

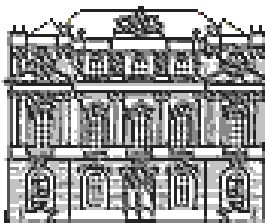


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*The Transformation of Austrian Political Parties through European
Integration
or
How to Avoid Reality*

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**The Transformation of Austrian Political Parties through European
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MONIKA MOKRE/ JOHANNES POLLAK

This paper summarizes the results of a research project on “Institutional Change and Political Parties”. Within this project we studied how European integration affects the institutional arrangement of democracy and one of its key players, the national political parties. The project was carried out in Austria; it should serve a methodical pre-study for a comparative project in several member states.

It was the aim of the project to analyse and qualify the changes national parties are subjected to triggered by European integration, to explore the reactions of parties to them and to show possible ways of constructing the role of parties within the European polity. The normative frame of the study can be summarized by the finding of Schattschneider: *"Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties"* (1942: I) and J. Bryce (1921: 119) who stated: "parties are inevitable. No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them". This finding is based on the idea that democracy needs organization (Michels 1910/1952).

While the role of political parties for European Integration was neglected for a long time their impact has been acknowledged by Article 191 TEC stating that political parties should play an important role in the European integration process. In particular they should contribute to the formation of a European awareness and the expression of the political will of the citizens. Furthermore, parliaments as the cornerstone of Western representative democracy need a certain degree of organization to regulate access to them. This organization is in praxi provided by political parties. Thus there exists an inextricable link between parliamentarism and parties.

At the same time, the functions of political parties are severely eroded by European integration. The traditional policy-cycle is split into two interdependent levels: the European Union and the nation-state. While the definition of socio-economic problems and the implementation of policies largely remain at the national level, the agenda-setting and the policy initiatives have to a considerable extent been 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. Due to the inadequate adaptation of national political parties to the new course of the policy cycle as well as to the structures of European policy-making, they are increasingly unable to fulfil the role of aggregation and articulation of interests. Though the European Parliament has 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 and may be dubbed as "second-order national-elections" (Reif/Schmitt 1980; Franklin 1996). The decreasing turnout at the European level (and in particular the differences to national turnouts) points to the inability of the parties to mobilize voters. Reasons for this deficit are that the consequences of these elections seem to be close to zero for national parties as well as for the individual voter mainly because they do not lead to the formation of a government. To date European parliamentary elections have dramatically failed to produce a debate about genuine or coherent EU-wide issues.

Another reason why 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 vision of a societal model and preferences is weakened by the monetary and stability oriented prerogatives of the European Union: the obligation to comply with the Maastricht criteria puts remarkable strain on national budgets and consequently has important 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.

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We understand the difficult position of political parties in the European policy-making as part of the often cited (though rarely defined) “democratic deficit”. The main hypothesis tested in this project was:

If parties do not adapt to the changing political processes caused by European integration the erosion of the national institutional arrangement of democracy will continue through a further technocratization of politics.

While party research has hitherto mainly concentrated on structural analysis this project used a combination of institutional theory and policy analysis to understand the changing structure and function of political parties with regard to the transforming socio-political environment. In contrast to traditional comparative party research which has mainly focused on the comparison of e.g. structure and organization of parties, electoral turnout, volatility, partisanship (i.e. quantitative comparisons) etc. this project focused on the interdependence of European policy-making and changes in party activity and organization.

1. Theoretical Assumptions

1.1 Institutionalism

Our notion of “institutionalism” is based on a framework of Rogers Hollingsworth who defines five levels of institutional analysis starting with the basic norms, rules, conventions, habits and values of a society. The rule systems of a society are usually not homogenous. In order to avoid ambiguities of rule systems which could paralyse a society meta-rules and norms are developed "which encompass lesser rule systems." (1999: 8)

For our project the meta-rules and norms are those concerning democracy, i.e. the conviction that the demos is the sovereign of a polity and that all state power is derived from it, the rule of majorities and the protection of basic rights of the individual and of minorities, the free political discourse as presupposition of decision-making and the operationalisation of democratic ideals in the form of representative democracy.

