

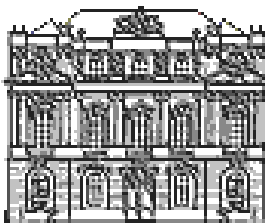


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Polical Parties as Agents of European Democracy?

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*Political Parties as Agents of European Democracy?**

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Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties
Schattschneider

I. Introduction

Within this paper we shall present some general considerations on the transformation of political parties through European integration. The starting point for this project was the often mentioned „democratic deficit“ of the European Union, a catchword which - though lacking a concrete, generally accepted meaning - shows the feeling of unease ever growing parts of citizens and elites in the EU are haunted by. However, many of the discussions on the European democratic deficit miss the real core of this problem, especially when focussing on greater „closeness to the citizens“. Modern democracy is not about the direct influence of citizens on political processes but about rules of representation. Thus, the first question within this context would be “Who is the *demos* of the European Union?”¹ and the second one, “Who shall represent this *demos*?”, i.e. “Who are the agents of European democracy?” We argue that a representative institutional arrangement conceived for the new European “polity” must be legitimised by the *demos* of the member states. And as representation presupposes the aggregation and organisation of the citizens’ interests, a role traditionally assumed by political parties, we ask whether and how national political parties within the European Union are prepared to fulfil this task in the European domain.

Political parties have occupied a prominent role in scientific research for over half a century. Thus, the literature on political parties, i.e. their origins and developments, their organization and structure, their functions and flaws is abundant and, sometimes, redundant. The same holds true

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¹ Since we all agree that there is no European *demos* and that the European Union is something in between a federation and a confederation, i.e. a political entity *suis generis* the search and alleged need for such a *demos* seems

for research on the European Union: the literature is vast by any standards. However, the literature on political parties in the Union is minimal. "We can say, therefore, that very little of the literature on integration is on political parties, and very little of the literature on political parties is on integration. " (Gaffney 1996: 1). One reason for this stunning deficit might be the lack of adequate theoretical models and concepts to grasp the complex multi-level system of the European Union, theoretical and methodological deficits are still looming large, when European Integration and its impact on national political parties and vice versa are analysed.

Within this paper we do not simply ask whether parties do matter in the European integration process but what they actually *do* in order to remain their relevance. It is this question which led to the methodological choice of combining institutional analysis with policy analysis to a theoretical framework to interpret and analyse the interdependence of European and national policy-making and its impact on traditional democratic procedures within the nation-state. Since the project is still work in progress we cannot do more here than try to answer some of the most pressing issues and sketch our research approach to further issues.

II. The Transformation of Political Parties

In modern representative democracies parties fulfil important tasks: the definition of aims, the functions of aggregation and articulation of interests, the mobilisation and socialisation of groups and individuals, the recruitment of elites and the function of government building (Beume, 1985:25). Due to the ongoing socio-economic changes and the process of European integration some of these functions are severely eroded.

Socio-economic and political Changes

West European political systems have been affected by severe changes in different sectors of society (Smith 1989; Müller 1997): the composition of the citizenry was altered by industrialisation, the growth of the tertiary sector, an unprecedented affluence, the spread of higher education, increasing spare time, better welfare systems, migration etc. These factors

to originate in a limited power of imagination in dealing with non-state political communities. Besides that, the existence of a single people in the European nation states is rather a myth than fact.

transformed the norms, rules and values of society and therefore also individual resources and preferences. But these substantial changes (e.g.: greater liberalism, egalitarianism, emergence of ecological topics) were not adequately represented in the institutional arrangement of representative democracy. Thus, protests against the ruling system have arisen since the late 1960s and have led to alternative forms of political action (e.g. direct democracy and extraparlimentary opposition) and to the emergence of new political groups which defined themselves as grass-root organisations. Though these movements subsided or were assimilated into the traditional party system over time, party influence was challenged and gradually reduced. Furthermore, technological change in the media sector enhanced the possibilities for communication and the transfer of information. The colonisation of the public sphere by new, independent media forced political parties to develop new forms of presentation and mediation of contents to uphold their influence in policy-making.

