

## THE ELUSIVE EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEM

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### INTRODUCTION

The historical graveyards are cluttered with parties which dominated the political scene but which subsequently failed to adapt to new circumstances and therefore died, were absorbed by new more active movements, or withered into small marginal parties.[1]

There are few who challenge the centrality of political parties in the operation of contemporary, representative democracies. Parties are the chief means of linking people with government and the policy process.[2] They are the primary forces producing competitive elections and developing alternative political elites that are at the heart of modern representative democracy. Even as Western democratic parties faced crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, the prospects for their replacement by alternative organizations were slim.[3] They remain the central actors producing democracy and in making it work.

As the Union expands its jurisdiction, policy competencies, and powers, political parties might be expected to play an increasing role in efforts to assure democratic control. So far, there has been little evidence of the development of an entirely new party system for the European Union. Instead the trend has been toward adaptation of the existing national-level parties to actions on the European scene. I will argue that the lack of progress toward a European party system is the result of this national orientation: parties that are well designed to work at the national level are not appropriate at the European level. If parties are the key to democracy, there will be a need to develop a new party system at the European level with party structures and orientations that are different from those at the national level.

### THEORIES OF PARTY DEVELOPMENT

Concern with the origins of political parties has been a neglected topic over the past three decades. After a flourish of interest in that topic when new parties were emerging in postwar Europe and the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa the subject has been ignored except for a few scholars. Now, as new democracies are emerging and as there are new concerns about improving or adapting democratic structures in long-established democracies there is a need for renewing our search for theories to explain party development. This is especially true as we look at the pattern of party politics in the European Union. To analyze the possible place of parties in the Union, it is useful to first review the conclusions of those who have studied the origins of parties and patterns of party development on the nation-state level.

In his classic study,[4] Maurice Duverger saw many parties as the evolutionary result of transforming political clubs and groupings among members of parliament in order to cope with the demands of an enlarged electorate. He also described later trends to create extra parliamentary parties that reflected important ideological causes. Above all, Duverger believed that the nature of the

electoral system defined the party system. His concern with the electoral system is directed solely at the electoral law: proportional representation versus plurality systems and two-ballot systems.

Duverger also introduced the notion of party formation and modification in order to win elections. He argued that moderate and centrist parties often adopted organizational styles and tactics first developed by parties on the Left in order to more successfully compete in elections with broader electorates. This was what he called "contagion from the Left." [5]

Anthony Downs carried this forward in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* [6] when he saw parties as coalitions of people that seek to control government. Parties are driven by a "self interest axiom" that underlies all human behavior. For Downs, the single most important task for parties is to succeed in winning elections. As a result, parties structure themselves, develop electoral strategies, and shape policies in order to maximize their votes. Thus, parties emerge and develop in ways that will allow them to meet the electoral imperative of vote-maximization.

Joseph A. Schlesinger built on Downs' notions of party as a market-driven organization. [7] Adapting Mancur Olson's logic of collective action [8] to fit parties, Schlesinger focused on the ambitions of party members and supporters. For him, the key issue that structures the nature of parties is the set of political opportunities in the sense of public offices that are available directly or indirectly through party action. Again, parties are shaped by elections but more specifically through the drive for public office. Thus, "the structure and content of parties in democracies will reflect primarily what candidates and officeholders see as useful to their election and reelection." [9]

Not all students of party development focus on the electoral context. For many, political parties are means to bring social and ideological cleavages onto the political stage. Lipset and Rokkan saw parties as the reflection of the divisions and cleavages in society. [10] They argued that parties emerge through differing patterns of mobilization in order to reflect underlying social cleavages. Lipset and Rokkan noted four near-universal cleavages. Two cleavages are the result of the creation of the nation state: church vs. state; subject vs. dominant culture. Two are the product of the industrial revolution: workers vs. employers; primary vs. secondary economy. Political parties emerge to reflect the interests and causes linked with these cleavages. Parties then channel social discontent and policy demands based on social cleavages into the political system where it can be resolved or moderated. As Lipset and Rokkan noted:

a competitive party system protects the nation against the discontents of its citizens: grievances and attacks are deflected from the overall system and directed toward the current set of power-holders." [11]

These social cleavages, although often dated and irrelevant by social change, remain important political divides and anchors in contemporary Western democracies. [12]

Leon Epstein's theory of party development is multi-faceted. He viewed parties as the product of their specific environmental conditions and "developmental circumstances." [13] These circumstances include not only Duverger's enlargement of the suffrage and Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage patterns but also the nature of the political institutions within which the parties operate. Specifically, Epstein points to the impact of federalism or unitary structures and the nature of the relationship between the executive and legislative authority. Epstein does not ignore the electoral arrangements but he goes beyond the specifics of the electoral law to include the length of the ballot and what offices are elected.