Rule-systems on a lower level which are of interest here are the normative cores of the different political parties, e.g. social-democratic or christian-democratic ideals which they subordinate to the rules of representative democracy (though their can be different interpretations of what exactly the rules of representative democracy are).

On the other hand, we claim that the European Union has developed its own system of rules which cannot be subsumed without previous inquiries into the institution "democracy" or "representative democracy". The difference between the institutions of the Austrian and the EU-polity for instance can perhaps be best characterized as the difference between an input- and an output-concentrated system: While in national democracies much attention has been paid to the *processes* of decision-making, the European Union has – mainly out of historical reasons – up to now focused on the production of outputs which satisfy the largest possible number of people to the highest possible degree. (Obviously, this are relative not absolute differences: As the summit of Nice in 2000 has shown decision-making processes are obtaining continuously more interest within the European Union while the welfare state itself is a case in point for the importance of political results for nation states.) Still, there arise different forms of ambiguity in society and especially in the polity because of these differing sets of institutions.

The next level of analysis are *institutional arrangements*. Institutional arrangements are e.g. markets, states, corporate hierarchies, networks, associations, communities etc. The institutional arrangement we are most interested in here is the state at the national level and the EU-polity at the supranational level. The "state" at national level is understood as the implementation of the institutions of representative democracy whereas this process has to be seen much more complex in the case of the EU: The EU-member-states via the European Council created institutions (i. e. norms, rules and values) for the European Union. Those institutions are to be implemented by the member states themselves; furthermore, they also lead to the development of specific institutional arrangements of the EU, namely the European Commission and the European Parliament. European Council, European Commission and European Parliament can therefore be understood as three non-hierarchical institutional arrangements of the EU which in a next step contribute to the further development of EU-institutions which have to be implemented by the nation states, i.e. lead to changes of national institutional arrangements.

Institutional arrangements are in some way the realistic picture of the ideals expressed in institutions though the original institutions can, of course, be changed and distorted through the implementation process. Frequently, institutional arrangements mirror the influence of different and/or contradictory sets of institutions as can be seen in decision-making processes which are divided between the national and the supranational level.

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. Different institutional arrangements lead to different forms of cooperation and/or competition of institutional sectors, e. g. neo-liberal and conservative political parties and the representative bodies of business enterprises co-operate in different forms in the institutional arrangement of Austrian representative democracy on the one hand and at the EU level on the other hand.

The fourth level of analysis are *organizations*. They embody rules, norms, conventions and habits but their organizational structures may change much more rapidly than a society's rules, norms, and conventions. Political Parties are the organizational units we have been focusing on within this project.

The last element of this conception is the *output and performance* of the various institutional components of a society. At this level institutional components are most pragmatic and flexible. By measuring outputs one can evaluate the performance of institutional arrangements and organizations. In our example outputs are policies shaped by specific policy preferences of political parties.

1.2 Party Research

Party politics has mainly been studied within the context of nation states. The state level is the context within which political representation in the modern sense was developed: "The political party is essentially a national and local phenomenon". (Gaffney 1996: 2) However, comparative party research has been done quite frequently but hardly transcends mere descriptions of different party systems and parties within the respective nation state.

In the context of the EU, the question of the role of political parties needs to be addressed at several levels. First, one can ask which role parties have played in the construction of the European Union. The widespread scholarly view is that the role of political parties has in general been usurped by other political actors. According to this view, interest groups, bureaucratic and academic elites and other actors such as big companies with access to restricted knowledge, skills and networks, and to the national and European bureaucracies, are in the main the actors who are responding to and attempting to shape micro- and macro-economic forces and the political responses to them. In this process, the political parties are of "very secondary importance" (comp. Gaffney 1996: 2f.). What remains to be done for parties is the recruitment of elites. From our point of view this claim is misplaced. It is the more diffuse and changing nature of their influence which needs to be assessed, so that their proper place and potential in the political process of European integration can be identified.

