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EUROPE

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**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“THE EUROPEAN
UNION IS
UNDEMOCRATIC
AND OUT OF TOUCH
WITH THE PEOPLE
OF EUROPE”**

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KEY TERMS

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INTRODUCTION

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NOTES

1 On 12 June 2008, the stability of Europe was dealt a severe blow when the people of Ireland voted a resounding ‘no’ to the EU’s
1 Lisbon treaty in a national referendum. The result sent shock waves through Europe, pushing former European Commission vice-president Neil Kinnock to call the ‘No’ vote a ‘triumph of ignorance’ on the one hand [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and Declan Ganley of anti-treaty lobby group Libertas a ‘triumph for Irish democracy’ on the other [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. News that a second referendum is likely to be called in Ireland [Ref: [openDemocracy](#)] has only deepened the row, leading one commentator to accuse Europe of demonstrating ‘elite disdain for the democratic process’ [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and allowing others to breathe a sigh of relief that Ireland has been given the opportunity to think again. The way in which the referendum results have been interpreted is revealing of the different sides in the Europe debate.

Whilst some commentators boldly state that the European project is so essential to our shared future that the treaty must proceed with or without Ireland, others say that the ‘No’ vote and responses to it indicate just how undemocratic the Union is [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Whether Europhile or Eurosceptic, the Irish ‘no’ vote raises profound questions about the future of Europe and indeed democratic politics.



THE BANKERS' PAY DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What is the European Union and how democratic is it?

The European Union (EU) is an economic and political partnership between 27 European countries, including the UK. It mainly comprises the European Parliament, which is directly elected every five years, the Council of the European Union, representing the governments of member states, and the European Commission, which proposes new laws to the Parliament and Council, and manages the implementation of policy. The EU is democratic in that all laws and policies have to be agreed by a directly-elected European Parliament and, more importantly, the parliaments of the member states represented by the Council of the EU. Nonetheless, critics argue that the EU has become too bureaucratic and is distant from the electorates. Turnout for elections to the European Parliament is typically low, and many voters take little interest in it, while decisions made in Brussels are often detached from the concerns of national politics [Ref: [Idea](#)]. Unpopular policies are sometimes presented to domestic voters as impositions from Brussels, even though they have been agreed by national politicians. In this sense, discontent with the EU might be seen as an expression of a broader democratic deficit, and advocates argue that it is unfair to blame the EU for this.

The EU referendums controversy

An EU Constitution, designed to codify various treaties and agreements, was agreed in 2004, subject to ratification by the member states [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. In 2005, voters in France and the Netherlands rejected the constitution in national referendums, forcing the European Commission to rethink.

In 2007, they agreed on the Lisbon Treaty [Ref: [Europa.eu](#)], but critics argued that it was just the constitution by another name, and this too was rejected by Irish voters in 2008. Since all 27 member states have to ratify the treaty, the process cannot go ahead as planned unless Ireland agrees to a second referendum, as it did with the Nice Treaty in 2001 [Ref: [European Commission](#)], and wins the people's support. But rather than casting a shadow on Europe's claim to political legitimacy, a number of commentators have suggested the debacles tell us more about the folly of using referendums as a means of democratic decision-making [Ref: [openDemocracy](#)]. Others argue that when governments pass power onto a third party, the people have a right to express consent or not by direct democracy [Ref: [openDemocracy](#)]. In this vein some suggest that hostility to referendums reveals more about critics' failure to persuade the electorate than a problem with the process.

Europhiles and Eurosceptics

There has been a long-standing divide in British politics between those who favour closer union with Europe (Europhiles) and those who want more independence (Eurosceptics). The former see European unity as a desirable ideal in itself, or simply the best way to deal with transnational issues like trade and terrorism. The latter fear that the EU is undermining national sovereignty by taking power away from national electorates. While Euroscepticism is often associated with the right wing, both positions are represented in the major parties, and similarly the 'no' campaigns involved people and organisations from both left and right.



DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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Populism and elitism

Critics of the EU often characterise it as elitist, reflecting the interests of a narrow political class, and detached from the concerns of ordinary people across Europe. Supporters of the EU sometimes counter by suggesting opponents are guilty of populism, or pandering to the lowest common denominator in politics, especially national chauvinism. A more positive case can be made for each position, however. Rather than being elitist, some see the relative detachment of the EU as a natural reflection of its concern with complex, technocratic matters that don't interest most people and are best left to experts. Opponents counter that it is essential for the public to be involved in politics if those in power are to be held to account, whether at a national or European level, and that without popular support the EU is illegitimate.



ESSENTIAL READING

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Referenda: democracy vs elites

Gisela Stewart *Open Democracy* 18 June 2008

The referendum: populism vs democracy

George Schöpflin *Open Democracy* 16 June 2008

Head to head: EU treaty referendum

Bob Crow vs Gary Titley *BBC News* 24 August 2007

For

Challenging obfuscation on Europe

Guardian 19 October 2008

Why is the EU so undemocratic?

Rupert Matthews *ConservativeHome.com* 2 August 2008

Europe's union of disenchantment

Christopher Bickerton *Le Monde Diplomatique* 1 July 2008

Undemocratic means lead to EU ends

Bruno Waterfield *Daily Telegraph* 22 June 2008

Now it's clear: the EU is an alien imposition in Europe

Frank Furedi *spiked* 16 June 2008

Against

The Irish vote must not thwart a better Europe

Observer 15 June 2008

Ireland's no vote: Europe is not going away

Dennis MacShane *The Times* 14 June 2008

No vote would precipitate a major European crisis

John Palmer *Irish Times* 9 June 2008

We can't let the Euro-crazies drag us out of the club

Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 16 October 2007

Fifty years of peace is great, but it's not enough. Europe needs a new mission now

Johan Hari *Independent* 19 March 2007

In Depth

What next for the EU?

Chris Bickerton *Battle of Ideas Battle in Print* 22 September 2008

If EU referendums are taboo, what then?

Toger Seidenfaden *EUobserver* 3 October 2007

Depicting Europe

Perry Anderson *London Review of Books* 20 September 2007

What story should Europe tell?

Backgrounders

What next for democracy in Europe?

Battle of Ideas debate on FORA.tv 1 November 2008

Q&A: Irish treaty referendum

BBC News 13 June 2008

EUROPA

EU Institutions: who does what?

BBC News



IN THE NEWS

Will the rest of the EU have to re-ratify the Lisbon Treaty?

Daily Telegraph 17 December 2008

Dublin and the democratic deficit

Wall Street Journal 15 December 2008

'Misunderstandings led to rejection of Lisbon'

Belfast Telegraph 14 December 2008

Domestic discord vs European impatience at Lisbon

Irish Times 13 December 2008

Libertas leader engaged on a vanity project

Irish Times 13 December 2008

Deal to keep Lisbon vote off political agenda

Financial Times 13 December 2008

Irish EU 'no' camp already bracing for second poll

AFP 10 December 2008

Czechs ready to fulfil their EU obligations - EU Minister Vondra

České Noviny 18 November 2008

EU chief hits back at criticism of EU Commission

AFP 21 June 2008

Turkey tries to revive EU drive

BBC News 19 January 2008

Gordon Brown rules out a referendum on EU

Daily Telegraph 5 July 2007

EU constitution: where member states stand

BBC News 25 March 2007

EU 'trying to brainwash children in classroom'

Yorkshire Post 3 January 2007

Chirac's appeal for French Unity

BBC News 31 May 2005

France say firm 'No' to EU treaty

BBC News 30 May 2005

Dutch 'no' campaign helped by French result

Independent 13 May 2005

Dutch vote on Europe constitution

BBC News 1 January 2005

EU leaders sign constitution

BBC News 29 October 2004

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ORGANISATIONS

I Want a Referendum

The Democracy Movement

The European Movement



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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

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Professional role
(if applicable)

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School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

