WHAT ROLE FOR PARTIES IN EU POLITICS?

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Preliminary thoughts, so please do not quote. But any comments welcome on bs239922@skynet.be

Introduction.

Political parties are often thought to be conspicuous by their absence from European integration. Interest groups, policy networks, communities of experts, advocacy coalitions, and even transgovernmental alignments of equivalent agencies from national governments suggest that the EU is more than a game of intergovernmental bargaining. Yet without fully developed parties of its own, the Union is less than a system of pluralist politics. This is because party-like actors perform the distinctive role of aggregating citizen preferences at a level of broad programmes or approaches to government. Their absence is, therefore, a defect in any process of public representation, especially where there are trade-offs of resources and values to be made between different branches of public policy.

In contrast to such a conventional view, this paper attempts a qualified revision of the ‘no parties thesis’. The first section argues that the EU occupies an unexplored middle ground between a partyless political system and one that has full parties of its own. The second offers some means of conceptualising that middle ground. The third challenges received wisdom that established players have an interest in blocking the further development of party politics at the European level, while the fourth suggests that even the status quo makes limited but useful contributions to the representation of citizens in the Union’s political system.

Section 1. Party politics without parties.

The study of parties and European integration has been characterised by three phases of intellectual activity. The first consisted of attempts by the neofunctionalists of the 1950s and 1960s to specify the role that parties could be expected to play in the development of a new political system at European level. Ernst Haas predicted that parties would eventually emerge as the ‘carriers of integration’. Regardless of whether they were supporters or opponents of integration, the competitive logic of pluralist politics would compel parties to direct political demands in to the European arena and to organise themselves in to whatever transnational alignments or formations were necessary to maximise their influence over the institutions of the EC. Parties that failed to behave in such a way would lose voters and members to those that did, since they would be less successful at extracting political pay-offs from the new European level of governance for their supporters (Haas, 1958).

A second phase in the literature was provoked by the decision to proceed with direct elections to the European Parliament from 1979. Geoffrey Pridham and Pippa Pridham provided the first comprehensive survey of the two kinds of transnational party formation that had developed in association with European integration, the multi-national party groups in the European Assembly (soon to be European Parliament) and extra-parliamentary federations of national parties. Although they concluded that both kinds of formation remained weak twenty years on from the
formation of the EC, Pridham and Pridham pointed out that this could change once parties had to organise for pan-European elections and for the exercise of the powers of a directly elected European Parliament (1979).

Such prospects were, however, thrown into doubt by Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt’s analysis of European elections as ‘second-order’ in nature (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). As long as both voters and those who competed for office cared more about outcomes in the national arena than the European, even elections for the European Parliament were likely to be fought by national parties on domestic issues. This would leave little room for the incremental development of parties specific to the European arena.

The emergence of a ‘third-generation’ literature on party politics at European level can be linked to a shift in interest from modelling integration as a process to analysing the EU as an established political system (Quermonne, 1994; Hix, 1994 & 1999). Fulvio Attinà (1990) initiated what has now become a widely-used technique of using data from European parliamentary votes to make inferences about party political behaviour at European level. These include measures of which political families are most cohesive in the EP, of who votes with whom, and of how party actors cleave on different dimensions of choice raised by European integration (left-right; intergovernmental-supranational; small-large states; north-south and so on) (Raunio, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997; Hix, 2000).

Other contributions demonstrated how domination of the electoral arena does not free national parties from pressures to adapt to emergent transnational structures in the European parliamentary arena. The Single European Act (SEA) of 1987, the Treaty of European Union (TEU) of 1992 and the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 cumulatively moved the EU in the direction of a political system characterised by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) and the Council of legislative outputs by Council and Parliament. For national parties of government it is no longer enough to rely on veto powers in the Council. For national parties of opposition there are new opportunities to participate in the making of Union laws. For both kinds of party, maximisation of influence over the policy outputs of the Union now requires reflection on whether they are optimally aligned with the transnational party group structures of the European Parliament.

Intensified incentives on national parties to maximise their influence in the EP, the need to mobilise an absolute majority of MEPs to exercise key parliamentary powers under the Treaties, habits of collaboration between the two largest groups (the Party of European Socialists/PES and the European Peoples Party/EPP) and internal EP rules on access to finance and political opportunities, have all come together to give the European Parliament a centripetal party system in which national party delegations face strong incentives to join transnational groups and to migrate from small groups to large ones. Even in the case of those five-yearly Parliament where the second-order pattern of elections has fragmented party structures at the beginning of the term, tendencies towards concentration have asserted themselves during the course of the legislature (Bardi, 1996).

New insights into the workings of the EP party groups were matched during the 1990s by new research into the federations. Simon Hix’s doctoral thesis (1995) noted that while the federations had not emerged as significant vehicles of electoral linkage, they had developed an unexpected role in co-ordinating the politics of the Union with political parties. This was because national party leaders, including those in opposition, had taken to meeting in their federations immediately
prior to sessions of the European Council (see also Hix, 1999, pp.178-80).