Second, the changing political environment requires parties to adapt to the new circumstances.¹ What needs to be analysed is the extent and location of this adaptation processes. We do not suggest that we are yet able to identify a new party type emerging from the compounded policy-making processes within the European Union. We only suggest that the substantial changes of the policy-making procedures requires national political parties to develop new strategies if they want to influence society according to their normative ideas. Since this area is clearly under-researched this project also intends to hint at possible new ways of doing research about parties within the EU.

1.3 Party Change

According to Cortell and Peterson (1999) change occurs at specific instances called "punctuated equilibrium". A punctuated equilibrium is a situation in which there is a mismatch between the challenges the organization faces and its traditional way of solving problems. This mismatch may result in a restructuring of the organization, a redefinition of its goals, an adoption of new means or inclusion of new participants. At punctuated equilibria a 'window of opportunity' opens and

¹ W. C. Müller (1997) differentiates between two major contemporary approaches: the environmentalist interpretation assumes that parties adapt to environmental changes; from the purposive action approach party change is perceived as strategic leadership action.

makes change possible, but not automatic. T. Börzel and T. Risse (2000) differentiate between two types of misfits:

1. Policy misfit: European policies can challenge national and/or party policy goals, regulatory standards, and the policy style and profile. Such policy misfits produce adaptational costs at the nation-state level due to the supremacy of the European legal system.

2. Institutional misfit: European rules and procedures grant different accessibility for the various political actors. E.g. national governments have privileged decision-powers vis-à-vis other domestic actors thereby challenging the territorial institutions of highly decentralized member states which grant their regions autonomous decision powers.

Both sorts of misfit apply to the question of what triggers party change. National political parties follow their own policy goals and agenda for implementing them. European policies can either hamper or foster these goals. E.g. the so-called Maastricht (convergence) criteria had eased the way for national deregulation in Austria thus strengthening the demands of the People's Party for economic liberalisation.

The second question is where does change take place? Does the European integration affect the entire political system of member states or single institutions and/or actors? Does it affect the whole party system or single parties?

To tackle these questions we combined elements of various methodological concepts, namely policy network analysis, policy style concept and policy profile concept. Out of these concepts we considered the following points as the most relevant ones for the study of party transformation: number, function and relation of actors, formalisation (degree of codification of policies), interest constellation, problem solving behaviour (planning and control perspective, active/re-active, target consideration), time horizon of envisaged policies (short-, medium, long-term strategies), decision processes, power relations and target definition.

The analysis of these elements offers the chance for a connection of an actor and institution centred 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. Our hypothesis is that the changes of the policy environment affect the institutional arrangement of national democracy indirectly by transforming an important organization within this arrangement, namely political parties. Therefore, the next question is "How does the additional layer of European policy-making affect the structure, function and strategies of national parties?". The potential transformation of national parties has been analysed in the following four dimensions :

1. internal structure and organization;
2. communication;
3. competition and collaboration with other intermediary institutions;
4. policy options.

2. Empirical Analysis

2.1. The Austrian Party System

Until very recently the Austrian party system was exceptionally stable (Luther 1999) and Austria was considered as an almost archetypical case of a consociational democracy (Lijphart 1968, 1969; Luther 1992). This fact can partly be explained by the long tradition of the Austrian party system and its three main parties (Socialist, Christian-conservative, Pan-German) which go back to the year 1880. (Pelinka 1998:74) The Second Republic linked up with this party system: For nearly five decades after the end of World War II the party system was dominated by the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social-democratic Party (SPÖ). The general features of the Austrian party system are: Parties as membership organizations are the largest in western Europe in relative terms and among the largest in absolute terms; post-war politics has been party politics par excellence, in which the two major parties - SPÖ and ÖVP - have established a substantial grip on political institutions and civil society; the four parties (SPÖ, ÖVP, Austrian freedom Party, Green Party) evidence a wide ranging structural variation (Müller 1994: 51). In the 1980s, new political mobility and the concurrent erosion of the extreme party state changed the party system and transformed its characteristics: The Greens emerged as a fourth party in 1986 when they gained access to parliament; the FPÖ repositioned itself as a "right-wing populist" party, a move that has increased its share of votes at the cost of the two major parties; the Liberal Forum split from the FPÖ in protest over the latter's right wing populist tendencies. The electoral system was changed in 1992 (Ucakar 1995) resulting in the elimination of the

Liberal Forum from parliament. Thus in 1999 only four parties were represented in the parliament.

