8 WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

Conclusion and discussion

8.1 EUROPE AND PARTIES

Parties and Europe cannot be understood in isolation from each other. On the one hand, theories about the way in which Europe develops and about the progress of EU integration, need to take into account the role that political parties and their representatives in government play. On the other hand, any analysis of parties within their national party system cannot do without the role of the EU, in a direct or indirect form. Thus, this dissertation tackles issues that are related to the study of both EU integration/Europeanisation and political parties. The findings of this study add to the theoretical and methodological debate on Europe and parties. The aim has been to shed light on a number of claims and assumptions that have not yet received sufficient empirical scrutiny.

The first of these claims relates to the ‘impact’ or ‘effect’ of Europe on domestic political systems. To begin with, this viewpoint is often too deterministic, assuming an inescapable pressure to which policies and politics have to be adapted, while change may actually be of a more voluntary nature. Moreover, partly as a result of this, effects of Europe are often overestimated, both in their scope and in their timing. Change is often more moderate and more incremental. Finally, despite the inspiration drawn from the theory of neo-institutionalism, commonalities and convergence are often stressed. In practice, differences between countries or party families or parties prove resilient and often it is rather divergence that occurs in response to EU pressures. For these reasons, it has been important to make a realistic assessment of the actual domestic changes that can be linked to Europe.

The second of these claims regards the crisis of parties. The end of party democracy, party families or individual parties has often been proclaimed, but has only materialised in a very limited number of cases. First, this has to do with the close link between parties and democracy, and the lack of a feasible and acceptable alternative. Second, it shows that the ability of parties to adapt to continually changing circumstances is often underestimated. Third, it reemphasises that the debate on crisis or decline is dominated by a particular viewpoint on what parties are, which focuses on aggregation and mobilisation. Therefore, the aim has been to carefully document the way in which parties have changed in the performance of all their functions.
Thus, we should not take the idea of a European impact or a crisis of parties for granted. These are to be considered hypotheses that need empirical verification. Even more caution seems to be in order when arguments on the effect of Europe and crisis of parties are combined. That is, when those who claim the crisis of parties find an additional argument in the assumed impact of Europe. Next to the doubts we may have about the actual scope of the changes that are due to European pressures, the mere fact that two developments seem to occur jointly does not mean that they are related.

Which is then the most fruitful perspective to analyse how European changes and party changes are related? One viewpoint holds that this relationship can be fitted within the ‘Europeanisation’ literature, which argues that national polities, policies and politics are increasingly influenced and moulded by EU integration. This literature starts from a development at the EU level which is then tracked down to the national level, in order to see what the ‘impact’ of this EU development is. Since most of the Europeanisation literature so far has focused on change of policies (which are the result of directives, regulations etc.), it could be interesting to see the extent to which such a logic can be applied to parties well.

Yet, for a number of reasons, this study follows a different approach. First, it has been argued that the applicability of insights from the Europeanisation literature is limited. Admittedly, there are some interesting innovations in this field, and there is some theoretical and/or methodological progress in this area. In particular, the work of Radaelli (2005) and Haverland (2006) which deals both with the theoretical weaknesses and the underspecified methodology deserve mention here. Yet, Europeanisation essentially remains unidirectional (top-down) and it entails a causal logic that is at odds with the perspective that has been chosen here. A one-way approach not only puts aside possibly relevant ideas of concurrence of co-evolution, it also does not allow for the creative (discursive) usage of Europe which is unrelated to the ‘objective’ importance of EU policies. That is, there may be a European ‘impact’ without specific European events preceding this.

The reasons for choosing a different perspective not only have to do with the inadequacy of Europeanisation. There are also positive considerations which have led to opting for the party perspective in this study. First of all, it allows us to borrow from the wealth of literature on parties, party systems and party change. There is no need for new concepts and new theories – rather, the main focus is on the empirical testing of what sometimes tends to be an overly normative literature, disentangling what parties are and what they ought to be.
Next, this literature shows that adaptation and transformation is an essential feature of parties, common to all periods and all countries. In that sense, this dissertation neatly fits in. Parties have faced many challenges, and they will continue to do so. Even if some may argue that EU integration is a particularly difficult challenge, there is no reason to give it any special status in this respect. EU integration is a particularly relevant and interesting illustration of this adaptation strategy. Finally, this study has aimed at the analysis of political parties and party functions, not on Europe per se. The purpose has been to understand how parties perform their balancing act between conflicting goals and strategies, in their performance of three central functions: aggregation, recruitment, and mobilisation. This balancing act has become more difficult over time, but at best partly due to the advance of EU integration.

