



# Towards a European Transnational Party System

edited by  
Marco Mascia

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# **TOWARDS A EUROPEAN TRANSNATIONAL PARTY SYSTEM**

*Edited by*  
Marco Mascia

August 2014

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## Foreword

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This book presents a selection of the contributions discussed during the International Conference “Representative Democracy and Political Participation”, organised by Associazione Universitaria di Studi Europei (AUSE) with the support of the European Commission – EACEA. The Conference took place at the University of Padua on 5 and 6 May 2014.

The Conference was also the occasion for celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of AUSE and of the Jean Monnet Programme.

The formal act establishing it was signed in Milan on September 27 1989 at the Office of the European Commission in Italy, which was to become the legal venue of the Association.

AUSE was created with two main aims: to promote university-level research and teaching on the legal, political, social, economic and historical aspects of the European integration process, institutions and policies; and to cooperate with similar university associations and public and private institutions operating in Italy, in Europe and in other continents. AUSE is founding member of the “European Community Studies Association”, ECSA-World, that represents today 60 national European Studies Associations.

In 1989, thanks to the strong support of Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission, and of Emile Noel, former European Commission Secretary-General, the European Commission launched the Community Project denominated “Jean Monnet Action”, later “Jean Monnet Programme”, to introduce the teaching of European studies in universities. At the same time, on the initiative of the European Commission, in agreement with the European Conference of Rectors

and ECSA-Europe, the European University Council for Jean Monnet Action was established in Brussels, comprising a Chairperson, four Rectors designated by their Conference and four Professors nominated by ECSA-Europe. Some of them are present in this hall today.

The Jean Monnet Programme has achieved outstanding results: 900 Chairs, 2.150 Modules, 180 Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence.

The celebration of the two anniversaries cannot but follow the approach of further developing research and teaching on European integration and dialogues with civil society, as a continuation of progress to date, with the inspiration and operative directions that Italian universities in particular received from Altiero Spinelli, one of the founding fathers of the European unification system and process and one of the most influential for his thoughts, projects and actions.

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# **Towards a European Transnational Party System. An introduction**

Marco Mascia\*

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**Abstract.** *The author deals with the issue, still unresolved, of a better defined and more substantial institutional and functional position for political parties in the European Union system. This subject is part of the broader, endemic problem of the democratic deficit and the political development of the Union. The need for a genuinely “systemic European” - hence transnational - dimension of political parties is addressed by the author in terms of “European party-building”, within the ongoing broader process of ‘democratic institution-building’ of the EU. The future of a genuine European party would be assured by its role of relevant actor of the transnational extension of democracy, that is as a vehicle of democracy in the glocal political space.*

**Keywords:** *European Political Parties; European Party System; International Democracy*

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1. The issue of a better defined and more substantial institutional and functional position for political parties in the European Union system is still unresolved. This question is part of the broader, endemic problem of the Union’s democratic deficit and political development. The more the Union makes decisions and rulings affecting sectors of vital interest to everyday life, such as, for example, food security and telecommunication networks, the more keenly the need is felt for structures that are simultaneously able to represent general interests and to rein in, if not condition, pre-existent centres of corporate power, in particular economic interest groups.

The current scenario is extremely complex. At the European system level, the area of representation has, from the outset, been occupied by the tentacle-like role of the European Commission and multiple networks of interest groups. At a sub-system level instead, national politi-

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cal parties suffer not from a-priori exclusion, but rather from the opposite phenomenon of excessive occupation of governmental power, which mires them inextricably at the level of national and sub-national interests.

The question of the role of political parties in the EU cannot be side-stepped, both for the system's functioning and, above all, to enhance its democratic credentials.

Once it has been assumed, as the most recent theories on European integration do, that in the era of globalisation it is in states' interest to coordinate with one another and surrender part of their sovereignty within structures of multi-level governance, there is a growing need to have guarantees of democracy, the governance of which is correctly proportional to the size of the institutions making the decisions. It is always legitimate to question whether the macro-dimension required by governability consists of eliminating all possibilities of mediation between decision-makers and those who are at the receiving end of such decisions. This question would be resolved at the outset if one were to admit that at present there is space for mediation only for the macro trans-national structures of vertical and corporate aggregation of interests, or, at the end of the day, only for large economic and financial corporations. The approach we take, however, diverges from acknowledging the determinisms of the world market. We assume that the new frontiers of politics and governability are those of international democracy, hence the extension of democratic practices beyond the borders of the nation state (Papisca 1995).

In the case of the EU system, the prospect of the development of democracy *also* through political parties is complicated by the originality, or rather the atypical characteristics, of a system in which the Commission, a genuinely supranational government institution, is the principal, if not the sole (at least in actual practice), "transparent" aggregator of political demand.

We must, however, also take another aspect into account, one that would appear to contradict the position of those who decry the continuing absence of an appropriate role for political parties. If one looks carefully, there is a "party influence" in the EU which is pervasive and transversal to the various steps of the decision-making process up to the

highest institutional levels. One must also consider that the destiny of the Union is in the hands of party leaders who, by virtue of their position, have become heads of government or of state and therefore, automatically, members of the Council of Europe and of the European Council. "Party influence" is present in the European Commission itself, since its president and its members are formally nominated by governments, but in substance designated by parties. Of course this influence is present, and even more visible, within the political groups of the European Parliament (Hix and Lord 1997).

It is hardly necessary to mention that national political parties played a fundamental role in the crucial start-up stages of the integration process in the six founding member countries of the ECSC (1951), of the EEC and of EURATOM (1957). European unification was the focus of major political debates and commitment and, in some cases, especially in Italy, the cause of ideological clashes (Walker 1976; Papisca 1979; 1979a; 1978). The launch of the Europe-building process was not an operation undertaken by leading cabinets, nor was it standard parliamentary practice for the ratification of legally binding international agreements. It instead shook the political-dramatic arena of parties and electorates. The role of parties was therefore fundamental to establishing the community system, and yet this was not transfused proportionately so as to give rise to suitably equivalent European party organisations.

This pervasive party influence at the European level is, instead, simply the transposition - often crudely mechanistic - of the national sub-system dimension of political parties, whose major preoccupation is, *naturaliter*, to defend national interests.

Consequently, the need for a genuinely "systemic European" and hence transnational dimension of political parties is as important as ever. The prospect can be seen in terms that we could call "*European party-building*", within a broader process of '*democratic institution-building*', a process that, in this case, would not take place in uncharted waters. It must take into account, on the one hand, the aforementioned atypical representation of interests broadly practised at the European level by lobbyists, and on the other, the entrenched positions and resistance coming from the even more consolidated national party systems.

2. The questions that come up again and again are many. First of all, that of whether a more visible, independent European party system could be the result of integration between pre-existing national political parties, or whether it should come from the creation *ex novo* of transnational party organisations. One thing is certain, national parties cannot be ignored. This explains why, as was natural, it was precisely the national parties who took the initiative, in the early 1970s, of establishing forms of coordination between parties belonging to the same ‘families’, managed by European party (con)federations, the current so-called European parties (Gagatex 2008). Official names aside, the results produced to date, both in terms of organisation and in terms of substance of their functions, do not go beyond what can be expected of a loose federal structure.

At the same time, a relationship has developed between the political groups in the European Parliament and the corresponding European party structures (Hix, Kreppel, Noury 2003), where the former are decidedly dominant over the latter, contrary to national systems, where parliamentary groups are conditioned by their members’ respective political parties.

This state of affairs would induce one to surmise that truly European political parties could, over time, be produced by the European Parliament’s political groups rather than as the result of a horizontal process of integration from below, a sort of parliamentary birth, the outcome of which is more *top down* rather than vice versa (Bardi 1995, 2002).

Other authors have wondered whether the direct election of the EP has had a positive impact as a sort of “institutional catalyser” for the development of a party system at the EU level (Pridham and Pridham 1981; Hix and Lord 1997). Their position is that direct elections, rather than fostering the formation of “mass Euro-parties” have produced “elite-level parliamentary parties”. In other words, the formation of political groups in the EP as the (natural) consequence not so much of direct elections, but of the EP’s progressively increased power.

The future of European parties will inevitably be influenced by the fact that, since the Treaty of Maastricht, they have become formally recognised organisations and, by virtue of the Treaty of Nice, also the recipients of public funding from the EU budget. This circumstance could,

already in the short term, encourage greater visibility and autonomy of the role played by current European parties, albeit still in a (con)federal format, and contribute to redressing the balance of their relationship with political groups. In recognising that political parties at a European level “contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union” (art. 10.4), the Lisbon Treaty implicitly attributes to them a direct role in the exercise of political power in the European Union system. That same article, in paragraphs 1 and 2, establishes that “the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy” and that “citizens are directly represented, at Union level, in the European Parliament”. These acknowledgements of the current European party system could encourage greater visibility and a more autonomous role, although still within a confederate dimension and contribute to balancing their relationship with political groups (Bardi et al. 2010, 2014; McElroy and Benoit 2010).

If one grants that, thanks in part to these incentives, the political system of the Union will manage to equip itself with its own party sub-system, one still wonders how much weight it will have in decision-making processes.

In the past, a role as “real federators” was envisaged for European parties (Papisca 1978a). Considering that, as previously mentioned, this role is currently filled by the leaders of national parties who have become heads of government or of state, and consequently members of the European Council, one wonders whether this very role, if not wholly subsumed, will not at least be shared with a more independent and transparent European party sub-system.

Another question concerns the future organisation of the division of political labour, particularly as far as the representation of interests is concerned, with the pre-existing, multiple and distinct networks of aggregating structures, specifically with the Commission, special interest groups, local powers and organised entities of civil society.

A further question mark concerns the manner of exercising and impact of other typical functions of political parties, such as political socialization, recruitment to political roles as well as the technical and economic management of election processes.

In such a crowded, diverse and complex arena as that of the EU sys-

tem, what identity will European political parties have? Will they be multifunctional players or simply an election machines?

Thanks to the important contributions of illustrious academics, this book will try to find answers to these questions.

3. It should not be too difficult to answer the question as to whether the so-called European parties are, as things currently stand, genuine parties. If we start from the definition of what a political party is, “the political agency which competes in elections to express popular demands and in order to win *direct exercise* of political power” (Fisichella 1972: 24, my Italics), or from the analogous definition which distinguishes parties from other social groups on the basis of the power they have to influence policy-making, especially through the exercise of functions of government, the answer can only be negative. European parties do not recruit candidates directly and independently – this would require the exercise of a power supra-ordinate to single national parties – and within the European system they have no “prospects of governing” in the true meaning of the term.

The *ratio* of current European parties is that of communications agencies or, if one wishes, of transnational networking, since their duties are predetermined by the national political parties, which remain their main backers. In other words, European party (con)federations are bodies with limited sovereignty. Their limits derive from a dominant position tightly held within them by their national parties, which in turn are obstinately clinging to what is left of the sovereignty of the states to which they belong. Using conceptual categories outlined in the classical M.A. Kaplan’s modelling (1967), European party structures are systems “with dominant subsystem”. One can also observe structural similarities between the way states interact with European institutions and the way in which national parties interact with European parties. The continuing blandly federal structure of the latter, in line with the strictly ancillary role of their functions, is the result of national parties’ concern that they might have to renounce their status as the first-born of a sovereign nation state (Papisca 1979c). For their part, national governments react to the same conservative concern by strengthening and safeguarding (though it seems more like forcing through), the intergovernmental di-

mension of the EU's institutional organisation (Coreper, EU Council, European Council).

We have seen that the main, if not the sole important function of European parties is that of drafting the text of electoral platforms before European parliamentary elections, but that this is not accompanied by the power to autonomously draw up lists of candidates. This situation is even more penalising if one considers that the selection of representatives destined to be appointed to other institutions and organs of the Union, starting with the Commission, is precluded *a priori* by the role played by national parties and governments. In short, in choosing both parliamentary and administrative staff, national parties are firmly holding onto the reins of their monopoly. At best, the European parties' role as drafters of election manifestos could even be significant, if the same were widely disseminated and used in European election campaigns. In this case one could also consider the productivity of a European party in terms of political socialisation and a capacity to induce political identification with European community symbols. This, however, is only the case to a very limited extent and only implemented as of current European elections. The content of the platforms, could be a causal factor of this shortcoming, as in many ways there is not much difference between them. This "Europe effect", which one could also call a convergence of paradigms, has been further accentuated by a series of events such as the "fall of walls", globalisation in its various and contradictory effects and migratory flows. These external environmental stimuli, as well as discouraging any attempts to distinguish themselves in old ideological guises, force the larger party families to pursue a common strategic objective, hence to manage the governability crisis without lowering European citizens' living standards, and thus consensus.

The current status of political parties is, if this is possible, even more heavily obstructed by the same governance crisis afflicting states. However, while states, with more or less conviction, are moving towards the downward redistribution of responsibilities and power at a domestic level, and their upward redistribution at an international level, in line with the principle of subsidiarity, political parties remain entities that, in addition to their national focus, are also obstinately centralised.

4. The future of European parties is also threatened by difficulties and conditioning stemming from elements such as the chronic state-centric syndrome of national political parties, the inescapable minimal differentiation in cultural content between European parties, the lack of a uniform electoral law for European voting, the absence of full legislative powers for the European Parliament, the previously highlighted absence of prospects of actually ‘governing’ the EU as the physiological outcome of European elections.

To the above points one must add the “lesson” coming from the constant decline in turnout at European elections: from 63% in 1979 to 43% in 2009 (Lodge 1990; Pinder 1994; Attinà 1995; Papisca 2009; Bressanelli 2013). Turnout for the 2014 elections was only 43%, as in 2009.

Data concerning voter participation in European elections provides a picture of the overall “electoral crisis” the EU system is experiencing, mirroring the situation in some of its Member States.

Taking for granted, as we have just done, that widespread abstention is part of the broader phenomenon affecting domestic elections within Member States, there is certainly a widespread sense of disappointment towards European institutions, partly explained by the high expectations European citizens had of the European integration process and, more specifically, of an EP elected by direct and universal suffrage.

The principles of European citizenship and subsidiarity, of which so much has been said in recent years, have not yet produced the results many had hoped for, bringing Europe closer to its citizens and to local institutions.

It is also possible that the crisis experienced by democratic representation at a national level is having a negative impact at a European level.

And the electoral malaise of the EU is not completely unaffected by the fact that, thirty-five years since the first direct elections, there is still no uniform election law.

