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A party system without a party government in the European Union?

Francesca Longo^{*}

Abstract. *The European Union has developed a relatively stable party system based on political groups present in the European Parliament. The Union's institutional organisation, however, does not appear to envisage a party government. This paper analyses the existing contradictions in the Union deriving from the existence of a party system and the absence of a party government, proposing two possible solutions.*

Keywords: *European political parties; European party system; European Parliament*

“EU politics is party politics”. (Hix, 2005:180). This statement is one that can be agreed with. Political parties control the European Union's system (EU) both directly, organising elections for the European Parliament, and indirectly, selecting national political personnel that then represent Member States in the indirectly elected common institutions. The statement could, however, be reformulated as follows: “EU politics are national party politics.”

The reference, in this case, is in fact made to national parties. The topic of a European party system seems instead linked to the eventuality of the Union having developed a European political party system.

The Treaty on European Union has acknowledged European political parties as relevant players in the European integration process ever since the 1992 agreement signed in Maastricht. The Lisbon Treaty states that the Union is founded on representative democracy and emphasises the centrality of European political parties in order to “contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (Article 8 TEU).

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Has the European Union's political system managed to develop "party politics" that are not a reflection of the activity of the national political parties of member states in addressing these hypotheses? In order to assess this hypothesis, it is best to proceed starting from two different perspectives. The first, focused on the "party system", is aimed at verifying whether such a party system is functionally autonomous within the specific framework of the Union. Such a level involves parties' capability to develop a genuinely European dimension linked to the Union's political system's political and institutional sphere. The second perspective, focused on "party government", is set at a systemic level and concerns the analysis of the current institutional configuration of the EU's political system, paying particular attention to relations between the Union's governing institutions in order to identify incentives that the EU's systemic organisation provides to the development of a "party government".

The "party system" perspective

In contemporary democratic political systems, the party system is one of the main functional units. Its characteristics are determined by the configuration assumed by the individual political parties that compose it and relations established between them (Sartori, 2005). This is, therefore, based on two elements, (1) organisation; understood as the existence of organised and autonomous political parties, and (2) competition; understood as the existence of parties with differing political agendas.

Political parties in the European Union are a composite player. The two main elements are the political groups in the European Parliament and transnational party federations. The political groups, which aggregate MEPs elected in the constituencies of member states on the basis of political affiliation represent the "party in the institutions." Federations of political parties, formed by the leaders and the main political components of national parties, represent the party outside the institutions. A study of these two elements in terms of stability and

autonomy will allow an assessment of the existence of the first of the two characteristics of a party system.

Political groups in the European Parliament are based on a right-left axis, and have, ever since the first parliamentary assembly was held, been organised according to the classical model for party competition. The work of parliamentary assemblies and Commissions is organised around these political groups as is the distribution of the European Parliament's resources and the management of institutional appointments. The stability of these parliamentary players can be measured using two indicators identified by Bardi (2002) to verify the institutionalisation of groups; inclusiveness and voting cohesion. The first indicator measures the number of national delegations that join a political group, while the second measures cohesion among the group's members in terms of agreeing on a vote. Inclusiveness should be considered the indicator that, first of all, measures the group's importance in terms of power vis a vis the assembly, for reasons linked to the work done by the European Parliament. EP assigns financial, organisational and political resources on the basis of the number of members a group has. Furthermore, this indicator measures the potential autonomy of groups compared to the national secretariats of MPs' parties of origin as well as their ability to programme positions and vote on the basis of their own dynamics in the parliament they are elected to. (Longo, 2005). Voting cohesion, the second indicator, is relevant in order to assess stability, since it measures the political group's level of integration compared with that of its Members of the European Parliament.

While the number of political groups present in parliament has changed between 1979 and the current legislature, it is possible, however, to identify a "historical core" that has basically remained stable. This core consists of the three political groups that, in the current legislature which began in 2014, represent about 64% of votes and together hold 479 seats out of a total of 751¹. These groups are the European Peoples Party (EPP), the European Socialist Party

¹ The EPP has 221 seats, the PES/S&D 191 and ALDE 67

(PES/S&D), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

The composition of these groups, in terms of participant national delegations, has changed over time. They have, however, maintained the two indicators at constantly high level. The two largest groups have high levels of inclusivity and can be described as transnational (Raunio 1996), as they have added MEPs from almost all member countries ever since their creation.