All these developments altered and weakened the link between political institutions and the citizenry and demand adaptations of representative democracy (the identification of deficits and constant improvement being integrative part of the institutional arrangement of democracy). The existence of a pluralist party system as the arbiter of the election of representative organisations has, in modern times been one main criterion for the definition of democracy (Merkel 1996; O'Donnell 1993; O'Donnell/Schmitter 1986; Schmitter/Terry 1991). New forms of direct democracy as mentioned above have not served as a compensation for the weaknesses of representative democracy but remained unsuitable attempts to cover up the upcoming problems of political legitimation. The terms and models to grasp this problem range from bureaucratisation, technocratisation, and pillarisation of politics in general and the party system in particular to an increased feeling of impotence of the citizen to influence the political process. Political scientists have produced a lot of empirical evidence for the citizens' scepticism about political parties and their patronage system. The term "partitocrazia" has become a classic while in recent time scholars have developed the concept of the cartel-party (Katz/Mair 1995; Koole 1996) suggesting the ever closer fusion of state and parties. However, parties continue to recruit elites for public posts and to organise election campaigns, but they wither in their role of important actors engaged in tasks such as aggregating defined interests, formulating achievable goals, negotiating political compromises, intermediating between political elites and citizens.

Thus, policy-making based on the representation of interests is being substituted by technocratic, output-oriented politics, while legitimation through input was ever more neglected. This transformation of the institutional setting also changed the party system (understood as "the system of interaction resulting from inter-party competition", Sartori 1976: 44) comprising competition for votes, offices and policies in different arenas.

European Integration

As long as the European Union was seen as an intergovernmental regime the questions of legitimacy and democracy did not attract much attention. But moving away from a mainly intergovernmental regime to a state-like polity the European Union has attracted ever more functions until then reserved for the nation-state and the constant enlargement of the policy competences of the European Union since at least Maastricht unveiled (or created) the problems of democratic legitimation, the referenda on the Treaty of Maastricht in Denmark and France being important cases in point (Wolton 1993). Also the number of governments involved has grown, and their intensity of involvement has deepened (Wallace 1990, ix). Thus, by the 1990s, the integration process had penetrated far deeper into economy and society than at any previous juncture.

This transnationalisation of policy-making constricts the discretion available to national governments and hence to the parties in those national governments curtailing their room for manoeuvre. The traditional policy-cycle consisting of definition of problems, agenda-setting, policy-formulation, implementation (Windhoff-Héritier 1987:65) and reformulation is split between two interdependent levels: the European Union and the nation-state. Whereas the definition of socio-economic problems and the implementation of policies remains largely at the national level, the agenda-setting and the policy formulation has largely shifted to the supranational level. This leads to an ever-growing cleavage between the agenda-setting power and the vote-/office- and policy-seeking strategies of parties (Müller/Strom 1999). Policy initiatives are to a certain extent set on the European level whereas the trade-off between votes and offices takes place on the national level. These initiatives are the result of complex bargaining situations and package deals, of national interests and even party politics (for "quagmire" see Wright 1996). Furthermore, the veil of complexity and secrecy resulting

therefrom leads to an increasing feeling of impotence of the citizen to influence the political process.

On a national level this dissatisfaction with the present situation of policy-making in Europe is mainly due to the insufficient adaptations of national democratic arrangements to the socio-economic changes in the last decades and the transformation of Western European political systems through European integration. The emerging European polity has never been conceived in terms of classic democracy - thus, European integration exacerbates the "democratic deficits" without offering satisfying solutions at the supranational level (O'Neill 1999; Wincott 1998;). The transfer of national sovereignty to the European level was not met by adequate co-determination for the citizens or a sufficient adaptation of the institutional arrangement at the national level to secure minimum standards of democracy thus resulting in legitimacy problem (Wolton 1993, Andersen/Eliassen 1996, Scharpf 1996 and 1999, Lodge 1997, Puntischer Riekmann 1998).

