
The aggregating function of political parties in EU decision-making

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Abstract

This *Living Review* uses concepts of aggregation to analyse what we do and do not know about the contribution of political parties to the politics and democratic performance of the European Union. It suggests that present representative structures are better at aggregating 'choices of policies' than 'choices of leaders'. Much more, however, needs to be done to analyse the causal contribution of party actors to those patterns of aggregation, and to understand why European Union parties do not develop further where aggregation seems to be deficient in the EU arena.

Keywords: democracy, European elections, participation, political parties, political representation, legislative procedure, MEPs, European Parliament

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14 September 2010: This Living Review has been extensively rewritten and restructured to take account of a number of significant developments in the literature and in how the party politics of the European Union work in practice. The reader will discover much new material on the extra-parliamentary European Union parties; on just how far European elections are second-order for political parties; and on the question of whether national parties really do dominate the party groups in the European Parliament without, in turn, being constrained in their relationship to the overall system of party groups. In all, about 50 new references to a fast-developing literature are included.

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1 Introduction, parties and aggregation

Democracy is by nature a form of aggregative choice. Means have to be found of combining the votes of the people or their representatives and those means must themselves conform to democratic standards.

There are at least four profound difficulties in meeting such a challenge. The first relates to the political equality conditions for democracy (Beetham 1994: 28; Weale 1999: 14). Whereas the simple rule ‘one person, one vote’ makes it easy to proceduralise political equality at the level of the individual citizen, matters become more difficult when it comes to combining votes. It is difficult to think of any method of aggregation that does not make the votes of a few pivotal to decisions binding on all. Maybe at best we can only design systems so that the pivotal few are likely to be representative of the rest. Thus, systems that encourage competition for the support of the median decider have the advantage (where preferences are one dimensional and normally distributed) of handing the pivotal role to the actor whose views are the least average distance from all the rest (Powell Jr 1989).

A second well-known difficulty in the study of aggregation is one of avoiding non-arbitrariness. Ever since Kenneth Arrow’s ‘impossibility theorem’ (Arrow 1951), social choice theory has been aware of the difficulty of designing any system for aggregating preferences – representative institutions included – that simultaneously satisfies what Armatya Sen describes as the following ‘mild-looking conditions’: a) pareto efficiency; b) avoidance of interpersonal comparisons in which some preferences are assumed to be better than others; c) independence of preferences and d) complete and consistent rankings of preferences (Sen 2002: 72).

Under further conditions – notably where preferences cannot be arranged along a single dimension of choice – matters become so indeterminate that an infinite number of outcomes are possible. Any ideal of procedural neutrality in which it is only the choices of citizens and their representatives that matter, and not the means of combining them, collapses all too easily into its opposite: the method of aggregation becomes the key determinant of what is decided (McKelvey 1976). Hopes that procedures can be neutral between alternative preferences and allocations of value have to contend with structural incentives to manipulate procedures to achieve specific outcomes (Riker 1982: 305).

A third challenge follows from John Dewey’s famous observation that voting can never be enough in a democracy (Dewey 1927: 207). Since voting is in many ways a remarkably coercive form of choice (see also Dunn 2005: 19 on how democratic governments ‘add insult to injury’ by closing ‘the circle of civic subjection’ in ‘their citizens’ own name’), it is unlikely to be acceptable without arrangements that demonstrate to the outvoted that their preferences have been set aside ‘for reasons’ and not through mere ‘acts of will’ (Mill 1861: 239-240). Any system of aggregation, in other words, needs to be accompanied by one of deliberation and justification (on this see also Habermas 1996 and Forst 2007).

A fourth challenge is motivational and cognitive. If my vote is most unlikely to be one that makes a difference after it has been aggregated with everyone else’s (Downs 1957) what can motivate me to take part? How, indeed, can I know how to combine my vote with those of millions of unknown others so that all of our behaviours have some chance of producing their intended effects?

How democracies respond to these problems of aggregation is partly a matter of institutional design, and partly a matter of how actors organise themselves in relation to the political system. Political parties are foremost amongst those actors who can help or hinder. They can help by:

1. Competing around broad approaches to government. Where parties do this well, they make it possible to consider issues in relation to one another and not just in isolation. This is likely to be especially useful where externalities and cumulative unintended consequences dictate that choices of value cannot optimally be made issue-by-issue.

2. Directly or indirectly offering the same menu of choice across the political system, so that any two voters can co-ordinate their actions by simply voting for the same party programmes on offer, even though, of course, most voters are unknown to one another (Cox 1997: 5).
3. Simplifying choices so that citizens can participate in complex democratic systems with only minimal information. Meaningful choice may require no more than an understanding of the ordinal (i.e. relative) position of parties along a key dimension of choice, such as left-right; or no more than an opportunity to renew or recall existing patterns of power-holding by voting for parties of government or opposition.
4. Solving some of the inter-temporal problems of democratic politics. Individual power holders may come and go, but in systems of 'party responsible government', parties can be held responsible for governing performance. They can also have a developmental role where use of a political system by voters and their representative to achieve output or input democracy is a capability that grows with use (March and Olsen 1995). Parties recruit and train elites in specific forms of expertise needed for representation. With time, voters may also have a clearer idea of what it is to choose between parties.

Yet, there is no guarantee that parties will perform these roles very well in practice. Rather than compete for the favours of the voters, they may limit the scope of political competition and choice, carve up the benefits of a political system between themselves (Katz and Mair 1995; Blyth and Katz 2005) and present barriers to the entry of new parties to the political market place.

So what of the European Union: do parties contribute to aggregation in ways that help or hinder its democratic performance? Do we even know enough to answer this question in full? After introducing the *dramatis personae* (Section 2) this *Living Review* appraises what we know about the contribution of the European Union parties (Section 3), the European party groups (Section 4), and national parties in their role in structuring voter choice in European elections (Section 5) to the aggregation of preferences. Section 6 then discusses how far these various components of the Union's party politics link aggregation across the electoral and parliamentary arenas. Section 7 discusses what more we need to find out and Section 8 concludes.

2 Analysing the EU ‘party system’

Since the Treaty on European Union (1992) ‘Political parties at European level’ have been recognised as an ‘important factor for integration within the Union’. In a step which led to a regulation on the ‘statute and financing of European political parties’ the Nice Treaty (2001) authorised the Council to lay ‘down regulations governing political parties and in particular rules governing their financing’ at European level (Article 191). The Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the Union shall be ‘founded on representative democracy’ before specifying in the same article that ‘political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union (Article 8a).

But are these Treaty provisions merely aspirational or do party politics really have a role in Union institutions? To all outward appearances, political parties contribute to the agency and structure of the European arena. Access to the European Parliament, the European Council, Councils of Ministers and even the College of European Commissioners is for the most part only *via* a career in party politics. Moreover, the Union has its own ‘party system’ (see Hix and Lord 1997: 56) to the extent that new constellations have developed for the specific purpose of allowing political parties to participate in EU institutions. National parties have formed themselves into European Union parties and, of course, the European Parliament has been organized into multi-national partisan groups since the Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1953 (Westlake 1994: 184). Table 1 shows how European Union parties registered under the EU regulation on the status and financing of parties relate at the time of writing to the group structure in the European Parliament.