Meanwhile Thomas Jansen’s case study (1998a & b) of how the two political families of the European Centre Right (Christian Democrats and Conservatives) merged together from the end of the 1980s to form an enlarged European Peoples’ Party (EPP) provided further evidence of how the empowerment of Union institutions increases competitive pressures on both political families and individual national parties to ensure that they are not out-organised at European level. As Treaty changes replaced the Commission-Council tandem by a triangle of influence that also included the EP, the centre-right found itself paying a price for its historic division into Christian Democratic and Conservative political parties: the PES formed the largest single group in every European Parliament after 1975. This, in turn, meant that it enjoyed political leadership within the PES-EPP alignment that dominated most parliamentary votes, with the likely consequence that the legislative outputs of the Union were to the left of where they might have been with a more coherently organised centre-right (see also Rinsche & Weller, 1999). Indeed, Jansen’s study demonstrated a further theme: the need for transnational party formations to adapt to successive enlargements of the Union as to well as changes to the powers of its institutions. The notion that the EU depends on dual legitimation - by its states and its public - extends even to a felt-need on the part of the principal party federations to have at least at one major national party per member state. Yet, each enlargement beyond the original Six EC (with the exception of Austria) took the Union beyond the heartlands of Christian Democracy.

In Political Parties in the EU Simon Hix and Christopher Lord (1997) summarised evidence of increasing structure in interactions between the EU’s political system and party political actors. With some up-dating to include developments since 1997, the party politics of the EU can be presented through the following propositions:

1. Many of the most important executive and legislative positions in the EU are recruited from party actors. Only rarely is appointment to the main agenda-setting institution, the European Commission, achieved without a background in party politics. A convention even seems to be developing that the President of the Commission should be a former Prime Minister, and, therefore, a party leader accustomed to dealing with other party leaders in the European Council. Access to the Union’s authoritative decision-making body - the Council of Ministers - is a by-product of domestic inter-party coalition formation, as is the question of who gets to sit on which sectoral Council. Membership of the European Parliament, is determined by direct election from national party lists.

2. There has been a development of party political institutions specific to the EU. Although the Federations include parties from non-member states, the bulk of their work is directed towards EU matters, they receive funding from the European Parliament’s budget, and they were re-constituted in the early 1990s in response to the article 191 of the TEU that recognised the role of parties in European integration. Four federations - The European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), the European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP) and the European Liberal and Democratic Reform Party (ELDR) - now have an institutionalised relationship with a counterpart party group in the European Parliament. This covers around 80% of the membership of the 1999-2004 Parliament, with the overwhelming majority of the national parties being covered by a pre-commitment that any MEPs elected in their name will automatically join the relevant transnational parliamentary group.
3. The party groups in the European Parliament provide a complete parliamentary party system in the sense that include all the party families to be found in various member states. Christian Democrats and Conservatives (European Peoples’ Party, EPP), Socialists and Social Democrats (the Party of European Socialists, PES), Liberals (European Liberal and Democratic Reform Party, ELDR), Greens (V), the Far left (Union of European Left), Far Right and Eurosceptics are all represented. A series of factors indicate that this may be a system of parliamentary parties into which the EP is likely to stabilise and settle: the first six groups on the list have all been present in all three of the last parliaments; most mainstream national parties are now aligned with their preferred EP group, with the result that changes of affiliation imbetween elections can be expected to slow; and the parliamentary groups are capable of consistently respectable levels of cohesion (as measured by the frequency with which members vote with one another), in spite of a membership of upwards of 20 national parties and the absence of any need to organise stable majorities of government and opposition in the EP. Further enlargements may, however, prove a perturbing factor to the extent that parties from the East do not easily fit into Western European political families.

4. Party institutions at European level play some role in providing the horizontal inter-institutional linkages that are needed in a complex political system of dispersed powers. Presidents of the Parliamentary groups are present at the regular summits of national party leaders immediately prior to the European Council. Some commentators also claim to detect legislative alignments between partisan clusters of government on the Council of Ministers and their corresponding parliamentary groups in the EP. John Peterson, for example, makes the argument as follows:

Under co-decision bargains struck when EU policies are ‘set’ often are not intergovernmental ones in any meaningful sense of the term. Co-decision fosters competition between alliances of member states linked to European Parliament (EP) factions. Usually the strongest EP factions will seek allies on the Council who may have agreed reluctantly to the terms of a common position. The EP then tries ‘peel them off’ from the rest of the Council. When this strategy works, policy choices tend to be less determined by intergovernmental bargains and more reflective of broad political tendencies (socialist v. Christian Democratic) (Peterson, 1997, p.15)

5. The role of parties at EU level is not monopolised by national parties of government. Indeed, it allows parties of opposition to make substantial incursions into a purely intergovenmental model of European decision-making. On the one hand, the federations give national parties of opposition indirect access to the most authoritative agenda-setting body in the EU, since leaders of those parties are included in party leaders’ summits immediately before European Councils. On the other hand, the European Parliament tends towards strong representation of national parties of opposition, as a direct consequence of anti-government swings produced by second-order voting in European elections. The 1994-9 Parliament, accordingly, started life with a 39:61 per cent balance between government and opposition parties respectively. Likewise, in the 1999-2004 Parliament the centre right EPP became the largest single group for the first time since 1975, just as the unprecedented hold of the centre-left on parties of Government gave the PES access to 11 out of 15 places on the European, and to 13 out of 15 seats on various sectoral Councils of Ministers.

