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All Politics is National, but Policy is Supra-national: A Decisive Discrepancy

The establishment of a European Union is no minor achievement:

> *No other institution in the world brings together under one roof representatives from different national states, who have been directly elected to that institution and who have been given a range of legally entrenched powers. Nowhere is there an equivalent body, eager both to exercise its powers beyond the reach of individual governments and to extend its influence over the decisions that are taken above the national level.*[1]

However, this optimistic perspective on the EU is not shared by all, and several points made in the above quotation require qualification.

First, the ability of the European Parliament to "exercise power beyond the reach of individual governments" and the extent to which political representatives at the European level have "influence over decisions that are taken above the national level" is questionable. National politicians (prime ministers, ministers and heads of state) dominate the decision-making process at the European level, not supra-national ones.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of members of the European Parliament is very weak as a result of low turnouts at European elections and they do not have sufficient powers to hold the European executive accountable or to counterbalance policy decisions made by national political actors. The European "executive" still consists of national politicians in the form of the Council of Ministers, while Commissioners are still selected and appointed by national governments. This leads not only to the blurring of the boundary between the executive and the legislature at the European level, but also to a political system in which democratic accountability and control are routed primarily via the national level. The European Parliament's ability to scrutinize policy implementation is strongly restricted by the fact that the latter takes place at the national level.

Finally, national political parties are responsible for the selection of supra-national politicians, whose careers are, by and large, controlled by national party leaders, which reduces their autonomy dramatically.

Together, these elements constitute a significant discrepancy in the EU political process: while political parties and their leaders are still dependent on the national political and institutional context for their electoral success and control of government, their political fate is often determined by the success – or otherwise – of policies which are increasingly being developed at the supra-national level within a multi-tiered process. In short, while politics is still primarily a national affair, policy-making is increasingly supra-national in character.

In this paper I will show that politics is national in terms of both issue salience and elite recruitment patterns, while policy-making is increasingly being shifted to the supra-national level where popular support and legitimacy are low and democratic control is inadequate. This supra-national level of decision-making is characterized above all by nationally elected politicians who face little opposition, scrutiny or democratic supervision.

All politics is national: the absence of the EU issue in national politics

While an increasing number of issue arenas are being brought under EU authority – particularly the politically crucial macroeconomic policy issues in terms of which national parties compete (see Schmitter 1996, 125) – hitherto most European parties have not paid much attention to this transfer of power: politics in Europe is still a national affair and the question of the EU remains absent from electoral competition.

To give an example, Table 1 shows the marginal – if not negligible – amount of attention devoted to the issue of European integration in party manifestos across European countries during national elections since 1970. On average, around 2% to 3% of party platforms concern pro- or anti-EU standpoints. Even in countries where there have been fierce political and

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1 Corbett et al. 1995 : 3.

public debates on entry or exit (the UK and Sweden), or where national referenda have been held on EU issues (Denmark, France, Italy), the EU issue in party platforms still has very low status and is often absent from national political campaigning (see also Binnema 2003).

Table 1. Significance of the EU issue in national party manifestos 1970–1998 (% of total manifesto)

Country	1970 –1979	1980 –1989	1990 –1998	1970 –1998
Austria	0.8	0.5	1.7	1.1
Belgium	3.1	2.2	2.0	2.6
Denmark	1.9	1.6	3.0	2.1
Finland	0.1	0.0	1.8	0.5
France	3.2	2.0	4.2	3.0
Germany	4.6	3.6	4.6	4,2
Greece	1.5	1.4	4.1	2.5
Ireland	0.2	1.0	3.1	1.5
Italy	2.0	2.0	2.7	2.3
Luxembourg	3.4	4.9	3.6	4.2
Netherlands	1.3	2.5	3.5	2.2
Portugal	0.7	2.3	4.0	2.1
Spain	2.0	3.6	4.2	3.3
Sweden	0.3	0.9	5.3	2.3
UK	3.4	2.3	4.7	3.3
Average	1.7	1.9	3.3	2.3

Source: Binnema 2002. Data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (for description see Budge et al. 2001, pp. 222–8). Included are items labeled per108 and per110, which refer to favorable or hostile mentions of European Community/Union and expansion of the EU or the desirability of remaining a member, joining, or leaving the EU. The average scores in the last column are weighted for the number of elections in a given period.

The results of a number of other analyses point in the same direction. It has been shown that there is little competition between major party families over European integration (Hix 1997); that the positions of the major parties on European issues do not deviate much (Marks and Wilson 2000); and that European integration has had little effect on the format and mechanics of party systems (Mair 2000).

As far as the major party families (Christian democrats, liberals and social democrats) are concerned, between 1976 and 1994 they gradually converged towards moderate pro-integration positions. Hix (1997) even speaks of a pro-integration "cartel" of major parties. This cartel has left room for parties to the extreme left and right of the political spectrum to compete with the major parties on the basis of an anti-integration agenda (see Marks and Wilson 2000; Hix 1997; Mair 2000; Taggart 1998). However, even these parties tend to "normalize" and become pragmatic pro-European actors as soon as they enter national government (Bomberg 2002); this is what happened, for example, to the Austrian FPÖ and the German Green Party.[2]

This seems to confirm Mair's assertion that the process of European integration has had little impact on national party competition. Out of more than 140 new parties that have competed in recent elections across Europe, only three can be directly linked to the issue of European integration (in Austria, Finland and the UK) and none of them received more than 2.6% of the vote. Mair (2000, 31) concludes that European integration "has had virtually no direct or even demonstrable effect on the format of the national party systems". In addition, political parties appear to subsume the EU issue under other issues within existing areas of conflict: parties respond to "new" issues such as European integration on the basis of their historical origins and ideological schemas that are rooted in political cleavages salient in their own national political system. In this manner, attitudes to the EU issue reflect centuries of national political conflict. Marks and Wilson (2000, 459) conclude that "European integration is domestic politics [conducted] by other means".

