Electoral Democracy and Political Representation in the European Union

Peter Mair
European University Institute
Florence
Peter.Mair@eui.eu

&

Jacques Thomassen
University of Twente
Enschede
J.J.A.Thomassen@utwente.nl

Abstract

This paper addresses two particular aspects of the much debated democratic deficit in EU governance – the capacity of parties at the European level to represent the will of the citizens of Europe, and the absence of a system of party government at the European level, whereby parties in the parliament lack the capacity to effectively control the governing bodies of the EU. We first evaluate the debate on the effectiveness of the supranational national system of political representation. We take issue with the traditional view that the European process of political representation fails mainly because political parties do not compete on so called European issues. We argue that this view is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and function of both the European Parliament and the national parliaments. We find that despite a poor process of political representation at the European level, European elections and political parties do not really fail as instruments of political representation. We then go on to address the absence of an intimate relationship between the parties in parliament and the European 'government'. An understandable reaction to this problem is often to recommend that the Union adapt to well known processes of representative government at the national level. Conventional solutions to this problem then seem fairly straightforward and involve combining representation with accountable government either through a full-blooded parliamentary system (the Commission becomes accountable to the EP) or through a full-blooded presidential system (the Head of the Commission becomes electorally accountable to the citizenry). Both involve variations of party government. We question the self evidence of this solution. The traditional systems of party government at the national level are no longer shining examples of effective and legitimate systems of representative government, and the conditions that facilitated the effective fusion of the functions of representation and of control of the government might well no longer pertain in contemporary democratic settings. In these circumstances, it might actually prove unwise to seek to replicate this process at the European level.

Introduction

One of the most persistent problems cited in analyses of the European Union as a political system is the so-called democratic deficiency of its institutions. Although this has become a major preoccupation within the literature, it is not always clear what precisely is meant when observers talk about the European democratic deficit. There are at least three aspects of the problem that can be distinguished. The first, and probably oldest aspect is the perceived lack of power of the European Parliament in the legislative process. Indeed the term 'democratic deficit' was first coined in a study of the European Parliament and its weaknesses (Marquand 1978). Since the time of that analysis, of course, the EP has become directly elected and its formal powers have steadily increased to a degree that has even encouraged one group of recent analysts to claim that 'the European Parliament has evolved from an elected consultative body to one of the most powerful elected assemblies in the world' (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006a): 3).

The second and third aspect of the democratic deficit can best be discussed against the background of the explicit ambitions of the European Union to be a representative democracy, and these are also the aspects on which we concentrate in this paper. The EU ambitions are clearly stated in the *Treaty on European Union* as amended in the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, and the two aspects of the democratic deficit that concern us in this paper are directly connected to the second and the third clauses of Article 10A. According to Article 10 *Treaty on European Union* (post Lisbon*)*:

1. *The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy.*
2. *Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. Member states are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.*
3. *Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.*
4. *Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.*

In the second paragraph of Article 10 (post Lisbon EU Treaty), two different channels of political representation are distinguished, the supranational channel that operates

via the European Parliament and through which citizens are directly represented at Union level, and the intergovernmental channel that operates via the national systems of political representation. There is a clear lack of symmetry here, however. Whereas the heads of states or governments of the member states in the Council are said to be democratically accountable either to their national parliaments, or to their citizens, nothing similar is said about the Council as an institution, or about the European Commission, the second key component of government at the European level. This, of course, reflects the reality of the present European institutions. In contrast to the national systems of representative democracy there is no European government that is democratically accountable either to the European Parliament or to the European people. At most, we can speak of the Commission as being in a limited sense accountable to the European Parliament in that the Parliament – in the words of the new post Lisbon EU Treaty – "shall elect" (Articles 14, 1 and 17, 7) the President of the Commission on the basis of a proposal put forward by a qualified majority in the European Council, in that it approves the membership of the Commission as a whole, and in that it may force the resignation of the Commission by passing a vote of censure. This creates the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby the Commission, as a body, "shall be responsible to the European Parliament" (Article 17, 8) while at the same time "in carrying out its responsibilities, [it] shall be completely independent" (Article 17, 3).

It is perhaps for this reason that Article 10 refers to "representative democracy" rather than "representative government". Citizens acquire voice at Union level through the EP in the sense of being directly represented. But they are not offered a means of mandating or holding electorally accountable the key institutions of Union government. The body that facilitates democratic representation, the EP, has no direct control over the actions of the bodies that govern. What we see here, then, and exceptionally in European political traditions, is a separation between representation, on the one hand, and government, on the other. The notion that we can have representation as such, or representation without an intimate connection to government, is quite alien to the European tradition of political representation. In that tradition, as can be seen in the member states, representation and government are combined through the aegis of party, and representative government takes the form of party government, with representative democracy operating as party democracy.

Parties in this model both represent citizens *and* control government, thus fusing the two functions. Since this is the model of representative government most people in most European countries are used to, the absence of an intimate connection between the parties (representing a working majority) in parliament, on the one hand, and the separated government, on the other, is often seen as a second aspect of the democratic deficit.

The third aspect of the democratic deficit is clearly connected to the fourth clause. Here, with a phrasing that was already included in the Maastricht treaty, it is stated that 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union'. Despite its phrasing as an empirical statement, this is obviously meant as a normative statement. At the same time, however, as the literature on the functioning of the European Union polity amply attests, there is a substantial body of opinion arguing that for several reasons the parties that operate at the European level actually fail to represent the will of the citizens of Europe. Although their role in this regard might well be seen as desirable by the various drafters of the various European treaties, the practice of party democracy at the European level appears to tell a different story.

