

Research impact: making a difference

Making European Union politics more open, democratic and accountable

LSE research has illuminated how politics works within the European Union and helped to reform democratic processes within EU institutions

What was the problem?

The European Union's 28 member states have a combined population of more than 500 million people. To hold their politicians to account, EU citizens need to know how the system works and what their elected representatives are doing on their behalf.

Yet politics within the European Union has long been plagued by complaints that it is undemocratic, remote and lacks transparency. Even those most closely involved, such as politicians, policymakers, journalists and interest groups, often lack key information

Especially opaque are the voting records of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the governments in the Council of the European Union. The way in which decisions are made within the EU can also provoke controversy, as the recent furore surrounding the election of the President of the European Commission has demonstrated.

What did we do?

LSE's efforts to research democracy within the European Union were led by Professor of Government Simon Hix in collaboration with colleagues at New York University and University of California, Berkeley. Together they pioneered a method for collecting, processing and analysing voting within the European Parliament (EP) and produced an index to measure the cohesion of groups within a parliament.

Building on this work, in 2009 Hix set up a website, www.VoteWatch.eu, with LSE colleague Dr Sara Hagemann and Doru Frantescu (now its Director). VoteWatch collects, analyses and publishes all recorded votes in the European Parliament and, since 2011, in the European Council.

Hix's research has investigated how different voting systems affect the relationships between citizens and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). It found that MEPs elected under voting systems that identify their candidates, such as open-list proportional representation, have a better record of keeping citizens informed about elections than MEPs elected under closed-list systems, i.e. when votes are cast for parties rather than individuals.

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Hix has also been active in the European debate about how best to elect the President of the European Commission. In a paper to the UK Cabinet Office he proposed an electoral 'college' of national parliamentarians to make the process more open and accountable. In his book *What's Wrong with the European Union and How to Fix It*, Hix supported the case for naming rival presidential candidates prior to European Parliament elections, instead of allowing the President-elect to emerge by consensus, an approach which effectively politicises the President's role.

What happened?

Hix's research, backed by the VoteWatch website, led to changes in the way important votes were taken in the European Parliament. Most EP votes were simply conducted by a show of hands, supplemented where necessary by electronic voting. A small minority of votes were conducted by electronic 'roll call', which recorded how each Member voted. In 2009, the European Parliament changed its Rules of Procedure so that all final votes on legislative proposals were conducted by 'roll call', making the process significantly more transparent.

Hix's research also influenced voting by European governments. The European Parliament invited Hix to submit evidence to its reform hearings in 2008 and, as a result, incorporated Hix's proposal that all member states should use a form of preferential voting as one of its main recommendations for reform.

"Overall, Professor Hix's on-going attention to European Parliament (EP) activities and advocacy for reform are important contributions to the EP's broader efforts to more transparently and effectively relate with its 500 million constituents within an increasingly democratic EU."

**Klaus Welle, Secretary-General
of the European Parliament**

Actively promoted by Hix to top-level audiences across Europe, VoteWatch has developed into Europe's leading website for tracking the voting behaviour of elected members and of governments. It is regularly consulted by non-governmental organisations, journalists, citizens and European institutions wishing to improve their transparency.

The VoteWatch website receives on average 12,000 visitors a month and over 15,000 mentions each year in print and web-based media.

In 2010, both the World E-Democracy Forum in Paris and Barcelona's Personal Democracy Forum identified VoteWatch as an example of best practice for using e-democracy tools to hold politicians to account.

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The European Council has acted on VoteWatch's proposals for more open reporting of its legislative decisions and the European Parliament has discussed its proposals within its ruling body and in full plenary session.

VoteWatch has directly affected the attendance and voting behaviour of MEPs, as evidenced by the fact that those who failed to justify their voting record subsequently lost their seats.

There is also activity towards introducing competitive elections for the European Commission's President. While Europe was debating a consolidated constitution for the EU, several think tanks adopted Hix's proposal for an electoral college, which was also endorsed by the Swedish and Irish governments. Consistent with Hix's proposal in his book, before the 2014 European Parliament elections, the European political parties put forward rival candidates for the Commission President ("*Spitzenkandidaten*"). Not all member state governments accepted this interpretation of the Treaty, but this is now likely to become the standard way of "electing" the highest executive office in the EU in the future.

The 'democratic deficit' remains a concern in European politics. By throwing the spotlight on decision-making within the European Union, and by analysing alternative ways of selecting MEPs and the European Commission's President, Professor Hix's research is helping to address perceived legitimacy issues at the heart of European democracy.

Professor Simon Hix

Simon Hix is Professor in European and Comparative Politics and Head of the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His primary research interests are democratic political institutions and elections, particularly in Europe. He has published 8 books and over 50 articles in peer-reviewed journals, has won many prizes for his research, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. He is Chairman of www.VoteWatch.eu (and transparency NGO in Brussels), co-editor of the journal *European Union Politics*, and regularly gives evidence to the committees in the House of Commons, House of Lords, and European Parliament.

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