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Leiden**
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Dimitrova, Antoaneta

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Antoaneta L. Dimitrova
Leiden University

The European Union and the European States

Antoaneta L. Dimitrova is an assistant professor in the Department of Public Administration at Leiden University in the Netherlands. She teaches and conducts research on institutional change in the European Union, and on enlargement, democratization, and institutional change in postcommunist states. Her edited book, *Driven to Change: European Union Enlargement Viewed from the East* (2004), analyzes the role of the European Union in the postcommunist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe.
E-mail: dimitrova@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

Vivien A. Schmidt, Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Polities (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). 338 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN: 9780199266982.

Calling on wise men and women for advice has been a traditional remedy when the European Union (EU) has found itself in crisis. The current crisis, which follows the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in referenda in France and the Netherlands and the Treaty of Lisbon by an Irish referendum, certainly qualifies for such a measure. On the evidence of her book *Democracy in Europe: The EU and National Polities*, the leaders of the EU could do worse than to consult Vivien A. Schmidt. The book deals with the important questions of the Union's democratic deficit and its legitimacy among its citizens. In contrast to many other contributions in this ongoing debate, however, Schmidt does not lay the blame on the EU's institutional setup, but rather searches for the root of the Union's democracy problem in the failure of the national polities to adapt to the evolving European public sphere.

Schmidt finds her own original perspective in what is currently a well-populated debate. She refutes the well-used argument that the EU is undemocratic, as legitimacy can only be "predicated on a country's indivisible sovereignty with a fixed set of boundaries with a coherent national identity enabling the expression of collective will" (20), by referring to the Union's "compound polity" (9), "contingent sovereignty" (14), and "composite identity" (17). She suggests that EU democracy is fragmented, split between "government *by* and *of* the people at the national level and governance, *for* and *with* the people at the EU level" (9), but that its legitimacy can be enhanced if it is reconceptualized in terms of a regional state. From this, a constructivist argument emerges that finds the sources of popular rejection of the EU in three main areas: first, the poor fit with national institutions; second, the absence of national debates to challenge historically formed ideas about democracy; and third, the lack of discourses to

help the public adjust to the changes that the EU has brought to national polities.

Having pointed to the limited ability of national polities to adjust to the impact of the EU, Schmidt examines this impact on the polities of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. Her frame of reference is the differences between simple and composite polities, where composite polities are defined as those in which multiple authorities share governing activity. By choosing two simple and two composite polities, she highlights the differential impact of the EU, as a composite polity, on national institutions. This central part of the book makes an excellent contribution to the literature on Europeanization, especially given that most existing studies assume that the EU's impact on national polities is minimal compared to its impact on policies.

The analyses of the impact of the EU on the traditional balance of power in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy are made from a historical institutionalist perspective that benefits from the author's broad and comprehensive overview of institutions in the four countries. Her finding that the EU has a stronger impact on unitary polities echoes the arguments of those who claim that federalist states, such as Germany, deal more easily with the EU (Bulmer 1997; Wallace 2005). Schmidt puts in perspective the relative loss of national autonomy by the French executive or the British Parliament, pointing out that the governments of both countries are very good at exporting their preferences to the EU level.

For Schmidt, the next important part of the puzzle is impact of EU policy making on statist versus corporatist systems and the role of interests and societal actors in policy making. She shows how historically shaped ideas about the role of organized interests in policy making can be a source of discord between member states and the EU when it comes to democracy. A deeper look into the sectoral effects of EU policy making reveals a wealth of insights that are worth reflection and debate on their own. For example,

Schmidt's claim that the EU's rules have clashed with the French "administrative state," which allows exceptions for business actors at the implementation stage, should be discussed in light of France's poor implementation record. The suggestion that the loss of flexibility in implementation in France is a problem for organized interests focused at the national level has broader implications for our understanding of the newly emerging domestic anti-EU coalitions. This example also illustrates one of the more complicated aspects of the EU legitimacy problem, namely, that action that serves to support equality and maintain a level playing field at the Union level can disenfranchise certain groups at the national level.

This erudite book not only sets forth some important arguments regarding democracy in the EU, but also, by virtue of the breadth of its analysis, provides a portrait of the Union seen through the lens of its four most important member states. The focus on these four states is both strength and a weakness. On the positive side, nothing significant happens in the EU without Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. This remains true in a Union of 27 countries as much as it was true in the early years of the European Community. On the minus side, however, focusing on these contrasting pairs of large states inevitably fails to shed light on another aspect of the democratic deficit, namely, the power asymmetry between large and small states when it comes to projecting policies and preferences to the EU level and in the international arena. Intergovernmental conferences on institutional reform have always come up against the smaller states' fear of dilution of their influence through institutional change—a recent example was the Irish concern with losing a commissioner who had played a role in the Lisbon Treaty referendum. In policy terms, EU rules have sometimes been bent to accommodate a large member state while smaller member states have borne the full force of enforcement mechanisms when failing to comply—for example, with European Monetary Union Stability Pact requirements.

What does the author ultimately think of the democratic credentials of the EU as a system of representative politics that has no name? Schmidt finds that citizens of unitary polities have more trouble with lost channels of representation than those in compound polities. She confirms that representative politics is failing to provide citizens with clear channels of access to the EU level, but suggests that lobbying and nonpartisan activism may be more effective. She is not particularly concerned with this erosion of participation, as long as it is compensated by the "rise of government *with* the people" (169)—involving new channels of participation and direct democracy instruments such as referenda. But there are more problems with the recent referenda than the fact that they give, as Schmidt notes, national answers to EU questions.

By serving as a focal point for those disadvantaged by globalization, referenda on EU treaties might end up stifling the voice of a silent, moderate European majority that does not oppose European integration. Therefore, the importance of ideas and especially discourses for communicating the EU's success, as highlighted by Schmidt in the last part of the book, should not be underestimated.

While the attention to the importance of EU-related discourses on democracy is, in my view, fully justified, the introduction of "discursive institutionalism" as a new analytical framework at the very end of the book is not. The introduction of a new set of terms, such as "communicative and coordinative discourses" and "discursive policy communities," so late in the book does not fit well with the rest of the volume and its references to institutions, interests, and political actors. It is not that the last part of the book does not provide an important perspective on how the EU should develop a more communicative voice to the European public. It is more that it refers to concepts far removed from those in the rest of the book, although the concluding insights on how legitimacy can be enhanced in simple polities through discourse bring back the general theme of the differentiated impact of the EU.

Apart from this late addition of a major new approach, the book's self-confessed heterogeneity of approaches and unstructured approach to empirical evidence do not, on the whole, weaken its arguments. Rational institutionalists may be surprised to find rational institutionalism assumptions co-opted in its mix of approaches, and strict methodologists who are interested in rigorous specification of a limited number of variables will be disappointed. But the comparative analysis of the EU's impact on unitary versus compound polities is well structured and, ultimately, convincing. Schmidt remains a true academic in providing no straightforward solutions to the EU's legitimacy problems, but instead, by illuminating the multiple ways in which Europeanization has left national polities and politicians behind, she points us in the direction to go if we are to resolve the current impasse. For this reason, this is a book that should be read carefully by both politicians seeking to define their country's stance on important decisions on the future of the EU and by experts seeking to formulate more sophisticated arguments in the democratic deficit debate.

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