From this rapid survey of theories of party origins and development I draw three key determinants of party organization and behavior: underlying socioeconomic and political cleavages, the structure of key political institutions, and the nature of electoral competition and rewards. In examining these dimensions of party structure and action, I will attempt to explore the emergence of a European party system within the context of the European Union.

## VOTER ALIGNMENTS AND A EUROPEAN-LEVEL PARTY SYSTEM

By and large, the political party systems of the European Union member states still conform to the alignments along social cleavages that are fifty or one hundred years old. [14] This is the case even though the issues directly related to the original Left/Right divisions -- such as the nature of democracy, the place of the church in society, and the economic role of government -- have been either resolved by political decisions or made irrelevant by social change. In the past two decades, the electoral impact of these cleavages has diminished in several countries. [15] Nevertheless, these social alignments still

serve to establish the basic electoral coalitions in most countries. They remain the best predictors of electoral behavior.[16]

The durable nature of these social cleavages and their political alignments mean that many of the newer political issues facing political parties in the 1990s cut across these cleavages and their related parties. Inglehart and others have noted the emergence of an important new set of "post materialist" values that have little relationship to traditional party cleavages.[17] However, the alignment of parties still occurs primarily along traditional socioeconomic and political cleavages than in accordance with positions on the new values. Environmental protection, civil liberties, social and political equity for women and ethnic minorities, immigration, and law enforcement are not issues that correspond with the older cleavages. They therefore pose problems for parties based on the traditional cleavages. Some of these parties' natural supporters end up on both sides of the new issues.

European unity is another issue that does not relate to the traditional cleavage patterns of the national political parties of EU member states. Support for integration has come from the full range of economic classes; so has opposition. Religious divisions within the Union occasionally stirs encouragement or resistance to unification but only in a most tangential and ephemeral way. Differences over the nature and value of democracy produce opposition to European unity only in the marginal and fringe parties whose commitment to liberal democracy is suspect. Regionalism is sometimes associated with support or opposition to integration but the alignment is neither consistent nor strong. The European issue seems more a subterfuge for regional conflict over economic and social concerns rather than a true reflection of regional differences.

As I shall argue below, the internal differences over European unification within parties are usually greater than the differences over the issue between parties. The fact that this debate is within parties rather than between them demonstrates the irrelevance of the principal parties based on traditional cleavages to European debates. But there is no evidence to suggest that there is a new cleavage emerging within member country societies to reflect the European issues. Europe is certainly not a Left/Right issue in the traditional sense. Table 1 demonstrates that attitudes on Europe -- positive, ambivalent, or negative -- are virtually the same across the political spectrum. The usual Left/Right distinction does not seem to easily correlate into support or opposition to European integration.[18] With domestic politics still oriented toward the old ideological divisions, the virtual identical spread of opinions across the Left/Right spectrum explains why European integration has not emerged as more of a partisan issue.

Several European parties have very public internal divisions over Europe. At present, the British Conservative party is a paramount example with well-defined internal divisions between increasingly doctrinaire Euroskeptics and advocates of further European cooperation. Similar divisions exist in the Gaullist party in France and the Danish Social Democrats, with less intense divisions in many other parties throughout the Union. In the past, the British Labour party, Greece's New Democracy, and Spain's Popular party have all experienced intense internal debate on European unification. Even within parties generally united in their support of the concept of European unity, there exist wide ranges of often strongly held opinions about how fast and how far unification should proceed, about which issues should have priority, and about the division of sovereignty between the national states and the emerging European state.

But these visible, internal party disputes over Europe are not always reflected in the attitudes of their voters. Table 2 shows the attitudes toward Europe of party identifiers in each country. Almost everywhere in Europe, the differences on Europe within the major political parties are more significant than the differences between these parties on issues of European integration. And this is true of many of the parties whose elites dispute European issues in public.

Such a cross-party pattern of differences on European integration causes few problems at the national level. Divisions over Europe usually can be minimized by emphasis on domestic issues that unite the party and make it an effective voice for a specific set of significant social groups and interests. However, on the European level, the national parties' internal divisions are over the very essence of what parties should be saying and representing in Brussels and Strasbourg. As a result, these intra-party divisions over the nature, priorities, extent, and future of European unity make the existing national parties poor substitutes for a European party system.

