

Possibilities for European Parties: 2004 and Beyond

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Why Euro-Party Competition is Essential for Europe

A common assertion in writings on the EU's "democratic deficit" is that the EU needs pan-European parties. At face value this is a typically fatuous Euro-federalist suggestion: i.e. any pan-European organisations who compete with national governments are "good for Europe!"

From a healthily sceptical perspective of a political scientist, however, there is a more sober reason for arguing that EU-level party politics is essential for the future of Europe.

What distinguishes democracy from 'enlightened despotism' is *political competition*.

Competition forces elites to propose rival policy ideas and candidates for office. Competition guarantees that outputs cannot stray too far from voters' preferences. Competition provides voters with a mechanism to punish politicians who fail to implement their promises or who are corrupt. Competition is also a vehicle for promoting debate and deliberation, which in turn leads to the formation of "public opinion" around specific policy positions. Above all, democratic identities do not develop and evolve without political competition. Competition enables citizens to learn to accept being on the losing side in one contest because they expect to be on the winning side in the not too distant future. This is how democratic identities formed in America and at the domestic level in Europe, and is the only way a "European identity" will form at the mass level.

And, political parties are the only political organisations known to man that can structure political competition in a democratic system. As Schattschneider famously put it: "democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties".

As currently designed, however, the EU is closer to enlightened despotism than competitive party democracy. The processes of electing Ministers in the Council and Members of the European Parliament do not promote or even allow for European-level party competition. National elections are about domestic issues, and European elections are subsidiary to these national contests: fought by national parties on the performance of national governments. At no point do citizens have the opportunity to choose between rival candidates for EU executive office or rival policy agendas for the EU.

This is not a problem while the EU produces relatively “enlightened” policies: such as a moderately-regulated market. But, citizens now demand more: such as reform of the current macro-economic model, a place for Europe in world politics, and policies to deal with Europe’s new multiethnic society. These policies cannot be tackled at the national level. But, the EU does not have the mechanisms nor the incentives to force Europe’s elites to tackle these problems at the European level, as any policy decision on these issues would alienate large sections of the European public, and so undermine the legitimacy of the EU.

In a fully democratic polity, in contrast, tough policy decisions are resolved as a positive by-product of the process of competitive elections. Competition forces elites to debate issues and come up with rival ideas. Voters then form opinions in response to this debate. A new majority is then formed in favour of policy change in one direction or another, and this majority is given a chance to see if this policy strategy works.

In other words, the development of genuine party competition at the European level is more than simply desirable for the democratic accountability of the EU. It is absolutely essential for the future development of European society.

What Is To Be Done – Incentives for Party Competition

Parties do not naturally compete: like large firms, they prefer to collude. Hence, incentives need to be in place to force parties at the EU level to develop and enforce rival policy agendas. In the short-term, new incentives can be developed within the current institutional design of the EU. But, in the medium-term, more fundamental reforms may be necessary.

Competition for the Executive: the President of the Commission

In all democratic polities, the key driving incentive for party competition is the chance to capture the office of chief executive – the Prime Minister in Britain, the President in the United States, or the Chancellor in Germany. The same should be true for the EU, with a contest for the President of the European Commission.¹

¹ The media focus on the Chair of the Council is a ‘red herring’. Unlike the Commission President, the Chair of the Council will have few formal powers – such as the right of legislative or budgetary initiative or the ability to hire-and-fire the Commissioners – and will hence be dominated by the Commission President.

In July 2004, the Commission President will be chosen for the first time under the new Investiture Procedure introduced by the Nice Treaty: where the European Council proposes a candidate by a qualified-majority, who is then ratified or rejected by the European Parliament by a simple-majority. Since the Maastricht Treaty, the Parliament has had the right to veto the governments' nominee. However, because the European Council still proposed a candidate by unanimity, this person was always likely to be backed by a broad coalition (of parties in government) in the Parliament. For example, in July 1994 Jacques Santer won a vote in the Parliament because he was supported by a coalition of governing parties' MEPs (from both centre-right and centre-left), against the majority in the largest party group in the new parliament (the Socialists), and a broad anti-Santer coalition of Liberals, Greens, and the Radical Left.

However, the shift to qualified-majority voting for the nomination of the Commission President opens the door to partisan competition for the most powerful position in EU politics. A smaller majority in the European Council will be less able to force its nominee on a reluctant European Parliament.

Also, with a change to majority voting, political parties who are likely to be on the losing side in this vote will have an incentive to propose a candidate before the European elections, in an attempt to take the political initiative away from the other side. For example, in the current EU, most member parties of the Party of European Socialists (PES) are in opposition at home, and hence not represented in the European Council. Hence, if in May 2004 the Socialist party leaders could propose a candidate for Commission President, the leaders of the European People's Party (EPP), European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party, and the European Federation of Green Parties would be forced to do the same. With a number of personalities on the table, national parties would then be forced to take sides in the elections in June, and to follow these positions in the subsequent bargaining in the European Council and European Parliament. Also, if the Socialists then emerge as the largest group in the newly elected Parliament (i.e. because of the mid-term effect in these elections), the Socialist leaders in the European Council would be under pressure to support the PES candidate in the European Council, or at least to vote against a centre-right candidate of a majority in the Council and support the PES parliament group's decision to vote against this person in the July plenary session of the parliament.

