EUI Working Papers
SPS 2008/10

Party Government in the EU:
On the Road to Presidentialization?

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the growing importance of the European Union has changed the internal dynamics of national political parties. It can be shown that European integration strengthens national party elites, and this is particularly the case when parties are in government. At the same time, MEPs operate fairly detached from their national parties even though the European Parliament has become an important actor in the legislative process of the European Union. Given that ever more national policies are decisively moulded by the EU, national political parties and parliaments have experienced an erosion of their control over policy formulation. These findings raise important questions about the limits of party government within the European Union.

Keywords

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European integration has thoroughly changed politics in Europe – this is clearly stating the obvious. Unsurprisingly, there is a large and growing body of research investigating the varying effects of European integration under the heading of 'Europeanization', which is a research agenda rather than a clearly defined concept (Olsen, 2002, Carter et al., 2007). One of the dominant perspectives concentrates on the way national institutions and actors have changed as a result of the ongoing process of European integration (Börzel and Risse, 2000). Research on this so-called 'top down' process of Europeanization has focussed on virtually all conceivable actors and institutions including parliaments, interest organizations, NGOs, governments, bureaucracies, the media etc. – except political parties as extra-parliamentary organizations.

To be sure, this statement is a slight exaggeration, and the author of this contribution is part of a relatively small contingent of researchers who have attempted to shed some light on how national political parties have changed in response to the growing importance of the EU for national politics and policies (Poguntke et al., 2007a). Other notable exceptions, both theoretical and empirical, include Bomberg, 2002, Ladrech, 2002 and Lord, 2002. Still, it remains remarkable that political parties were largely ignored in the debate over Europeanization which gained momentum as a result of a number of fairly fundamental EU reforms beginning with the Single European Act (1987) and leading via Maastricht (1993), Amsterdam (1999), Nice (2003) to the (failed) constitutional treaty (2004) and now the Treaty of Lisbon (2007).

One explanation for this might be found in the specific nature of European integration which started out as a relatively technocratic project steered by an intergovernmental logic. European unification was driven forward (albeit slowly) by national governments and a growing body of bureaucrats. It was only when direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) were introduced in 1979 that political parties entered into the picture. While virtually all members of national governments who had been involved in European decision-making were party politicians, it was only now that the *parties as organizations* actively entered European politics for the first time. Even though European elections remained second-order elections fought along national (not European!) political battle lines (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Marsh and Franklin, 1996; Weber, 2007), they were *European* elections and this attracted considerable attention from psephologists around the globe (see, for example Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999b; Katz and Wessels, 1999).

Correspondingly, the now directly elected EP and its parliamentary groups quickly became another important focus of political research. After all, the parliamentary party groups were a truly European actor (see, for example Wessels, 2005, Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999a; Raunio and Hix, 2000). In addition, the introduction of direct elections to the EP re-vitalized the somewhat dormant moves to create European party federations, and this also attracted some attention from the ranks of the party researchers (Bardi, 2005, Niedermayer, 1983).

National political parties have oddly fallen by the wayside. Since they are national actors who essentially select all European decision-makers, it is plausible to expect that the growing decision-making competence of these party politicians within the increasingly important EU institutions should not have remained without repercussions on the internal dynamics of national parties. In a nutshell: If those who are involved in European politics have gained power because the EU has become so much more important, we should expect that this also enhances their status 'back

home'. Since all politics is about power, they should have become more powerful within their parties as a result of the growing relevance of the EU for domestic politics. This essay will discuss the mechanisms behind these changes and report relevant empirical results thereby concentrating on the two most relevant groups, namely MEPs and members of national governments who are involved in EU-level decision-making arenas. The main focus will be on possible power shifts within the national leadership bodies (i.e. the party central office) which are most likely to attempt to monitor what their elites are 'doing in Brussels' while the party on the ground will only intermittently be in a position to deal with the EU activities of their elites (for example on a party congress).