In the past, these internal party divisions were easier to control and ignore. Until the end of the cold war, European unity was defended as a necessity in the face of the communist threat from within as well as from the east. A broad consensus at the elite level limited discussion about fundamental

issues of European unification; to oppose unification was to undermine western solidarity and to give comfort to the opponents of democracy. In addition, the undeniable economic successes of the early years of the EEC and broad public support for its institutions produced what Lindberg and Scheingold referred to as a "permissive consensus" that allowed the development of the European Community.[19] The paramount virtue of the goal of a united Europe allowed minor disagreements over specific modalities and policies to be accommodated within parties. Europe was still in its infancy and did not seem to pose a real threat to national sovereignty or the integrity of national institutions.

Now, of course, the setting is much different. The need for western solidarity evaporated with the fall of communism and with that the pariah status for opponents of European unification also disappeared. The growth of the EU in membership, competencies, and ambitions poses immediate threats to sovereign powers and institutions at the national level. The consensus -- beyond some ritualistic acceptance of the desirability of a vague European unity -- is now endangered at both the elite and popular levels. As a result, even parties that have been solid supporters of a united Europe now experience more internal division over the extent, specific details, and pace of unification.

Clearly, the broad issue of support or opposition to European unification does not correspond with existing cleavage structures in the member countries. But do these cleavages and the resulting parties have meaning in dealing with the more detailed European decisions that parties may wish to take such as on environmental protection, the social contract, regional development, movement toward a single currency, Union support for research and development, equity and social solidarity, and so on? The evidence on party alignments at the European level on such micro-issues suggests again little differentiation among main parties even though such issues do distinguish them at the national level. In part, this is because there is a tendency to use such microissues as proxies to carry on broader battles over the macroissues of the degree and speed of integration and the role of the European Parliament in making these macrodecisions. The shifting of perspective from narrow and specific issue to broader ones confuses party alignments even on the microissues where traditional cleavages might have some relevance.

In sum, national parties of EU member states still reflect traditional lines of cleavage. They are internally divided on the broad issues of European integration; they often interpret even the more narrow microissues in terms of the relationship of these issues to the broader concern with the extent and pace of integration. No new parties have emerged at the national level to reflect public divisions over European unification although some fringe parties have picked up on public resentment toward Europe to bolster support for broader agendas that are unrelated to European issues. The emergence of a European party system, then, is handicapped so far by the failure of parties to develop and represent emerging cleavage structures based on European issues.

## EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Many of the fifteen member countries of the European Union are among the best examples of the "party government" model of representative democracy. Where party government prevails, political parties provide policy options to the voters; the winning party or parties forms a government controlled by its adherents; party discipline and cohesion then allow the party-dominated government to adopt and implement policies in line with its electoral promises. Of course, there are often gaps between this ideal model of party government and the actual performance of parties in power.[20] But even in those EU countries where the party government model is least developed, political parties play crucial political roles and dominate internal politics.

The emerging EU protostate, however, is one where political parties are virtually powerless. Political parties exist, as we shall see, but they play remarkably small parts in setting agendas, shaping policy, or defending that policy to their electorates. As a result, they are not able to perform the linkage task expected of democratic political parties.

In part, the exclusion of parties is the legacy of institutions that evolved out of international agreements where party politics generally was avoided. Building Europe was a key element of the postwar political consensus. The European institutions reflected the unanimity and non-partisan approach to integration adopted by the principal political parties in each of the member states. An additional explanation of the weak party presence is found in on-going struggles for power among

European institutions which lead politicians in particular institutions to mute their partisan differences in order to strengthen their hand in seeking greater influence from other EU institutions.

### Parties and the European Commission

The key European policy institutions -- the Commission and the Council of Ministers -- are by their very nature multipartisan. National governments appoint Commissioners and they usually appoint individuals from the government's own party or coalition. The recognition of the lack of partisanship in Commission affairs is supported by the fact that the five countries entitled to two Commissioners often name one from the government party or parties and the other from an opposition party, something that they would never do for an important domestic appointive office. Since the party composition of the fifteen member states is inevitably varied, the Commission always is a body with representatives from a broad range of party backgrounds. In addition, Commissioners may have a different political affiliation than the current home governments since they are appointed for fixed, five year terms that do not coincide with electoral cycles in the member countries. Often a Commissioner appointed by one government will remain in office long after that government has been replaced by its rival.