This could occur without any changes to the Treaty. However, the proposals in the draft Constitution, if adopted, would reinforce these incentives. At face value, the proposed new investiture procedure looks like the current status quo: with a qualified-majority in the

Council wielding proposal power, and a simple-majority in the Parliament wielding veto power. But, two minor amendments would strengthen the power of the largest party group in the Parliament. First, the draft constitution says that when proposing a candidate the European Council must “take into account the elections to the European Parliament” [Article I-26]. Although it does not explicitly state that the European Council must follow “the results” of the elections, the wording of the article would make it difficult for the European Council to propose a candidate who is not the choice of one of the largest groups in the newly elected parliament.

Second, if the nominee is then rejected by the Parliament, “the European Council shall within one month put forward a new candidate”. This gives the largest group in the new parliament *carte blanche* to vote against the proposed candidate of the European Council if it is not their expressed candidate from before the elections, knowing that they could not be accused of disrupting EU business while the issue of the Commission President is resolved.

In other words, even without more radical reform of the procedure for electing the Commission President – for example by allowing the Commission to be elected by the European Parliament or by a direct presidential election – there is ample room under the current design of the EU to enable parties to propose rival candidates for this post, and to fight in European elections and in the European parliament for the election of this candidate.

If such a contest could take place this would fundamentally alter the way the EU works in a positive way. The elected candidate would be backed by a clearly identifiable group of supporters, and would have a clear policy agenda. If this agenda fails, these supporters would be held responsible. Moreover, the losing forces in this contest would have an incentive to fight every proposal, to cultivate an alternative president “in waiting”, and to try to construct a coalition large enough to support this person next time round. This is how normal democratic politics works at the domestic level, and there is no reason why this should not work at the European level.

Competition in the Legislative Process: in the European Parliament

Parties would also need to compete more in the amendment and adoption of EU legislation and budgetary policies. As the powers of the European Parliament have increased, empirical research on voting in the Parliament has shown that the internal cohesion of the party groups

and competition between these groups has increased dramatically.² As a result, politics in the European Parliament is much like politics in domestic parliaments in Europe or the US Congress: where coalitions are primarily formed along left-right lines, and parties compete for key positions inside the parliament and to secure their policies in EU legislation.

However, the ferociousness of party competition in the European Parliament is still constrained by the internal structure of the Parliament and the rules of the EU legislative procedures.

On the internal side, power in the Parliament is dispersed in a strictly proportional sense: via the allocation of senior offices (such as the Vice-Presidents), committee chairs, and *rappoteurships* in proportion to the seats won by each party group. On the positive side, this allows all groups some access to agenda-setting power. On the negative side, though, this undermines the ability of a particular parliamentary majority to promote a clear policy agenda for the period of the Parliament. For example, in the US Congress and in most domestic parliaments in Europe, the parties forming the majority dominate key committee positions. Hence, a shift in political control of the chamber feeds through to a shift in control of the internal agenda of the chamber.

A similar system could, and should, operate in the European Parliament. For example, a particular majority coalition – which would probably be a centre-right coalition between the EPP, Liberals, and Conservative-Nationalists (in the Union for Europe Group), or a centre-left coalition between the Socialists, Greens, and Liberals (or Radical Left) – could be allowed to take two-thirds of the committee chairs, the President of the Parliament, and two-thirds of reports. The “minority” parties would still have some offices, but their power in the chamber would be severely diminished. In other words, this would not be a full “winner-takes-all” system like the House of Commons of the US Congress, but more a “winners-take-most” system, as in most parliaments on the Continent and in Scandinavia.

Such a change could be made by the parliament through its own Rules of Procedure, without any change to the EU Treaties. However, the full effect of such internal changes would have a more significant impact if they were matched by changes in the EU’s legislative procedures, to allow more majoritarian party competition in the Parliament. Under the main procedure for adopting legislation (the Codecision Procedure), the European Parliament can propose amendments in the first reading and adopt final bills in the third reading by a “simple-majority” (fifty-percent-plus-one MEPs in a vote). However, in the second reading,

² See Simon Hix, Abdul Noury and Gérard Roland (2002) *How MEPs Vote*, London/Brussels: Economic and Social Research Council of the UK/Weber Shandwick-Adamson.

the rules require the Parliament to act by an “absolute-majority of component members” (fifty-percent-plus-one of all MEPs regardless of how many show up to vote).

As in all parliaments, it is rare that all MEPs show up to every vote. Attendance has increased in the Parliament to well above 80 percent. But, even with 80 percent of MEPs voting in the second reading, the absolute-majority requirement means that a coalition of 63 percent of MEPs is required to propose amendments at this stage. This forces the two largest parties to vote together in the second reading, and so abandon any pretence of competition.