Thus, we have not been looking for a European ‘effect’ or ‘impact’. Rather, an attempt has been made to understand party change with a potentially increasing role of Europe. The boundaries between the European level and the national level appear are in flux. As a result, national political parties operate within an increasingly European political system, with its own logic of input, throughput and output. Yet, in terms of electoral competition and governance, parties are still tied to a particular territory. Parties have to find their way in this new and complex situation of multilevel governance (Marks and Steenbergen 2002).

This is in line with Radaelli’s (2005) emphasis on how EU factors play a role in domestic interactions (‘bottom up’). The way in which parties interact with each other is continually being challenged as a result of internal factors (new parties, party splits, change of election systems) and external factors (individualisation, EU integration, communication technology). In order to map out and evaluate these changes in party interaction, party functions have been chosen as the yardstick. Although a large inventory of these functions can be made, the core of these consists of mobilisation, recruitment and aggregation. Again, it is noted that these functions are used as empirical indicators of how parties develop and adapt, without carrying the ideological or theoretical baggage of (structural) functionalism.

8.2 MOBILISATION, RECRUITMENT, AGGREGATION

The core question is how each of these functions have changed in themselves and in their relationship with each other. Second, at what point in time and in which way are these changes and the changing balance influenced by factors
related to Europe? Methodologically, this is comparable to Harmel et al. (2005) who consider meaningful variation in the dependent variable as an indication of a European effect. Thus, if Europe has ‘anything to do with it’, this variation should coincide with important instances in the history of EU integration and (length of) membership: earlier and stronger. Thus, three hypotheses could be formulated:

- We would expect the strongest effect in ‘old’ members of the EU – particularly the six founding countries, but also in the new members of 1973. Their longstanding and continuous involvement in EU policy making suggests these nine countries as the most likely cases to witness such effects.
- There would be a clear difference between countries inside and outside the EU throughout. If Europe indeed adds to existing trends, this should mean that these are the more visible or more pertinent inside the EU.
- We would expect a role for Europe in the years leading up to accession. The prospect of joining the Union stimulates debate among parties and forces them to take a position.

In addition, it was posited that either of these expectations should hold in order to speak of a role of Europe. Moreover, that even if they are not found simultaneously in each country and not with similar strength, the EU role would seem the stronger if all three appeared together or in sequence. Next, the indicators for each of these functions were specified as well as the role that Europe might play in these areas (table 8.1).

As compared to a Europeanisation approach, the role of Europe is less dominant and the nature of adaptation is more voluntary. In that sense, the role of actors (parties) is stressed vis-à-vis the institutional context in which they function. Europe is one of a number of factors that parties have to take into account in the performance of their functions. Throughout this study, it has been argued that a shift from representative functions (mobilisation and aggregation) towards governance functions (recruitment) is taking place. The waning of the traditional role of parties and the weakening of the link between parties and voters – once strongly tied by class and religion – is indeed confirmed.

Party membership and party attachment have declined, just as electoral turnout, while volatility has increased in many cases. Societal trends such as individualisation or modernisation and the rise of modern communication are the
main drivers of this dealignment. Although there are some indications that the decline of turnout and the increase of volatility have been somewhat stabilised, this does not affect the general conclusion that parties are increasingly unsuccessful in their mobilisation function. Partly as a response to this, parties have focused more and more on their governing functions.