The nature of the individuals selected as Commissioners also tends to limit partisan influences in the European body. Often, governments send senior civil servants with little background in partisan politics as their nominees to the Commission. They are instead primarily noted for their technical expertise and administrative skills. Many of the most prominent Commissioners came from civil service backgrounds with little or no experience in party politics: Walter Hallstein, Jean Monnet, Sicco Mansholt. Monnet, for example reflects the anti-party sentiments common among technocrats in his comments on joining a political party: "How can one affiliate to a system over which one has no control? ... To belong to a [political] party, the very phrase repels me." [21] When governments do send politicians, they often send individuals who are just below the top rank. [22] In many cases, they are senior politicians who are ready to withdraw from the partisan exchanges of the past. For example, Britain's Conservative government nominated Neil Kinnock, the former Labour party leader who had withdrawn from party leadership after his party's 1992 electoral defeat. France recently named a former prime minister to the Commission, Edith Cresson, but her career was on the decline after her short and inglorious experience as prime minister. One Commissioner, noting the trend to appoint those nearing retirement, noted "It is akin to being put out to pasture." Whatever the stage of the nominee's career, governments generally send individuals with an interest in and a commitment to Europe to serve on the Commission. They avoid nominations of members of extremist parties or of individuals from extremist factions within the major parties. [23]

The political heterogeneity of the Commission leads to the avoidance of openly partisan positions. Partisan preferences tend to be muted and to be filtered through the sieve of Union values and priorities. Since the Commission's proposals must always be approved by a Council made up of a variety of national party leaders, openly partisan stands must be avoided. The Commissioners also know that their success in presenting new Union policies and in administering the existing policies depends upon their own internal unity, which is best assured by skirting ideological or partisan stands.

Of course, ideological views are present in the Commission and find their way into policy proposals. For example, the Social Charter was strongly influenced by the socialist orientations of Jacques Delors, president of the Commission and a French socialist, and of Greece's Vasso Papandreou, the Commissioner charged with the preparation of that proposal. But there are also examples of Commissioners who seem to ignore their ideological roots once in Brussels. For example, the current Commissioner in charge of competition is Karel Van Miert, a Belgian and former socialist deputy. His socialist party background might lead us to expect that he would be tolerant of dirigiste policies and government subsidies to troubled industries. But this has not been the case; Van Miert has been a vigorous opponent of efforts by national governments to subsidize their industries.

On the whole, there is little evidence of openly partisan or ideological wrangling within the Commission. Party backgrounds and ideologies rarely intrude into the Commission's otherwise open discussion and debate. The absence of partisanship is not necessarily a positive feature. The Commission is usually seen as the driving force of European unification; the limitation of party influence in the Commission leaves political parties out of shaping the direction of integration and most of the specific policies that emanate from that body.

## Parties and the European Council of Ministers

The same mixture of many parties is found in the European Union's Council of Ministers. This body is made up of government ministers, usually parliamentary or party leaders, from each of the member states. Since there is always a difference in the party composition controlling the fifteen national governments -- ranging from socialists to Christian democrats to conservatives and others, there is always a diversity of parties present in the Council. Council participants are national ministers who are also usually top rank politicians. Party considerations tend to be greater on the Council than on the Commission because of this. However, the very diversity of parties represented on the Council and the varying agendas for similar parties from different countries keeps partisan posturing at a minimum.

Another feature of the EU Council of Ministers sometimes further weakens party alignments. The Council's membership varies with the subject matter under consideration. For example, when agriculture is on the agenda, it is the ministers of agriculture who meet; when it is transportation, it is the ministers of transportation. This compartmentalization of Council policy making allows ministers with strong personal attachments to the issue that may not correspond with their own parties' preferences to act according to their consciences. For example, ministers of the environment often find themselves neglected in their domestic councils of ministers; at the European level they meet with kindred spirits and can blame any departures from party line to constraints of bargaining with their European colleagues. A recent example came in 1992 when the ministers of health meeting as a EU Council of Ministers directed the Commission to draft new guidelines on health and nutrition, issues that were highly sensitive in several countries. The Commission soon backed away from that volatile issue too but the point is that compartmentalization permitted ministers at the European level to shunt aside party and domestic political considerations that could not be avoided at the national level.

An additional factor at work in minimizing partisan influences is the Council's norm of seeking consensus. Even though rules now allow more decisions to be made by majority or qualified majority votes on the Council, in practice the Council continues to strive for policies that all members will accept. This places the emphasis on consensus-building rather than on partisanship.

