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Does a European Party System Exist?

A Conceptual Framework for Analysis

Mathieu VIEIRA¹

Mathieu.Vieira@ulb.ac.be

*Université libre de Bruxelles (CEVIPOL) and Institut d'études politiques de Grenoble
(PACTE)*

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Introduction

Since the first European elections in 1979 and the empowerment of the European parliament (EP), the research agenda on the EP has been focused on understanding the emergence of “Europarties” and a “European party system”. However, although the scholars who study the party phenomenon at the EU level refer to the concept of party system, the question of the existence of such a system has never been properly examined. Without being debated, the concept is used by convenience. In a similar manner, scholars tend to confuse the conditions of existence and the classification criteria (i.e. division state and ideological polarization) of a party system. In other words, rather than establishing the conditions of existence of a party system, these researches have been trying to determine the form that it could have taken.

This mix-up can be explained by the lack of interest of the political scientists in the definition of the concept of party system. On this matter, Sartori’s (1970) well-known distinction between the intension and the extension of a concept helps us to characterize this propensity of scholars concerning the party systems: while there are numerous typologies of party systems, we can hardly find any clarification of the concept properties. Thus, the concept of party system does not escape to the reef of “conceptual stretching”.

In light of these observations, I will favor a deductive method (Stoker, 1995). Such a method requires on the one hand examining the properties of the concept of party system, by identifying the conditions of existence of a party system. On the other hand, I will compare this framework with the system formed by the European political organizations (parliamentary groups and European federations). This method has the advantage of clearly indentifying the conditions of existence that this “unidentified political object” must satisfy in order to pretend to the label of European party system.

The paper will be organized as follows: First, I will provide an overview on the research area on the emergence of “Europarties” and a European party system. Second, I will specify the conditions of existence of a party system. Third, the paper will explain why the European partisan network does not pretend to the label of party system.

1. A European party system as a palliative to the democratic and representation deficit

The partisan phenomenon at the EU-level

The study of the partisan phenomenon at the EU-level has been widely discussed in the literature. The corpus of publications concerning European partisan dynamics must be included in the broader research agenda on the EP. With the first election by direct universal suffrage in June 1979 and the constant rise of power, influence and legitimacy of the EP, political scientists became interested in this institution. The literature on the EP has developed around four analysis streams (Hix et al., 2003; Costa and Rozenberg, 2008): (1) the functioning and the organization of the EP, (2) the European elections and the electoral behaviour of the Europeans, (3) the political organization of the EP and the nature of the inter-partisan competition, (4) and finally, the empowerment of the EP and the inter-institutional bargaining between the latter, the European council and the Commission.

A particular attention will be paid to the third analysis stream that concerns more particularly this research. How has the partisan phenomenon been studied at the EU-level? What approaches have been privileged by the authors?

First, political scientists have focused on the formation of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary groups. The history of parliamentary groups began in 1953 during the first European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) meeting. On this matter, the constitution of transnational political organizations at EU-level does not date from the first EP election (Van Oudenhove, 1965; Fitzmaurice, 1975; Henig, 1979). These researches emphasize the structure, the functions and the central position of parliamentary groups in the functioning of the EP (Pridham and Pridham, 1981; Bardi, 1994; Delwit and De Waele, 1995; Gaffney, 1996; Raunio, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997; Raunio, 1997). The European federations become an interesting topic too. Two questions have led the research agenda on European federations: their role and their position in the EU policy-making (Niedermayer, 1983; Bardi, 1992; Delwit and al., 2001; Johansson and Zervakis, 2002).

Second, political scientists adopted a different approach inspired by the rational choice theories. The nature of the competition inside the EP becomes the leitmotiv of the European partisan phenomenon studies. The aim of those researches is to know how the MEPs vote and according to what dimensions. The statistical studies included in this research agenda claim to

be a response to the widespread idea that the MEPs would essentially vote according to their national affiliation and at the expense of their political family. Contrary to this hypothesis, the examination of roll call votes indicates that the coalitions of vote are formed according to the parliamentary groups rather than as coalitions of countries (Attinà, 1990; Brzinski, 1995; Kreppel, 2002). The dimensionality of votes constitutes the second field of research of the European Parliament Research Group (EPRG). It is used to present the competition inside the EP emphasizing its consensual logic. The “alliance of centre” between the two principal groups (the European People’s Party -EPP- and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats -S&D-), also known as the “grand coalition”, would then dominate the majority of the votes. The studies will stress on the contrary that the major dimension influencing the structure of the MEPs’ votes is the left-right dimension (Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999; Noury, 2002; Kreppel and Hix, 2003; Hix et al., 2003; Thomassen et al., 2003; Hix and al., 2007).

