

Tendencies of Integration and Disintegration in the European Parliament:

Problems of Political Representation at the European Level

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1. Introduction

The speed of the process of European integration has increased tremendously during the last years. Maastricht and now the IGC, the forthcoming currency union and the probable enlargement of the European Union are major steps toward a supranational political system. However, the faster the process of integration is and the larger the advances of integration, the more important become democratic institutions capable of handling the problems of political representation and democratic intermediation between the interests of the European citizens and the European institutions. The national institutional solution to these problems has been parliamentary representation. This route has at least partly been also chosen for Europe. The institution of direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) exists since 1979. The EP has powers in three areas: supervisory power over the Commission and the Council; the right to participation in the legislative process; and budgetary powers. However, the EP has not yet gained a role and power position comparable to national parliaments. With Maastricht its role has been extended and the discussion process in connection with the IGC gives rise to the expectation that the EP will develop more and more toward a full-fledged legislative body. It is not clear yet, whether the institutional design of the European Union will somehow mirror the functions of democratic institutions and mechanisms at the national level. But it is obvious, that democratic legitimization, representation and intermediation will rest more and more on the shoulders of the Members of the EP.

Given that this is a correct assumption, several problems of legitimacy and political representation have to be solved in order to improve democratic political representation at the European level. The research literature of the recent years points to different aspects of the problem, for example those of the European elections being only "second order" (Reif 1985), the democratic dilemma existing with respect to the European electoral law and the democratic deficit due to the domination of the European institutional setting by the "executive," the nation-state boundaries of political competition and interests not allowing for a mobilization of European interests and consciousness, and last but not least the lack of a European party system.

In this paper I will deal with some of these urgent problems of political representation at the European level:

- How does the voters' will translate into the European Parliament and what are the limits and shortcomings of policy representation set by the institutional design at the moment?

- Under which conditions are representatives likely to choose a European rather than a national or even local focus of representation?
- Is there a chance that issue conflicts and conflicts of interests could follow political rather than national divisions?

The first question is of essential importance with respect to the problem of political equality in representation, thus dealing in a specific way with the democratic dilemma. The second question refers to one of the prerequisites for a representation of the European people rather than the people of Europe. Only if there is some chance that representation could be perceived and defined at the European level, the European Parliament is likely to be more than just an assembly of national deputies. The third question deals with the structural problem whether and under which conditions it might be expected that political competition would extend beyond the nation state and reflect policy rather than national positions.

The Data

The analyses are based on data sources gathered by the international research project on "Political Representation in Europe." One pillar is the European Election Study, held in conjunction with the 1994 European Elections (coordinated by Hermann Schmitt, University of Mannheim), a second the European Candidate Study, a survey among the candidates to the European Parliament in ten European countries (coordinated by Jacques Thomassen [University of Twente], Pippa Norris [Harvard University], Richard Katz [Johns Hopkins University] and Bernhard Wessels [WZB]), and a third pillar is a survey among the members of the European Parliament in 1996, directed by Bernhard Wessels in cooperation with Jacques Thomassen.¹

1 The financial support by the German Science Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) for the survey of the members of the EP is gratefully acknowledged. The survey of the members of the European Parliament was carried out by Infratest Burke in Strassbourg between May 20 and June 21 in 1996. Half of the members of the EP answered the questionnaire, which is, given the time constraints of such a population, a reasonable return rate. This would not have been possible without the support by the former President of the EP, Klaus Haensch and his staff, in particular Mr. Grunert from the Directorate General for Research as well as without the willingness of so many deputies. They all deserve our thanks.