Table 1 – *National delegations per political group in the current legislature 2014/2018*

EPP	27
PES/S&D	28
ALDE	21
GUE	19
GREENS	17
EUC/Ref	15
EFDD	7

Data processed by the author; source www.europarl.europa.eu

The table indicates that, compared to the complete transnationalism of the EPP and PES, among the other groups only the newly-created Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group² has members from less than half of the Member States. Furthermore, all groups, excluding the one most recently formed, present constant growth as far as levels of inclusiveness are concerned. The GUE-European United Left, founded in 1989 by four national political parties, has progressively increased its number of national delegations, especially in the 2004 elections, in which the group presented an association of fourteen delegations. The Greens-European Free Alliance political group also presents a tendency towards increased inclusiveness, rising from six national delegations in the 1989-1994 legislature, to nine in the 1994-1999 legislature, fifteen in the 1999-2004 and 2004-2009 legislatures, to the current seventeen. In

² This group contains mainly British MEPs belonging to the National Party and Italian ones belonging to the Five Star Movement, plus seven MEPs belonging to conservative and euro-sceptic parties in Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Latvia and one French MEP from the Front National who joined this group following disagreements with Le Pen's party.

2009, when it was formed, the Conservatives and Reformists group associated eleven national delegations.

The second indicator of the institutionalisation of the “European party” system, the stability of groups measured in terms of MEP’s roll call voting, has been measured by many researchers using the “Cohesion Index” which, originally created by Attinà (1990), was then used and adapted by many analysts (Raunio, 1996; Noury, 2002)³. All empiric research carried out on MEPs’ voting behaviour has confirmed data indicating a constant increase in political groups’ voting cohesion between 1979 and 1999⁴.

Assuming, as Brzinski did (1995), that voting discipline is an indicator of a group’s success, one can state that cohesion data provides us with an image of a parliamentary assembly that organises competition on the basis of the dynamics of the setting in which these same groups work.

The second characteristic of an organised party system is the existence of alternative political agenda presented by different parties. This element has been analysed using two different methods. The first focuses on an analysis of MEPs votes, to verify whether parties siding with different ideological positions, on the Right/Left axis, vote coherently with their own political agendas, or whether instead they vote based on alliances. Attinà (1995) and Bardi (1996) emphasised the existence of “institutional incentives” deriving from the need for parliament to achieve an absolute majority in order to carry out its functions. This rule could encourage voting behaviour aimed at achieving the threshold required for the approval of the result required. In such a perspective, voting is not finalised at the success of the aggregated interests of groups, but of parliament as an institution.

³ This index measures the ratio between the total number of votes cast by MEPs belonging to one same group when voting takes place by roll-call on shared positions (Attinà, 1990) – or on shared positions and individual amendments to shared positions (Raunio, 1998) – and the difference between the position expressed by the same MEPs obtaining the highest number of votes between “yays”, “nos” and “abstained” and the sum of the two other positions. The result obtained is then multiplied by 100 and the closer the result is to 100 the greater cohesion there is.

⁴ Post 1999 data on voting patterns is still not available.

In order to consider voting behaviour as an indicator of the existence of alternative political agendas, one must read data on voting discipline ranked on the basis of specific issues representing classic and “European” social rifts.

Thomassen, Noury and Voeten (2004) analysed the voting behaviour of European Members of Parliament concerning four aspects of the political debate; the classic Right/Left dimension, national integration/independence, traditionalism/progressivism, the north/south dimension. They also used data concerning both voting behaviour and attitudes, as well as the individual positions of MEPs on issues concerning the aforementioned aspects using opinions obtained through individual interviews.