In this paper we address these second and third aspects of the democratic deficit. In the next section we evaluate the debate on the effectiveness of the supranational national system of political representation. We take issue with the traditional argument that the European process of political representation fails mainly because political parties do not compete on so called European issues. We argue that this argument is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and function of both the European Parliament and the national parliaments. We find that despite a poor process of political representation at the European level, European elections and political parties do not really fail as instruments of political representation.

In section three we address the second aspect of the democratic deficit, the absence of an intimate relationship between the parties in parliament and the European 'government'. An understandable reaction to this problem is often to recommend that the Union adapt to well known processes of representative government at the national level. Conventional solutions to this problem then seem fairly straightforward and

involve combining representation with accountable government either through a full-blooded parliamentary system (the Commission becomes accountable to the EP) or through a full-blooded presidential system (the Head of the Commission becomes electorally accountable to the citizenry). Both involve variations of party government. We question the self evidence of this solution. The traditional systems of party government at the national level are no longer shining examples of effective and legitimate systems of representative government, and the conditions that facilitated the effective fusion of the functions of representation and of control of the government might well no longer pertain in contemporary democratic settings. In these circumstances, it might actually prove unwise to seek to replicate this process at the European level.

Political Representation at the European Level

In most of the political science literature on the theory and practice of democracy in Europe, the dominant model of political representation is assumed to be the *model of party government*. According to this model elections can function as an instrument of democracy when the following requirements are met (Thomassen 1994):

1. Voters do have a choice, i.e. they can choose between at least two parties with different policy proposals.
2. Voters do vote according to their policy preferences, i.e. they choose the party that represents their policy preferences best.
3. The internal cohesion of parliamentary parties is sufficient to enable them to implement their policies.
4. The party or coalition of parties winning the elections takes over the government.
5. Both the policy programs of political parties and the policy preferences of voters are constrained by a single ideological dimension.

These requirements are mostly self-evident. Parties can only convey a clear and unequivocal message to the voters and keep their promises after the elections if they are united and well disciplined, and the democratic effect of elections would be futile unless the elected (majority in) parliament has a say in the formation and the policies of the government. If the formation of the government and the policies adopted by the government were not derivative of the elected parliament, there would be no direct linkage between the will of the electorate and government policy. Voters can only

vote for the party closest to their own policy preferences when they have such preferences and also know where the parties stand on these issues. However, even when all these conditions are met, a single vote does not necessarily convey an electoral mandate with respect to any specific policy domain. Political parties offer a package deal to the voter. By voting for a particular party, voters are forced to vote for the whole package. The voter who is in favour of party A with respect to policy domain 1, but of party B with respect to domain 2, has no alternative but to choose for either one of them on the basis of his own idiosyncratic weights given to the different policy domains. This may be an acceptable solution for the individual voter, but at the level of the political system it means that there is no necessary relationship between the electoral majority and the policy majority on any specific issue.

This phenomenon is known as the Ostrogorski paradox (Ostrogorski 1902; Rae and Daudt 1976; Thomassen 1994), and as a consequence, as Dahl puts it, 'all an election reveals is the first preference of some citizens among the candidates standing for office' for 'we can rarely interpret a majority of first choices among candidates in a national election as being equivalent to a majority of first choices for a specific policy.' (Dahl 1956). The only solution to this paradox is that the parties, in the composition of their programs, and the voters, when they decide which party they will vote for, are constrained by the same one-dimensional ideology. Only then it is absolutely clear where the electoral majority stands in policy matters (Thomassen 1994). In Western Europe the left-right dimension is the most likely candidate to serve as the single dimension being able to connect the policy views of the electorate with public policy.

It might be obvious that this is a set of stringent and perhaps not totally realistic requirements – even at the national level - but they offer a useful conceptual framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the process of political representation in any polity. Many academic evaluations of the effectiveness of the system of political representation at European level explicitly or implicitly use this model as a frame of reference.

According to the dominant political science literature *none* of these essential requirements of the process of political representation operates effectively at the

European level. First, despite the increased - and perhaps underestimated - powers of the European parliament, it does not form and control a European government, for the simple reason that there is no such thing as a European government, at least not in any traditional sense of the concept. Therefore, as noted above, it hardly needs to be argued that at least one requirement of the system of party government, formation and control of the government by a majority in parliament, is not met. We come back to this in the next section. However, while this first requirement is clearly not met, this does not mean that the other requirements also fall by the wayside, and it is to these other requirements that we now turn our attention. These requirements refer to the process of representation in a more narrow sense, i.e. to the process linking the policy preferences of the people to the behaviour of parties in parliament.

The traditional verdict on this process is equally negative. According to the party government model political parties are supposed to supply different policy platforms for the voters to choose from. At the European level they do not. European political parties as such do not compete for the votes of a European electorate. European elections are fought by national political parties and mainly on national issues, with voters making their choices on the basis of their opinions on national issues and their perception of the position of national political parties on these issues. Voters also 'abuse' European elections by expressing a judgment on the incumbent national government. Seen in these terms, European elections fail as an instrument of democracy at the European level, i.e. they fail to express the will of the European people on European issues. The remedy for this failure, according to some observers, is for political parties to organize themselves at the European level and fight elections on European rather than national issues.