The emergence of a European party system? Between normative debate and wrong criterion

First, the question of the emergence of a European party system is strongly linked with the debate concerning the “democratic deficit” (Weiler et al., 1995) of the EU. Indeed, the transformation of “Europe des patries” from “Europe des partis” (Marquand, 1978) is considered by scholars and practitioners as a palliative to the democratic and representation deficits. In this context, the debate is largely normative and participates to the "normative turn" of the European Studies as described by Bellamy and Castiglione (2000).

On the one hand, scholars have looked into the link between the forming of “Europarties” and the problem of representation in the EU. According to Andeweg, the deficit of representation in the EU comes not only from the democratic deficit but above all from the absence of a true European party system or multi-level party system (Andeweg, 1995). Other scholars as Beetham and Lord, by contrast, consider that the structuring of “Europarties” and a European party system is a fundamental element to the development of a European representative democracy (Beetham and Lord, 1998). In the same direction, Thomassen and Schmitt stress the fact that political accountability is a key question inasmuch as the political parties are accountable vis-à-vis the voters (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999).

On the other hand, already in 1975, Fitzmaurice proposed to develop new extra-parliamentary organizations in order to introduce a potential party system at EU-level (Fitzmaurice, 1975). The establishment of a real political debate between the different political families is considered as a means to reinforce the democratisation of the EC. Lord (1998, 2002) notes for his part that “Europarties” must play a central mediatory function between the national and European arenas. According to Hix, the democratic deficit can also be analysed as a deficit of legitimacy (Hix, 1995). More specifically, the structuring of “Europarties” and a European party system can contribute to reduce the legitimacy deficit at the European economical governance level. It presupposes that the competition between “Europarties” contributes to the forming of the European voters’ opinion. Thus, the establishment of a European party system allows to link the “Europarties” to the electorate.

Second, I argue that scholars have used the concept of “party system” by convenience to describe the partisan reality at the EP (Attinà, 1992; Lecureuil, 1996; Kreppel, 2002). In this respect, Hix et al. (2007) describe the system formed by the political groups as a “two-plus-several party system”. In addition, the criterion of existence of a European party system applied by the scholars of the EPRG, i.e. cohesion of party groups, is inappropriate. In other words, I consider that these scholars answer the question of the “mechanisms” (form) that the European political organizations could have taken rather than the one concerning the nature of this system. For instance, who doubts that a party system exists at the US Congress despite the fact that the intra-party cohesion is low? Moreover, some scholars have pointed out the limits of roll-call votes analysis such as the special nature of roll-call votes, the too direct link between party cohesion and party discipline, and the overestimation of the Parliament practices (Costa and Rozenberg, 2008).

2. The conditions of existence of a party system

Conceptual stretching

Sartori’s well-known distinction between the “intension” and the “extension” of a concept to explain the risks of “concept misformation” and “conceptual stretching” (Sartori, 1970, 1991), helps us characterize the tropism of the study on party systems. Intension refers to the collection of *properties* covered by a concept. Extension returns to the class of *things* to

which the concept applies (Salmon, 1963: 90-91). Sartori is right to highlight that “confusion and profusion of terms seem to be the rule” (Sartori, 1976: 119) concerning the researches on party systems. While there are numerous typologies of party systems, we can hardly find any definition of the concept properties.

Since the first appearance of the term (Bryce, 1888) at the end of the 19th century, the scientific debate has rather focused on how to classify, and then how to compare national party systems. In other words, while the concept of “party system” is part of the common vocabulary of the comparativists and political scientists in general, it has never been the object of a scientific controversy. Moreover, there is not what we could call a standard definition. Sartori has certainly proposed the most cited definition of a party system when he explains that:

“the concept of system is meaningless – for purposes of scientific inquiry – unless (i) the system displays properties that do not belong to a separate consideration of its component elements and (ii) the system result from, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its component parts, thereby implying that such interactions provide the boundaries, or at least the boundness, of the system. Parties make for a “system”, then, only when they are parts (in the plural); and a party system is precisely the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition” (Sartori, 1976: 43-44).