2. Policy Representation at the European Level: Shortcomings and Inequalities²

Direct elections to a European Assembly were envisaged in the Rome Treaty which established the European Community in 1957, but it was not before 1979 that elections took place for the first time. Direct elections were an acknowledgment of the necessity of 'democratic politics' (Lodge and Herman 1978), but the reality has disappointed many who feel the quality of the European representative process is fundamentally flawed. Yet while the elections may not be held under ideal circumstances, the results have been better than might have been expected. Van der Eijk and Franklin (1992) (see also Schmitt 1994) pointed out some correspondence between the opinions of voters on European issues and the opinions voters ascribed to their parties. This correspondence could be taken to imply at least some post hoc approval of European policy. The perception of such a congruence does not necessarily mean, however, that there is a real one. Moreover, the European opinions measured by van der Eijk and Franklin were evaluations of the European project in general rather than specific policy perspectives. In addition, the official position of a party on European integration might or might not be a good indicator of the opinions of their MEPs. It remains to be seen how far the actual policy outlooks of MEPs correspond with the outlooks of the publics they represent. Such a view of political representation resembles one American view of the policy congruence. MEPs can be seen as representatives of national opinion. This comes close to the model of Miller and Stokes (1963), which might quite well apply to the European level, given the weakness of supra-national (European) parties, even if it is seen as inappropriate to national politics (Thomassen, 1991).

Following the Miller and Stokes tradition, this paper examines the match between the European political outlook of European publics and their MEPs. It does so using questions about specific issues on the European political agenda as well as items which touch on more general political evaluations. These questions were asked of the electorate and of those seeking election in each member country of the EU in 1994. By looking at the extent to which the views of MEPs (elected candidates) as a whole are representative of the views of their Europe-wide electorate, the question whether the European Parliament represents its electorate will be answered.

Three features of the electoral process may be important sources of the degree of representativeness. Firstly, there is the range of political options available to the electorate:

2 This section of the paper is based largely on an article written together with Michael Marsh (University of Dublin) on „Territorial Representation“ published in the *European Journal of Political Research* (Special Issue on „Representation in the European Parliament“, ed. by Michael Marsh and Pippa Norris), Vol. 32, 1997, pp. 227-241.

the supply of candidates (supply factor). It may be that the candidates on offer do not represent a range of opinions broad enough. Secondly, the fact that a large proportion of the electorate does not vote may mean that some opinions are unrepresented (mobilization factor). Lastly, the way in which votes are translated into seats may introduce a further distortion into the representative process (proportionality factor).

In order to answer the question of the degree of policy representation, we can focus on three questions: *support for unification*, and issues dealing with *currency* and *borders*. The questions were asked in identical form of both candidate and mass public interviewees.

The generalized support for unification was tapped by the following widely employed measure:

'In general, are you for or against efforts being made to unify Western Europe?'

1 For - very much; 2 For - to some extent; 3 Against - to some extent; 4 Against - very much.

Referring to the two policy issues, the following two questions both asked respondents to place themselves on a 10-point scale, on which each extreme was labeled.

Currency issue:

'Some people think it would be best for [NATION] to keep its own currency and make it more independent from the other European currencies. Others think the best thing would be to create a common European currency. What do you think? Should [NATION] keep its [NATIONAL CURRENCY] and make it more independent from the other European currencies, or should we aim at one common European currency?'

Border's issue:

'Still another issue with the European Union (European Community) has to do with national borders. What do you think? Should European Union (European Community) continue to remove national border controls and let people move freely between the countries, or should we re-introduce tighter border controls in order to be better able to effectively fight crime in [NATION]?'

In the following analysis the unification and border scales were recoded so that higher scores indicated more pro-integration responses.

There are several ways to assess the similarity of electorates and their representatives (for discussion see Achen 1977, 1978; Herrera et al. 1992). Two of them shall be used here. The first compares the average score for each group on the scale in question: a simple and straightforward measure of the typical MEP or elector. The limitations are those of the average itself; in particular a dependency on extreme values. Any such measure of typicality will not differentiate between a situation in which there is a wide spread of values around the typical and one which is grouped closely. As far as the range of opinions is important, a measure of the difference between two distributions as a whole is required. Interpretation of the mean is problematic since whether a difference is big or small depends on the range of possible difference. However, the mean can be standardized by expressing it as a proportion of the maximum possible range of the scale item, and we will make use

of this below. Duncan's Index of Dissimilarity complements the mean measure by taking differentiation into account. It is calculated by summing the absolute differences between the proportions of each of the two groups across each category of the scale item, and dividing the total by two. It naturally ranges from 0-100, 0 meaning complete agreement and 100 indicating maximal difference.

