

The aggregating function of political parties in EU decision-making

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Abstract

This Living Review uses concepts of aggregation to analyse what we do and do not know about the contribution of political parties to the politics and democratic performance of the European Union. It suggests that present representative structures are better at aggregating 'choices of policies' than 'choices of leaders'. Much more, however, needs to be done to analyse the causal contribution of party actors to those patterns of aggregation, and to understand why European Union parties do not develop further where aggregation seems to be deficient in the EU arena.



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1 Introduction, Parties and Aggregation

Democracy is by nature a form of aggregative choice. Means have to be found of combining the votes of the people or their representatives and those means must themselves conform to democratic standards.

There are at least four profound difficulties in meeting such a challenge. The first relates to the political equality conditions for democracy (Beetham 1994: 28; Weale 1999: 14). Whereas the simple rule ‘one person, one vote’ makes it easy to proceduralise political equality at the level of the individual citizen, matters become more difficult when it comes to combining votes. It is difficult to think of any method of aggregation that does not make the votes of a few pivotal to decisions binding on all. Maybe at best we can only design systems so that the pivotal few are likely to be representative of the rest. Thus, systems that encourage competition for the support of the median decider have the advantage (where preferences are one dimensional and normally distributed) of handing the pivotal role to the actor whose views are the least average distance from all the rest (Powell 1989).

A second well-known difficulty in the study of aggregation is one of avoiding non-arbitrariness. Ever since Kenneth Arrow’s ‘impossibility theorem’ (Arrow 1951), social choice theory has been aware of the difficulty of designing any system for aggregating preferences – representative institutions included – that simultaneously satisfies what Armatya Sen describes as the following ‘mild-looking conditions’: a) pareto efficiency; b) avoidance of interpersonal comparisons in which some preferences are assumed to be better than others; c) independence of preferences and d) complete and consistent rankings of preferences (Sen 2002: 72).

Under further conditions – notably where preferences cannot be arranged along a single dimension of choice – matters become so indeterminate that an infinite number of outcomes are possible. Any ideal of procedural neutrality in which it is only the choices of citizens and their representatives that matter, and not the means of combining them, collapses all too easily into its opposite: the method of aggregation becomes the key determinant of what is decided (McKelvey 1976). Hopes that procedures can be chosen from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ as to who will benefit from them (Rawls 1993) have to contend with structural incentives to manipulate procedures to achieve specific outcomes (Riker 1982: 305).

A third challenge follows from John Dewey’s famous observation that voting can never be enough in a democracy (Dewey 1927: 207). Since voting is in many ways a remarkably coercive form of choice (see also Dunn 2005: 19 on how democratic governments ‘add insult to injury’ by closing ‘the circle of civic subjection’ in ‘their citizens’ own name’), it is unlikely to be acceptable without arrangements that demonstrate to the outvoted that their preferences have been set aside ‘for reasons’ and not through mere ‘acts of will’ (Mill 1861: 239-240). Any system of aggregation, in other words, needs to be accompanied by one of deliberation and justification (on this see also Habermas 1996).

A fourth challenge is motivational and cognitive. If my vote is most unlikely to be one that makes a difference after it has been aggregated with everyone else’s (Downs 1957) what can motivate me to take part? How, indeed, can I know how to combine my vote with those of millions of unknown others so that all of our behaviours have some chance of producing their intended effects?

How democracies respond to these problems of aggregation is partly a matter of institutional design, and partly a matter of how actors organise themselves in relation to the political system. Political parties are foremost amongst those actors who can help or hinder. They can help by:

1. Competing around broad approaches to government parties in ways that allow all issues to be considered in relation to all others. This is likely to be especially useful where externalities and cumulative unintended consequences dictate that choices of value cannot optimally be made issue-by-issue.

2. Directly or indirectly offering the same menu of choice across the political system, so that any two voters can co-ordinate their actions by simply voting for the same party programmes on offer, even though, of course, most voters are unknown to one another (Cox 1997: 5).
3. Simplifying choices so that citizens can participate in complex democratic systems with only minimal information. Meaningful choice may require no more than an understanding of the ordinal (i.e. relative) position of parties along a key dimension of choice, such as left-right; or no more than an opportunity to renew or recall existing patterns of power-holding by voting for parties of government or opposition.
4. Solving some of the inter-temporal problems of democratic politics. Individual power holders may come and go, but in systems of ‘party responsible government’, parties can be held responsible for governing performance. They can also have a developmental role where use of a political system by voters and their representative to achieve output or input democracy is a capability that grows with use (March and Olsen 1995). Parties recruit and train elites in specific forms of expertise needed for representation. With time, voters may also have a clearer idea of what it is to choose between parties.

Yet, there is no guarantee that parties will perform these roles very well in practice. Rather than compete for the favours of the voters, they may carve up the benefits of a political system between themselves (Katz and Mair 1995; Blyth and Katz 2005). They may fail to form even where there is an identifiable group capable of being represented (Olson 1965); or they may fail to supply choices in relation to a particular level of government.

So what of the European Union: do parties contribute to aggregation in ways that help or hinder its democratic performance? Do we even know enough to answer this question in full? After introducing the *dramatis personae* (Section 2) this Living Review appraises what we know about the contribution of party politics to the aggregation of preferences amongst representatives (Section 3), voters (Section 4) and the two combined (Section 5). Section 6 discusses what more we need to find out and Section 7 concludes. There will necessarily be limits to how much of the literature that can be covered here. In particular, the author has concentrated mainly on English and French language sources. Since, though, this is a ‘Living Review’ it is hoped that readers will treat the whole exercise as open-ended and come back to the author with their own comments on what further arguments and sources need to be incorporated into a summary of recent research into political parties and the EU.