But although this argument may be generally accepted, we regard it as disputable on two grounds. First, it is based on the assumption that European elections and more in general the process of representation at the European level should refer to 'European issues', meaning issues dealing with the process of European integration as such. As a consequence the main dimension of contestation at the European level should be on the dimension of pro- anti further European integration. As we have argued elsewhere (Mair 2004; Mair 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999a), this argument is highly disputable. The very idea that elections for the European Parliament should be fought

on so-called European issues is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. It makes little sense to base a system of representation, and therefore a party system, on issues that are decided at a different level to that at which the representation takes place. Formal decisions on a further transfer of sovereignty from the national to the European level and on enlargement are subject to the intergovernmental regime of European decision-making. They need the consent of national governments and are, at least in principle, under the control of national parliaments and national electorates. Therefore, the interesting paradox is that what are usually called *European* issues are, in fact, *national* issues, and insofar as the existing party system fails to offer a meaningful choice to the voters on these issues, it is a problem of representation at the national rather than the European level[1]. The crucial test for the effectiveness of the European system of political representation is therefore the extent to which it is effective with regard to the more substantive policy areas in which the European Parliament is competent.

At first sight this argument does not take us much further, however, since it can hardly change the verdict on the European system of political representation. In other words, even if we are talking about substantive policy issues rather than the pro's and con's of integration, it remains true that European political parties as such do not compete for the votes of a European electorate, that European elections are fought by national political parties and mainly on national issues, that voters make their choice on the basis of their opinions on national issues, and so on. But this does not necessarily mean that these confused European elections fail as an instrument to 'express the will of the citizens of the Union.' Once we accept the argument that the European level of governance is mainly responsible for substantive rather than constitutional issues, then there is no reason to assume that the issues on the European agenda are very different from the policy agendas at the national level, particularly since the allocation of the main responsibility for particular issue areas to a particular level is only partly a matter of principle and is more often a consequence of economies of scale or simple boundary effects. If the relevant issue dimensions at

---

[1] This, of course, does not solve the problem. At the contrary, because in most countries opinions on 'Europe' are not related to the main dimension of contestation, the left-right dimension, national elections do not serve as an instrument of linkage with regard to this issue either. As a consequence time and again major political parties are taken by surprise by their own electorate in referenda on European treaties.

the European level are not really different those at the national level, one can expect the same dimensions of contestation to be relevant at both levels.

This means that there is no reason why we should expect the basic structure of the party system at the European level to differ from that at the national level, any more than we might expect the structures at national level in most systems to differ from those at the subnational level. To be sure, differences may exist. But there is no logical or necessary reason to believe that they will always be present. Quite the contrary: given the limited diversity in the roots of the party systems across most member states (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), it might seem eminently feasible to conceive of a (pan-)European system of political representation. The party systems in Europe, at least in Western Europe, are built on a more or less similar cleavage structure, particularly with regard to the traditional left-right divide. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have shown, the greatest variation – which is itself relatively limited – among the individual European party systems is owed to differences in the older pre-industrial cleavages, whereas the effect of the class cleavage has been to promote greater standardisation and uniformity in terms of party alignments across the European polities (see also Bartolini 2000). This means that even when national parties dominate European elections and voters vote on the basis of national cleavages and issue dimensions, the aggregation of these national systems in the European parliament can result in a party system that is hardly less competitive, in the sense of consisting of distinct and cohesive parties, than are the party systems at the national level.

The effectiveness of a European system of political representation depends on its ability to aggregate and integrate national political agendas and the national cleavage structures at the European level. The major challenge for an effective democratic political system at the European level is to overcome the traditional dividing lines in Europe, the national borders. The more political differences coincide with national borders, the more disruptive the politicization of these differences becomes. But the more political parties base their policy appeals on cross-national cleavages rather than on national interests, the more they compete on conventional transnational left-right issues, for example, the better they can serve their function of 'expressing the will of citizens of the Union'.

Therefore, even though there is not much of a *process* of political representation at the European level, elections for the European parliament – following the requirements of the party government model - might still serve this function if :

a.   Political parties of the same party family across member states develop similar programmes and profiles during their election campaigns;

b.   Their voters across Europe vote according to similar considerations;

c.   Being a member of a particular party group rather than national background defines the policy views and behaviour of members of the European Parliament.

The fifth requirement of the party government model can be translated in the requirement that the manifestos of parties of the same party family are strongly constrained by the same ideological dimensions and in particular by the left-right dimension, that members of the European Parliament are organized in political groups rather than in national delegations, that the behaviour of MEPs is constrained by their positions on the left-right dimension, and that voters across Europe vote mainly according to their position on the left-right dimension.

The available empirical evidence clearly shows that each of these requirements is met to a surprisingly strong degree. The compatibility of national party systems is relatively high due to roughly similar cleavage structures across Europe, particularly in the light of the standardising effects of the left-right divide. The manifestos of parties of the same party family are strongly constrained by the same ideological dimensions and in particular by the left-right dimension. Aggregating the positions of national parties on this dimension to the European level leads to distinct and cohesive party groups (Schmitt and Thomassen 2008), and the distinctiveness of the party system on the left-right dimension at the European level is hardly less than at the national level (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). European party groups are organised according to their position on the left-right dimension, and roll call votes can to a large extent be explained by MEPs' positions on the left-right dimension. Other dimensions, including the pro-anti-European integration dimension on which the Parliament lacks essential competence, hardly play a significant role (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006b; Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten 2004; Voeten 2008). This clearly

indicates that European party groups not only compete mainly along the left-right axis, but also that the aggregation of the main dimension of contestation from the national to the European level has been relatively successful.