The first elections to the European Parliament in Austria took place in October 1996. The election was perceived as a "second order election" resulting in a high number of protest votes (comp. Dimitrias et al. 1994; Van der Eijk/Franklin/Marsh 1996) against the government parties², especially the SPÖ. In 1999 the situation changed. Compared to European elections in other member states the first election in Austria was characterized by a high effort of all parties and intensive mass media coverage. This may be due to the proximity of the elections to the Austrian parliament which took place only three months later. Additionally the pro-Europe sentiment was much higher than in 1996: 64% of those surveyed took a favourable view of Austria's membership of the EU - this is 10% more than 1996.

2.2 Empirical Results

The first part of the empirical work consisted in the evaluation of written sources, i. e. governmental programmes, party programmes, strategy papers, election campaign brochures etc. The core of our empirical work, however, were interviews with party representatives. Three representatives of each party in the Austrian Parliament have been interviewed, among them for each party one member of the national parliament and one member of the European parliament. The third person was named by the first interviewees of the respective parties; usually somebody familiar with the party structure was selected. Obviously, the sample chosen is far too small for valid statements on Austrian political parties in general. The main aim of the interrogation was to test the methodology of the project. However, we shall also present the contents of the interviews as they permit at least a basic understanding of the current situation of Austrian parties and may be helpful for the development of further research options.

2.2.1 Methodological Results

Concerning the methodological framework developed within this project we have to differentiate between two levels: the level of internal consistency and the level of applicability. What has been shown in the theoretical discussion is that a combination between policy analysis and institutional

² This is in line with the results of the European elections in 1994: in eleven of twelve member countries the government parties suffered considerable losses (Hickersberger/Lutter 1996: 387)

analysis is highly relevant and prone to deliver new results in party research. Parties are conservative organizations with strong inertia. This inertia results from the effort to present a consistent policy profile based on normative assumptions to its potential voters. Thus, institutional theory can help to analyse these normative assumptions which in turn have a strong influence on the policies parties represent. According to R. Hollingsworth institutions (i.e. basic norms and values) change very slowly since organizations always start to change their performance first, i.e. in the case of parties, their policies. Consequently, we introduced a second theoretical strand, namely policy analysis. We assumed that the constant shift of policy areas towards the European level constitutes a kind of long-term external "shock" for national political parties. This "shock" requires parties to react, either by adapting to the new circumstances or by losing influence in the institutional arrangement of democracy at the national level. Since parties are *per se* functional organizations, i.e. striving for votes, offices or policies an adaptation could reasonably be assumed. But before this adaptation can take place the actor has to perceive the "shock" as being a challenge to its traditional behaviour. Thus one intention of the questionnaire was if parties recognize the importance of the European level and adapt their policies accordingly. The parallel analysis of the policy field served to counter-check a potential adaptation. The feedback-loop between recognition and organizational adaptation was a second question.

Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating (applicability) we have to deal with certain shortcomings of the research design too. The reliance on governmental programmes, party programmes, strategy papers, election campaign brochures etc. did not suffice to get a clear picture about party positions. Most of them do not go beyond paying lip-service to the importance of a specific topic. Furthermore, it is difficult to find a party member able to inform about certain policies and at the same time speaking about changes in the party structure. Moreover, parties are reluctant to reveal details about the real flows of influence within them. But inferring from non-information to non-existence does not correspond to the reality of policy-making processes.