The lack of attention towards national political parties is even more surprising if we remind ourselves that European member states are all governed by political parties. No doubt, some countries correspond more closely to the model of party government than others in that their politics is centrally determined by political parties (Katz, 1986) while there are stronger presidential elements elsewhere (Lijphart, 1992). However, it is clearly beyond doubt that parties provide the essential linkage between rulers and ruled (Sartori, 1976: 25). Hence, if European governance wants to be reasonably democratic and responsive it will need to have strong(er) traits of party government extending to 'Europe'. This means that political parties need to become more prominent players in the sometimes confusing European political game, and they have already begun to do so. One recent conspicuous example was fairly prominent role of the European Peoples Party (EPP) in the selection process that led to the appointment of José Manuel Barroso as President of the European Commission.

While European integration has begun to change the internal dynamics of national political parties, it remains doubtful whether this change will contribute to the reduction of the widely bemoaned democratic deficit of the EU system of multi-level governance. In fact, this chapter sets out to show the opposite: Referring to the findings of a large cross-national project, we will argue that the Europeanization of national political parties is largely synonymous with a strengthening of party elites and a simultaneous weakening of the accountability mechanisms. As such, it enhances the general tendency of modern democracies to become ever more presidentialized. This means that decision-making increasingly becomes the de facto prerogative of government and party leaders while collective actors like party executives and cabinets are being weakened (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Following a brief review of the most important changes in the political environment under which national political parties operate, we will analyze to what degree involvement in EU politics can be used as a resource in intra-party power struggles. This means that the focus will be on the 'big', politicized issues and not on the much larger number of more technical issues or details which tend to be determined by administrative actors and are hardly ever debated in the Council of Ministers or the European Council.

The Changing Environment of National Political Parties

Let us begin with a brief reflection on what has actually changed as a result of the reforms of the EU system of governance. Overall, there are three major effects of the above-mentioned series of treaty revisions. First, the EP, which follows an inherently supranational logic, has been given a lot more competencies, and this means

that the supranational element of the EU has been strengthened. Second, the possibilities for Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) have been widened and this has gradually shifted the decision-making logic of the Council of Ministers towards a supranational logic. Last but not least, the range of policy areas which are at least partially affected by EU policies has been greatly expanded which means that a larger number of decisions made by the Council of Ministers, the European Council and the EP directly interferes with national policies.

These changes constitute a gradual yet fundamental transformation of the environment within which national political parties operate. In the language of theories on party change, they were confronted with a system-level trend which is the classic cause of gradual party change – in contrast to the experience of crisis which tends to induce abrupt changes in the way parties organize, behave strategically or position themselves programmatically (Harmel, 2002; Harmel and Janda, 1994; Janda et al., 1994). More concretely, EU reforms have changed the relevant environments of national political parties with respects to all three classic party goals, namely office, votes, and policy.

Office: The introduction of direct elections to the EP has created a new career path for party politicians. While EP elections are clearly not directly about 'office' in that they are not about determining a government, good EP election results provide parties with additional career positions and organizational resources that can also have an impact 'back home'. The example of how the German Greens used the first direct EP elections in 1979 as a 'launch pad' for creating a successful nation-wide party is well-known but by no means the only one. More generally, MEPs constitute a relatively new group of party elites and it is plausible to expect that this will have changed the internal balance of power of national parties to some degree.

Votes: EP elections have confronted parties with the need to organize an additional nationwide election campaign. While they are still largely national second-order elections, conflicts over European integration have had also significant effects on the substance of national party competition in some countries. As such, the EU has directly changed the core environment of some national parties, namely the political space within which they compete for national votes, office and policy. Clearly, this represents a strong incentive to attempt to influence EU policies in a way that is compatible with national party strategy.

Policy: The growing scope of European governance has greatly reduced the degree of control of national (party) governments over domestic policy. A very large share of national legislation is now moulded (or even determined) by the EU while the blame for unpopular policy outcomes is still mainly laid at the doorsteps of national party politicians. The expansion of QMV means that national politicians have (partially) lost their ability to obstruct unwanted policy decisions at the EU-level. At the same time, however, the executive bias of the EU enhances their strength vis-à-vis national parties and parliaments (Poguntke et al., 2007b).

To summarize, national political parties have seen the erosion of their policy control while their top elites have become increasingly involved in EU-level decision-making when their parties are in national government. Also, MEPs represent an additional group of fairly well-resourced professionalized politicians who have entered intra-party politics. This is a particularly relevant innovation for parties in non-federalized (or devolved) political systems – and this applies to the majority of EU member states. To be sure, MEPs may be an almost negligible quantity in small parties

in small countries, but they represent sizeable groups within large parties in larger member states.