The Council is the EU body most explicitly tied to national governments but Council participants tend to focus on defending national interests and issues of sovereignty rather than on domestic political matters. The secrecy and less publicity of most EU Council sessions allows the avoidance of partisan politics, both domestic and European. Indeed, it is not unusual for highly partisan politicians to take very accommodating and non-partisan stances at odds with their usual ideological orientations in Brussels that they would never adopt in their national capitals.

Finally, the operation of the Council usually reflects intergovernmental negotiations where specific party considerations within countries as well as between them are rarely evident. Here, the legacy of the EU as an international organization continues to influence its policy-making processes. When the Council is divided, the cleavages are more often along the lines of national interests or big nations versus little nations or less-developed southern states against more-industrialized northern countries. It is highly unusual for EU Council of Ministers participants to align themselves along party distinctions in their deliberations on EU policy. EU Council ministers who are not on speaking terms with members of rival parties at home sit alongside other EU ministers from parties allied with their domestic opponents. One of the rare occasions when party considerations intruded into EU Council of Ministers activities occurred earlier this year when several ministers participating in Council meeting refused to greet or shake hands with the Italian minister who was associated in domestic politics with the Italian neo-fascist party.

## Parties and the European Parliament

Unlike the muted party presence in the Council and the Commission, parties are very much in evidence in the European Parliament. Members of the European Parliament have formed party groups that cross national lines. In the current Parliament, there are nine groups, all of which include deputies from three or more countries. (See Table 3.) The members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sit and vote as parties rather than as national delegations. Voting cohesion within the groups is high although not as strong as in comparable parties at the national level. The groups meet regularly to discuss positions and issues. Each has its own secretariat and staff, with size varying according to the number

of MEPs in the group. Speaking time on the floor of Parliament is allocated to the party groups, again according to their size.[24]

Despite the parties' presence in Parliament, they are able to exert little influence over the Union's life. It was once fair to explain this by referring to the Parliament's own limited role. But the European Parliament is now emerging as a more effective and powerful force in EU affairs and in setting the agenda for European decision-making.[25] But the parties that are found there still have little voice in shaping European decisions or setting priorities for Europe. While the party groups play highly visible roles in the European Parliament, they are at best only weak reflections of the powerful national parties found in the EU member states.

Voting cohesion within the various European Parliamentary groups is high.[26] This is often used to support the claim that national loyalties are set aside in favor of European perspectives. The cohesion is impressive given the fact that the European groups are nearly all coalitions of national parties who join together in Strasbourg for a variety of reasons, often more pragmatic than they are programmatic. Often members of the same European parliamentary group defend quite different positions from one another in their separate countries' domestic politics. In addition, several European parliamentary groups include two or more parties from the same country. For example, between 1989 and 1994, the Socialist group in Strasbourg had three rival Italian parties, two British, and two Belgian parties in its ranks. These parties oppose each other in national politics but come together on the European scene if only to allow them a place in a legislative group.

The cohesion of parliamentary groups is also somewhat misleading. Most of the votes of record in the European Parliament command broad, intergroup support. Cohesion between the major groups is probably nearly as great as that within groups. For procedural, pragmatic, and political reasons, parliamentary leaders always strive for consensus across party lines.[27] The body's rules of procedure call for the congress of party group presidents to "endeavour to reach a consensus on matters referred to it." This is part of the typical search for accommodation and consensus that is characteristic of all EU decision making. As one observer notes, Parliament's consensual method runs deep, and great effort is made to take on board as many views as possible.[28]

This non-partisanship is reflected in the comments of a British MEP who reported he enjoyed the European Parliament more than his service in the British House of Commons because "while both argued interminably, talk in the Commons was all about disagreement while in Europe it was directed to seeking agreement." [29]

There is also a good dose of pragmatism behind the search for broad majorities. Many parliamentary votes require special majorities: absolute majorities of the membership or two-thirds majority votes. Since no single party group has ever had more than a third of the seats and since absenteeism is high and a problem in meeting required absolute majorities, broad coalitions are needed.

