



Shouting is not enough!

On politicisation as a reform strategy and its proper implementation

1 THE VICES AND VIRTUES OF THE POLITICISATION DEBATE

Public opposition to the European Union is perhaps the most formidable challenge faced by advocates of integration today. It is nothing short of embarrassing that announcements of referendums are received as threats in European quarters. If all Member States today had their citizens vote on the Reform Treaty it can well be doubted that a single vote would pass. The 2009 parliamentary election is unlikely to attract but modest interest. The lack of public support spells gloomy prospects for practical reform measures as much as it does for the legitimacy of the integration project.

The most recent “buzz-word” to have taken hold of the debate what to do about public opposition is the term “politicisation”. The idea behind is that increased political contestation at the European level will render alternative choices visible, forge stable coalitions between like-minded actors, overcome institutional fire-walls and policy deadlock and, ultimately, attract the media, facilitate voter choice and make elections (more) meaningful. These, of course, are views expressed most specifically by LSE-based political scientist Simon Hix.¹

The ideas resonate strongly within the community of practitioners. A recent example is provided by the leader of the liberals in the European Parliament, Graham Watson. In late 2008, Watson called for an “ideological coalition” to dominate EP politics

instead of the consensus-based politics prevailing presently.² Shortly after, Watson announced his group’s withdrawal from “job-fixing” of the post of the parliamentary president, calling for a “pro-active debate” instead of a “back-room culture that lets our politics down”.³ If Watson must be seen as among the staunchest advocates of politicisation, it is no secret that the idea of enhanced and intensified political contest inspires much current debate. The hopes, as European Affairs commentator Peter Sain Ley Berry has it, are that “from little acorns mighty oaks do grow”.⁴

While the gains from politicisation appear tempting, indeed, we maintain that reaping them is by far not as easy as presently perceived. Advocates of politicisation maintain that policy-makers need to change their behaviour in order to introduce an adversarial element in the political process. This reasoning, of course, stems from experience with national politics: Here, at the risk of oversimplifying matters, political contest is a vehicle for the communication and advocacy of competing positions – it facilitates, renders visible and makes interesting what, otherwise, would perhaps be opaque and complex. There is, however, a notable conceptual problem: EU politics is not national politics.⁵

Stefano Bartolini forcefully argues that national political contest is embedded in a variety of context conditions that are lacking in politics beyond the

nation state.⁶ Let only three broad points be noted: (1) European parties are weak whereas strong parties are required to build coherent policy programmes, to allow cross-institutional coordination or to give cues for voter choice; (2) European Parliament elections have unclear effects on policy agendas whereas consequential elections at the national level constitute a visible way by which citizens affect outcomes⁷; (3) There is no European demos, no public sphere and no common language although these are essential facilitators for making sense of public debate, providing common frames of reference and drawing attention to the political process.⁸ politicisation requires these conditions. Without them the debate that its advocates hope for will not reach the European citizens – its vehicles are missing, its meaning is unclear and the transmission belt between elites and citizens is weak to non-existent. Politicisation understood as behavioural change only is bound to have next to no positive effect whatsoever. Shouting is not enough.

This is not to say that politicisation is not a potentially important concept. However, as a reform strategy based only on behavioural change of policy makers, it lacks credibility and is all too easy to attack along the lines noted above. We suggest that politicisation is best seen as a long-term commitment to the transformation of European Union politics which entails political contest but, as importantly, the gradual establishment of the conditions which allow political contest to unfold its beneficial effects.

This has two consequences: First, it follows that the debate needs to be broadened to encompass the question as to how the absence of context conditions can be addressed. Second, it is equally obvious that we need to refrain from putting all hopes into isolated reform initiatives. The challenges ahead are notable and the prospects for positive effects in the short-term are low. Not only is politicisation a long-term reform strategy – its effects are also slow to emerge. If the pro-European policy-making elites are to build support for European integration, they must engage in reforms beyond lukewarm lip-service paid to behavioural change without prospects for short-term improvement.

A gradual reform approach is called for. Its appeal is twofold. On the one hand, it is anchored in a realistic understanding of the scope of the problems

in the way of politicisation and the re-vitalisation of European politics. On the other hand, it is equally rooted in a strongly normative believe that making European politics work is desirable; that this cannot be done without regaining public support; and, ultimately, that it is worth the efforts for advocates of integration to begin a reform process with a temporal dimension in excess of the normal attention span of contemporary political elites.