In terms of the mechanics of party systems, on the other hand, Mair (2000) shows that the EU issue has not been particularly divisive. A large majority of the "European electorate" vote for political parties that are strongly pro-European and on average only 8% vote for parties which are strongly against European integration. Only in the UK, Austria and Italy do the mainstream parties depart from a pattern of overall pro-European consensus (see also Raunio and Wiberg 2000, 155–7).

To sum up, overall there seems to be little or no electoral competition on the EU issue, with the possible exception of the UK, Sweden and Denmark, while the significance of the EU issue in party platforms is low. A pro-European consensus is clearly discernable:

2 Deviations from this pattern of pro-European consensus can easily be explained in terms of national factors: EU issues become a matter of party competition if internal divisions develop. This is what happened to the Conservative Party in the UK (see Aylott 2002), but also to the Scandinavian social democratic parties, which have been more Eurosceptic than other continental social democratic parties for reasons of national party competition. Hence, as a result of national political developments, although on average the positions of party families are largely similar and their variations show significant overlaps, party families have become more heterogeneous on the issue of European integration (see Marks and Wilson 2000; also Ray 1999).

the issue of European integration is often depoliticized and national party elites find little opposition or contestation.

The "nationalization" of party competition at the EU level

While European integration has had little impact on national patterns of political competition, "nationalization" of the supra-national or EU level is high: the process of European integration strengthens the position of party leaders vis-à-vis their national parliaments and their parliamentary parties, and national party leaders dominate the policy-making process at the EU level.

This is visible in at least four related aspects. First, party leaders have increasingly come to dominate their national party organization at the expense of the members. Second, while national parliaments have become weaker, the powers of the European Parliament have not been increased sufficiently to compensate for this loss in national democratic control. Third, transnational party organizations remain weak and their composition is determined by national party leaderships. Finally, the process of European integration has increased the power of national party leaders: summits make the information deficit of national parliaments even worse and provide national party leaders with an additional – and high-profile – political arena by means of which national parliaments can be sidelined. We shall clarify these points in what follows.

The emergence of the strong party leader

Since their emergence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, political parties have changed significantly. Party leaders have professionalised their party organizations extensively, in particular – on the continent – by means of substantial funding from the state, thereby making parties less dependent on membership fees and voluntary activism by party members. This marginalisation of the membership in numerical and financial terms is matched by their negligible influence on leadership selection and policy formation (Krouwel 1999).

Table 2. Levels of party membership in European democracies, 1945–2000 (% of total electorate)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	X	*Beta (ß)*
Austria	23.8	26.1	29.8	29.1	25.9	13.5	24.7	–.179
Belgium			7.7	8.6	8.9	5.9	7.8	–.253
Denmark	18.3	20.9	17.4	10.1	7.1	5.0	13.1	–.573*
Finland			18.4	15.7	13.5	9.2	14.2	–.145
France	8.3	3.0	1.5	3.2	2.9	1.3	3.4	–.305
Germany	4.3	2.6	3.1	4.2	4.3	3.1	3.6	–.210
Greece				3.1	5.8	6.7	5.2	.461
Ireland			5.5	9.1	11.8	3.0	7.4	–.582*
Italy	11.9	12.9	16.4	11.4	9.6		12.5	–.425*
Netherlands	12.9	10.9	7.9	4.6	3.4	2.1	10.0	–.404*
Norway	14.0	12.7	13.7	11.6	13.0	8.7	12.3	–.345*
Portugal				2.8	4.9	4.6	4.1	–.209
Spain					1.7	2.8	2.3	.575*
Sweden	20.2	19.5	21.1	21.5	22.3	6.1	18.5	–.259
Gt. Britain	9.4	10.8	2.4	3.7	3.5	2.0	5.3	–.630*
Average	13.7	13.3	12.1	9.9	9.2	4.9	9.6	–.247*

Source: Krouwel 1999.

Note: An asterisk (*) indicates that the significance level (t) is below the five percent level (t=<.05). The column marked "X" lists the average of the periods and the column marked :Beta (ß)" provides regression coefficients between the exact center point in the party system and the year of observation.

Otto Kirchheimer (1966; 1969 [1954]) was among the first to point out this marginalisation of members as a source of financial support for what he labeled "catch-all parties". In catch-all parties members have only a marginal role in increasingly professional election campaigns and in internal decision-making processes. Therefore, catch-all parties tend not to attempt to incorporate a large proportion of their supporters as party members and require limited member involvement in party activities.

This "de-membering" and societal uprooting of political parties is perhaps best illustrated in terms of membership levels. Table 2 summarizes national trends in the level of party membership.

Although there are substantial differences in levels of party membership across Europe, the trend is one of consistent decline in most European democracies, particularly since the 1980s. The steepest decline over time is found in the UK, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Ireland and France, while the downward trend in Austria, Finland, Germany and Sweden is more moderate but still marked. The democratic hiatuses in Greece and Spain resulted in low levels of party membership and these southern European countries now form the exceptions to the general trend of declining party membership.

Katz and Mair (1995) have argued that there is no linear evolution of party transformation. While party grassroots (members and activists) are in decline, party central offices and especially parties in public office have increased their financial and human resources, reinforcing the dominance of party elites over party organizations (see also Webb 1995; for criticism see Detterbeck 2001; Koole 1996; Kitschelt 2000; Von Beyme 1996; Yishai 2001; Young 1998).

This partial decline of political parties, with the extra-parliamentary party losing many of its functions, is related to the disappearance of the mass-party format. The modern means of communication available to parliamentary leaderships make the party membership less necessary for interaction with the voters. Parliamentary representatives have used their legislative powers to accumulate their own resources for the purpose of political competition. As a result, for example in terms of finances and personnel, parliamentary party organizations are increasing their resources at an unprecedented rate (Krouwel 1999; Farrell and Webb 2000) and the parliamentary party group has become the most powerful section of the party, dominating the party on the ground (Helms 2000; Heidar and Koole 2000).