How Have National Parties Changed?

Expectations

The most likely effect of these environmental changes for the internal dynamics of national political parties has already been indicated in the opening remarks. Since these environmental changes represent a system-level trend, we expect to find a gradual party change and no abrupt party reform. In other words, while fundamental party reform (like the creation of new party bodies) is unlikely, we anticipate to discover minor changes in rules and in the way intra-party politics functions that add up to significant power gains in favour of those who are directly involved in EU politics, that is, party elites and MEPs.

If we conceptualize power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes, even against resistance (Weber, 1980: 28), it becomes clear that power can either flow from spheres of autonomous control or from resources at the disposal of a political actor that make it possible to overcome resistance. Hence, if we want to identify in which ways power has changed within national political parties in response to growing European integration we need to identify either the growth of zones of autonomous control by certain groups of party actors or the growth of power resources at their disposal.

First and foremost, this should apply to members of national governments who are members of the Council of Ministers or the European Council. While they lose exclusive control over national policy as a result of growing European integration, they gain autonomy vis-à-vis national parliaments and national parties because Council negotiations follow an intergovernmental logic which requires that participants have considerable autonomy to reach compromise. Furthermore, once compromise has been achieved, it becomes very difficult (if not inconceivable) for national parties or parliamentary majorities to obstruct ratification. This is the essence of the so-called 'executive bias': There are inherent limits to ex ante controls because those who are present at the negotiation table need to be able to negotiate and eventually achieve compromise. Ex post controls, on the other hand, are extremely costly because they would normally mean blocking results at the national level that have been achieved after difficult supranational negotiations (Carter et al., 2007: 11).

Significantly, ex post vetoes on treaty revisions have normally not been issued by (parliamentary) parties where the need not to damage their own elites becomes paramount. Instead they have been imposed by national referenda where the direct link between party elites and their organizational support base does not exist. It could be objected that such treaty revisions are rare and far between and therefore represent no adequate evidence of the executive bias. However, it is obvious that the same logic applies when it comes to more routine EU legislation. A cabinet member or prime minister who agrees to a controversial EU directive or regulation in the Council of Ministers or the European Council does normally not endanger the stability of his or her government back home.

To be sure, additional factors work in favour of governmental elites. They include informational advantages that flow from the direct involvement in these negotiations (Hix and Goetz, 2000: 13), which enable them to more or less define the

alternatives that were (allegedly) at stake. After all, if negotiations take place behind closed doors any meaningful ex post control is severely limited by the fact that those present in the conference room control all relevant information. Another important resource is their access to specialized expertise that needs to be accumulated in the relevant sectors of governmental bureaucracies and their access to EU specialists (Poguntke et al., 2007b).

Similar mechanisms should have strengthened the intra-party positions of MEPs. In addition to the very fact that they have direct access to expertise on European affairs, they are themselves EU specialists and their knowledge on European policies and politics should have become a valuable commodity in internal party politics since the EU has become so much more important for national politics. Also, they are increasingly important decision-makers themselves as a result of the enhanced powers of the EP. To be sure, national delegations of MEPs always need to reach compromise within a heterogeneous and supranational parliamentary group, and their individual power (in the sense of voting weight) within this group may well be very minor. Still, they may yield considerable influence within their group because their country may be an important player within the EU – or simply because their national government may be an important player in a specific controversy. In such cases, MEPs should be able to use such weight within the EP as an important resource in national party politics.

Findings

Measuring power or even power shifts is notoriously difficult. One established approach is to attempt gauging subjective power by asking actors about their perception of their own power and the power of other key actors within their immediate organizational environment. This can either be done via in-depth interviews or through standardized questionnaires. Both methods facilitate, within reasonable limits of course, the measurement of change over time by asking interviewees and respondents about their perception of how things have changed over the past years. The findings reported below are based on a combination of these methods and are based on some 140 elite interviews in 6 EU member states and completed questionnaires from 334 party actors from 86 parties in all EU-15 countries.[1] The in-depth interviews were conducted in the Austria, France, Germany Sweden, Spain and the UK. Hence we covered all important types of EU-15 member states in that we included founding members and more recent members, centralized and federal states, small and large countries. The mail questionnaires were administered to all relevant parties in the EU-15. It is noteworthy that the findings from elite interviews and standardized questionnaires corroborate each other, which can be regarded as an important external validation of both data sources.