Nearly all major votes feature the cooperation of the three largest groups -- the Party of European Socialists and the European People's party (Christian democratic) -- and the smaller Liberal, Democratic and Reformist group. Together, these three parties account for over two thirds of the votes in Parliament. Indeed, it is correct to speak about the situation in Strasbourg as a "party oligopoly" based on the long-term joint domination of Parliament by these three parties since the 1979 introduction of popular elections.[30]

The political reason for non-partisanship, equally important, is that strong the European Parliament sees itself in a contest for power with other EU institutions more than it sees itself as an arena for developing or expressing partisan differences. Broad, near unanimous votes in Parliament are seen as a means of enhancing the institution's voice in European affairs. This is especially the case over the last decade as the Parliament has unified in pursuit of its own power and prerogatives. Parliamentary leaders have called publicly for MEPs to vote only for those measures that will enhance the powers of the Parliament rather than on the merits of specific proposals.[31] As a result, more often than not, the struggle between the Parliament and the Commission or EU Council for greater parliamentary power overrides partisan concerns in the debates and votes in Strasbourg. A good case in point can be seen in the European Parliament's ratification of Jacques Santer as new EU Commission president in June 1994. After a sharp debate which focused more on the Parliament's need to be respected by other EU institutions, the Parliament narrowly approved Santer's nomination by a vote of 260 for, 238 against, and 23 abstentions. The issues were less Santer's partisan ties, qualifications for the job, or political positions than it was the MEPs desire to claim a greater say in EU politics. One

parliamentary leader stated their goal quite baldly: "We are determined not to be taken for granted. The net result of [this] vote [on Santer] will be greater parliamentary influence over the Commission." [32] It was an unusual coalition of Greek and Spanish socialists who did not want to embarrass their own governments, neo-fascists from Italy, and the bulk of the Christian Democrats who made up the narrow majority that endorsed Santer.

There are European-wide associations of the major party groupings that coincide with the European parliamentary groups: socialists, Christian democrats, and liberals. [33] Some observers had expected the transnational parties to acquire greater strength and meaning once the European Parliament shifted to a popular election. But that has not happened. After an initial growth in pan-European party activity in 1979, the transnational parties resumed their minor roles. [34] They remain weak, led by aging or second rate national party leaders, underfinanced, and often divided on European issues. They sometimes issue campaign statements for the European elections but these statements are then largely ignored at the national level when the campaigns get underway.

The party groups do play the key role in managing the affairs of the European Parliament with control over agenda, debate, and voting. To that extent, they have political significance. But these parliamentary groups have not developed close ties with their associated national parties nor have they built their own organizations at the national and grassroots level in the member states. The European "parties in parliament" have at best weak ties with the transnational parties that correspond to their political tendencies which in turn have only ephemeral linkages to the functioning national parties.

More than fifteen years after the introduction of a popularly elected European Parliament, there is no indication that the expected emergence of parties from that body -- as parties had developed in the history of most national parliaments -- has happened and nor is there much evidence that it may happen in the foreseeable future. At the national level, the governmental and policy-making institutions that parallel these European bodies are the principal arenas of party politics. If the political parties do not dominate these institutions in all the member countries, they are nevertheless clearly the principal actors. They are what make democracy work at the national level. On the European level, however, the parties are secondary or tertiary actors. Broadly excluded from the Commission and the Council, they do find a presence in Parliament. But they have more a symbolic presence rather than powerful role even in the European Parliament.

## THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL COMPETITION

In most democratic countries electoral competition is the lifeblood of the party system. Parties emerge to take part in that competition; they transform themselves in order to better compete. [35] The nature of electoral competition thus shapes the parties and their relationships to one another. There are very limited electoral opportunities in the emerging European state. As we have seen, the key positions on the Commission and Council are appointive ones linked to domestic politics. The only European electoral campaigns are those organized every five years to elect a Parliament still struggling to gain recognition as an important actor.

The shift to direct, popular elections of the MEPs beginning in 1979 might have been expected to produce new parties or changes in the existing parties. These elections offered a new set of political opportunities and a very different form of electoral arena. However, the anticipated party changes did not occur, not only because of Parliament's limited power, but at least equally because of the ways in which the elections occur. The European parliamentary elections are faulted in three ways: they attract less able politicians; they are conducted more as national elections over domestic issues than as European elections; and they fail as a means of linking citizens with European institutions, including the Parliament. Together, these deficiencies have prevented European electoral competition from either creating new European parties or transforming national parties to make them more concerned with European elections or issues.