Table 1: Political Parties at the European Level

	Ideology	EP Group	MEPs
European People’s Party (1976)	Christian Democrat: Conservative	Group of the European Peoples Party	265
Party of European Socialists (1992)	Socialist: Social Democrat	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats in the European Parliament	184
European Liberal and Democratic Reform Party (1976)	Liberal	Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe	59
European Democratic Party (2004)	Pro-Integration	ditto	25

Corresponding to these different actors we can distinguish three core literatures on the party politics of the Union. The first focuses on the European Union Parties. David Hanley (1994), Thomas Jansen (1998) and Karl Magnus Johansson (1997) have studied the EPP at various stages of its development; Stephen Day (forthcoming), Simon Lightfoot (2005) and Erol Külachi (2004) have covered the Party of European Socialists; Camilla Sandström (2002) & (2004) and Thomas Dietz (2000) & (2002) have respectively published on the Liberals the Greens.

A second literature seeks to understand the multi-national party groups in the European Parliament. A engaging account – based on participant observation – of what it is like for ‘deracinated’ MEPs to ‘cohabit’ in the surrogate ‘families’ provided by their multi-national party groups is included in Marc’s Abelès anthropological work, *La Vie Quotidienne au Parlement Européen* (1992:

See esp. Chapter 4). In successive editions of their *locus classicus*, Richard Corbett, Francis Jacobs and Michael Shackleton (2005) have provided invaluable practitioners' accounts of the internal workings of the party groups. Olivier Costa has used extensive interviews with MEPs to study the contribution of the groups to the deliberative functions of the Parliament (2001). However the most important contribution to the aggregative role of the party groups, is provided by the quantitative research into parliamentary votes conducted by Simon Hix and his collaborators, about which more in section Section 4.

A third literature has studied the Europeanisation of national parties. Paul Pennings (2006) uses data from the Comparative Electronic Manifestos Project to demonstrate that parties which are united on integration are more likely to mention European Union matters in their programmes, whilst divided parties prefer to 'hide' EU questions. Han Dorussen and Kyriaki Nanou (2006) claim that European integration has resulted in significant programmatic convergence amongst domestic parties. This change in the micro-foundations presumably has the double-edged effect of making parties more compatible at the Union level whilst reducing the overall significance of party politics as a means of registering difference and choice. Other authors have studied adaptations in the internal organization of national parties to Europe (Ladrech 2002; Hanley 2008). Through the *Europeanisation of National Political Parties project*, Robert Ladrech (2007) and Thomas Poguntke *et al.* (2007) found *inter alia* a) that European integration has had the effect of strengthening national party leaderships without making those leaderships more accountable for what they do in the Union arena (See also Raunio 2002a and Carter and Poguntke 2010 and b) national parties often compartmentalize the handling of Union issues in the hands of a few specialists, rather than mainstream them within their internal organizations.

In addition to these core contributions, the literature contains a number of more general reflections on possible interactions between the dynamics of European integration and those of party systems. The following are examples.

Claim 1. *Party politics at the European level reflect conscious choices of institutional design.* Indeed in Stefano Bartolini's view they have been largely 'engineered' as part of a façade politicisation designed to add legitimacy to otherwise technocratic and intergovernmental modes of decision-making (Bartolini 2005: 355–356);(Bartolini 2006: 37).

Claim 2. *Party politics at the European level are shaped by competitive pressures.* In contrast to the last, this claim need not imply any deliberate attempt to promote party politics in the European arena. To the contrary it would be consistent with 'invisible hand' explanations of the development of party formations in the European arena; or, in other words, with accounts which see party politics emerging at that level as the 'not entirely intended consequence' of competition between pre-existing national parties. As early as 1958, Ernst Haas famously remarked that political parties would eventually emerge as the carriers of European integration. Regardless of whether they were for or against integration, parties would have to engage with European institutions or risk losing votes to competitors better able to influence the development of European policies on behalf of their supporters. Studies of how the EPP was formed in the 1980s – as part of a merger between the two party families of the centre right (the Christian Democrats and Conservatives) – seem to provide some support to the thesis of competitive adaptation. After all, that merger would seem to have been largely motivated by a wish to prevent the PES from being the largest group in the EP and thus the senior partner in 'grand coalition' votes on individual pieces of legislation (Johansson 1997; Jansen 1998; Rinsche and Welle 1999). Note, though, two things. *Pace* Haas, parties may adapt to European integration without emerging as carriers of it. Second those adaptations may be driven by competition for office or legislative influence, rather than directly for citizens' votes.

Claim 3. *European integration is more ‘party destructive’ than ‘party creative’.* The suggestion here is that European integration is itself a part of contemporary forms of post-ideological – and post partisan – politics; and that, far from seeking to reproduce party politics at the European level, governing elites have used integration to anaesthetize them in the domestic arena (Mair 2005). On this account parties themselves are likely to be complicit in a Union without party politics: in a Union based on consensus, management and fragmentation of issues, rather than on competition between competing partisan ideologies.

Indeed it is possible that the Union is an arena of party actors without being one of party politics. Even if a career in political parties is the usual background for those who occupy leadership positions in Union institutions it does not follow that that political behaviours or policy outcomes resemble those found in a political system based on party politics. The view that party politics matter in the European arena encounters two forms of scepticism which might be summed up as follows: party games are dominated by other games in the European area and, in any case, what pass for European party formations are dominated by national parties.

The view that the Union simply is not a system a party politics can, in turn, be sub-divided into the claims that it is still largely organized for intergovernmental bargaining; that it practises an extreme form of consensus politics that leaves little room for ideological competition between political parties; and that it deals with its own complexity by segmenting issues and entrusting them to specialized policy communities. Influence in those policy communities is then proportional to forms of technical expertise which resist aggregation into the general and ideological approaches taken by political parties.

The view that European party formations are, in any case, dominated by national parties questions how far parties are themselves aggregated at the Union level. Thus Thomas Jansen cautions against mistaking ‘political parties at the European level’ for ‘European Union parties?’ (Jansen 2001: 7). How, then, can we be sure that transnational party formations are not just *epiphenomena*: social clubs, junkets, brands, and logos that may accelerate the co-ordination and aggregation and preferences here and there, but which otherwise remain ‘sub-system’ dominant, condemned to negotiate agreements as best they can on a case-by-case between national parties, which do not change their preferences or beliefs as a consequence of co-operation, and which might even be capable of securing similar outcomes without it?

Differences in the assessment of how important parties are to EU politics are hardly helped by uncertainty as to exactly what is at issue. Is the key issue 1) whether political parties are important actors in the Union arena? 2) Whether it has political parties of its own? 3) Whether it has a party system of its own?