A weak European Parliament ...

European integration has helped to shift the intra-party power balance even more in favor of national party leaders. The major factor contributing to this development is the power imbalance between national executives, who constitute and dominate the supra-national executive of the European Union, and the relatively weak European Parliament which lacks (legislative) powers and cannot hold the executive fully accountable for its actions.

On the first point, the popular representatives in the European Parliament lack the right to draft legislation in many areas and can scrutinize policy implementation only to a limited degree. During the 1950s the powers of the Assembly were slowly increased from mere monitoring to (albeit weak) budgetary, consultation and advisory powers. Only since 1979 has the Parliament been democratically elected, and with the Single European Act (1986), the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), European Parliament authority over the legislative process and the EU budget was increased. Constitutional changes introduced after the Amsterdam summit extended the scope of issues over which the European Parliament has co-decision-making powers. However, the relatively weak European Parliament is still the only directly elected body in the EU.

Second, the legislature cannot hold the executive (Commission and Council of Ministers) accountable and it can determine its composition only to a minimal degree. Democratic standards of representative democracy are violated at the EU level because citizens who vote in elections can neither directly nor indirectly influence the composition of the EU executive.

The Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties did give the European Parliament a role in appointing the Commission and the right to a "vote of investiture" as regards the President of the Commission. While at first glance this may resemble the parliamentary origin of the chief executive this is not the case, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the European executive is a dual executive, in which the Commission shares executive power with national governments via the Council of Ministers and the European Council. The dual executive (Council of Ministers and the Commission) is not accountable to the voters, either directly or indirectly (via the European Parliament). Ministers participating in the Council are accountable only via national parliaments and through national elections (Hix 1997, 1). On the other hand, since the Council is dominant and has substantial nominating power with regard to the Commissioners, it is clear that the European Parliament

has little autonomy and basically 'rubber-stamps' decisions already made by national political leaders. The key actors in the selection and nomination of Commissioners are still the national political elites. The power of the European Parliament is weak also in respect of the termination of the executive term: the European Parliament can force the whole Commission to resign by means of a vote of confidence, but not individual Commissioners.

… made up of poorly developed supra-national party organizations …

There is little evidence of the emergence of a genuine European party system (Mair 2000, 28). Such a development is also unlikely to occur since the presence and significance of social cleavages, as well as the structure of party systems, vary substantially across European countries; the process of enlargement makes this even more improbable (Bardi 1994, 369–70). Moreover, as long as there is no executive office to compete for at the European level, party competition will be severely limited. As a result, politics at the EU level is conducted between national actors, while transnational party groups are made up of unstable and heterogeneous alliances of national parties (Andeweg 1995).[3] Nevertheless, some authors claim there is a development towards genuine Euro-parties. Hix (1996, 311), for example, argues that "the party federations have evolved towards European parties". Like most observers, Hix bases this assertion mainly on evidence of increasing cohesion in the voting behavior of the transnational party groups. According to Hix and Raunio "tribe" no longer seems to dominate "ideology" and party cohesion at the EU level is increasing (Raunio 2000; Hix 1997; Hix et al. 2003a). Several studies have analyzed the roll-call behavior of the transnational party groups in the European Parliament and have concluded that their cohesion and voting discipline has grown since 1980 (see Attiná 1990; Quanjel and Wolters 1992; Brinzsky 1995). However, cross-time analysis of the voting behavior of transnational party groups in the European Parliament has revealed that the cohesion of the European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED) has diminished, while the MEPs from two of the other main European party groups, the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) vote increasingly along transnational party lines (Hix et al. 2003b; Faas 2003). Furthermore, within all party groups there is evidence that some MEPs tend to vote on the basis of national lines rather than following their EP party group. Anti-European national parties in particular, such as the British Conservatives, Forza Italia and Scandinavian parties, vote against the majority positions of their EP groups (Hix 2001, 684; Hix et al. 2003a, 38–41). Other party groups, such as the Union for a Europe of the Nations (UEN), Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities (EDD) and the non-affiliated group have a relatively low level of structural cohesion in terms of voting behavior. Overall, the left-wing political groups have a higher level of cohesion than right-wing ones.

Analysis of the voting behavior of party groups at the European level brings to light a number of cleavages on which party conflicts tend to concentrate. The literature refers, on the one hand, to a conflict between center and periphery – between national interests and deepening European integration – and on the other hand to a cleavage based on the traditional left–right division (Hix 1996, 1997 and 2001; Hix and Lord 1997; Hix et al. 2003a; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999; Attiná 1990). However, this structure could also be seen as evidence of the claim made in this paper that national lines of conflict (namely the left–right cleavage that is present in all European systems) have simply been transposed to the supra-national level, where they are combined with a struggle between national actors over the extent to which sovereignty should be pooled at the European level or should remain at the level of the nation state. This coincides with the observation of Hix et al. (2003b, 24) that while national interests dominate voting in the Council, the left–right divide structures voting behavior in the European Parliament.

… whose members are recruited and selected by national party leaders

European integration has had an impact on internal shifts of power which have increased the autonomy of national party leaderships and transformed the functioning of national political parties. The democratic

3 Bardi (1994, 359) regards the transnational party structures in the European Parliament as "only a second co-existing and, to an extent, competing party system". Transnational political groups vary in the number of member states they represent: from the PES and EPP spanning the entire Union to party groups including only a small number of national parties. However, the EPP is a sometimes unhappy alliance between Christian Democrats and conservative parties (see van Hecke 2003). Bardi concludes that the transnational party organisations, in terms of political relevance or organizational structure, hardly play a role during EP election campaigns and "common manifestos are practically ignored by nationally selected EP candidates" (Bardi 1994, 369).

functioning of parties seems increasingly limited to the recruitment of political personnel and the organization of electoral campaigns to get candidates elected to legislative and executive office. However, the pool from which this elite is recruited has been progressively narrowed to a small number of professional groups, primarily in the public sector (Blondel and Thiebault 1991; Eldersveld et al. 1995; Krouwel 1999). This narrowing of the recruitment base to civil servants has also reinforced the specialization, professionalization and technocratization of the political arena. Political parties are increasingly experiencing problems in mobilizing the populace outside the professional bureaucratic and political class.