Table 8.1 Party functions and the role of Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party function</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Role of Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobilisation</strong></td>
<td>- party membership</td>
<td>- irrelevance of national politics – adding to distrust and dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- party attachment</td>
<td>- politicisation of EU issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- voter turnout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- electoral volatility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- elections &amp; referenda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recruitment</strong></td>
<td>- composition of parliament</td>
<td>- direct elections to the European Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- composition of government</td>
<td>- involvement in EU decision making (ICG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- coalition formation/ party government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- career patterns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- parliamentary control of EU affairs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aggregation</strong></td>
<td>- party agenda</td>
<td>- transfer of policy making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- salience of EU</td>
<td>- politicisation of EU issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Euroscepticism</td>
<td>- inter-party exchange of ideas, mutual learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- patterns of party competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mobilisation**

The possible role of Europe regarding mobilisation consists of two parts. First, EU integration could aggravate the weakening of links between citizens and voters, thus speeding up a process already taking place. The essence of this argument is that the transfer of policy making to the European level results in the ‘irrelevance’ of national politics, which in turn makes mobilisation more and more difficult for parties operating at that national level. Second, politicisation of the EU issue in domestic party competition (elections or referenda) would offer
parties new chances for mobilisation. Thus, we have two trends that could counterbalance each other. As chapter 5 concludes, the findings are mixed, to say the least. While the role of the EU issue in national elections is marginal – for both the long-standing and the new members – there is also hardly any European dimension to elections which are close to European elections, Treaty ratifications or EU accession. Domestic issues continue to dominate and Europe has no priority either to voters or to parties, with only a few exceptions.

Another disconfirmation comes from the trends of membership decline, the increase of volatility, and turnout decline, which are all stronger in countries outside the EU. Moreover, similar trends occur in countries that have joined the EU at various points in time and countries that have joined in the same accession round display largely diverging trends. The main explanatory factor for decline in membership is whether a country has a tradition of mass parties. If this is the case, decline is steep, but this has more to do with the original situation than with the EU. Existing national trends continue and the main differences between developments inside and outside are caused by the composition of the EU at a particular point in time. Hence, there is no discernible effect of EU integration, apart from a potential reinforcement of existing trends.

**Recruitment and governance**

Concerning recruitment and governance, the second main function of parties, we find that parties are in a strong position. They dominate recruitment for parliament and government and become more closely linked to the state (Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 2004). Throughout Europe, party systems become more fragmented. This is partly the result of the weakening position of the traditional parties. Structures of party competition also become more open, which means that the range of parties able to join government increases, and innovative coalitions are formed. Yet, it has to be noted that this openness has not paved the way for independent, non-partisan candidates; on the contrary. Probably as a consequence of the growing importance of EU integration and the involvement of party leaders in EU decision-making, governments have come to rely on a broader base, with more instances of surplus coalitions. It is noteworthy that in the majority of countries, the parliamentary base has increased or at least remained similar.

The levels of interaction between the national party base and the European party groups have not kept pace with the emerging multi-level polity. Not only are political careers at the European and national level still very much two worlds apart, parliaments have also not developed proper mechanisms for
scrutinising their governments and they have not connected with the European Parliament. Then again, some parties may not consider this too much of a problem, as recruitment and governance are still firmly in their hands.

**Aggregation and integration**

The aggregation and integration function of parties may seem most likely to be influenced by EU integration. A correlation can be expected between the progress of the European project on the one hand and limitations set to domestic party competition on the other hand. Again we have to say that there only seems to be a limited role for the EU, both if we consider the politicisation of Europe and the reduction of policy alternatives available to parties. There is no clear difference between old and new members, or between countries inside and outside the EU. Moreover, the extent of EU involvement in particular policies does not relate to the salience – either increase or decrease – of these issues in domestic party competition.

This conclusion holds, irrespective of the indicator used – issue salience, Euroscepticism, hollowing out of competition, or convergence. Indeed, we find many common trends, consistent patterns, and consistent fluctuations. Yet, these are rarely related to the advance of EU integration. Rather, they are common to all countries in the analysis, irrespective of whether they part of the EU, long-standing members or newcomers: similar issues become salient in party competition, which hints at a broader process of diffusion of ideas. New issues emerge on the political agenda in approximately the same periods in a large variety of countries. Likewise, other issues become outdated to many parties, and disappear from the party agendas. The involvement of the EU in certain policy areas nowhere leads to a complete disappearance of these issues – sometimes even the reverse. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that there is no consistent and direct impact of EU integration. Rather, there are individual countries, party families or parties for which the EU is more salient and comes to play a role in party competition under specific circumstances.