What can one envisage for the future of European parties? As already mentioned, there could be the prospect of increased institutional visibility thanks to their full formal legitimation within the EU system, generated first of all by the Maastricht and Nice Treaties, and subsequently by the Lisbon Treaty.

Article 17 of the latter establishes that the choice of candidate President of the European Commission by the European Council, shall be

made taking into account the outcome of the European elections and that this candidate is *elected* by the European Parliament by a majority of its members. This indicates the explicit political will to enhance both the influence of the European Parliament and the political weight of the European elections. Junker's recent election - as the EPP's candidate - to the European Commission's presidency, is the real expression of this political will.

The possibility of forming a majority government and an opposition within the EP, as happens in all democratic political systems, is, however, still a long way off.

Faced with the pressing challenges of economic, social and environmental globalisation, the urgency for a concrete response to the need for governability could induce people to make more clearly-defined choices and, therefore, lead to a greater differentiation in identity between the current European parties, with a trend towards a more marked polarisation between moderates and progressives. This trend could be strongly influenced in terms of greater solidarity by pressure from the vast network of civil society's organisations (Mascia 2012).

Upward globalisation of the economy, biotechnologies, environmental causes and the respect of human rights are some of the problem areas in which political debate is most heated and in which civil society's organisations are most heavily engaged.

The future of European parties is, above all, dependent on a breakthrough by democracy's traditional mainstays, in other words, going beyond the borders of the nation state. The "practice" of democracy – not, of course, the "value" of democracy – is undergoing a crisis due to a lack of space, which means potentially working in a vacuum. The democratic method becomes only procedural if deprived of its primary objective; the legitimation and auditing of those who make decisions. The crisis originates from the fact that the real decision-makers are no longer found within the traditional space into which democratic practice is still confined, and risks suffocation. The future of European parties, at least from a rational standpoint, to be managed hand-in-hand with civil society organisations, would be assured by the role of creators of a transnational extension of democracy, and as a vehicle of "glocal" democracy.

5. The approach characterising the present book is a multidisciplinary mix of political analysis, historical and juridical contributions. In her essay on the European Party system, Francesca Longo emphasises how the EU developed a relatively stable party system based on political groups in the European Parliament, without, however, having institutionalised a real party government. The author analyses from two different perspectives the contradictions that exist in the EU deriving from the existence of a party system and the absence of a party government. The first, definable as the “party system”, is established as a player, the European political party, and is aimed at verifying whether such a party is functionally autonomous within the specific framework of the Union. Hence whether it is able to develop a European dimension linked to the EU system’s political and institutional sphere. The second perspective, definable as “party government”, is set at a systemic level and concerns the analysis of the current institutional configuration of the EU’s political system, paying particular attention to relations between the Union’s supranational institutions in order to identify incentives that the EU’s systemic organisation provides to the development of a “party government.”

Massimo Piermattei’s paper, on the other hand, is a historical analysis, setting European political parties within the framework of the broader European integration process, with the dual objective of revisiting the main issues, phases and political cultures that characterised the development of European parties within the EEC/EU, and emphasising which disciplines have most contributed to the integration process.

Daniele Pasquinucci retraces the attempts made by the European Parliament to develop a uniform procedure for its direct election, between that of 1952-1953 within the context of an ad hoc assembly charged with drafting the charter of a European political community, to the one approved by the European parliamentary assembly in 1960, but vetoed by the French government which was opposed to European elections. The author emphasises that since then a number of attempts have been made (the most recent by the British MEP Andrew Duff), which only partly aligned the rules for European elections, without, however, managing to fully achieve the objective of having a real “European electoral system.”

The subject of funding for European political parties is addressed in an essay by Maria Romana Allegri, who analyses new EU regulations

on this subject, applicable only as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. The author underlines how these rules appear to be decidedly weaker compared to the Commission's original proposal presented in 2012, and amendments approved by the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee in April 2013. The main shortcomings discussed include the disappearance of all obligation to ensure democracy within political parties, obliged only to respect the European Union's founding values in programmes and policies, the excessive influence exercised by Member States on the registration, de-registration and sanctioning of European political parties, and the possible overlapping of roles by the various bodies responsible for control procedures, among them the new Authority specifically created for this purpose.

Salvatore Aloisio comments on Italy's Central Directorate for Electoral Services' decision to allow participation in European elections when a party is affiliated to a European political party represented in parliament, without collecting signatures for a list minus any European Members of Parliament elected in Italy. The Central Directorate for Electoral Services justified its decision on the basis of Italian constitutional law and European law, in particular concluding that every citizen "is therefore part of one single European electoral body." The author comments on this decision with reference to the well-known German Federal Constitutional Court ruling dated June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 on the Lisbon Treaty and the recent decisions challenging the legitimacy of the minimum threshold for participation in the allocation of seats.

Giuliana Laschi analyses the connection between information, citizenship and European elections from a historical perspective, attempting to understand if and to what extent there is a connection between, on the one hand, citizens' interest in direct elections to the European Parliament, and, on the other, their attitude to the European integration process.

Through a diachronic review based on an analysis of Eurobarometer surveys carried out between 1979 and 2009, this essay emphasises how the little attention paid by citizens to the European elections is not only linked to Eurosceptic tendencies, but rather to a more widespread indifference to, and disaffection with, political systems.

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

Francesca Longo\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *The "party system" perspective*

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

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

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

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

While the number of political groups present in parliament has changed between 1979 and the current legislature, it is possible, however, to identify a "historical core" that has basically remained stable. This core consists of the three political groups that, in the current legislature which began in 2014, represent about 64% of votes and together hold 479 seats out of a total of 751<sup>1</sup>. These groups are the European Peoples Party (EPP), the European Socialist Party

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

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

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

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

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

Data processed by the author; source [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu)

The table indicates that, compared to the complete transnationalism of the EPP and PES, among the other groups only the newly-created Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group<sup>2</sup> has members from less than half of the Member States. Furthermore, all groups, excluding the one most recently formed, present constant growth as far as levels of inclusiveness are concerned. The GUE-European United Left, founded in 1989 by four national political parties, has progressively increased its number of national delegations, especially in the 2004 elections, in which the group presented an association of fourteen delegations. The Greens-European Free Alliance political group also presents a tendency towards increased inclusiveness, rising from six national delegations in the 1989-1994 legislature, to nine in the 1994-1999 legislature, fifteen in the 1999-2004 and 2004-2009 legislatures, to the current seventeen. In

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

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

The second indicator of the institutionalisation of the “European party” system, the stability of groups measured in terms of MEP’s roll call voting, has been measured by many researchers using the “Cohesion Index” which, originally created by Attinà (1990), was then used and adapted by many analysts (Raunio, 1996; Noury, 2002)<sup>3</sup>. All empiric research carried out on MEPs’ voting behaviour has confirmed data indicating a constant increase in political groups’ voting cohesion between 1979 and 1999<sup>4</sup>.

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> Post 1999 data on voting patterns is still not available.

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

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

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

The second study method assesses the level of competition between European political parties, analysing the political manifestos of the various federations. Numerous studies have emphasised that the four main European federations<sup>5</sup> have developed political manifestos, which, on subjects concerning social-economic rifts, reflect the classic Right/Left positions that member parties have at a national level. The manifestos are thus clearly distinguishable, different and stable over

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

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

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

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

*The “party government” perspective*

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

In this context, it is therefore important to understand whether the European party system plays an important role in forming the Union's executive. The Lisbon Treaty does not provide a clear systemic configuration of this aspect. In fact, according to Article 17<sup>6</sup> the European parliament has the power to *elect* the president of the Commission and approve the college of commissioners. This expectation is strengthened within the same article, stating that in choosing the candidate for the Commission's presidency, the European Council must take into account the results of European elections.

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

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

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

## *Conclusions*

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

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

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

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

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

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## The Union's political parties: historical evolution and research

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**Abstract.** *Transnational federations of European political parties are one of the “weak points” in European studies. In this paper they are set within the broader context of the European integration process, with the dual objective of: 1) revisiting the main issues of phases that have characterised the development of European parties within the EEC/EU, which political cultures (how, when and why) created and developed the federations; 2) emphasising which disciplines have been interested in European political parties (in this case too, how, when and why) and their contribution to the integration process.*

*By combining an interdisciplinary approach and a long-term overview, it becomes possible to present an overall picture of European parties that moves beyond each individual federation and provides a contribution able to strengthen research in the study field.*

**Keywords:** *European parties; European studies; European Parliament*

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### *A periodization*

In the history of European integration, the relationship between transnational forms of political cooperation and the European integration process can be divided into four stages. 1) The “waiting period” from the beginning of unification at the end of the sixties; 2) The re-launching, from the summit in The Hague to the end of the eighties; 3) The turning point, from the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Maastrich agreements at the end of the nineties, and 4) Complexities, from 1999 to today.

Altiero Spinelli clearly outlined the role political forces would have to play in creating a Federal Europe, to the extent that he believed that

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European unification would create a new and modern cleavage between progressive and conservative parties, the latter more attached to preserving national power and sovereignty, regardless of their position on the Right-Left axis. However, by assigning prominence to governments and relegating political forces to playing a secondary role, the European integration process was born and developed along different lines compared to those wished for by the Italian federalist. For national political parties this marked the beginning of a long waiting period that started with the May 9<sup>th</sup> 1950 declaration and only ended with the 1969 summit in The Hague. During this period, the level of political battles in Europe was very weak, although on some issues such as defence, parties belonging to the same political sphere often assumed shared positions<sup>1</sup>. The Cold War often influenced the position of individual national parties in a decisive manner. Left-wing parties, for example, albeit with some exceptions, agreed with the Soviet interpretation of the beginning of the integration process, while the main Christian Democrat parties and the liberals were strongly in favour of integration. That waiting period was, however, crucial in allowing political parties “to get to know one another” and create a network of relationships that would turn out to be useful in later stages<sup>2</sup>.

With the summit held in The Hague and decision later taken to elect the European Parliament (EP) directly, the context changed radically. The introduction of a first element of direct democracy encouraged political parties to debate the European project, “obliging” them to outline their vision for Europe. European elections required progress in transnational relations, and the first “European political parties” appeared, while national elites started to become aware that belonging to a federation was an added value for electoral campaigns, also so as to differentiate

<sup>1</sup> Landuyt, Ariane, “I socialisti, i comunisti e i problemi della difesa nell’Europa occidentale”, in Pier Luigi Ballini, (edited by), *La Comunità Europea di Difesa (CED)*, Soveria-Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2009, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Guerrieri, Sandro, “La formation des groupes politiques à l’Assemblée commune de la Ceca (1952-1958)”, paper presented at the conference entitled *European political cultures and parties and the European integration process 1945-1992*, Lucca 2011 and Grazi, Laura, “Verso una “communauté d’action supranationale”. Il gruppo socialista all’Assemblea comune della Ceca (1953-1957)”, in Federica Di Sarcina, Laura Grazi, Laura Schichilone, (a cura di), *Europa in progress*, Milan, Angeli, 2006.

themselves from “internal rivals.” It was not just a “marketing” problem. The re-launching of the integration process started by the EP and resumed by Delors during the eighties, was a step in the direction of also strengthening European political parties. Belonging to one such party became an essential element in terms of trying to influence the integration process<sup>3</sup>, especially if in opposition at a national level, as in the case of the Italian Communist Party. Finally, the eighties marked the arrival on the scene of new a political culture, the Greens, clearly of European and supranational origin. This party was removed from the logic of a nation-state and has a political and identity agenda more open to the future than founded on the past.

Between 1989 and 1991 conditions changed starting a new phase, and with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Maastricht agreements the European framework was abruptly overturned. This marked the beginning of a period of change for party federations. The end of the Eastern Block put back into circulation a mass of political forces trapped for a long time by the Cold War and even the ideas of Left and Right were starting to be questioned<sup>4</sup>. In the EEC, these events marked the beginning of a more “conflictual” competition between socialist parties and the EPP which, having become a “*force d’attraction*”<sup>5</sup> for conservative parties, soon abandoned its Cristian Democrat and federalist historical origins to assume an attitude more “*marquée au centre-droite du spectre politique*”<sup>6</sup>.

However, the event destined to most influence the evolution of European political parties was the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, in which their role was acknowledged for the first time with the words, “Political parties at the European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens

<sup>3</sup> Grazi, Laura, “Un «progetto socialista per l’Europa?» Il PSI e l’elezione a suffragio universale diretto del European Parliament (1979)”, in Federica Di Sarcina, Laura Grazi, Laura Scichilone, (edited by), *Res Europae*, Florence, CET, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> “Destre e sinistre”, by Maurizio Ridolfi, *Memoria e Ricerca*, no. 41, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Chenaux, Philippe, “Les démocrates-chrétiens au niveau de l’Union européenne”, in Emiel Lamberts, (ed.), *Christian Democracy in the European Union. 1945-1995*, Leuven, KADOC, 1997, p. 454.

of the Union” (Art. 138 a). Added to powers assigned to the EP by co-decision making procedures, this acknowledgement gave European political parties a new lifeline, starting an inter-party debate (albeit a slow and at times conflicting one) on the EU’s future and that of the integration process.

The end of the nineties marked the beginning of a lengthy phase characterised by the complexity that enveloped Europe and the integration process. Problems in the march towards a single currency and enlargement to the East, Kosovo, the Bush administration’s international policy, the trauma cause by referenda on the so-called constitutional treaty, caused the European project to experience a crisis. This, added to more "seductive” proposals to fall back within national borders, slowed down the strengthening of political battles at a European level (the failure of Europe led by “pink” governments between 1997 and 2000 was resounding, with 13 out of 15 governments led by parties belonging to the ESP and the presence in the European Council of a president and two vice-presidents who belonged to the Socialist International).

European political parties seem therefore to have started to assume a more incisive role in the life of the EEC/EU only in the second half of the eighties and above all after Maastricht. One should therefore not be surprised that research was started only at that point. Furthermore, it seems evident how transnational federations tended to “suffer” the dynamics of the integration process rather than influence them. This too explains the “delay” in research.