If the definition of Sartori seems *a priori* convincing, it neglected two elements of definition of a party system. On the one hand, the relations between political parties do not come down only to inter-party competition. Ware indeed indicates that *“as important as competition is the cooperation - formal, informal, and implicit – that is part of any party system”* (Ware, 1996: 7). On the other hand, in giving priority to the mathematical sense, i.e. in focusing on the interactions between the elements of the system, he neglects the reason of the inter-party competition: the competition for government. In sum, a party system is defined by three dimensions: (1) a party system refers to a system of interactions that political parties have between them; (2) these relations can be of competition or cooperation; (3) political parties choose one or the other strategy in order to control or influence the exercise of government power.

If political scientists first focused on the characteristics, i.e. the “format” of party systems, rather than on the nature of a party system, this is due to the question they had to answer. It was a matter of understanding why there was such a diversity of national party systems.

Nobody seriously doubted the fact that those national party systems were party systems. For this reason, political scientists first took an interest in defining the characteristics of the different national party systems, their disagreements, and then in explaining them. It resulted in a “path dependency” (Pierson, 2000) within the party systems analysis, giving priority to the classification rather than the study of the criteria of existence.

The three conditions of existence of a party system: contribution to a neglected question

Before revealing the three conditions of existence of a party system it would be necessary to stress the clarifications that some scholars bring to my theoretical framework. Three main streams could be identified in the literature: a *genetic* stream (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), a *comparative* stream (Duverger, 1951; Almond and Coleman, 1960; La Palombara and Weiner, 1966; Blondel, 1968; Sartori, 1976), and finally, a stream concerning *party system change* (Mair and Smith, 1990; Mair, 1997).

The comparative approach focuses on a crucial point: the numerical criterion. It is not innocent that the original distinction made by Lowell (1896) between two-party systems and multiparty systems is based on the mathematical criterion. Obviously, a party system is above all a system, i.e. the combination of several elements. Although the numerical criterion is necessary, it is not sufficient. In this respect, Bardi and Mair introduced a major distinction between a simple “set of parties” from a “system of parties” (Bardi and Mair, 2008: 153). In order to define these two terms, Bardi and Mair refer to the “systemic approach” developed by Sartori. A “system of parties” differs from a “set of parties” by taking into account the interactions and the relations that maintain the parties altogether. In a party system, the parties are restrained by their interactions with the other parties and position themselves consequently. In other words, parties are not the system as it is the case for the set of parties. The “systemic constraints or opportunities” (Bardi and Mair, 2008:153) characterize a party system. This distinction is a main contribution for scholars who study the formation of party systems. Therefore I consider the notion of “set of parties” like the minimum condition of existence of a party system.

The systemic approach developed by Sartori gives us a second clarification. With the notion of “relevant party”, Sartori (1976) uses for his typology the criterion of the importance of the

parties according to their capacity of influence on the parliamentary game. Pitching on this criterion, Sartori favors the parliamentary prism to study party systems. As a consequence, a party system makes sense if the electoral and the parliamentary arenas are connected. In this regard, I adopt the three functional arenas presented by Bardi and Mair (2008) inside which a party system structures itself, i.e. the electoral arena, the parliamentary arena and the governmental arena.

The stream of party system change brings in a last contribution. Because it considers party system change through the structure of the competition for government, this approach offers a different theoretical point of view. On the basis of this variable, I note that the formation of a party system requires an additional connection between the governmental arena and the electoral and/or parliamentary arena.

These various contributions allow us to underline the three conditions of existence of a party system. The formation of a party system requires the existence of (1) *a set of parties*, (2) *a parliamentary arena linked to a competitive electoral arena*, and (3) *a governmental arena strongly linked (designations of the representatives (i), vote of laws(ii)) to the electoral and/or parliamentary arena*.

3. The absence of a European party system

The structuring of a European partisan network

The European partisan phenomenon can be understood only through the partisan triangle composed of national party delegations, parliamentary groups and the European federations. Since their creation at the end of the 1970s, scholars have witnessed the emergence of European federations on the European public space. These extra-parliamentary organizations have progressively structured themselves in order to ensure coordination between the actors of the partisan triangle and between the various levels of powers, i.e. the coordination of the political family. The “constitutional recognition”² (Külahci, 2008) by the Maastricht Treaty of those extra-parliamentary organizations as “political parties at European level” (article 138 A) is a decisive step in the institutionalization process of the “transnational party networks”

² Külahci identifies three stages in the recognition of the European federations by the European institutions: the indifference (1951-1969), the informal recognition (1969-1991) and the constitutional recognition (since 2003).

(Kohler and Myrzik, 1982). The institutionalization of the European federations has accelerated since the introduction of a financial support in 2003³.