**Overall**

First, there is no clear difference between the old and the new EU members, in the sense that changes are more pertinent in long-standing member countries. Neither do we see a trend in the opposite direction, in which countries that joined early have seen more incremental change than newcomers. Second, there are no consistent differences between countries inside and outside the EU, under the assumption that we were to find the strongest effect inside the EU.
Third, the prospect of joining the EU is also of little importance: it does not necessarily increase the politicisation of the EU issue or come with other changes that are similar to EU countries.

In sum, parties develop within the context of their country and party system, and find their own balance between mobilisation, recruitment and aggregation. There are some indications that EU integration plays a role in this, but its relevance is limited. Most trends reported in the previous chapters are either specific to a country, or to a party family. Other trends are more general and can be found across all European countries (and even outside Europe, which makes EU membership a negligible aspect). Factors such as history, tradition, and institutional context are far more important to understand how parties (and their functions) change.

Party change has a dynamic of its own, which is largely unrelated to EU integration. For this reason, our focus has been on the mapping and understanding of the trends of party development, under the assumption that we may witness similar trends across countries. If and when differences were observed, they were explained with reference to their particular national or institutional context. In so doing, we avoid the risk of overestimating the ‘impact’ of EU integration or unjustifiably attributing certain changes to Europeanisation. The role played by EU integration becomes embedded in the broader trend of party change and adaptation.

8.3 EPILOGUE

Both in public and in scientific debate, the ’democratic deficit’ has emerged as one of the major problems facing the European Union. Hix (2005: 178) makes five claims associated with this deficit: 1) increased executive power vis-à-vis decreased national parliamentary control, 2) the European Parliament is too weak, 3) there are no ‘European’ elections, 4) the EU is too distant, 5) policy drift. Thus, the EP and the national parliaments do not have enough power and/or information to control the executives. Moreover, European elections are fought on national issues (second-order elections). Finally, since EU policy making is incomprehensible and impenetrable for EU citizens, it entails the risk of adopting policies that do not reflect their preferences.

Following Majone (2000), arguments about this deficit can be grouped under three headings, reflecting the standards that are used for comparison: 1) analogy with national institutions, 2) democratic legitimacy of the member states, and 3) social justice. If we take national institutions as our point of
departure, the assumption is that European institutions will evolve to become like national ones, i.e. that the EU steadily moves toward full-fledged parliamentary democracy. The second group of arguments stresses the importance of veto power for each member state; since the legitimacy of the EU stems from the legitimacy of national authorities, moves toward majority voting would cause a democratic deficit. Thirdly, there are a number of arguments concerned with the inability of the EU to provide social justice. The main problems identified are the slow pace of political integration combined with worry about the national welfare states.

Accordingly, the solutions for solving this democratic deficit are widely varied. Several strategies have been proposed for increasing legitimacy in EU governance (e.g. Abromeit 1998). Solutions are to be found in a) altering the criteria for legitimacy, b) using new techniques and forms for interest representation or c) increasing elements of direct democracy. But what kind of legitimacy is required? How can the will of the European people be expressed more adequately and representatively in policy-making? Schmitter (2001) has formulated the challenge at hand: ‘what is there to legitimise and how might this be accomplished?’.

Interestingly, the number of sceptical authors claiming that there is no real democratic deficit - or at least not as impressive as often assumed - has increased. Recent contributions to this debate include Héritier (1999), Höreth (1999), Moravcsik (2002) and Zweifel (2002). Yet, there is a clear difference in the line of reasoning of these authors. Some authors point at the unique character ‘sui generis’ of the EU, which would require different standards for judging its democratic quality, while others explicitly use the comparison with existing national arrangements to show that the EU does not perform badly in that respect either.

The first type of argument has as a central tenet that it is unfair to judge democracy in the EU on criteria that have been developed in an entirely different context: the nation-state. In particular, the demand for more power to the European Parliament implies a too heavy reliance on input legitimacy, whereas it would be more appropriate to assess the EU on the basis of the quality of its output. As Höreth (1999) argues, next to the legitimacy of the EP there is the EU’s efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with political problems, or output legitimacy (cf. Scharpf 1999): it is the quality of governance for the people that counts. Another source of legitimacy stems from the legitimacy of the Member States and their respective parliaments. In line with this approach are recent pleas for increasing the role of national parliaments in EU decision
How parties change

Moravcsik (2002) points at the fact that most observers who lament about the democratic deficit tend to compare the EU to 'an ancient, Westminster-style, or frankly utopian form of deliberative democracy'. The thrust of Moravcsik’s argument is that there has been a general trend of governments delegating and insulating certain ‘functional’ tasks to independent bodies and agencies. In other words, these are functions that are outside the realm of redistributive politics that parties and their voters care about. It so happens that many of these functional tasks are nowadays carried out at the EU level – so why all of a sudden demand democratic control?