6. The EU’s party political institutions are, however, unevenly transnational. Only the EPP and
PES are regularly able to form parliamentary groups that cover all member states, with the result that the others either have a pronounced territorial bias or a gap in their capacity to represent the geographically heterogeneous political space covered by the EU. Even the EPP and PES experience periods in which just two or three national parties hold more than half of the seats in the group. During the 1994-9 Parliament, for example, the British Labour Party accounted for 30% of the PES.

7. Party political institutions at European level are also unevenly developed. As implied above, the extra-parliamentary/parliamentary link is most developed in relation to four political families: ChristianDemocrats/Conservatives, Socialist/Social Democrats, Liberals and Greens. Three others - the far left, regionalists and far right - either have no fully institutionalised federation that is specific to the EU or no wish to form such a body.

Inside the EP, transnational party organisation has proven easier at some points on the political spectrum than others. The Far Right, has only rarely been able to constitute itself as a group at all, in part through lack of inclination and internal divisions, and in part because its pariah status reduces the incentive to cohere by making it uncoalitionable with other political families. Likewise, a parliament that is organised ideologically rather than territorially has required regionalists to choose between distributing themselves between other Euro-parties, or organising themselves into a group that can at best only be technical in nature.

More fundamentally, it remains to be seen how far the EPP has succeeded in resolving the historical divisions between Christian Democrats and Conservatives that until recently meant the mainstream right has been more fragmented than the centre left. The EPP was only able to emerge as the largest parliamentary group in the 1999-2004 Parliament by practising an element of flexible integration within its own ranks. It had to conclude a special agreement with its second largest national delegation, the British Conservatives (36 members) which effectively allows the British Conservatives to negotiate opt-outs from PPE group positions on a case-by-case basis.

8. It does not follow from the presence of party political actors, or even of party political institutions, that the EU has parties of its own. There are two good reasons for not treating the federations or party groups in the EP as full political parties. The first is that they lack independent authority and resources with the result that they are sub-system dominant. The only mass membership parties with direct roots in civil society are national ones. National parties likewise monopolise appointment to office and the assignment of political opportunities. Amongst examples are the following: national parties decide on the selection or re-selection of MEPs, and otherwise reward or sanction their careers; shared manifestoes for European elections are thin on concrete commitments, and rarely feature prominently in the campaigns of individual national parties; the party bureau of each group in the EP is comprised of one representative per national party and there is a strong presumption of decision-making by consensus even where there are more than 20 national parties to be accommodated; opportunities to set the policy agenda in the European Parliament via rapporteurships are apportioned by the double application of a points system. After the party groups have made their bids, the final allocation is undertaken by the national parties within the groups.

A second reason why the federations and groups do not allow us to classify the EU as having full political parties is that they do not co-operate and compete in a way that directly links voter
choice to the outputs of the Union’s political system. The principal difficulty here is, of course, the second-order pattern of European elections, whose domination by domestic politics mean that is neither possible to view programmes agreed at the level of the party federations as structuring voter choice for a forthcoming European Parliament nor to regard electoral outcomes as public judgements on EU policies during an out-going European Parliament. Party political institutions at European level, therefore, fail to meet preconditions for responsible party government, either through ex ante or ex post models of representative politics. They neither aggregate voter choice behind a menu of options that operate with some commonality across the system as a whole, nor provide the individual representative with an incentive to anticipate popular preferences at the time of the next election. The survival of MEPs has little to do with any behaviour of their own, or any policy output of the political system in which they operate.

These two dependencies on national parties - for personal career prospects and for voter mobilisation - may even have certain self-perpetuating qualities that lock party political institutions at European level into a sustained pattern of under-development. This problem is usefully elucidated with the help of James March and Johan Olsen’s observation (1995) that both representatives and citizens need ‘political capabilities’ relevant to their roles if democratic politics are to function effectively. The development of capabilities amongst representatives may presuppose a group of professional politicians committed to making their careers in European institutions. Yet, as long as national parties play the key role in rewarding or sanctioning political careers, turnover of MEPs between Parliaments is likely to remain high. Even in the fourth and fifth directly elected Parliaments, there were more MEPs who had never served in the EP before than those who had (Corbett, Jacobs, Shackleton, 1995). Little has changed since MEPs were described as regarding the European Parliament as a mixture between kindergarten, convalescent ward and retirement home for those at different points along the political-life cycle of national politics.

