This chapter discusses the extent to which decision-making in the European Union can be considered democratic and legitimate. The chapter clarifies the concepts ‘democracy’ and ‘legitimacy’, and describes how, although initially the legitimacy of the European polity was not perceived as a problem, it became more problematic as the EU gained more competences. The European democratic deficit became an important issue of debate only during the 1990s after the Maastricht Treaty had transferred considerable powers to the EU. The main solution to the democratic deficit has been inspired by the parliamentary model of democracy and involves strengthening the European Parliament (EP), while also paying attention to the role of national parliaments and regional and local authorities. The chapter also shows how the governance debate at the start of the twenty-first century broadened the conceptual understanding of democracy in the EU by addressing the complexity of European governance (see also Chapter 7). By looking at different stages of policy-making and different modes of governance, while dealing with issues such as transparency and the role of civil
society, the chapter discusses a wider range of issues associated with the democracy and legitimacy of the Union. It assesses the impact on EU democracy of the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. The chapter concludes by warning that three main crises, namely the economic, migration, and security crises, have revived nationalist and populist movements exacerbating the challenges to the EU’s legitimacy.

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