Not only are these logically distinct questions, but they are also open to being tested in ways that are either so dismissive as to guarantee failure or so permissive as to guarantee success. A dismissive test – certainly of questions 2) and 3) – might amount to a simple syllogism: Parties need a mass membership and a record of competing directly for the people’s vote in deciding who should occupy the top offices in the political system. The EU parties have neither. Therefore, they are ‘pseudo-parties’. End of discussion. A permissive test – most suited to question 2) – might begin at the other end of the spectrum of party political development. Instead of asking what would be needed for full political parties at the EU level, it might ask what would be minimum deviations from pure co-ordination mechanisms between national parties. Thus it might look for evidence of national parties ‘limiting their autonomy’ in favour of the Euro-parties by accepting rules that allow for majority voting or even expulsion. It might also look for evidence that national parties learn from co-operating in transnational groupings: that they form and transform their preferences through the process of co-operating, rather than prior to it.

An intermediate test might attempt to probe forms of *interdependence* between pre-existing national parties and party formations at the European level. Intriguingly this test, arguably, allows

for the possibility that the answer to question 4) might be ‘yes’ even if the answer to question 3) is ‘no’. It anticipates that party formations at the national and European level may combine together to provide features of a party system even in the absence of fully developed parties specific to the EU arena. On the assumption that this last test is the most apt for a multi-level and non-state governance system, the next sections aim to establish how far existing research has identified a division of labour between any roles European Union parties, the EP party groups, and even national parties play in aggregating preferences on EU questions.

3 The European Union parties

The European Union Parties – and before them the Federations – were originally seen as fora for agreeing manifestos for European elections. The anticipated division of labour was one in which national parties – with all their familiarity and ‘brand recognition’ – would mobilize voters. Yet they would also aggregate votes at the European level in so far as they campaigned on manifestos agreed by their European Union parties. Studies have, however, noted that the manifestos are often little more than statements of attitude, and, even then, there is little evidence that they play a large part in the election campaigns of the national parties subscribing to them (Smith 1996: 279).

Whilst, however, the European Union parties have only developed a limited role in co-ordinating the structuring of electoral choice, they have been unexpectedly active in organizing summits of party leaders prior to European Councils. These summits get most attention during the allocation of the Union’s top political offices. Whilst it should not be underestimated how far the Members of the European Council strive for an intergovernmental consensus, provision for deciding top appointments by Qualified Majority Voting, and the informal practice of appointing several positions in a log-roll, both mean that alignments between governments from the same European Union parties can count in aggregating preferences which determine who is to occupy the Union’s top leadership positions. Thus, in 2009, the appointments of Herman Van Rompoy as first President of the European Council and Catherine Ashton as the High Representative, were in part negotiated within and between meetings of the party leaders of the EPP and PES, as, indeed, was the linked reappointment of José-Manuel Barroso to the Presidency of the European Commission.

Other studies, however, claim that the primary importance of the summits of the European Union parties lies at least as much in shaping policy outcomes as in allocating office. Thus a series of studies variously claim that the EPP ‘won’ in the case of the Single European Act and at Maastricht, whilst the PES ‘won’ at Amsterdam (Johansson 1999, 2002a & 2002b; Külahci 2004; Lightfoot 2005). If, however, these studies are to avoid the trivial conclusion that governments with similar party preferences are likely to align in making appointments or in setting the terms of Treaty change, they have to demonstrate that party leaders summits do something more than just mechanically aggregate pre-existing preferences. It remains debatable whether we know enough about the party leader meetings to assess how far and how often they shape what governments want in the first place or allow them to combine and trade their preferences in original ways.

Evidence that European Union parties have had a lesser role than expected in co-ordinating European election campaigns, and a greater role than anticipated in organizing summits prior to European Councils, might even be taken as a sign that parties too have had to adapt to the continued priority of intergovernmental bargaining in Union decision-making. Yet, even that might be to over-state the role of parties in so far as it is by no means clear how far party affiliation affects alignments between governments in the Council of Ministers or European Council. The relationship between the party preferences and intergovernmental bargaining would seem, as Mikko Mattila puts it, to be ‘rather complex’ (2009: 855). An analysis of voting in the Council suggests that left-right differences between governments are secondary to a geographical/territorial cleavage between Northern Member States and those from Southern and Eastern Europe on the other (See also Hagemann 2007; Hagemann and De Clerck-Sachsee 2007; Hagemann and Hoyland 2008; Naurin and Lindahl 2008). Indeed, at least one study, based on survey evidence rather than voting in the Council, suggests that governments mostly define their preferences on legislative proposals on a case-by-case basis, or, if there is an underlying dimension to their alignments, preferences for or against integration are more than the left-right positioning of governments (Zimmer, Schneider, and Dobbins 2005). In any case, voting in the Council remains just too much of a black box for us to say for certain whether the left-right affiliations of governments make any difference to individual behaviours and collective outcomes. Too many questions are decided in working groups

and by COREPER without ever being voted on in publicly recorded roll-calls. There is no data on how governments vote on final amendments rather than final texts, and even votes on the latter may not reveal real preferences, as opposed to a mixture of strategic voting and public positioning (Hix 2008: 1258).

The eruption of party politics into European Council bargaining may be no less constrained and conditional. Jonas Tallberg and Karl Magnus Johansson suggest three general reasons why this is so. First, only a few of the issues negotiated by the European Council are salient to party politics. Second, it is rare for all heads of Government to come mainly from the centre left or the centre right, with the result that the consensus rules of the European Council preclude partisan outcomes. Third, differences are, in any case, common between heads of Government from the same party family (2008).

The latter difficulty is well illustrated by the appointment of the European Commission President in 2009. For all the talk that the European Union parties would strengthen the link between European elections and the designation of the Union's top offices by indicating rival candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission, the Party of European Socialists failed to indicate a preference for a candidate prior to the 2009 European elections, following a split between the British, Portuguese and Polish and Spanish parties, who were all willing to renominate Barroso and others, led by the French *Parti Socialiste*, who would have preferred to support a challenger.

What, though, of the wider College of Commissioners? Several studies emphasise the importance of party politics in designating Commissioners and the different games within the governing parties of member states which influence appointments (Döring 2007; Wonka 2008). But, once again, it is by no means clear how far this influences the behaviour of Commissioners once appointed. Morten Egeberg argues that the organisation of administrative resources and expertise specific to each portfolio – rather than the party background of Commissioners – is the main determinant of outcomes (Egeberg 2006).

4 The EP party groups

Of the party families common to many EU Member States, Christian Democrats and Conservatives, Socialists and Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens, the Far Left and Eurosceptics have all managed to organise themselves into multi-national groups in successive European Parliaments. Only the Far Right has found it hard to form a group at all. Only the Eurosceptics have found it hard to cope with the left-right pattern of voting in the Parliament. Only the regionalists have had to distribute themselves across groups formed by other party families.

Some information about MEPs and their relationships to European parties and national parties is available from survey work. The MEP Survey conducted in 2000 and 2006 by the European Parliament Research Group (EPRG) is a rich source of information on MEP policy preferences, their role conceptions and beliefs about representation (Farrell, Hix, Johnson, and Scully 2006). Also helpful is a survey by Tapio Raunio (2002b) of the relationship between national party delegations in the EP and their parent parties in Member States.