Over the last few decades, national party leaders have maintained their dominant role in the recruitment, selection, nomination and appointment of politicians at the EU level: MEPs and European Commissioners, including the Commission President (Hix 1997, 3). The power distribution within candidate selection procedures is important as they influence the (voting) behavior of elected politicians. Politicians will show most loyalty to party bodies or groups of individuals which influence their (re-)selection. Hix has recently shown that when a conflict exists between an MEP and the national party and the European Parliamentary group, the MEP will be more likely to vote against the European Parliamentary group and in line with the national party if the latter is in a position to "punish" him or her (Hix 2003a, 24–25). If a national party is able to control its MEPs through electoral institutions, particularly "closed-list" proportional representation, small districts and centralized candidate selection procedures, MEPs will toe the national party line. Thus, if the procedure is centralized and deputies depend for their reselection on the central party leadership, they will avoid deviant voting behavior in the European Parliament.

Selection procedures for (European) parliamentary candidates have been democratized over the last decade: more and more candidate selection procedures have been opened up to all party members under a one man–one vote system. Kitschelt (2000) has noted this increasing sensitivity on the part of party leaders to the preferences of the wider membership and the electorate at large. Party leaders often regard the activist body of their party as largely unrepresentative of the total membership and certainly of the wider electorate. However, this "democratization" does not necessarily mean that national party elites are losing control over candidate selection. Mair (1994, 16) has argued that it "is not the party congress or the middle level elite, or the activists, who are being empowered, but rather the 'ordinary' members, who are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership". This introduction of more plebiscitary techniques means that well-informed middle-level activists are being circumvented and party leaders are appealing directly to ordinary – and disengaged – party members. The fact that activists are generally not representative of the electorate at large now looms large and party leaderships try to sideline them. By means of this new "democratization" internal dissent and discussion are expunged from the grassroots party, making it possible, among other things, to proclaim party unity.

While control over the careers of supra-national politicians is the most powerful means of policy control, national party leaders have adopted other mechanisms to direct the behavior of their MEPs and Commissioners. The most important tool of these is policy coordination. Raunio (2000) has shown that since MEPs are strongly dependent on their national parties for re-election they are eager and willing to consult with and inform the national party leadership of their voting record and intentions. The increasing importance of EU legislation has resulted in more frequent contacts between national party leaders and their MEPs, leading to their increasing institutionalization: that is, transnational politicians are progressively being integrated into national party organizations. Leaders of the "European" part of the party are represented on the national executive and the national leadership has frequent meetings with most MEPs. Often, the leadership of the transnational party has direct access to ministers (particularly when their party is in government) and to the parliamentary leadership at the national level. MEPs tend to have political experience at the national level, which eases their access to the national leadership. Although there is little evidence of explicit voting instructions, except in relation to issues of "fundamental importance", the fact that MEPs of many parties acknowledge the possibility of national intervention at the supra-national level says something about power relations between the two. However, even without direct voting instructions there is ample opportunity to influence MEPs' behavior. Although, as the deepening and widening of Europe continues – a process that has gained momentum since the early 1990s – MEPs have gained in importance within their parties, this has not resulted in a significant shift in policy control towards the supra-national level.

European integration strengthens national governments (in other words, national party elites)

European integration has transformed the functioning and performance of national political institutions such as parliaments, political parties and governments, as well as legislative–executive relations in national democracies. One major effect has been that power has shifted from parliament both to the executive and, upwards, to EU institutions. The room for national policy-making is restricted and shrinking (see Streeck 1996, 83–85) with the result that governments (that is, national party elites) are experiencing a diminution in policy-making terms, but a gain in autonomy vis-à-vis their national parliamentary parties. Indeed, the latter have suffered significantly in terms of power and policy influence and are now less capable of scrutinizing their national executives. Raunio and Hix (2000, 163) conclude that "overall, the ability of parliaments to control executives has declined since the 1950s, and the process of European integration is certainly one of the reasons why this has happened – providing executives with an arena for action away from domestic parliamentary scrutiny, and a monopoly on information in an ever larger portfolio of public policies".

The shift of policy-making to the European level has strengthened the power of the national executive elites (Moravcsik 1994), while national governments are using EU institutions to further strengthen their powers vis-à-vis the national legislature and other national actors (Raunio and Hix 2000). Particularly in terms of agenda-setting the powers of national executives have also widened the information gap between national political leaders and the average (national) MP. In addition, the piecemeal scrutiny of individual items of – often complex – EU legislation in national parliaments makes parliamentary oversight and control increasingly problematic. It also reduces the scope of policy formation and makes radical policy shifts increasingly infeasible, which makes it difficult for national actors to respond to the wishes of the electorate. One of the strategies adopted by national leaders is "scapegoating": unpopular policies are blamed on the European Union and presented as *faits accomplis*. Also, national leaders return from European summits and present package deals to the national parliament which the latter cannot easily reject because this would entail political leaders going back to the European negotiating table looking weak and unreliable.

The autonomy of the leadership of political parties is greater in countries with weak parliamentary scrutiny over EU affairs (Raunio 2002). The fact that national parliaments have attempted to regain control and oversight and to hold their government accountable can be shown by the establishment of special committees for European affairs in all European countries (see Raunio and Hix 2000, 154–9; Raunio and Wiberg 2000, 150–4). In addition, several member states have, in response to the transposition of EU directives into national law, introduced constitutional changes to strengthen the legislature's ability to control the executive. Nevertheless, most of these special EU committees are weak in terms of their ability to mandate the government or to bridge the information gap that exists between the national executive and parliamentary representatives (Raunio and Wiberg 2000, 151).