2 Analysing the EU ‘Party System’

By the EU party system, (see [Hix and Lord 1997: 56](#)) is meant here the party groups in the European Parliament, the EU extra-parliamentary parties and party federations, and even national parties in so far as they structure choice in European elections. Whilst, of course, the Council of Ministers, and even the Commission, are drawn indirectly from the governing parties of the Member States, this review is mainly interested in assessing our understanding of those aspects of the Union that are explicitly organised for party politics.

Of the party families common to many EU Member States, Christian Democrats and Conservatives, Socialists and Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens, the Far Left and Eurosceptics have all managed to organise themselves into multi-national groups in successive European Parliaments. Only the Far Right has found it hard to form a group at all. Only the Eurosceptics have found it hard to cope with the left-right pattern of voting in the Parliament. Only the regionalists have had to distribute themselves across groups formed by other party families.

However, whilst European party groups exercise the powers of the Parliament, citizens do not vote directly for them. Rather, they choose between national parties, whose only cross-national linkage for the purposes of European elections consists of their common membership of the so-called ‘European Union parties’ listed in [table 1](#).

European People’s Party (Christian Democrats/Conservatives)	European Green Party
Party of European Socialists	European Free Alliance (Regionalists)
Party of the European Left	Union for Europe of the Nations (Eurosceptics)
European Liberal and Democratic Reform Party	European Democratic Party (Centrist/Strongly pro Integration)

Table 1: Political Parties at the European Level (Registered under the Party Statute of the European Union, 2006).

Since the Treaty on European Union (1992) ‘Political parties at European level’ have been recognised as an ‘important factor for integration within the Union’. The Nice Treaty (2001) then authorised the Council to lay ‘down regulations governing political parties and in particular rules governing their financing’ at European level (European Communities Treaty, A. 191). In the hope of confining status and resources to authentically transnational party networks whose activities are directed at influencing the institutions of the Union ([Jansen 2001: 8](#)), the ‘European Party Statute’ stipulated that ‘political parties at the European level’ must be:

‘...represented in at least one quarter of Member States by Members of the European Parliament, members of national parliaments, or members of regional parliaments or assemblies *or* have received in at least one quarter of Member States at least three per cent of the vote in those Member States in the most recent European elections’.

If, moreover, they have not already participated in a European election, they must have ‘expressed an intention of doing so’ (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 15 November 2003, L 297/1-4).

Yet, Thomas Jansen is surely right to ask ‘are these “political parties at the European level” or “European Union parties?”’ ([Jansen 2001: 7](#)). Putting the question this way highlights the slipperiness of the Treaty language. It also underscores how even the tests in the Statute could be satisfied by mechanisms for co-ordinating the engagement of *national* parties with the Union.

Does the academic literature suggest any clearer criteria than the Statute for determining how far the European Union has political parties of its own? One dismissive approach amounts to a

simple syllogism: Parties need mass memberships and/or a direct relationship with voters. The EU parties have neither. Therefore, they are 'pseudo-parties'. End of discussion.

A very different approach begins, as it were, at the other end of the spectrum of party political development. It asks not so much 'what would be needed for full political parties at the EU level?' as 'what would be the minimum deviation from pure co-ordination mechanisms between national parties that would allow us to talk meaningfully of party politics specific to the European Union arena' (my quotation marks)? Here the search is usually guided by an implicit assumption of isomorphism. In the words Tsatsos report of the European Parliament, it is assumed that the best way to recognise a Euro-party is through 'various features derived from the image of the political parties in the Member States and transferred - *mutatis mutandis* - to the level of the European Union' (Parliament 1996: 4). Whether there is much to be gained from this approach is best appraised through a critical examination of the following claims associated with it:

Claim 1. *The internal structures of 'Euro-parties' resemble those of political parties:* As Jansen puts it, the typical structure of the Euro-parties is that 'a congress of delegates decides on the policy programme, an executive body deals with day-to-day business, a party leader acts as a spokesperson, and a party secretariat provides technical and organisational back-up' (Jansen 2001: 16). Euro-parties also resemble national parties in linking the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary dimensions of their political systems. Some three quarters of MEPs come from national parties which are committed by their membership of Euro-parties to joining a corresponding groups in the EP. Also worth noting is that by allowing individual membership, some of the Euro-parties are not *stricto sensu* 'parties of parties'.

Claim 2. *Euro-parties are recognised as such through a mechanism for their resourcing through the political system itself.* Until the practice was declared illegal by the ECJ, Euro-parties were funded from the EP budget via the party groups in the Parliament. Now the Party Statute is in place, they are funded from the Community budget.

Claim 3. *Euro-parties perform a similar function to conventional political parties in agreeing programmes and manifestos.* Euro-parties have long agreed manifestos for European elections. However, this may even under-state their contribution to the programmatic development of the Union. Some commentators claim, first, that national parties form, and do not merely exchange, preferences on EU matters through the medium of the Europarties; and, second, that those socialised preferences then feed into Treaty change and other policy development (Johansson 1999; Kulahci 2001) through national parties of government, and through use by the EP groups of Euro-party texts to guide their own co-operation (Jansen 2001).

Claim 4. *National parties have to some degree 'limited their autonomy' in favour of the Euro-parties.* The most obvious evidence for this lies in the Statutes of the EPP (European People's Party), PES (Party of European Socialists), ELDR (European Liberal and Democratic Reform Party), which have all allowed party positions to be established by majority vote.

Yet, none of the previous claims is conclusive. Structural resemblances between Europarties and conventional political parties may be mimetic only. Union resourcing may even be taken as a sign that Europarties lack the roots in society that would allow them to do more to fund themselves. Accounts of how and where political preferences are formed are notoriously over-determined and therefore elusive. Majority voting is balanced by a lack of clear sanctions (in both the groups and the Europarties) for those who do not follow the majority line.