*Studies on transnational federations: methodological approaches and problems*

Research on European political parties was progressively added to more consolidated research on political groups in the European Parliament and the European elections. As far as the European elections are concerned, there had for some time been a lively *querelle* between

those describing them as “*second order national elections*”<sup>7</sup> and those who, albeit acknowledging obvious “national exploitations”, also emphasised the gradual “Europeanization” of the public debate and the greater importance of transnational federations, thereby identifying the foundations of a real European party system<sup>8</sup>. These different approaches were probably the result of an even greater diversity, perhaps a more important one, concerning the perspective from which one observes European political parties. The EU’s atypicality could not but be transferred to the party dimension, and hence transnational federations were an element of rift and something new that was neither a traditional political party nor a simple International. There have essentially been two main approaches; the first could be described as minimalist, considering federations “as no more than transnational interest groups”, while the second maximalist approach “regards them as European-level political parties”<sup>9</sup>.

Both approaches are based on an almost ideological “defect”. Supporters of the minimalist vision seem especially devoted to the traditional concept of a political party, finding it hard to see federations as parties, and tend more easily to perceive them as an updated and exclusively European version of the old Internationals. Maximalists instead aim above all at endowing federations of European political parties with the same role as the one played by national political parties within each nation. The most authentic portrayal, perhaps, would be to take stock of the federations’ evident “supranational” element without, however, underestimating their limitations.

As far as political groups in the European Parliament are concerned, research has been, above all, addressed at studying their internal relations and development in Strasbourg<sup>10</sup>. The picture that emerges

<sup>7</sup> Reif, Karlheinz, Schmitt, Hermann, “Nine second order national elections? A conceptual framework for the analysis of European Election Results”, in *European Journal of Political Research*, no. 1, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Pasquinucci, Daniele, Verzichelli, Luca, *Elezioni europee e classe politica sovranazionale 1979-2004*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004, pp. 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Hix, Simon, “The transnational party federations”, in John Gaffney, (ed.), *Political parties and the European Union*, Londra-New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 321.

<sup>10</sup> Grazi, Laura, “In search of a supranational cooperation. The socialist group in the European Parliament and the difficult path towards a strong and open Europe” in the

confirms the role played by the Maastricht Treaty and that of a “magnet” played by the main groups as far as both individual MEPs and non-affiliated national parties are concerned. The gap between parliamentary groups and the federations has widened, and in the case of Europe, however, relationships are overturned compared to what often happens at a national level, where the party’s predominance over the parliamentary group is more than significant, albeit not absolute. In other words, the creation of a European party system is developing not so much thanks to a strengthening of parties, but of groups in the European Parliament.

From what has been written so far one can sense to what extent relations between an affiliated party, the group in the EP and the federation are important and influenced by: 1) European election results; results achieved by a national party can significantly change a group’s balance and that of the entire European Parliament – as happened in 1999 in Great Britain with the introduction of proportional representation. 2) National political events, such as the Italian 1992-1993 crisis. 3) An affiliated party’s new position; a party’s redefinition at a national level can change the composition of the corresponding group in the EP as well as the federation’s, as in the case of the Tories in the EPP and the PDS in the PES. The European aspect of political battles appears therefore to take place within a triangle, the vertices of which are national political parties, parliamentary groups in Strasbourg and transnational federations. Contacts between the three vertices are maintained by specialised political elite, more often than not consisting of a party’s most important leaders and national and European parliamentarians. The emphasised “specialisation” of this elite, added to a lack of direct contact with militants and supporters, has resulted in the development of a certain “*internationalisme des fonctionnaires*”<sup>11</sup>.

80s, paper presented at the conference on *European political cultures and parties and the European integration process 1945-1992*, Lucca 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Obiols, Raimon, “La nécessaire dimension transnationale du socialisme européen”, in *Nouvelle revue socialiste*, no. 11, 1990, p. 140.

Furthermore, European political parties have replicated the atypicality of the EU, in the sense that they privilege dynamics inspired by an intergovernmental modal rather than democratic forms of more direct and supranational participation. This means that the most awaited events are not party conferences, which at national level establish a party's strategy, but summits organised to establish a shared position expressed by affiliated political parties and the secretaries of member parties just before European heads of state and government summits. In this context, just as nation states were the main impediment to addressing the integration process in greater depth, national political parties had the same effect, as far as the creation of a more effective and organised level of European political struggles were concerned.

The lesser importance of traditional dynamics in the political process has made it particularly difficult to find a common position shared by a large number of parties, in spite of them being inspired by the same political culture. If one then adds to the usual Right-Left dimension of politics, another aspect concerning the national sovereignty-European integration rift, the situation becomes even more complicated. Simon Hix and Christopher Lord have created a well-known model in which the aforementioned difficulties are instantly detectable<sup>12</sup>. The development of a European political debate has been impeded by national political parties and the differences between those affiliated to one same federation. The more difficult the search and pursuit of a common strategy, the more the incisiveness of a federation is compromised. As to a certain extent happened to the EPP, the risk is that a federation may give up its attempts to have greater internal cohesion – in terms of policies and identity – to exclusively privilege increasing its numbers in the European Parliament.

Another effective image appears when observing “where” European political parties have been founded, hence which political cultures started them on the path to becoming federations. Transnational federations were founded, 1) by the main traditional political cultures, the Christian Democrats, Liberals and Socialists, and 2) by cultures that,

<sup>12</sup> Hix, Simon, Lord, Christopher, *Political Parties in the European Union*, London, MacMillan, 1997.

due to their political heritage, have supranational characteristics, such as the Greens and the Radicals. Nationalism, also infra-national and ethno-regionalist, acts instead as a natural brake on the development of unitary processes in the area of right-wing European parties, which have in fact never gone beyond the creation of common groups within the EP.

The popular, socialist, liberal and green federations have been those most studied. Researches undertaken are rather similar and have been mainly addressed at studying, 1) historical stages, 2) the evolution of membership, 3) manifestos for European elections, 4) links with parliamentary groups in the EP, and 5) attempts to influence the integration process. However, a number of traditional aspects in the study of political parties have been partially neglected, such as policy development and party management, all the more interesting in the case of transnational federations due to the plurality of political subjects composing them. There are still not any real monographs on the individual federations and something like a “History of the EPP” is still lacking. Comparative research too, which could provide a significant contribution, still remains at a superficial level with books mainly consisting of a collage of essays on individual parties, in which a comparison of the various federations is most of the time relegated to introductions and conclusions.

### *Conclusions*

Delwit and Gaffney have expressed the same concept using different words, stating that the study of European political parties and their place within the broader context of the European integration process has for a long time been that of the “poor relatives” of European studies<sup>13</sup>. The political dimension and the role played by transnational federations are rarely addressed by research on specific aspects of European construction, in terms of policies for example, or in research

<sup>13</sup> Delwit, Pascal, De Waele, Jean-Michele, Kùlahci, Erol, Van de Walle, Cédric, “*Les fédérations européennes de partis: des partis dans le processus décisionnel européen ?*”, in Paul Magonette, Eric Remacle, (ed.), *Le nouveau modèle européen. Vol. I. Institutions et gouvernance*, Brussels, EUB, 2000, p. 125.

concerning national political parties. It is only the European elections and EP political groups that have attracted a degree of interest.

Political science was, perhaps, the first discipline that addressed the various aspects linked to the European aspects of the political battle. Its commitment was mainly addressed at finding new categories, going beyond the traditional ones reserved to national political parties. In recent years, however, progress has been made in the quality of the historiography of the integration process, which has progressively moved away from classical approaches concerning players and institutions as well as the more “militant and federalist” one, to achieve a more “mature and scientific” level. There is now a degree of interest in other “fields” such as policies and, more specifically, the political dimension as a whole. Historical research has added an extra element, setting studies on European political parties within the broader context of the integration process, with a long-term overview that seizes undertones and dynamics that are not very evident when using other approaches. The challenge that European studies are starting to address extremely well is that of increasingly linking research on contemporary history’s “classical” aspects to a European dimension, which, especially during the seventies, became essential in order to correctly identify a member state’s internal dynamics, also as far as political parties and political culture are concerned. How could one study the Italian Communist Party of the eighties and early nineties without clearly bearing in mind the prospect of joining the Socialist International and the CPS launched by the party’s majority well before the “fateful” autumn of 1989?

The wealth generated by synergy between different disciplines emerged progressively along this path of in-depth analysis and mature reflection. The power of European studies, in fact, lies in the fruitful dialogue and intense network of relationships and studies between disciplines and scholars who, from different perspectives and with different objectives, study European integration. A genuine interdisciplinary approach, therefore, is basically a compulsory passage for those studying European political parties, their role in the integration process and their connection with national political movements.

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## **The European Parliament and the Uniform Electoral Procedure**

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**Abstract.** *The essay retraces attempts made by the European Parliament to develop a uniform procedure for its direct election. The first attempt dates back to 1952-1953, and took place within the context of an ad hoc assembly charged with drafting the charter of a European political community. The second project was approved by the European Parliamentary assembly in 1960, but was vetoed by the French government which was opposed to European elections. Not even the first direct elections in 1979 were held with a uniform electoral system. Since then, there have been other attempts (the most recent by the British MEP Andrew Duff), which have only very partly created uniform rules for European elections, without, however, fully achieving the objective of a real “European electoral system.”*

**Keywords:** *European Parliament; European elections; Uniform Electoral procedures*

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Although forms of transnational political parties exist since a quite long time in Europe, a real supranational party system has not yet taken shape. Political parties become a system only when they oppose one another and interact, generally by competing, with electoral campaigns and elections as the most significant events. Until now, interaction, debate and competition between parties has taken place at a “domestic” level, as it has for the election of the European Parliament (EP), when every political party or movement competes to obtain the seats allocated to each member state competing in each individual country with other national parties<sup>1</sup>. There is no need to emphasise how many obstacles hinder, or render very complex, the creation of a European party system. It is instead worth mentioning, how among these obstacles there is also the permanent

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<sup>1</sup> See Luciano Bardi et al., *How to create a Transnational Party System*, Brussels, Report for the Committee on Institutional Affairs of the European Parliament, 2010.

absence of uniform electoral rules for the direct election of the European Parliament. The drafting and implementation of such rules could instead, according to many authors, be an important and even fundamental passage for the creation of a supranational party system. Since the idea of uniform electoral rules is historically associated with the hypothesis of parliament being directly elected, this idea is obviously as ancient as the first European communities.

The first two attempts to draft a European electoral law took place respectively in 1952 and 1953, by a sub-committee on political institutions of the ad hoc assembly presided over by the French Christian Democrat Pierre Henri Teitgen, and then between 1958 and 1960 in the Working Group created within the European Parliamentary assembly and presided over by Fernand Dehousse. In the first case the objective was the identification of a common electoral system for electing the People's Chamber, the elective branch of the political community's parliamentary system. In the second case follow up was established in Article 138 of the Treaty of Rome, which assigned new normative powers to the assembly, allowing it to approve a uniform electoral procedure for its own election. This procedure would only come into force when the law was unanimously approved by the Council of Ministers of the Community. As known, these projects failed. The proposal presented by the Teitgen Committee followed the fate of the European Defence Community, rejected by the French National Assembly in August 1954. The *Dehousse Convention* was approved by the parliamentary assembly with a broad majority in May 1960, but it was vetoed by the French Government (behind which there were also many other governments, including the Italian)<sup>2</sup>.

In spite of their failure, it is precisely from an analysis of these projects that I would like to start, because it is in them than one finds the historical roots of the continuing problems in electing European Parliament using a uniform electoral procedure. In the ad hoc Assembly's sub-committee and in the Working Group an in-depth debate on electoral engineering developed, a debate in which politicians and experts from

<sup>2</sup> See Daniele Pasquinucci, *Uniti dal voto? Storia delle elezioni europee 1948-2009*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2013, pp. 23-118.

various countries joined in and one affecting every aspect of the organisation of the “European vote.” The various solutions proposed on those two occasions implied a commitment to confer a “supranational” and therefore a new dimension to principles of political representation, to the concept of citizenship and to the notion of “electoral consensus.” In brief, electoral mechanisms were one of the issues on which the various plans for the organisation of the common political-economic area being created in the post-World War II period were considered, obviously also including the creation of a European party system. Two subjects are of particular interest to us. The first is the electoral formula, the mechanism through which votes are translated into seats. One of the main subjects addressed by the sub-committee chaired by Teitgen in 1952 and 1953, was the identification of mechanisms that would permit the creation of a supranational *conventio ad excludendum* against Communists (excluded from the European Assembly, whose members, as known, were appointed by national parliaments). The drafting of a European *conventio ad excludendum* extended at a community level the political-electoral dynamics developed in France, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany, and that arose from the desire to stabilise political systems also by marginalising political movements considered “subversive.” In France, electoral reform in May 1951 had introduced a mixed formula, which combined the principles of proportional representation with those of the majority system allowing lists to join their forces – and this was the most important innovation – in order to isolate the Communist Party and the Gaullists (opposed, as known, to the Fourth Republic)<sup>3</sup>.

In Italy too, a desire to “protect democracy” from opposite extremisms resulted in the abolition of proportional representation and the adoption in 1952 of the so-called ‘legge truffa’, which guaranteed a majority prize to the coalition that managed to obtain an absolute majority of votes<sup>4</sup>.

The search for factors that would stabilise western post-war democracies did not only follow the path of electoral engineering, as

<sup>3</sup> Peter Campbell, *Remarques sur la loi électorale française du 9 mai 1951*, in «Revue française de sciences politiques», October – December 1951, pp. 489-499.

<sup>4</sup> See Maria Serena Piretti, *La legge truffa. Il fallimento dell'ingegneria politica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003.

proved by the case involving West Germany, where the search for stability was pursued by making different choices. I am referring here to two Constitutional Court rulings, dated 1953 and 1956, respectively banning the Sozialistische Reichspartei, on the basis of its affinity with the National Socialist Party, and the German Communist Party<sup>5</sup>.

On these basis, Teitgen's sub-committee approved an electoral formula based on the French model, hence proportional representation with coalitions, aimed precisely at isolating "extremist parties" at the European level.

The justification most frequently used to oppose the presence of Communists in the Assembly was the possibility that they might obstruct the development of European integration and take advantage of the Strasbourg arena to promote their ideas and objectives. It was equally important to prevent the rules for European elections from delegitimising juridical-constitutional electoral laws or any others applied in some Member States to "protect democracy". The case involving Germany is a good example supporting this argument. Within Dehousse's Working Group attention had to be addressed at how to reconcile the participation of the German Communist Party in the European elections with the previously mentioned Karlsruhe Court ruling of August 1956. The outlawing of the KPD due to its stated "unconstitutional" nature could obviously not be extended in any way at a Community level. The solution was found by adding Article 13 to the *Dehousse Draft Convention* approved by the European Parliamentary Assembly, on the basis of which European suffrage would be applied for "provisions constitutionally regulating in each Member State the admission of political parties to elections"<sup>6</sup>. It is, however, evident that once the problem involving a Communist presence had been added to the debate on European electoral law, the easiest way to resolve it would have been to continue to appoint delegates in Strasbourg.

