

When the Banal Becomes Political: The European Union in the Age of Populism

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The European Union is facing a new era of politicization. Populist parties across Europe have challenged its legitimacy and ever-expanding authority. While the European Union was designed to govern, rather than represent, that is no longer enough. Today there is an urgent need to build a culture of healthy electoral contestation that does not shy away from debate over the very real transfer of political authority that is occurring. Upgrading norms about democratic contestation, rather than doubling down on technocracy, is the only way to generate a more robust European identity, adjudicate what kind of Europe its citizens want, and repair Europe's frayed social solidarity.

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From the United Kingdom's Brexit vote to the increasing electoral success of Euroskeptical parties across France, Germany, and beyond, the European Union seems to be in the crosshairs of populist leaders everywhere. The European Union's historically technocratic and elite-driven governance, which in its earliest years kept it safe from both impassioned protests and emotional attachment, has made it a compelling target for anti-establishment, populist movements across Europe.

This new politicization marks a significant change. Despite the highly intrusive and consequential movement of power and authority toward the European level that has occurred over the last several decades, for most of its history the European Union's highly insulated governance processes were subject to remarkably little overt electoral contestation.¹ Even critically important developments such as the creation of the Euro were not subject to overt, partisan debate between mainstream parties on the left or right.² Instead, decisions were delegated to national

1. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus," *British Journal of Political Science* 39 (2009): 1–23.

2. Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

leaders, and mass contestation was limited to a series of referendums involving up or down votes on key initiatives. This putatively apolitical frame also extended to the social processes at work undergirding the European Union's deep integration. The European Union's evolution rested in part on the broader set of legitimating symbols and practices put into play by all of its various governing bodies, national leaders, and private actors alike.³ But these symbols and practices did not create a deep European identity of emotional attachment and social solidarity. The stunted European identity that was created was matched by uneven political development in the institutions and capacities of the European Union, setting it apart from the development of nation states even as it took on many of the core powers previously carried out by sovereign states, such as a single currency, market integration, and regulating citizen mobility.

The current era is different; the European Union can no longer be framed as simply a bureaucracy determining the size of bananas, tolerated even if unloved. The European Union has come into focus instead as a deeply intrusive political entity, seriously infringing, whether for good or bad, on national sovereignty. Thus, a key challenge confronting Europe today is whether the E.U. and its leaders can create the necessary conditions to support this new politicization. One such condition is a political culture that supports overt, healthy democratic contestation with open and constructive debate about the European Union's real powers and values. Doubling down on technocracy is a failing strategy for legitimating the E.U. as an emergent polity of great consequence. Alongside the need to repair the policies, institutions, and mechanisms of governance, I argue in this contribution to the symposium that the broader political culture of the European Union and its fragile imagined community of Europeans need to be rebuilt. The E.U., and those political leaders who support its innovative form of governance, need to be more direct about the value and cost of Europe and more open to the emotional issues of identity that its continued political development engages. Only then will the European Union project and its uniquely transnational and cosmopolitan identity successfully navigate this age of populist backlash. While the E.U. is merely the most extreme example of a widespread phenomenon of voters profoundly disassociated from political elites and traditional parties, it may be the one most challenging to address. Given the tensions inherent in the European Union's unique version of transnational governance, its leaders and citizens must more fully grapple with this

3. Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2017).

limited democratic legitimacy and embrace a new era of politicization—one that engages healthy democratic contestation rather than denying it.

The European Union's Ongoing Crises

The past few years have been particularly rough for the European Union and its citizens. Most dramatically, the referendum vote taken on June 23, 2016 in the United Kingdom over membership represents a startling departure from the seemingly inevitable path of “ever closer union” enshrined in its founding Treaty of Rome. The mid-decade escalation of waves of refugees washing up on the beaches of Italy and Greece produced a humanitarian crisis while exacerbating nativist sentiments within the European Union. A decade of post-financial crisis tensions in the Eurozone continue today, despite a slowly improving European economy. The E.U. has seen the rise of autocratic regimes within its own borders, as backsliding by Hungary and Poland has eroded democratic consolidation in the former Soviet sphere, creating a fundamental challenge to it as a liberal, democratic order. Finally, the deeper structural problems facing most of the national electorates put even more stress on the European democracies, as Julia Lynch describes in her contribution to this symposium.⁴