This rule allows the Council to ignore amendments proposed by the Parliament at first reading, knowing that the parties in the Parliament will have to try to muster an absolute-majority in the second reading to re-propose these amendments. If the Parliament can secure this absolute-majority, the Council usually accepts the amendments. However, this is not the point. Instead, the requirement of an absolute-majority undermines the ability of a party-political majority to form in the Parliament to pursue its electoral promises.

Overall, the party groups in the European Parliament have demonstrated that they can form cohesive organisations and compete in legislative votes. This is positive for Europe. However, this competition should be set free, both internally in the Parliament and in legislative bargaining with the Council and Commission. More vigorous and open party competition in the Parliament would go hand in hand with a partisan contest for the election of the Commission President, as the elected EU chief executive would have a clear set of supporting parties in the Parliament. If these parties form a majority, the EU would be able to adopt a clear set of policies for term of the Parliament. But, even if there was “divided government” in the EU, with the Commission President from the opposite side of the political divide to the majority in the Parliament, the policy conflicts would be more transparent for voters and for the media. Either way, the EU would be more accountable, and policy debates would be out in the open for the first time.

Making European Elections Work

The final missing element is the connection between European level parties and the voters. At present, this connection is conspicuous by its absence. Few voters know of the existence of the European level parties, what they stand for, and who are their leaders. Less than 50 percent of voters participate in European elections, and those that do are not exposed to European parties in these contests. Also, few voters are aware of any political personalities at

the European level other than their own national government leaders, and what the policy differences are between these people.³

Some of these problems will be resolved if the aforementioned changes could be made. A contest for the Commission President and more open ideological warfare in the European Parliament would immediately generate European political personalities, battles and intrigues, which would wean at least parts of the national media away from their addiction to national political “soap operas”. Also, more would be at stake in European elections, as the results of these contests would have an impact on who would be the leader of the Commission, and which political majority would control agenda-setting power in the Parliament. For the first time, national parties would have incentives to take these elections seriously, rather than to treat them as mid-term referendums on national party leaders.

However, even more could be done to break the hold of national parties in European elections. Currently, in most EU member states, national parties monopolise the selection of candidates in European elections. Only in Ireland, which uses a system of single-transferable-vote (STV), and Finland, which has a fully-open form of proportional representation (PR), do individual candidates for the European Parliament have an incentive to raise their profile directly amongst the electorate. For example, in the United Kingdom, which moved to a “closed” form of list-PR in the 1999 elections, the positions of candidates on the party lists is determined by the national party officials, and voters are forced to choose between pre-ordered party lists rather than for individual politicians. In contrast, under STV or fully-open list PR (where the order of the candidates on the list is determined by the number of individual votes each politician receives), politicians not only compete with candidates from other parties, but are also forced to compete with candidates from their own party. Not surprisingly, research shows that MEPs in Ireland and Finland campaign more rigorously than MEPs in other member states, and voters in these countries are more aware of who their MEPs are and what they stand for.

This might sound contradictory: i.e. how does increasing the candidate-centred as opposed to party-centred nature of European elections strengthen party competition? Answer: by undermining the dominance of national parties in European elections, the establishment of more candidate-centred electoral system would strengthen the influence of European level parties. For example, candidates would be freer to support European party positions against their national parties, and European parties would be free to help fund the election campaign

³ For example, in a Eurobarometer opinion survey in 1997, the Commission was so embarrassed that so few people knew who Jacques Santer was that this finding was left out of the final report of the survey results.

of key figures in the Parliament. Voters, ultimately, would be able to choose: either to elect politicians who would be lackeys of their national leaders, or to elect politicians who will be more independent and capable of representing their interests directly in the EU policy process.

Summary: How to Build a Party-Political Europe

- Competition between rival European-level parties for control of the EU policy agenda is the only way to make the EU truly democratic – to ensure that EU policies reflect citizens’ wishes and to hold EU level politicians accountable for their actions.
- Party competition at the European level, connected to voters’ choices, is also the only way to legitimise tough policy choices by Europe’s leaders.
- In the short term, party competition at the European level can be promoted *within* the current Treaty structure if:
 - European parties present rival candidates for the Commission President in the 2004 European elections, and national party leaders back one or other of these candidates in the subsequent investiture battle between the Council and Parliament;
 - the rules of procedure in the European Parliament are changed to enable the winning electoral coalition to dominate the policy agenda inside the parliament (via controlling committee chairs and *rapporteurships*); and
 - national political parties reform their candidate selection procedures and electoral systems in European elections to allow candidates to be chosen locally and elected via more open methods.
- In the medium term, party competition at the European level can be promoted through further Treaty reforms, such as:
 - allowing the majority in the European Parliament to elect the Commission President (a full-blown parliamentary model), or electing the Commission President directly by the citizens (a full-blown presidential model);

- changing the second-reading of the Codecision Procedure (and the Budgetary Procedure), to allow the European Parliament to adopt amendments by a simple-majority rather than an absolute-majority; and
- introducing a uniform electoral system for European elections, based on a candidate-centred rather than party-controlled electoral system, and with European-wide top-up lists controlled by European level parties.