III. Consequences for the political system

Parties are confronted with a multiple range of interests: on the one hand we find economic interest groups issuing clear cut demands for further liberalisation and less state intervention; on the other hand demands e.g. concerning the welfare state, public goods or individual rights are getting less attention. Whereas the dual transnationalisation of policies has favoured economic interests who found adequate channels of representation through lobbying, diffuse interests have hardly found a powerful representation or a forum for articulating their demands. The realization of the internal market and the preparation for the European Monetary Union not only required huge adjustment costs but also demanded a restructuring process putting the welfare state under considerable strain (Parry 1995; Scharpf 1996a). Since such a restructuring touches the very heart of the European post-war societal model, i.e. the welfare state, a broad basis of legitimation is needed. Thus, a political system which gives the general societal interests a forum and place in the decision-making process is essential.

Due to the inadequate adaptation of the traditional intermediary organisations as well as to the structures of European policy-making national parties are increasingly unable to fulfil the role of aggregation and articulation of interests. Though the European Parliament has since its existence gained considerable co-decision power it still does not play an adequate role in the decision-making process which is dominated by the Council. Elections to the EP are still fought on national themes, they can still be compared to "second-order national-elections" (Reif/Schmitt 1980; Franklin 1996). The decreasing turnout points to the inability of the parties to mobilise and represent the voters. Reasons for this astounding deficit are that the consequences of these elections seem to be close to zero for national parties as well as for the individual voter and the political ineffectiveness of supranational party organisations and the dominating national political arena in the election campaign. To date European parliamentary elections have dramatically failed to produce a debate about genuine or coherent EU-wide issues.

As European topics are hardly block-busters to win national elections they are not subject of public discussion and even elections to the European Parliament are fought over national topics. One of the reasons why the political parties are perceived as being less than centrally relevant in the European context is that here they do not perform one of the essential functions of the political party, that of linkage (see Katz 1990); that is to say, on European issues they do not act as channels between citizens' interests and governmental or supragovernmental institutions (Gaffney 1996:17). Besides that, the power of parties to act as distributive agents according to their societal model and preferences is weakened by the monetary and stability oriented prerogative of the European Union: the obligation to comply with the Maastricht criteria puts remarkable strain on national budgets and consequently has tremendous effects on the capacity of political parties to design national tax, wage and labour market policies. As a result we are confronted with decreasing electoral turnout at the national level and an erosion of the so-called permissive consensus towards the project of European integration.

At the European level the intransparency concerning the agenda-setting and policy-formulation invites speculation on how and where decisions are taken. A jungle of lobbying and expert committees (Pedler/Schaefer 1996; Joerges/Vos 1999; Van Schendelen 1998) surrounds the European Commission who has not issued clear-cut rules for expertise. Furthermore, the sessions of the Council take place behind closed doors. Motives and interests leading to decision cannot

be followed and responsibility is difficult to ascribe. This lack of transparency also hampers the development of a European public sphere where collective problems, political concepts and solutions can be discussed.

The democratic inadequacy of the European Union also influenced the capacity of the national system and its democratic quality as most political agendas are now set on the supranational level with hardly any mediation of "pouvoirs intermédiaires" as we know them from the nation state level. The above mentioned societal changes lead to political changes to the extent that they become politically relevant. And the extent to which the party system can control what becomes politically relevant is diminished (Mair 1983:420) by the additional layer of European policy making. Because decision-making within Europe itself is not seen to be mediated by parties, decisions are taken primarily by either the representatives of national governments acting behind closed doors in the various councils of ministers, or by commissioners who formally eschew a representative role, or even, and more marginally so, by a European Parliament which is organized by parliamentary groups standing quite remote from the parties as organized at national level – this is likely to undermine even further the relevance of parties in representative and democratic terms (see Mair 1997: 133).

The difficulty lies in the lack of forms of participation which could allow citizens to express their views on Europe at a European level, while intermediary powers able to aggregate and transport this will into European institutions are either missing or remarkably weak. In the European decision-making process, political parties, unions, or corporatist associations have never been key actors, as they had been on the national level. As a result of the integration process, these actors lose out on the national level, too.

Political parties (as well as other intermediary powers) are undergoing another significant change in their functions and structure, this time caused by or at least enhanced by European integration. The most important change appears to be one influencing the policy process, where the parties' traditional role of representing specific sectional interests is further eroded. This is due to the fact that European policy-making and decision-making is the privilege of bureaucracies acting under the conditions of international negotiations and compromise-building as well as under the strains of new forms of powerful lobbying by increasingly narrow sectoral interest groups. Though

political parties are not disappearing, they are being by-passed. Being rather unaware of this change, parties tend to neglect the need for developing appropriate strategies and tools to maintain their influence. They continue to function in the belief that their power is still unaltered. This holds particularly true for parties in government, as they continue to have a say in the recruitment of the governing elites, who will then formulate, negotiate and implement European policies.