These crises have been met with seemingly ineffectual responses by European and national leaders, provoking frustration and anger across publics and ushering in a new era of politicization for the European Union.⁵ Unsurprisingly, Euroskeptical parties have grown in popularity and demanded the re-nationalization of sovereign control over both borders and markets, even as their specific platforms vary dramatically across each member state.⁶ As Sheri Berman emphasizes in this symposium, this outcome was shaped in part by the collapse of traditional European national parties, on the left in particular.⁷ While the European Union has stumbled badly at various points in its over half century of existence, the seriousness and the multiplicity of challenges it is facing today are unprecedented and intersect with the

4. Julie Lynch, “Populism, Partisan Convergence, and Mobilization in Western Europe,” *Polity* 51 (2019): 668–77.

5. Pieter de Wilde and Michael Zürn, “Can the Politicization of European Integration be Reversed?” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 50 (2012): 137–53; and Sabine Saurugger, “Sociological Approaches to the European Union in Times of Turmoil,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 54 (2016): 70–86.

6. Catherine De Vries, *Euroskepticism and the Future of European Integration* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2018).

7. Sheri Berman, “Populism is a Symptom Rather than a Cause: Democratic Disconnect, the Decline of the Center-Left, and the Rise of Populism in Western Europe,” *Polity* 51 (2019): 654–67.

broader sweep of global populisms. How should we make sense of this moment and of the degree to which populism's emphasis on the people versus the elites is inflaming the European Union's own crises?

It is crucial to start with the observation that the European Union has risen to become a powerful, innovative political entity in part because it was depoliticized by design.⁸ As I have argued in earlier work, one mechanism of that depoliticization is found in the particular narrative generated by political elites, a narrative that has framed the European Union as banal and unremarkable.⁹ The symbols and practices surrounding European governance continuously shape the everyday lives of those living within its borders and create a narrative that helps redraw the boundaries of legitimate authority. These social processes are necessary elements that undergird governance in the European Union, as in any emergent polity throughout history.¹⁰ But its symbols and practices have done so in subtle ways, under the radar, that do not directly engage political passions, prompt partisan debates, or create deep attachments to it as a political community and a source of felt political identity.¹¹

Unlike the impassioned nationalism of the modern nation state, the European Union's cultural infrastructure is rooted in a specific type of banal authority, which navigates national loyalties while portraying the European Union as complementary

8. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe* (see note 3 above); see also Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Politicization of European Integration," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 54 (2016): 32–47; and Pieter de Wilde, Anna Leupold, and Henning Schmidtke, "Introduction: The Differentiated Politicisation of European Governance," *West European Politics* 39 (2016): 3–22.

9. Laura Cram, "Imagining the Union: A Case of Banal Europeanism?" in *Interlocking Dimensions of European Integration*, ed. Helen Wallace (London: Palgrave 2001), 231–46; Laura Cram, "Banal Europeanism: European Union Identity and National Identities in Synergy," *Nations and Nationalism* 15 (2009): 101–08; and McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe* (see note 3 above).

10. Chris Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2000); Vincent Della Salla, "Political Myth, Mythology and the European Union," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 48 (2010): 1–19; Ian Manners, "Symbolism in European Integration," *Comparative European Politics* 9 (2011): 243–68; Claudia Sternberg, *The Struggle for EU Legitimacy: Public Contestation 1950–2005* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); and Christoffer Kølvraa, "European Fantasies: On the EU's Political Myths and the Affective Potential of Utopian Imaginaries for European Identity," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 54 (2016): 169–84.

11. Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Ideas, Identity, Reality* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995); Laura Cram, "Inventing the People: Civil Society Participation and the Enhabitation of the EU," in *Civil Society and Legitimate European Governance*, ed. Stijn Smismans (London: Edward Elgar, 2006), 241–59; Neil Fligstein, *Euro-Clash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Thomas Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).