2 TOWARDS GRADUAL REFORM: FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN PARTIES

To move the debate forward, we now take a closer look at one of the obstacles to politicisation. European level parties are weak and their strengthening is a necessary condition for making politicisation work. It is worth stressing again that this must be seen as part of a gradual strategy towards transforming European politics. We propose to take four measures in order to bolster the role of European parties:

- National Parties should transfer competencies for the strategic planning of all campaign events exclusively related to European Integration to the European party federations they choose to join.
- At the level of European party federations, a bureaucracy with commensurate responsibilities should be strengthened or established and its organisational structure should not be based on geographic principles.
- National parties should endow the European party organizations they choose to join with own resources of which these can dispose freely in the financing of electoral campaigns of individual candidates.
- European party organisations should become entitled to nominate a sub-set of the candidate lists of national parties to European Parliament elections.

The remainder elaborates the reasoning underpinning these recommendations. We begin with the question as to why European parties are weak in the first place. A better understanding of the reasons for their weakness helps, in turn, to identify ways to strengthen them.

Why European Parties are weak?

What is the function of political parties? Basically, they facilitate collective action and credible mutual commitments amongst more or less like-minded individuals.⁹ This function holds at the national level. But at the European level, there are clear hurdles to

the emergence of stronger parties. The following are especially noteworthy:

- **Functional necessity.** European parties develop in a political environment that is already heavily structured by existing party organisations at the national level. The national parties satisfactorily perform many functions that make parties necessary. The coordinate legislators, tie political elites to the grass-root level of activism, provide mechanisms for selecting leaders, or constitute vital organisational and administrative capacities in election campaigns, to name but a few functions. It is not clear which activities are really in demand from strong rather than loosely affiliated European parties.
- **Ideological diversity.** It has often been noted that labels such as left and right, despite their common usage across Europe, are heavily loaded with distinct national cultures and historical trajectories.¹⁰ European parties would, thus, have to find ways to reconcile (or promote convergence in) diverse ideological perspectives.
- **Individual utility.** Careers of legislators are made and broken nationally in local constituencies or by national party leadership. National parties, thus, have at their disposal strong incentives and sanctions in order to enforce party unity. Individual legislators face incentives to focus activities on national parties as this has personal utility for them in terms of career prospects. Again, it is not clear what, beyond personal affection, the individual utility a legislator gains from strong commitment to a European-level party is.

Empowering European parties means to engage with these obstacles. Two points need to be made here. First, the ideological diversity of national parties belonging to the same party family is beyond what can be easily manipulated. Changes in entrenched values and beliefs of individuals do occur but this goes neither quickly nor easily. Such changes, moreover, are hard to manufacture artificially. We think, therefore, that it is more appropriate to concentrate on ways to empower European parties through the structuring of incentives and constraints. Changes of identities may occur through gradual shifts in attention and loyalties if European parties become more relevant but this is not a condition for the recommendations to unfold their effects.¹¹

Second, both the problem of individual utility and the problem of functional necessity can be alleviated

through organizational change. Utility is a question of incentives faced by individuals. Such incentives – most obviously in terms of career opportunities (which, in turn, is linked to such important gains as income, prestige and power) – can be engineered. Functional necessity, similarly, can be created consciously by attributing relevant functions to European party organisations. The point, thus, is that both individual utility and functional necessity can be enhanced by design rather than by chance.

Shortly, we devote attention to the crucial question why one might have confidence in the realism of our recommendations. First, however, let us now discuss how the above recommendations are explicitly derived from a focus on the creation of functional necessity and individual utility.

Creating functional necessity for European parties

The creation of functional necessity requires two connected strategies. On the one hand, it is necessary to transfer relevant organizational functions to European parties. On the other hand, such organizational functions should no longer be provided by national parties or, at least, the activity of European parties has to provide a value-added that cannot be neglected. Under such conditions, the existence of European parties would be functionally necessary. There would be a practical underpinning for a stronger role of such parties in multi-level governance.

At this stage, recall the first two recommendations made earlier:

- National Parties should transfer competencies for the strategic planning of all campaign events exclusively related to European Integration to the European party federations they choose to join.
- At the level of European party federations, a bureaucracy with commensurate responsibilities should be strengthened or established and its organisational structure should not be based on geographic principles.

The underlying logic is as follows: The first statement reflects the idea that a transfer of competences is the basis of creating functional necessity given the broad range of functions that are otherwise already satisfactorily performed domestically. Organising electoral campaigns is a critical function of national

parties and it would be inappropriate to assume that European parties could perform such tasks better across the board. However, their specific role relates to European affairs and, after all, national parties choose to join party federations in order to interact transnationally. If European parties are given responsibility for the strategic planning of European Affairs-specific events in national electoral campaigns, they would become necessary as the very provider of such functions in case a national party intends to have such an event. Given the growing importance of the EU in citizens' daily lives, it seems that at least some such events will be called for. It would, at the same time, create incentives to have a common EU specific strategy rather than to subsume EU affairs under other issues such as external relations.