A principal constraint on the development of citizen capabilities needed to support a Euro-party politics is that as long as voters are mainly motivated by domestic concerns, any national party seeking to switch the emphasis of its campaign to European issues may face a game prisoners’ dilemma: it can only make the switch if it can be sure that its principal competitors will do the same. Yet each European election fought on national issues increases the probability of the next election following a similar pattern. One reason for this is that European elections never get the opportunity to have a socialising or educational effect. This is a defect given the finding that ‘turnout is related to interest in European politics, to knowledge of the EU, to having a positive or even mixed image of the European Parliament’ (Blondel et al, 1994, p.244). Another reason why it may be difficult to kick the habit of fighting European elections on domestic issues is that a five-yearly opportunity to hold what is in effect a national general election without any risk of a change of government has come to assume an elaborate place in the domestic political game of several member states. Amongst consequences for domestic politics of previous European elections have been the following: catalysed development of new political forces which would otherwise have developed more slowly or not at all; accelerated decline in some national parties; changes in the composition or priorities of coalitions; changes in party leaderships (see Andeweg, 1995).

Section Two. Towards a Fourth-Generation of Research. Conceptualising the Middle Ground between a ‘partyless’ political system and one with parties of its own.
From what has been said so far, the current state of research may be summed up as follows: party political actors have regular and patterned effects on policy outputs of Union; yet the EU has no full parties of its own. It remains unclear, though, precisely how the link between party politics and Union policy outputs operates. The peopling of Union institutions by party political actors is merely suggestive. To prove a link of significance - and still more to specify the manner in which it works - it is necessary to develop some testable theories of how key decisions in the European arena are recurrently motivated and constrained by party politics.

The remainder of this paper attempts to develop three possibilities using the standard social science strategy of typologising theoretical alternatives according to different assumptions about actor knowledge and contexts. On the assumption that key actors in Union decision-making are rational maximisers of preferences formed outside the EU arena, the first alternative will specify the party politics of the EU as a nested game. On a like set of assumptions, but with the additional premise that party-like actors are constrained by the policy and office seeking behaviour of their predecessors, the second theoretical alternative will specify the party politics of the EU as a form of path-dependence. On very different assumptions of bounded rationality, endogenous preference formation and politics as a norm-driven activity, the third alternative will suggest ways in which party-like actors may be significant contributors to the formation of the EU as a political system even in the absence of full Euro-parties.

**Euro-Party politics under Nested Games**

Nested games occur where pay-offs in a ‘principal arena vary according to the situation in other arenas’ (Tsebelis, 1990, p.10). From what has been said so far there are good reasons to believe that the EU will function as a nested game and that party politics will be a principal cause of that nestedness. First, there is a defined principal arena, which for most actors in the Union co-deciding bodies - the Council and EP - can probably be taken to be domestic politics. Second, the wide competence of the Union’s rule-making powers means that many of the policy seeking goals of political parties in the domestic arena are delivered either through the implementation of Union Treaties or through the normal operation of its legislative process. Third, the growing politicisation of European integration issues, notably through repeated rounds of Treaty ratification, and the often destabilising effects of five yearly European elections on national parties, means that office-seeking ambitions in the domestic arena are also increasingly conditioned by parallel games in the European arena. Fourth, national parties have opportunity as well as motive to play Union politics as a nested game, given that they have access to the European Council and Council of Ministers, and they are principal recruitment agents for the Parliament and even the Commission. Before reaching some general conclusions of how Union policy outputs may be affected by the domestic party games of key actors it is useful to consider some examples of the phenomenon.

**A French Example.** In the mid 1980s it was widely predicted that the Parti Socialiste would lose its majority in Assembly Elections scheduled for 1986, forcing Mitterrand into a period of co-habitation with the right in the period running up to Presidential elections in 1988. By pressing forward with the Single Market programme and Single Act in 1985-6, Mitterrand was able to regain the political initiative after the failure of his domestic programme of 1981-3. He was also able to shift a central plank of his economic policy from the domestic to the European arena where there would be fewer constraints on attempts to re-invent the Parti Socialiste as a champion of social market solutions, and to ensure that, in the event of cohabitation, a higher
proportion of domestic policy would be located in the Presidential domaine reservée.

**A British Example.** During the Maastricht European Council of December 1991, the British Prime Minister, John Major, took care to ensure that all drafts of the proposed Social Chapter were cleared with the Secretary of State for Employment, Michael Howard, in the knowledge that resignations from his cabinet, and a split with the Eurosceptic right, would almost certainly follow from any outcome that seemed to threaten the labour law reforms of the Thatcher Government of 1979-1990 (Forster, 1999, pp.86-7). Six years later the UK adopted the Social Chapter as one of the first decisions of the Blair Government elected in May 1997.