Since reacting and adapting to a changing environment in a way that voters appreciate is one of the basic mechanisms that parties use to organise electoral support the transformation of political parties through European integration seems to be at the core of the problems of Western European democracies. Thus we have to ask "How are national parties adapting to the changing environment?" or "How does European integration influence national parties and the national arrangement of democracy?".

The options for national political parties to re-act to their changing environment are at least threefold:

- They can refer to symbolic politics, i.e. preaching national politics at the national level and acting on a European level instrumentalising European policy-making either as excuse for unpopular measures or claiming success for popular policies devised without their input thus trying to maximise votes and office at the national level.
- They can relinquish certain policy areas where their influence has been reduced dramatically through European integration, e.g. monetary policy and concentrate on the remaining "national" agendas being against any further integration.
- Or they can apply an offensive strategy either demanding a strengthened national political arena, e.g. revaluation of national parliaments, adhere to a strong principle of subsidiarity or e.g. favour a strong European Parliament and intensify the role of transnational party federations.

Depending on their position in the national political system (government/opposition; representing different interest groups; their normative core and policy core) and the policy field concerned parties will apply a mixture of these options.

IV. A possible starting point for further research?

For research on the interdependent relation between the different levels of European multi-level governance we suggest an institutional approach combined with policy analysis.

New Institutionalism

We shall tackle the normative problem of the democratic deficit in Western Europe by using the theoretical assumption of new institutionalism that the behaviour of (single or collective) agents is induced by bounded rationality whereas the boundaries for rational behaviour are shaped by institutions (Simon 1983, Screpanti 1995). We are interested in the question how institutional arrangements are changing due to the new conditions of European integration and what impact these changes have on the incentive structure (North 1990) of the arrangement, i. e. the interplay of national and supranational settings, its impact on the institutional arrangement of democracy hitherto framed in the nation state and what role parties play within this process. In the following we will chart a possible conceptual approach for future research.

Our considerations are theoretically based on Hollingsworth (1998) who offers clear-cut definitions of the key elements of institutional analysis. This framework encompasses a whole model of society while most other institutionalist authors concentrate on questions of economic performance and enables us to denote the object of change.

According to Hollingsworth we define five levels of institutional analysis starting with the basic norms, rules, conventions, habits and values of a society. These are the most fundamental properties of *institutions* and are the most enduring and resistant to change. The next level of analysis are *institutional arrangements*. Institutional arrangements are e.g. markets, states, corporate hierarchies, networks, associations, communities etc. The third level consists of the *institutional sectors* of a society. Institutional sectors are e. g. the financial system, the system of

education, the business system, the system of research and the system of politics on which this project concentrates. The fourth level of Hollingsworth's analysis are *organizations*. They embody rules, norms, conventions and habits but their organizational structures change much more rapidly than a society's rules, norms, and conventions. The last element of Hollingsworth's model is the *output and performance* of the various institutional components of a society. At this level institutional components are most pragmatic and flexible. Outputs are a means to measure the performance of institutional arrangements and organisations. As pointed out above we will focus on the role of parties within the institutional arrangement of representative democracy.

European Integration leads to changes of all elements of Hollingsworth's model: A new institutional arrangement (namely the European Union) emerged devoted to different norms, rules and values (i.e. institutions) than the nation states and differentiating itself in institutional sectors and organisations creating their respective outputs. The institutional arrangement "European Union" is influencing the effectivity of the institutional arrangements in the member states.

In a perfect world, institutional arrangements should change when they have become ineffective. However, institutional change which would improve the overall situation of a society in a long-term-perspective can nevertheless be very costly for singular agents and/ or in short term. That is why changes due to ineffectiveness often do not take place for a long time. Furthermore, the question arises at which point an agent thinks an institutional arrangement to be ineffective. As the perception of the agent is shaped to a good deal by existing institutions it is likely that the perception of institutional ineffectiveness will evolve only gradually and slowly (see North 1990).