to, not in competition with, local identities.¹² The labels, images, and practices generated by European policies are often deracinated, purged of their associations with the powers of the nation state and instead standardized into a seemingly unobjectionable blandness. Examples of this banality by design abound. The Euro's paper currency displays abstracted bridges and windows, instead of images tied to a specific person or place. Rather than building one monumental national capital in Brussels to symbolize and practice European Union governance, European institutions and their mostly unremarkable buildings are flung far across its member states, and the European Parliament even moves, like a vagabond, between cities. The single diplomatic voice for Europe created in the Lisbon Treaty was labeled the "High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy," rather than the European Foreign Minister, symbolically watering down the impact of this potentially pivotal position. Moreover, the symbols and practices of Europe are often localized by nesting them within the member states. For example, the standardized European Union passport is still issued by each country with its own national crest and the words "France" or "Czech Republic," although it is placed under the overarching European Union label. Euro coins balance standardized European symbols and maps on one side while a Celtic harp graces Euros originating in Ireland, Queen Beatrix is on Netherland's coins, and Cervantes is on Spain's. All of this juxtaposition of European symbols and practices with national and local meanings has built a very tepid version of European identity that only tenuously underpins the E.U.'s governance.

Europe's manifold recent crises have built upon years of increasing frustration across E.U. publics, piercing the bubble of depoliticization, and making clear the limits of these strategies of stealth. The absence of real engagement with the public over the European Union's ever-increasing powers has created a democratic vacuum, one that must be filled if it is to survive. In this way, the European Union's experience shares similar causal roots to the populist backlash in other countries, as technocracy and efforts at depoliticization have only served to hollow out trust in political elites and mainstream parties more broadly across Europe.¹³

The European Union as an Incomplete Polity

While the European Union shares many of the same trends and challenges of populism found in national settings and highlighted by the other contributions to this symposium, it is arguably in a much more difficult situation because of the particular

12. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe*, chs. 4–8, elaborates on this argument (see note 3 above).

13. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void* (London: Verso, 2013).

shortcomings of its governance structures, beyond its constrained imagined community and fragile political identity. Comparing the European Union to the historical evolution of nation states and federal systems is instructive.¹⁴ Rather than seeing the E.U. as just a set of temporary bargains or deals between states, one needs to recognize that it has accrued a tremendous amount of political authority, as its policies and programs now penetrate deeply into the daily life of European citizens.¹⁵ However, unlike earlier historical political authorities that coercively removed pre-existing power holders, the European Union has been built through the voluntary transfer of certain key capacities to the European level, while other policies and institutions have been retained at the national level. Meanwhile, political parties have for a long time largely remained focused on domestic politics within the member states of the European Union, with very little electoral competition around European issues.¹⁶ In turn, technocracy and expert consensus have trumped effective representation at the European level. While this balancing of sovereignty has allowed the European Union to achieve an astonishing level of integration over the past decades, it has also resulted in major dysfunctions. These dysfunctions, in the context of the broader global populist challenge, have produced an unprecedented level of contestation and backlash in today's European Union.

While there is no nation state on this planet that has a perfectly functional set of institutions and policies, incomplete political development plagues the European

14. Gary Marks, "A Third Lens: Comparing European Integration and State Building," in *European Integration in Social and Historical Perspective: 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jytte Klausen and Louise Tilly (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 23–43; R. Daniel Kelemen, *The Rules of Federalism: Institutions and Regulatory Politics in the EU and Beyond* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); R. Daniel Kelemen, "Building the New European State? Federalism, Core State Powers and European Integration," in *Beyond the Regulatory Polity: The European Integration of Core State Powers*, ed. Philipp Genschel and Marcus Jachtenfuchs (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2014), 211–29; Stefanie Börner and Monika Eigmüller, eds., *European Integration, Processes of Change and the National Experience* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and R. Daniel Kelemen and Kathleen R. McNamara, "How Theories of Statebuilding Explain the EU," paper presented at the 25th International Conference of Europeanists, Chicago, March 28–30, 2018.

15. Kathleen R. McNamara, "Authority Under Construction: The European Union in Comparative Political Perspective," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (2018): 1510–25; Philipp Genschel and Markus Jachtenfuchs, eds., *Beyond the Regulatory Polity? The European Integration of Core State Powers* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Simon Hix and Bjørn Hoyland, *The Political System of the European Union* (London; Palgrave, 2011).

16. Simon Hix, "The EU as a Polity (I)," in *The SAGE Handbook of European Union Politics*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen, Mark Pollack, and Ben J. Rosamund (New York: Sage Press, 2006), 141–58.