However, we must not exaggerate the loss of parliamentary control and inter-party competition as a result of Europeanization. Before the process of European integration took off, a small elite of party and interest-group leaders dominated parliamentary representatives, particularly in consensus democracies with strong corporatist decision-making procedures. Nevertheless, the position of the leadership of the major national parties has been enhanced as a result of the European integration process. Opposition parties in particular, which at the national level could always seek popular or interest-group support in order to further their case and oppose the government, are being progressively "disarmed" as national executives become less directly accountable and controllable.

The democratic dilemma of the EU: distrusted institutions, low electoral turnout, widespread dissatisfaction

Political parties trusted least

Political parties are becoming less and less socially embedded. They are losing their members, their core voters and their popular appeal. However, declining membership levels do not tell the whole story. Political participation may simply be shifting to other political organizations or towards more ad-hoc forms of political engagement. In simple terms, party-political activities may be out of date and no longer square with people's everyday lives. We may demonstrate the profound change in citizens' attitudes towards party democracy by evaluating their psychological predispositions towards the main institutions of representative democracy.

Table 3. Trust in political institutions in percentages, 1989–2003

	Trust in political parties					Trust in political institutions			
Country	**1997**	**1999**	**2001**	**2003**		**1999**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Austria	24	22	23	20		45	49	47	45
Belgium	10	17	17	22		26	44	40	36
Denmark	31	27	34	37		43	58	54	50
Finland	14	20	22	24		43	46	43	43
France	12	11	11	15		32	38	30	32
Germany	13	18	16	11		37	40	35	36
Greece	20	20	18	17		38	43	34	34
Ireland	20	21	24	20		39	47	44	42
Italy	13	16	11	15		25	31	29	25
Netherlands	40	40	32	33		56	58	52	52
Norway	–	–	–	–		–	–	–	31
Portugal	14	19	19	21		44	45	40	39
Spain	20	19	24	23		38	45	40	40
Sweden	16	17	18	20		34	49	49	40
Gt. Britain	18	16	15	13		34	38	34	27
Average	16	18	17	16		35	45	36	35

Source: Various Eurobarometers 1997–2003.

Note: * Trust in four political institutions: government, parliament, civil service and political parties.

This analysis is disheartening: as Table 3 clearly shows, only around one third of Europeans consider core democratic institutions such as government, parliament, the civil service and political parties trustworthy. However, political parties are the least trusted of all: only one in six citizens trusts them.

However, it is not so much the structure of representative democracy as a whole that is under siege, but rather its agents (established parties and politicians) as well as certain procedures of public policy-making that have little credibility with the population at large. A gap seems to have developed between "politics" and society. Does this mean that we have an indifferent, dissatisfied and cynical European citizenry? We will assess this on the basis of electoral turnout and surveys of people's satisfaction with national and European democracy.

European elections are second-order elections with low turnout

One of the core requirements for a democracy is active citizen participation. Electoral participation thus is an indicator of the importance people attach to certain democratic institutions.

Several scholars have claimed that higher levels of education and income tend to increase political participation; paradoxically, however, while educational levels and income have risen substantially, aggregate levels of voter turnout have declined significantly over the post-war period in most European countries (Mair 2002, 128–9). Average turnout in the advanced industrialized countries has declined, from an average of around 84% in 1945 to one of 78% in the 1990s.

Many factors have been put forward as influencing political participation. Gray and Caul (2000) have shown that within highly developed democracies the

decline in turnout is best explained by the transformation of patterns of popular mobilization (decline in trade union density and lower levels of political organization of peripheral voters through workers' parties), faster growing voting-age populations (making political mobilization more costly) and a country's institutional format (particularly the electoral system). The number of parties seems to have a positive effect on turnout, but only up to a point: too much fragmentation discourages people from casting their vote.

Similar effects have been found in Eastern Europe. In the wake of the transition towards pluralist democracy, the initial popular enthusiasm for electoral participation has declined rapidly. Kostadinova (2003, 752) shows that in the founding national elections the average turnout was over 86%, while in the most recent elections the average turnout was only 66.6%. This decline is best explained, next to the specific dynamics of democratic transition, by the electoral system and the number of parties.

Moreover, if we look at electoral turnout in "second-order elections", such as sub-national elections or those for the European Parliament, a sobering picture emerges. Elections to the European Parliament have failed to generate high levels of participation and involvement among European voters. Indeed, considering the substantial drop in participation in the 1999 European elections, it seems that despite the increased powers of the European Parliament and the greater importance of EU policy-making (for example, as a result of the introduction of the single currency), fewer and fewer people appear to be connecting to the political process at the EU level. This might be caused by some of the factors described above: parties are not able to present, and compete in terms of, coherent and alternative visions of "Europe" and tend to regard Euro-elections as an arena dominated by national competition (Scully 2001, 518; Andeweg 1995, 73).

High levels of voter abstention at Euro-elections may also be attributed to more direct causes. Moravcsik (2002, 616) has argued that the issues on the EU agenda are simply not salient enough for voters to be interested in them. Whatever the reasons for voter apathy, EU elections mobilize far fewer voters than national elections. Table 4 summarizes turnouts at national elections and elections for the European Parliament in 24 countries. Since no elections for representatives at the European level have been held in accession countries, I have taken turnouts in EU referenda as a proxy for the importance voters attach to the process of European integration and European-level politics in general.