Yet voting data is the main basis for academic analysis of the party politics of the EP. Since the pioneering work of Fulvio Attinà (1990) roll-call analysis has been hugely developed by Simon Hix (2001; 2002b) and his collaborators (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005), most recently in their book, *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (2007). Moreover, up-to-date analysis of the voting records of MEPs, their European party groups and their national party delegations is now publicly available via the web-site <http://www.votewatch.eu/>.

For all its sophistication, however, there is a suspicion that roll-call analysis rests on shaky foundations (Carrubba and Gabel 1999). Since roll-calls cover only a third of EP votes, and decisions to request them are themselves political acts, they are likely to be biased towards particular kinds of behaviour, including: a wish to demonstrate to the Commission and Council the cohesion of the Parliament as a whole, a wish to check that MEPs within a group are voting as promised, and a wish to embarrass other groups by revealing the extent of their internal divisions.

Assuming, though, that voting data is the best information available to us, what does it tell us? First and foremost that left-right preferences form the dominant dimension of preference aggregation in the European Parliament. Hix *et al.* observe that ‘a one per cent decrease in the ideological distance between two parties implies an increase of approximately six per cent in the probability that these parties will vote the same way. This result gives a strong indication of the importance of left-right politics in the European Parliament’ (Hix *et al.* 2005: 228).

But do other dimensions count in addition to left-right and, if so, how far and when? Preferences for and against integration form a weak second-dimension, seemingly accounting for little more than a tenth as many voting alignments as left-right. There would also seem to be some evidence that MEPs from national parties of Government and Opposition behave differently. Hix *et al.* (2007) find that MEPs from national parties of government are more likely to vote with their groups. They attribute this to ‘there being more at stake’ for these MEPs to the extent that their parties are also present in the Council. Björn Høyland reaches the intriguing conclusion that MEPs from parties of government in Member States are even more likely than those from parties of opposition to support amendments at second reading of Co-decision since ‘most of the governments that supported the common position want to change the policy even further away from the *status quo*. Hence they try to push the policy further towards their ideal policy through amendments in the Parliament’ (Høyland 2005).

The previous points imply that it may be easier for some representatives than others to aggregate their preferences through the EP party system. The dominance of left-right alignments may make it harder for those who are more interested in representing pro-anti integration views – and especially anti-integration views – to organise effectively in the Parliament. Thus the Eurosceptics have consistently been the most divided of the groups in the EP, reflecting their own internal division between left and right Eurosceptics. Then, of course, no sooner did the British

Conservatives join the group closest to their left-right preferences in 1992 than its relationship with the pro-integration EPP came to be contested domestically. Yet, it proved only slightly easier for the British Conservatives to leave the EPP than to remain within it. Only with difficulty did they persuade enough MEPs from sufficient other Member States to form a hybrid Conservative/Eurosceptic group in the 2009–2014 Parliament (Maurer, Parkes, and Wagner 2008; Maurer *et al.* 2008: 257–258).

However apart from the dimensionality of MEP preferences, and the ‘fit’ between the preferences of particular parties and their groups, it is important to distinguish the contributions that the groups make at different stages of preference aggregation.

Stage 1. Participation

Whilst in the 1980s, the two largest groups of the centre – the EPP and PES – were much more successful than the others in persuading their Members to participate in votes, that difference was much less obvious by the time of the 2004–2009 Parliament. Hix *et al.* (2007) argue that the convergence in participation rates is linked to greater competitiveness in the aggregation of preferences. Overall participation is higher when votes are closer. The participation of the Liberals increased as they became more pivotal to votes in the Parliament, and that of the smaller groups increased as the size of average winning majorities decreased during the 1999–2004 Parliament. As an aside, it is, however, worth noting that whilst the groups have succeeded in reducing the once wide differences in the frequency with which their MEPs participate in plenary votes, there are still variations in how often MEPs from different national party delegations participate in other activities central to the exercise of the powers of the Parliament (Votewatch.eu). Marked differences in how often they pick up *rapporteurships* are especially significant, given that the latter allow individual MEPs the opportunity to set the agenda on specific issues (Benedetto 2005).

Stage 2. Within-party aggregation

Patterns of aggregation map fairly well onto the divisions between the party groups. In other words, MEPs vote most of the time with their party groups. Hix *et al.* note that the average voting cohesion of what they call the three ‘genuine European Parties’ – the EPP, PES and ELDR – was 89.1 per cent in the 1999–2004 Parliament (Hix *et al.* 2005: 216). So what explains this? Some factors that might be expected to be negative influences on cohesion – the number of national parties whose views need to be accommodated and the related process of enlarging the Union itself – appear to have little effect. In contrast, the cohesion of the groups is strongly related to the powers of the Parliament. One of the most striking findings of Hix *et al.* is that, controlling for other factors, the cohesion of the main groups increased by 7.1 per cent after the Amsterdam Treaty (Hix 2002a: 226–228), which, of course, extended Co-decision and redesigned it into a more level playing field between Council and Parliament.

Stage 3. Cross party aggregation

Aggregation of preferences across groups follows two dominant inter-party alignments that can be contrasted as bipartisanship vs. bipolarity. The former consists of a Grand Coalition of the centre. Although mythically presented as a PES-EPP cartel, it may be more accurately be described as ‘bipartisanship plus’. A core EPP-PES coalition structurally underpinned by co-operation agreements between the two groups is often supplemented by the ELDR and even the Greens. Bipolarity, on the other hand, consists of the PES and EPP opposing one another, with the ELDR swinging either to the left or the right.

There are variations across issues in how far voting is bipolar or bipartisan (Hix, Kreppel, and Noury 2003: 326). It used to be believed that this is mainly because the decision-rules

of the Parliament also vary. Only a coalition including the main groups is likely to meet the ‘absolute majority rule’ that a majority of all MEPs, and not just of those voting, is needed to amend legislation. Thus, issues subject to Co-decision will produce more bipartisan voting. Since, however, bipartisanship occurs more frequently than can be explained by variation in the decision-rules of the Parliament itself, Amie Kreppel argues that it is also encouraged by the Parliament’s relationships with the other Union institutions: for ‘the EP to have any effect, it must create legislative proposals (Amendments) that are broadly acceptable’ to the Council and Commission’ which are themselves cross-party bodies (Kreppel 2000: 346, 358).

Hix *et al.* claim, however, that voting has become more competitive – as measured by a slight decline in the frequency with which the EPP and the PES vote together and by a decline in the average size of majorities in the EP – since the peak of bipartisanship in the 1989–1994 Parliament (Hix *et al.* 2005: 219). On the other hand, Giacomo Benedetto (2005) disputes this claim. In his view, high levels of EPP-PES co-operation continued to dominate voting, committee assignments, the parceling out of agenda-setting opportunities through rapporteurships, appointments to other EU offices (mainly the Commission), and the shaping of the EP’s input into the Union’s Constitutional politics. Also useful is Jeong-Hun Han’s observation that in the first half of the 1999–2004 Parliament – often considered a pivotal moment by those who claim that voting alignments have become more competitive – the Grand Coalition still prevailed in 395 out of 636 roll-call votes (2007: 484).