Results are presented in table 1³. The distortions in representation show that elites are more in favor of European integration. The mean differences all have positive values, indicating that MEPs as a whole are more favorable to unification, more supportive of a European currency, and more inclined to weaken border controls. The Maastricht ratification process seemed to indicate that European elites were 'ahead' of their electorates in the enthusiasm for Europe, and our evidence suggests that this remains true in the European Parliament.

Table 1: Comparisons between MEPs and European electorate on three issues

| | Duncan index of difference | Mean difference | Standardized Mean difference |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| | MEPs-Public | MEPs-Public | MEPs-mean |
| <i>All countries</i> | | | |
| Unification | 53.5 | 0.76 | 25.3 |
| Currency | 52.8 | 3.22 | 35.7 |
| Borders | 56.2 | 2.79 | 31.0 |
| <i>Response > 20 %^{a)}</i> | | | |
| Unification | 46.7 | 0.71 | 23.7 |
| Currency | 47.5 | 3.13 | 34.8 |
| Borders | 50.2 | 2.64 | 29.3 |

Means: MEP country means weighted according to seats in EP, publics country means weighted according to size of electorate. Duncan: Country distances weighted according to seats in EP and size of electorate. Significance of difference between distributions for every issue is > .0001 (Chi-square, calculated on weighted European distributions, but original numbers of cases [MEPs maximum 158; publics maximum 10950])

a) Excludes France and Ireland.

³ Our samples of elected candidates, candidates and European electors all require some weighting before they can be considered reasonable samples of the populations. We weighted the samples as follows. For country level analyses candidates were weighted according to the number of candidates their party nominated at the 1994 European election and elected candidates were weighted by the proportion of seats won by their national party in the EP election. While constructing a Europe-wide sample, electors, candidates and elected candidates in each country were weighted by the relative size of the electorate of the country. This exercise could not always be completed satisfactorily, as the sample of candidates in some countries and in some parties was very small. At some points in the analysis below, separate calculations are made including only those countries where the candidate response rate was over 20 per cent.

The question is, however, whether European elections and the resulting European Parliament lead to equal representation. The nature of this question is two-dimensional. The *first dimension* relates to the question whether all votes have equal weight. This is clearly not the case, given the fact that the number of seats allocated to countries is not related to population size. On European average, a member of the European Parliaments needs 429.729 votes, but this number varies considerably across countries: it is only 37.339 electors in Luxembourg but 610.848 electors in Germany. However, this is the common political will of the countries of the Union. It clearly has severe implications for political representation, but this problem will here not be dealt with. The *second dimension* relates to the question whether the structural conditions within each member state are likely to produce equal chances and opportunities of political representation. This dimension is of relevance regardless of the first one. Whatever the number of seats of a country is, the internal mechanisms of the still nation-based European elections should provide equal quality of representation. This problem relates at least to two questions: the supply of candidates and the translation of votes into seats.

„Supply“ Factor

European elections are fought within the national context which means that it is mainly a competition with reference to the national level and the national party system. This clearly is not too supportive for a European kind of representation. But empirical results point to a second problem relating to the cross-national variations in the structure of party competition. Some party systems are characterized by an essentially centripetal competition, with all parties pursuing the median voter. Others are characterized by a more fragmented competition, with different parties focusing their efforts on different groups of voters. Whereas in the first type, parties would be expected to offer similar choices to the voters, in the latter the range of choice should be greater. This is not simply a matter of the number of parties, but of the number of different positions those parties occupy in the competition space. Huffman (1991) has attempted to measure this differentiation (although he calls it polarization) through a weighted difference between the positions of all parties in a political system. He used a number of issues to calculate the left-right positions for each party, and then weighted these according to their electoral and parliamentary strength to give a measure of political differentiation. Following the argument above, we should expect more differentiated party systems to provide a slate of candidates being more representative of the electorate than would be the case in less differentiated systems.

Table 2: Differentiation of party system and representation (aggregate correlations, entries are Pearson's r)

| | Candidates - Publics | |
|--|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Standardized Mean Difference | Duncan Index |
| <i>All Countries</i> | | |
| Unification | -.11 | -.21 |
| Currency | -.19 | .08 |
| Borders | -.32 | -.56** |
| EU issues together | -.29 | -.26 |
| <i>Countries with response rate >20%^{a)}</i> | | |
| Unification | -.42 | -.61* |
| Currency | -.14 | -.44 |
| Borders | -.72* | -.93** |
| EU issues together | -.63* | -.88** |

* p < .10 **p < .05

a) Excludes France, Italy, and Spain.

