

Political representation in the European Parliament

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The political structure of the European Union is experiencing a period of critical change, as leaders seek to address the twin problems of the ‘democratic deficit’ and institutional effectiveness in the Intergovernmental Conference. Problems of governance, already serious, have become more urgent, and will be further compounded by increasing EU powers and subsequent waves of European enlargement. The widely recognised danger is that the expansion of the European Union will be threatened by a growing crisis of democratic legitimisation and of effective governance (Andersen & Eliassen 1996; Hayward 1995). All the articles in this special issue focus on the relationship between citizens and Members of the European Parliament. The aim is to examine the effectiveness of alternative channels of representation, and the way weak linkages contribute towards the democratic deficit within the Union.

To understand the problems of democratic legitimacy in the Union we need to unpack the concept of ‘political representation’, which has a number of multifaceted and complex dimensions (Thomassen 1994; Holmberg 1989; Eulau & Wahlke 1978; Birch 1971; Pitkin 1967). Ideas of representation reflect different assumptions about the nature of democracy, the most appropriate linkages between citizens and the state, and the role of legislators.

Collective representation via parties

Throughout Europe representation is commonly understood to work via the ‘responsible party government’ model, in which the electorate selects from two or more parties based on their policy promises and performance (see Thomassen & Schmitt in this issue). This model has certain minimum conditions:

- On the *supply-side* disciplined parties need to provide an alternative set of programmes on the major issues facing the country;

- On the *demand-side* voters need to choose parties based on retrospective evaluations of their record in government, or prospective evaluations of their policy platforms;
- And lastly *free and fair elections* need to be held at regular intervals to translate votes into parliamentary seats, and seats into governments.

Through these means, citizens can hold parties in power collectively accountable for their actions. If these conditions are met, the party (or parties) in government are understood to have a democratic mandate to implement their agenda for the duration of their term of office (Norris 1997a; Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge 1994; Dalton 1985; Schattschneider 1942).

This mechanism provides a link between the preferences of citizens and the actions of governments. The focus has been described as ‘representation from above’ (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996), since it emphasises that parties compete by offering alternative solutions to policy problems, responding to public concerns. Governments with a parliamentary majority are allowed considerable discretion for effective decision making, even on difficult and controversial issues. Yet parties in power remain accountable on a day-to-day basis to parliaments, and at regular intervals to the electorate, who retain ultimate control. Voters can evaluate governments on polling day, and remove parties from office if dissatisfied with their promises or performance. This is the most widely understood modern conception of ‘representation’, particularly common in parliamentary systems with strong, competitive, programmatic parties.

Yet this model becomes highly problematic when applied to the context of the European Union. The electorate can influence the Union through two channels: *indirectly* through their choice of governments in national elections (discussed by Norris in this issue), and *directly* through elections to the European parliament. Focusing only on the latter route in this paper, for this model to work certain minimal conditions need to be met, namely:

- Cohesive and unified parties within the European parliament need to offer alternative policy programmes on the major issues facing Europe;
- The electorate needs to choose parties based on retrospective evaluations of their performance and prospective evaluations of their programmes;
- And the outcome of parliamentary elections should thereby link voters’ preferences with the policy making process within the European Parliament.

In this sense individual MEPs are understood to be elected first and foremost as party standard-bearers, bound by collective responsibility and constrained by party discipline. As such, we would expect the European party group of MEPs to be the strongest predictor of their attitudes, values and behaviour.

Yet, for a series of reasons, this model sits oddly with the politics of the EU. Far from being governing bodies, commentators like Pedersen stress that European party groups are loosely co-ordinated umbrella organisations linking representatives from like-minded parties, but with few formal structures, no real mechanisms for party discipline, and little internal cohesion (Pedersen 1996; Gaffney 1996). These supranational bodies facilitate parliamentary administration and co-ordinate members' services, but they cannot be regarded as 'parties' in the traditional sense, rather as loose coalitions of national parties.

