

# WESTERN EUROPE SHIFTS (A BIT) TOWARD DIRECT DEMOCRACY

By Elinor Scarbrough

*'... the moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free'*  
(Rousseau, *The Social Contract*)

Rousseau's warning has gone largely unheeded in modern European experience. The practice of democracy in Europe has been dominated by the representative model. At the same time, democracy is clearly equated with freedom rather than participation. A 1973 survey in the Netherlands posed the open question, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'democracy'?" The most frequent responses (34%) were expressed in terms of "freedom"; only 8% thought democracy is "having a say in political decisions". Similar results emerged from a 1978 survey in West Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, none of the political systems of the region have succumbed to the crises of "ungovernability" or "legitimacy" as predicted by critics in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the "velvet revolutions" in Eastern Europe seemed to mark the victory of democracy. Yet there is now a certain urgency among scholars and politicians alike about the possibilities of new institutional forms of democracy. Although often dismissed as undesirable, impractical, even outdated<sup>3</sup>, direct democracy is again being given serious thought.<sup>4</sup>

Direct democracy has flourished only in Switzerland. By contrast with the United States, strong, hierarchically organized and disciplined parties, with deep historical roots, have been the principal agents of political life in western Europe. The parties are thus unlikely to be advocates of unmediated democracy. Nonetheless, some forms of direct democracy are practiced—both in the strict sense that citizens vote on some questions which, in representative democracies, are usually decided in parliament, and in the looser sense of giving citizens more say in political processes.<sup>5</sup>

## The Referendum

The most familiar device, the national referendum, while not uncommon, has proved neither infectious nor addictive. The constitutional referendum has a long history in France, and the modern constitutions of Italy, Spain, Greece, and Belgium were all confirmed by referendum. Denmark, Ireland, and Switzerland also require approval of constitutional change by referendum. However, neither the German Basic Law nor reunification was put to a popular vote; nor was progressive federalization in Belgium.

The referendum has also been used to settle major issues which threaten party unity. Italy (successfully) and Ireland (unsuccessfully) have confronted the issues of divorce and abortion by referendum. Austria, not given to the referendum, used it to defuse the nuclear power issue, as did Sweden. Some of the most bitterly fought referenda have been over membership in the European Community — in Norway, Britain, France, and on three occasions in Denmark and Ireland. In Scandinavian countries, except on the EC issue, referenda are usually only consultative.

In most countries, the use of the referendum is infrequent and unsystematic.<sup>6</sup> No referendum has been held during the postwar period in the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, or Portugal. As a device in the hands of government, the referendum is a "controlled" form of direct input and, thereby, usually "pro-hegemonic" in outcome.<sup>7</sup> Even so, the referendum has been known to burn its initiators, notably de Gaulle (in his 1969 "referendum for renewal").

The frequency of referenda, with provision for popular initiatives, makes Switzerland highly unusual in western Eu-

rope. But it is not an encouraging exemplar: The outcomes have been largely conservative, for instance, delaying women's suffrage until 1971; and as the frequency has risen, participation has fallen, averaging 37% over the 1978-86 period.<sup>8</sup>

In Italy, by circumventing entrenched interests, the referendum has proved a major instrument for social and political reform. In particular, the popular initiative was skillfully used by the reform movement *Corel* to secure eight referenda in 1993 which swept away some of the more blatant features of *partitocrazia* (a system run by parties, not government) and *lottizzazione* (a spoils system). But the referendum in Italy provides only for the abolition of statutes, not for proposing or approving new legislation.

Although the referendum has a patchy record in western Europe, it seems to have popular appeal, as turnout tends to be about as high as in general elections. Opinion in Britain certainly appears favorable. A 1968 Gallup poll showed 69% in favor of holding referenda "to decide certain issues"; in a MORI poll in 1991, 75% were in favor. The MORI poll also suggests widespread support for the popular initiative: 77% thought it was a "good idea" if a petition of some one million signatures could compel the government to hold a referendum. On the other hand, in a 1979 ORC poll, when confronted with a list of priorities for reforming the British system of government, 16% ranked referenda as their first choice compared to 29% selecting a proportional electoral system and 19% selecting party primaries.

The British public, however, seems to understand the referendum as a way of passing verdicts on policies, rather than as direct input to policy formulation. In the

1991 MORI poll, 77% wanted a referendum on the infamous poll tax, and 61% on the death penalty. By contrast, 43% supported a referendum on electoral reform. Even among activists for institutional reform, such as the Charter 88 movement, there is no head of steam for making the referendum a regular policy device.