2.2.2 Qualitative Results

Organizations change due to some kind of misfit. Two types of misfit can arise with respect to parties and party systems, namely policy misfit and institutional misfit. Both types of misfit have

been perceived by some of our interviewees but usually only in a superficial way without noticing the deeper consequences European Integration has had and will have in the future on national policy making. Members of the European Parliament and members of the national government³ were most sensitive to these changes and to their consequences. This result corresponds with the view that parties are oligarchic and elitist as well as with the perception that governments are privileged by the EU vis à vis the national parliaments. For the internal party structure the interviews also make clear that party members in the government further deprive their own parliamentary group of power.

If we look at the different functions of political parties the following changes can be seen out of the interviews:

- Educating citizens: All political parties try to some extent to make their electorate understand European issues.
- Training political elites: This is perhaps the most stable function of political parties which they now also fulfil for the European level. On the other hand, people with experiences at the EU-level are also called back to Vienna to work in domestic politics so that one could say that the training function works both ways. But recruiting for the EU is also not without problems: "Even after 5 years of membership there is a certain inertia: Sometimes we have troubles to find Austrian candidates who are willing to go to Brussels. This does not hold true for young people but for important positions, e.g. in the General Directorates: There it is extremely difficult to motivate Austrians to apply."⁴

The slowness of party change as perceived within this project corresponds with the findings of Müller (1997: 294) that party change is path-dependent and following an internal logic. As to the question how parties react to European Integration self-descriptions in the interviews all see their own party as pro-active and relatively europeanized in its activities.

³ While we did not intentionally include members of the government in our sample one of the interlocutors was a former minister.

⁴ Selbst nach fünf Jahren Mitgliedschaft gibt es ein gewisses Trägheitsmoment: Manchmal haben wir Schwierigkeiten, österreichische Bewerber zu finden, die bereit sind, nach Brüssel zu gehen. Das gilt nicht für junge Leute, sondern bei den wichtigeren Jobs, in Generaldirektionen etwa: Dort ist es unendlich mühsam, Österreicher zu bewegen, sich zu bewerben. (I 4)

If we were to find a differentiation of Austrian political parties along the category Europeanization one could get to the following conclusions:

- The FPÖ is basically an anti-EU and anti-European Integration party. This is probably why they do not manage to instrumentalize the European level as effectively as other Austrian parties. Their strategy to nominate independent experts for the European Parliament was successful insofar as election results (in 1996) went well but they did not succeed (or did not try to) to bind those independent MEPs closely to the party in Vienna so that their work in Brussels is mainly coined by personal political interests.
- The ÖVP, on the other hand, is *the* Austrian integration party looking back on a tradition of active European politics. However, out of the interviews the impression arose that this European perspective is not further developed at the moment. This has probably two reasons: 1. the ÖVP is *the* party of farmers and has therefore to deal with the EU-scepticism of its clientele (obviously, the ÖVP's orientation towards Europe has always rather been an elitist project within the party), and 2. the coalition with the EU-critical FPÖ and the so-called "sanctions" of the EU-14 against this government do certainly not enhance the European engagement of the ÖVP.
- The SPÖ did not show much interest in the EU until the mid-80s (see chapter IV, history of Austrian political parties) but is unanimously supporting European Integration since then. As one social democratic representative put it: "We are just as the ÖVP good Europeans, not very initiative, but we both marched into the existing European structures at full blast."⁵ If the SPÖ does not seem very active in their European policy this is rather due to the shock of the last national elections than to specific European considerations.
- The Green Party campaigned against Austria's accession to the European Union with the slogan "Yes to Europe, No to European Union"⁶ expressing thus their basic support of European integration and their critic towards the deficits of the European Union. After the referendum they immediately started to develop a pro-active European policy. The acceptance of their European policy became obvious by the results of the second EP elections in Austria in 1999 when the Green Party was the only one gaining votes in spite of the

⁵ „Sowohl die ÖVP wie wir sind brave Europäer, nicht sehr initiative, aber wir sind beide mit ziemlich fliegenden Fahnen in die bestehenden europäischen Strukturen eingezogen.“ (I 7)

⁶ „Ja zu Europa, nein zur europäischen Union.“ (I 12)

extremely low voting turnout. Whereas the ÖVP is the traditional Austrian Europe party the Green Party is probably the one with the most active European policy.