Even the role of Europarties in cross-institutional co-ordination may be grounds for doubting, rather than confirming, their 'partyness'. The key point here is that national party leaders of at least the EPP, PES and ELDR meet in their Europarties prior to European Councils. On

occasions, ‘caucusing’ through Europarties may also impact on the business of sectoral Councils of Ministers. In the view of some, this need to be serviceable to bargaining between governments – and would-be parties of government – tells us who the Europarties’ real political masters are. In contrast, claims that Europarties do anything meaningful to link citizens to representatives are only part of a façade politicisation ‘engineered’ by the Commission and Council themselves to add legitimacy to otherwise technocratic and intergovernmental modes of decision-making (Bartolini 2005: 355-356; Bartolini 2006: 37).

3 Aggregation of representatives' preferences

The last section demonstrated that there is still much disagreement on how important political parties are in the EU arena and on whether the Union has in any meaningful sense developed its own form of party politics. The remainder of this review asks whether the concepts of aggregation reviewed in Section 1 can help resolve some of those disagreements?

Beginning in this section with the contribution of the EP party groups to aggregating preferences amongst representatives in the EP, much of what we know comes from roll-call analysis of how MEPs vote. Since the pioneering work of Fulvio Attina (Attinà 1990) roll-call analysis has been steadily perfected, notably by Simon Hix (Hix 2001, 2002a) and his collaborators (Hix *et al.* 2005, 2006). Yet in spite of its sophistication, there is a suspicion that it rests on shaky foundations (Carrubba and Gabel 1999). Since roll-calls cover only a third of EP votes, and decisions to request them are themselves political acts, they are likely to be biased towards particular kinds of behaviour, including: a wish to demonstrate to the Commission and Council the cohesion of the Parliament as a whole, a wish to check that MEPs within a group are voting as promised, and a wish to embarrass other groups by revealing the extent of their internal divisions.

Some further information about MEP behaviour is available from survey work. The MEP Survey 2000 conducted by Simon Hix and Roger Scully for the European Parliament Research Group (EPRG) is a rich source of information on MEP policy preferences, and on their role conceptions and beliefs about representation (available at EPRG). Also helpful is a survey by Tapio Raunio (2002) of the relationship between national party delegations in the EP and their parent parties in Member States. Of course, all these sources face the difficulty that the object of enquiry is itself continuously changing. The 2004 enlargement, for example, changed the composition of one third of the Parliament and brought into the party groups national parties whose background in the transition politics of East and Central Europe, arguably, differs from the more settled party politics of most of the EU15.

Assuming, however, that the roll-calls and the surveys are the best evidence available, they tell us at least the following about the aggregative behaviour of the groups:

1. The EP groups for the most part aggregate preferences along a left-right dimension. All the groups except the Eurosceptics are composed of left-right national party delegations. Simon Hix has used Nominate scaling to demonstrate that left-right is by far the most important explanation of voting alignments, with preferences for and against European integration forming a second, much less important, dimension (Hix 2001: 669-676). In his work with Abdul Noury and Gérard Roland, he observes that 'a one per cent decrease in the ideological distance between two parties implies an increase of approximately six per cent in the probability that these parties will vote the same way. This result gives a strong indication of the importance of left-right politics in the European Parliament' (Hix *et al.* 2005: 228).
2. Government *vs.* Opposition in Member States would also seem to be a factor in the aggregation of preferences in the EP. For example, Bjorn Hoyland reaches the intriguing conclusion that MEPs from parties of government in Member States are even more likely than those from parties of opposition to support amendments at second reading of Co-decision since 'most of the governments that supported the common position want to change the policy even further away from the *status quo*. Hence they try to push the policy further towards their ideal policy through amendments in the Parliament' (Høyland 2005).
3. Country of origin, on the other hand, is rarely significant at a higher level of aggregation than national party delegations (Hix *et al.* 2005: 677). Whereas, in other words, all votes allocated to a Member State are cast in the Council of Ministers as a bloc according to a single interpretation of the national interest, MEPs from the same country are dispersed between

diverse ideological groupings and, for the most part, they stay that way in individual votes of the Parliament. One of the few exceptions in recent years was the Takeovers Directive which was opposed by all German MEPs.

4. Patterns of aggregation map fairly well onto the divisions between the party groups. In other words, MEPs vote most of the time with their party groups. Hix *et al.* note that the average voting cohesion of what they call the three ‘genuine European Parties’ – the EPP, PES and ELDR – was 89.1 per cent in the 1999-2004 Parliament (Hix *et al.* 2005: 216). So what explains this? Some factors that might have been expected to have been negative influences on cohesion – the number of national parties whose views need to be accommodated and the related process of enlarging the Union itself – appear to have little effect. The same goes for what might have been expected to be positive influences, notably the socialisation of individuals into their groups with the passage of time spent in the European Parliament (Scully and Farrell 2003). In contrast, the cohesion of the groups is strongly related to the powers of the Parliament. One of the most striking findings of Hix *et al.* is that, controlling for other factors, the cohesion of the main groups increased by 7.1 per cent after the Amsterdam Treaty (Hix 2002b: 226-228), which, of course, extended Co-decision and redesigned it into a more level playing field between Council and Parliament.
5. Aggregation of preferences across groups follows two dominant inter-party alignments that can be contrasted as bipartisanship vs. bipolarity. The former consists of a Grand Coalition of the centre. Although mythically presented as a PES-EPP cartel, it may be more accurately be described as ‘bipartisanship plus’. A core EPP-PES coalition structurally underpinned by co-operation agreements between the two groups is often supplemented by the ELDR and even the Greens. Bipolarity, on the other hand, consists of the PES and EPP opposing one another, with the ELDR swinging either to the left or the right.

