Weak Citizens Make for a Weak Union: Some Reflections on the 'State of the Union' on the Eve of the 2014 EU Elections

This Sunday, 25th of May, the Spanish people will elect 54 candidates to take their place in the 751-strong European parliament. These elections, to be held in all EU member states, are a good occasion to reflect on the "state of the union" and the challenges it must overcome if it is to live up to its promise of creating an allliance that is not merely a common market, but a genuinely *political* union that promotes and honors principles of personal and associational freedom, democracy, rule of law, and subsidiarity.

In order to become a truly political union in which principles of self-government hold sway, the EU needs to develop a form of European citizenship and governance that (i) gives ordinary Europeans the possibility of expressing their political will and playing a significant role in determining their collective future; and (ii) gives ordinary Europeans reasons to *care* about the future of the European Union, and value their role as EU citizens. Otherwise, the European Union, instead of being a force for social progress and solidarity, will become an undemocratic and unrepresentative bureaucracy that rules over unfree subjects.

So far, the EU has failed to deliver effective and meaningful citizenship. It has abysmally failed to embody the ideal of representative democracy (*genuine* representation and democratic accountability) in its political institutions, which continue to be ruled primarily by government-appointed deputies and unelected commissioners, who can hardly be said to be answerable in any meaningful sense to ordinary citizens. The European parliament, the EU's only popularly elected body, is only competent to approve and amend laws proposed by the European Commission, not to initiate its own laws. Therefore it does not have the "teeth" of a national parliament. In addition, the delegates of any given member state have a very limited impact on such an assembly, especially when representing the unique interests of their constituent nation states. For example, even if Ireland's eleven candidates spoke with one voice, that voice would have great difficulty in being heard in a Parliament of 751 deputies.

This objective democratic deficit in European institutions is also borne out in the perceptions of ordinary Europeans, many of whom neither trust European political rulers nor value their European citizenship as a channel for making their voice heard. Between 1979 and 2009, average EU election turnout dropped from a respectable 62% to a disappointing 42%. Participation in European elections, with a few exceptions, now lags far behind participation in national elections. For example, in 75% of Spaniards cast a vote in Spain's 2008 national elections, compared with just 45% in Spain's 2009 EU elections.

Levels of trust in the European Union among EU citizens have fallen from 50% in 2004 to 31% in 2013, according to a Eurobarometer report published in spring 2013. According to the same poll, some 28% of Europeans believe their voice counts in the EU, compared with 67% who believe it does not. Finally, only four in ten citizens had a "positive" image of the EU in 2013, while three in ten citizens had a "neutral" image of the EU and three in ten had a "negative" image.

All of these trends toward apathy and disaffection are extremely worrying, because a political regime without a critical mass of active and informed citizens can no longer claim to speak for its people. A politically disaffected population either breeds volatile dissidents on the fringes of the political system, or passive "subjects" who obey the rules to avoid imprisonment. An unrepresentative political system is often perceived as illegitimate, and this can provide an ideological basis for extra-political and even revolutionary forms of resistance, as it has in Palestine, the Basque country, and Northern Ireland. I am not condoning armed resistance to undemocratic regimes. Rather, I am pointing out that current levels of civic disaffection in the European Union not only bode ill for the practice of self-government, but could eventually pose a serious threat to social stability and public order.

How can the European Union address the problem of political disaffection and the democratic deficit that plagues its institutions? There are a few strategies it could consider: first, it could attempt to engage in more comprehensive educational campaigns designed to inform and motivate Europeans about the value of European citizenship and civic engagement. But campaigns of this sort have thus far failed to stem the tide of political disaffection. Second, it could undertake deep and lasting reforms of its political institutions of the sort that would given citizens a greater say over the political future of Europe. However, given the sheer scale and cultural and linguistic diversity of the population of Europe, giving ordinary citizens any meaningful say over its decision-processes seems quite unrealistic.

Finally, the European Union could give up its ambition of becoming a fully fledged *political* union and revert to something more akin to an economic treaty than a body politic, delegating the bulk of its political powers to national and regional governments, so that they can foster the type of citizenship and self-government they see fit at national and regional levels. But this would be tantamount to abandoning the integrationist aspirations of the European project as we know it, and would require political actors to surrender a large amount of their political power, which is not likely to happen except in the most desperate of situations.

For the time being, it appears that we must let the European project run its course, until rates of internal disaffection reach levels so unsustainable that Europe's political elite is forced to either adopt a more autocratic style of rule (which would only galvanize and unify Euro-dissenters), decentralize the powers currently concentrated in Brussels, or face the prospect of political collapse.

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