Table 4: Electoral turnout at parliamentary and European elections, 1988–2003 (%)

Country	Mean turnout national elections (%)	Mean turnout European elections	Turnout at EU referenda	Difference (%)
Austria	80.6	58.35	–	–22.2
Belgium	86.4	91.04	–	+ 4.6
Czech Rep.	77.8	–	55.2	–22.6
Denmark	83.4	43.76	–	–39.6
Estonia	68.0	–	64.0	–4.0
Finland	75.2	45.20	–	–30.0
France	62.5	52.16	–	–10.4
Germany	76.7	58.02	–	–18.7
Greece	86.8	75.42	–	–11.4
Hungary	65.5	–	45.6	–19.9
Ireland	74.6	54.80	–	–19.8
Italy	90.9	79.30	–	–11.6
Latvia	77.8	–	72.5	–5.3
Lithuania	64.3	–	63.3	–1.0
Luxemburg	63.4	87.52	–	+ 24.2
Netherlands	78.5	44.28	–	–34.3
Poland	47.3	–	58.6	+ 11.3
Portugal	78.4	49.75	–	–28.7
Romania	76.0	–	54.0	–22.0
Slovakia	82.1	–	52.2	–29.9
Slovenia	78.2	–	60.2	–18.0
Spain	74.3	61.80	–	–12.5
Sweden	83.4	39.95	–	–43.5
Great Britain	73.3	32.16	–	–41.2
Average	75.2	60.15	58.4	-16.9

Source: Data on electoral participation from the IPU, IFES and EU websites.

Overall, voter participation in national elections is much higher than in Euro-elections – only in three countries (Belgium, Luxembourg and Poland) do more people go to the polls for European elections or referenda than for national elections. While the overall average for national elections is 75%, the overall turnout at European elections and EU referenda is 15% to

17% lower. From this evidence it seems that elections for the European Parliament are clearly second- or even third-order elections in the eyes of many European voters (Reiff and Schmitt 1980; Hix 1996 and 1999b; Hix and Lord 1997).

Moreover, in half the member states the turnout for the European Parliamentary elections is less than 50%, and of those countries where participation is above average there is compulsory voting in Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece (also in Italy until recently). In Italy and Greece the turnout rates are just above 70%, while in Austria just under 60% of the population cast their vote at European elections. Turnouts in Finland, Spain and Germany are just above the average at European elections, while in France and Denmark they are just below the average. The lowest turnouts at European elections are found in the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Portugal and, particularly, the Netherlands. In countries such as Sweden, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands, the difference between turnouts at national elections and at European elections is a striking 30% to 40%.

Since they are offered neither a real choice among competing visions of Europe nor an opportunity to determine the composition of the European executive, European electorates seem to "vote with their feet" rather than with their heads or hearts (Eijk and Franklin 1996, 301–4). Although it is difficult to establish the precise order of causation among the different variables (lack of competition as regards European integration, the democratic deficit characterizing the EU institutional framework, and voter apathy), the result is clear: a substantial portion of European voters are disconnected from the political process at the EU level and ignorance of the workings of the EU is widespread (Blondel et al. 1998, 240).

A situation in which voters are indifferent and apathetic does not immediately or automatically entail problems with democracy. What matter are the reasons for abstention. If the apathy can be linked to the weak legitimacy of the European Union, understood as a lack of support among the population for this particular form of government, then those who favor party democracy have more reason to be pessimistic about the future.

Satisfaction not guaranteed: the EU's legitimacy deficit

Public support for European integration has been consistently high across Europe (Raunio and Wiberg 2000, 159–61). This is very much in line with the pro-European consensus among the major political parties in most European countries. Moreover, further integration – not to mention EU membership itself – is hardly disputed in the Benelux countries, Ireland, Italy and Portugal. However, in Denmark, Spain, Austria and, particularly, the United Kingdom and Sweden, citizens are only lukewarm towards European integration and since the early 1990s opposition to further European integration has greatly increased.

However, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the level of democracy within the European Union. The democratic deficit is a matter of concern to a large number of citizens. In 1992, only 15% of the respondents in a Europe-wide survey expressed satisfaction with the degree of "democratic influence" exerted by citizens (Niedermayer and Sinnott 1995). It has been argued that EU citizens formulate their assessment of democracy in the EU on the basis of what they think about their national political institutions (Andersen 1998). Many Europeans have little knowledge of EU institutions and tend to be unable to distinguish between them (Karp et al. 2003, 277). In order to overcome the problem of citizens evaluating national rather than European institutions, I have summarized levels of satisfaction with democracy in western and southern Europe in relation to both the national and the European level. An overview of recent surveys on levels of satisfaction with national democracy is given in Table 5 and satisfaction with democracy at the European level is presented in Table 6.

Clearly there are substantial differences between European countries regarding evaluation of the functioning of their national democratic system. While Italians, Portuguese and Greeks are extremely dissatisfied with the working of their national democracy, at the other end of the scale Danish, Dutch and Irish citizens seem relatively satisfied. However, as the Portuguese and Spanish cases show, countries can exhibit significant variation over time. The most important overall point which can be inferred from Table 5 is that, over the last ten years, the rate of approval of national democracies has increased. In Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden more and more citizens say that they are satisfied with the functioning of their national democracy. Although clearly a substantial proportion of the population in every European country is not satisfied with democratic functioning, they tend to constitute a minority.

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy within the European Union is clearly lower, on average, than in the case of national democracies. This is not surprising and perhaps reflects the observed democratic deficit of the European democratic institutional

Table 5. Satisfaction with national democracy, 1989–2003 (% of total electorate)

Country	1990	1992	1993	1994	1995	1997	1998	1999	2000	2002	2003
Austria	–	–	–	–	–	55	60	64	56	72	65
Belgium	56	53	59	53	55	28	29	49	60	71	65
Denmark	70	80	82	68	83	77	84	81	79	88	91
Finland	–	–	–	–	54	50	50	67	64	70	77
France	42	47	58	47		48	39	59	60	59	68
Germany	74	56	63	52	63	45	50	66	54	66	59
Greece	44	36	31	32	30	38	33	62	53	53	49
Ireland	57	62	69	65	70	70	75	74	70	69	66
Italy	22	12	25	19	20	30	28	34	36	34	38
Netherlands	67	71	64	66	69	71	75	78	80	66	70
Portugal	71	85	48	55	42	39	35	57	50	35	37
Spain	37	41	34	31	41	55	51	71	75	70	58
Sweden	–	–	–	–	55	56	56	65	63	77	75
Gt. Britain	50	45	51	49	48	63	61	64	56	60	60
Average	52	45	49	49	48	48	57	60	57	59	59

Source: Eurobarometer.