Table 2 shows the correlations between candidates-publics differences and party system differentiation. If differentiation does produce a more representative candidate profile we should expect to see significant negative correlations between differentiation and the degree of candidates-publics difference. While all correlations but one are in the expected direction for the ten countries for which data is available they are not significant with one exception. However, if we confine the analysis to the countries for which the data is more reliable, the correlations are much stronger. We also used a combined measure of all three EU issues. This is simply a standardized average of the three issues, giving us a measure based on both generalized and specific issues of integration which is arguably more stable than its component parts. When this is used, the correlations are -.63 for standardized mean difference and -.88 for the Duncan index. This gives support to the argument that the supply of candidates in a more differentiated political system allows at least more congruence between the opinions of representative and represented.

The results clearly show that the quality of political representation is unequally distributed across countries depending on the programmatic and political supply offered by the respective party system. The more clearly structured a party system with respect to political alternatives, the better represented are the voters. The implication is obvious: as long as European elections are fought within the national context and supply depends on what national parties offer, political representation will be unequal between countries. Thus, even disregarding the built-in inequality due to the number of seats allocated to countries, internal mechanisms of party competition still account for differences in representation.

„Proportionality Factor“

A second reason, why political representation in the European Parliament is not equal between countries lies in the differences in electoral systems and the way they translate votes into seats. Elections are commonly justified as a mechanism for selecting the more popular ones from a list of options. Electoral systems vary in the extent to which they allow the degree of support for all options to be reflected in the distribution of seats. The less proportional the system, the more likely support is only reflected for the most popular options. We can see what impact on MEP-Public policy differences might be due to the extent to which the electoral system encourages proportionality of representation.

Table 3: Disproportionality of electoral system and representation (aggregate correlations, entries are Pearson's r)

| | MEPs - Publics | |
|--|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Standardized Mean Difference | Duncan Index |
| <i>All Countries</i> | | |
| Unification | 0.37 | 0.17 |
| Currency | 0.49* | 0.42* |
| Borders | 0.46* | 0.42 |
| EU issues together | 0.49* | 0.34 |
| <i>Countries with response rate >20%^{a)}</i> | | |
| Unification | 0.31 | 0.03 |
| Currency | 0.42 | 0.29 |
| Borders | 0.39 | 0.30 |
| EU issues together | 0.42 | 0.18 |

* p<.10 **p<.05

a) Excludes France and Ireland.

Table 3 shows the relationship between disproportionality and representativeness of MEPs. Correlations are not always quite strong enough for significance at the .10 level, but their consistency in strength and direction is encouraging. It suggests some support for the hypothesis that more proportional electoral systems produce MEPs who are more representative of their national publics on the issues considered here.

The findings point to a central problem of political representation in Europe. Representation is of an unequal quality between countries. MEPs are much less representative of their electorates in some countries than in others. This would be a lesser problem if it would be the case only at the national level. But the national differences in representation translate directly in a collectively un-representative body. The differences between countries are clearly at least in part due to different electoral and party systems. A common electoral system allowing a high degree of PR (see also Huber and Powell 1994)

and a European party system encouraging a high differentiation of candidates on offer would almost certainly produce a more representative parliament. In addition, a different party system might arguably provide more encouragement for the parties to make European policy more central to their campaigns (Bogdonor 1989; Andeweg 1995; van der Eijk, Franklin et al. 1996, Chapter 21).

For a long time, the unrepresentativeness of the European Parliament was no serious problem, since the European project was so remote from the day-to-day life of the citizens. But the European Union Treaty has made European policy much more relevant for citizens than it was ever before. The 'permissive consensus' is no longer adequate now. European policies interfere directly and obviously with the lives of the European citizens. The need for better representation becomes paramount if the EP is to perform adequately on behalf of the European citizens.