There are variations across issues in how far voting is bipolar or bipartisan (Hix *et al.* 2003: 326). It used to be believed that this is mainly because the decision-rules of the Parliament also vary. Only a coalition including the main groups is likely to meet the ‘absolute majority rule’ that a majority of all MEPs, and not just of those voting, is needed to amend legislation. Thus, issues subject to Co-decision will produce more bipartisan voting. Since, however, bipartisanship occurs more frequently than can be explained by variation in the decision-rules of the Parliament itself, Amie Kreppel argues that it is also encouraged by the Parliament’s relationships with the other Union institutions: for ‘the EP to have any effect, it must create legislative proposals (Amendments) that are broadly acceptable’ to the Council and Commission’ which are themselves cross-party bodies (Kreppel 2000: 346, 358).

6. The previous points imply that it may be easier for some representatives than others to aggregate their preferences through the EP party system. First, the dominance of left-right alignments may make it harder for those who are more interested in representing pro-anti integration views – and especially anti-integration views – to organise effectively in the Parliament. Second, parties of the far right or far left are less likely to participate in winning majorities of the Parliament. Third, representatives from some Member States may find it easier than others to aggregate preferences through the EP party system. Taking the core of the latter to be the ‘EPP-PES-ELDR’ triangle, Lori Thorlakson calculates that ‘ineffectively channeled mandates’ in the 2004-9 Parliament vary from 46.2 per cent in the case of Ireland to zero in the cases of four Member States (Thorlakson 2005: 478-479).
7. The question of whether patterns of aggregation in the European Parliament are becoming more competitive and politicised has recently attracted much academic interest. What is probably beyond dispute is that competitive pressure has long influenced aggregation within

the groups. The otherwise surprising tendency since the 1980s for the main EP groups to become more diffuse gatherings of more national parties, whilst also increasing their cohesion in parliamentary votes, has not just been the product of new opportunities, but also of new threats, associated with the empowerment of the Parliament. Those who care about the closeness of overall Union policies to their own preferences have had all the more reason to remove any relative inefficiency in how ‘their MEPs’ combine to use the powers of the Parliament. Thus after 1986 the centre right felt that it could no longer afford a group structure in the EP that reflected its historic division into Christian Democrats and Conservatives (Johansson 1997; Rinsche and Welle 1999). Division on the centre right made it likely that the more unified centre left would form the largest group in most Parliaments, and that in some it would amend legislation in a consistently leftwards direction, as arguably happened between 1989 and 1994.

A more contentious claim, however, is that the main groups are no longer just competing within a framework of consensus in which the name of the game is to maximise their individual contributions to decisions they eventually expect to be agreed by all the main groups. Rather, they are apparently more likely than before to vote against one another. Hix *et al.* claim, first, that the peak of PES/EPP bipartisanship was reached in the 1989–94 Parliament (Hix *et al.* 2005: 219). Second, that the two groups have scope to decide how much or how little to co-operate on any one issue. Third, that they are more likely to vote against one another precisely where other evidence indicates they disagree most – on internal socio-economic issues (such as environment, agriculture and health and safety regulation, as opposed to institutions and external trade) (Hix *et al.* 2003: 326).

Yet, Hix *et al.* appear to build their claim that EP party politics are becoming ‘more competitive’ on a modest drop in EPP-PES collusion from 71.0 per cent (1989–1994) to 69.2 and to 69.4 per cent respectively in the last two parliaments (1994–1999 and 1999–2004) (Hix *et al.* 2005: 219–221). Indeed, Giacomo Benedetto (Benedetto 2005) disputes Hix’s claims in relation to almost every aspect of the work of the 1994–1999 and 1999–2004 Parliaments. In his view, high levels of EPP-PES co-operation continued to dominate voting, committee assignments, the parceling out of agenda-setting opportunities through rapporteurships, appointments to other EU offices (mainly the Commission), and the shaping of the EP’s input into the Union’s Constitutional politics.

In any case, deeper empirical and conceptual questions may need to be asked about what counts as competition and collusion. Amie Kreppel’s observation that the ‘real battles’ are at the amendment stage, whilst the ‘grand coalition’ is much more frequent in votes on final texts (Kreppel 2000: 356), suggests that in the making of any one decision there will often be an interplay between the aggregation of preferences by competition and consensus. Benedetto provides evidence of just such an effect. Whereas in the first half of the 1999–2004 Parliament the EPP and PES voted together on 60.9 per cent of Co-decision part texts, they did so on 90.7 per cent of whole texts (Benedetto 2005: 76, 79).

4 Aggregation of voter preferences

So far we have analysed the role of parties in aggregating the preferences of elected representatives in the EP. What, though, of their role in aggregating the preferences of voters in European elections? From the outset European elections have been understood as ‘second-order’ contests that are decided on national issues and influenced by national electoral cycles (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This implies parties do not do much to structure and then aggregate voter choice around issues relevant to the European Union itself.

Recent research, however, suggests a number of refinements to second-order theory.

On the one hand, second-orderness is increasingly understood as a complex of different behaviours. Thus European elections are used by some voters to sanction governing parties. Others use them to vote ‘more sincerely’ and ‘less strategically’ by plumping for small national parties they are normally deterred from supporting for fear of wasting their vote (Hix and Marsh 2005). Both behaviours are ways of using European elections for domestic purposes. Yet they are quite different in their consequences for representation at Union level. By boosting the representation of national opposition parties, the former increases the probability that the European Parliament will check and balance the Council of Ministers. By increasing the number of national parties that are likely to be represented in the EP, the latter somewhat fragments representation in the Parliament to the benefit of its peripheral groups (Bardi 1996).