However, the European *conventio ad excludendum* brings us to another problem linked to choosing an electoral system, and more in general to a uniform electoral procedure. For national governments the

<sup>5</sup> See Sergio Ortino, *L'esperienza della Corte costituzionale di Karlsruhe*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1966, pp. 67-98.

<sup>6</sup> Cit. in D. Pasquinucci, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

internal effects of European elections, organised on the basis of rules differing from those used for national elections, was no less frightening than the presence of Communists in Strasbourg. Different rules, in fact, might favour a different distribution of consensus compared to that achieved in national elections, which might have weakened the solidity of parliamentary majorities.

This concern was explicitly voiced by the outspoken Belgian Foreign Minister, the Christian Democrat Pierre Wigny, in November 1959 at a meeting of the Working Group chaired by his compatriot Dehousse<sup>7</sup>:

It is dangerous for the Assembly, as it is for member states, to have different majorities in the European Parliamentary assembly to those in national parliaments. In Belgium, for example, members of the majority might hear the opposition say, “You represent a false majority, as you can see the real majority has emerged in the European Parliamentary Assembly” Or they may be informed of the contrary, hence the nature of the two assemblies [...] will be incessantly subject to objections.

The idea of creating trans-border constituencies was another initiative that brought to light problems that a uniform procedure could pose to governments. This hypothesis was tabled in 1958 – within the Working Group – by France’s Edouard Corniglion-Moulinier, who reasoned on the “Europeanist” effect those kinds of constituencies would spark among EEC citizens. There were, of course, many complications. For example, trans-border constituencies were incompatible with assigning a fixed number of delegates in the Assembly to each Member State<sup>8</sup>. Technical obstacles, however, played a secondary role in the decision, when it was finally made, to give up that idea. Politics played a decisive role due to the insurmountable opposition of Luxembourg’s political circles.

It may make one smile representatives of the small Grand Duchy were the ones who vetoed this idea. In truth, they did nothing but honestly express positions that were widespread in all chancelleries as well as in some parliaments of the six member States. As Nicolas Margue, the Vice

<sup>7</sup> Cit. in *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

President of Luxembourg's Christian Social Peoples Party clarified, "the European Community is formed by states, not by individuals" and therefore "it is essential in establishing electoral constituencies to divide them by nationality"<sup>9</sup>. It is certainly significant that it was the issue involving trans-border constituencies that led governments to bear in mind how a direct election of the European Parliament with a uniform procedure could not call into question the centrality of states in the integration process, also established in Treaties. However, the aforementioned quote also expressed the persuasion, and certainly also the desire, that direct election of the European Parliamentary Assembly should involve six national electorates and not just one European electoral body. The veto concerning trans-border constituencies was expressed because, by projecting outside the national territory the area in which citizens could have taken political action, these constituencies would have been incompatible with precise national boundaries (the existence of an "inside" and an "outside" and therefore "borders") which established state organisations. Among other things, opposition to trans-border constituencies also rejected conjectures, presented by federalists, concerning the existence of a "European people" and reiterated that national states remained the players in the integration process.

Opposition to the presence of Communists in the Assembly, fear of seeing delegitimised national provisions aimed at protecting democracy during the most intense period of the Cold War, alarm concerning a possible divergence between European and national election results and, therefore, for the solidity of government majorities, a desire to reiterate that the European integration process was one undertaken by states and not by peoples or a European people, were all concerns united by a desire to promote a weak idea of community institutions, and were transformed into as many reasons for opposing direct elections and a uniform electoral procedure. In the case of the European *conventio ad excludendum*, for example, it is not hard to see how it implied the idea that Community institutions were (and should remain) fragile, and this fragility required a defensive position to be assumed against "left-wing extremisms". The same applied to Europeanist ideals, to which (in

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi.*

debates in Strasbourg) left-wing parties and other 'anti-system' movements were to remain totally indifferent. A structure of this kind made any hypothesis of a supranational party system obviously anachronistic. This subject, furthermore, was the object of debates in the sub-committee and in the Working Group, but always as a residual issue or as the argument used to underline the artificial nature of European elections that would be held without European parties.

Throughout the seventies, following the French veto of the *Dehousse Convention*, direct elections and uniform electoral procedure remained in limbo. These issues returned to the Community's agenda between 1973 and 1974. In 1973, the European Parliament created a Commission presided over by the Dutch socialist, Patjin, in order to reform the *Dehousse Draft Convention*, also updating it in view of the enlargement to the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland, to then present it to the Council of Ministers. The following year, the Paris Summit approved European elections. The two processes were totally independent one from the other, so much so that the European Parliament was surprised by the decision taken by the heads of state and government. However, the unexpected availability of governments did not lead the Patijn Committee to behave bravely. On the contrary, the electoral law approved by the Parliament in January 1975 was extremely timid (perhaps due to past problems and the fear that governments would change their minds), had a very low degree of uniformity and attributed to Member States all the qualifying aspects of an electoral system, primarily the task of choosing the electoral formula<sup>10</sup>. The Council of Ministers approved the law, reducing the level of uniformity even more, with an Act dated September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1976, which still today provides the juridical basis for European elections, albeit with a number of amendments. The Act was then sent to be ratified by national parliaments which were also responsible for defining most of the electoral laws. That double process revealed the presence of very strong opposition to European elections, a uniform procedure and even the idea of a supranational party system. It will surprise no one to learn that the main opposition was in France, where the debate assumed tones

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174-186.

comparable to those heard in the days of the *querelle* about the Defence Community. At the centre of these controversies was Michel Debré, who doubted that “European elections” were in conformity with the French constitution. It is necessary to refer, albeit briefly, to Debré’s arguments, because he challenged the idea that it would be possible to create a democracy (and therefore a political system) at a supranational level.

Debré believed that the nation was the *condition* for the respect of human rights and for exercising democratic power. He believed that universal suffrage could not be allowed if not within that juridical and political framework, because it is only through the unbreakable bonds of solidarity that nations establish among their individual components, that it becomes possible to eliminate the inevitable fragmentation arising from the expression of the will of the people<sup>11</sup>:

The same solidarity is needed in order to exercise the rules of democracy, which are those of the majority. A law is passed by the parliament with a majority vote. That law applies to everyone. If a referendum is rejected with a difference of only a few hundred votes, the text presented has no importance at all. If the President of the Republic is elected with a 1% margin by millions and millions of electors, he is everyone’s president. It is miracle of solidarity that allows national sovereignty, which cannot be transferred, alienated or divided without deteriorating, with the most serious risks for democracy and freedom.

Nonetheless, the *Conseil Constitutionnel*, appointed to deal with the matter by the President of the Republic Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, stated that the Council’s Direct Elections Act was in compliance with the constitution of the Fifth Republic<sup>12</sup>.

In other countries obstacles were also overcome and the first European elections were held in June 1979 with national electoral laws and on the basis of the few general rules established by the Patijn Convention. The 1976 Direct Elections Act, moreover, established that after the first direct elections, the European Parliament’s political

<sup>11</sup> Michel Debré, *Du bon usage du suffrage universel*, in «Le Monde», December 29<sup>th</sup> 1976.

<sup>12</sup> See L. Favoreu, L. Philip, *Jurisprudence du Conseil Constitutionnel. Elections au suffrage universel direct des membres de l’Assemblée européenne*, in “Revue de droit public et de la science politique”, no. 1, Janvier - Février 1977.

committee would draft a report on the uniform electoral procedure, on the basis of studies undertaken by an ad hoc sub-committee. Starting in 1980, there were a series of attempts that lasted until the mid-nineties. They were all, however, unable to achieve the objective, either due to divisions within the parliament in Strasbourg, or – above all – because governments were not prepared to concede on uniform electoral procedures.

The Treaty of Amsterdam acknowledged the problems and formulated a more realistic approach. Article 190 modified Article 138 of the EEC Treaty, leaving the EP free to draft a project aimed at allowing elections on the basis of a uniform procedure or just “according to the principles shared by all Member States.” The possibility that the objective might be downsized could have resulted in definitely giving up the idea of a uniform system, which was, however, resumed through the British Labour Party’s decision to abandon the first past the post system to use proportional representation for the European elections as of 1999.

In July 1998 the EP approved yet another Resolution, this time one presented by the Greek member of the Peoples’ Group, Georgios Anastassopoulos. The document emphasised how the future enlargement of the EU made a final decision on electoral procedures indispensable, and also stated that “with a view to a European political awareness and the development of European political parties, a certain percentage of seats should be distributed on a proportional basis within a single constituency formed by the territory of the Member State<sup>13</sup>.” The Anastassopoulos Resolution marked the beginning of a lengthy inter-institutional planning process that resulted in the Council’s decisions of June 25<sup>th</sup> and September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002, which amended the Act dated September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1976, introducing as of 2004 the incompatibility of the office of Member of the European Parliament with that of being a member of a national parliament and the obligation to adopt proportional representation for the European elections. The creation of European constituencies was no longer debated<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> EP, Committee on Institutional Affairs, *Report on a proposal for an Electoral Procedure Incorporating Common Principles for the Election of Members of the European Parliament*, Rapporteur Georgios Anastassopoulos, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1998, A4-0212/98.

<sup>14</sup> D. Pasquinucci, *op.cit.*, pp. 342-343.

This hypothesis was resumed in the most recent project aimed at a uniform electoral procedure undertaken by the British MEP Andrew Duff, a member of the EP's Liberal Group. This project did not succeed also due to opposition from part of the European Parliament<sup>15</sup>. Its content is, however, interesting also because of its origin. Duff was inspired by a document drafted by OECD, which had monitored the 2009 European elections in 15 member states, reporting various criticalities, among them the great heterogeneousness of electoral rules and the lack of national legislative norms regulating and fostering the electoral campaigns of euro-parties, reduced to “service providers for national parties (for example encouraging the use of shared symbols and posters). The electoral campaigns of Euro-parties was not visible in any of the member states visited by OECD's observers.”<sup>16</sup>

Duff thereby presented a cogent proposal to the EP, in which the qualifying element was the creation of a constituency consisting of the entire Union's territory in which 25 members of the European Parliament, in addition to the 751 envisaged, should be elected on the basis of lists of candidates coming from at least one third of the member states and whose selection would be the responsibility of European political parties. These – as Duff himself pointed out – would thus be able to compete against one another in the same geographical area<sup>17</sup>, establishing one of the fundamental premises, the creation of a shared setting for political competition, for the birth of a supranational party system.

<sup>15</sup> See what Andrew Duff himself said in *Why do MEPs fear electoral reform?*, in “EUobserver”, 14.3.2012, at <http://euobserver.com/opinion/115596>.

<sup>16</sup> OCSE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Elections to the European Parliament, 4-7 June 2009*, Warsaw, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009, pp. 8-9.

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament, Committee on Institutional Affairs, *Draft Report on a proposal for a modification of the Act concerning the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage of 20 September 1976*, rapporteur Andrew Duff, 12.04.2010.

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## Transparency, supervision and responsibility in the funding of European political parties

Maria Romana Allegri\*

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**Abstract.** *New rules for the legal status and funding of European political parties have at last been approved, although they will only be applied as of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2017. Compared to the proposal originally presented by the Commission in 2012 and amendments approved by the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee in April 2013, the new rules seem to be decidedly weaker. One of the main shortcomings is the disappearance of all obligations to enforce internal democracy in political parties, now only obliged to respect the values on which the EU bases its programmes and activities. Even the influence of Member States on the registration, cancellation and sanctioning of European political parties seems excessive. Finally, it is possible that there may be a superimposition of the roles played by the various bodies assigned to carry out verification procedures, among them one newly created specifically for this reason.*

**Keywords:** *European political parties; Transparency; Democracy*

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On April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the plenary Assembly of the European Parliament approved legislation for new rules concerning the legal status and funding of European political parties and European political foundations<sup>1</sup>. Legislative procedures for this provision had been rather troubled.<sup>2</sup> The proposed bill presented by the European Commission in

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<sup>1</sup> P7\_TA-PROV(2014)0421.

<sup>2</sup> I have in the past addressed the subject of European political parties, concerning the proposal presented by the European Commission in 2012, since it was expected that the new rules would be approved before the May 2014 European elections in order to apply them on that occasion. See my two essays on the subject dated 2013 – “I partiti politici a livello europeo fra autonomia politica e dipendenza dai partiti nazionali” and “Il finanziamento pubblico e privato ai partiti politici europei: il regime attuale e le modifiche proposte in vista delle elezioni europee del 2014” – as well as the bibliography used here concerning European political parties, much of which is repeated at the end of this paper.

2012<sup>3</sup> was assessed and amended by the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013<sup>4</sup>, after hearing the opinions of the Juridical Commission and the Committee on Budgets. It was only on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014, thanks to the decisive stimulus provided by the Greek presidency to the legislative process, that the Committee approved its own proposal, which was – in spite of significant differences compared to the one received from the European Parliament – then accepted by the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee at a meeting held on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, so that it could be approved at April's plenary Assembly.

These new rules will not, however, come into effect immediately, and will only be applied as of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 (Art. 41). In mid-2018, the European Parliament will publish a report on the application of these rules, as will the European Commission before the end of 2018, accompanying this report with a proposal containing legislative measures aimed at amending them (Art. 38). Such a long period of grace in implementing the new rules, justified by the need for Member States to have enough time to adapt to them (“considering” no. 45), negates the effort made to ensure the rules were approved before the 2014 European elections and can only be perceived as a sign of the Committee's weak political will to seriously reinforce the political importance of European political parties.

Thus, as of 2017, political alliances – organised cooperation between political parties and/or citizens, based in a Member State – will be permitted to register as European political parties (no longer as the current rules state “political parties at a European level). These European political parties must be non-profit, have headquarters in a Member State and pursue in their programmes and activities the values on which the European Union is founded (human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including those of minorities). European political parties must have taken part in European elections or simply publicly expressed the intention of doing so, be represented in the European Parliament or in

<sup>3</sup> COM(2012) 499 dated September 12<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>4</sup> A7-0140/2013.

national or regional parliamentary assemblies in at least one fourth of the Member States (currently seven) or have received in at least one fourth of Member States at least three per cent of the votes cast in each of these Member States at the last elections of the European Parliament (Art. 3). These rules envisage that participation in elections for the European Parliament and the presence of delegates in this is only a potential requisite and that a political party could be considered European even without elected representatives in the European Parliament.