In all countries of the European Union left-right position is amongst the most significant factors explaining party choice and the effect of left-right is about the same in all countries. In this sense one might speak of 'a single European electorate'(Van der Brug et al. 2008). This also means that the left-right dimension is a suitable vehicle for meaningful mass-elite communication across the European Union (Van der Eijk, Franklin, and Van der Brug 1999). As a consequence we can expect the process of political representation at the level of the European Union to be particularly effective with regard to the left-right dimension and issue domains that are correlated with it. And this indeed appears to be the case. Empirical evidence suggests that the party groups in the European parliament represent their voters (i.e. the voters of the national parties composing those party groups) relatively well on the left-right dimension (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999b).

Most of the empirical evidence sustaining this conclusion is based on empirical research conducted before the 2004 enlargement, and a possible problem of this enlargement that is often overlooked is that the cleavage structure and the dimensionality of the issue space of the developing democracies in Central and Eastern Europe does not easily fit in the cleavage structures shared by most of the democracies in Western Europe. If this would be the case it would no longer be possible to aggregate the national cleavage systems and the national systems of political representation and still have effective political representation at the European level. In the event, however, enlargement has not seriously affected either the competitiveness or the cohesion of the European party groups (Schmitt and Thomassen 2008; Voeten 2008), while the idea of a single European electorate, primarily motivated by a common left-right dimension, can still be validated (Van der Brug et al. 2008).

This leads us to conclude that the system of political representation *at the European level* functions much better than is often assumed to be the case. Despite the fact that there is no reads process of political representation at the European level, the

aggregation of the outcomes of national processes still leads to a reasonable congruence between the European electorate and the European Parliament. Of course, the empirical evidence we cite in support of this claim refers only to the left-right dimension which, while dominant, does not constrain all of the policy preferences of voters and political parties. It is also perhaps waning in importance, with competing dimensions of competition, most notably the authoritarian-libertarian dimension, appearing to become more powerful (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006) (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2004). This, however, is not a problem specific to European Union politics but is a reflection of the developments at the national level. Moreover, it bears repeating that our rather positive conclusion on the process of political representation refers to the *outcome* of the process rather than to the process as such. A full fledged system of political representation at the European level still asks for European political parties competing for the votes of a European electorate. But the available empirical evidence clearly indicates that such a system of political representation is at least feasible.

Party Government at the European Level

But even if we have an effective system of political representation linking the policy preferences of the European electorate to the preferences and behaviour of the parties in the European Parliament, we are still confronted with the remaining democratic deficit, which derives from the absence of a political link between (the working majority in) Parliament and the 'European government'. Does a full fledged system of political representation at the level of the European Union not ask for a system of party government? Is this not the essence of representative government?

It can probably be taken as axiomatic that the process of political representation in contemporary democracies requires the involvement of political parties, however minimally defined. As Dahl has repeatedly emphasised, the sheer scale of the modern democratic polity – and this is true in particular for the European polity – precludes an exclusive reliance on direct democratic procedures and requires instead the presence of intermediaries who can act on behalf of the citizenry. Democracy requires

representation,[2] and once the choice is made to select representatives by means of electoral contests – the 'only feasible solution' to meeting democratic requirements in a large political unit "is for citizens to elect their top officials and hold them more or less accountable through elections by dismissing them, so to speak, in subsequent elections" (Dahl 1998) – parties become inevitable. To be sure, these 'parties' may be simply individual candidates or they might be groups of candidates bound together only by a common label. They also may be tightly organised and disciplined mass parties, with claims to represent large swathes of voters throughout the polity. But regardless of their form, it is by virtue of the sheer fact of electoral contestation that we can speak of the presence and involvement of parties as being a necessary element within representative democracy. As Schattschneider famously put it "political parties created democracy and …modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties" (Schattschneider 1942): 1 [3]

The link between electoral democracy and party democracy is also reinforced by two other considerations that are particularly relevant in the European context. In the first place, electoral democracy and party democracy have always gone together in practice. Electoral democracy in Europe is still less than a century old, with the large majority of European polities admitting universal male suffrage in the decade leading up to 1917-18, and with universal female suffrage usually following shortly after. In all cases, without exception, this occurred within a context of more or less established party competition. Indeed, the formation of European parties, and often also the establishment of strongly-structured mass parties, predated the final completion of electoral democracy. If only for this reason, it is difficult to conceive of an electoral process which does not involve political parties and hence which is not also channelled alongside the system of party democracy. To conceive of elections without parties in the European context is to conceive of something of which we have no real-world experience.

The second consideration which is relevant here is that most long-established European democracies are parliamentary democracies, and hence involve parties as

---

[2] As John Stuart Mill put it in 1861: "The only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate….But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative" (quoted by Dahl 1998: 95).
[3] See also Przeworski (1991: 10): "Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections."

key actors in the organisation of the legislature and in the formation and maintenance of government. The two partial exceptions to the parliamentary mode are France, which has maintained a semi-presidential system since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958, and Switzerland, which operates with a collegial executive that does not require the maintenance of parliamentary support. In all other cases, executives are formed out of parliament and require the – contested – support of a majority or a working minority in parliament that is delivered by political parties. The parties also provide the members of the cabinet, develop at least the initial formulation of the policies that are to be implemented by government, and ensure the passage of legislation. As Gallagher et al (2005: 71-2) put it, "the existence of large and disciplined voting blocs is central to the practice of European parliamentary democracy." Without parties it is difficult to conceive of the proper functioning of parliament, and hence it is also difficult to conceive of the proper functioning of most European democracies.

