

PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

6. Transnational politics¹

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

Party politics in the European Union

The main setting of transnational party politics in the European Union is the European Parliament. In Lijphart's model (see the second topic), the EU is one of the prominent examples of consensus democracies. Although it is not a federation like the United States, for the sake of easier understanding, one can imagine the EP as the lower house of a bicameral parliament in a federative country. In this analogy, the Council would be the upper house. So, staying at the categories of Lijphart's model, we are looking at a symmetric bicameral legislature.

Of course, there are numerous differences between the structure of the union and that of a traditional federation. To name one, the Council and the Parliament do not have the right of initiative, that is reserved by the Commission. In this sense they are very different from traditional legislative bodies.

Since 1979, members of the European Parliament are elected directly by the citizens of member states. With direct elections came the need for national parties to organize themselves on the supranational level. First, they remained a loose alliance of national political parties and their institutionalization was sped up much later, when the Maastricht treaty explicitly recognized "parties at the European level" in 1992.

Main Europarties

The most prominent parties institutionalized at the European level are the Christian democratic-conservative European People's Party, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, and the liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (currently participating under the

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name Renew Europe). These parties have the three largest parliamentary groups in the European Parliament. There are however other groups. The right-wing nationalist Identity and Democracy, the Greens, the European Conservatives and Reformists, and The Left also have their own groups. There are also a number of so-called non-inscrits. They are representatives who did not join any of the aforementioned groups.

Europarties are European level alliances of national parties. They have their own organizational structure, internal institutions and rules, but at the end of the day, they still consist of traditional political parties.

Elections to the European Parliament

The European Parliament had 751 members (including its president) until 2020. With Brexit, the number of MEPs had decreased to 705. Each member states receives seats based on its population size. Elections are held every five years, at the same time, but organized on a national level. The electoral system used varies by country, however, member states all have to use some form of proportional method. The overwhelming majority uses a party list based PR system for electing the MEPs.

This is another way the European Union resembles a consensus democracy. The proportional electoral system allows smaller groups to be represented but does not produce an absolute majority in the legislatures, which compounds the constant need for compromises on a European level.

Second-order elections

The most influential scientific model explaining the outcomes of elections to the European Parliament is the second-order election model of Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt. One of their main assumption is that at these supranational elections, there is *less at stake*. This generally leads to lower levels of participation at the European elections since the voters do not consider them that significant. Small and new parties often perform better than on first-order (e.g. national legislative) elections, because voters are willing to support alternatives that are less likely to win. Government parties often underperform their national results because these elections provide a protest opportunity for their dissatisfied supporters. These assumptions of prove true for most European countries. Turnout is generally lower than on national elections, and results can differ greatly from first-order competitions.

This theory considers European elections as dependent on national politics. Such an approach was warranted (especially when the original research was conducted in 1979) because in the past decades, these elections did seem like secondary domestic political events. While campaigns sometimes feature European elements, the campaigns focus on



national issues and are different in each member states. This creates a situation where European level politics had been influenced by national issues than European level topics.

Spitzenkandidaten

The Spitzenkandidaten system (the word means leading candidate in German) is an informal attempt to improve the legitimacy of European elections and to increase participation. The idea was that the President of the Commission would be the candidate of the party that gained the most seats in the EP. This way, voters would know how their vote affects the leadership of the European Union. However, the system was somewhat abandoned in 2019 – the European People’s Party won the relative majority of seats, but due to political compromises made after the election, it was not their preannounced candidate, Manfred Weber, who became president but another Christian democrat, Ursula von der Leyen. Since the Spitzenkandidaten system is informal, there is no European rule enforcing it and parties are allowed to disregard it.

The Spitzenkandidaten system is a possible solution for a problem that is often considered as a disadvantage of consensus democracy, multiparty systems and proportional electoral rules as discussed in previous topics. No party has a chance to gain an absolute majority in the parliament, so forming a coalition is always necessary – this is usually accomplished by the three establishment parties, the socialist, the liberals and the conservatives. Even if seat shares shift, it is always the most likely that these three groups will make the most important decisions on the European level. In this situation, the value of voting in the elections is low as the effects of supporting one or the other of the parties is unclear. The Spitzenkandidaten system does not fundamentally change this situation but it improves the visibility of the winner and promises a clear connection between the votes and the election outcome.

Literature

Katz, R. S., Crotty, W. J., & SAGE. (2014). Handbook of party politics. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). Nine second-order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results. European Journal of Political Research, 8, 3-44. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.1980.tb00737.x

Questions

1. Which model of democracy does the European Union resemble more? What institutional arrangements indicate this?
2. What is one of the main the difference in the powers of the European Parliament and those of a national legislature?



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3. What prompted the creation of European level parties informally? When and how were they formally recognized?
4. What are the main establishment Europarties? Compare them to national political parties!
5. How many members does the European Parliament has and why did it change recently?
6. How are the seat numbers assigned to member states?
7. What type of electoral system is used for elections to the European Parliament?
8. What are the main assumptions of the second-order election model?
9. Explain the Spitzenkandidaten system!
10. What is the advantage of the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten?



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