Because of these two reasons – self-interest of agents and limitedness of perception because of existing institutions – institutional change is usually incremental and path-dependent. The concrete development of institutional change depends on the perceptions of agents within the organisations.

Policy shifts as indicators of change

However, this does not tell us anything about change directly and how to measure/analyse it. A first, rough categorisation can be the differentiation between the following parameters of change (Mair 1983):

- reasons for change: what triggers change?
- location of change: does the whole institutional arrangement change (revolution) or just institutional sectors?
- extent of change: what constitutes meaningful change and which indices can we use to measure the degree of change?
- duration of change: does change occur suddenly or gradually?

The starting point for our considerations concerning the selection of a suitable approach is the shift of policy arenas from the national level to the European Union level. Comparative system analysis refers to the high degree of interdependence between EU-member-states, the important role of supranational institutions and the common EU legal system which makes a reasonable partition of the European and national level obsolete. Since the European Union is a system in flux with ongoing changing configurations and protagonists only a qualitative analysis seems to be adequate.

Analytically, a differentiation between the organisational set up of the party (and its position within the respective institutional arrangement of democracy) and its output in the chosen policy field is needed. The crucial point for any analysis is the feedback loop from the policy field as a common policy arena for European and national organisations and its potential impact on the functional, structural and strategical options of the respective party. Subsequently, we have to ask how these changes and potential adaptations of national parties affect the institutional arrangement of democracy at the national level.

Combining structure and agency is not a new idea in institutional theory as Perkins (1996) states but it has been hardly used in party research. Authors utilizing or suggesting this approach refer

to it variously as the new institutionalism (Grafstein 1992; March/Olson 1989; Shepsle 1989), historical institutionalism (Steinmo/Thelen/Longstreth 1992), contingent choice (Karl 1990), possibilism (Hirschmann 1988) and resource mobilization and political opportunity structure (Kitschelt 1994; Tarrow 1994).

To analyse how parties trigger change, react and adapt to their changing environment we not only have to combine institutional theory and structural analyses but we have to find out what parties actually do. This can be most clearly shown by analysing policy preferences, strategies of adaptation on the national and supranational level and the possible emergence of new types or models of linkages between these levels. An analysis cannot only concentrate on the structural, social, political, cultural and economical aspects but has to focus rather on their connections within this framework thus clearing the set up and interdependencies within a given institutional arrangement.

The completion of the policy-network (Waarden 1992) concept with elements from the policy-profile concept and the policy-style concept (Feick/Jann 1988) offers the chance for a connection of an actor and institution centered perspective (polity and policy perspective) as well as the possibility to study the effects from a policy-analysis for the entire system, i.e. the institutional arrangement. Out of the two concepts we consider the following elements as the most relevant ones:

- Actors
- Formalisation
- Interest constellation
- Problem solving behaviour
- Time horizon of envisaged policies (short-, medium, long-term strategies)
- Power relations
- Target definition.

These elements can be used to analyse the output of the respective national political systems and the European political system thus structuring the policy-making process within the policy fields.

The next question will be "How does the additional layer of European policy-making affect the structure, function and strategies of national parties?". The potential transformation of national parties should be analysed in at least four dimensions:

1. **internal structure and organisation** (Which organisational changes arose? (new working groups and networks, budget shifts, new forms to recruit party personnel, frequency of contacts with supranational parties, changes in internal educational programmes for functionaires); How did balances of power shift within political parties? (Narrowing of decision-making towards avantgarde of specialists); In which way were internal communication structures influenced by European Integration? What are the differences between the parties within the nation state and within "party families" (e.g. parties favouring state intervention or market liberalism; parties in government or opposition) with respect to the above mentioned questions?).
2. **Communication** (Do they adopt a European point of view, i.e. becoming mediators of European policies at the national level and try to convince their electorate of it? Or, do they explicitly represent national positions? Or, is the "muddling-through"-strategy the most prominent? Do political parties feel a commitment towards "their" nation state or rather towards their party family?).
3. **Competition and collaboration with other intermediary institutions** (Do parties realize these challenges? And, if yes, how do they react to it? Do they try to find new alliances (associations, NGOs, lobbies) or do they compete at their own?).
4. **Policy options and preferences** being the most complex point thus requiring further elaboration:

In complex bargaining situations policy preferences serve as road maps rooted in the normative order of parties. Parties have developed their policy preferences in order to maximise their policy, office or vote option thereby aggregating and representing certain kinds of interests in the national arrangement of democracy. If the changing environment does not allow them to adhere to their preferences any longer because matters are decided elsewhere (thus narrowing the range of policy options) they are not able to represent the interests of their clientele (or in case of cartel parties: of the national public). What does this mean for the normative set-up of parties?