On the other hand, second-orderness may itself be a matter of degree, and limited ‘break-outs’ from it would seem to be possible. The following are examples:

1. Voters may get opportunities to vote for at least some parties that mainly fight European elections on the issue of European integration. Although they are much more common at the Eurosceptic end of the pro-anti integration continuum and any MEPs elected in their name are probably less ‘coalitionable’ than any other category of representative in EP votes, parties specifically organised for registering preferences on integration itself have appeared in Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden (Thorlakson 2005: 480).
2. Parties may give different salience to different aspects of their appeal when they fight European as opposed to national elections, or voters may find different reasons for voting for them in the two contests. There is evidence that parties which campaign with a clear position either for or against European integration (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004) do better in European elections than would be predicted from a straightforward application of the second-order model (Hix and Marsh 2005: 22). By appealing to differences in competences and policy opportunity structures at the Union and national levels, parties can likewise persuade voters to switch for the purposes of European elections only. Thus Green parties have pitched to those who favour strict environmental policies at Union level which they would oppose at national level for fear of lost competitiveness (Carrubba and Timpone 2005).
3. Sometimes candidates from the same national party can compete more or less explicitly against one another in European elections. This can allow otherwise ideologically similar voters and candidates to differ on EU issues. Examples include: Ireland where European elections are contested in multi-member constituencies; Finland where open-lists allow voters to change the order in which candidates are ranked; and France where ‘notables’ from the same political family have fielded lists in competition with one another.

5 Aggregation across the parliamentary and electoral arenas combined

Section 3 summarised research on the work of the EP party groups in aggregating the preferences of representatives. Section 4 did the same for the role of national parties in aggregating the preferences of voters in European elections. But are we in any position to assess the overall capacity of the EU party system to aggregate across the electoral and parliamentary arenas combined? A good starting point is with the seminal work of Herman Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen [Schmitt and Thomassen \(2000\)](#).

In both the 1979 and 1994 European elections, Schmitt and Thomassen found a close fit (with correlation coefficient of 0.88 (1979) and 0.82 (1994)) between the left-right orientations of candidates and those who voted for them ([Schmitt and Thomassen 2000](#): 323). They also found that candidates and their voters in European elections were well matched in their general attitudes towards integration, and even where they diverged on its specifics, there was a tendency over time for parties to follow changes in their voters preferences towards integration, rather than *vice versa* ([Schmitt and Thomassen 2000](#): 318).

All of this has an important implication: even though European elections are second-order contests between national parties, voters seem to end up with representatives whose preferences are fairly close to their own along dimensions of choice relevant to the EU. Using the categories set out in Section 1 and the research reviewed in Sections 3 and Section 4, it is not hard to see how Schmitt and Thomassen's argument might be elaborated into an assessment of aggregation in the EU arena.

If we accept that for all the complex variety of national parties on offer across the Union in any one European election, 'left-right' is a general choice of policy direction available to all voters – and pro-anti integration is a choice of direction that comes into play wherever there is voter demand for it – there surely is a sense in which any two voters from anywhere in the Union can aggregate and co-ordinate their preferences through a broadly compatible structure of 'offers'? Also, the two dimensions – themselves broad aggregates – surely imply that the party politics of the Union largely end up considering a wide-range of issues in relation to one another?

Yet present arrangements also preserve the familiar. To the extent that a large amount of voting remains habitual and even the de-aligned feel a need to choose between familiar 'brands', relative falls in turn-out between national and European elections may even be minimised by a continued role for national parties in both sets of elections. In sum, then, a benign view of the *status quo* is that voters benefit from a double simplification that drastically economises on the information they need to make meaningful choices in European elections: an underlying dimensionality allows them to make general choices of policy direction that are relevant to the Union and those dimensions can largely be accessed through choices between national parties.

Others, however, are less convinced that present patterns of party politics can work simultaneously across both dimensions. Citing research by Cees Van Der Eijk and Mark Franklin ([Van Der Eijk and Franklin 2004](#)), Stefano Bartolini doubts that voters 'can choose a party on the basis of its EU position, while at the same time choosing on the basis of its left-right position' ([Bartolini 2005](#): 345). Indeed, it might be added that two-dimensional structures of political choice present precisely the conditions under which it is hard to aggregate preferences without arbitrariness.

Defenders of the *status quo* are thus forced to claim either that two-dimensionality does not matter very much or that it can be managed. Here they are likely to argue, first, that one of the dimensions – left-right – is clearly more important than the other in both the parliamentary and electoral arenas of EU politics; and, second, that the two dimensions are, in any case, procedurally separable. Choices of both voters and their representatives can be aggregated separately along the two dimensions: through European elections and the EP in the case of 'left-right' preferences and through Treaty change in the case of 'pro-anti integration' preferences. The powers of the EP are

mainly left-right. Its scope to act unilaterally along the pro-anti integration dimension only arises where it can change its own internal rules of procedure in ways that affect the operationalisation of specific Treaty powers (Hix 2002b; Hix and Lord 1996). Even then, the EP aggregates the preferences of representatives through legislative and other single-issue coalitions, rather than governing ones. This gives national party delegations the flexibility to combine differently depending on which of the two dimensions they think is the more salient to their voters. Curiously, there is probably no better evidence for this than the relationship that the British Conservatives have had with the EPP since 1992.

Rather than attempt to settle this argument about the manageability of two dimensionality, I would like to add some further difficulties that I feel have received rather less attention in the literature. First choices between national parties will not always be good proxies for choices on Union issues along any *one* given scale of values. Schmitt and Thomassen note that ‘representation works pretty as far as general lines of policy are concerned’ but ‘congruence between voters and their representatives is remarkably poor’ on the ‘specifics’ (Schmitt and Thomassen 2000: 319). In a further contribution (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999), they elaborate on where this problem is most acute. However, it seems to me that there is a further difficulty that arises not from any distinction between the general and the specific in substantive policy preferences, but from a distinction between voters in general and voters in particular. It is possible for a system to produce a good average fit between the preferences of voters and representatives, yet constitute an unsatisfactory structure of choice at the level of the individual voter.