**A German Example.** During the Dublin European Council of December 1996 Chancellor Kohl informed President Chirac that he would be unable to proceed any further to Monetary Union without concessions on a Stability Pact (Milesi, 1998). Only by offering continuing guarantees of fiscal discipline would he be able to manage strains in his three-way coalition. Otherwise Germany’s efforts to meet the convergence criteria were in danger of being gridlocked between the left of the CDU (opposed to spending cuts) the FDP (opposed to tax increases) and the CSU (opposed to any loose interpretation of the qualifying criteria on state borrowing. In contrast, the French Government opposed a Stability Pact that made no provision for a discretionary over-ride of the rules. With the replacement of the CDU-CSU-FDP coalition by an SPD-Green coalition from autumn 1998 there was, however, a reversal in the relative positions of the French and German Governments on discretionary vs rule-based economic co-ordination in the Euro-11. This was most evident during the Lafontaine period between October 1998 and March 1999, but also afterwards, when the German Government seemed more interested than the French in an active policy towards managing the external value of the Euro (Levitt and Lord, 2000).

In sum, these examples illustrate the way in which EU policy outcomes can be influenced by the following games that party actors play: competitive positioning and differentiation of parties in the electoral market place; coalitional bargaining between parties; and inner-party politics of factions, tendencies and personalities. Although the examples point to a pattern of domestic preference formation, it is important to note how far the analysis has drifted from intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1993 & 1999): what matters is not some inter-state distribution of national interests in a context of economic interdependence, but the manner in which those interests are interpreted by party political actors and fed into party games. Thus, it is hard to see how the UK could have had a ‘national interest’ in abstaining from the Social Chapter in 1991, but joining it in 1997; or how Germany could have had a ‘national interest’ in a rules-based approach to the Stability Pact in 1996, and a discretionary approach to co-ordination from autumn 1998. Indeed, the point can be put even more strongly: any political system needs party-like actors for the determination of those policies that involve judgements of value, rather than calculations of interest; it is the use which national parties make of the European Council, Council of Ministers and European Parliament that enables the EU to meet that need without full parties of its own.

**Euro-party politics under path-dependence.**

The last section offered a theory of how EU policy outputs are *motivated* by the games that national parties play in the European arena. This section demonstrates that the playing of such games is none the less *constrained* for any one set of national parties by the like behaviour of their predecessors in previous time periods. The following are the three principal examples of
such path-dependence.

1. Previous use of the European Council, Council of Ministers and European Parliament to pursue national party objectives through the development of EU policies has given the European arena a predominantly left-right cleavage structure. Since it is on left-right questions that most national parties are sanctioned or rewarded in domestic politics, it is unsurprising that the policy goals they direct in to European arena have been largely socio-economic in nature. In contrast, many national parties have an interest in playing down intergovernmental-supranational issues, which are either internally divisive or a source of unpredictable voter behaviour. As, however, the Union matures and the acquis communautaire grows, an increasing proportion of decisions are means of servicing and up-dating existing policy frameworks, rather than entirely novel initiatives. The result is to perpetuate the socio-economic bias in the EU’s policy portfolio. This, in turn, stabilises the organisation of national parties into federations and European parliamentary groups that are almost exclusively arrayed along a left-right continuum (the Eurosceptic groups in the 1994-9 and 1999-2004 are the only exception, but they only account for some 3% of the political representation in the EP).

2. Pursuit of left-right objectives through a multi-national political system have locked the EU into a ‘grand coalition’ approach to the aggregation of partisan preferences. On the one hand, left-right policy objectives have meant delegating powers to majorities in the Council and the EP, given the importance of maintaining decision-making efficiency in questions that relate to economic competitiveness and the performance of markets. On the other hand, the multi-national character of the EU has required continued safeguards against the dangers of any one group of representatives being outvoted. A measure can only be approved by the Council with 71% of the weighted vote under the QMV. A like threshold exists in the EP when normal levels of absenteeism are considered in conjunction with the ‘absolute majority rule’ that legislative powers require a majority of all MEPs and not just those voting. Moreover, these two effects are cumulative: the consensus position within the Council and the Parliament can never be too far from that in the other body if the one is to propose legislative amendments that have any chance of being accepted by the other (Tsebelis, and Kreppel, 1998)