However, the parliamentary groups still remain the first partisan actors of the European political life for three main reasons. First, they have been linked to the electoral arena since the first European elections in 1979. Second, the successive achievements of the EP and its legislative empowerments in particular, allow the parliamentary groups to be at the heart of the EU policy-making. In spite of the introduction of the Leader's Conference by the main European federations, the extra-parliamentary organizations find themselves on the edge of the EU policy-making. Third, parliamentary groups play a significant role in the functioning of the EP, like the parliamentary groups at the national level (distribution of assignments, accession to the commissions, distribution of reports, speaking time, etc.). Since 1953, the MEPs choose to sit according to political affinities rather than national ones. The ideological affiliation shows *de facto* the entrance of the political families at the EP. The first three parliamentary groups correspond to the Socialist, the Liberal and the Christian Democrat family. The "club" later opened up to the Conservative, the Communist and the Gaullist families (1965-1973). The second enlargement took place with the first legislature and the entrance of the ecologists and the eurosceptics.

The first condition: when appearances are deceptive

Despite the progressive structuring of the European extra-parliamentary organizations, they cannot pretend to the label of "Europarties". In contrast to most other studies, I argue that the analogy of words must not be taken for granted. Delwit et al. stressed quite rightly that "*European political parties cannot be qualified of "party" in the light of the characteristics given to national political parties in the scientific literature*"⁴ (Delwit et al., 2000: 137). These authors explain more specifically that European partisan organizations do not inter in the classical definitions and typologies of political parties. Indeed, the authors stress the fact that parliamentary groups and European federations do not fulfill the traditional functions assigned to the national political parties, in particular with regard to selection of elites for governmental positions and the legitimization of the political system. Even for the EP

³ Regulation (EC) N°2004/2003 of the EP and the Council on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding.

⁴ Quotation translated by the author.

elections – and this situation has not evolved since 1979 – the national parties distribute the investitures, and not the organizations at EU-level⁵. Yet, this characteristic was considered by Sartori as the minimum definition of a political party. According to Sartori, “*a party is any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office*” (Sartori, 1976: 64). In the light of those criteria, the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political organizations correspond to a *European partisan network* rather than “Europarties”. As a consequence, the first condition of existence of a party system is not fulfilled at the EU-level. In fact, Seiler is right to indicate that “*in terms of political parties the fact has always been prior to the law. Here the law is prior to the fact to the point to include in the European law units that don’t exist in the reality*”⁶ (Seiler, 2003).

The second condition: a late but achieved connection

If the political groups have occupied the parliamentary arena since 1953, it was not linked to the electoral arena before 1979. The principle of direct elections of the EP was an ever-recurring issue. This demand could be formed in a resolution submitted by Paul Raynaud at the La Haye Congress in 1948 (Déloye, 2005). The principle is not accepted by the instigators of the Treaty of Paris in 1951. We must wait for the Treaty of Rome in order to see the question of the direct election of the EP officially put on the European agenda (Lindberg, 1966; Hogan, 1967). The article 138 of the European Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) states that “*the Assembly shall draw up proposals for elections by direct universal suffrage in accordance with a uniform procedure in all member states*”. The agenda-setting of this question echoes the realization of the limits of the system of MEPs’ designation of the ECSC Assembly. Two problems are pointed out (Mény, 2009): the representativeness and the legitimacy of the institution on one hand, and the double mandate national/European exerted by the MEPs on the other hand (Hepman and Lodge, 1978). It is only at the end of the 1970s and the European integration crisis that the principle

⁵ We must in fact distinguish between the level in which candidates are appointed – which is often local (activists’ or sympathizers’ vote) – and the one of the investiture which is always the task of the national organization when it is about candidatures to national elections.

⁶ Quotation translated by the author.

of direct elections is posed. The Act concerning the election of the representatives of the EP by direct universal suffrage is signed on 20 September 1976⁷.

Although the connection between the electoral and parliamentary arenas is a fact since June 1979, the electoral arena is questioned by three main elements. First, the decreasing participation rate at the European elections since 1979 corroborates the label of “elections without voters”. Second, the Europeanization of the electoral rules and the setting up of a uniform electoral procedure is not achieved. Third, their features as “second-order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) are still a matter of concern.

The third condition: a limited connection between the parliamentary and governmental arenas

The third condition of existence of a party system is not fulfilled at the EU-level inasmuch as the European governmental arena is not totally connected to the parliamentary one. This disjunction between the governmental and parliamentary arenas – which two indicators are government designation and the voting of laws - stops the emergence of a partisan logic.