Note: Scores are percentages of respondents stating that they are (very) satisfied with the functioning of national democracy.

Table 6. Satisfaction with democracy in the European Union, 1989–2003 (% of total electorate)

Country	1993	1994	1995	1997	1998	1999	2000	2002	2003
Austria	–	–	36	40	45	38	29	53	42
Belgium	55	52	51	30	29	48	59	65	58
Denmark	40	46	47	31	40	30	36	59	60
Finland	–	–	38	31	27	37	41	43	44
France	41	32	37	40	34	43	50	47	50
Germany	38	41	45	28	32	39	39	48	45
Greece	33	28	35	39	39	41	56	50	51
Ireland	67	64	57	63	62	60	60	61	60
Italy	41	33	38	36	35	43	41	45	48
Netherlands	39	46	45	36	42	43	42	48	48
Portugal	43	53	35	35	31	51	48	41	42
Spain	38	37	33	46	43	61	62	58	41
Sweden	–	–	19	18	18	19	25	42	41
Gt. Britain	29	40	30	33	33	32	31	38	34
Average	42	43	38	36	35	42	43	48	46

Source: Eurobarometer (various issues).

Note: Scores are percentages of respondents stating that they are (very) satisfied with the functioning of national democracy.

framework. Dissatisfaction with the EU is influenced by lack of confidence in the EU institutional framework and the weakness of the European Parliament. Some countries, such as Italy, deviate from this pattern and show higher levels of satisfaction with EU democracy than with democracy at home, although this reflects domestic democratic problems rather than a positive evaluation of the level of democracy at the European level. However, in most countries – and particularly in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK – citizens are more satisfied with their national democracy than its EU counterpart. Karp et al. (2003, 280) conclude that "unlike most stable democracies but like other transnational institutions, the EU is not likely to enjoy a reservoir of diffuse support". Moreover, although we can see an increase in the level of satisfaction with EU democracy over time, the political process within the EU will tend to be viewed with skepticism by a majority of European citizens. Moreover, the level of political knowledge is highly correlated with dissatisfaction with the workings of EU democracy. For national democracies the satisfaction level rises as knowledge increases, but for the EU level the correlation is negative: dissatisfaction with democracy in the EU increases together with citizens' political knowledge and educational level. In addition, people who tend to discuss politics more often are also more likely to become dissatisfied (Karp et al. 2003, 285–7).

The structure of political satisfaction within the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe differs from that in the established democracies (Andersen 1998a; 1998b; 1999). First of all, satisfaction is significantly lower and progressively declining in Eastern Europe: greater political freedom (as measured by the Freedom House Index) has actually reduced levels of satisfaction. While the overall level of satisfaction in established democracies hovers around 60%, in Eastern Europe satisfaction with national democracy is as low as 35%. This is unrelated to political culture or system performance. Moreover, it seems that particularly in those countries which achieved high levels of freedom early in the transition there is a substantial number of citizens who are still "uncomfortable with the disorder of democracy" (Anderson 1998b). Enthusiasm for EU membership is also lower in Eastern Europe, in particular among state-dependent pensioners and farmers (Chichowski 2000). Citizens' attitudes to EU membership and support for European integration were found to be strongly linked to the extent to which they favor a free-market economy and are satisfied with the transition to democracy. Studies also suggest that political parties by and large structure public attitudes towards membership of the European Union (Anderson 1998a and 1999; Taggart 1998; Chichowski 2000). Regardless of ideology, political parties that take a clear position on European integration provide a cue for citizens regarding EU issues. In the words of Chichowski (2000, 1272), "voters may use party attachment as a proxy to answer questions on EU membership".

The discrepancy: a rupture between democratic politics and policy-making

We began by analyzing the disconnection between policy-making and mechanisms of democratic control, focusing on *the almost total absence of the issue of European integration from party competition* in most European countries. National (socioeconomic) issues still dominate national politics. Political parties and their leaders are evaluated by voters primarily on the basis of national socioeconomic policy.

At the same time, *at the European level the party system remains weakly developed* in democratic terms. The "Europeanization" of national party systems is very poorly developed, while the "nationalization" of party competition at the European level is substantial. Indeed, as already mentioned, European integration has tended to strengthen national party leaderships and national governments. National political leaders are by and large able to dominate policy-making at the supra-national level and the process of European integration has further strengthened the position of national party elites, particularly those in government. This national control over supra-national policy-making is secured through the supremacy of nationally elected politicians (presidents, prime ministers and ministers) in the recruitment and selection of European politicians (MEPs and Commissioners). In other words: *national political parties dominate the recruitment and (s)election of politicians at the supra-national level.* By controlling the careers of supra-national politicians, national party leaderships command substantial loyalty and discipline. As a result, transnational party organizations in the European Parliament have very little autonomy. Thus, *at the European level we find a weak European Parliament made up of poorly developed supra-national party organizations whose members are recruited and selected by national party leaders.*

The same national party leaders also dominate the *European executive, over which democratic control and scrutiny are far below democratic standards* (this is the so-called "democratic deficit" of the EU) as a result of the limited powers of the European Parliament and the non-accountability of the executive at the supra-national level. This democratic deficit can be shown

only by default but the arguments are well grounded: the institutional framework of the European Union is characterized by very low levels of democratic parliamentary control and scrutiny of the executive, combined with a very low level of legitimacy in terms of mass support. In addition, there remains a weak link between the "popular will" as expressed in Euro-elections and the formation of the supra-national executive. It is neither a presidential type of democracy where the executive is directly elected, nor a parliamentary democracy where the executive originates from the legislature (see Hix 1997). What we observe is an EU executive made up of national politicians (Council of Ministers) and Commissioners appointed by national states and their political leaders. Again, national party leaders emerge as the most powerful actors. While this national control over supra-national politicians does not necessarily lead to a democratic deficit (since national politicians are themselves subject to scrutiny and accountability at the national level), this dominance of national political actors means that their own declining legitimacy is superimposed upon the European level. This decline in the legitimacy of national political parties is visible in the fact that political parties are the least trusted institutions of representative democratic systems, are rapidly losing members and are becoming socially uprooted at an unprecedented rate.