The European Parliament has still to claim its power and prestige. As a result, those who run for the European Parliament tend to be second-level politicians, usually on the down side rather than the rising end of their careers. They also include politicians who have lost in national elections and need a temporary sinecure to hold them over until the next election at home. The few politicians of national repute elected to the European Parliament are usually among those who rarely attend. Recently, news

reports noted that one very prominent Italian leader had been in Strasbourg so rarely that when he did show up to vote on the accession of four new member states in 1994, he was unable to vote on the first two because he did not know how to use his voting card.[36] These may be influential leaders but they are not the kind of parliamentarians likely to exert important control over either the general processes of unification or the details of European policies. As the Parliament gains in stature and power, it may eventually attract more capable and interested politicians. In the meantime, it is clearly not an arena where ambitious party leaders find it useful to devote their time and partisan efforts.

The campaigns for the European Parliament are dominated by domestic rather than European politics. The parties that conduct these elections are the national ones and, in general, they do not take these elections very seriously. They devote less attention and resources to European elections than to national or even local elections. In some cases where public campaign finances are fixed, they even "save" some of the money given them for the European campaigns for other domestic political purposes.[37] The parties nominate less significant leaders for the European Parliament. More often than not, they conduct the campaign to serve domestic political objectives rather than to debate European issues. One observer correctly notes that European elections are simply national elections on a European scale.[38] Such campaigns offer opportunities for voters to express opinions on the parties' domestic records rather than on questions of European policy.

National politicians see the European elections as a time to conduct a mid-term referendum on the performance in office of the governing parties at home. As a consequence, European election campaigns are often frequently dominated by national issues rather than European ones. When European themes are elicited in the campaign -- and this is exceptional apart from a few minor parties who oppose integration as part of a broader critique of contemporary society, the debate focuses on the broad questions of how much integration is desirable and how fast it should proceed rather than on positions on specific policy issues likely to come before the European Parliament. The MEPs who are elected in such campaigns thus go to Strasbourg without a clear mandate from their voters.

Parties have a hard time asserting themselves on the European level because their own voters refuse to take them seriously as vehicles of their European viewpoints. Voters are less likely to follow the European elections and they turn out at the polls at much lower rates. Overall turnout for the 1994 European Parliamentary elections was the lowest ever. Indeed, contrary to expectations, electoral turnout has declined steadily in every European election: 63 percent in 1979, 61 percent in 1984, 58 percent in 1989, and 56 percent in 1994. In the largest countries (Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain), the 1994 turnout ranged from a low of 36.4 percent in Britain to a high of 74.8 percent in Italy, significantly lower than turnout for national or even local elections in every member country. European elections are seen as "second-order" elections -- elections that count for little -- since they do not affect the distribution of power on the national level or in the local city halls. It is national elections that voters still see, and correctly so, as the seat of real power. As a result, voters use European elections to send messages to the parties in power and to vote for smaller parties with narrow, single issue agendas that voters may support in such second order elections without losing a chance to be a part of making the decision of who rules. One observer notes that voters feel "liberated" in European elections and often use them as a time to vote against their preferred parties in order to vote for minor parties or to protest against their usual party.[39]

## NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND EUROPEAN POLITICS

Some observers note the difficulty in building a "new" European party system. The national parties are in place and they do not intend to yield their place to new European parties. Consequently, there has been no transfer of party sovereignty from national parties to transnational parties to match the shifts in sovereignty over policy matters.[40] Nor does such a transfer seem likely to occur. The principal parties, even when they are seemingly out of touch with the voters, are very adept at defending themselves against domestic challengers; they are likely to have even less trouble repelling threats to their preeminence from new or existing European transnational parties.

The national parties have largely stayed aloft from European issues. As I pointed out above, party alignments with respect to general political tendencies are not correlated with attitudes on the pace and goals of European integration. People's attitudes on Europe vary as much within the parties they claim

to support as between them. Consequently, the broader questions of European integration as well as specific policy issues under consideration are rarely issues of interparty debate in national politics. A good case in point was in the first round of the recent French presidential elections. The French president is clearly France's most prominent policy maker on Europe but European issues were nearly entirely left out of the campaign. Initially, it was thought that the campaign might include debates over Europe between the two leading Gaullist contenders. But the issue was scarcely discussed by these candidates or the other leading candidates. Only a minor candidate, Philippe de Villiers, who was able to muster less than five percent of the vote made Europe a prominent issue in his campaign.

The major parties in nearly all member countries seem curiously uninterested in addressing either the broad macroissue of how much and how fast integration and the microissues of specific policy positions on the broadening array of Brussels-based decision making. This is perhaps the greatest problem for those who see the national parties developing into appropriate vehicles for linking citizens with European policy concerns.