In any case, deeper empirical and conceptual questions may need to be asked about what counts as competition and collusion. Amie Kreppel’s observation that the ‘real battles’ are at the amendment stage, whilst the ‘grand coalition’ is much more frequent in votes on final texts (Kreppel 2000: 356), suggests that in the making of any one decision there will often be an interplay between the aggregation of preferences by competition and consensus. Giacomo Benedetto provides evidence of just such an effect. Whereas in the first half of the 1999–2004 Parliament the EPP and PES voted together on 60.9 per cent of Co-decision part texts, they did so on 90.7 per cent of whole texts (Benedetto 2005: 76, 79).

In sum, the research into the groups demonstrates the need to investigate two somewhat different matters if we are to understand in full their contribution to preference aggregation. On the one hand we need to investigate the dimensionality of preferences that underlie alignments within and between the groups. But this is not enough on its own unless it is also accompanied by study of actor configurations and processes which can combine the underlying dimensions in different ways. This last point, however, raises a problem of attributing causation similar to that encountered in the case of the European Union parties: namely, one of identifying how far outcomes can be attributed to the European party formations *per se* as opposed to bargaining between their component national parties. The most cohesive actors in European Parliament votes are not the multi-national party groups but their national party delegations. In the event of a conflict of loyalties MEPs are four times as likely to vote with their national party delegation and against their group than *vice versa* (Hix *et al.* 2007). Whilst country of origin is rarely the basis for alignments in the Parliament at a level of aggregation higher than single national party delegations, the latter none the less trump European party groups in their cohesion. Indeed, the groups may only be cohesive as a by-product of the cohesion of the national party delegations (Faas 2003). We will return to this in Section 7.

5 National parties and European elections

So far we have analysed the role of the party groups in the European Parliament in aggregating the preferences of MEPs. But do parties do anything to link the aggregation of votes in European elections to the choices MEPs make in exercising the powers of the European Parliament? At first sight this seems unlikely. Whilst national parties may engage in sophisticated forms of co-ordination in the European Parliament, they appear to segment the electoral arena to the point at which elections to the EP are classically understood as 27 ‘second-order’ national elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Without much in the way of an *ex ante* contest between the rival promises parties make for the next European Parliament, and without much in the way of an *ex post* contest between rival claims as to how well they represented voters in the outgoing Parliament, the party politics of the EU do not appear to provide much of a link between voting in European elections and the exercise of the powers of the EP. Instead, European Union elections appear to be contested on national issues and to be dominated by national electoral cycles.

Yet recent research has qualified the notion that European elections are ‘second-order’ in at least the following ways:

1. The notion of second-order elections itself covers a complex of different behaviours. Already by the end of the 1990s, Blondel, Sinnott and Sverson (1998) questioned whether the problem of low voter participation in the European elections ought to be lumped in with second-order theory. Given that survey evidence found those who participate and abstain from voting in European elections were equally likely to consider the European Parliament a powerful institution it seemed hard to attribute abstention to a perception that European elections do not matter. More recent research has concentrated on unpacking motives for using a European election to cast ‘domestic’ votes. A wish to punish national parties of governments or to switch to a small party just for the purposes of European elections have been identified as the two main motives, though Till Weber has also recently noted that the task of mobilizing votes in European elections is inherently different for national parties of government and of opposition. Not only can the latter concentrate on the elections but they can also attempt to develop an appeal that is less encumbered by responsibility for current policies (2007).

Using data from the Eurobarometer survey of the 1994 European elections, Thadeus Kousser calculates that 85.4 per cent of those who had voted for governing parties in the previous national election continued to support them in the European election. However, those who ‘defected’ ‘divided fairly evenly into those who switched to another major party (7.4 per cent) and those who switched to a minor one (7.2 per cent) (2004: 15). It is important to differentiate these effects, since they have different consequences when aggregated at the European level. By boosting the representation of national opposition parties, mid-term protest votes against national parties of government increase the probability that the European Parliament will check and balance the Council of Ministers. By increasing the number of national parties that are likely to be represented in the EP, switching to small parties somewhat fragments representation in the Parliament to the benefit of its peripheral groups (Bardi 1996).

2. ‘Second-order’ voting is a matter of degree. On the one hand it varies across national arenas. In some, voters are less prone to use European elections to punish Governments, since, in systems less prone to alternation between governing parties there is less incentive for voters to use European elections to signal how governments might secure their domestic survival by changing their policies (Marsh 1998: 597). In other Member States – notably the New Member States in Central and Eastern Europe – it may be difficult to disentangle ‘second-order’ effects from those of a still weakly consolidated party system. In still others some voting behaviour that can be classified as second-order’ in the sense that it is motivated by domestic considerations may, none the less, amount to more ‘sincere’ and less ‘strategic’ voting than

is the case in national elections. This, indeed, is one more reason for not classifying all votes lost by governing parties as protest votes. Some of it is better understood as voters returning to their first party of choice. In a contest which does not immediately affect who will form the national government there is no need to vote for a second-choice party if that is more likely to affect who will win power (Hix and Marsh 2007).

3. Some behaviour of voters and parties in European elections can hardly be classified as second-order at all. The following are examples:
 - a) New parties specifically formed for European elections – usually with the aim of opposing integration – have appeared in several Member States (Thorlakson 2005: 480). Even, then, if there is anything to the claim that incumbent parties have attempted to depoliticise European integration and maintain their own control of EU issues by keeping them out of European elections, such a strategy would not seem to have prevented the overall party system adapting in some Member States to the wish of some voters to use European elections to vote on a pro-anti integration dimension of choice.
 - b) Even some existing parties differentiate their appeals – and motivate different voters in different ways – when contesting European as opposed to national elections. By appealing to differences between the arenas, parties can persuade voters to switch for the purposes of European elections only. Thus Green parties have pitched to voters who are prepared to support environmental policies at the European level that they would oppose at the national level for fear that unilateral adoption of tough standards would lead to lost competitiveness (Carrubba and Timpone 2005).
 - c) Parties which do campaign on EU matters seem to be rewarded by voters. Parties that take a clear position – whether it is for or against integration – appear to benefit at the expense of those which are divided or reluctant to mention Union issues (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). The pay-off from clarity is, though, bigger for Eurosceptic parties. Thus, controlling for party size, Hix and Marsh show that ‘anti-EU parties gain almost four percentage points more than those which are neutral, while those who are extremely positive gain almost a point more than those who are neutral’ (2008: 503).