In sum, the assumptions inherent in the conventional national conception of democracy seem relatively robust: Who says democracy says elections; and who says elections says parties. To translate these assumptions onto the level of the Union therefore implies not only a need for parties as representatives, which we already have (see above), but also a need for parties as governors, which we don't have.

Following the terms adopted in the new Treaty, the Union is founded on the principle of 'representative democracy' and political parties 'contribute …to expressing the will of the citizens'. This latter phrase catches perfectly Sartori's notion of the 'expressive function' of parties, a function that he sees as defining the *sine qua non* of parties and that emphasises the notion of party "as the agency which typically communicates the demands of the society to the state, as the basic link or connector between a society and its government" (Sartori 2005: 24). In the Union's usage, therefore, the parties can be seen as agencies that articulate the demands of the citizenry and hence enable democracy to be representative. In both Mill's and Dahl's usage, by contrast, as cited above, the purpose of elections, and hence of parties, is (also) to facilitate representative *government* and to ensure the accountability of 'top officials'. Parties in this sense not only offer voice to the citizens, as the Union treaty has it, but they also ensure democratic control of the executive. In the case of the Union, the parties

represent, and then their role ceases, whereas following the more traditional model of democracy, they also govern, or are responsible for governing or for ensuring the accountability of government. This also corresponds to the fourth item in the model of party government indicated above, whereby 'the party or coalition of parties winning the elections takes over the government.'

Seen in these terms, the democratic deficit in the Union is owed to the fact that parties have a single function in Union politics whereas they enjoy a double function in national politics. This also makes the deficit obvious to the citizens. It then follows that an easy remedy is to accord the parties that double function also in Union politics, and thereby to build a system of representative government as well as a system of representative democracy. This is, after all, how the member states operate and how the model of party government is supposed to work, and this is often the solution offered by those observers pleading for a means of overcoming the democratic deficit.

The remedy may be more problematic than is suggested by many of these observers, however, particularly in the contemporary era. As we noted above, the traditional systems of party government at the national level are themselves no longer shining examples of effective and legitimate systems of representative government, and are often characterised by their own democratic deficits, while the conditions that facilitated the effective fusion of the functions of representation and of control of the government no longer seem adequately to pertain. In brief, while parties at the national level may be institutionally or logistically necessary to the proper functioning of parliaments, and, indeed, to the proper functioning of elections in parliamentary systems; and while elections, and thereby parties, are also necessary to the proper functioning of national as well as European democracy, the parties themselves are beginning to experience considerable difficulty in justifying or legitimizing their position in this whole process (e.g., Dalton and Weldon 2005).

Parties were initially able to assume a key role in modern systems of representative government precisely because they integrated under one single tutelage two key roles: the offer of representation to the citizenry, on the one hand, and the capacity to organize government within the polity, on the other. More specifically, they were almost obliged to play both roles at the same time, in that the most effective way of

legitimising their role in government was by emphasising their capacity to represent. Combining a strong presence on the ground with a dominant role in public office, parties offered to democratic polities a unique capacity which remained unchallenged by any other groups or associations. This is how party democracy and party government gained both strength and legitimacy.

With time, however, and for a variety of inter-related reasons (Mair 2006), this unique contribution has come unstuck. With time, it appeared that parties have begun to lose their capacity and willingness to function as representative organizations, and have begun to lay commensurately more emphasis on their procedural functions and on their more specialized role as organizers of government within the polity. From having been largely 'private' and voluntary associations which developed within civil society, and which drew their legitimacy from their roots within civil society, parties increasingly subjected themselves to a regulatory framework which has the effect of according them a (quasi-) official status as part of the state. As the internal life and even the external activities of parties become regulated by public law, and as party rules become constitutional or administrative rules, the parties themselves became transformed into public service agencies, with a corresponding weakening of their own internal organizational autonomy (see Bartolini and Mair, 2001: 340). Parties further cemented their linkage to the state and to the public institutions by increasingly prioritising their role as governing agencies. In the terms adopted by the analysts of coalition formation, they became more office-seeking, with the winning of a place in government seeming to become increasingly an end in itself.

In part, these changes have been forced on parties. As European electorates modernized (Thomassen 2005), for example, the capacity of parties to represent large groups of voters was curtailed. Electorates became more individualized, interests became more particularized, and an increasingly competent and well-educated body of voters found other means of channelling their demands. Party networks also suffered, with parties increasingly operating as self-sufficient organizations that were no longer intimately linked with a complex of like-minded interest organisations, cultural associations, and the like. To adopt the powerful Dutch term, there was a

gradual fragmentation and breakdown of the old system of *verzuiling*, or pillarization, that had long sustained the leading position of the traditional mass party.

In part also, however, the changes were also welcomed and encouraged by the parties, or at least by their leaders. The catch-all and later cartel organizational styles adopted by parties in the last decades of the 20th century freed party leaders from the constraints imposed by strong electoral constituencies and demanding party memberships and thereby made it easier for these leaders to enter and manage government. In other words, by facilitating the ascendancy of the party in public office within the party organization as a whole, the new modes of party organization afforded leaders more strategic flexibility and made it easier for office-seeking motivations to predominate. The result is that while parties at the national level were used to combine representative and procedural roles, and while party democracy was built on that double-headed foundation, the balance later began to change. By the end of the 20th century, parties throughout Europe could mainly be characterised as governing organisations, or even as public utilities (van Biezen 2004; van Biezen and Kopecky 2007), while their representative role had become more marginalized and ineffective, being often passed on to other agencies and media.

