

# Centripetal Democracy

## Democratic Legitimacy and Regional Integration in Belgium, Switzerland and the European Union

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### Abstract

This dissertation aims to arrive at a model of democratic legitimacy for the European Union. There is, however, a strain of thought pre-dominant in political theory since the nineteenth century that doubts the capacity of political systems constituted by multiple public spheres to have sustainable democratic systems. This view is referred to here as the *lingua franca thesis on sustainable democratic systems* (LFT). It states that, in the absence of a common language for political debate, democracy cannot function well in the long-term as citizens existing in distinctive public spheres will inevitably come to have diverging preferences that cannot be satisfactorily resolved by a collective democratic process. Poor quality democratic institutions, as well as acute demands to divide the political system (through devolution or secession) so that state and society become more congruent, are predicted by this thesis.

To arrive at a model of democratic legitimacy for the EU, in light of the challenge presented by the LFT, three major steps are taken. Part One attempts to arrive at an account of democratic legitimacy as a realistic ideal for modern political systems. Understanding democracy as a system which strives to maximise citizens' equal opportunities for control over the decisions to which they are subject, the maximisation of electoral and direct voting opportunities for citizens is recommended, subject to certain practical constraints. Importantly, democratically legitimate institutions are identified as having important external effects, which amount to more than just the peaceful resolution of conflict. *Centripetal democracy* is the idea that legitimate democratic institutions set in motion forms of citizen practice and representative behaviour that serve as powerful drivers of demos-formation.

In the second part of this dissertation, an effort is made to both classify and normatively assess the EU. As a political system the EU is taken to be a *demosi-cracy*, or a democracy of democracies, whereby the demos of the member states take sovereign precedence over the European demos constituting the citizens of Europe as a whole. While citizen's control over their respective governments' roles in EU decision-making is seen to have significant shortfalls, the major democratic deficiencies are detected in citizens' control over actors located exclusively at the European level. Overall, the absence of voting opportunities directly connecting citizens to European power ensures that the EU is not controlled by its citizens in a way that is commensurate with the power it wields.

If the EU is to democratise, it must be capable of dealing with the dynamics predicted by the LFT. Part Three of this dissertation analyses the sustainability of democracy in two political systems that bear striking resemblances to the EU, namely Belgium and Switzerland. Like the EU, these are multilevel and multilingual political systems attempting to organise themselves in a democratic

fashion. Belgium proves to be a near perfect case for corroborating the LFT, its linguistic communities finding it increasingly difficult to coexist in one democratic community. Switzerland, by contrast, has managed to produce one of the most democratically legitimate political systems in the modern world, despite being fractured into linguistically distinct public spheres. As my conception of centripetal democracy predicts, however, the Swiss success in integrating the public spheres within one political system is in no small part related to the arrangement of its democratic institutions.

That being said, there are certain conditions that made the development of centrifugal forces more likely and centripetal democracy less likely in Belgium than in Switzerland. In Part Four, where I finally derive a model of democratic legitimacy for the EU, it is demonstrated that while many of the conditions that made centrifugal forces so strong in Belgium are not (or not yet) present in the EU, the conditions for the development of a legitimate democratic process are also generally lacking. This is especially true when it comes to the introduction of direct democracy at Union level, although there may be fewer obstacles to making European institutions more electorally accountable.



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### **Bio**

Joseph Lacey's main interests are in political theory and comparative politics, especially concerning the themes of democracy, justice, federalism, diverse societies and European integration. In addition to the EUI, he has studied at KU Leuven, University College Dublin and the Milltown Institute. During his Ph.D., he spent a research period at Princeton University's Department of Politics, with the support of a Fulbright Schuman Award. From 2015, he will hold a Junior Research Fellowship in Politics at the University of Oxford.