Union in notable ways.¹⁷ The creation of a single currency, the Euro, occurred without the plethora of supporting fiscal, banking, and political institutions present for every other national currency.¹⁸ The Schengen area tore down internal border controls, allowing for free movement across many of the European Union's member states beginning in 1995, while European citizens enjoy a common, standardized passport.¹⁹ But little was achieved toward the hard task of developing effective European Union-level control of external European borders. Nor was mobility across European borders initially matched by upgraded intelligence sharing or funding for border protection agencies such as Frontex or Europol, even after the consequences for public safety and tensions around immigration became clear. While perhaps unsurprising, given the tendency of the European Union to avoid the hard-fought and often violent battles that produced such enhanced capacities in nation states, this institutional incompleteness has contributed to the dissatisfaction felt by many towards the European Union in the wake of the deepening of integration that began with the Maastricht Treaty era.

Democratic Contestation and the Glue of Identity

All of these governance shortcomings are further compounded by the particular type of identity politics generated by the European Union's incomplete development. Western democracies across the globe today face backlashes to elite rule, expert delegation, and conventional party politics, as outlined in the other contributions to this symposium. But the European Union now faces an even more challenging situation. Whereas the rise of the European nation state in the nineteenth century saw many efforts by motivated elites to create an impassioned sense of shared national identity,²⁰ as outlined above, the European Union has been consistently framed by those in power as complementary to, not in competition with, national identities.²¹

17. Kelemen and McNamara, "How Theories of Statebuilding Explain the EU"; and Genschel and Jachtenfuchs, *Beyond the Regulatory Polity?* (see note 15 above for both sources).

18. Kathleen R. McNamara, "Forgotten Embeddedness: History Lessons for the Euro," in *The Future of the Euro*, ed. Matthias Matthijs and Mark Blyth (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015): 21-43; more generally, see the other contributions to this book.

19. Ruben Zaiotti, *Cultures of Border Control: Schengen and the Evolution of European Frontiers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

20. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1976).

21. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe* (see note 12 above).

Why is the cultural infrastructure of deliberate depoliticization and diluted identity important? All polities experience policy failures and hard times, but some prove resilient, able to pull together to overcome their troubles without deep lasting cleavages and disintegration.²² Part of the reason for this success lies in the political legitimacy of the governance system and the sense of shared social solidarity of the citizens within it. Simply put, political systems hang together better if they are made up of people who feel a sense of deep-knit, emotional attachment to the larger political community. Identifying as an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson's seminal phrase, glues together a citizenry and underpins political authority and the accrual of power at the center of a polity.²³ It certainly would make sorting through the Eurozone crisis or dealing with the waves of desperate migrants washing up in the Mediterranean much easier to accomplish.

In contrast to historical cases of democratic development, the European Union has evolved to govern rather than represent, even as the ever deeper penetration of the European Union into people's lives means a greater need to debate the distributional consequences of E.U. policies, the values promoted, and the choices at stake. The more youthful and cosmopolitan citizens of the European Union may embrace this new reality and see Europe as a natural and positive thing, a backdrop to their changed everyday lives that creates more opportunities than it shuts down. But those that feel left behind and fearful about the future are not comforted by an expert consensus for the single market, open borders, or the Euro, but rather wish their own, non-elite voices to be heard. The sleight of hand of the European Union's particular cultural strategies of symbols and practices that emphasize the European Union as localized and deracinated has clearly bumped up against its limits and fed the Euroskepticism and populism that challenges the European Union's very existence.

Conclusion: Taking the Long View

Historically, new political authorities have emerged and evolved in messy, ugly, and often violent ways. National projects of political unification have involved coercion, civil wars, and the brutal exercise of power. These projects are never complete; for example, questions of federalism in the United States are still being fought over today. Although the nation-state seems universal and natural, there have been

22. John Campbell and John Hall, *The Paradox of Vulnerability* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

23. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1993).

many other forms of government in Europe alone; the Hapsburg Empire, Italian city-states, and the Hanseatic League, for example, have all come and gone.

The European Union therefore remains a striking historical innovation even as the populist surge that has overtly politicized Europe is a necessary backlash, bringing out the real issues at stake and opening them up for robust debate and democratic contestation. But today's politicization needs to be channeled in positive ways, with responsible political parties that seek to fix the frustrations fueling populist anger in ways that provide inclusive economic and social solutions for all. Just as with the national-level issues taken up in the other essays in this symposium, in order to solve the European Union's problems, elites need to grapple with the legitimate claims of voters for more voice in politics. Doubling down on technocracy is not the answer.