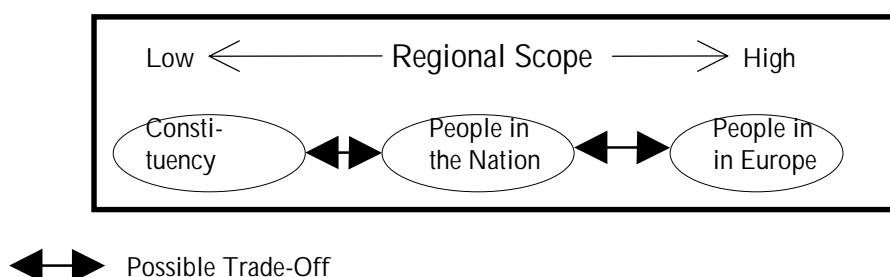
3. A European Focus of Representation?

Even if the mechanisms of political representation would allow equal conditions of the linkage between electors and elected and thus guarantee equal conditions of representation, another problem would still persist. This is the problem of whether it is possible to think of political representation at the supranational level rather in European than in national terms. One precondition of European political representation in the sense of a more or less integrated policy would be that representatives can think in such an entity. This question refers to the focus of political representation. Thus the question is, under which conditions it would be likely that representatives choose a European rather than a national or local focus of representation.

It is known from research that the two central dimensions of representational roles, *focus* and *style*, are not only influenced by personal but also by structural characteristics of a political system (Jewell 1970). The type of the electoral system, the degree of competition, district magnitude, proportionality and the like are such structural characteristics. But this research is limited to nation state or levels even below the nation state.

A different problem is how to explain the choice of foci of representation going beyond the boundaries of the nation state. Obviously, one has to search for different structural factors if one wants to explain role taking decisions in a situation of different trade-off alternatives (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Role Conceptions of Geographical Representational Focus



One possibility is to try to apply approaches used to explain differences in the degree of popular support for the EC/EU. Another possibility is to take into account the relative power position of a country within the EU. From research into popular support of European integration it is known that for a long time popular support was highest in those countries being member longest, i.e. the EC6 (Niedermayer 1995). This has led to the hypothesis of societal learning arising from exposure to the European institutions (Inglehart and Rabier 1978). To simplify the hypothesis: duration of membership breeds familiarity. The hypothesis arising from this with respect to the choice of representational focus thus is, that the longer the membership of one's country, the more MEPs can think of a focus of representation beyond the nation state.

Thus, the longer the membership, the more European the representational focus. Setting the year of membership into relation to the trade-off between representing the people of Europe or the people of one's own country, the correlation quite strongly supports the hypothesis with one exception: Luxembourg (table 4).

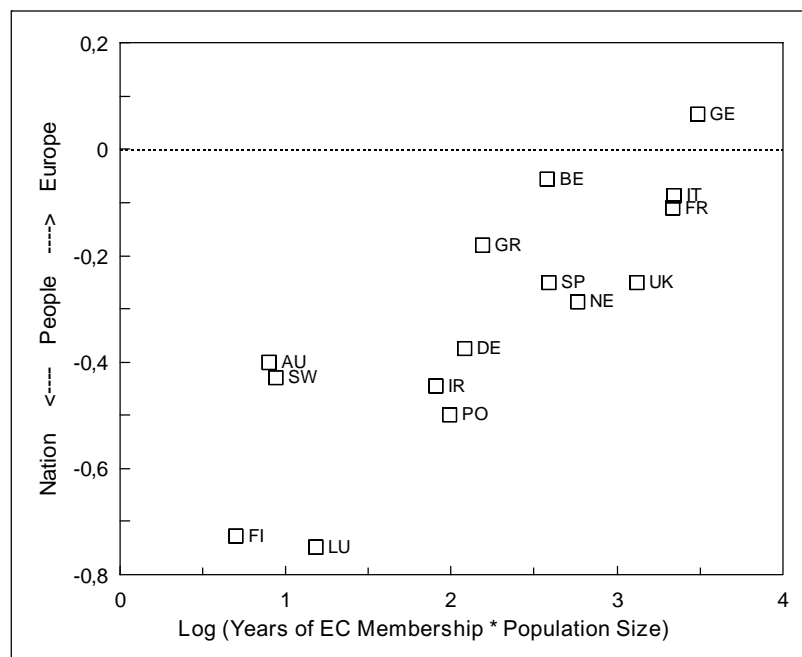
Table 4: European Focus of Representation and its Correlates