The platforms offered by parties in European elections offer the public little choice about alternative policies guiding the future of the Union. Transnational party manifestos are so loosely worded, with so little substance, that they amount to little more than platitudes (Gaffney 1996). It is therefore difficult for the public to use these statements as a reliable guide to future actions. National party manifestos do offer voters alternative choices towards substantive policy issues within the Union which fall along the classic left-right dimension, such as policies regulating conditions of work in the labour market, transportation or industrial competition. But because of a widespread consensus among elites, most parties fail to offer voters a clear choice of policy alternatives on the major issues of European governance, such as the expansion of membership to Central and Eastern European countries, the project on European Monetary Union, or deep-rooted institutional reform. Most campaigns in EU elections continue to be dominated by the domestic political agenda, focused on the performance of national governments. The consensus shared by most elites about the desirability of further European integration means that few major parties, outside of Britain, offer the electorate clear alternatives for the future development of the European political system (see van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Irwin 1995; Reif & Schmitt 1980). Hence the lack of linkage between public preferences and constitutional decisions by the Parliament. The public in different countries may or may not favour European Monetary Union, the enlargement of the Community, or greater European integration, but unless parties campaign on these issues and offer alternative positions in European elections, there are few ways that public preferences can be expressed in an effective manner. In Britain the debate has been heated, but this splits the major parties internally, at least as much as it divides government from opposition parties.

There are other factors limiting the relevance of this model. In a complex system of divided powers, elections to the European Parliament are not about 'government': no party assumes the reins of power in a cabinet drawn from the legislature. It is therefore hard to know what it would mean to hold party groups in the European parliament accountable for their actions. Most citizens

also have only the haziest notions about the role and activities of the EP, still less the work of party groups or individuals MEPs. For all these reasons, few would argue that the responsible party government model reflects the reality of European parliamentary elections. Some also express strong doubts about the desirability of strong party government given the context of a highly diverse and pluralist Europe (Dehousse 1995). Nevertheless, since we commonly assume that modern democracy is based on party government (Klingemann et al. 1994), this justifies a close analysis of its performance in the EU context. Thomassen and Schmitt outline the core features of the model and consider whether this translates to the level of the European Parliament.

National delegates

Yet there are several other important meanings of political representation which are distinct, and which may be equally or more significant channels in the European Parliament. One common view suggests that the European Parliament can be understood as an international forum where MEPs represent national interests. The theoretical basis for this view can be derived from the *delegate* conception of representation associated most closely with Miller & Stokes (1963). In this perspective, the actions of *individual* representatives should be guided by, and consistent with, the opinions of citizens from the area which elects them. The primary responsibility of MEPs in this view is to their constituency, not their party. The 'constituency' may be single-member districts, regions, or the whole country, depending upon the type of electoral system used. Populist theories of democracy envisage members as spokespersons elected to Parliament to articulate the concerns of their citizens. This can be seen as 'representation run from below' as opposed to the responsible party model which is 'representation run from above' (Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996). Under the delegate conception, with medieval roots, parliaments are seen to function as a geographic forum, bringing together spokespersons from all parts of the kingdom (Birch 1971). Just as lawyers are seen to 'represent' or speak for their clients, so members of parliament are seen to speak for their districts. This conception is strongest in political systems, like the USA, with parties characterised by decentralised organisational structures, low levels of discipline, and minimalist programmatic platforms. Given the looseness of European party groups, and the division of powers within European institutions, a modified version of this model may also apply to the European Parliament. Perhaps in this context Congress, rather than Westminster, provides the more accurate model of political representation.

The strength of this form of representation has been measured in the Miller and Stokes tradition by comparing the degree of congruence between the pref-

erences of citizens living within a specific district, and the views or behaviour of their representatives (Converse & Pierce 1986; Dalton 1985; Miller & Stokes 1963). In their original study (1958), Miller and Stokes analysed the correlation between the roll call behaviour of individual legislators, the views of legislative candidates, and the political attitudes of voters in their district. The study reported some congruence between representatives and their district on measures of social welfare, a stronger correlation on civil rights, but no apparent agreement on foreign policy. Further, the study concluded that the roll call behaviour of Congressional representatives was strongly influenced by their perceptions of the policy preferences held by their constituency.

The study of Congressional representatives by Miller and Stokes assumed that members were delegates of single member districts. The territorial basis of the delegate model has been modified in other contexts to examine the degree of policy congruence between the entire parliament and the entire electorate. This approach has been applied to the Swedish Riksdag (Holmberg 1989; Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996), the French National Assembly (Converse & Pierce 1986), the British House of Commons (Norris & Lovenduski 1995), and the Australian House of Representatives (McAllister 1991).