Evidence of the principal parties' unwillingness to address European issues can be seen in the troubled and lengthy process of ratifying the Maastricht Treaty.[41] Unlike the original Treaties of Rome that went through the national parliaments with very little or no debate, the Maastricht treaty ratification process produced lengthy and difficult debates in several countries with longstanding reputations as strong advocates of unification, notably Germany and France. In Britain, where European attachments are shallower, the process was especially painful taking 210 hours of parliamentary debate to deal with over 600 amendments before the third reading of the ratification document.[42] While it is easy to misinterpret the public debates over ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the principal parties clearly did not reflect the uneasiness of their voters about Europe. Table 4 shows the virtual unanimity of parliaments in supporting the treaty, a unanimity that was not reflected in public opinion polls and in the referendums that were held in the three countries holding referendums on the Maastricht Treaty. Consensus may still exist at the elite level but it appears that consensus at the popular level is no longer present. Yet public disquietude is not reflected in the principal government or opposition political parties.

A study of middle level party elites in several EU countries revealed remarkably little interest in European issues. In Germany, for example, 79-90 leaders from the major parties reported that European issues were rarely or never discussed at local party meetings even though the poll was conducted shortly before or shortly after European elections.[43] There are, of course, party activists who do become interested in European issues but they are usually unable to bring the issues to the forefront of their parties. These European specialists tend to be few in number, less involved in party policy setting, and less likely to be on the fast track to leadership positions.[44]

The only parties that directly take the issue of European unification to the people are fringe parties -- especially nationalist parties on the far Right. However, in most cases their evocation of European themes is used more as an ancillary theme to exploit public uneasiness about Europe. They seem more interested in expanding their electorates than to truly enter into the debate on Europe.[45] Usually these fringe parties and their voters have other items at the top of their agendas and address Europe as only a peripheral concern. So far these extremist parties bring along so many concerns about their commitment to democracy and internal authoritarianism that their electoral appeal is limited. Whether or not their success in exploiting economic nationalism suggests perhaps the beginning of a new social cleavage upon which a European party system may be founded -- one based on new parties espousing European or national approaches to economic and social issues -- is still very much unclear.

In summary, the national parties are not ready to assume the linkage function between citizens and the developing European polity. European integration remains a peripheral interest to most parties and not one seen as effective in mobilizing voters. To the extent that the parties address European issues, it is to deal with their national implications.[46]

## CONCLUSIONS

There are few signs of an emerging European party system either in the form of a set of new European parties or through national parties capable of addressing European concerns. This fact, more than the limitations on the power of the European Parliament, is the principal cause of the current

democratic deficit in the European Union. And this situation is likely to continue. Political party loyalties seem to endure even as the cleavages on which they were originally based change or disappear. The European institutions, including Parliament, are inimical to partisan politics. European elections have offered neither the competitive pressures nor the opportunities for ambitious leaders that might stimulate party transformation. The principal national parties remain little interested in European questions. These national parties are not likely to yield their preeminence to new ones at home or abroad. They have proved their durability in overcoming the party crises of the 1970s and early 1980s. New parties and alternative organizations have not had the impact on party systems that most thought they would. If the national parties can withstand such domestic challenges, they are well-placed to overcome any supranational rivals. And they can continue to ignore the European issues because their voters persist in seeing domestic issues as more important than European issues even in spite of the very real transfer of sovereignty to Brussels.

Political scientists and advocates of democratizing Europe can argue persuasively on behalf of a new European party system. But the fundamental reality of political party persistence is still unchallenged. As Peter Merkl put it:

Like old soldiers, it seems, old parties just about never die no matter how often they may have disgraced themselves. Worse yet, they do not even seem to have the decency to fade away in accord with long-range, secular erosion processes at their particular base. Instead, they hang on tenaciously to their strategic positions in the party system, taking advantage of the voters' inertia and lack of viable options and perhaps attracting new groups of supporters to make up for those whom they have alienated.[47]

Table 1 SUPPORT FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION BY POLITICAL FAMILY IN ALL EU MEMBER COUNTRIES, 1993

. Respondents identifying with the:

. Left Center Right

Positive 59% 55% 54%

Ambivalent 34 38 37

Negative 7 7 9

[Based on responses to two questions: "Generally speaking, do you think that (your country's) membership in the European Community is: good thing, bad thing, neither good nor bad?" and "In general, are you for or against efforts being made to unify Western Europe? For very much; for to some extent; against to some extent; against very much." Positive attitude required a "good" to the first question and "for very much" or "for somewhat" to the second question.]

Source: Eurobarometer 39, June 1993, p. A18.

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