| | People of Europe vs. people of country | |
|---|---|-----------------|
| Year of EC membership | -.48 | (p=.03, n = 15) |
| - without Luxembourg | -.76 | (p=.00, n=14) |
| Population Size | .71 | (p=.00, n = 15) |
| Log (population size) | .80 | (p=.00, n = 15) |
| Log (length of EC membership* population size) | .84 | (p=.00, N = 15) |

An alternative hypothesis relates to the relative power position within the EU. One might argue, that “weak” countries may be more concerned with national interest and the realization of their national interest with the help of the EC, while, at the same time, protecting themselves against a dominance by the EC. One possible indicator for the strength in the concert of nations at the EU-level is the population size of a country. It also translates into political terms, for example the distribution of seats in the EP. And indeed, there is a quite strong relationship with population size: the greater a country, the more European is the focus of representation of the MEPs from this country. The correlation is even somewhat higher than for the length of membership, even if not taking into account the deviant case Luxembourg.

The best “predictor” of the distribution of choices of representational focus, however, is a combination of both measures. It accounts for 71 per cent of the variance in the mean value of role orientation trading-off Europe vs. nation (table 4, figure 2).

Figure 2: Impact of “Familiarity” and Relative Power in the EU on the Focus of Representation of MEPs



Familiarity: Length of EC membership

Relative Power: Population Size

$r = .84, p = .00, n = 15$

The implication of this finding is that it is possible that members of the European Parliament are indeed ready for an orientation toward European political representation under certain conditions: long membership experience and being representative of a large country. On the one hand, this is promising. It is, on the other hand, also problematic since these are structural conditions limiting this kind of focus to a certain group of countries. Whether this is an indication of a Europe of different pastes or a Europe à la carte is hard to say. Obvious is, however, that representatives of smaller countries have their difficulties with conceptualized political representation in European terms.

4. Nation or Party: the Nature of Political Interest Differentiation in the EP

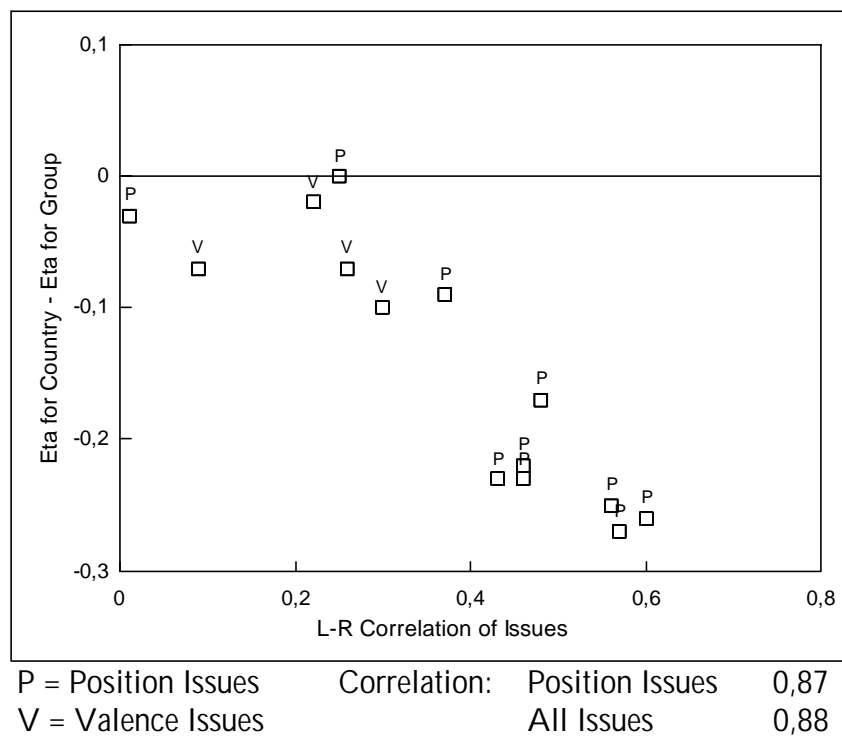
Another factor often regarded as a major shortcoming of European integration and representation is the lack of a developed European party system. It is argued that European elections serve only second order purposes (Reif 1984, 1985; Reif/Schmitt 1980), which means blaming the national political actors, in particular the national governments without high costs. Election campaigns of the European elections are fought within the national political arena mainly with reference to national issues. One argument in the debate is that the missing reference to supranational issues in the competition of parties in European Elections makes it impossible for citizens to regard the European Elections as what they should be: political competition about issues with supranational relevance (van der Eijck and Franklin 1996). This critique is only valid up to the point that one assumes there is a clear division between the European and the national level, i.e. constitutional issues and so-called domestic issues. Today, EU policies are in many areas binding for the national level. Consequently, it is not so much of a problem anymore that European Elections are rather fought about issues which for a long time were reserved to national authority.