This alone, however, does not yet serve the purpose of strengthening EU level parties. European parties also need the organisational resources to provide this job effectively. This can be achieved by creating or strengthening the bureaucratic structures available to the European parties. Bureaucratic structures have additional advantages here such as their tendency to create 'bureaucratic turf' – that is, individuals and groups of individuals with an interest in maintaining a meaningful role or even extending their competences.¹² The long-term dynamics of bureaucratic interaction are, thus, potentially beneficial to the European level of party organisation.

At the same time, organizations are at risk of fragmentation. This is particularly possible if organisational principles at different levels are similar.¹³ So, despite internal sub-divisions, national parties cooperating at the European level are, obviously, primarily differentiated according to the national context from which they come. A bureaucracy at the level of European parties – to which such national parties feel to belong to – risks fragmentation if it would be sub-divided into departments with national responsibility. The likely result would be to find delegates from the various national party bureaucracies in the respective organisational units. In a sense, this merely means the spatial transfer of a domestic party department to a different place – certainly not the purpose here. As a consequence, a different organisational principle is needed so that the staff of European party bureaucracies possesses incentives to think outside the box of their national party affiliation and to adopt

the outlook of the European level party bureaucracy. This would similarly facilitate the emergence of vested interests and bureaucratic turf and, in the long term, promises to strengthen European parties.

Creating individual utility of European parties

The lack of individual utility exerted by European parties' activities is another reason why they have not become strong actors in European politics. This section elaborates the third and fourth recommendation. Both are targeted as the utility of European parties for affiliates of national parties – such as parliamentarians or party officials. The basic logic is similar as noted above. One can expect individual utility to increase if European parties provide functions for the individual which national parties do not or no longer provide. This means that national parties need to concede such functions in favour of European level party organizations. Recall the two recommendations made earlier:

- National parties should endow the European party organizations they choose to join with own resources of which these can dispose freely in the financing of electoral campaigns of individual candidates.
- European party organisations should become entitled to nominate a sub-set of candidate lists of national parties to European Parliament elections.

One needs to acknowledge an obvious deficit in both recommendations. That is, national electoral systems differ greatly and not every member state has either direct candidates running in defined districts or candidate lists that are put to vote nationally. It would be necessary to further differentiate the points noted above in light of such difficulties. This cannot be done here for reasons of space but it is still worth pointing out the general advantages that these recommendations promise if the particular problems of distinct national electoral systems can be resolved.

The first recommendations (number three overall, that is) establishes the ability of European Parties to make a contribution independently of national parliaments to the political efforts of individual party members running for election. This is intended to make the European party organization a point of interest for individuals – a point which it is worth paying attention to. By maintaining ties and networks with delegates from European Party bureaucracies, individual members of national

parties can obtain actual financial benefits. Moreover, if this is seen in conjunction with non-national principles of organization that should apply at the level of European party bureaucracy, one may be optimistic that national party members do not merely maintain ties to their own nationals via national party organizations.

The second recommendation (number four overall) aims at a similar point. By allowing the European party organization a say over a limited number of candidates to be placed on party lists, it creates a tangible benefit for individuals who seek access to such nomination via European level party politics. It is certainly clear that the number of such nominations will be limited as it is one of the core prerogatives of national parties – both leadership and/or grass-root depending on the specific party – which are unlikely to be willing to concede much. Yet, as the following section discusses, limited concessions are not entirely unlikely either.

Is this realistic at all?

There can be no underestimating of the difficulties of implementing institutional reform of the scale of the above recommendations. While limited in scope, they are premised on the voluntary concession of competences on part of national parties in favour of the European party families they choose to join. Besides the general problems of veto points and vested interests, there are other difficulties. For instance, such transfers create strong commitments of national parties to particular European level organizations and, thus, make shifting membership less likely. In this sense, it can be questioned whether the ideological diversity even between parties coming from the same party families can be overcome. One might see, possibly, smaller party organisations with ideologically more consistent groups joining. One cannot deny these difficulties but we would also propose two arguments why one might also have some optimism regarding the willingness of national parties to surrender certain limited competencies.

For simplicity one might imagine the national party as consisting of the leadership and the grass-root organizational level and assume that both have to agree to the transfer of competencies. The leadership might have to design the plans and put forward a proposal to do so. The grass-root might have to agree by means of whatever procedure for decision-making

is envisaged in the parties' internal rules. Why would either level agree?

To begin with, the leadership of most national parties continues to be supportive of integration. Indeed, many party leaders have contributed as office-holders to the shaping of the European integration process or might envisage to do so in the future. As representatives of the public, they are in need of popular acceptance of the integration project in order to maintain its viability and make its further development possible. Otherwise, the failure of Treaty revisions will remain a recurring phenomenon. Thus, it is critical that the reform recommendations noted above are presented in their proper context – that is, as the gradual establishment of conditions that make the beneficial effects of politicisation possible. If presented as steps towards improving public acceptance of European integration, national party leadership might actually have incentives to engage in reform. This is particularly so given that reforms are limited in scope. Party leaders need to be reminded that building support for European integration has to go beyond lukewarm commitments to intensified political contest.