After all, while national political parties are essentially associations of citizens, European parties are associations of associations, only occasionally admitting individual membership, and often with a number of restrictions in terms of the right to vote at party conferences. Therefore the relationship between European political parties and their national homologues becomes determinant in terms of their very existence and qualification. This all the more so, since for as long as elections for the European Parliament continue to be dominated by political competition between national parties, even the requisite concerning a European party's representation in the European Parliament is closely linked to the electoral success of national political parties belonging to it. However, parties poorly represented in the European Parliament will be penalised from a funding point of view. The new rules establish that, in order to obtain contributions from the European Union, a political party must have at least one representative elected to the European Parliament (Art. 17 paragraph 1) and that eighty-five per cent of funding will be distributed among parties in proportion to the number of representatives they have in the European Parliament (Art. 19 paragraph 1).

The new rules oblige political alliances intending to register as European political parties to ensure their legal charters guarantee transparency as far as their internal organisation is concerned. Unfortunately, while the European Commission's original proposal envisaged charters based on principles of internal democracy (democratic election of members of the party's executive board, democratic decision-making processes, clear and transparent procedures for selecting candidates and the election of those appointed to public

positions), all this has disappeared in the Committee's amended version, in which Art. 4 now only refers to formal requisites. Hence European political parties' only explicit link to democracy remains the mention of the values on which the European Union is founded (Art. 3 comma 1 letter c), which, however, refers only to the party's programme and activities – therefore its external projections – and not to its internal organisation<sup>5</sup>. Respect for the values on which the European Union is founded is an indispensable requisite for a political party's place on the register, so much so that the consequence linked to non-observance of this clause is deletion from the register (Art. 27 paragraph 1). It is possible that the Member States in which the political party is based may demand that the party's charter be integrated by additional requisites, on condition these are not incompatible with European regulations (Art. 4 u. c.). Some Member States may, for example, demand respect for internal democracy, and even consider a lack of respect for national regulations on internal democracy as a possible cause for removing parties from the register on the basis of Art. 16 paragraph 3.

Abandoning the idea of imposing requisites on internal democracy in European political parties was determined by the difficulties experienced by a number of national juridical systems in accepting the principle of the democratic organisation of political parties being imposed by law, since parties are free associations of citizens and, as such, characterised by organisational autonomy. In Italy, for example, Law no. 13/2014, which converted Decree no. 149/2013<sup>6</sup>, did not maintain the provision stated in comma 2 of Art. 3 of the legislative

<sup>5</sup> On the issue of internal democracy in European political parties and its repercussions at a national level, see G. Grasso, "Democrazia interna e partiti politici a livello europeo: quale termine di raffronto per l'Italia?", 2010. Among the many scientific contributions on the problem of political parties' internal democracy, see the recent paper by P. Marsocci, "Sulla funzione costituzionale dei partiti e delle altre formazioni politiche", 2012. See also E. Rossi, "La democrazia interna nei partiti politici", 2011 and A. Ruggieri, "Note minime in tema di democrazia interna ai partiti politici", 2010. For an in-depth analysis see references.

<sup>6</sup> Abolizione del finanziamento pubblico diretto, disposizioni per la trasparenza e la democraticità dei partiti e disciplina della contribuzione volontaria e della contribuzione indiretta in loro favore.

decree, which stated that a party's charter should be based on respect for the fundamental principles of democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the rule of law. The converted law replaced this wording with a more generic mention of respect for the Constitution and for European Union law, and one must assume that, also as far as Italian political parties are concerned, the appeal to democratic values present in the law's heading is to be understood as referred only to the party's objectives and not to its internal organisation<sup>7</sup>. After all, since European political parties consist of national parties, rules for national political parties used in most Member States could not be ignored in the new rules for European political parties, all the more so since electoral campaigns and procedures, and the link between candidates and their potential voters, still remain strictly anchored to the national dimension<sup>8</sup>. An important opportunity has been lost for incentivising national juridical systems to orient their laws regulating national parties towards a democratic internal organisation.

Registration will allow European political parties to acquire European legal status (Articles 12-16) replacing or in addition to that of the Member State in which the party is based and thanks to which parties will obtain recognition and juridical status in all Member States. In the version approved by the Committee, rules concerning legal status seem significantly more detailed compared to the original ones proposed by the Commission, and, at times, are in particular aimed at defining relations between European and national legal entities, protecting on one hand the interests of the Member State in which the political party is based and, on the other, those of the party itself. Hence (Art. 14), European political parties will be subject to triple legislation: European law, national law for all aspects not addressed by European laws and finally, for all that remains, their respective charters. A party's de-registration can occur also when requested by the Member State in

<sup>7</sup> I discussed this subject in "Democrazia, controllo pubblico e trasparenza dei costi della politica", 2014.

<sup>8</sup> On this aspect see the book "How to Create a Transnational Party System", listed in the bibliography, with papers by Luciano Bardi, Edoardo Bressanelli, Enrico Calossi, Wojciech Gagattek, Peter Mair, Eugenio Pizzimenti.

which it is based, in the event of serious violations of applicable national legislation (Art. 16 paragraph 3).

European legal status will be linked to the political party being registered. Should a party be deprived of registration, its European legal status will revert to national legal status. This will also involve losing the right to receive funding from the European Union's overall budget. Provisions concerning funding are the *corpus* of central regulations in the new rules, as they are in the current ones. In order to be brief, I will not analyse this aspect in-depth, referring you instead to a previous paper on this subject<sup>9</sup>, considering that on this issue the recently approved rules are basically the same as those proposed by the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee in April 2013. As far as public funding is concerned, I will simply refer to the passage from a funding system based on subsidies to one founded on a system of contributions for expenses. European political parties will therefore no longer be burdened with the obligation of presenting a yearly work programme or estimate balance sheets to justify requests for subsidies, but will simply justify their expenses *ex post*. As far as free donations are concerned, a limit of 18,000 euros a year per donor has been established<sup>10</sup>, which will not, however, be applied to donations from members of the European Parliament, from regional parliamentary assemblies or from national political parties that are members of European ones<sup>11</sup>. Finally, as far as the use of public and private funds is concerned, the new rules explicitly sanction in Art. 21 the possibility for European political parties to use their resources to fund electoral campaigns for the European Parliament, which is instead ruled out by current legislation.

Information addressed at citizens assumes fundamental importance in the new rules and this is without doubt a clear sign of the effort made to democratise the EU's political life. According to Art. 31, within the framework of elections to renew the European Parliament, European

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Allegri, "*Il finanziamento pubblico e privato ...*", cit.

<sup>10</sup> The limit established by current rules is 12,000 euros but the Commission's original proposal would have raised this figure to 25,000 euro.

<sup>11</sup> Amounts that are unrestricted on condition that they are not more than forty per cent of the yearly budget of the European political party benefitting from the donation.

political parties may in fact adopt all suitable means to inform the citizens of the Union of existing links between national political parties and candidates and European political parties. One must underline, however, the use of the word “may” instead of “must”, which makes the provision non-cogent. Art. 32, furthermore, obliges the European Parliament to create a special website through which it must transparently provide all citizens with all information concerning European political parties, their charters, non-approved registration requests and reasons for rejections, an annual report on public funds allocated to political parties, parties’ budgets and accounts, donors’ names and the amounts donated<sup>13</sup>, contributions received from member national parties, a list of people having legal status affiliated to European political parties, the number of members, a description of any technical assistance provided to parties, sanctions decided with their reasons and an assessment report on the European Parliament. These are commitments that are a step in the right direction, that of considering citizens the subjects towards which European parties must first of all feel responsible. The fact remains that this should be completed with equivalent national rules, obliging national political parties to make their political relationships transparent as well as their economic-financial ones, together with their European reports. From this point of view, recently adopted Italian law on political parties is seriously wanting<sup>14</sup> and the electoral campaign that has just ended simply emphasises this weakness. National political parties did not in fact generally make clear to public opinion their affiliation to their reference European party and therefore their support for a given candidate to the presidency of the European Commission, as specifically requested by the European Commission<sup>15</sup> and the European Parliament<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Minor donations, those lower than 1,500 euro a year per donor and those amounting to between 1,500 and 3,000 euros for which the donor has not given permission to make public come under this obligation. In these cases only the total amount will be published and not individual donations.

<sup>14</sup> M. R. Allegri, “*Democrazia, controllo pubblico ...*”, cit.

<sup>15</sup> COM(2013) 126 dated March 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, *Preparing for the 2014 European elections: Preparing for the 2014 European elections: further enhancing their democratic and efficient conduct* .

What is radically different in the recently approved rules compared to those proposed in 2012 by the European Commission and the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee interpretation in 2012, are the provisions concerning supervisory authorities. It will now no longer be the European Parliament, assisted by a committee of independent experts, ensuring that requisites required for the registration of political parties and their permanence are respected, but an independent authority with its own legal status, composed of a director appointed every five years in agreement with the European Parliament, Council and Commission, assisted by a technical staff (Art. 6). The new rules entrust the authority with various tasks, such as keeping the register of European political parties (Art. 7), verifying that European parties have the requisites needed for registration (Art. 8), verifying they continue to maintain these requisites and deciding on eventual de-registration from the register (Art. 9 and Art. 27), regulating the consequences arising from the loss of European legal status by a political party (Art. 16 paragraph 7), checking accountancy documents presented by European political parties at the end of each financial year (Art. 24), sanctioning defaulting parties in the cases established by Art. 27 by applying the sanctions listed<sup>17</sup>, supervising the correct treatment of personal data together with the European Parliament and the Committee of independent experts (Art. 33). All decisions made by the authority can be appealed in the Court of Justice (Art. 6 paragraph 11 and Art. 35) and will be the subject of court proceedings (Art. 34).

<sup>16</sup> *European Parliament resolution of 4 July 2013 on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014*, P7\_TA-PROV(2013)0323, July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>17</sup> In cases of more serious non-quantifiable offences, the sanction consists of disbarment from the register, and consequently a loss of European legal status. Other misdemeanours, usually linked to not having complied with transparency obligations attributed to political parties, are subject to fines ranging from five to fifty per cent of the budget of the political party concerned, depending on the seriousness of the matter. As far as quantifiable offences are concerned, such as accepting forbidden private donations or using financial resources for objectives that are not permitted, the sanction corresponds to a percentage ranging from one hundred to three hundred per cent of the sum illegally accepted or illegally used. As an additional sanction, the political party may be excluded from being allocated amounts deriving from the Union's general budget for a period of up to five years, and if the offence is repeated more than once over a five year period, exclusion can last for up to ten years.

This Authority, however, will not be the only body invested with supervisory tasks. Firstly, according to Art. 10, the decision to de-register a political party may be taken by the Authority, if requested by a Member State, only after having acquired the non-binding opinion of a Committee of six independent eminent experts of which two are appointed by the European Parliament, two by the Council and two by the European Commission (Art. 11). Such a decision may only be made on condition that the European Parliament or Council do not lodge an objection; should they do so the political party will remain on the Register. Hence, the final word goes to the European Parliament – as is logical – but also to the Council. It is through the Council that the governments of Member States assume the role of arbitrators as far as the fate of European political parties is concerned. However, this rule does not clarify what the consequences are if an objection is lodged regarding the de-registration of party just by Parliament or just by the Council and not by both.

Furthermore, according to Art. 24, financial supervision will be exercised jointly by the Authority, Authorising Officer of the European Parliament and by Member States, responsible for obligations stemming from applicable national law. At the end of each financial year, European political parties will have to send all accounting documentation to all three bodies, which are obliged to cooperate with one another and exchange all relevant information (Articles 23 and 24). To these one must add: independent auditing companies or a group of independent experts responsible for certifying parties' annual budgets (Art. 23), the Court of Auditors (Art. 25 paragraphs 3 and 6) exercising its powers *ex Art. 287 TFEU*, the European Anti-Fraud Office (Art. 25 par. 7), the European Data Protection Supervisor to ensure that all personal data is protected in compliance with provisions set out in the new rules EC no. 45/2001 (Art. 25 par. 7) and finally, the European Union's Court of Justice, where the Authority's decisions can be appealed (Art. 35). Such a complex supervisory system, created in order to avoid the risk that decisions basically entrusted to the European Parliament could be determined mainly by assessments of a political nature, has not, however, avoided criticism. There is the risk of confusion as well as an overlapping of the roles of the players involved,

procedures are increased, and a new institution created, one currently still not entirely clear, and above all European citizens represented in Parliament are distanced from all forms of control over the activities of political parties.

The feeling one gets is that, as has happened on other occasions in the history of the European Union, the governments of Member States represented in the Council have expressed and made known a degree of fear regarding a strengthening of the European Union's political identity. On the eve of the European elections this may have been influenced by a degree of uncertainty regarding the consequences of electoral results or perhaps fear of an undermining of consolidated equilibriums by Eurosceptic political elements, which were expected to make gains. All in all, considering the immediate practical uselessness of the new rules for European political parties, since they only come into force in 2017, and the very little attention paid to them by the media as well as the very small role played by these rules in debates during the electoral campaign, it would not have been a bad idea to postpone their approval to the recently elected legislature.

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## Italy's Central Directorate for Electoral Services takes a small step towards political parties' legal status at a European level contributing to the debate on the nature of the European Parliament

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**Abstract.** *This paper comments on the Ufficio Elettorale Nazionale della Corte di Cassazione (Italian Court of Cassation's Central Directorate for Electoral Services) decision to allow participation in the European elections, without collecting signatures for a list minus European Members of Parliament elected in Italy, when a party is affiliated to a European political party represented in parliament. The Central Directorate for Electoral Services justified its decision on the basis of Italian constitutional law and European law, in particular concluding that every citizen "is therefore part of one single European electoral body." This paper comments on this decision with reference to the well-known German Federal Constitutional Court ruling dated June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 on the Lisbon Treaty and the recent decisions challenging the legality of the minimum threshold for participation in the allocation of seats.*

**Keywords:** *European parliamentary elections; Electoral lists; Minimum electoral threshold*

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1. Within the framework of discussions concerning a transnational system for European political parties, I believe that it is worth mentioning the *Ufficio Elettorale Nazionale della Corte di Cassazione* (Italian Court of Cassation's Central Directorate for Electoral Services') recent decision concerning an appeal presented by the *Federazione dei Verdi - Green Italia*<sup>1</sup>, on the basis of which the association of a national electoral list with a European political party represented in an incumbent European Parliament (EP) has, as far as the presentation of the list itself is concerned, previously non-acknowledged juridical importance. This, because

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<sup>1</sup> This ruling was passed on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 by the Supreme Court of Cassation's Central Directorate for Electoral Services, following an appeal presented by the *Federazione dei Verdi- Green Italia*.

it is applied regardless of the presence in the referred-to parliamentary group of representatives elected in the state in which an electoral list is presented. Notwithstanding the importance of the decision addressed later in this paper, and the more technical aspects of the ruling, a number of the arguments used to support this ruling seem particularly interesting and potentially open to future developments.