First, the “parliamentarization” of the EU political system is not fully achieved yet (Magnette, 2009). Even if the parallel with the parliamentary system is appropriate in many aspects considering the process of “governmentalization” of the Commission, the political power exerted by the Parliament on the latter – which shares the executive function with the Council – remains low.

Second, the legislative function is shared between the Council and the EP. In other words, the legislative function is no exception to the “institutional overlapping” (Blumann, 1995). The EP progressively becomes a “part of the legislative body” (Blumann, 1995) and participates actively to the legislative process. The EP legislative powers range from consultation to the co-decision procedure. The introduction of the colegislator status by the Maastricht Treaty is a sign of the increasing influence of the EP on the European policy-making. Nevertheless, the co-decision does not concern all the areas of EU competence. The consultation and assent procedures continue to be applied to certain policy areas. As a consequence, the distribution

⁷ For an overview of the process, see (1977), *Elections du Parlement européen au suffrage universel direct. Rapport, résolutions et débats du Parlement européen*, Luxembourg, Office des publications officielles des Communautés européennes.

of the legislative power between the Council and the EP is still in favor of the Council. Although it became a legislative body, the EP somehow bears the scars of a consultative body.

Does the Lisbon Treaty ratification set up a new deal? Does the Lisbon Treaty introduce significant changes confirming the thesis of an “emerging European party system”? The paper pointed out the unachieved nature of the connection between the parliamentary and governmental arenas. The Lisbon Treaty evolves towards this direction, offering in particular a better separation of powers and an improvement of the PE in the European policy-making (Ziller, 2008).

In a first place, the Lisbon Treaty introduces a change concerning the appointment of the President of the Commission. It establishes that the Council must suggest the candidate to the Commission Presidency “taking into consideration the EP elections”. Contrary to the former procedure, it is also indicated that the candidate is elected by the EP qualified majority of all EP members. The election of the President of the Commission by the MEPs aims to confer him a democratic legitimacy. These new measures confirm the emergence of a partisan logic inside this institution that is often described as an “aéropage technocratique” to use again the expression of De Gaulle. In addition, this new system is meant to strengthen the political responsibility of the Commission in front of the EP. The clarification of the functions and the powers of control on each institution are also added by the treaty⁸. If we keep in mind that the separation of powers in the EU – that I call a bursting of functions – distinguishes itself from the parliamentary or presidential system type, I observe that the Lisbon Treaty is a first step towards the fulfillment of the third condition of existence of a party system.

In a second place, the legislative procedure is modified. The codecision procedure is extended to 34 new policy areas to become the “ordinary legislative procedure”. Whereas the cooperation procedure is abolished, this decision mode represents 90 % of the legislative procedure while it concerned 60 % under the Nice treaty (Ziller, 2008: 42). The extension of this procedure to almost all the areas of competence of the EU shows the desire to balance the share of the legislative function and to reach a better inter-institutional cooperation.

⁸ On the initiative of the Commission (article 17 TEU), both the Parliament and the Council exert the legislative power (articles 14 and 16 TEU). The executive function is entrusted to the member states authorities and to the Commission (article 17 TEU and 291 TFUE).

Conclusion

The three conditions of existence that I highlighted constitute, beyond the question of the emergence of a European party system, a first clarification of the scope of the concept of party system. In this regard, I hope that my framework will encourage taking over again the theoretical field.

In spite of the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the embryonic nature of the European partisan organizations does not allow us to corroborate the thesis of a “nascent European party system”. On the one hand, the European federations will never have the minimum characteristics of political parties. Indeed, they do not interfere in the nomination of the candidates to the European elections. On the other hand, the governmental arena is not linked enough to the parliamentary arena. In sum, the first and third conditions of existence of a party system are not met by the European partisan network.

If we consider that the actors and the partisan organizations adapted themselves to the multi-level governance context (Kohler-Koch and Eising, 1999; Hoogue and Marks, 2001), a better understanding of the European party phenomenon requires necessarily a multi-level analysis (Deschouwer, 2000, 2003, 2006; Van Houten, 2009; Moon and Oivind, 2010). Deschouwer rightly points out that “*it is not possible any more to understand the dynamics of a single party system without taking into account its linkages, both horizontal and vertical, with other party systems*” (Deschouwer, 2000: 19). Such an analysis leads to decompartmentalize the existing studies that address the partisan phenomenon either in the national level or at the European one. From that perspective, we need to cross the two analysis streams dealing with the European partisan dynamic and the Europeanization of political parties (Mair, 2000, 2007; Ladrech, 2002; Poguntke, 2007).

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