

Political Linkage in the European Union

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A major channel of socio-political linkage is provided by general elections organized by political parties (e.g. Lawson 1980; Klingemann et al. 1994). Nowadays, this electoral connection is sliding somewhat out of view. Contemporary political science is more concerned with "deliberative politics" (see Elster 1998, MacEdo 1999), the import of "social capital" for the stability of democratic rule (see Putnam et al 1993, van Deth et al. 1999), or the contribution NGOs make to the process of "governance" (see Hewson and Sinclair 1999, Väyrynen 1999). The elevated interest in these questions may be due to the relative sterility of the economic approach that has predominated in electoral studies over the last decades (see Schmitt 2001). However, it should not be forgotten that the electoral connection still constitutes the engine¹ of contemporary democracy (Römmele and Schmitt, in preparation).

The subject of the present paper is the state of linkage between society and politics in the European Union (EU). In this field, political science is a science of democracy: the democratization of the EU is a ubiquitous issue. We therefore begin with a clarification of the notion of a "democratic deficit" in the European Union. In the second and third parts, we address questions of interest intermediation and opinion formation. In doing so, we try to substantiate the view that the democratic deficit of the EU is caused by a defective process of opinion formation much more than by problems of interest intermediation. We end with a proposal for EU constitutional reform that suggests itself as an appropriate means to more effectively shape the process of opinion formation.

I.

European political science has given considerable attention to the democratic qualities of the European Union. The relevant literature usually argues that the EU has a "democratic deficit". What that democratic deficiency is defined to be,

¹ Technological progress cannot be ignored: some forty years ago, Schattschneider (1960) in this context still spoke of parties as the "workhorse" of modern democracy.

however, depends a good deal on how the various observers define "democracy". As a result it is useful right at the outset to name two key criteria for the functioning of a representative democracy. Following Robert Dahl (1989), we call a political system democratic if (1) all citizens are guaranteed the same political rights and if (2) the political process is structured as a competitive system that foresees and permits government change through general elections.

The European Union has little difficulty in meeting the first criterion. EU citizens have equal rights to participate in the political process even if their votes are given a different weight depending on the member country they are living in (see Attina 1995). One can regret this fact, but one can hardly derive a grave democratic deficit from it (see Weßels and Schmitt 2000).

The second criterion, positing the possibility of government change through general elections, is more difficult to meet. It is quite evident that the election of the European Parliament does not result either in a government being voted into or out of office.² That this nonetheless is not the full answer to questions about EU democracy is due to the multi-tiered system of government of the European Union and the resulting differences of governmental 'modes' – the two most important variants being the intergovernmental and the supranational mode of EU government (see Weiler et al. 1995; König et al. 1996). From the intergovernmental perspective, national politics is the "competitive system that foresees and permits government change through general elections". As long as national governments when pursuing their European policies answer to national parliaments, and are thus at least indirectly responsible to their voters, the democratic chain of mandate and control remains unbroken.

² It is for this reason in particular that there is 'less at stake' in European Parliament elections, which in turn is a major reason for the low voter turnout and the systematic loss of support for big parties and parties in national governments (see Reif and Schmitt 1980).

But in those policy areas where the Council of Ministers takes decisions by majority vote, European policy making cannot reliably be controlled nationally. Because national governments can be outvoted in this venue, those decisions do not necessarily rely on the approval of a majority of representatives in each of the parliaments of the member-states. It has been precisely in such areas where the politics of the EU moves from an intergovernmental to a supranational governing mode that the European Parliament has fought for greater consultative and co-operative decision-making powers over the last decades (see König 1997). The consequence of this is that the delegation of powers by the electorate and the parliamentary control of government action that otherwise exists at national levels can be at least partly mirrored at the EU level by European Parliament controls exercised on behalf of the "European people" – that is, if such a creature actually exists.³

One can observe three things from this brief overview. First, equal political rights, political competition, and government change through general elections are not alien to the multi-tiered system of government of the European Union. Second, a judgment as to the democratic status of the EU cannot be based solely on the intergovernmental or the supranational governing mode. Third, it would certainly be equally misguided to characterize the European Union today as a smoothly functioning democracy.