2. In brief, the issue arose due to the interpretation of *Art. 12, comma 4, legge n. 18 del 1979* (Art. 12, paragraph 4, of Bill no. 18 dated 1979), which envisaged an exemption from the burden of having to ensure that the presentation of lists of European parliamentary candidates with at least 30,000 voters' signatures, among other cases, for parties or political groups that in the last elections had obtained at least one seat in the European Parliament. When a list is presented with a composite symbol, that of two or more parties, exemption is now applied if the list contains the symbol of at least one party or political group exempt from the obligation to collect signatures<sup>2</sup>.

A member of the European Green Party, whose symbol dominated the electoral ballots of the list called "Federazione dei Verdi- Green Italia", the 'Federazione dei Verdi' argued that it was exempt from collecting the otherwise required signatures because it was a member of a European political party represented in the European Parliament, even if none of those MEPs had been elected in Italy. Conversely, on the basis of instructions issued by the Italian Ministry of Interior, according to which exemption from collecting signatures is only applied to parties or political groups having won at least one seat in the European Parliament among those assigned to Italy, the constituency electoral office rejected the request, stating that Art. 12, when read in the correct manner and on the basis of its original objectives, refers exclusively to national political parties<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Regulations for composite symbols and procedures for their use, in particular as far as European political parties are concerned, are rather complex and only briefly mentioned in this paper. For a more in-depth analysis see G. MAESTRI, *Sognando Strasburgo.... senza firme: il caso del simbolo dei Verdi europei*, in *www.federalismi.it*, n. 9/2014, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2014, p. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Also with reference to events that preceded the Federazione di Verdi's appeal to the Central Directorate for Electoral Services, see G. MAESTRI, *cit.*, p. 7.

The Central Directorate for Electoral Services, called upon to pass a ruling by the *Federazione dei Verdi*, accepted the appeal overturning the interpretation that had prevailed until then. Supreme Court Judges stated that the aforementioned Art. 12 paragraph 4, uses a literal wording that does not preclude its interpretation in compliance with European Union treaties and the Italian constitution. Judges based their ruling on unfounded restrictions to benefits arising from the right to exemption from the obligation to collect signatures, based on the national or European status of the requesting national or European political party or movement. To support this interpretation the decision first of all refers internal legislation suitably interpreted in view of the constitution. This interpretative orientation is also strengthened by a series of references to European Union law, both in the original or primary sources and in the secondary law<sup>4</sup>.

3. As far as references to European law are concerned, in particular basic EU law, the Central Directorate for Electoral Services concentrated on those laws promoting the role played by political parties at a European level and those proclaiming and applying the principles of democratic representation in the EU's institutional organisation.

With regards to the first aspect, the ruling refers to Art. 10 paragraph 4 of the European Lisbon Treaty (ELT) which states, "Political parties at European level contribute to (...) expressing the will of citizens of the Union" and Art. 12 paragraph 2 of the EU's Charter of Rights along the same lines, as well as a number of guidelines issued by the Commission, the European Parliament and the Italian parliament aimed at requiring a real application of the aforementioned principles through the promotion and dissemination of existing links between national lists and European political parties, all within the framework of the overall legal context addressed at strengthening the role played by

<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between original (or primary) and derived EU law, among many see I. NICOTRA, *Diritto Pubblico e Costituzionale*, II ed. Turin, 2013, p. 470 ss.; T. GROPPÌ – A. SIMONCINI, *Introduzione allo studio del diritto pubblico e delle sue fonti*, II ed., Turin, 2013, p. 102; C. ZANGHÌ, *Istituzioni di diritto dell'Unione Europea*, V ed., Turin, 2010.

supranational political movements as a means of democratising the European Union<sup>5</sup>.

Of equal importance are references to the Treaty on European Union's statements concerning European citizenship (Art. 9), to the right of each citizen to participate in the Union's democratic life (Art. 10 paragraph 3), to the innovative expectation that the President of the Commission should be elected by the European parliament, and, above all, the statement according to which: "The European Parliament shall be composed of *representatives of the Union's citizens*" (Art. 14 paragraphs 1 and 2, author's Italics). But it is the conclusions drawn from these principles by the Central Directorate for Electoral Services in reference to the appeal on which a decision had to be made, which are of the greatest interest. Based on the creation of European citizenship and the principle of representational democracy according to which "every citizens shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union", the Supreme Court judges ruled that each citizens is "therefore part of a *single European electoral body*"<sup>6</sup>.

It is my opinion that this statement is the direct consequence of the aforementioned legislative framework, to which one could add paragraph 2 sub-paragraph 1 of Art. 10 stating that "citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament." This marks a clear change compared to everything previously stated<sup>7</sup>, which envisaged the European parliament having "a supra and transnational nature." This is in

<sup>5</sup> Within a framework aimed at encouraging the participation of European parties as such in elections for the European parliament, see G. MAESTRI, *cit.*, p. 4-5, who uses as an element of assessment of choices made in this sense, the rules concerning the funding of European political parties over time, a subject also addressed broadly, among others, by M.R. ALLEGRI, "Il finanziamento dei partiti politici europei: trasparenza, controllo e responsabilità". For an overall perspective see G. GRASSO, *Partiti politici europei*, in *Digesto delle discipline pubblicistiche*, update III vol., t. II, Turin, 2008, p. 609 ss.

<sup>6</sup> See Decision, p. 4, out italics.

<sup>7</sup> See Art 189 Treaty Establishing the European Community CE (Version advised 2002) on the basis of which the European parliament consisted of "representatives of the peoples of the states brought together in the Community"; and within that legal framework, the right of European citizens being able to vote also in states in which they were resident if different to that of their nationality, was already envisaged.

line with expectations as far as the aforementioned political parties at a European level are concerned<sup>8</sup>.

This clearly innovative interpretation of the Treaty, however, has been seriously questioned, in particular by the June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 ruling by the German Federal Constitutional Court on the Lisbon Treaty<sup>9</sup>, in which, in spite of the amendments to the Treaty just mentioned, the idea that the European parliament can represent a sovereign European people was rejected<sup>10</sup>, but continues to be considered an assembly representing the peoples of the member States<sup>11</sup>. In this framework European Members of Parliament represent their respective national quotas previously agreed on by the Member States.

This is not a suitable occasion for resuming the debate that followed the aforementioned ruling (an extremely broad one and one that continued with further jurisdictional intervention, not only German, in a sort of dialogue between courts concerning the European integration process<sup>12</sup>), at times only with reference to the issues debated here<sup>13</sup>. It is

<sup>8</sup> The link is emphasised by L. MOCCIA, *Il 'sistema' della cittadinanza europea: un mosaico in composizione*, in ID., *Diritti fondamentali e Cittadinanza dell'Unione europea*, Milan, 2010, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> The ruling is published in the original language and also semi-officially in English on the Court's website at [www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de](http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de) and, in an Italian translation by J. Luther at [http://www.astrid-online.it/Dossier-L4/Corte-cost/Corte-cost/Luther\\_KarlsruheLisbona\\_aic\\_nov.09.pdf](http://www.astrid-online.it/Dossier-L4/Corte-cost/Corte-cost/Luther_KarlsruheLisbona_aic_nov.09.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See § 280 The ruling that states “Even in the new wording of Article 14.2 Lisbon TEU, and contrary to the claim that Article 10.1 Lisbon TEU seems to make according to its wording, the European Parliament is not a representative body of a sovereign European people. This is reflected in the fact that it is designed as a representation of peoples in the respective national contingents of Members, not as a representation of Union citizens in unity without differentiation, according to the principle of electoral equality.”

<sup>11</sup> See § 284

<sup>12</sup> On this subject, it is worth mentioning the ruling passed by the Czech Constitutional Court on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009, once again concerning the Lisbon Treaty, on which please see the opinions of M. POIARES MADURO – G. GRASSO, *Quale Europa dopo la sentenza della Corte costituzionale tedesca sul trattato di Lisbona?*, in *Dir. Unione europea*, 2009, p. 519 and 507; and The Editors and J. Komarek *The Czech Constitutional Court's Second Decision on the Lisbon Treaty of 3 November 2009*, with translations of passages of the ruling, in *EuConst*, 5 (2009), p. 345 ss.; see also *Mangold-Urteil* speaking from the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2010, about which see P. FARAGUNA, GERMANIA: *Il Mangold-Urteil del BverfG. Controllo ultravires sì, ma da maneggiare europarechtsfreundlich*, in [www.forumcostituzionale.it](http://www.forumcostituzionale.it) and A.A. GENNA, *Il controllo “eurodeferente” del Bundesverfassungsgericht sugli atti ultra*

sufficient to bear in mind that the over-simplified opinion expressed by the German Federal Constitutional Court is opposed by a ruling promoting shared citizenship, proclaimed by the Lisbon Treaty, as a source for the democratic legitimisation of the Union as a whole and of the European Parliament in particular<sup>14</sup>. The Central Directorate for Electoral Services' acknowledgement of the existence of a single electoral body as the premise for a decision on electoral matters for parties addressing this one single audience of voters, to form together a

*vires delle istituzioni europee dal Lissabon-Urteil al Mangold-Beschluss*, in *Riv. Ital. Dir. Pubb. Comunitario*, 2011, p. 268 ss, in particular p. 295 ss. More recent jurisdictional rulings following supranational interventions on finance and budgets include among the most interesting cases those in Germany, Estonia, Ireland and to a certain extent Portugal. As far as the first three are concerned see a comparative analysis by E. BERTOLINI, in *La nuova dimensione della sovranità dei Parlamenti nazionali in materia finanziaria e di bilancio*, in *Diritto pubblico comparato ed europeo*, 2013, p. 135. On Portugal see T. ABBATE, *Le Corti costituzionali dinnanzi alla crisi finanziaria: una soluzione di compromesso del Tribunale costituzionale portoghese*, in *Quaderni costituzionali*, 2013, p. 438. Finally, the decree dated January 14<sup>th</sup> 2014 with which the German Federal Constitutional Court for the first time raised a prejudicial postponement in the European Union's Court of Justice, on the subject of procedures started by appeals against the buying of government bonds issued by some states in the Eurozone by the European Central Bank. See G. DELLEDONNE, *La "prima volta" di Karlsruhe: il rinvio pregiudiziale relativo alle Outright Monetary Transactions*, in [www.csfederalismo.it](http://www.csfederalismo.it), February 25<sup>th</sup> 2014, no. 25; R. CAPONI, *Salvaguardare l'euro con ogni mezzo? Il primo rinvio pregiudiziale della Corte costituzionale tedesca*, in *Giornale di diritto amministrativo*, 5/2014, p. 469; A. DE PETRIS, *Un rinvio pregiudiziale sotto condizione? L'ordinanza del Tribunale Costituzionale Federale sulle Outright Monetary Transactions*, in [www.federalismi.it](http://www.federalismi.it), February 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, no. 4; A. DI MARTINO, *Le Outright Monetary Transactions tra Francoforte, Karlsruhe e Lussemburgo. Il primo rinvio pregiudiziale del BverfG*, in [www.federalismi.it](http://www.federalismi.it), February 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, no. 4; E. OLIVITO, *Atto primo: Il Bundesverfassungsgericht rinvia alla Corte di giustizia su OMT e poteri della BCE. Un'occasione per il futuro dell'Unione Europea?* in [www.costituzionalismo.it](http://www.costituzionalismo.it), February 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, no. 3.

<sup>13</sup> On this subject I have expressed more wide-ranging opinions in S. ALOISIO, *La sentenza del Bundesverfassungsgericht sul Trattato di Lisbona: uno sguardo alla posizione del PE e al ruolo delle costituzioni nazionali*, in F. BASILE – M. PILATO (edited by), *Per costruire l'unità. Studi sull'Italia e l'integrazione europea di fronte alla nuova governance mondiale in occasione del 150° dell'Unità d'Italia*, Cacucci, Bari, 2012, p. 221 ss., where can be found several references to the doctrinal debate.

<sup>14</sup> On this subject see L. MOCCIA, *Cittadinanza e democrazia nell'Europa in crisi: quale via all'Unione politica*, in *La cittadinanza europea*, 2/2012, in particular pp. 40-44. In a critical sense with regard to the mentioned ruling see also ID., *Il 'sistema' della cittadinanza*, cit., p. 185.

parliament, the election of which and in which voting takes place “by merging and not by national delegations.”<sup>15</sup> This should be understood as affirmation of this last orientation in an authoritative setting and one capable of producing relevant practical consequences.

4. Finally, by eliminating the need to collect signatures in order to present a list of candidates in elections for the European parliament, who are linked to a party or a group with representatives in Parliament, the decision addressed in this paper emphasises how this circumstance satisfies the list’s need to be representative, solving the problem of signature collection<sup>16</sup>.

Although not directly linked to this issue, this last aspect of the decision made by the Central Directorate for Electoral Services resulted in a number of opinions on the subject, during the period in which it was at the centre of a legal debate, involving the expectation that there would be minimum threshold levels in national electoral laws regulating European elections.

As known, in this case also, the German Federal Constitutional Court intervened twice, eliminating the minimum threshold. These rulings are part of national electoral regulations allowed thanks to a 2002 Council Decision with which, in the absence of the expected uniform electoral system, a number of shared principles are set out in order to guarantee a degree of harmony between national laws for the European parliament. In Italy two applications to the Constitutional Court, aimed at eliminating the aforementioned threshold, were raised just before the 2014 European elections<sup>17</sup>.