Overall there is a parallel between the theme of this section and that of the last: between the electoral and parliamentary dimensions of European Union party politics. In both cases a well-known pattern of behaviour – second-order elections and Grand coalition alignments between parliamentary parties – probably remains more common than not. Yet, the presence of counter-examples demonstrates that neither second order elections nor consensus in the Parliament is inevitable. To the extent, though, that both are behaviours of political parties, they may be sustained, or succumb to change, together. A pattern of party politics in which national parties structure voter choice in elections to the European Parliament, yet the party groups in the European Parliament operate by consensus, is probably the most likely to encourage second-order voting. Consider the consequences – both unintended and peculiar – of adding what is in effect a further general election to the domestic political cycle. Given that votes are aggregated at the level of each Member State in a contest between more or less the same parties as contest national parliamentary elections, opposition parties often have an incentive to turn European election into ‘no-confidence debates intended to demonstrate that national governments have lost support before the expiry of their term. On the other hand, the consensus politics of the EP itself limits the opportunity costs of fighting European elections on domestic issues. The decision by any one national party to fight European elections on domestic or European issues is unlikely to have more than a marginal impact on how close the legislative outcomes of the European Parliament are to its preferences. Still, it is possible that the combination of consensus between European parliamentary parties and second order voting in European elections between national parties, has survived because it is in some sense serviceable. The next Section 6 considers just such a possibility.

6 Aggregation across the parliamentary and electoral arenas combined

Section 4 summarised research on the work of the EP party groups in aggregating the preferences of representatives. Section 5 did the same for the role of national parties in aggregating the preferences of voters in European elections. But are we in any position to assess the overall capacity of the EU party system to aggregate across the electoral and parliamentary arenas combined? A good starting point is with the seminal work of Herman Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen (2000).

In both the 1979 and 1994 European elections, Schmitt and Thomassen found a close fit (with correlation coefficient of 0.88 (1979) and 0.82 (1994)) between the left-right orientations of candidates and those who voted for them (Schmitt and Thomassen 2000: 323). They also found that candidates and their voters in European elections were well matched in their general attitudes towards integration, and even where they diverged on its specifics, there was a tendency over time for parties to follow changes in their voters preferences towards integration, rather than *vice versa* (Schmitt and Thomassen 2000: 318).

All of this has an important implication: even though European elections are second-order contests between national parties, voters seem to end up with representatives whose preferences are fairly close to their own along dimensions of choice relevant to the EU. If we accept that for all the complex variety of national parties on offer, 'left-right' is a general choice of policy direction available to all voters – and pro-anti integration is a choice of direction that comes into play wherever there is voter demand for it – there surely is a sense in which any two voters from anywhere in the Union can aggregate and co-ordinate their preferences through a broadly compatible structure of 'offers'? Also, the two dimensions – themselves broad aggregates – surely imply that the party politics of the Union largely end up considering a wide-range of issues in relation to one another?

Yet present arrangements also preserve the familiar. To the extent that a large amount of voting remains habitual and even the de-aligned feel a need to choose between familiar 'brands', it is conceivable that turn-out to European elections would be even lower if national parties did not contest European elections. In sum, then, a benign view of the *status quo* is that voters it simplifies and economises on the information voters need if they are to make meaningful choices in European elections: a left-right structure of party politics at both the national and European levels allows voters to make choices about the policy direction of Union policy *via* choices between national parties.

However, I am less than convinced that choices between national parties will always be good proxies for choices on Union issues. Take the example of left-right values. Given differences in methods used to re-allocate values – and in who is likely to win or lose from any re-allocation – voters might have good reasons for being of the left in relation to one arena but of the right in relation to another. The Union is quite unlike its component states in mainly re-allocating values as a by-product of regulation (Majone 1996); and even where it does re-allocate through financial transfers, a member of a relatively disadvantaged sociological group in a Member State that is a net contributor to the EU's budget might self-interestedly support redistribution in the national arena but oppose it in the European.

Another reason why preferences acquired at one level of government may not always be an adequate basis for choice in relation to another has to do with the likelihood that parties may converge on similar positions under commonly found conditions of political competition. Where more than one party is equidistant from their preferences, voters may feel that a sensible basis for choosing would be to judge which is more likely to deliver, given past performance and estimates of how different parties are likely to be strategically positioned over the coming legislative term. But, in contrast to any hope that the structure of choice available in the domestic arena can be used as a proxy for making choices in the European arena, all this presupposes that voters are able

to make informed judgements about party politics at the Union level itself.

My final reservation goes deeper than the other two. Even in the absence of the foregoing quibbles, it is not entirely clear how much is proved by the finding that the preferences of candidates and voters in European elections correlate along key dimensions of choice. As successful candidates go on to exercise the powers of the Parliament, correlations between their preferences and those of their voters may increase the probability of the Union 'doing what the people want'. That may be desirable, but it is unclear that it corresponds to the core meaning of democracy. Given that we may, on the one hand, prefer representatives who use their own judgement and we may, on the other, find that benign technocracies satisfy our needs, it is unclear in what sense 'doing what the people want' is either a sufficient or necessary condition for democracy. Not only may democracy be more valued for the rights it confers than the policy outputs it produces (Plamenatz 1973), but also, the right it confers on all citizens to combine together as political equals to exercise public control by dismissing political leaders is, arguably, a more secure marker of its uniqueness as a system of rule than any claim that it gives the people what they want (Dunn 2005).

Even insofar as European elections produce some correlation between the policy preferences of voters and representatives, it would be hard to argue that they are structured for public control: that they aggregate votes around competing assessments of how well powers are being exercised in the Union arena. As a footnote it is also worth noting that other research suggests that parties do not 'follow' public opinion on questions of European integration. Rather, 'political parties are able to influence voter opinions' (Hellström 2008: 1136). Given their somewhat fuzzy preferences on Union questions, many voters would seem to take their 'cues' on European matters from the parties they happen to support for other reasons.

7 Known unknowns

So far, we have attempted to make some sense of where aggregation is present and where it is lacking in the EU arena. But this only raises two further questions. The first is one of causation, the second one of constraint. The question of causation is: where aggregation seems to work, well, how far can that be attributed to party politics at the Union level? The question of constraint is: where aggregation seems to be lacking, why do parties not develop further in the EU arena to fill the gap? Compared with matters considered so far, these two new questions take us on to more treacherous ground, where existing research allows us to form plausible hypotheses without always generating the evidence needed to adjudicate between them. As such, this section is more suggestive than previous ones of where further investigation is needed. For the sake of brevity, the question of causation is examined through the example of the groups in the EP, and that of constraint through an analysis of why European Union parties are absent from the electoral arena.

7.1 Causation

The causal question raises the cruel possibility that we have not progressed very far since Section 3 first asked whether the EU's party politics do anything more than co-ordinate the engagement of national parties with Union institutions? How, indeed, can we even be sure that there is a party system at the Union level worth studying, as opposed to a series of mechanisms that do little more than co-ordinate national party adaptations to Europe.

