.

As previously mentioned, the two main measurements I have decided to focus on in deliberative democracy is those of information and diversity, as I consider these the most relevant to the European Parliament. The three remaining measurements I have thus excluded are substantive balance, conscientiousness and equal consideration. The former regards a certain ‘balance between competing sides of an argument; all options on the table’ (Fishkin, 2009), which is naturally relevant to the European Union, but perhaps not as relevant as information and diversity, although strongly connected to the latter. Certain informal agreements in the European Parliament have led to it being a certain balance, due to the two largest groups in the parliament ‘splitting’ the presidency between the two of them (Hix, 2008:139). This itself is a sign of having a certain balance and one could certainly discuss this further, but I have decided not to. The second measurement I have omitted, conscientiousness is, according to Fishkin (2009) that ‘participants acting conscientiously; having the desire to reach a correct decision not merely based on strategy or disruption of others’ deliberation’. Although the European Parliament naturally should have the best interest of the EU – including all of its member states – one can not disregard that representatives also have their national interests in mind, which can count as a form of ‘strategy’. However, it is likely that the Council would be the institution where national leaders usually fight for their own countries interest, which is why I have disregarded this measurement for further discussion. The last omitted measurement, equal consideration, which is detailed as: ‘Arguments are considered regardless of who they were presented by; viewpoints should not be discounted’ (Fishkin, 2009). Although certain political groups have a smaller voice than others, due to their size and thus their clout in the discussion, the European Parliament strives so hard to be democratic that it is close to unthinkable that opinions would be disregarded merely due to who presented them. At the same time, as e.g. populists or other representatives with beliefs and values which is not in accordance to those of the EU are also present in the deliberation, one could assume that some opinions or outrages are disregarded by the rest of the parliament. Although an undemocratic feature, one can of course argue that it is ‘necessary’, but it does nevertheless hinder the democratic principles. This is, however, an entire discussion of its own and an issue to big to be analysed in a bachelor thesis, which is why it will not be investigated further.

4.2.1 Information

The aspect of information in deliberative democracy regards both information transparency and availability. ‘More opportunities for political expression (access to broadcast media, print media, non-censorship)’ (Joshi, 2013) is the definition used for information transparency in liberal democracy, which can be viewed as a general definition for what information transparency is, and thus can be also used for deliberative democracy. I will therefore also look at this definition when discussing the matter.

The first factor, access to broadcast media, is of course a natural part of elections campaigns. It is, however, as previously mentioned, a factor that the media coverage candidates would potentially receive in national media is mostly based on national politics and not necessarily the European politics, which upon one could argue that transparency is not optimal because voters cannot completely understand what they are voting for. On the other hand, one could argue that the EU has been working towards becoming more transparent to its citizens but that does not necessarily include election campaigns and information about candidates. Upon visiting the European Parliament election website, a lot of the information is not easily available, and visitors are referred to their national election offices etc. to ‘find out more’ (European Elections, n.d. a & European Elections, n.d. b). Although information on how to vote is accessible, finding information about the candidates in one’s election region/country is much harder, weakening the general opportunities for political expression for candidates and party groups. Also relevant is the previously mentioned fact that the European elections are often based on national politics rather than the European, which can naturally be viewed as weakening the information available to the voters.

Censorship is, on the other hand, not highly practiced in member states of the European Union, which can certainly be regarded as a win for the democracy. However, one could here also argue that the media is never completely unbiased, and as they control the agenda-setting – the correlation between what the media focuses on and the voters’ view on the issues at hand (Scheufele & Tweksbury, 2007) – there is a significant possibility that the most-read newspaper with their respective views would affect and bias the voters. In a case where two newspapers, which have taken completely different political stands, convey the same issue or candidate information with a conflicting message, the reader receives an ambiguous message about either (Zaller, 1996). Although perhaps confusing for the voter to get two completely different perspectives on the same matter, it can also be regarded as a positive feature for the democracy to be provided with both sides of an argument. However, as media tend to be oriented towards

one side of the political spectre, and the voters do not necessarily read both sides, one could argue that the media unconsciously expose the voters to subtle censorship.

Nonetheless, the European Parliament and European Union have laid a somewhat ideal ground for information transparency during elections, but there will always exist certain issues as long as the guidelines are not equal for each member state. However, much of the responsibility can be handed to the mass-media, in which the EU does not have any control (as this would be even worse: censorship). One could thus conclude that information transparency and availability within the European Parliament is not optimal, but that it is – again – mostly beyond their control and that although there are certain limits, the practice of information availability is improving.

4.2.2 Diversity

‘Diversity of viewpoints in the positions represented; all ‘sides’ participating’ (Fishkin, 2009) is the third criterion we are using for deliberative democracy; closely connected to that of substantive balance. Considering that national interests are weighted by the representatives of each member state, and the political groups also tend to represent different viewpoints on issues, one could argue that diversity is a well-established phenomenon within the European Parliament. However, certain issues arise due to a number of factors, among others that participation in itself can be hard to achieve. So, although there should be a certain diversity of viewpoints present in the European Parliament, one can, on the other hand, argue that all ‘sides’ are not necessarily participating and that the diversity of representatives is not optimal due to electoral system.