Perhaps the key question here is: how easy is it under present arrangements for the individual voter to choose differently at the national and European levels? Take the example of left-right values. Given differences in methods used to re-allocate values – and in who is likely win or lose from any re-allocation – voters might have good reasons for being of the left in relation to one arena but of the right in relation to another. The Union is quite unlike its component states in mainly re-allocating values as a by-product of regulation (Majone 1996); and even where it does re-allocate through financial transfers, a member of a relatively disadvantaged sociological group in a Member State that is a net contributor to the EU’s budget might self-interestedly support redistribution in the national arena but oppose it in the European.

Of course such voters might still be able to register their preference through a national structure of choice by plumping in a European election for a domestic party other than they normally support. But by now we are assuming choice that is both guided by Union policy and sufficiently informed about the latter to match voter preferences to the nearest domestic party. If the original assumption was that choices between domestic parties allows voters to economise on the need to acquire information about the Union arena, we have departed from it.

A second reason why preferences acquired at one level of government may not always be an adequate basis for choice in relation to another has to do with the likelihood that under commonly found conditions of political competition and consensus formation more than one party will be more or less equidistant from the preferences of many voters. A sensible basis for decision under such conditions might be to assess the relative chances of parties delivering on their promises. Whether that assessment is made on the basis of past performance or of a calculation of how a party is likely to be situated in the future in relation to all others, it, once again, presupposes knowledge of the specific political system to which representatives are being elected.

My final reservation goes deeper than the other two. Even in the absence of the foregoing quibbles, it is not entirely clearly to me how much is established by the finding that the preferences of candidates and voters in European elections correlate along key dimensions of choice. As successful candidates go on to exercise the powers of the Parliament, correlated preferences may somewhat increase the probability of the Union ‘doing what the people want’. That may be desirable, but it is unclear that it corresponds to the core meaning of democracy. Given that we may, on the one hand, prefer representatives who use their own judgement and we may, on the other, find that

benign technocracies satisfy our needs, it is unclear in what sense ‘doing what the people want’ is either a sufficient or necessary condition for democracy. Not only, may democracy be more valued for the rights it confers than the policy outputs it produces (Plamenatz 1973), but also, the right it confers on all citizens to combine together as political equals to exercise public control by dismissing political leaders is, arguably, a more secure marker of its uniqueness as a system of rule than any claim that it gives the people what they want (Dunn 2005).

In sum then, Schmitt and Thomassen’s findings can at best be turned into a defence of present arrangements for aggregating ‘choices of policies’. They do not justify present arrangements for aggregating ‘choices of leaders’ (and were never intended to do so). Of course, this is in good part because the powers of the EP itself do not penetrate deep into appointing or dismissing the political leadership of the EU. But limitations on how far existing representative structures can be used to exercise public control of office holders are also evident from the one instance where office is designated by competition election. As long as European elections are ‘second-order’ contests between national parties, the link between voting behaviour and the appointment or dismissal of legislators in the EP will be accidental and not systematic. Voting will be neither an evaluation of rival programmes for a forthcoming European Parliament nor an appraisal of the relative performance of parties in an outgoing European Parliament.

6 Suggestions for further research

So far, we have attempted to make some sense of where aggregation is present and where it is lacking in the EU arena. But this only raises two further questions. The first is one of causation, the second one of constraint. The question of causation is: where aggregation seems to work, well, how far can that be attributed to party politics at the Union level? The question of constraint is: where aggregation seems to be lacking, why do parties not develop further in the EU arena to fill the gap? Compared with matters considered so far, these two new questions take us on to more treacherous ground, where existing research allows us to form plausible hypotheses without always generating the evidence needed to adjudicate between them. As such, this section is more suggestive than previous ones of where further investigation is needed. For the sake of brevity, the question of causation is examined through the example of the groups in the EP, and that of constraint through an analysis of why European Union parties are absent from the electoral arena.

6.1 Causation?

The causal question raises the cruel possibility that we have not progressed very far since Section 2 first asked whether the EU's party politics do anything more than co-ordinate the engagement of national parties with Union institutions? How, indeed, can we even be sure that there is a party system at Union level worth studying, as opposed to a series of mechanisms that do little more than co-ordinate national party adaptations to Europe (Ladrech 2002; Poguntke *et al.* 2006)?

The limits on how far existing knowledge allows us to answer this question are well illustrated through the example of the EP groups. We know that it is the decision of whole national party delegations to defect or stay loyal in individual votes that best explains the much vaunted cohesion of the groups (Faas 2003). Likewise, much of what we know about incentives and identities suggests that it makes more sense to take national party delegations, rather than the EP groups themselves, as the basic units of the Parliament.

National parties are better placed than the EP groups to steer the behaviours of individual MEPs. In the short-term, even those rewards and sanctions that are dispensed by the groups – committee memberships and chairs, and opportunities for MEPs to shape the Parliament's agenda through rapporteurships – are distributed to individual MEPs through the medium of national party delegations (on this see esp. Kreppl 2002: 202-209; also McElroy 2006: 12). In the long-term, it is national parties that have the power to play snakes and ladders with the careers of MEPs by issuing passports back to domestic politics (Andolfato 1994), or by deciding on their re-adoption as candidates in subsequent European elections. The use in most Member States of closed lists – in which chances of political survival are not just dependent on being re-adopted, but on the order in which parties present their candidates – creates intense competition amongst MEPs to please national parties.