The extent to which supermajoritarianism operates as a ‘structure induced equilibrium’ (Shepsle, 1986) that locks party-like actors in to grand coalition politics in the European arena can be illustrated by voting figures from the EP. Using data from the 1994-9 Parliament Simon Hix has calculated that if all possible winning coalitions under the absolute majority rule are considered equally probable, the PES would be pivotal to 50.3%, the EPP to 39.5%, and the others just 1.2% a piece (Hix, 1999, p.82). Although the 1999-2004 Parliament offers unusually propitious conditions for occasional alternatives to grand coalitions - two other alliances (the EPP, ELDR and forces to their right and the PES, ELDR, Greens and United European Left) are within striking distance of an absolute majorities - it needs to be emphasised how difficult it will be for these alignments to form: not only will they require a nearly 100% turn-out, it is also in cases where just a handful of votes are critical at the margin that the less than perfect aggregation of national parties into Euro-families makes it difficult to do without the grand coalitions of the PES and EPP. Thus the ELDR consists of left-liberal and right-liberals; the ‘left-over’ parts of the right includes those who reject economic liberalism; and some Conservative parties - notably those from the UK and Scandinavia - may be unreliable partners where issues are ‘hybrid’ ones that have a mixture of ‘left-right’ and ‘supranational- intergovernmental implications’.
Amongst probable self-perpetuating effects of grand coalition politics on the party politics of the EU two deserve special attention. One is that practices of party political competition and contestation—let alone clear lines of government vs opposition—never really get the opportunity to take root and develop in the EU’s political system. Euro-party politics is absorbed in the pursuit of consensus. Indeed, closer inspection of the voting figures suggest that this goes even further than the much-vaunted EPP-PES duopoly. In practice, all but the Eurosceptic group and the far right are included in anything between 50 and 80% of winning coalitions. The second, is that it limits prospects for reconciling ‘outliers’ on the left or the right to European integration, since those groups are systematically less likely than politicians of the centre to take part in winning coalitions within the EU’s political system.

3. As the Union grows in size, and transnational party structures become more settled, individual national parties are more likely to be structure-takers, rather than structure-makers, in relation to the prevailing pattern of federations and parliamentary groups. To see why this is so, it is useful to assume that transnational associations have no intrinsic value to national parties: in other words, they are purely instrumental means of maximising efficiency in realising the policy goals of national parties.

Under such assumptions, an explanation for why national parties end up by forming transnational party groups inside the EP might run as follows. The EP has to deal with scores of votes per monthly plenary; it also devolves agenda-setting powers to a system of 20 committees and, within those, to individual MEPs who act as rapporteurs. By getting together into transnational groups, like-minded national parties can establish a division of labour that allows them to have influence throughout a vast and elaborate representative process that none could cover individually. They can also save on the transaction costs of having to build coalitions on a case-by-case basis, and minimise the risk of non-decisions in which the powers of the EP go unexercised through a simple failure to discover winning coalitions in the time available.

Let us now make the further assumption that all but one national party has already made its choice of group. This could approximate to the position of a party from an accession country, but also to that of a party from an existing member whose profound reappraisal of its policy goals leads it to question whether it is optimally aligned in the EP.

The national party in question will be doubly constrained in its choice of group. First, it will have to accept the basic dimensionality of the EP as a body that is aligned along a left-right continuum. Although the formation of the Eurosceptic demonstrates the theoretical possibility of a small number of MEPs positioning themselves along an alternative dimension, it also demonstrates the heavy trade-off involved in such a decision: by attempting to make certain kinds of choice salient that are of little interest to the policy seeking goals of others, the Eurosceptic group has made itself the least coalitionable group in the EP. Second, an individual national party may find that even on the left-right dimension it is constrained to make a sub-optimal choice of affiliation, as measured by the group whose average preferences are the least distance from its own: it may, for example, face a trade-off between joining a marginalised group that is close to its own position on the left-right issues, or joining a group that is often pivotal to winning coalitions but a little further away from its own ideal position.

The basic structural consideration that conditions these two constraints is that there are now more than 100 national parties in the EP. Few are large or strategically important enough to force a
redesign of the overall party system on their own. In addition, existing groups represent enormous sunk investments in the development of elaborate practices for transnational coalition-building at Union level.

*Euro-party politics under Normative Institutionalism.*

So far we have analysed party activity at European level within an exchange view of politics: actors have goals, which they work more or less rationally to maximise, sometimes by constructing new mechanisms and practices, and at other times within constraints as they find them. Following the Normative Institutionalism of James March and Johan Olsen (1984, 1989, & 1995) these assumptions might be relaxed in two ways. The first is to assume that actors are guided by a ‘logic of appropriateness as well as by a logic of consequence’; that compliance with socially-defined norms and role attributions is as least as important as the pursuit of unilaterally-defined interests. The second is to assume that actors operate under conditions of bounded rationality’. These assumptions are clearly related: it is precisely where consequences cannot be finely calculated that actors are most likely to be motivated by vaguer conceptions of what is appropriate behaviour.