The results of this research indicate a context more difficult to analyse compared to the situation that arises when processing data related only to voting cohesion. While cohesion and MEPs attitudes seem linked to their specific group affiliation as far as Right/Left and traditionalism/progressivism dimensions are concerned, the rift on the intensity of integration bonds compared to national autonomy is in fact linked more closely to the domestic political dimension. Data collected and processed by Noury (2002), for example, indicates that MEPs elected in the United Kingdom behave in a manner associated to their country of origin, rather than party affiliation, on subjects concerning lesser or greater integration. Hix, Kreppel and Noury (2003) have emphasised that the two main political groups have the same voting behaviour on issues concerning institutional matters, while they instead compete on economic and social policies.

The second study method assesses the level of competition between European political parties, analysing the political manifestos of the various federations. Numerous studies have emphasised that the four main European federations⁵ have developed political manifestos, which, on subjects concerning social-economic rifts, reflect the classic Right/Left positions that member parties have at a national level. The manifestos are thus clearly distinguishable, different and stable over

⁵ The Federation of Socialist Parties, of Peoples Parties, the Conservatives, the Liberal/Democrats and the Greens.

time. (Gabel and Hix 2004; Sigalas and Pollak, 2012). The aspect concerning the use of these manifestos by national parties in electoral campaigns in member states is more problematic. On this subject Sigalas and Pollak (2012) prove that the percentage of subjects present in the electoral manifestos of federations and later adopted by national parties is low. The same study proves that the relevance of those issues that emerge from European manifestos, also becoming part of the electoral campaigns of national political parties, varies from one country to another.

The image of European parties that emerges from these analyses appears to be at the same time elusive and stably organised. Parliamentary groups, created within the institutions, seem to be stably organised, broadly inclusive and with satisfactory levels of internal cohesion. Party federations, created outside the institutions, have developed programmes that are stable over time and reflect the Right/Left traditional political dimension. However, national election campaigns for the European Parliament are still only partially linked to the manifestos of European federations of parties. The model for “second order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt, 1984), albeit weakened, has still not been replaced with a fully Europeanised format for political competition.

The stability and relative cohesion of party groups within the European Parliament, however, envisages for the Union the existence of a party system “within parliament” that is relatively autonomous and stable. Simon Hix (Hix, Noury and Roland 2007) described this as a ‘two-plus-several’ model in which the two centre-right and centre-left groups – the EPP and the PES/S&D – prevail, and together have always controlled about 35 % of the votes, and in which three or four other parties have controlled between 3% and 10%. But does the existence of a party system in the European Parliament mean that the Union has a *party government* system? To answer this question it is necessary to move on to the second analytical aspect with an analysis of the of the EU’s political-institutional structure.

The “party government” perspective

The Lisbon Treaty formally adopted an institutional order set up in the decade that preceded 2009. The European Parliament and the Council are the two legislative chambers in the sphere of ordinary legislative procedures (defined as a co-decision procedure before the Lisbon Treaty). The European Council and the Presidency of the Council of the European Union have the main executive powers, in the sense that they act as agenda setters. The Lisbon Treaty assigns to them responsibility for defining the Union's strategies and for establishing the political agenda. The Lisbon Treaty outlines a decision-making process based mainly on a double representation of states and the citizens. They respectively represent the electoral constituencies of the Council and the parliament, institutions that share responsibility for defining policies. In this sense, the European party system assumes a significant responsibility as far as representation of interests is concerned. This, however, is not enough to define the Union as a party government. This latter is characterised not only (and not much) by the parties' ability to determine the contents of policies during the decision-making processes, but also by the parties' ability to determine the system's political agenda themselves, exercising direct or indirect control over the executive power.

In this context, it is therefore important to understand whether the European party system plays an important role in forming the Union's executive. The Lisbon Treaty does not provide a clear systemic configuration of this aspect. In fact, according to Article 17⁶ the European parliament has the power to *elect* the president of the Commission and approve the college of commissioners. This expectation is strengthened within the same article, stating that in choosing the candidate for the Commission's presidency, the European Council must take into account the results of European elections.

⁶ Article 17 TEU: *Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.*

Furthermore, the same Article 17, states in point 8, that “The Commission, as a body, shall be responsible to the European Parliament. In accordance with Article 201 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the European Parliament may vote on a motion of censure of the Commission.”