At a more sociological level, MEPs identify somewhat more with their national parties than their EP party group. In an analysis of MEP role conceptions, Roger Scully and David Farrell's found that the mean importance attached to representing national parties and EP group was 3.64 and 3.42 respectively. Whereas 25.9 per cent gave the maximum score of '5' to representing their national party, only 14.6 per cent did the same for their party group (Scully and Farrell 2003: 272).

Yet, anyone who has conducted interviews in the European Parliament will know how often MEPs claim that they contribute through their participation in the EP groups to whatever preferences their national parties have on many EU issues. It is thus possible that *systemic* indicators, based on incentives and *identity* indicators based on loyalties, point to the groups being less important than their component national parties, whilst *cognitive* indicators based on patterns of preference formation point to the opposite conclusion.

However, the implication of the systemic/cognitive distinction that the groups have influence

but not power may even sell the groups short. In particular, the distinction may be a false one if the ‘system component’ is equated only with the application of incentives and sanctions by organised hierarchies. On the analogy of the theory of perfect competition in micro-economics, the ‘systemness of the system’ may consist not so much in organised concentrations of power as in the smallness of many of the units in relation to the whole. Although, of course, there are some large national party delegations in the EP, their average size is only 4-5 MEPs.

All this may plausibly have further implications for the ‘party systemness’ of the EP. Consider the argument that EP party groups have developed as means of reducing transactions costs between national party delegations (Hix *et al.* 2005: 212). At first sight, this is just the kind of theory that reduces the groups to a marginal role as pure co-ordination mechanisms. But here some further insights can be added. First, the power of legislators in all kinds of system is linked to how they organise and accumulate expertise by dividing labours between themselves, usually through developing efficient interfaces between parties and committees (Krehbiel 1991). Second, expertise acquired within a specific division of labour means that switches of allegiance will usually incur costs while staying put will usually yield increasing returns (Pierson 2000). Third, less than one in twenty national party delegations have enough MEPs to cover all the committees of the Parliament and even those that do would have little chance of getting the committee assignments of their choice if they attempted to operate outside the group structure. Fourth, probably only three groups – the EPP, PES and the ELDR – have the numbers both to accumulate expertise across the range of committees and exercise power (as measured by power indices) in each committee. All this implies not only that national parties which want to participate in the effective use of the Parliament’s powers have to operate within a group, but such parties also have few plausible options in choosing which group to affiliate with.

In sum, then, our knowledge of incentive structures and identities is insufficient to ground the conclusion that the EP groups are causally less significant than their component national delegations. It is possible that the organisation of knowledge and ‘voice’ gives the groups real ‘systemness’ and structural power. Yet, we are far from knowing this for certain. In contrast to all that we know about voting behaviour in the Parliament, there is little firm evidence beyond the hearsay of interested actors of where and how preferences get to be formed or valuable forms of expertise get to be accumulated. ‘Large n’ case studies using methods of process tracing would be the obvious way to fill the gap.

6.2 Constraint

A second question that requires more research is: what constrains parties from developing further as a means of aggregating preferences in the European arena? One possibility is that further development is blocked by incumbents. Another is that there is little obvious need for anything more than we have already. These hypotheses are best deployed as alternative explanations for why European Union parties have not developed in the electoral arena.

Incumbent national parties have been accused of operating mutually reinforcing restraints on competition in European elections and the EP itself. In Pascal Delwit’s assessment, national party campaigns in European elections are so low-key that it is ‘possible to question whether there has been an election at all’ (Delwit 2000: 310). Stefano Bartolini argues that it is only on account of this depoliticisation of the process by which the Parliament is elected that its groups can operate as efficiently as they do to form legislative coalitions (Bartolini 2006: 45). Still others argue that collusive voting amongst MEPs then feeds back into muted competition in European elections. As one of its recent Presidents puts it, the Parliament is yet to ‘demonstrate to voters that preferring one set of candidates to another will change policy outcomes at the European level’ (ELDR 1999).

So what alternatives to the *status quo* might stimulate greater competition that is also more clearly structured around EU issues? Suggestions include the following: a) allocation of some EP

seats at the European Union level (10 per cent has been suggested) b) strengthened linkage between European elections and the appointment of the Commission c) open lists for European elections d) encouragement of national parties to clarify their relationship with the EU party system (for example, by indicating their EU party affiliations, and not just their national party names, on ballot sheets).

Given that incumbent parties can probably block all these changes through their influence over the EU Treaties and national electoral procedures, the key question then becomes: what interest do they have in change? Suspicion that present arrangements suit them well centres on the observation that, as long as European elections are second order, MEPs have no special incentive to follow the preferences of their electorate. MEPs' chances of re-elections are conditioned by the domestic political cycle and not by any actions of their own. Yet, they do have reason to follow the preferences of their 'selectorate'. As seen, it is national parties who reward or sanction their careers.

If this interpretation is correct, national parties will be able to extract rents from the operation of the EU's political system to the extent that they can substitute a predictable carve-up of the offices and policy outputs of the European Parliament for the full adjustment of either to voter choice (Katz and Mair 1995). To continue with the analogy of imperfect markets, they may be able to use low politicisation and muted competition to divert some of the 'surplus' of the EU political system from satisfying voter wants to pursuing their own goals.

Yet there are difficulties with the claim that national parties constrain the competitive emergence of improved means of linking voters to the EU arena. First, Raunio's survey shows that only 8.5 per cent of national parties regularly instruct their MEPs; a further 32.2 per cent only instruct on matters of 'fundamental importance'; and 47.7 per cent never instruct (Raunio 2002). This implies that rent-seeking at worst works through MEPs of their own volition, anticipating the views of their national parties more than those of their voters. It hardly ever takes the form of a closely monitored principal-agent relationship between national parties and MEPs.