Héritier (1999) also distances herself from the 'very specific yardstick' derived from the national context with which some try to measure the democratic quality of European policy-making. Héritier describes a number of mechanisms that have been developed to ensure both input and output legitimacy, which lead to the conclusion that the EU polity disposes of many origins for democratic control and legitimation. Moreover, that there is more bargaining and compromising to the EU than input-legitimation through elections and representation combined with majority decision-making. In a similar vein, others have defended the legitimacy of EU decision making by pointing at the involvement of networks, the openness to various interests and the quality of deliberation (Kohler-Koch and Eising 1999; Schmalz-Bruns 2001).

There is one major problem with this reliance on alternative modes of decision making, such as deliberative democracy and network governance (Scharpf 2001: 14):

‘... their normative persuasiveness must rest on the proposition that the accommodation of special interests and the substantive quality of European standards could be a legitimating substitute (my italics) for democratic accountability based on general and equal elections and public debates.’

In addition, this form of legitimacy – based on arguments of efficiency or expertise – is extremely vulnerable at the national level and even more so at the EU level. It would break down once 'non-accountable actors should exceed the limits of the 'permissive consensus’ on which their governing powers depend’ (Scharpf 2001: 10).

There are two interesting parallels to be drawn with the debate on political parties. The first parallel is that like democracy in the EU, the functioning of actual parties is judged by standards of ideal-typical parties (that perhaps never existed in real political systems). Thus, the idea of what parties
ought to be becomes the (normative) yardstick which is used to evaluate current-day parties and the types of arguments used in the ‘democratic deficit’ debate increasingly resemble those in the ‘party decline’ debate. Just as Moravcsik argues that EU democracy is compared to an artificial Westminster type of democracy, parties are compared to an artificial model of the ‘mass party’ which most countries in the European Union have never seen. Similarly, those who complain about how few people have trust in political parties nowadays seem to overlook the fact that parties have always been among the most distrusted institutions in nearly any European nation.

The second parallel is that of the solution to the deficit or the crisis. It is argued that new standards are needed, that deliberation, efficiency and output are the new criteria on which to base our judgement. In such a constellation, parties are not really necessary, since input can be organised in a different way and it is after all output that counts. If this kind of democratic ideology enters national political systems, it means that arguments are turned upside down. Then the challenge is not to make the EU evolve into a parliamentary democracy. Instead, it is about learning at the national level how democracy can be organised in a different way (this is what Mair criticises in his concept of partyless democracy). Taking the argument one step further, it also means that next to Moravcsik’s functional tasks, it will be discussed why other issues should be subject to party ideological debate. From such a perspective, it is very well understandable (and strategically wise) that parties move away from representation and focus more and more on recruitment.

Yet, the story does not end here. First, Scharpf’s warning about the adequacy of deliberation and efficiency as our new benchmark of legitimacy is well addressed. It is not without reason that a democracy based on parties and elections has become the norm. Despite many highly interesting theoretical claims about deliberative democracy and governance, this is not the way most citizens or voters see democracy. The essence of representative democracy – including parties! – is hardly contested. Second, the ability of parties to adapt, i.e. the emergence of new parties, the redefinition of political ideologies, the changes between government and opposition, all show the necessary vitality of parties and party systems. Equally, the role of parties within the emerging polity and the extent to which EU democracy is becoming a party democracy has been underestimated. Finally, there is an inadequacy in both the democratic deficit and the party crisis literature: parties and democracy are extremely resilient, precisely because they are continuously reinvented together.
Just as parties have to find their equilibrium between the strategic goals of votes, office and policy, a democratic system seeks the balance between input and output legitimacy. The EU dimension which has been added over the last years makes this balancing act the more difficult. The challenge for future research is to stay away from gloomy predictions about the waning of parties or the end of democracy, but to understand these mechanisms of resilience and to understand how this intimate link between parties and democracy continuously evolves in a multilevel system.