The limits on how far existing knowledge allows us to answer this question are well illustrated through the example of the EP groups. As seen at the end of Section 5 it is difficult to determine from the quantitative evidence alone how far the cohesion of the party groups can be attributed to the groups themselves. Is it the product of anything they themselves do to socialize preferences or constrain behaviours? Or is it just the by-product of decisions by their component national party delegations to apply their disciplines to the benefit of the group (Lindberg, Rasmussen, and Warntjen 2008: 1109)?

It might be thought that this question is largely answered by studies which show that national parties – rather than European party groups – are best placed to reward or sanction the behaviours of individual MEPs. Even those opportunities which are dispensed by the groups – committee memberships and chairs, and rapporteurships – are distributed to individual MEPs through the medium of national party delegations (Kreppel 2002: 202-209; also McElroy 2006: 12). Although, Gail McElroy finds that MEPs who are disloyal to their group are more likely to lose out when the committee memberships change halfway through each Parliament (2001), Nikoleta Yordanova finds that there is no relationship between the loyalty MEPs show to their groups in parliamentary votes and the likelihood they will receive the most powerful committee positions (2009: 274). As for rapporteurships, Björn Lindberg claims to detect some evidence that the EPP at least links the assignment of Co-decision reports to loyalty to the group (Lindberg 2008; Lindberg *et al.* 2008: 1121).

Beyond incentives internal to the Parliament itself, it is, however, national parties that have the power to play snakes and ladders with the careers of MEPs by issuing passports back to domestic politics (Andolfato 1994), or by deciding on their re-adoption as candidates in subsequent European elections. The use in most Member States of closed lists – in which chances of political survival are not just dependent on being re-adopted, but on the order in which parties present their candidates – creates intense competition amongst MEPs to please national parties.

At a more sociological level, MEPs identify somewhat more with their national parties than with their EP party groups. In an analysis of MEP role conceptions, Roger Scully and David Farrell found that the mean importance attached to representing national parties and EP group was 3.64 and 3.42 respectively. Whereas 25.9 per cent gave the maximum score of '5' to representing their

national party, only 14.6 per cent did the same for their party group (Scully and Farrell 2003: 272).

Anne Rasmussen offers an intriguing suggestion as to how these different claims on the loyalty of MEPs might relate to one another. Maybe, she suggests, MEPs have stronger ‘attitudinal links’ to their national parties, yet stronger ‘regulatory’ links to their European Party groups in the Parliament. Whilst national parties use their powers of candidate selection to screen the attitudes of would-be MEPs *ex ante* to check if they really are ‘one of us, the European Party groups are, arguably, in a better position than national parties back home to regulate and monitor MEPs behaviour on a continuous basis (Rasmussen 2008: 1165). Indeed, she demonstrates from the MEPs’ survey that they are more than twice as likely to describe themselves as receiving their voting instructions from their party groups than their national parties (Rasmussen 2008: 1172).

I would suggest two further reasons to be cautious of any suggestion that it is national party delegations, rather than the groups themselves, which principally explain voting behaviours. Even if they have a stronger hold over identities and incentives, national parties may themselves depend on their participation within the groups, in order to decide what it is they want in the first place from their share in the exercise of the powers of the European Parliament. Insofar as their preferences are less than fully formed on some Union questions – and their knowledge of the cause-effect relationships that are likely to follow from each alternative choice available in the Union arena is less than perfect – national parties may participate in European party groups, no less than in the committees of the Parliament, in order to accumulate expertise within a division of labour that is only likely to acquire critical mass where ideologically like-minded parties from several Member States are prepared to co-operate.

Second, on the analogy of the theory of perfect competition in microeconomics, the ‘systemness of the system’ may depend not on organized hierarchies – not on the presence of principals or superiors with a power to discipline and instruct others – but on the smallness of many of the actors (in this case national parliamentary delegations) in relation to the overall field in which they operate. Although, of course, there are some large national party delegations in the EP, their average size is only 4–5 MEPs. Moreover less than one in twenty national party delegations have enough MEPs to cover all the committees in what is essentially a committee-based Parliament. (See Krehbiel 1991 for a general discussion of the vital importance of committees to the acquisition of expertise legislators need to achieve policy outcomes). On top of all that, most national parties have limited exit options, given that they often have little chance of changing the group structure without persuading several other national parliamentary delegations to abandon their existing affiliations (Maurer *et al.* 2008: 247).

Recent empirical research provides two tentative indications that the party system in the Parliament may, indeed, have some autonomy of its parts. First, Gail McElroy and Kenneth Benoit provide evidence based on expert opinions of party positions that the largest of the groups – the EPP – has ‘adopted a more centrist position than the median position of its constituent parties’ (2007: 20). Second, eastern enlargement has occurred without disturbance to either of the two defining characteristics of the group structure: the cohesion of single groups or the alignments that are common between groups. Whilst, however, both these are highly suggestive, neither is decisive in demonstrating that national parties need to adapt to the group structure more than *vice versa*. The deviation of the EPP from the average position of its national parties needs to be tested in the absence of the distorting influence of the British Conservatives (several of whose MEPs themselves deviated from the median position of their own national party). On the other hand, post-communist parties from East and Central Europe may be less consolidated than their western counterparts. They may also be somewhat to the right of the latter. But, as Schmitt and Thomassen have shown using Eurobarometer data, manifesto data and expert surveys, their voters would seem to be much the same as those in the rest of the Union in fitting the basic ‘horseshoe structure’ of party politics on European Union questions, with pro-integration opinion clustered towards the centre and more anti-integration opinion located on the far right and to a lesser extent on the far left (2009a; 2009b).

7.2 Constraint

The question of what, if anything, constrains parties from developing further in the European arena would also benefit from further research. As it stands, the literature suggests three contrasting answers.

1. One possibility is that further development is blocked by incumbents. Incumbent national parties have been accused of operating mutually reinforcing restraints on competition in European elections and the EP itself. In Pascal Delwit's assessment, national party campaigns in European elections are so low-key that it is 'possible to question whether there has been an election at all' (Delwit 2000: 310). Stefano Bartolini argues that it is only on account of this depoliticisation of the process by which the Parliament is elected that its groups can operate as efficiently as they do to form legislative coalitions (Bartolini 2006: 45). Still others argue that collusive voting amongst MEPs then feeds back into muted competition in European elections. As one of its recent Presidents puts it, the Parliament has yet to 'demonstrate to voters that preferring one set of candidates to another will change policy outcomes at the European level' (ELDR press release 15 July 1999, cited in Lord 2004: 120).

So what alternatives might encourage parties to compete more clearly around EU issues? Suggestions include the following: a) allocation of some EP seats at the European Union level; b) strengthened linkage between European elections and the appointment of the Commission; c) open lists for European elections; d) encouragement of national parties to clarify their relationship with the EU party system (for example, by indicating their EU party affiliations, and not just their national party names, on ballot sheets). Note, that insofar as these changes would either require Treaty change or changes to domestic electoral procedures incumbent national parties, arguably, have scope to block them. Moreover, they, arguably, have a motive to block change. As long as European elections are second order, MEPs may have more incentive to follow the preferences of the national parties which operate as their *selectorate* than to anticipate the views of an *electorate* which seemingly does not vote on the basis of anything that happens in the Parliament.