The 'delegate' model has been subject to serious critique. The methodological basis of the original Miller and Stokes study was criticised on the grounds that there are major problems of measuring 'constituency opinion' in the absence of large surveys in each Congressional district, a problem which has long hindered empirical studies within this approach (Achen 1977), and moreover Miller and Stokes generalised upon the basis of only three issue questions. Moreover Lane (1996) has criticised the implausibility of the assumptions about the capacities of voters inherent in the model, suggesting that members should be regarded as trustees rather than delegates. Most importantly, Thomassen (1994) has argued that the strength of party discipline in legislatures in European democracies makes this model unrealistic in most parliamentary systems, since individual representatives have minimal freedom to 'vote the district', rather than 'vote the party'. Nevertheless for this very reason, the weakness of Euro-parties in the European Parliament, and its role as an intergovernmental forum, may make members see themselves more as national delegates. If this model is correct, we should find similar views among citizens and elected members within the nations of Europe: that is, British MEPs should reflect public opinion in Britain, while French MEPs should share the concerns of the people of France. Following this approach Marsh and Wessels compare national-level differences between European voters and the political elite, and account for some of the variations they discover.

Functional and service representation

Alternative linkages between citizens and the European parliament may operate via 'functional interest' representation. This stresses the lobbying channels organised interest groups and new social movements use to influence European policy making (Anderson & Eliassen 1996: 41–56; Mazey & Richardson 1993; Richardson 1996). The ability of citizens to get organised, mobilise support and pursue individual and collective goods is widely regarded as an essential component of democracies. The role of such groups, particularly the major economic sectors in society, is formally recognised in the Economic and Social Committee. Functional representation may be important for Parliament if elected members see their role as spokespersons for groups such as trade unions, farmers, or small business, or if they feel that they should respond to the demands of organised interests. Pluralist theories stress that interest groups provide another linkage between citizens and the European Union, compensating for weak parties, and that vigorous competition between lobbying organisations is healthy for democracy.

Channels between citizens and members may also operate via 'service representation'. This includes MEPs' case-work on behalf of individual constituents, and their delivery of collective public goods (pork) to their national, regional, or district territory. Case-work is commonly stressed as a critical component of members' roles in parliaments as diverse as the US Congress, the Japanese Diet, the Irish Dáil, and the British House of Commons (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina 1987; Norris 1997b; Norton & Wood 1993; Bogdanor 1985). While 'pork-barrel' politics has usually been regarded as highly undesirable in modern politics, it can be seen as an important and legitimate way for members to act as a conduit between their electorates and European programs. The body of work which has investigated these issues has been concerned with the roles representatives adopt, and their consequences (Eulau & Wahlke 1978). Katz explores functional and service role conceptions of MEPs, and how far these vary cross-nationally in the European Parliament.

Social representation

Moreover, 'social representation' is also widely regarded as critical for the legitimacy of democratic bodies (Lovenduski & Norris 1996; Norris & Lovenduski 1995; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). This concept refers to the presence of political minorities in decision-making bodies, and the demands for parliaments to reflect the social composition of the electorate in terms of social class, gender, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities (Phillips 1993). This concept has a long history, and it is legally embodied in electoral systems

which reserve seats for specified groups, such as women or the indigenous population, in order to ensure that their voices are heard in the legislature. Social representation may be linked to organised interests, for example if trade unions sponsor working class candidates. Nevertheless the two concepts remain analytically distinct: women may stand for office who do not identify with the women's movement, and at the same time feminist organisations may sponsor pro-choice candidates, whether male or female. The older tradition suggested that the impact of the social background of members on their attitudes and behaviour was modest, at best. Nevertheless more recent studies in Germany, Sweden, the UK and the USA suggest that the social background of members – including their class, gender, generation and education – does make a difference within parties (Wessels 1985; Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Thomas 1994; Norris 1996). The paper by Norris and Franklin examines the nature of social representation within the European parliament, and considers what light this sheds on explanations for female underrepresentation in legislative bodies.

Civic participation

Lastly, political representation also depends on voters' confidence in democratic institutions. Civic participation, most commonly measured through electoral turnout, is one of the most important indicators of such support. Turnout in European elections varies substantially from one country to another, nevertheless overall there has been a decline in successive European elections, from 66% in 1979 to 58% in 1994. Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson examine national variations in turnout, assess different meanings of non-voting, and consider the implications for the EU.