Since parties are no monolithic blocks the changing environment will not only have different effects on their structure, function or strategies but also on different layers of the normative order of parties. In analogy with the advocacy-coalition model developed by Sabatier (1988, 1993, 1993a; Jenkins-Smith/Sabatier 1993a, 1993b), we differentiate between the normative core of a party, its policy-core and single-issue perceptions.

The normative core comprises the basic normative and ontological axioms reaching across all policy areas. A change in these basic values is highly unlikely. The policy-core is limited to the respective policy field and features elementary attitudes – based on the normative core - about how certain policies should be realised. It answers questions about the right balance of market and state, the distribution of power and authority between different levels of government and the kind of policy instruments which are to be used. A rather long-term change in these attitudes is possible, but only if basic elements of the model are challenged. A study of party history, party programmes, strategy papers, governmental programmes etc. should enable us to sketch the features of the normative core of a party.

Single-issue perceptions of parties apply to attitudes and questions of short-term decisions and change easily.

Besides the written sources (election campaign brochures, strategy papers and minutes of the member state's parliaments) extensive interviews will serve as a source for mapping out the normative order of parties and its potential changes; on the other hand it should enable us to assess the strategical, functional and organisational changes seen from the point of view of party elites. Since the concrete development of institutional change depends to a high degree on the perceptions of the agents we consider interviews to be the appropriate instrument to test the usefulness of the developed theoretical model and the methodological approach. The shift of the institutional arrangement depends on the nature of change. Change in the institutional arrangement influences the perceptions of the agents, thus their preferences.

After having analysed the transformation of national parties due to European integration we have to ask what these changes mean for the "traditional" functions of parties, i.e. aggregation and articulation of interests, the mobilisation and socialisation of groups and individuals, the recruitment of elites and the function of government building. If the structural changes cause

functional changes we will further ask what this indicates for the national arrangement of democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

One overall result could be named the “Dilemma of European Democracy”: On the one hand, democracy in the European political system (supranational and national level) is only possible if the national parties become agents of mediation of European policy processes. On the other hand, the possibilities as well as the incentives for effective policy making of political parties are constantly weakened by European integration: at the European level, political decisions are not passed by political agents elected for this function. This additional layer of European politics has severely influenced the ability of parties to leave their mark on modern societies by reducing their room of manoeuvre. And, as the policy cycle is divided between these two levels policy making and vote-/office-seeking are increasingly uncoupled so that symbolic politics becomes ever more attractive for political parties.

This holds especially true for parties of the left: An indirect consequence of the new policy environment and the narrowed room for political manoeuvre is a diminishing capacity of parties to mobilise and socialise individuals/groups. This has divergent implications for different party families. In the post-Second World War era the nation state became the main instrument for social democratic governments to design the welfare state. That is the reason why there seems to be evidence that parties serving so-called diffuse interests (general welfare, public goods) have more problems with the functional breaking up of the domestic policy-cycles than parties serving well specified economically driven interests (Marks/Wilson 1999). Parties addressing redistributive goals and serving diffuse interests suffer from the diminishing of their policy-seeking capacity.

But political parties are not only objects but also subjects of European integration and are therefore themselves responsible to re-gain and/or newly define their democratic function. Up to now, we cannot see many attempts of political parties to assume a pro-active role in European policy-making. Usually, they refer to symbolic politics or play the national card in seeming

opposition to “the European Union”. In this way they try to maximise their national votes by enhancing at the same time the many deficits of European democracy.

If the national parties do not become the agents of the mediation of European policy processes in the national institutional arrangement, the erosion of representative democracy will continue through a further technocratization of politics. This might pose serious problems for the continuity of the integration process.

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