Elsewhere (Mair 2003), it has been argued that this rebalancing of roles was part of a more or less necessary process of party adaptation: because they no longer functioned so effectively as representatives, parties sought to compensate by building up their role within the institutions. They may have grown less capable of giving voice to citizens, but they had also come to be regarded as an essential element in the functioning of democratic government. In effect, the parties had adapted to a new set of circumstances and would thereafter seek to survive in the context of a new organizational equilibrium. In fact, this prognosis now strikes us as unconvincing. Parties might well seek to compensate for diminished capacities in one direction with enhanced capacities in another, but there is no guarantee that they will prove successful in this. On the contrary: while parties might well have the capacity to govern at the national level, and be unchallenged – democratically – in this respect, the weakening of their representative role may mean that they become unable to legitimize that role. Parties may be able to fill public offices, but they may no longer be able to justify doing so. In other words, if parties as governors are to be trusted,

and if party government more generally is to be legitimate, it is likely that the parties must also be seen to be representative. Party democracy depends on this.

This then is the paradox. One reason why parties in the national polities in Europe are now seen to be less representative of the citizenry is because representation itself has become more difficult – particularly in large-scale democratic polities (Andeweg 2005). However, parties have also become less representative because they have laid more emphasis on the need to govern, and on the need to maintain the sort flexibility that is required in the political executive of the modern polity. Parties are less representative, in other words, because they need to govern, with the demands of efficient government seeming to outweigh those of outweigh those of representative government. In the past, parties needed to be representative in order to govern; today, these goals are more likely to run counter to one another.

But this also begs other questions, and it is these that take us back to the European Union as a distinct form of political system. Given the distinct circumstances whereby parties and elections are disconnected from governing at the European level, and given the distinct circumstances in which a notion of representative democracy is promoted in the absence of representative government, it might well be that there is more opportunity for parties to emerge – and survive – at the Union level with a more or less exclusively representative role. In this sense, the current practice at the European level might offer a much more effective mode of political representation than that which is possible at the level of the member states. To be sure, parties at the European level will suffer from some of the same problems as those at national level in that representation as such will also prove more difficult – and perhaps even more difficult – at this level. But other problems will not be evident, and in particular they will differ from the national parties in not running the risk of being led away from their representative roles by the demands and appeals of governing.

Representation and Government at the European Level

Increasingly, it seems that the conditions favouring the fusion of the two functions of representation and government no longer easily pertain. Parties either govern, and accept that they are not trusted as representatives, or, as is the case of many of the new populist parties of the left and right, they emphasize representation and shy away

from governing. To put it another way, the experience of the national polities in Europe suggests that the demands of government are proving more and more difficult to align with the assumptions of representative democracy, leading to a growing tension at the heart of the systems of representative government in modern Europe. Should this continue to be the case, then perhaps the most important role that parties can play in contemporary democracy is that of representative *pur sang*, an agency that gives voice to citizens and that represents their interests to those who govern, but that does not take on that governing role itself. And while it might be difficult to conceive of such a shift taking place at the national level, this comes very close to how parties actually operate at the European level. Following this reasoning, in other words, what is currently seen as a democratic deficit may well offer the basis for a much more robust and legitimized system of representative democracy.

Of course, any such conclusion clearly runs counter to the strong argument that the democratic deficit of the European Union should be remedied by introducing a full fledged form of party government at the European level. As noted before, the powerful legitimizing argument implied by the model of party government is that if all of its requirements are met, government policy will then prove be congruent with the policy preferences of (the majority of) the electorate. This strong democratic appeal is eloquently phrased by Arnold-Foster:

> 'How is this country governed? *By the government* is the first answer that you will be likely to give, and in a way the answer is right. *But who governs the Government?* The answer is that Parliament does. But last of all, *who governs Parliament?* And the answer to that is that the *People of this Country* govern Parliament. And so you will see that the real answer to the question 'Who governs the country' is that 'the country governs itself'.

As beautiful as this rhetoric may sound, however, the practice of party government is less convincing. In Arnold-Foster's image of democracy the democratic process is presented as two consecutive principal-agent relationships, between the people and Parliament and between parliament and the government. If in both cases the agents follow the will of their principals, government policy will be in line with the will of the people. In reality both relationships are problematic.

The first problematic assumption is that Parliament controls the government. According to the rigid logic of the party government model there can hardly be a friction between the majority in parliament and the government does nothing more than implement the election manifesto of the single party (in the case of a single party government) or the pre-election policy agreement of the coalition parties to which both the government and the majority in parliament are committed. But this, of course, is a highly abstract argument[4]. Party manifestos and coalition agreements are limited in scope and more often than not are overtaken by developments in society not foreseen when the documents were written (Manin 1997). Also, the practice in parliamentary democracies usually is that parliament does not really control the government, but that it is the party in government that controls its parliamentary party. According to Lijphart the dominance of the cabinet vis-à-vis Parliament has even become one of the defining characteristics of a majoritarian system of democracy[5], despite the theoretical insistence that this particular relationship is supposed to be reversed (Lijphart 1999):12).

This implies, first, that the system of *responsible government* exists in name only. The responsibility of ministers to parliament can only be an effective instrument of power of Parliament if parliament is free to use that power. Second, it underlines how the intimate relationship between government and (the majority in) parliament can undermine the principal-agent relationship between the people and parliament.