Pressure from party leadership might then be one factor making it more likely that the parties' grass-root level would also support the reform recommendations. But there are also other reasons to be optimistic. These recommendations might actually enhance the independence of the local level by establishing mechanisms through which the power of the leadership can be overcome. The grass-root level, thus, gains room for manoeuvre which it would not enjoy otherwise. It also gains additional sources of funding and local candidates might benefit from additional opportunities to achieve places on parties' electoral lists. There are, consequently, a host of benefits for grass-root party levels associated to the recommendations put forward here. Transfer of competencies need not be framed as unequivocal loss but as a package of trade-offs – some of which quite beneficial for the local level of party organization.

3 TAKING STOCK OF THE ARGUMENT

We hope to have demonstrated three points in this paper:

First, politicisation is best seen as a long-term approach to the transformation of European Politics. Its proper implementation extends well beyond

enhanced political contestation and debate. As a strategy of reform, politicisation is only credible if it is extended to include the background conditions in which political contest is embedded nationally: most notably, the EU deficits regarding party politics, consequential elections and shared identity, language and public sphere.

Second, it is perhaps one of the problems of the debate that individual actors seek to come up with all-encompassing solutions. We find it more realistic to build on a gradual approach. Hence, the focus in this paper has been on one of several conditions

inhibiting the realisation of beneficial effects from politicisation – the weakness of European parties. Third, this has enabled us to focus our attention on a few yet, as we hope to have argued convincingly, concrete recommendations. It is of crucial importance that these recommendations be seen and framed as part of the gradual reform approach advocated earlier. Only in this way it is possible to sell them to decision-makers. Only under the umbrella of revitalising public support can politicisation as a reform strategy and its proper implementation succeed in its bold ambition to transform European politics.

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¹ Hix, S. (2006), 'Why the EU needs (Left-Right) Politics? Policy Reform and Accountability are Impossible without it', in Notre Europe Policy Paper No. 19, Politics: The Right or Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU. Notre Europe: Brussels. Hix, S. (2008) What's Wrong With the European Union and How to Fix It. Cambridge: Polity Press.

² Euractiv.com (06/11/2008) "ALDE chief: European Parliament needs 'ideological coalition'".

³ EUObserver (27/01/2009) "Liberal leader pledges to end job-fixing in the EP".

⁴ EUObserver (30/01/2009) "[Comment] The EP presidency should be reformed".

⁵ The EU may certainly be analysed drawing on terms and concepts employed for the analysis of political systems elsewhere but this does not mean that the EU is quite the same as a nation-state. See Hix, S. (1998), 'The Study of the European Union II: The "New Governance" Agenda and Its Rival', Journal of European Public Policy 5(1): 38-65.

⁶ Bartolini, S. (2006), 'Should the Union be ,politicised'? Prospects and Risks', in Notre Europe Policy Paper No. 19, Politics: The Right or Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU. Notre Europe: Brussels.

⁷ The question why citizens would bother to vote absent of clear gains is, of course, a long-standing concern of economic approaches to voting behaviour early and most prominently expressed in Downs, A. (1957), 'An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy', The Journal of Political Economy 65(2): 135-150.

⁸ Cederman, L.-E. (2001), 'Nationalism and Bounded Integration: What it Would Take to Create a European Demos', European Journal of International Relations 7(2): 139-74. Kimlicka, W. (1999), 'Citizenship in an Era of Globalization: A Comment on Held', in I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón (eds.), Democracy's Edges. Cambridge UP, CH. 7.

⁹ This function, at least, is most relevant for the argument here. A brief but fuller review is in Lindberg, B., Rasmussen, A. and Warntjen, A. (2008), 'Party politics as usual? The role of political parties in EU legislative decision-making', Journal of European Public Policy 15(8): 1107-26.

¹⁰ e.g. Benoit, K. and Laver, M. (2005) Party Policy in Modern Democracies. London: Routledge.

¹¹ These arguments are mirrored in neo-functional integration theory. For an overview, see, for instance, Rosamond, B. (2005), 'The uniting of Europe and the foundation of EU studies: revisiting the neofunctionalism of Ernst B. Haas', Journal of European Public Policy 12(2): 237-54.

¹² General discussions of this phenomenon can be found in Peters, B. G. (2001) The Politics of Bureaucracy, 5th edition. London: Longman. Dunleavy, P. (1991) Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

¹³ For an organization theoretical argument along these lines see, for instance, Egeberg, M. (2001), 'How federal? The organizational dimension of integration in the EU (and elsewhere)', Journal of European Public Policy 8(5): 728-46.