There are mediated, or restricted, mechanisms for tapping public opinion apart from referenda. Public consultation on specific policy proposals has become a widespread practice. As the forms of public consultation vary widely, from national public inquiries to local planning hearings, it is difficult to quantify this growth. A consultative culture has certainly developed in Britain; in Scandinavia it is institutionalized in the *remiss* system.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, during the 1970s and 1980s most western European governments — except, notably, Britain — introduced devolution and decentralization in the name of greater participation and local control.<sup>10</sup> Again, it is difficult to quantify the general impact of these innovations, but they have been an important contribution to the emergence of the Northern League, a free-market movement in northern Italy.<sup>11</sup>

### Party Democracy

Other devices of direct democracy, such as the recall or mandating, are rare. A much modified form of recall is available in Britain where constituency associations can withdraw support from the incumbent MP. The MP is not compelled to resign, but deselection at the next election is almost certain. All other countries, except France, have proportional electoral systems with multi-member constituencies and party lists, so recall is a device with limited potential.

The endeavors of the West German Green Party to impose mandating ran aground from internal feuding and the representative principles laid down in the Basic Law. The parliamentary behavior of the Communists in Italy and France often looks like a form of mandating but,

in reality, reflects strong party discipline.

Probably more significant are efforts to democratize political parties. The major parties are typically "closed worlds" with well-defined ideological profiles and programs. Party members participate in policy discussions at local and national levels, but policy decisions and electoral strategies, especially framing the party's election manifesto, rest with the leadership. As multi-party systems are the norm, there tends to be a proximate fit between electors and parties despite the dominance of the party apparatus.

During the 1980s, the West German Greens advocated a participatory model,

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with open meetings, decentralized policy making, parliamentary mandates, and the rotation of leadership. The experience has not been encouraging: Members have proved no more active than members of other parties; disputes about procedures and the rotation of MP's added to faction fighting over policy. The party won no seats in the 1990 all-German elections.<sup>12</sup>

Candidate selection for parliamentary elections in most countries rests with local conventions of party delegates. But candidates are usually selected from centrally approved lists, and the national executive retains a right of veto. In France, Greece, Italy, and Portugal, where the "notables" tradition persists, candidate selection remains the prerogative of a party's national executive. Nominations for presidential elections are usually reserved to the central party apparatus.

Until recently, American-style pri-

maries were almost unknown in western Europe. Opening candidate selection to the membership at large was thought to undermine party organization and party discipline. That it is a legal requirement for parliamentary elections in Finland is exceptional. We may, however, be seeing the beginnings of a general movement towards party democratization.

In June 1993, the leadership of the German Social Democrats was opened to all party members, with local ballots on a common list of nominations. Despite the fears of party managers, their candidate, Rudolf Scharping, won. With a turnout of 57%, the innovation was trumpeted as "a way of ending disenchantment with democracy".<sup>13</sup> Nearer to the truth, it was a strategy to resolve the vexed question of the nature of the SPD, particularly its relationship with the Greens.

In Finland, the February 1994 presidential election — for the first time — was by direct popular vote. The three major parties organized two-stage primaries in fourteen multi-member constituencies: the first stage among party members to select two candidates, the second stage among the electorate at large. Although neither the Conservatives nor the Social Democrats secured the nomination of their "own" candidate, and some of the procedures are still in dispute, a precedent may have been established. In the run-up to the 1995 presidential election in France, an all-party primary is currently being mooted among the RPR-UDF ruling coalition for selecting the candidate of the right.

These innovations are something less than American-style primaries: candidates are established figures in the party leadership; local primaries are not followed by a national convention. Rather, they represent an extension of the modified primary which has become conventional in some countries.

For example, several parties in Scandinavia poll their members, using mail questionnaires, before drawing up party lists. In France, in response to the two-ballot electoral system, parties of the

left and the right usually stand separate candidates on the first ballot, with the weaker candidate withdrawing on the second. The first ballot votes are crucial in determining the balance of power, and policy, within the party "blocs".

The immediate outlook for direct democracy in western Europe, then, looks unpromising. Direct devices are not without precedent but they lack many advocates. This prompts two questions: First, why is there so little direct democracy in western Europe, and second, are there indications that more participatory modes of democracy might emerge? We have to come at both questions indirectly. Indeed, the paucity of data, in itself, suggests that progress towards direct democracy will be halting. Otherwise, political scientists would have been more assiduous about investigating democratic possibilities among the public at large.

### Popular Attitudes

There is little popular momentum towards direct democracy because west European citizens are broadly satisfied with their political systems. Data to sustain this claim come from a collaborative, cross-national research project, *Beliefs in Government*, funded by the European Science Foundation, and now in its final stages. Many of the findings, from re-analysis of data over twenty-five years challenge some of the recent wisdom about mass politics in western Europe.

High levels of commitment to democracy are evident. Eurobarometer data (1988 and 1989) reveal that support for democracy as a general idea is widespread; at the aggregate level, it exceeds 90% in all states of the (then) European Community, including Italy. Support for "democracy as a form of government" is somewhat lower but, with the exception of Ireland (and Northern Ireland), is still around 75%.<sup>14</sup> These figures may come as no surprise to those schooled in American politics, but some west European countries have experienced nondemocratic or quasi-democratic regimes which have not been widely unpopular.