Given the conceptualization of power described above, we have measured power by asking our interviewees and respondents about how much 'discretion' MEPs or party elites active in EU-level decision-making have vis-à-vis their national parties. This term

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[1] The data were generated by a comparative research project on the Europeanization of National Political Parties, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council (grant No. R000 23 9793) and supported by the Keele Investment Fund of Keele University, and the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (Acción Especial SEC2002-11872-E). Project members were Thomas Poguntke (principal investigator), Nicholas Aylott, Robert Ladrech, Kurt Richard Luther (co-applicants), Elisabeth Carter, Laura Morales, and Luis Ramiro. Fieldwork extended from 2003 to 2005.

captures the room for manoeuvre these actors enjoy and has the advantage of avoiding the terms 'power' or 'autonomy' which are laden with normative connotations that we wanted to avoid (Carter and Poguntke, 2007).

MEPs

Our findings largely corroborate the theoretical expectations. When it comes to formal organizational change, the picture is one of relatively high stability. To be sure, there were some formal changes but they did not substantially alter the formal power structure of national political parties. The main formal organizational innovations were induced by the need to nominate candidates for EP elections and to gradually integrate senior MEPs (usually the delegation leaders) into national leadership bodies (Aylott et al., 2007: 194).

Moving from the 'official' to the 'real story' (Katz and Mair, 1992: 7), that means to those processes within political parties which can only partially be gauged by analysing formal structures because not all political routines are normally formalized, we discover that MEPs do in fact play a significant role in internal policy formulation and manifesto writing. When it comes to using the expertise of those senior EU specialists, a large portion of national political parties has made them important participants in commissions or working groups dealing with 'Europe'. This also applies to the formulation of manifestoes for EP elections or those sections of national election manifestoes which deal with European politics and policies (Aylott et al., 2007: 195-97).

However, this significant role in specialized policy formulation has not really spilled over into a stronger position of internal party power. Irrespective of the fact that the EU as a governance structure has permeated a large portion of national policies, those who are directly involved in this policy-making process at the European level have not been able to use this involvement and their expertise as a resource in domestic power games.

This works both ways, of course: The mirror image of the (largely) missing clout of EP expertise in intra-party power games is that many MEPs are very autonomous when it comes to how they act and vote in the EP. Essentially, this can be explained by the fact that national parties are still struggling to fully comprehend the relevance of EP decisions for their domestic policy agenda. As a result of this, many of them have not (yet) developed adequate linkage structures between their EP delegations and national party bodies to ensure the accountability of MEPs to their national party organizational principals. While the current debate in comparative politics focuses very much on how accountability of parliamentary and governmental actors can be assured (see, for example Strom et al., 2003), MEPs tend to complain about the lack of interest in what they do on the part of their national parties and also their ultimate principal, namely their electorate. Some of them try to reduce this detachment from national party politics by following a 'supply-side logic of accountability' in that they are actively trying to heighten the awareness of relevant national party and parliamentary actors of what they do within the EP (Poguntke, 2007: 124). To be sure, this would reduce their autonomy (and hence their power) as MEPs but it would integrate them better in domestic party politics and would therefore enhance their political stature back home.

To be sure, there is some, albeit limited, cross-national variation. The British Labour Party, for example, has attempted to reign in on its MEPs through a link system

even though this has not really reduced the autonomy of Labour MEPs considerably (Carter and Ladrech, 2007: 66-7). Still, it is significant that the UK parties tend to watch their MEPs' activities somewhat more closely than parties in most other EU member states, and this is certainly related to the relatively high level of Euroscepticism in the country. After all, ' Brussels' is, at least when it comes to the bulk of the UK tabloids, almost synonymous with a foreign power waiting to cross the channel and invade the island that has happily survived for so long in splendid isolation.