If the first section modelled party political behaviour at European level as an instrument of the office and policy seeking goals of national parties, while the second accepted the same account of motives but added the caveat that national parties might none the less come to be significantly constrained by the development of a party political environment in the European arena, this third perspective is quite distinctive: it allows for the possibility that transnational party actors may shape what national parties want from the EU, and become a source of constraints that function as deeply internalised behavioural norms, not just as external costs on goal-seeking behaviour. Needless, to say this is probably the least researched and most difficult to prove of the three models. Yet, there are at least two reasons to believe in its plausibility, if only under particular conditions, rather than generally:

1. There is likely to be significant slack in the competitive environment. Not all matters that the federations and groups are called upon to decide will relate directly to the office or policy seeking goals of national parties. On the one hand this follows from the necessarily reductive character of political competition: only some issues can become salient if (electoral choice in particular) is to be manageable. On the other, it relates to the costs of mobilising attention around specific problems where time is limited, agendas are crowded, and the number of actors numerous. There may, in other words, be large areas where transnational actors have free rein to develop their own areas of policy initiative and norms of association.

2. Those aspects of decision-making under uncertainty that give rise to bounded rationality are likely to be compounded in the case of the EU. On top of the normal complexity and fluidity that make it hard to be certain how causes link to effects in social life, the EU is a novel political system. It employs policy instruments that have no exact counterpart elsewhere; it unleashes unpredictable interactions by greatly increasing the scope for actors (private and public) to combine and co-ordinate across national boundaries; it operates within *sui generis* and often imperfectly understood rules for agenda-setting and final decision-making. Understanding the EU and the opportunities and pitfalls that it presents to party political actors thus becomes a full-time and specialist task within the political division of labour.
Rather than duplicate the investment of resources in such a task, it often makes sense for national parties to adopt policy orientations that have been hammered out within the federations or groups of the EP. Scope for transnational party formations to become sites for policy leadership in this way is increased by procedural factors that mean that they ‘go first’ in the policy cycle. Arguably more important than the legal obligation to consult the EP before the Council even considers its initial reaction to draft legislation is the fact that the Parliament has routinised such consultation into clause by clause consideration of drafts by rapporteurs in committee. In contrast, the response of national party actors depends on more random and spasmodic demobilisation of attention from the domestic agenda.

Section Three. Prospects for further development of party politics at EU level.

The last three sections offer alternative frameworks for conceptualising the present split-level party system in which national parties dominate electoral politics while transnational formations operate at European level. The first of the next two sections asks whether that system is sustainable; and the second considers its normative qualities in relation to core standards of democratic governance - representativeness, responsiveness and the public control of executive power.

At first sight, the success of national parties in maintaining a dominant position in both the domestic and EU political systems resembles an oligopoly in which existing players are able to block new entrants (Euro-parties) at the expense of consumer (voter) choice. Such an analogy might be developed as follows. Much of what we know about voter behaviour - that many citizens still follow life-long and even inherited voting habits in spite of partisan dealignment - means that new fangled Euro-parties would stand little chance if they attempted to fight European elections in a head-to-head competition with national parties. True, Euro-parties might be able to build up a following over a number of elections. But that would raise a ‘time-inconsistency problem’: the policy and career goals of those who finance parties and those who are prepared to give their time to run for office are likely to require more immediate gratification than a strategy that looks to the long haul.

All of this means that those who aspire to be European-level party actors have little choice but to accept that their selection and election will be governed by national parties. In turn, national parties are able to use this relationship of dependency to keep Euro-parties in a permanent state of under-development. Where it suits them, they can insist that national party delegations align in key EP votes with domestic party preferences, rather than those of their European parliamentary groups (Hix and Lord, 1996). They can draw up lists for European elections with a view to settling domestic political debts, even if that condemns the EP and its party groups to high levels of turn-over, or periodically decapitates the leadership of those bodies, so disturbing the steady development within the political division of labour of elites who specialise in the idiosyncratic task of representing the public in the European arena.

One solution to all of this could be to use the election rules to incentivise the structuring of voter choice around new European-level formations. In direct contrast to this, the Herrenverträge - all of whom happen to be national party leaders - have preferred the one electoral arrangement that is most likely to confirm the hold of domestic parties over both national and European elections: member states either directly or indirectly constitute the constituencies for election to the EP.
There are, however, two problems with such a view of national parties as rent-seekers whose hold on both domestic and European elections operates to the detriment of voter choice: it ignores the costs and risks to national parties in attempting to support party politics in both arenas, and it neglects some important benefits of such an arrangement to the overall pattern of public representation in the EU’s political system. The second point will be considered in the next section. As to the first, European elections have frequently proved destabilising of individual parties and party systems since they were first introduced in 1979. They have been associated with party leadership changes, strains in multi-party coalitions, splits within parties and surges of support for anti-system parties, with the result that we are left with a paradox in which European elections fail to achieve any significant structuring of choice around EU issues, but remain political events of central importance on account of their indirect effects for national political competition.