We asked in which ways political parties reacted to the changes due to European integration.

- Do they refer to symbolic politics, i.e. preach national politics at national level and act at European level instrumentalising European policy-making either as an 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?
- Do they relinquish certain policy areas where their influence has been dramatically reduced through European integration and concentrate on the remaining "national" agenda, while opposing latently or overtly any further integration?
- Or do they apply an offensive strategy either demanding a strengthening of the national political arena, e.g. through an upgrading of national parliaments, insist on a strict interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity or favour a strong European Parliament and intensify the role of trans-national party federations.

Two of our interview partners mentioned the necessity of re-structuring the European polity, one of them of the SPÖ and one of the Green Party. But, generally, most Austrian politicians seem to concentrate on symbolic politics as defined above.

The lack of pro-active European politics in Austrian political parties also hampers the effectiveness of Austrian lobbying at the European level (I 9 and I 11). Here, considerable differences between the situation in Austria and in other member states become obvious. The planned realization of the project in an internationally comparative way would be of high interest as huge differences in the Europeanization of parties in the different member states have been mentioned (I 12).

Generally, it has to be stated that the purpose of our project could only partly be fulfilled as the understanding of European processes within political parties was dramatically lower than expected. This is why our very specific hypothesis - the shifted room of manoeuvre for political parties would lead to the alteration of policies which in a feedback loop would then also change structural dimensions – could neither be proved nor disproved. We did, however, get a

differentiated picture of the extent of Europeanization of the single parties and of single agents within them.

Conclusion: Parties and Democracy: An indissoluble relationship?

Representative democracy itself generates the need for parties in order to manage the pluralism inherent in modern societies and subsequently the formulation of policy options, although they are less and less involved in the concrete policy-making process. That was less important in the Greek polis with its special form of direct expression of agonistic actors. Modern pluralism needs different forms of rationalization and hence of organization so that the different ideas and interests might become important enough to have impact in the decision-making process. This was particularly the case in those periods of modern democracy when deep ideological cleavages dominated the societies as a result of socio-economic cleavages.

So, it appears unthinkable to conceive of a European democracy without parties. The question, however, is whether and how a full-fledged party system at the European level might emerge in a foreseeable future. One important facet of the European political system is the existence of a directly elected Parliament. In spite of all the difficulties such as the national focus dominating European election campaigns or the low turnouts, parties have to organize and manage these campaigns. Moreover, the European Parliament being ever more intensively involved in the policy-making process by procedures of co-decision and consent is forced to elaborate policy profiles along specific interest lines which are represented in differing party positions. Throughout the last two decades party cleavages have become more visible also at the European level. Even if less than in the national context due to the fact that the European Parliament as a whole is fighting for more power against other organs, in particular against the Council but also against the Commission.

Thus, it becomes all the more plausible to speak of a European form of parliamentarism notwithstanding the lack of truly Europeanized parties. In analogy with historic party formation processes in some member states one could speculate about the emergence of European parties as a result of the sheer existence of the supranational parliament. Can the history of the 19th century be repeated? (comp. Kluxen 1983) And if so, what guarantees for the success of the development? Will these parties be able to gain legitimacy? And how will they be able to develop

long-term visions with regard to the *finalité* of the Union, while representing quite divergent national and regional interests? In short, how will they reduce the need for a European identity and the deeply rooted national identities to a common denominator? In some European member states (Austria and Germany serving as examples) the evolution of parties and party systems went hand in hand with the formation of national identities. Could this experience be repeated on the supranational level, without being trapped in European nationalism? We argue here that European democracy will depend on the capabilities of parties in carrying out this highly complex and risky task.

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