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EU in Focus: Brussels Leadership Retreat Reflection

I am appreciative to have been given the opportunity to visit the heart of the European Union and it was an unique experience to go from one capital to another. It is surprising to realize how little Americans know about European politics. It’s not that we’re uneducated, but more that there is already so much going on in America, in addition to our long distance from Europe, that we concern ourselves with and prioritize other things. As extensive as my high school government and policy classes were, we never ventured deeper into European politics. Our neighbors across the pond seemed too foreign and like far too many Americans, I, for the longest time, prioritized American politics, ignoring the significance of a connection with the rest of the world. But then came the summer of 2016, and Brexit happened, and it was all anyone could talk about. Most of what I learned about the European Union and Brexit were through exhaustive Google searches or scrolling down Apple News. My Facebook feed, filled with many angry reacts (but still some heart reacts) to CNN articles on the referendum, sparked my curiosity to learn more. The speakers we heard from in Brussels all pretty much shared a general opposition towards Brexit. One of the questions I asked the speaker at the European Council was regarding to the incentive the E.U had to renegotiate trade deals with the United Kingdom. If no new trade agreement is reached with the E.U, the U.K will have to fall back to the policies set by the World Trade Organization, which will significantly hurt their already unstable economy. The European Union is set on its countries to follow the legislation it establishes, and the United Kingdom feels it can avoid that but still have access to the E.U’s single market. This is a very
unlikely scenario as the E.U will never agree to it in fear of other countries leaving, but letting the U.K fall back to WTO rules will negatively impact it as well, as they will have lost multiple opportunities for future trade deals. Their issue is similar to the Prisoner's Dilemma, where if both parties decide to act in their own self-interest, it will end up harming them both. It’s all pretty fascinating, especially given the fact the technically the U.K cannot negotiate a new trade deal with other nations until March 2019.

In addition, through this trip, I realized the similarities of American policy making to European Union policy making. Like us, they have two “houses” that must agree for a law to pass. They have the European Parliament, consisting of the Counsel of the European Union, or the Council of Ministers, and the European Commission. Committee meetings are generally held in Brussels. They have specifically assigned committees too. It’s important to note that though their government works similarly to ours, they are not a country, like we are. We have a centralized federal government and then decentralized state governments, holding less power. The EU is composed of countries with their own government systems. The EU’s policies are decided together, and what they all must follow, but they are free to make their own policies as long as it doesn’t contradict. One could compare it to the power granted to the states in American government, but on a larger scale.

The first activity we had to complete (which I would like to point out was created with the intention of educating high schoolers) was a mock Parliament session. (It was sort of like Mock Trial meets Model UN but condensed into two hours for time efficiency) The topics were
water solidarity and microchip implants. Granted it is all a simulation model meant for educational purposes, but upon hearing about the policy proposed to instill microchips in individuals, I thought right away about how this wouldn’t even be brought to the table in America. Policies are proposed through agenda setting, as we learned in class, and the people controlling the agenda are very much for the Fourth Amendment. I still played out the debate in my mind: Conservatives concerned about an individual’s right to privacy would have shot it down right away. Opposition would then argue the benefits in modern day society, where humans need to team up with technology to create a safer environment.

The policy on water conservation on the other hand helped me step away from American politics for a bit. I hadn’t realized the impact of agriculture on the European economy prior to this exercise. Farmers contributed to a lot of the water use in the European Union, and as a result are taking away clean water resources from the common people. However, farmers’ need of water is crucial to keeping the economy going, as agriculture is one of the main sources of income. One of the policies proposed to attempt to fix this issue was raising the price of water, so people would realize the true value of water and not waste it. As one would assume, this did not fly by the consumers that easily. They instead proposed an alternative, which was to tax the farmers on their excessive use of water.

The “Parliament” struggled to come up with a consensus so this led us to Phase 2. Suddenly, alarms started blaring and we were prompted to another room with a fake news channel playing on the screen. The pretend news anchor was reporting a breaking news story of a
water pipe erupting, causing much damage to the surrounding area, resulting in missing people. This was obviously planned for convenience and with no surprise, the parties changed sides. It’s supposed to be a model but it goes to show how the media and current events can change policy views quite easily, all over the world. Now the real world isn’t is simple as this model we partook in. If anything, this just makes me wonder how much it really takes to be able to change a party’s view on a major policy. News events alone don’t really make as big of an impact as we’d like; take the gun control issue as an example. So many mass shootings happened and keep happening but yet there is still much change to be done. It’s not as simple as textbooks portray it out to be. Parties have hidden agendas when it comes to policy making, and it is not always influencable by current events or lobbyists. It would have been interesting to learn more about this aspect of politics rather than the basic cookie cutter model.

This model contributed to the ideas presented in Downs’ *Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue Attention Cycle*. There was the pre-problem stage: only the farmers knew how badly the water crisis was. An alarmed discovery caused the public to urge the E.U to make a change. The cost of significant progress was then realized: The E.U and then the public’s only possible solution involved raising taxes or raising the price of water. For the purposes of the simulation model, we had to come up with a policy that ended up raising the true value of water. However, in real life, this issue if not resolved soon enough would lose public interest. But Downs’ most likely would not believe it would enter the “post-problem” phase just yet. In his article, he claimed pollution as pretty bipartisan — it affects everyone. “Since it is not politically divisive, politicians can safely pursue it without fearing adverse repercussions. Attacking environmental
pollution is therefore much safer than attacking racism or poverty. For an attack upon the latter antagonizes important blocs of voters who benefit from the sufferings of others or at least are not threatened enough by such suffering to favor spending substantial amounts of their money to reduce it.” (p.10) The same can then be applied to the E.U’s water problem. Pollution made a scapegoat of big corporations and similarly much of E.U’s water dilemma is blamed on farmers who use up large amounts of the resource for agriculture. Teaming up against the farmers would seem favorable to politicians trying to get the votes of the general public concerned for their water supply.

Policymaking, partisan debates and agenda setting aren’t unique to just American politics. They are an important part of the legislature making processes all around the world. It was definitely more informative to see where the E.U decides on its policies rather than just reading about it on the news or from a textbook. I got to immerse myself in a different culture, and not just politics wise. We got the chance to visit art museums and try traditional Belgium dishes. International relations is always an invigorating topic to pursue because you learn more about yourself and other nations in terms of a larger global community, making the world seem a little less foreign.