Legal regulations and organizational traditions also account for cross-national variation. The example of the Spanish parties shows, for example, that centralized control over candidate selection could be a powerful tool to limit the autonomy of MEPs. German parties might be a counter-example, because strong legal and constitutional guarantees ensure the almost complete independence of MEPs from national party leaderships. This represents a strong institutional incentive for MEPs to make sure that their regional party base remains loyal when it comes to re-nomination while the support of the national party and its leadership tend to be less important. In both cases, however, the generally low level of specific interest of national parties in what their MEPs do leads to identical results: MEPs are largely detached from their national parties and are only listened to when it comes to formulating EU-specific policy statements or EP election manifestoes (Poguntke, 2007; Ramiro and Morales, 2007).

Party Elites

There can be little doubt that involvement in European governance has significantly changed the internal power relations of national political parties when they are in government. For many government members, entering national government in an EU country is now synonymous with entering EU governance arenas at the same time. A large number of national government portfolios are mirrored by the respective Councils of Ministers where a considerable portion of nationally binding (or committing) legislation is decided upon. As has been pointed out above, this executive bias of EU decision-making makes it very difficult for national collective actors such as parliaments and parties to ensure the accountability of their elites when they act at the European level. It needs to be emphasized again that we are not concerned with the large number of primarily technical issues which are often dealt with at the level of top bureaucrats. Instead we are concerned with politicized issues that are negotiated in the Council between members of national governments who collectively become legislators for the EU as a whole.

We have learned from the elite interviews that government ministers enjoy a very high degree of discretion when acting at the EU level. With the exception of the Swedish Social Democrats national parties do not subject their government ministers to serious ex ante or ex post accountability controls when they participate in EU bodies like the Council of Ministers or the European Council (Aylott et al., 2007: 202-03). Of course, this does not mean that national party elites are fully detached from their parties when they become involved in EU politics. After all, they are able to anticipate the sensitivities of their own parties or coalition partners and they need to take into account how popular or unpopular certain EU decisions might be with the general public and hence the electorate. To be sure, the public awareness of EU policies is rather limited in most member states but it has been rising over the past years as a result of a growing

number of EU policies that directly affect European citizens. Hence, even if no direct controls are applied politicians will normally avoid spending too much of their political capital which they will need for re-selection or re-election. Furthermore, political parties represent formidable mechanisms for ensuring a certain degree of accountability by selecting and socializing their elites (Müller, 2000).

More fine tuned measurements (compared to our elite interviews) were applied in our mail questionnaire where we asked respondents to report the degree of ex ante and ex post controls using a five-point scale. In addition, we asked them to tell us how things have changed over the 'past ten years or so' on a nine-point scale. The findings corroborate our theoretical expectations: Parties do use a range of ex ante and ex post controls but they tend to limit such mechanisms to a rather modest degree of specificity. Consequently, party elites acting in EU arenas are expected to follow general guidelines and explain their actions afterwards in general terms but parties are, by and large, prepared to furnish their elites with sufficiently large room for manoeuvre. Consistently, this discretion is somewhat larger for the European Council than for the Council of Ministers. This makes substantive sense because negotiations in the Council of Ministers are often more technical and therefore lend themselves to somewhat more specific and detailed guidelines or reporting procedures. The European Council, on the other hand, is the arena where the 'big beasts' meet to hammer out fundamental reforms and it obvious that this requires more freedom of manoeuvre.

Unsurprisingly, there has not been massive change over the past decade. This is in line with the well-known organizational inertia of parties (like other organizations) and the rather short time span that we referred to in our questionnaire. Furthermore, it corresponds to our theoretical expectations that most of the reported changes point in the direction of a larger degree of discretion of party elites when acting in key EU decision-making bodies. Significantly, this has been accompanied by a simultaneous extension of accountability mechanisms. Faced with the absorption of their elites into a supranational logic of decision-making, national political parties are obviously trying to hold their ground. Yet, they seem to be fighting a losing battle – in other words: There seem to be inherent limits to what parties can do in order to control what their elites are doing in EU politics (Carter and Poguntke, 2007). This clearly adds an additional dimension to the widely discussed democratic deficit of the EU.

Finally, when it comes to change over time we have found very little variation across countries and party families, and this suggests that the shifts in intra-party power relations tends to be a fairly universal phenomenon independent from ideological traditions or specific national political conditions like institutional peculiarities or particular traditions of political culture.