Levels of satisfaction with "the way

democracy works in (my) country" are more varied, from highs of over 80% in Luxembourg and West Germany to lows of 27% in Italy and 41% in Northern Ireland. Even so, despite general claims about growing disillusionment with democracy, there is actually a weak but detectable trend toward increasing satisfaction with it over the period 1976-89.<sup>15</sup>

The electoral data point in the same direction. The mean turnout in national elections since 1945 across western Europe as a whole is 83%. Turnout rates were highest in the early 1960s, lowest in the late 1980s — but, overall, the variation amounts to a decline of some three percentage points over a period of forty-five years.<sup>16</sup> Even in the late 1980s, only Switzerland (at 47%) had an average turnout lower than 70%.<sup>17</sup>

Parties remain the principal intermediaries between citizens and the state. West European citizens are not as dissatisfied with their parties or their governments as often supposed. Steep declines in partisanship are confined to Sweden and Britain, while partisanship is rising in the most recently democratized countries — Greece, Spain, Portugal. Attachment to parties in most countries lies somewhere between these poles, but with periodic fluctuations.<sup>18</sup> Direct democracy has few advocates among established political elites and, without a place on the agenda of the major parties, it lacks a broad constituency.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, evaluations of government do not indicate general dissatisfaction. All west European states practice "big government", albeit with wide variations between the highly developed welfare states of Scandinavia and the still developing welfare systems of southern Europe. But hostility to the power of government, voiced by critics of the left and the right, appears not to be widespread among citizens. Data from the 1990 International Social Survey Program reveal that even in response to a very general question, no more than the barest majority in Britain (50%), Ireland (51%), and Italy (53%) thought government "has too much power". In Norway, 50% thought gov-

ernment power "was about right"; in Germany the figure was 61%.<sup>20</sup>

Attitudes towards the scope of government are decidedly positive. The Political Action (1974) and ISSP surveys (1985 and 1990) show overwhelming majorities in favor of "big" government. Across several countries and a range of policy areas, the proportion who view action as the responsibility of government seldom falls below 75%. Support for some policies — especially health and care of the elderly — tends to be over 90%, whereas support for reducing income differences or providing jobs for those seeking work tends to hover around 70%.<sup>21</sup>

### Prospects for Democratization

If the dominance of parties persists, and disaffection with government is not widespread, what grounds are there for anticipating further democratization? As liberal democracy is conceived as a progressive and educative process, we would expect west European citizens to be pushing at the institutional boundaries of representative government. Economic and social developments, especially detraditionalization, rising education levels, and expanding communication opportunities, contribute to this pressure.<sup>22</sup> Much remains the same, but mounting pressures on representative traditions are also evident.<sup>23</sup>

There has clearly been something akin to a "participative revolution" in western Europe over the last thirty years or so. *The Civic Culture* (Almond and Verba, 1959) suggested that the vast majority of electors (some 85%) did nothing political other than vote. The World Values Survey shows that by 1990, across thirteen countries, this figure had halved to 44%. While activists remain around 10%, the proportion who do something more than vote has risen dramatically (from 11% to 46%) over the period.<sup>24</sup>

New social movements during the 1970s reflect a general momentum towards greater participation. Movement memberships are difficult to quantify in surveys, but the European Values Survey and the World Values Survey indicate

that the grass-roots activism typical of new social movements increased in nearly all west European countries during the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Participation in demonstrations, boycotts, and the like were considered unconventional in the 1960s and the early 1970s. During the 1980s they became part of the standard repertoire of political action.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, there have been shifts in the political agenda which have not been spearheaded by the established political parties. During the 1980s, the new political wisdom contrasted the "old" agenda, centered on class conflicts, against the "new" agenda of the environment, the rights of women and minority groups, the Third World, and international coexistence. Time series built from Eurobarometer data reveal that, rather than having different constituencies, these concerns have become integrated into a single but enlarged agenda. Established parties have been compelled to accommodate these new concerns.<sup>27</sup>

We have one direct measure of the demand for a more participative politics: "giving people more say in the decisions of government" is one of the four items in the battery used to tap materialist-postmaterialist values in the Eurobarometer surveys. The proportion of respondents selecting this item as their first priority has increased year on year, in all member states of the European Community over the period 1976-1989.

Across the Community as a whole, the proportion seeking "more say" as a priority rose from 16% to 26%. Excluding Greece, Spain, and Portugal, for which the time series is shorter, the smallest increase is 5 percentage points in France; the largest is 17 percentage points in both Ireland and Luxembourg. Moreover, in most EC countries, the priority given to "more say" outstrips that for "protecting

freedom of speech". Across the Community as a whole, support for freedom of speech has risen only from 13% to 17%.

Representative democracy has come to be equated with strong party organization in western Europe. Unless parties cease to matter—an implausible prospect—direct democracy seems as distant now as when Rousseau wrote on its behalf. Nonetheless, popular pressures do seem to be moving parties toward being more open, participatory, and responsive.

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