Second, it is unclear that the *status quo* really is a source of unalloyed benefit to national parties. Precisely because European elections are to some degree 'second-order', they have since 1979 been associated with 'shocks' to parties and party systems in several Member States, whose effects have included party leadership changes, strains in multiparty coalitions, splits within parties and surges of support for anti-system parties. Rudy Andeweg (Andeweg 1995) has thus questioned whether national parties might not, in fact, benefit from new ways of structuring voter choice in European elections, which would reduce spill-backs to domestic political competition.

What, then, of the alternative hypothesis that there may simply be little voter demand for parties to structure choice differently in European elections? As Peter Mair argues (Mair 2005), publics are most likely to find parties useful as a means of linking them to a political system where choices are 'framed primarily in normative or ideological terms, or where there are equally valid competing and potentially irreconcilable demands'. For reasons of both its policy portfolio and its institutional structure, the Union is unlikely to crystallise conflict around large-scale ideological choices, except, perhaps through Treaty changes, which are largely decided outside the operation of its day-to-day political system.

One suggestion is that the Union even approximates to a 'pareto-improving' polity. With decision-rules that require high levels of consensus, limited legitimacy of its own and high levels of dependence on the active co-operation of its Member States and sometimes other stakeholders too, the EU can only operate effectively by ensuring that its overall policy portfolio leaves a wide range of participating actors as well off in terms of their own preferences as they would be in the absence of Union-level co-operation. Even if pareto-improvements are not always evident in relation to single issues, they are established by implicit and explicit vote- and veto-trading between issues. Even if Union law has binding force, its disciplines are ultimately grounded in a need to overcome particular kinds of co-ordination and collective action problems (incomplete contracting, asym-

metric information, non-simultaneous delivery of commitments and time inconsistency) involved in the realisation of *individual* preferences.

Yet if their reallocations of value are ultimately traceable to voluntary bargaining within an overall context of consensus and pareto-improvement, the operation of Union institutions is unlikely to provoke the significant and durable cleavages in wider society that may be needed to sustain the role of parties in aggregating issues around broadly conceived ideological or normative alternatives. Moreover, the structure of voter choice in European elections only conforms to the overall pattern of avoiding single ideologically-charged ‘moments’ when a great deal could change. Not only are European elections largely limited in their implications to a choice of one half of one branch of government (the legislature), but the Parliament’s participation in reallocations of value are necessarily incremental. As Amie Kreppel puts it (Kreppel 2000), the EP is only likely to succeed as a Co-legislator where it proposes ‘moderate’ amendments in relation to the preferences of the Council and the Commission.

Even if there were net long-run benefits to society in restructuring choice in European elections around pan-European parties competing on EU-relevant issues, Mancur Olson (Olson 1965) reminds us that we would only expect new modes of political organisation to develop where the marginal returns from innovation exceed marginal costs. In a political system where decisions are dispersed, consensual, incremental and only mildly re-allocative of values, it is unlikely that the marginal return of inventing different parties to fight elections for any one five-year European Parliament would exceed the marginal risk and cost of fielding pan-European parties with little voter recognition. It is still less likely that the marginal return from change would exceed the marginal cost if Schmitt and Thomassen are correct that, for all their shortcomings noted above, present arrangements already provide a rough-and-ready form of policy aggregation along key dimensions of choice. As for those who are closely affected by reallocations of value through Union institutions, they may find that calculations of marginal cost and benefit point to participation through policy-specific networks, rather than to supporting the emergence of ‘general-interest’ organisations such as electoral parties structured around Union issues (Magnetite 2000).

7 Conclusion

Section 5 demonstrated that the party politics of the EU are better at aggregating ‘choices of policies’ than ‘choices of leaders’. The former failure is only partial. The latter is more deep-seated. The use of national parties to structure choice on Union policies certainly encounters difficulties. Not only are the party systems somewhat less than isomorphic at the two levels but, even where there is a reasonable fit between them, choices between national parties cannot always serve as ‘good proxies’ for choice on Union matters.

Yet for all these difficulties, there would appear to be an underlying dimensionality to choices of ‘left-right’ and ‘pro-anti integration’ policies at Union level. Although it is possible to disagree on whether those dimensions are combinable, separable or fated to clash (Bartolini 2005), it is probably common ground that parties allow choices along one of those dimensions – left-right – to be aggregated in the EU arena.

In contrast, the EU’s political system hardly even attempts to link choices of leaders to electoral choice between parties. Even in those instances – limited to the choice of the EP itself – where office is filled by competitive election, party politics are not structured for the public control of those who are competing for office. It would be hard to argue that the ‘second-order’ characteristics of European elections have been softened to the point at which they aggregate votes around competing assessments of the performance of parties in an out-going European Parliament or around competing assessments of what parties have to offer for a coming Parliament.

Could things be better? It is not easy to answer this question when – as Section 6 demonstrated – so much remains mysterious about the party politics of the EU. More research is needed before we can tell whether incumbent parties block greater competition on EU issues or whether there is simply little voter demand for different ways of representing publics and aggregating choice at Union level.

Nor, indeed, do we even know for certain what kind of party representation has already been created in the European arena. For Simon Hix the groups in the EP are already distinct, cohesive and competitive enough to provide a basis for party-responsible government at the Union level. For Stefano Bartolini, the whole structure remains a delicate set of elite compromises between national party delegations that would not survive electoral competition linked to the performance and behaviour of the groups themselves. In between these contrasting assessments is another possibility, little noticed, hardly researched and omitted from present accounts of aggregation and representation in the Union arena. It is that EU party actors are constrained by the *collective* of national parties that comprise them, yet national parties are *individually* constrained by a wider EU party system that none can easily change on their own.

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