However, three qualifications need to be made with respect to the power gains of national party elites as a result of growing European integration. First, power gains happen mainly when a national party joins government while opposition parties are largely unaffected by the effects of European integration. Furthermore, these effects do not tend to 'stick'. Once a party loses governmental office most of the additional elite power tends to disappear (Ladrech, 2007: 217). To be sure there are some power gains for party elites that flow from their involvement in Europarty activities but they are fairly minor compared to those power gains related to involvement in EU governance. Second, these power gains of governmental elites are not only temporary but also incomplete in that they are shared power gains – shared with colleagues coming from now 27 EU member states. And these colleagues may even impose policies upon some

of their colleagues by invoking QMV. No doubt, this represents a significant loss of national sovereignty and also of power exercised by individual members of national governments. They have simply lost their exclusive control over national policy. At the same time, however, they have gained considerable power vis-à-vis their national principals because it is intrinsically very difficult for a party or a parliamentary majority to veto what their elites have agreed to in an EU body. Third, institutions also matter, of course, and even though it is beyond the scope of this study it needs to be mentioned the differential powers of European affairs committees do account for some cross-national variation as regards power shifts in favour of governing party elites. The Danish example of a strong European affairs committee in national parliament shows that there are (albeit limited) antidotes to too much elite detachment (Raunio, 2005: 335).

Last but not least, involvement in EU decision-making does not only allow national party politicians to decisively influence policy largely past their own national parties, it also furnishes them with an important additional power resource that flows from the public exposure as a chief negotiator at the European level (see, for example Aylott 2005). Clearly, this is not equally beneficial in all countries, and what might be an asset in a smaller country or a generally pro-European country may turn out to be double-edged sword elsewhere. Still, arguable even Tony Blair could benefit from the high public profile that he gained as the country's chief warrior to defend the famous red lines at EU summits. An even more conspicuous example is the German Chancellor Angela Merkel whose popular support rose significantly when the EU presidency allowed her to escape from the nitty-gritty of domestic Grand Coalition politics to the glamour of European summitry. There can be little doubt that this greatly enhanced her intra-party power and effectively silenced any potential internal dissent.

Explanations

The most important effects of growing European integration on the internal dynamics of national political parties are twofold. First, it leads to substantial (yet transient) power gains of party elites when their parties are in government, and it has, second, created a group of fairly well-resourced parliamentary deputies who operate largely detached from national party arenas even though senior MEPs (usually the delegation leaders) have been integrated into their national parties' main decision-making bodies.

This raises two questions: Why have national political parties (particularly their central offices) not been more active or efficient in trying to control what their elites are doing in EU-level decision-making arenas? And why have MEPs remained rather detached from their national parties even though they are representatives in an increasingly powerful European Parliament?

Let us begin with trying to explain the latter phenomenon. Arguably, the fact that EP elections have remained second-order national elections goes a long way in explaining why MEPs have remained rather detached (and hence largely powerless) within their national political parties. In the absence of a truly European political public, EP elections are largely national 'test elections', which are mainly fought over domestic issues. Hence, MEPs and their actions within the EP influence the outcome of these nationwide electoral contests only marginally. However, party actors who are fairly

unimportant for their parties' electoral performance are deprived of one key resource in intra-party power struggles, namely electoral appeal.

The major factor in explaining the continuing detachment of MEPs from their national parties is, however, that the intergovernmental arena is still a far more direct way of influencing EU politics and policies than the avenue via the EP. If a party is in government it is directly involved in the decisions of the Council of Ministers and the European Council. Clearly, the extension of QMV has removed veto powers from individual countries (and hence their party politicians) but it is still very exceptional to outvote a country that has made it clear that it regards a specific issue as important. Working 'through' the parliamentary groups in the EP is clearly a far more cumbersome way of moulding EU policies. After all, a party's delegation to the EP is always a fairly small minority in a large and inevitably heterogeneous supranational group and this makes for very difficult alliance building. In addition, parliamentary groups normally need to forge alliances with other EP groups in order to effectively influence EU legislation. Also, once a party is in national government it gains direct access to all the expertise in those sections of ministerial administrations that are dealing with European matters and this makes the specialized knowledge of MEPs far less important.