The data base

A comprehensive exploration of representation requires data from those who are supposed to represent and those who are to be represented. Moreover, an exploration of the EU which is relevant to the potential institutional reforms of the mid-1990s must utilise contemporary data which reflect the concerns of a post-Maastricht Europe. Articles in this issue build on the insights of research based on surveys of voters and of candidates over the lifetime of the EU (van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; van der Eijk, Franklin & Marsh 1996; Franklin, van der Eijk & Marsh 1995; Franklin, Marsh & McLaren 1994; van der Eijk & Franklin 1991; Lodge 1982, 1986, 1990; Bardi 1989; Holland

1986; Reif 1984, 1985; Dalton 1985; Sorenson 1984; Blumler & Fox 1982; Inglehart et al. 1980).

Research in this special issue is based on survey data on the attitudes, values and opinions of the European electorate and European candidates at the time of the 1994 European elections. Coordination of questionnaire design created data sets on citizens and candidates with a number of questions in common. This allows us to go beyond the examination of voters attitudes and the perceived positions of parties (as in van der Eijk & Franklin 1991) to look directly at the actual positions of voters and candidates. The survey of the European electorate was conducted after the 1994 European Election in conjunction with the EuroBarometer series (N. 13,096). The team responsible for the survey of the European electorate was directed by Hermann Schmitt. The survey of European Parliamentary candidates was part of a project directed by Richard Katz, Pippa Norris, Jacques Thomassen and Bernhard Wessels. It is based on a postal questionnaire sent to samples of EP candidates (including all whose circumstances suggested that they had a significant chance of election) just before the European election (N.1,231). These surveys are both described more fully in an appendix to this issue.

Representation in international institutions

There are a number of reasons why the quality of representation might be flawed. Research on European elections (van der Eijk & Franklin 1996) has confirmed that voters have little interest in constitutional issues of European governance, and parties have little incentive to alter this situation. The election has a low salience for the voters while the salience for parties derives from its impact on national not European issues. The result is that issues of European governance count for little in the decision of the electorate. Arguably such flaws are not unknown in other elections to other bodies but they are generally less severe. All EU member countries are not identical in the extent to which the process departs from various ideals. The papers here are able to use this variability to show how far these defects affect the quality of representation. In this way we learn more about the process of representation in general, and about solutions to the problem of inadequate representation in the EU in particular. Thomassen and Schmitt show that whilst the roots of a European party system exist, they are feeble ones, especially with respect to voters. Marsh and Wessels demonstrate how variations in the quality of national representation can be located in the absence of a common PR electoral system and European-level party system, and both papers underline the integrationist bias amongst MEPs. Norris and Franklin demonstrate the impact of variations in national political institutions and culture for women's representation.

Katz shows how national cultures pervade representative role perceptions and behaviour, while Blondel, Sinnott and Svensson show how differences in the institutional arrangements governing voting account for national variations in turnout for European elections, and how the rules might usefully be reformed.

Conclusions

Public opinion has not played a direct role in the development of the institutions of the EU to date. Moreover, the fact that the issue of European governance is generally of low saliency among the public, combined with the technicality of many of the proposed reforms to EU institutions, suggests that the public will probably play only a modest positive role in shaping the future direction of the EU. Instead detailed questions will be influenced more strongly by the political elite within European bodies, including elected politicians in the European parliament. Therefore we need to understand the attitudes, concerns, and preferences of Members of the European Parliament, and the European electorate, to capture the complexities of the debate which will determine the future of the European Union. While we know in general terms that MEPs are relatively enthusiastic about Maastricht, and about further integration, we know very little about the origins, structure, or consistency of those opinions, nor about differences of opinion within the European Parliament. Nor do we know how much the structure and substance of opinion owes to the electoral process. These papers significantly expand our knowledge of these questions.

We can conclude that the growth in the powers of the EU mean that the lives of European citizens are increasingly influenced by decisions being taken in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, rather than in national governments. Despite recent changes in the powers of the European Parliament, the direct mechanisms for public accountability remain weak so long as parties fail to offer voters clear policy alternatives about European governance in European elections. The other forms of political representation – in terms of national delegates, social representation, functional representation and service responsiveness – are also insufficiently strongly developed in the European Parliament. The linkage between European citizens and Members of the European Parliament therefore remain limited on every dimension. As the concluding paper discusses, the indirect mechanisms for public accountability of the Council of Ministers, the core legislative body in the EU, remain even weaker so long as most parties fail to offer voters choices about major issues of European governance in national elections. There is increasing concern about the democratic deficit, and the most appropriate institutional arrangements for European governance. The results presented in this volume will help illu-

minate the policy debate in European politics, as well as contributing to the wider theoretical literature about representative institutions.

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