The arguments used by the German constitutional judge (and continued in Italian appeals, in particular the appeal lodged by the court in Venice<sup>18</sup>) lead to many doubts as far as their legitimacy is concerned. According to the German court, the minimum election threshold is

<sup>15</sup> This is authoritatively mentioned by A. MANZELLA, in *Prima lettura di un Parlamento (un po’ meno) Europeo*, in [www.federalismi.it](http://www.federalismi.it), 28/05/2014 - Nr. 11 - Anno 2014.

<sup>16</sup> V. Decision p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> V. C. MARTINELLI, *Gli sbarramenti per le europee 2014*, in [www.rivistailmulino.it](http://www.rivistailmulino.it)

<sup>18</sup> The decrees can be found at <http://www.giurcost.org/cronache/index.html>.

justifiable if it “prevents extremist parties from entering parliament and consequently tends to protect better governability by the majority.” However, according to the judges in Karlsruhe such requirements do not exist<sup>19</sup>. This was consistent with German law’s recent trend aimed at persistently emphasising the existence of a constitutive difference between the national political-institutional system and the European one, although on this occasion they acknowledged that “such a development of the European parliament is politically desirable.” Incidentally, the arguments used seem, the least, to be untimely, considering they were used for the last election of the European Parliament. The new EP, in compliance with the full application of the Lisbon Treaty, more frequently exercises legislative power in a regime of equality with the Council and increased power regards to the budget<sup>20</sup>. The new EP has also for the first time been called upon to apply new procedures for appointing the President of the Commission (and the Commission itself) as stated in Art. 17 paragraph 7 of the Treaty on European Union.<sup>21</sup> This without doubt strengthens the European Parliament’s role, although a great deal will depend on the effective implementation of these rules, starting with informal candidatures presented by the main European political parties<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> On this point see. A. MARTINUZZI, *La fine di un antico feticcio: la sindacabilità della legge elettorale italiana*, at [www.forumcostituzionale.it](http://www.forumcostituzionale.it) (May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> On the subject of these two amendments see C. FASONE - N. LUPO, *Il Parlamento Europeo alla luce delle novità introdotte nel Trattato di Lisbona e nel suo regolamento interno*, in *Studi sull’integrazione europea*, VII (2012), p. 344 ss. V. and E. POLI - L. VAI, *L’impatto del Parlamento Europeo sul Processo legislativo europeo e nazionale*, in G. BONVICINI (edited by) *Il Parlamento Europeo per la nuova Unione*, Rome, 2014, p. 110 ss.

<sup>21</sup> Which regards to the President states: “Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.”

<sup>22</sup> For an in-depth critical analysis of procedures for the appointment of the President, see L. MOCCIA, *Il ‘nuovo’ Parlamento Europeo e il futuro dell’Unione*, in *La cittadinanza europea*, 1/2014, p. 12 ss.; see also L. BARDI - E. CALOSI, *Verso uno spazio politico europeo? La questione democratica a livello di Unione europea*, in G.

In all events, all this strongly demands that the newly elected European parliament should proceed at last to adopt a uniform electoral procedure<sup>23</sup>. As far as the minimum electoral threshold is concerned, considerations regarding representation and the role played by supranational political parties expressed by the Central Directorate for Electoral Services and previously mentioned, in addition to expressing an interpretation of the nature of the European Parliament that differs from those described in the rulings quoted, provide interesting ideas. This leads one to consider that appropriate forms of minimum electoral thresholds should be introduced. These should also be calculated not only at a national but also at a European level, in order to allow lists with broad and widespread consensus at a European level to also gain votes in national states, or in constituencies in which they have few voters.

BONVICINI (edited by) *Il Parlamento Europeo*, p. 88 ss. Regards to elements that lead one to state that a step towards a parliamentarisation of the EU's form of government after the Lisbon Treaty see G. RIZZONI, *Opposizione parlamentare e democrazia deliberativa. Ordinamenti europei a confronto*, Bologna, 2012, p. 321 ss. More cautious opinions have been expressed by C. FASONE - N. LUPO, *Il European parliament*, cit., p. 340 ss.; see also C. PINELLI, *Il Parlamento Europeo come agenzia di innovazione dell'assetto istituzionale dell'Unione Europea. Le strategie per il futuro*, in G. BONVICINI (edited by) *Il Parlamento Europeo*, p. 59 ss.

<sup>23</sup> On the tormented events surrounding uniform electoral procedures see D. PASQUINUCCI - L. VERZICHELLI, *Elezioni europee e classe politica sovranazionale, 1979-2004*, Bologna, 2004, p. 43 ss., and among others also D. PASQUINUCCI, "La procedura uniforme per l'elezione del Parlamento Europeo".

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# Election Time: Europe and Public Opinion in Historical Perspective (1979-2014)<sup>1</sup>

Giuliana Laschi\*

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**Abstract.** *This essay proposes to analyse from a historical perspective the connection between information, citizenship and European elections, attempting to understand if and to what extent there is a connection between, on the one hand, citizens' interest in direct elections to the European Parliament, and, on the other, their attitude to the European integration process. Through a diachronic review based on an analysis of Eurobarometer surveys carried out between 1979 and 2009, this essay emphasises how the little attention paid by citizens to the European elections is not only linked to Eurosceptic tendencies, but rather to a more widespread indifference to and disaffection with political systems.*

**Keywords:** *European elections; European citizenship; Political disaffection*

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*“Dans les années 1980, quand je suis arrivée au Parlement européen, j’imaginai encore une évolution vers un système de type fédéral. Aujourd’hui, à la fois parce que nous sommes plus nombreux et parce que les mentalités ont changé, je ne peux que constater un attachement croissant des citoyens à leur cadre national et aux facteurs historiques qui ont formé des identités singulières”<sup>2</sup>.*

## *Information, citizenship and European elections*

Turnout for European elections has never been very high, but it fell significantly in elections held after the mid-nineties and has always had a downward trend. Starting from this fact and added to the Europeans’

<sup>1</sup> I was asked to write an academic and political “position paper”, aimed at the heart of the matter. Albeit using a diachronic analysis, it is what I attempted to write. Historical contextualisation is, in my opinion, absolutely necessary, and speaks of personalities and moments in the history of integration that are known to a vast public, as is the general and basic historiography. Due to restrictions in space, I therefore consider both as known and refer readers in search of in-depth analysis to the many books written on the history of European integration.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone Veil, *Une vie*, Malesherbes, Ed. Stock, 2009, p. 189.

profound ignorance as far as the EEC/EU is concerned, my objective was to try and understand if there are relevant connections between citizens' interest in and attention paid to European elections since they have been held by universal suffrage, and a positive or negative attitude to the European integration process, as well as 'when and how' it changed over the years. There is also the issue of whether better-informed citizens are also those with a more pro-European attitude and show greater interest in European elections. The link between information, identity and full European citizenship, to which politicians (also often ill-informed and not very interested in European matters) often devote little attention, is instead certainly one of the most relevant, but also controversial in the Europe of 2014. A diachronic analysis may help shed light on what is, in my opinion, one of the crucial issues for the future of the EU. The instrument best suited to supporting this investigation is the Eurobarometer, created in 1973 specifically to constantly gauge the opinions of Europeans regards to the integration process in its various forms<sup>3</sup>. During years in which European elections have been held, most of the twice-yearly surveys were devoted to the elections and carried out before and after they were held.<sup>4</sup>

The first elections by universal suffrage were held at the end of the seventies<sup>5</sup>, difficult years for Europeans due to two oil crises. Not only did the economic and financial crisis inevitable affect European economies and societies, but it also confronted the European Community and the whole of Europe with international change that, for

<sup>3</sup> It was Rabier, the "father" of the European Community's information policies, who created the Eurobarometer. Fabio Casini analyses in depth Rabier's biography and his work in *Nascita e sviluppo della Politica di informazione delle Comunità europee (1952-1967)*, Doctorate thesis, Pavia University, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to specify that Eurobarometer readings are uniquely aimed at understanding change and the issues that may emerge at a diachronic level. I am not addressing methodological issues at all, nor in any sense analysing the validity of the Eurobarometer as a means. I leave such considerations to sociologists and political analysts who have on numerous occasions addressed this matter. Among them all I would like to mention the book by Blondel, Jean; Sinnott, Richard and Svensson, Palle, *People and Parliament in the European Union: Participation, Democracy and Legitimacy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> On the lengthy and complex process involving the organisation of universal suffrage European elections, see Daniele Pasquinucci and Luca Verzichelli, *Elezioni europee e classe politica sovranazionale, 1979-2004*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004.

the first time since World War II, envisaged the possibility of a wholly European foreign policy. OPEC's challenge in a sense created a rift in the rigid bipolar system, as had the détente started in those same years, and it was precisely during the seventies that the EU had tried to provide an effective answer, partly also separate from that of the United States. European citizens, therefore, for the first time voted in universal suffrage elections, experiencing a constantly changing international system, in which Europe's energy insecurity had caused the certainty of a West in full economic and social expansion to falter. It was a Europe in which the Community was attempting to play a more advanced role and individual nation states came to terms with the need for broader and more complete answers. With his usual optimism, Monnet wrote in his *Mémoires*:

*“L’opinion en Europe avait depuis longtemps sur ce point dépassé l’âge des hésitations et les sondages concordants révélaiient partout une tranquille maturité : il existait un vaste consensus sur la nécessité d’unir les peuples de l’Ouest et on vit qu’en France plus de soixante pour cent des gens interrogés se déclaraient favorables à l’idée d’un gouvernement européen, même s’il devait être présidé par un homme politique non français. Autant estimaient que l’élection du Parlement au suffrage universel serait une bonne chose”<sup>6</sup>.*

In 1979, Europe was fundamentally very different from that of the origins of the European Community and we therefore need a starting and reference point preceding the great systemic changes that started with President Nixon's 1971 statement on the unilateral cancellation of the direct convertibility of the United States dollar to gold.

In order to achieve this, I found it very interesting to see a 1963 survey carried out by the European Commission<sup>7</sup>. The objective of this survey was to assess European citizens' opinion on the integration process and its expansion. Overall satisfaction was very high, with 70% of citizens stating they were in favour of the European Community, albeit with significant differences in member countries. While 87% of

<sup>6</sup> Jean Monnet, *Mémoires*, Paris, Fayard, 1976, p. 745.

<sup>7</sup> Historical Archives of the European Commission, BAC 12/1969, n.36/1, « European Community Service », Opinion Survey, February 1963

Dutch citizens stated their approval, only 60% of Italians and just 27% of Luxembourg's citizens approved. This data also makes one reflect on the widespread belief that Italians and Luxembourg's citizens were, for very different reasons, absolutely in favour of integration and particularly in favour of integration and pro-Europe from the very beginning. It is, however, necessary to underline that a very small percentage of Europeans, including Italians and Luxembourgers, were totally against integration, while an extremely high percentage of citizens had no idea what to think of the integration process and of Europe. Among those with no opinion were 68% of Luxembourgers and 36% of Italians.

Table 1 – *Positions of the Community's citizens regarding the integration process, in %*

	Pro-Europe	No answer	Against
Germany	81	15	4
France	72	20	8
Italy	60	36	4
The Netherlands	87	9	4
Belgium	85	30	5
Luxembourg	27	68	5
Community	70	25	5

Source: Historical Archives of the European Commission, *BAC 12/1969, no.36/1, «European Community Service», Opinion Survey, February 1963.*

There were three reasons for which those interviewed said they were in favour. Firstly, European integration was seen as a safeguard against wars and a process allowing nations to build peace. According to 23% of Germans and 24% of French citizens interviewed, cooperation was necessary in order to avoid another conflict. Another reason often quoted by those interviewed was that they favoured integration because, if isolated, individual states would not survive and play an international role. Others spoke specifically of Europe as a third power. Dutch citizens speaking of the need for European states to unite in order to survive at an international level were particularly numerous. Finally, and it is no surprise, the third main reason concerns the interpretation of integration as a necessary economic stimulus, according to 32% of

citizens in the Netherlands, 17% in France and 15% in Italy. Albeit very important, one must observe that the economic motivation, which many would like to see as the only driving force and positive element of the integration process, was indeed considered important, but not the main reason provided by those interviewed to explain their approval of the process. In addition to these three macro-reasons, some citizens explicitly referred to a desire for European cooperation being the prelude to Europe's future intellectual, spiritual and social development. In France and in the Netherlands, non-materialistic motivations for desiring European unity<sup>8</sup>, ranked third in importance.

Predictions made about Europe's future by those interviewed were also very interesting. According to a significant majority, European unity would be achieved, and 15% even thought it would be achieved in their lifetimes. Italy was an important exception with only 30% of those interviewed believing that European unity would be achieved, with 9% believing it would never happen and a significant 61% had no opinion at all on this subject. The most optimistic citizens were the Dutch, with 70% declaring they were certain European unity would be achieved.

Tab. 2 - "Will Unity be achieved", in %

	Europe will achieve Unity	Not achieve	No opinion
France	61	11	28
Germany	56	17	27
Belgium	66	9	25
Italy	30	9	61
Luxemburg	54	6	40
Netherlands	70	18	12
Community	56	12	32

Source: «European Community Service», *Opinion Survey, cit.*

<sup>8</sup> In the paper there is a continuous reference to European unity. This is the precise terminology used in most of the questions posed. There are also references to integration, albeit fewer, and rare ones to cooperation.

*Universal suffrage elections*

At the end of the seventies, as previously mentioned, a large majority of Europeans were in favour of the Community and of the universal suffrage elections<sup>9</sup>. The first president of the European parliament elected by universal suffrage, Simone Veil<sup>10</sup> said, “*À l’époque, on pouvait penser que l’élection du Parlement européen au suffrage universel était porteuse d’une volonté de relance du fédéralisme*”<sup>11</sup>. However, while very critical of the French attitude to the European integration process, Veil also remembered how little attention the French political class paid to the European parliament<sup>12</sup> saying, “*En France, nous avons le plus grand mal à trouver des interlocuteurs. Cette indifférence frôlait la caricature à l’approche des élections européennes*”<sup>13</sup>. In spite of Veil’s negative opinion, one constant in Eurobarometer data was the politicians’ greater attention, knowledge and favour for the Community compared to European citizens, and at times, the gap was such that one could speak of politicians’ real detachment from society.

Another constant and very interesting figure up to the 2009 elections, was that, in spite of the little attention paid to the Community and to the European elections, citizens maintained a favourable opinion of the integration process, the Community and even their country’s membership, initially also in Great Britain with Denmark as the only exception. Even turnout at elections fell constantly, in particular among the young, but this appears to have happened regardless of citizens’ perception of the EEC/EU, as we shall see.

