

## **Federalism**

Federalism is an interesting and important notion in the context of the European Union. On the one hand federalism is a way of thinking about the EU. Scholars who seek to understand the European Union can use tools normally applied to the study of federations to study the EU. However at the same time, for many people a federal Europe is not just an objective political entity, but a political goal (or a map for how the EU *should* develop). Indeed, creating a federal Europe was one of the driving motivations behind the earliest moves towards European integration. As such, this extract considers federalism as a *political objective or model for the EU*, intrinsic to the development of the EU. Secondly, it considers federalism as an approach to the study of the EU.

### **European federalism as political objective**

The post-war period, politicians and scholars alike wanted to derive ways of avoiding future conflict in Europe. Creating a federation of European states was one of the way people thought this could be achieved and a driving motivation behind desires to integrate at a European level. Federalists tend to prescribe constitutional solutions that bind humans into behaving in a peaceful manner. Federalist logic, put concisely, is that function follows form. If the right constitutional structures (form) are put in place the necessary functions (avoiding war etc.) will naturally occur.

After the end of the Second World War, leaders in Europe sought to think of ways to overcome the national antagonisms that had led to the slaughter of 1939-45. For European leaders like Spinelli and Monnet, the answer lay in devising a European political structure that could bring the states of Europe together under a common political framework so that the common interest could be maximised and tensions be reduced (Burgess, 2000, p.36).

For Spinelli in particular, the key to peace and development on the European continent was the establishment of strong Europe-wide institutions that could perform the role of keeping European states in check. Spinelli advocated a federalist framework with central institutions responsible to some issues and responsibility for other issues held at the level of member states (Burgess, 2000, p.36).

For many, this objective of a federal Europe is an on-going project. Groups such as the Union of European Federalists campaign today for a more federal Europe. For them, a model of European governance with responsibility divided between the central level and regional levels is the best way to ensure both the unity and diversity of European peoples in the European continent. You can find out more about their vision for European integration [here](#).

### **Federalism as an explanatory framework for analysing the nature of the contemporary EU**

However, federalism also provides an analytical basis for understanding the contemporary EU. In this case, federalism is not so much a prescription for how the EU *should* develop, but rather a framework for understanding the nature of the European Union *as it is today*. Given the role played by federalist advocates of European integration such as Spinelli, we should at least expect to see some federal elements within the EU's make up.

Debates over what constitutes a federation vary (Nugent, 2003, p.468). There are, however, a number of features however that are generally thought to characterise a federation.

1. Federations have power divided between a central decision-making entity and regional decision-making bodies. Both have responsibility for different aspects of policy.

2. Disputes between the regional and central levels are settled by a supreme judicial authority
3. Within federations there is often some degree of overlap between levels
4. Normally, policy areas that are concerned with the maintenance of the system as a whole (notably in defence, security, foreign affairs, constitutional matters and the protection of fundamental rights) are the preserve of the central decision-making bodies. (Adapted from Nugent, 2003, p.468).

From a review of this list it becomes evident that while the EU exhibits some federal characteristics it does not conform entirely to the federal model (as described above). Indeed, the EU clearly has a balance of different powers between the central bodies (European Courts, the Commission) and the regional parts (the member states). Furthermore, the European Court of Justice provides an ultimate authority that settles disputes (in areas of policy delegated to the EU) (Nugent, 2003, p.469). However, at the same time, the EU does not have responsibility for some of the major areas of policy. Core issues such as defence and education remain largely the preserve of member states (Nugent, 2003, p.469).

Consequently, utilising a federal model to describe parts of the EU is useful as it draws our attention to the divisions of power between the centre and the regions and the role of supranational entities. However, it is evident that the EU does not fit this model perfectly and identifying the federal dimensions of the EU has limits in terms of understanding EU integration.

### **Critiquing Federalism's Explanatory Powers**

One of the biggest critiques of federalism as an explanatory theory of European integration is its theoretical elasticity. As was noted earlier,

federalism as a model has multiple meanings. While this makes it very popular for those advocating European integration, federalism is difficult for theorists to use to explain the EU as such a broad understanding of federalism's nature entails a loss of explanatory value.

Furthermore, considering the EU as federation does not really help explain why member states integrate in the first place (beyond abstract desires for peace) or help understand how processes of integration play out in reality. Indeed, while analysing the EU as a federation can be useful in a descriptive sense (particularly in charting how far the EU has moved towards a federation) it tells us very little about how or why integration of policy-making take place.

**Further Reading:**

Burgess, M. (2000). *The Building of Europe, 1950-2000*. Routledge: London.

Nugent, N. (2003). *Government and Politics of the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.