But there is a second argument doubting that it is possible to deal with policy issues at the European level in terms of party political positions since cleavages in the EP are rather along country than along party lines. That is, European party groups and federations do not show a sufficient degree of cohesiveness in terms of policy positions (Schmitt/Thomassen 1997). The reason for calling the cohesiveness into question is the observation that the member parties of the European party federations and the European Parliament party groups are deeply rooted in the national cultural and political traditions with the effect that the border lines in issue conflicts are nations' rather than political parties'.

However, recent research shows, that cohesiveness of European party groups is not less than that of national parties. But one has to be careful about this finding of Schmitt and Thomassen (1997). Only under certain conditions, national differences in policy positions

are clearly overruled by party lines. One of these conditions is the nature of the issues. Our findings suggest that necessary for overcoming nation as a dividing line is the possibility to conceptualize the issues in question with respect to the ideological left-right dimension. The more this is possible, the more the dividing line is along party lines. This is supported by our findings from a multiple classification analysis of position as well as valence issues. The within group variance in issue positions in European party groups is – compared to between group variance – the less the more the issue is related to the left-right dimension (figure 3). This gives an important hint with respect to how political competition in European Elections can be thought of as a competition of European parties: European policy topics must be raised which are related to the left-right dimension.

Figure 3: Left-Right Correlation of Issues and Difference in Mean Effect of Country and Party Group as Measured by Eta



Based on etas from MCA-Analysis with three European Party Groups as independent variables (dummies): PSE, PPE, ELDR; and five countries (dummies): France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and United Kingdom.

Thus, our third finding on tendencies of political integration and disintegration in the European Parliament suggests, that it is not impossible to overcome the lack of a European party system in order to make European elections a real linkage mechanism for political

representation at the European level. However, this is not possible without changes of the strategies of political parties in European elections.

5. Summary and Preliminary Conclusion

Political integration of the European Union faces many shortcomings. Central are those with respect to political representation. This paper raised three questions: Under which conditions can one expect proper policy representation in the European Parliament? Under which conditions is it likely that representatives conceptualize political representation in European terms? And thirdly, under which conditions is it likely that political competition at the European level will be fought along party rather than nation division lines.

The findings point to several shortcomings of political representation and at the same time to possible solutions. Policy representation at the European level is obviously unequal representation. This is not only the case because seats are allocated to countries in an unequal way. That is political will. But policy representation is also unequal because of the different electoral systems countries use in European elections and because political competition in European elections offers unequal choices for voters as indicated by the differences in supply structures of the party system across countries. In this respect, a common electoral system would be one necessary change. Secondly, political representation has to be organized in a way that clearly relates it to the European rather than the national level. For this, representatives must be able to conceptualize political representation in European terms. Results show that this is possible under certain conditions. However, there are clear limits for representatives of smaller countries and younger members of the EU. They still seem to fear the dominance of the big countries and rather stick to representation of national interests. Another point is that political competition has to be based on issues relevant at the European level. This poses the demand for a European party system. One necessary precondition of this is that one can think of issues for which dividing lines are parties' rather than nations'. Here it is obvious, that issues related to the left-right dimension are of crucial importance. This implies, however, that political actors, first of all the national parties fighting in European elections, change their strategies and select those issues for electoral competition.

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