There is one crucial sense in which the notion of representation that has come to be associated with the contemporary party government model differs from that which prevailed in the early phases of representative government. Then, the emerging political parties and the members of parliament worked to represent *somebody* to *somebody else* (Birch 1971)Sartori 1968). In other words, representation formerly

---

[4] For an extensive criticism of the mandate theory of of democracy implied by the party government model, see a.o. McDonald, M.D, and I Budge. 2005. *Elections, Parties, Democracy. Conferring the Median Mandate.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, Powell, G.B. 2000. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy. Majoritarian and Proportional Visions.* New Haven: Yale University Press, Riker, W.H. 1982. *Liberalism versus Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice.* San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.
[5] A majoritarian model of democracy can be seen as the ideal-typical institutional embodiment of the model of party government.

involved three elements: those who were represented, those who did the representing, and those – the king, the monarchy, the state apparatus – to whom representation was made. With advent of party government, by contrast, this was reduced to just two elements: those who are represented, and those who *both* do the representing *and* to whom representation is made – with both the latter elements being fused within one system of party government. In other words, those who do the representing have now also become those to whom representation is made, and the two elements are no longer distinguishable.

If voters see no difference between government and their representatives, then they might begin to wonder who is representing them to their representatives. This is a question perfectly understood by populist parties and politicians who tend to appeal to these feelings of being excluded by a closed conglomerate of government, political parties and the state bureaucracy. In effect, parliament within the model of party government loses the capacity to function in the way that Edmund Burke once favoured: 'The virtue, spirit and essence of a house of commons consists in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation. It was not instituted to be a control *upon* the people………..It was designed as a control *for* the people.' (as cited in (Sartori 1976): 19).

If one wants to avoid these anomalies in the nascent system of representative democracy at the European level one might therefore want to design a system of government in which once again three different actors can be distinguished in the process of political representation, and hence a system in which parliament focuses more exclusively on its traditional tasks of representing the people and overseeing the government on behalf of the people. It is of course beyond the scope of this paper to present a blueprint of such a system. But there are at least three alternatives to be considered for Europe, each with its own pros and cons.

The first one is a continuation of the present situation. The least one can say of it is that it prohibits a fusion between the tasks of representation and governing. Although there has been some movement towards the parliamentary model, the relationship between the Commission and Parliament is far removed from a parliamentary system or a system of party government. The main differences are that a parliamentary

majority cannot 'hire and fire' the executive at will (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006a): 13) and that there is no direct relationship between the outcome of the elections for the European Parliament and the composition of the Commission. This, of course, is what we referred to above as the second aspect of the democratic deficit. But in light of our argument so far the present situation might a blessing in disguise, in that it prevents the replacement of an institutional separation of powers by a political separation of powers, in which the Commission would be able to control the majority in parliament. It also gives all parliamentary groups ample leeway to focus on the task of representing the European people.

A second possible solution is more in line with parliamentary history in several European countries, i.e. in those countries which can be characterised as reflecting a consensus rather than a majoritarian type of democracy. Whereas the majoritarian model can be seen as the institutional embodiment of the party government model,[6] a consensus model is in several respects its opposite. The most important difference is the more balanced relationship between parliament and government in the latter, and instead of the legislature being dominated by the executive, parliament as an institution is in a better position to control the government. As the original prototype of a consensus democracy, the development of the Dutch political system offers an interesting example here. Although formally a parliamentary system it is often described as a system of 'limited dualism', with dualism being taken to mean that government and parliament have distinctive roles and responsibilities, and a balance that is more akin to the separation of powers that one would expect to find in a presidential system. This in contrast to 'monism' which refers to the absence of a clear distinction between Parliament and Cabinet (Andeweg and Irwin 2005): 130). In other words, the institutional separation of powers is more important than the political separation of powers between governing parties and opposition parties.

However, as much as this 'two-body image' (Andeweg and Nijzink 1995; King 1976) might still serves as a normative model in the Dutch case, it no longer fully corresponds to Dutch realities. Since the 1960s the institutional separation of powers

---

[6] The prototype of a majoritarian or Westminster model, the British political system, served as a model for the authors of the famous report 'Toward a More Responsible Two-Party Sytem' of the American Political Science Association published in 1950. Association, American Political Science. 1950. *Toward a More Responsible Two-party System.* New York: Rinehart & company, Inc.…

between government and parliament has gradually yielded to a more political separation of powers between the parties in government and the opposition. Coalition agreements have become more important, binding not only the ministers but also the parliamentary parties making up the government majority. Paradoxically, this development has long been loathed by a clear majority of the individual members of parliament who speak as if it were beyond their power to stop it. (Andeweg and Thomassen 2007; Andeweg and Irwin 2005). In effect, the Dutch experience offers ample proof that a fusion of the tasks of representing and governing seems to be inevitable if the separation of these tasks is not institutionally imposed.

A more radical institutional solution to keep government and parliament apart is therefore the introduction of a directly elected president of the Commission, modelled after the American presidential system. There seems to be a general agreement in the literature that the US Congress is more powerful vis à vis the Executive than most European parliaments, not despite but because of the separation of powers. For the same reason the representative function is less easily be confused with the governing function. At the same time the objections against a presidential system are obvious. First, it contrasts with the parliamentarist traditions of most members of the European Union. Secondly, the direct election of the president of the Commission by the European people would enormously increase his legitimacy and therefore indirectly his power vis à vis Parliament and the member states. Whether or not this is an attractive prospect depends on one's view on European unification.