<sup>9</sup> For a historical reconstruction of the European elections see Daniele Pasquinucci, *Uniti dal voto? Storia delle elezioni europee 1948-2009*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2013.

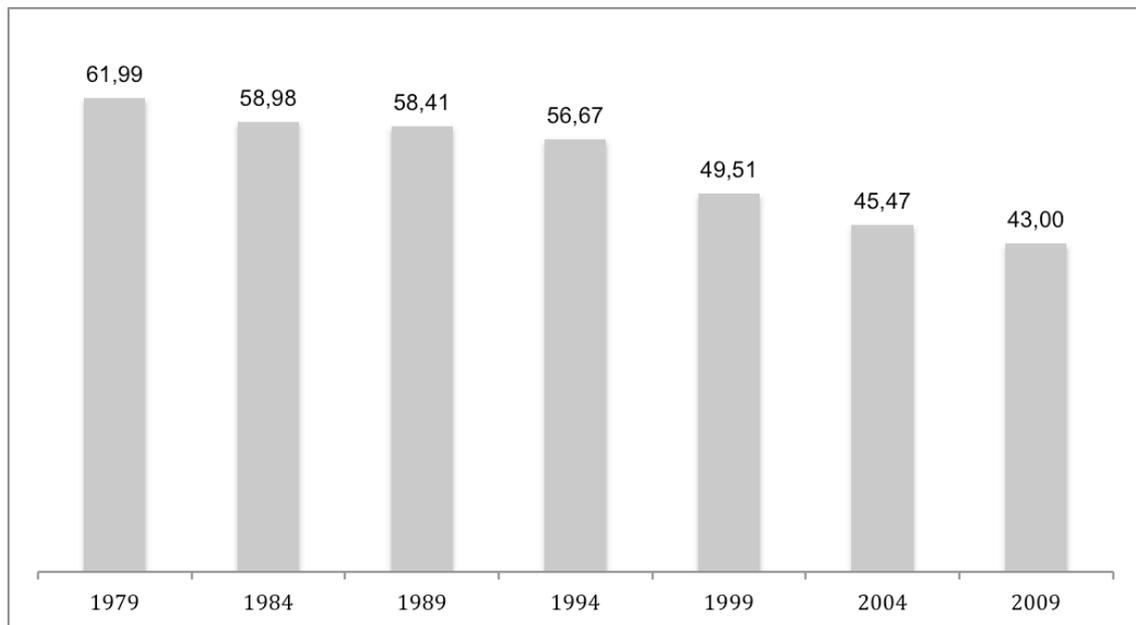
<sup>10</sup> On the European parliament, its role, functions and political characteristics see Richard Corbett, Francis Jacobs, Michael Shackleton, *The European Parliament*, London, John Harper, 2011 (8<sup>th</sup> ed.).

<sup>11</sup> Simone Veil, *Une vie*, op. cit., p.188.

<sup>12</sup> In reality the European parliament was for a long time considered of little interest by politicians, and also by scholars, since it was considered to be of little political importance as stated by Daniele Pasquinucci in his introduction to *I confini dell’identità. Il Parlamento europeo e gli allargamenti della CEE, 1961-1986*, Pavia, Jean Monnet Centre of Pavia, 2013. I fully agree with his analysis and conclusions.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Veil, *Une vie*, op. cit., p. 202.

Fig. 1 – Evolution of turnout in the European elections (in %)



Source: *Eurobarometer, Post-electoral Survey 2009, p. 6.*

Starting with a diachronic analysis of European parliamentary elections, one might have expected great interest in the first elections, which instead did not happen at all. Data for the 1979 and 1984 elections are clear in this sense about the great ignorance of citizens as far as the elections<sup>14</sup>, the European parliament's role and the entire European Community was concerned<sup>15</sup>. All the figures lead one to conclude that the first universal suffrage elections were held amidst a citizens' lack of awareness<sup>16</sup>, even among those who voted<sup>17</sup>. Only 10% of those interviewed believed that those elections were considered very important among people they knew, 31% thought they were quite important. Hence, even the first debates in parliament had practically no impact whatsoever on citizens. One surprising number became a constant in

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between information policies and the elections see Daniele Pasquinucci, *Uniti dal voto?*, op. cit, pp. 244-263.

<sup>15</sup> Eurobarometer, European Election Special June 1984, n. 21, May 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Eurobarometer, no. 12, December 1979, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> The little attention paid by European has often been justified with the Union's democratic deficit. See Luciano Bardi and Piero Ignazi, *Il Parlamento europeo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999, p. 9.

future elections, indicating that the Belgians were among those least informed and least interested.

What appears to be far more important, compared to elections held in the nineties and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the emphasis placed on final, federal and supranational objectives, on the European integration process, by some particularly supra-nationalist countries such the Netherlands, Germany and Italy. Seventy-five per cent of Europeans declared they were in favour of greater integration and only 11% opposed it.

Data concerning those in favour of European integration is particularly interesting if linked to fondness for one's own country and Community/Union membership. These figures increased significantly between 1981 and 1991, rising from 50% to 72%, the highest percentage ever reached. Many elements lead one to believe that citizens' enthusiasm for the integration process peaked in the early nineties. It was a positive moment for the European economy, the single market gave rise to great expectations and, at a European level, unemployment was under control. The Cold War was over and Europe had great potential and expectations even at an international level. All in all, everything seemed favourable to Europe's development. Instead, just a few years later the overall situation, and this was also the opinion of its citizens, Europe experienced a serious crisis and distancing from the integration process that in some cases has never been fully recovered. The crisis in the mid-nineties was caused by evident incidental problems that greatly reduced the expectations of Europeans. Among the main reasons one can briefly list the economic crisis and serious unemployment, the Gulf War, the debate that followed the Maastricht Treaty, the war in Yugoslavia and the addition of three relatively Eurosceptic countries. Thus, in 1999, support for Union membership in individual countries fell on average to just 49%, with very significant differences. Extremely high in Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, support crashed in Great Britain with only 31% of citizens in favour.

Table 3 – *Support for EU membership (%), 1999*

	Favourable	Against
Ireland	78	3
Luxembourg	77	3
The Netherlands	73	5
Italy	62	5
Portugal	59	4
Spain	55	4
Greece	54	11
Denmark	51	23
<b>Europe</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>12</b>
Belgium	47	8
France	47	14
Finland	45	19
Germany	44	11
Austria	36	23
Sweden	34	33
United Kingdom	31	23

Source: *Author's processing of Eurobarometer data, Report no. 51, July 1999.*

In my opinion, the most relevant data was the opposition registered in Germany, in spite of the fact that the Union had supported German reunification also at an economic level, and the constantly low percentages seen in Belgium, the country that from the very start had welcomed most of the Community, becoming the very heart of the integration process, benefitting financially as well as at a political and cultural level. One should bear in mind that the majority of Danes were in favour of membership, albeit with a significant degree of opposition.

European citizens are first of all powerfully attached to their own countries and far less to Europe. It is interesting to see in a 1999 survey to what extent those interviewed felt connected to their own city or country, 87%, to a region, 86%, and only 56% to Europe, obviously still very distant for many people in terms of being an element of identity. It is therefore not surprising that in the same 1999 survey, one of the main fears expressed with regard to the European integration process, was a loss of national identity and culture according to 46% of those interviewed, and an increasingly reduced use of one's own language, 39%. Among those particularly concerned about a loss of national

identity were the Irish, 44%, and the British, 68%. Data from Great Britain is not, or rather has not always been negative. In 1989, in spite of Mrs. Thatcher's reservations, three out of four of those interviewed said they were in favour of European integration<sup>18</sup>. It should be emphasised that in 1989 many Europeans still considered Europe's ever-increasing integration a good thing. Fifty-six per cent of those interviewed were in favour of a European government accountable to parliament. The situation was to change radically in the course of the nineties.

Table 4 – *Those interviewed indicated in percentage terms to what extent they agreed with each statement*

	1999	2004	2009
You feel attached to [country]	89	93	91
The membership of [country] is a good thing	49	70	69
You feel attached to Europe	56	69	64
You feel you are a citizen of the EU		66	64
You trust the institutions of the EU		46	50
The EP takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens		45	46

Source: *Author's processing of Eurobarometer data*

In 1999 confidence in European institutions was the subject of a survey concerning each individual institution rather than as a whole. The survey revealed that most of those interviewed trusted the European parliament<sup>19</sup>, 50%, while 28% did not, followed by the Court of Justice (44% and 23%), the Central Bank (42% and 24%) with only 40% trusting the Commission, with 33% against, while percentages for the Council of Ministers were 36% and 30%. These last figures are linked to little knowledge of the EU, since they reveal that few people were really knowledgeable about the roles and functions of each institution, seeing that more citizens trusted their own country more than the EU, but appeared not to have confidence in what their own governments did in Europe.

<sup>18</sup> Eurobarometer n. 31, June 1989.

<sup>19</sup> The European parliament is the institution preferred by citizens in all surveys. "Its role in spreading supranational sentiments among European citizens remains essential," as Bardi had already sensed in 1989. See Luciano Bardi, *Il Parlamento della Comunità europea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1989.

The link between information, approval of the Community and turnout for elections is extremely important, especially before 2000. It is so important that since 1994 the Eurobarometer has added a section to analyse this aspect in greater depth. Many citizens had stated that the main reason for abstention was inadequate information concerning the policies of the Community and its institutions and, more specifically, its parliament.

In 1999, 61% of those interviewed believed that the main reason for abstention was the lack of information about the EU, followed in second place with 59% having insufficient knowledge of the European parliament's role, importance, and powers. At the same time, media importance, as far as the information acquired was concerned, was ranked last. It was therefore not considered sufficient for the EU to speak of itself, and citizens appeared to demand constant in-depth information not only during the pre-electoral period, as well as quality information rather than fast and superficial news. Fifty-five per cent of those interviewed instead believed that parliament did not pay sufficient attention to the problems Europeans were interested in. It is important to observe that both in 1994 and in 1999, opposition to the principle of European integration was the least important reason for abstention.

Since 2004, however, the reasons are still the same but have become less relevant. Specific questions reveal that if it is true that in general European citizens have at least heard of the Union, very often the information provided about it is quite superficial and wanting, when not totally wrong. One evident figure is that those interviewed had little knowledge of the date and even the fact that European elections were to be held in the coming days. In 2004, in particular, those interviewed no longer listed a lack of information as the primary reason for abstention and one week before voting only 65% knew that elections were scheduled. Hence, faced with the urgency of some of the reasons provided, information became less important<sup>20</sup> and, furthermore, with the economic crisis, the media spoke more and more often of the Union, albeit not with increased precision and quality.

<sup>20</sup> The best Eurobarometer survey on abstention and the reasons for it is the Post European Elections 2004 Survey, June 2004.

Table 5 – Knowledge of the date on which European elections were to be held, in %

1979 (April)	67 had heard about the elections		
1984 (April)	39 had heard about the elections		
1994 (April)	22 (correct date)	19 (wrong date)	59% do not know
1999 (March)	15.5 (correct date)	9,7 (wrong date))	74.8 do not know
2004 (May)	36 (correct month)		
2009 (6 months)	29 (correct month)	7 (wrong date)	67 do not know

Source: Author's processing of Eurobarometer data. All elections were held in June.

Differences between the various countries were significant. In 1999, 57.5% of Belgians were informed about the election date, unlike the Germans, only 7%, while 2% of British citizens knew the exact date, 10% had the wrong date and 87% had no idea. In Italy, the figures were respectively 17.2%, 19.8% and 63%. Data for the young was worrying with only 8.5% of those aged between 15 and 24 knowing the date of the elections, 5.5% had the wrong date and 86% had no idea at all. The lack of cohesion between the young and the Union is an aspect that has been present for decades.

In the nineties, indifference among the young already appeared to be linked to disaffection for politics in general, not only the EU. Disaffection for politics and political parties has been increasing constantly and affects all age groups, especially the young. As far as European's confidence in the institutions is concerned, there was a very clear survey carried out by the Eurobarometer in 2004 presenting extremely worrying data<sup>21</sup>. The institution most trusted by Europeans was the police (65% tended to trust it, 29% did not), while for the Union<sup>22</sup> the percentages were respectively 41% and 42%, for national parliaments 35% and 54%, while only 16% of Europeans trusted political parties and 76% did not. Fifty-four per cent of those

<sup>21</sup> Eurobarometer 61, Spring 2004, published in May 2004.

<sup>22</sup> National data is interesting with only 19% of British citizens trusting the EU, 31% of Austrians, 42% of French citizens and 49% of Belgians. The highest percentage was that of the Greeks at 68%. The United Nations did not fare much better with the confidence of only 49% of those interviewed.

interviewed instead trusted television, with 40% preferring not to; this means 13% more than those trusting the Union. These figures speak for themselves as far as European citizens' interest for the elections is concerned, and in particular European elections. In 2004, however, 63% of those interviewed were in favour of a European constitution and the highest percentage, 78%, were Italians. Those interviewed were obviously in favour of greater European integration, but did not believe that European institutions or political parties would be capable of achieving this objective.

Data concerning knowledge of the election date increased until 2009 and half of those interviewed would like the European parliament to play a more important role. On the other hand, interest in the elections has not increased, with 44% of citizens interested and 53% not interested, figures that remain more or less stable in election years. In 1994, these figures were respectively already 42% and 56%. The economic crisis emphasised attention paid to daily life issues rather than European and global matters<sup>23</sup>. Survey results in a diachronic analysis tell us that those who abstain from voting do not decide to do so spontaneously for reasons linked to Europe. Abstaining is, first of all, the expression of disaffection for political systems. Until the 2009 elections, lower levels of interest in the Union and the integration process resulted in increased indifference rather than euro-scepticism.

<sup>23</sup> Directorate General for Communications, European elections 2009, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2009.

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## Towards a European Transnational Party System

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## STUDI SULL'INTEGRAZIONE EUROPEA

The issue of a better defined and more substantial institutional and functional position for political parties in the European Union system is still unresolved. This question is part of the broader, endemic problem of the Union's democratic deficit and political development.

The need for a genuinely systemic transnational European dimension of political parties is addressed by the authors in light of European party-building within the ongoing broader process of democratic institution-building of the EU.

The book includes a selection of contributions presented during the International Conference "Representative Democracy and Political Participation. Towards a European Transnational Party System" that took place at the University of Padua in May 2014. The full proceedings in Italian language have been published by Cacucci Editore, Bari.

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