This need not be a naïve hope for a more positive politics around the European Union. The slowly growing crises of representation and democratic legitimacy that began with the big leaps forward in European integration after the Maastricht Treaty cannot be wished away, but neither should leaders merely retreat into nationalism. The reality is that the everyday lives of all in the European Union are deeply intertwined through the deep integration of the European market and through the legal frameworks and rules that shape how the economy, and thus society, works. A new generation of citizens has grown up not knowing borders, and tends to vote for more Europe, not less, as the vast generational difference in the Brexit results demonstrated. While Euroskeptics' political mobilization is far more prevalent, there have been new and surprising displays of European solidarity, such as the protesters marching in London calling for a new referendum on Brexit vote, fervently waving signs that say "We love the EU," or the variety of video Facebook messages made by ordinary E.U. citizens stating "We love our British friends."²⁴ The activation of affect and emotional attachment of this sort provides the raw materials that could be used strategically by political actors to create a new commitment to undergird the European project. The rise of the Pulse of Europe civil society movement has brought regular demonstrations of support in Germany and across Europe representing a new pan-European grassroots activist network that breaks with the technocratic past.²⁵ More recently, a few grassroots political parties have begun to coalesce around pro-European platforms within an explicit electorally contested

24. On the People's Vote March, see the movement's website at <https://www.peoples-vote.uk/march/>; for an example of Facebook activity, see <https://www.facebook.com/campaigntoremain/>.

25. See its website at <https://pulseofeurope.eu/en/>.

democratic context, such as Volt, and Democracy in Europe 2025.²⁶ While these new movements are contributing to the necessary development of a European demos, this new politicization has also resulted in deeply disturbing rollbacks in support for the liberal democratic, rule-of-law-based European Union, as Milada Vachudova and Anna Grzymala-Busse's contributions to this symposium each make clear.²⁷

France provides examples of the ways in which politicization around the European Union can be healthy or can provoke a retreat into the cul-de-sac of ethno-nationalism. The electoral campaign of French President Emmanuel Macron was a highly unusual piercing of the veil of banal depoliticization by a more mainstream political party, providing a positive response to the critiques of populist Euroskeptics. Macron staked his election on the idea of a more impassioned advocacy of the benefits of Europe. His campaign rallies were remarkable in having supporters wave the red, white, and blue of the French flag along with the European Union's circle of gold stars, while playing the "Ode to Joy," the European Union's anthem. His widely publicized speech on September 26, 2017, set out a new vision for a strong European Union, one unapologetic in its support for a united Europe. Likewise, in an October 2017 interview with *Der Spiegel*, Macron talked of the need for political "heroes" and explicit efforts to create impassioned grand narratives to bring Europe together.

But Macron, once in office, has not persuasively engaged in explicit discussion of the costs and benefits of Europe, and he has struggled in the face of explosive protests by the *Jilets Jaunes* (yellow vests) while being viewed as far too regal and detached from the needs of his constituents. It remains to be seen whether political elites and their publics across Europe can develop a broader political culture and political parties ready to engage in healthy electoral contestation over specific questions about the kind of Europe that people want and more honest discussions about how to move forward. Only these sorts of upgraded norms about democratic contestation can repair Europe's incomplete development and frayed social solidarity.

The European Union will work only if all its citizens can imagine themselves part of a cosmopolitan, thriving democratic polity, one that balances local, national, and

26. For Volt's progressive platform, see <https://www.volteuropa.org/>; for Democracy in Europe 2025, see <https://diem25.org/>.

27. Milada Anna Vachudova, "From Competition to Polarization in Central Europe: How Populists Change Party Systems and Change the European Union," *Polity* 51 (2019): 689–706; and Anna Grzymala-Busse, "How Populists Rule: The Consequences for Democratic Governance," *Polity* 51 (2019): 707–17.

European Union powers, creates social and economic opportunity, and provides real opportunities for political representation, accountability, and contestation. The European Union today must refashion its banal cultural infrastructure and technocratic governance to meet these democratic demands and confront head-on the populist revolt, even while it also builds out its institutions—including the Eurozone, the Schengen area, the European Union’s foreign policy, and the threats to the rule of law—in order to deal with the multiple crises it faces. If it does not find a way beyond banality by design, the European Union’s bold experiment in a new post-national political form will end in failure.

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