In an unfinished and still developing political system like that of the European Union, it is certainly not incorrect to trace those problems back to structural defects. Such structural, or constitutional, defects can be most readily (and most reliably) discerned by analyzing the political process. In what follows, therefore, the democratic deficit of the European Union will be explored in view of

³ Kielmannsegg (1995) for example holds that a European democracy is a logical impossibility owing to the absence of a European *demos*. But see Fuchs (2000) who presents convincing counter-arguments based on the history of European nation-states.

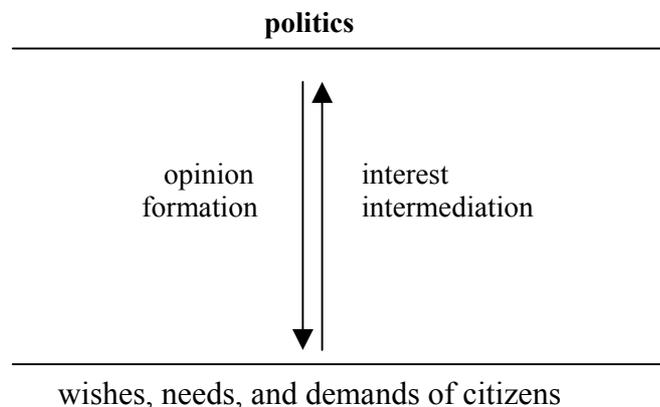
the opposite and complementary processes of opinion formation and interest intermediation in the European Union.

This is by no means a marginal question. If democratic competition should not content itself with the replacement of one leader by another (as the early empirical studies of electoral democracy still concluded – see Berelson et al. 1954), but must also include competition over political goals and policy concerns (see Schmitt 2001), then it will not manage to do so without linkage processes between polity and society.

Graph 1

Opinion Formation and Interest Intermediation

as opposite but complementary processes between society and politics



We will argue that problems in the democratic process of the European Union are concentrated in, and caused by, obvious defects of the process of opinion formation rather than the process of interest intermediation. A further democratization of the politics of the EU therefore requires a more effective opinion formation that is capable of discussing the larger questions about the current structure and future development of the European Union.

II.

Interest intermediation refers to the more or less successful process by which the politically relevant wishes, needs, and demands of citizens – that is, their political preferences – are transferred into politics. The relative success of interest intermediation is determined by two criteria: scope and effectiveness. The normative stance here is clear. In a representative democracy, the interests of all citizens should have an equally large influence on governmental policies. In terms of scope this means that the more citizens who are included, the better. The same is true for the effectiveness of interest intermediation, since the more influence there is on governmental policy, the better. In reality, both scope and effectiveness of the various mechanisms of interest intermediation are of variable sizes. Both criteria also need not point in the same direction in the sense that the mechanism with the largest scope is also the most effective.

The central actors in interest intermediation are political parties, accompanied by interest groups and social movements. These actors reflect the linkage mechanisms of general elections or referendums, and, respectively, lobbying, and public protests like demonstrations or traffic blockages. General elections and referendums organized by political parties are without doubt the most extensive of such mechanisms, which is to say the one of greatest scope. As a result, special attention is paid to them here.

Interest intermediation in the multi-tiered system of the EU follows different paths (see Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). The confederal path enables citizens to assert their European policy preferences through national politics. This promises success, since national governments influence EU policies in the European Council to a considerable degree. As a consequence, national governments become the central addressees for confederal interest intermediation.

National governments are formed on the basis of general elections, and to the extent to which the policies of the European Union become the subject of national election campaigns, elected governments are given a mandate – the success of which will be judged at the next election. If there are European policy decisions that go beyond existing constitutional limits, or that transcend the bounds of what is judged to be within the area of competence of the government, referendums are launched.

Compared to elections and referendums, lobbying and political protest are rather subordinated forms of confederal interest intermediation. Lobbyists interested in affecting EU policies usually address themselves directly to the political planners and decision-makers in Brussels, much less so to individual national governments. Political protest, by contrast, tends to address itself to national rather than supranational institutions, likely in part because the EU political system simply does not provide appropriate addressees. Such protest, however, is not all that vehement and originates in interest group politics rather than in that of social movements (see Rucht 2000).