References

Andeweg, R., and J.J.A Thomassen. 2007. Binnenhof van binnenuit. Tweede Kamerleden over het functioneren van de Nederlandse democratie. Den Haag: Raad voor het openbaar bestuur.

Andeweg, R.B., and H.W. Nijzink. 1995. Beyond the Two-Body Image; Relations between Ministers and MPs. In *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, edited by H. Doering. Frankfurt/New York: Campus/St.Martin's Press.

Andeweg, Rudy B, and Galen A Irwin. 2005. *Governance and Politics in the Netherlands*. 2th ed. Houndmills etc.: Palgrave.

Association, American Political Science. 1950. *Toward a More Responsible Two-party System.* New York: Rinehart & company, Inc.

Bartolini, S. and P. Mair. 2001. Challenges to Contemporary Political Parties. In Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (eds.), *Political Parties and Democracy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 327-43.

Birch, A.H. 1971. *Representation*. London: Pall Mall.

Dahl, R.A. 1956. *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dahl, R.A. 1998. *On Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dalton, R.J. and S.A. Weldon. 2005. Public images of political parties: A necessary evil? *West European Politics* 28(5): 931-51.

Gallagher, M., M. Laver and P. Mair. 2005. *Representative government in modern Europe*, 4th ed. New York: McGraw Hill

Hix, S., A.G. Noury, and G. Roland. 2006a. *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hix, S., A.G. Noury, and G. Roland. 2006b. Dimensions of Politics in the European Parliament. *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2):494-511.

Hooghe, L., G. Marks, and C. Wilson. 2004. Does left/right structure party positions on European integration? In *European Integration and Political Conflict*, edited by G. Marks and M. Steenbergen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

King, A. 1976. Modes of Executive-Legislative Relations; Great Britain, France, and West Germany. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 1 (1):11-36.

Kitschelt, H. 1994. *The Transformation of European Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kriesi, H., H. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Bornschier, and T. Frey. 2006. Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space; six European Countries Compared. *European Journal of Political Research* 45:921-956.

Lijphart, A. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries.* New Haven Yale University Press.

Lipset, S.M, and S Rokkan. 1967. Cleavage Stuctures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction. In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross National Perspectives*, edited by S. H. Lipset and S. Rokkan. New York: The Free Press.

Mair, P. 2003. Political Parties and Democracy: What Sort of Future? *Central European Political Science Review* 4 (13): 6-20.

Mair, P. 2004. The Europeanization Dimension. *Journal of European Public Policy* 11 (2):337-348.

Mair, P. 2005. Popular Democracy and the European Union Polity. In *European Governance Papers*.

Mair, P. 2006. Polity-Scepticism, Party Failings, and the Challenge to European Democracy. *Uhlenbeck Lecture* 24. Wassenaar: Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study.

Manin, B. 1997. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marquand, D. 1978. Towards a Europe of Parties. *Political Quarterly* 49 (4):425-445.

McDonald, M.D, and I Budge. 2005. *Elections, Parties, Democracy. Conferring the Median Mandate.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ostrogorski, M. 1902. *Democracy and the American Party System*. New York: MacMillan.

Powell, G.B. 2000. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy. Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rae, D.W., and H. Daudt. 1976. The Ostrogorski Paradox: a Peculiarity of Compound Majority Decision. *European Journal of Political Research* 4:391-398.

Riker, W.H. 1982. *Liberalism versus Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Sartori, G. 1976. *Parties and Party Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sartori, G. 2005. Party Types, Organisation and Function. *West European Politics* 28(1): 5-32.

Schattschneider, e.E. 1942. *Party Government: American Government in Action*. New York: Rinehart and Co.

Schmitt, H, and J.J.A Thomassen, eds. 1999. *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schmitt, H., and J. Thomassen. 2008. Towards a European party system? In *The legitimacy of the European Union after enlargement*, edited by J. Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Thomassen, J.J.A, ed. 2005. *The European Voter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomassen, J.J.A, and H. Schmitt. 1999a. In Conclusion. In *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*, edited by H. Schmitt and J. J. A. Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomassen, J.J.A. 1994. Empirical Research into Political Representation: Failing Democracy or Failing Models. In *Elections at Home and Abroad; Essays in Honor of Warren Miller*, edited by M. K. Jennings and T. E. Mann. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Thomassen, J.J.A., A.G. Noury, and E. Voeten. 2004. Political Competition in the European Parliament: Evidence from Roll Call and Survey Analysis. In *European Integration and Political Conflict*, edited by G. Marks and M. R. Steenbergen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thomassen, J.J.A., and H. Schmitt. 1999b. Issue Congruence. In *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*, edited by H. Schmitt and J. J. A. Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Biezen, I. 2004. Political Parties as Public Utilities. *Party Politics* 10 (6): 701-722.

Van Biezen, I. and P. Kopecky. 2007. The State and the Parties: Public Funding, Public regulation and rent-Seeking in Contemporary Democracies. *Party Politics* 13 (2): 235-54.

Van der Brug, W., M. Franklin, M. Popescu, and Tóka. G. 2008. Towards a European Electorate; One Electorate or Many? In *The Legitimacy of the European Union after Enlargement*, edited by J. J. A. Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van der Eijk, C., M. Franklin, and W. Van der Brug. 1999. Policy Preferences and Party Choice. In *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*, edited by H. Schmitt and J. J. A. Thomassen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Voeten, E. 2008. Enlargement and the 'Normal' European Parliament. In *The Legitimacy of the European Union after Enlargement*, edited by J. J. A. Thomassen: forthcoming.