Clearly, this all applies only to governing parties and opposition parties should have somewhat stronger incentives to integrate their MEPs into their internal process, not least because they are more dependent on access to information. However, the mere fact that national opposition parties have no direct access to the Council does not automatically make the EP a more promising arena for EU policy-making from a national party's point of view. It might even work the opposite way: If there is no danger that a party's MEPs contradict their own party's line in the Council or at a summit meeting, their autonomy may be even higher than when in government.

This leaves us with the second question: If governmental actors in EU-level decision-making bodies are those to whom decisions and actions are fairly clearly attributable – in contrast to the rather amorphous two-level alliance building by MEPs in the EP - why is it so difficult to establish strong accountability mechanisms? An important answer has already been given in our discussion of the executive bias of decision-making in the Council and (even more significantly) at EU summits. In addition, governmental actors benefit from exactly the same contextual conditions that work to the disadvantage of MEPs: A general lack of awareness among both mass publics and many politicians how important the EU has become for the substance of national politics. Just like many (or most) national parliaments have thus far not developed adequate structures to efficiently monitor EU policies (Raunio, 2002: 413), national parties have tended to regard the EU as something rather peripheral to their core business which is fighting national or sub-national elections.

And in many respects they are right for the following reason: On the one hand, actions by governmental elites may be clearly attributable even though they are able to control the information about what exactly were the options at stake. On the other hand, the EU governance structure as a whole is a highly complex institutional arrangement where it is virtually impossible to 'attach' responsibilities for specific outcomes (as opposed to specific decisions) to specific actors or coalitions of actors. Consequently, the repercussions of EU policies, and hence national party politicians' actions at the EU level, on a party's national electoral performance are likely to be rather small. On the contrary, it is well-known that national parties have used the EU for blame shifting in order to deflect public disaffection with policy outcomes from the national arena. In a

nutshell, national political parties that are primarily vote and office seeking behave rationally if they do not invest excessive energy in trying to control what is happening at the EU level. Parties mainly concerned with policy, however, should behave differently. Yet, they may realize the inherent limits of their capacity to influence the course of events.

Limits to Party Government in a United Europe?

Our review of the changes in the internal dynamics of national political parties has shown that party elites of governing parties have gained power at the expense of national parties as collective actors. The main losers are collective leadership bodies, that is the party central office, and, even more so, the party on the ground. Similarly (even though this is beyond the focus of this essay) parliamentary parties have seen their ability reduced to hold their governmental elites to account.

Essentially, national and European politics and policies are largely decoupled when it comes to elite selection and policy formulation. National party elites play a decisive role in EU governance yet they are selected almost exclusively according to national (not European!) criteria. While national political parties remain the central gatekeepers in this process of elite selection they have seen a tremendous erosion of their linkage function in that they are no longer fully capable of providing a meaningful substantive connection between rulers and ruled. After all, so much of what these rulers do is now done at the European level, and national political parties have remained almost exclusively national actors. While European governance is controlled by elites selected by national political parties, there is very little substantive party political linkage between EU decision-making and the preferences of mass publics. In other words, party government on the European level is only rudimentary in that parties as collective actors are only peripherally involved in European policy formulation, and the preceding discussion has shown that there are inherent obstacles against its strengthening.

To be sure, European integration is not the only cause of the erosion of national parties' function as policy linkage. We need to take into account a general trend towards the presidentialization of politics in modern democracies, which amounts to a strengthening of elites at the expense of collective actors such as parliaments and parties (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Arguably, the largely missing substantive linkage undermines the legitimacy of the EU because mass publics find it difficult to identify actors who are to be blamed (or praised) for the outcomes of EU policy.

To end with a provocative note: Maybe the way forward to generate sufficient legitimation of the European Union is precisely a stronger and more accepted reliance on the role of elites. If the process of European integration further fragments the already stratarchical nature of the political process and of political parties, the only viable mechanism that may still be able to deliver intra-party loyalty and system legitimacy may indeed be the focus on the leadership qualities of party (and governing) elites. The presidentialization of party politics may then become the 'glue' that holds together an organization that is increasingly looking into different directions: to the ground, to national public office, and to Europe.

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