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In search of European democracy

By Richard W. Rahn

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Is the European Union a democracy? The Europeans and most others will argue yes, but there are many different degrees of democracy. Many Europeans increasingly feel powerless when it comes to their national government and particularly that of the EU, and for good reason. Despite the fact that many of the nations of Europe are much older than the U.S., all of their democracies are much younger (with the partial exception of Switzerland), most have only been real democracies for the last several decades, and even less for the former communist states.

Many of the European countries have moved from a monarchal authoritarianism to a socialist authoritarianism, without really building democratic institutions to protect the individual from the government, like those that exist in the U.S. and Switzerland.

When a small group meets and votes for its leaders and almost all issues of importance, we call that process "direct democracy." America had such a system in many towns, the most famous were the New England town meetings. In these towns, the citizens came together to make many of the decisions as to how they would be governed, including how they would be taxed and how the money would be spent. Most countries, including the U.S., now have "representative democracies," whereby people elect "representatives" to voice their views in various legislative bodies.

Where the citizens know and can directly interact with their representatives, and the representatives fear they will lose their positions if they do not reflect the will of the local majority, the process tends to work reasonably well.

Many of the major European countries have developed a top down political system rather than a bottom up one. Top down is a system where a small group of political elites decides what it thinks is best for the people. France is a prime example. Most of the French political leaders went to the same, very small, elite school in Paris and developed a very tight "old boy network," hence the left-leaning and so-called right-leaning leaders are all fans of "big government" where they have control. The parliamentarians are all very firmly controlled by the party leaders; hence, unlike the U.S., dissenting votes are rare.

In the U.S. Congress, the leaders are forever negotiating with their own party members, attempting to create voting majorities. Most members of the U.S. House and Senate have their primary allegiance to their own voters rather than to their party or its leadership.

In Europe, it is quite the opposite. The rank and file members of the parliaments owe their primary allegiance to their party leaders, because if they dissent, they will be kicked off the list of who can "stand" (i.e., represent) the party in a given district. As a result, elected representatives tend not to make themselves readily available directly to their constituents as is done in the U.S.

The British Conservative party leader David Cameron has just announced that the party will not push for tax cuts in the next election. The Thatcherite wing of the party is outraged and believes it to be both bad economics (which it is) and bad politics; but because of central party control, virtually all of the Conservative candidates standing for the next election will have to buy into the no tax cut position in order to be selected to run.

Another factor leading to non-democratic centralism in Europe is that public-owned and -influenced TV is much more dominant in Europe than in the U.S. As would be expected, the journalists in the public-owned TV stations tend to favor big government (which is natural since that is where they get their salary checks). The most famous and notorious public-owned broadcasting entity is the BBC. The BBC has several TV networks in Britain and is rapidly expanding throughout the world, including the U.S., because it has a direct source of revenue; that is, a very hefty mandatory tax on each TV set in Britain. The BBC is also greatly expanding its local news coverage, attempting to crowd out local newspapers. The BBC editorial and news positions are consistently hostile to those who favor limited government and lower taxes.

Thus, the free market democratic forces in Britain, as well as other European countries, are at a double disadvantage in that they need to fight the big state centralism, which can dole out favors from the public purse, and they are constantly attacked by the state-owned or -influenced media. Given that neither the political elite nor the media really like democracy, it and its necessary conditions are steadily being undermined in Europe. This democratic deficit has led to (or is a result of) excess statism which, in turn, has destroyed much of the economic vitality of the continent.

The one bright spot is the recent rise of limited government, free market activist groups, such as the TaxPayers' Alliance in Britain, and Liberté Chérie (i.e., cherished liberty) in France. These groups are led by intelligent and highly-motivated young professionals who understand the need for fundamental change and are willing to fight for it.

Richard W. Rahn is director general of the Center for Global Economic Growth, a project of the FreedomWorks Foundation.