Finally, *supra-national policy-making processes and EU institutions clearly have a legitimacy deficit*: citizens are very indifferent towards or dissatisfied with EU institutions, as indicated by low turnouts at European elections and strong dissatisfaction with political institutions at the EU level. The low level of participation in European elections in particular casts doubt upon the legitimacy of the EU and its representative institutions. Citizens' basic attitudes to democratic institutions and political power-holders have already become more indifferent, even negative (van Deth and Scarbrough 1995; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Plasser 1999). Add to this the problem that many European citizens do not understand the very complex institutional framework of the EU, and the stage is set for a process in which citizens feel increasingly unrepresented and powerless. As a result, dissatisfaction with political institutions, popular frustration with democratic government, a decline in trust in elected politicians and political parties, falling membership of political parties, and a diminished ability on the part of the political system to solve collective problems by means of public policies all coincide with rising political cynicism and apathy. *The discrepancy between national politics and supra-national policy formation reinforces the erosion of political trust and (institutional) participation*, *creating a fertile breeding ground for neo-populist and "anti-system" parties* (Abedi 2002; Capoccia 2002; van der Brug and Fennema 2003; Mény and Surel 2002). Such parties politicize popular discontent by combining national political issues with anti-establishment criticism and censure of the existing institutions of representative democracy (see Keman and Krouwel 2003; Kersbergen and Krouwel 2003): in this sense populism and other anti-system voices are the "thermometer of democracy" (Taggart 2000).

This brings us back to the beginning of our story. The broad pro-integration consensus among the major parties in most European countries seems to be one of the most powerful factors explaining the level of support for the EU among European electorates. However, the major political parties may find themselves skating on thin ice. First, *the disconnection between primarily national patterns of political competition and the increasingly transnational character of policy-making could easily erode both trust in national democratic institutions and support for (further) European integration. This divergence between "politics" and "policy" is the most decisive discrepancy facing European states.* As a result of the process of European integration, national parliaments have lost a substantial part of their ability to control and scrutinize national governments and the space for national policy-making is restricted and shrinking. National governments and the party leaders that make up their executives, on the other hand, have strengthened their position. These national party leaders use the transnational level of policy-making as an additional arena enabling them, through strategies such as "scapegoating" and the monopolization of information, progressively to dominate national parliaments.

Second, *the process of European integration strengthens party leaderships within their respective party organizations*. The grassroots party, with its active body of members, is increasingly being neglected and professedly more "democratic" procedures are being introduced into internal decision-making. Membership ballots are used only for the selection of party leaders and parliamentary representatives: party members are not given a significant voice in policy formation. This supposed "democratization" means that the more informed (and, as analysis suggests, probably more Eurosceptic) activists are being sidelined in favor of the membership at large. The wider membership is more likely to support the pro-European party line and to endorse the candidates that the leadership puts forward for popular election – as already mentioned, the more informed citizens are about the workings of

the European Union, the more skeptical they tend to be. Apparently the democratic deficit of the European institutional framework is one of its most salient characteristics, for professional observers and "amateurs" alike: *while policy-making has shifted to the supra-national level, the institutions of democratic control and scrutiny have not kept pace.* It is only through their firm grip on the recruitment and selection of the transnational political elite that national party leaders are able to maintain the, in some countries marginal, majority opinion in favor of EU membership and (further) European integration.

Third, *empirical analysis points to low levels of trust in the basic institutions of representative democracy* and, with only a few exceptions, even lower levels of trust in the institutional framework of the European Union. *Political parties are the least trusted institutions within European systems of representative democracy and are also experiencing erosion of function.* Evidently, national parties in their traditional role as intermediaries and mobilizers are failing to maintain their (organizational and psychological) links with large parts of the electorate. Fewer citizens participate in elections, particularly in second-order Euro-elections, and those who do vote tend to switch between parties more often. In addition, a growing number of citizens are exiting and re-entering the electorate in an increasingly erratic pattern, making electoral outcomes and thus government formation less stable and ever more unpredictable.

These less structured and predictable "electoral markets", with lower levels of political participation and higher levels of electoral volatility, provide an opportunity structure for populist politicians and anti-system parties that are able to politicize and mobilize the public's apparently substantial political dissatisfaction, discontent and cynicism. This mobilizing capacity of popular cynicism and discontent has resulted in a number of new parties many of which exhibit populist behavior and use "anti-politics" rhetoric. These "new" parties have now entered numerous party systems across Europe and have also successfully challenged dominant parties. In some countries, such as Italy, Austria and the Netherlands, populist parties have also entered the executive branch of government. In other countries the "new" Left has been quite successful in elections and participated in government (Belgium, Finland and Germany). (Right-wing) populist parties in particular have at their disposal substantial political skepticism and dissatisfaction, particularly in relation to the leadership of traditional political parties. The "strange amalgam of discontents" (Taggart 1998) that populist parties are able to tap into is often combined with anti-establishment criticism and censure of the existing institutions of representative democracy. Furthermore, the neo-populists may have a point when it comes to the level of democracy, particularly at the supra-national level. This paper has shown that neo-populists can politicize real and existing political discontent, Euroscepticism and distrust of the major political institutions, particularly *political parties*. The latter, *once designed for mass mobilization for the purpose of democratic inclusion, now seem to be entangled in a process in which European integration and its democratic deficit feed political cynicism and dissatisfaction*.

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