Firstly, whether voting accessibility and registration is optimal in the election to the European Parliament can be difficult to determine, as the election process varies from member state to member state. However, as stated by the European Union, one should be able to vote if you are either a citizen of an EU country or have taken residence in a member state. However, as these possibilities varies and are subject to how national elections are performed, one can question whether it is optimally democratic when all EU citizens do not have the same basis. An example is the voting age, which differs from country to country. In the United Kingdom, and most other countries, you must be 18 years to be eligible to vote, whereas in Malta you only need to be 16 (European Elections, n.d. a & European Elections, n.d. b). This might not seem like a big problem, but it does exemplify that a person eligible to vote in one election in one country can be denied the right to vote in the same election in a different country, which also goes against

another important criterion of democracy; political equality. The fact some member states requires you to meet up in person at a polling station, e.g. Malta, whereas others permit you to vote through mail, e.g. United Kingdom, can also be seen as a threat against equal voting accessibility (European Elections, n.d.a & European Elections, n.d.b). Voting turn-out also affects whether an election can be viewed as fully democratic or not. Some member states have made it mandatory for their citizens to vote in European elections (European Parliament, 2019), but most have not. The voting turn-out in European elections is not convincingly high, averaging at less than 50 % in total, reaching a low of only 42.61 % in the last election in 2014 (European Elections, n.d. a). Why the turn-out is so low is a discussion of its own, but it is a major issue as it does prevent an ideal diversity among representatives due to the ‘unfairness’ of elections. It remains, nonetheless, an issue and a threat to the democratic principles the European Union should strive to meet.

On the other hand, one could argue that the EU does strive to achieve higher participation numbers, but that the citizens deciding not to vote are merely uninterested or have a certain ‘it does not matter’-mentality. The EU also allows citizens without a criminal record to stand as candidates, as long as they fulfil the national criteria for being a candidate in said country’s national elections. This means that it is not merely the ‘elite’ who can become candidates and potentially representatives in the European Parliament, which certainly is a victory for diversity.

I have already discussed that the citizens of the EU do not have the exact equal opportunities to either vote or stand as candidate, as the criteria for doing so varies from member state to state, which is an issue both to the participation principle, which is naturally reflected in deliberative democracy by affecting the ‘diversity of viewpoints’. The equal opportunity to participate may also be inhibited by the lack of information to all citizens, which is an issue previously discussed. One can here also bring up the subject of equal appointment. With the European Parliament’s struggle to proportionate representatives, one can clearly see a certain fulfilment to this aspect, however, the limitations on a minimum/maximum number of representatives is limiting the proportionate. Also, although proportioning representatives based on population, one can not disregard the fact the representatives also could promote national interests in the parliament, regardless of being gathered in political groups. As matters discussed and settled in the European Parliament affects all member states equally, it can be seen as unfair – and thus undemocratic – that the smaller member states with fewer representatives have less votes, since it affects their country as well.

One of the measurements reflected in the participation category of liberal democracy, which is also applicable when discussing diversity issues, is ‘number of effective parties’, which one could argue is a criterion that the European Parliament fulfils. In contrast to for instance the United States, where the two-party-system dominates, the European Parliament consists of a number of different transnational parties, covering the political spectre well. There are, however, too many issues regarding participation in general to be able to claim that all sides are indeed participating in the deliberation within the European Parliament, which potentially weakens the diversity of viewpoints with the parliament, but one cannot disregard the European Union’s strive to try maintaining an optimal level of diversity and equality.

One could thus argue that the explored measurements of deliberative democracy is somewhat fulfilled, however, one can again blame the system for limiting the optimisation of deliberation within the European Parliament. Although the concept of information transparency and availability certainly can be subject for improvement, the European Parliament do try, but perhaps not enough to be able to be declared democratic in regards of information. One can, though, certainly observe a positive trend. Upon evaluating the matter of diversity, however, it seems clear that the European Parliament are perhaps one of the most diverse institutions in the Western world, but that certain limits yet arise. Ironically enough, this is due to the already existing diversity in the respective member states and the lack of will to compromise on different processes, e.g. the electoral system. In sum, the European Parliament can be said to be immensely close to fulfilling the criteria of deliberative democracy – more than that of liberal democracy.

5. Concluding remarks

As proposed in the introduction, there is no definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to whether something can be classified as democratic or not. However, upon analysing the European Parliament in light of liberal and deliberative democracy, respectively, one can conclude that the European Parliament has tendencies to be more democratic in light of deliberative democracy compared to the liberal democracy model when looking at the four measurements: information and diversity in deliberative democracy and representation and accountability for liberal democracy. The European Parliament can although be said to be of democratic nature in theory, but that it in practice is more difficult to prove. However, although fulfilling the measurements of deliberative democracy better than liberal democracy, one could also argue that there might

be an impossibility to ever achieve an absolute and total democracy. In other words, to answer the research question: the European Parliament can be said to be as democratic as *currently* possible, and yes – the level of democracy it fulfils does indeed depend on the model in question.

There are of course different factors one should take into consideration upon this conclusion. Firstly, the outcome could have been different if the measurements in focus had been different; either upon choosing completely different measurements, or if the overlapping measurements were analysed in light of the opposite model. This last point especially regards the measurement of information, as the criteria were very similar and had it been discussed in light of liberal democracy rather than deliberative democracy, the former could potentially be standing out as the more democratic of the two. One could also argue that the extent of the analysis is merely not sufficient to conclude with these findings.

In further research, it would be interesting to achieve other perspectives on the European Parliament, for instance by including different democracy models, e.g. participatory democracy or cosmopolitan democracy. Another possibility would be to compare the state of the European Parliament in its earlier years to that of today, to potentially receive a perspective on how the democratic principles have improved. Nevertheless, the extent of democracy in the European Parliament and the European Union in general has been a discussion for a long time, and will continue to be subject to both criticism and praise.

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