There is, moreover, a basic structural reason to expect European elections to continue to be destabilising of national politics: on the one hand, they are hugely significant, since they have the unintended consequence of introducing a further general election (everyone votes at the same time in the single national constituency) into the domestic political cycle; on the other hand, voter behaviour is not anchored, stabilised and co-ordinated in an agreed understanding of the political choice that electors are being called upon to make. Is a European election a mid-term plebiscite on the performance of national governments? An occasional opportunity to vote ‘with the heart’ for parties that correspond to voters values, rather than ‘with the head’ for parties that correspond to voter interests? A means of expressing very general views on European integration, or (regardless of such views) of attempting to influence the legislative outputs of the EU within a 5 year time-span? European elections are probably all of these things - at different times, and for different groups of people.

If, however European elections are destabilising of domestic political competition, it is by no means clear that national parties have an unambiguous interest in sustaining a monopoly of electoral mobilisation at both national and European levels. The correct conclusion of the observation that national parties care more about the domestic than the European arena may well be that they should gradually withdraw from European elections - or differentiate the party formations responsible for national and European elections - in order to insulate domestic politics from Euro-contests (Andeweg, 1995).

National parties could begin to hand over the baton to Euro-parties by acknowledging their affiliation to federations and prospective EP party groups for the purposes of European elections, perhaps bracketing the latter on ballot papers with more familiar domestic party names. A more radical step might be for domestic party political actors to temporarily unbundle themselves into ad hoc formations during Euro-elections. In several member states, where there is a cross-cutting left-right and Euro-enthusiast/ Euro-sceptic cleavage parties, it would make sense to offer voters the choice of pro and anti European parties of the left and the right. Voters could also be given some experience of Euro-parties - before the complete withdrawal of national parties from European elections - by creating a single pan-European constituency of about 100-150 seats alongside the existing member state constituencies. That would, in effect, allow two political games to operate simultaneously: the one in which Euro-parties would be more likely to capture seats than national parties (the competition for the central list); and the other in which the balance of advantage would be the other way round (the contest within member states).
In sum, the appropriate analogy from microeconomics that best illuminates the presence of national parties in both domestic and European elections may not be that of the rent-seeking oligopolist. The problem may be better characterised as a market imperfection that imposes sub-optimal equilibria on both producers (parties) and consumers (voters): although gradual restructuring might be possible, no one competitor can make large-scale changes to the pattern of provision in any one round of the game without damaging the overall market (see especially theories of price rigidities such as Hall and Hitch, 1951). For example, direct substitution of unfamiliar pan European parties for national parties with their established followings, and brand recognition, would risk a precipitous slide in voter participation. National parties are, moreover, stuck in a game of prisoners’ dilemma: any who switch too suddenly to a European form of partisan organisation, risk losing out, with possible knock-on effects to the next national election, to those who continue to compete as national parties. In terms of the sustainability of the EU’s present split-level party system, the conclusion, therefore, is that national parties probably do have an interest in abandoning it, but will probably only do so if sufficient of their number can make changes without incurring risks in any one domestic political cycle, of which European elections have become a significant part.

Section 4. By way of conclusion. An appraisal of the representative qualities of present patterns of party politics in the EU.

In terms of representativeness, public responsibility and responsiveness, the combination of second-order elections with a split-level party system might seem to be the Achilles heel of representative politics in the EU. Not only are the party formations in which MEPs serve (EP party groups) different from those in which they are elected (national parties), the second-order pattern of European elections can be seen as short-circuiting both means of institutionalising a systematic linkage between citizen demands and policy outputs under party responsible government. The first of those - ex ante control through the selection of representatives on the basis of published policy programmes that are then more or less enacted - is precluded by a form of election that fails to structure either deliberation or choice around the policy programmes of parties for the European; the second - ex post control in the form of incentives on the representative to form rational expectiations at any one moment of the state of public opinion at the next election and to use these to shape public policy is undercut by a form of election in which there is no connexion between the political behaviour of MEPs and their chances of political survival.

A further difficulty is that the nexus between second-order elections and the EU’s split-level party system may compromise the developmental or socialising effects of electoral participation (Held, 1996). So long as European elections have little to do with the institution that is, in fact, being elected, there is little prospect of their functioning as learning experiences in which voters progressively develop the capabilities associated with effective use of the political system as a means of achieving citizen preferences (March and Olsen, 1995).

Yet, the combination of a second-order elections and a split-level party system need not preclude an ersatz form of representation. To the extent that both national and European politics are dominated by the same dimension of choice (left-right), and the party groups in the EP are similarly arrayed along that dimension to those who voted for their component MEPs, voting in the European Parliament can be expected to follow the broad preferences of the electorate on matters of substantive policy development. Simon Hix’s application of the nominate scaling
method to the European Parliament indicates that the first condition holds for the three largest groups of the EP, who account for 75 per cent of the representation of the EP (Hix, 2000). A large-scale Eurobarometer survey based on the 1994 elections and the MEPs returned to the 1994-9 Parliament, suggests that the second condition is also valid, though with the caveat that the correspondence between the preferences of representatives and those they represent is ordinal, rather than exact (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997).

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