If this interpretation is correct, national parties will be able to extract rents from the operation of the EU's political system to the extent that they can substitute a predictable carve-up of the offices and policy outputs of the European Parliament for the full adjustment of either to voter choice (Katz and Mair 1995). To continue with the analogy of imperfect markets, national parties may be able to use low politicisation and muted competition to divert some of the pays offs from collective action through the EU political system from satisfying voter wants to pursuing their own goals.

Yet there are difficulties with the claim that national parties constrain the competitive emergence of improved means of linking voters to the EU arena. First, Raunio's survey shows that only 8.5 per cent of national parties regularly instruct their MEPs; a further 32.2 per cent only instruct on matters of 'fundamental importance'; and 47.7 per cent never instruct (Raunio 2002b); and, as seen, Rasmussen likewise finds that MEPs are much more more likely to rely on the groups than national parties for voting recommendations.

Second, it is unclear that the *status quo* really is a source of unalloyed benefit to national parties. Precisely because European elections are to some degree 'second-order' they can produce destabilizing shocks to domestic parties and party systems – in the form of unusually large variations in vote shares. In the past, the effects of such shocks have included party leadership changes, strains in multiparty coalitions, splits within parties and surges of support for anti-system parties. Rudy Andeweg (1995) has thus questioned whether national parties might not, in fact, benefit from new ways of structuring voter choice in European elections, which would reduce spill-backs to domestic political competition.

2. A second possibility is that there is simply little need for party politics at the European level. Far, then, from incumbent parties blocking the *supply* of new forms of party politics suited to the European arena, there is, on this interpretation, no *demand* for more than limited forms of party politics at the Union level.

As Peter Mair argues (2005) parties are most useful in linking publics to political systems where choices are ‘framed primarily in normative or ideological terms, or where there are equally valid competing and potentially irreconcilable demands’. In contrast, the Union’s dependence on the active co-operation of its Member States and of its sectoral stakeholders, both for legitimacy and implementation, requires it to operate with a high level of consensus that would be hard to reconcile with partisan ideological competition. The Union, on this interpretation, unites all mainstream actors in a search for pareto-improvement. It does not encourage them to sub-divide themselves into parties which compete for value allocation.

Also important here is Mancur Olson’s (1965) observation that new modes of political organisation will not develop unless the marginal returns from innovation exceed the marginal costs. In a political system where power is dispersed, and the main site for party politics – the European Parliament – consequently needs to limit itself to proposing only incremental changes that are negotiable with the Commission and Council (Kreppel 2000), it may just be there is little likelihood of the marginal return of inventing different parties to fight European Parliament elections exceeding the marginal risk and cost of fielding pan-European parties with little voter recognition. It may also be unlikely that the marginal return from change will exceed the marginal cost if Schmitt and Thomassen are correct that, for all their shortcomings, present arrangements already provide a rough-and-ready form of policy aggregation along key dimensions of choice. As for those who are closely affected by reallocations of value through Union institutions, they may find that calculations of marginal cost and benefit point to participation through policy-specific networks, rather than to supporting the emergence of ‘general-interest’ organisations such as electoral parties structured around Union issues (Magnetite 2004).

3. A final possibility is that there is a need for the new forms of party politics in the European arena but parties find it profoundly difficult to respond to that need. This takes us back to the debate on the underlying dimensionality of European Union politics (Hix 1999; Marks and Steenbergen 2002, 2004; Selck 2004). Put simply, political parties work best in aggregating the preferences of voters and representatives where competition and co-operation in the political system can be organized along one dominant dimension of choice. The account which is probably the most hospitable to prospects for party politics in the Union arena is that which presents conflict on EU questions as two-dimensional, with one dimension (left-right), none the less, dominating over the other (pro-anti integration) in a relationship that allows the two dimensions to be managed in different institutional settings: with left-right issues being handled within the Union’s ordinary procedures and pro-anti integration for the most part being left to Treaty change (Hix and Lord 1997; though also see Hix 2002a for an analysis of how the EP can affect institutional questions by changing its own internal rules of procedure).

Alternative claims about the dimensionality of Union politics include, first, the possibility that the two dimensions are independent of one another. One possibility here is that pro-integration views are strongest towards the centre of the left-right dimension, whilst anti-integration are strongest on the far left and far right. It is also possible that the nature of the left-right dimension may itself change as a result of integration itself. Thus, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2008) have argued for a post-functionalist understanding in which integration interacts with a new left-right cleavage between Green Alternative and Left

values (GAL) on the one hand and Traditional, Authoritarian and National values on the other.

A final possibility is that, in spite of its robustness over 30 years experience with a directly elected Parliament, the left-right dimension is an artificial construct at the Union level. Those inclined to defend this view might argue that it was only because pre-existing national parties were left-right that they have thus far responded to European integration by forming left-right parties inside and outside the European Parliament. Yet, the argument might go on, there is little real basis for 'left-right' politics in a multi-national arena that tightly constrains how far policies can ever redistribute resources or reallocate values. In contrast, there may be a great deal of scope for conflict over questions of centralization and decentralization, intergovernmentalism and supranationalism (Marquand 1979), which has only been held back thus far by incumbent parties eager to avoid the divisiveness of those issues and any re-organisation of party politics that might be required to give them greater salience. Indeed, defenders of this point of view might see the formation of a Eurosceptic group in every Parliament since 1994, the formation in 2004 of an explicitly pro-integration European Union Party (the European Democratic Party) whose MEPs sit in the ALDE, and the attempt in the 2009 Parliament to form a hybrid Conservative-Eurosceptic group, as signs that a party politics more suited to the Union is at last beginning to break out from underneath a misguided attempt to reproduce left-right forms of competition and co-operation at the Union level.

8 Conclusion

So to return to the opening question, how far does existing research shed light on the possibility that important aggregative functions of political parties are distributed between the European Union Parties, the party groups in the European Parliament and the contributions national parties make to structuring voter choice in European elections? This review has assessed claims that a) the European Union Parties play a role in aggregating preferences in appointments to key EU offices and in Treaty formation; b) the EP party groups are cohesive – and, on occasions, increasingly competitive – aggregators of the preferences in the parliamentary arena; and c) national parties show some signs of being able to contribute to aggregation by differentiating their appeals between European and national elections, even if second-order voting remains the norm. There are, however, at least three difficulties. First, it is not always clear from existing research how far aggregation can be causally attributed to European party formations themselves. Second, it is unclear whether – and, if so, in what sense – parties are under-developed in the Union arena. Third, and closely related to the last, the notion that the disparate contributions of different party formations at different levels may have adjusted one to another to provide the Union with a form of aggregation that somehow works across both the electoral and parliamentary arenas to link voters to the polity is at best convincing in relation to the aggregation of substantive policy preferences. Since it implies a form of aggregation geared, at most, to choices of policies, rather than choices of leaders, it is less than clear that it can amount to a satisfactory means of public control.

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