This “combination of provisions” strengthens the bonds between the European Parliament and the Commission to the extent that, for the first time in the history of the Union, European political parties appointed their respective candidates for the presidency of the Commission during the 2014 electoral campaign. These candidates, also for the first time, disputed their respective parties’ manifestos and electoral proposals in a public debate. The Union’s political system, however, does not yet seem to be clearly defined. Firstly, in spite of the aforementioned provisions in treaties, there is no implicit or explicit bond of trust linking the president of the Commission to the political parliamentary majority. Furthermore, and this is the crucial point, is the Commission to be considered the Union’s executive institution? And even if the European Council were to take into account the European election results in choosing the Commission’s president, would he, or she, have the institutional power to guarantee the implementation of the electoral programme of the party that supported him, or her? Is it the Commission that acts as the European Union’s agenda setter? The Commission plays a central role that goes beyond its formal powers. The power to take legislative initiatives, the power to regulate strategic sectors, the power to execute and administer shared policies and the community’s budget, place this institution at the centre of formal political relations and make it the centre of policy activities. Moreover, the history of the Union shows that the president of the Commission can assume the role of leader of the integration process. Executive power, however, understood as the power to govern, does not belong to the Commission. This power, however, appears instead to be divided between the European Council, which establishes the Union’s long term strategies and governing policies, and the Union’s Council which in some extremely important contexts still seems to be the main decision-making player, for example, as far as economic and monetary policies are concerned.

Conclusions

The existence of a party system in the Union does not seem to delineate a system of party government. The definition of the nature of a political system is firstly based on the relationship between executive and legislative power. This specific aspect identifies the governing procedures of a system and distinguishes between systems with fused powers (parliamentary systems) and those with separate powers (Kreppel, 2009).

If, on the one hand, the Lisbon Treaty seems to delineate a path for the development of a system moving towards parliamentary democracy by instituting mechanisms linking the choice of the Commission's president to a parliamentary majority, on the other hand the same Treaty outlines a framework for relations between executive and legislative power closer to a system of separate power. The European Council and the Council of the Union, which hold the power to set the agenda have no direct relations with the European party system. Neither parliament nor the Council, in its dual version, have the power to influence one another. The definition of a compounded democracy, which Fabbrini (2004) uses to describe the Union's political system, adheres to the Union's current institutional organisation. This status, however, is not yet configured as party government. Katz (1987) defines party government as a system in which political power is exercised by those elected, who in turn answer to their voters through mechanisms assuring their accountability through political parties. In this sense a system of party government must guarantee a link between political parties and the institutions and players acting as agenda setters.

In this sense the Union does not (yet) appear to have a party government system, although it does have a party system and a number of mechanisms that seem to incentivise its activities in mobilising the electorate. Is a party system without a party government sustainable over the medium term? The current system certainly seems inconsistent and involves a number of problems both in terms of the accountability of the executive branch, which does not appear to have any mechanisms rendering it accountable to voters (Mair and Thomassen, 2010), and of

functionality, since it presents European political parties with conflicting signals regarding their specific function.

So what might the future of the European party system and the future organisation of the Union's political system be? There are at least two possible scenarios. The first is one envisaging a full achievement of parliamentary democracy in which the Commission would only act as a bureaucracy, and therefore be accountable to the executive power, hence the European Council, which in turn would answer to the European Parliament through the mechanism of the election of the president of the European Council by the parliamentary majority. The second scenario envisages the congressional model suggested by Sergio Fabbrini (2013) in which the European Parliament would see its power of control over the European Council and the Council of the Union strengthened by an extension of its decision-making powers to policies currently still managed by inter-governmental decision-making processes, crucial for the governing of the Union, such as foreign policy, financial and monetary policies. In both cases, the Union would acquire the configuration of party government and the current ambiguities would diminish or vanish. It is a question involving political choices and this may be a paradox, since these political choices are up to national political parties, as all member countries of the European Union are party government systems, and all institutional reform of the Union still requires observance of the unanimity rule.

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