National elections are the chief vehicle of confederal interest intermediation. Participation in national elections, although declining, remains high (see the comprehensive survey by IDEA n.d.). This determines the scope of interest intermediation. This vehicle has the disadvantage that EU constitutional matters do not often play much of a role in national election campaigns.⁴ As only those substantive questions that reach a certain level of importance in the campaign have the potential to influence the electoral decisions of citizens, it is hardly

⁴ Constitutional issues are not about the "whether" but the "how" of European unification. The introduction of a new common European currency in the wake of the currency union, or the opening of the borders between EU nation-states as a consequence of the Schengen Agreement are questions of this kind. The European Representation Study found mass-elite congruence in these questions to be deficient (see, again, Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). The eastward enlargement of the European Union also belongs in this issue category, an enlargement that already now is being critically commented upon in the member states (see Eurobarometer 55).

surprising that the correspondence between voters and representatives of national parliaments is deficient in this area.⁵

However, only a small part of the politics of the European Union is concerned with such constitutional issues. General questions and issues of common concern, even though they are much less spectacular, form the major part. Such general questions are debated and decided at the national as well as the European political level. The correspondence between electors and elected in such questions is larger, and interest intermediation is more effective.⁶

In referendums, by contrast, constitutional questions about the EU explicitly stand at the center of debate. This guarantees not only a relatively large scope but also relatively high effectiveness.⁷ But even here effectiveness is far from perfect, however, because the voting behavior of citizens – in deciding for or against joining the EU, for or against a common currency, or for or against extending membership to Eastern European nations – also reflects their general trust in the government that is putting the question in addition to reflecting their European policy preferences (see Franklin, van der Eijk und Marsh 1995).

If we shift our attention to the federal path of interest intermediation, we find citizens addressing their policy preferences directly to the political system of

⁵ However, while the mass-elite congruence about the "how" of European unification ("maintain national currencies" versus "introduce a new European currency") in the run-up to the currency union was limited, this did not put in question the much broader consensus over the "whether" of European unification ("for" versus "against European unification"; see Schmitt and Thomassen 2000).

⁶ Unemployment and health care are examples of such general questions. They are usually discussed in terms of the left-right ideology, making the political communication about such issues simpler and more effective. As a result, the mass-elite congruence in these questions is markedly larger than over constitutional questions of the European Union (see Schmitt and Thomassen 1999).

⁷ However, the scope of referendums is regularly, and in part massively, smaller than that of national elections, with a corresponding influence on the effectiveness of interest intermediation. See in this context the recent study by Sinnott and Thomson (2001), who, on the basis of ecological analyses, demonstrate that the defeat of the Irish referendum in June 2001 on the Nice Treaty was due far more to weak voter turnout than to an EU-critical shift in Irish public opinion.

the EU. Particularly important here are general elections, as in the direct election of the European Parliament, as well as lobbying. Compared to national politics, the lobbying by interest group representatives has taken on a new quality here, especially in the policy process of the European Commission. In addition to national administrators (such as agents of national ministries), representatives of national and European interest groups are explicitly included in deliberative committees of the Commission. Along with their specialized knowledge they naturally bring with them and represent their specific interests (see Mazey and Richardson 1993). However, there are few empirical analyses of this type of influence because they are difficult to conduct (but see Schnorpfeil 1996). Consolidated knowledge in this area is correspondingly rare. What we do know, however, indicates that the scope of interest intermediation through this particular channel remains relatively limited, though its effectiveness would have to be judged to be relatively high (see Bach 1999).

If we turn to the direct election of members of the European Parliament, then the most obvious development has been the decline in electoral participation, on the part of citizens from the first to the fifth direct election. Two in three Dutch and three in four British citizens abstained in the latest election in the summer of 1999. Union-wide, electoral participation went down from 62 percent in 1979 to a little less than 50 percent in 1999. However, it is important to not interpret this as a crisis symptom of the federalist path of interest intermediation. Rather, it seems that the decline is due largely to changes in the composition of the EU electorate. In the process of EU enlargement from nine to twelve and now to fifteen member countries, the proportion of voters operating under conditions of compulsory voting (as in Belgium, Greece, Luxembourg, and, in a way, Italy) has continuously declined. This has a near automatic depressive influence on the level of participation in this kind of second-order elections (see Weßels and Schmitt 2000).

Yet though one can describe the scope of interest intermediation through general elections in terms of participation rates, the effectiveness of this process also depends upon the powers of the assembly that is to be elected. We have already mentioned that the directly elected European Parliament has considerably expanded its consultative and cooperative decision-making powers in the last three decades. On the other hand, it remains a long way from being able to form and sustain a European government in the manner typical of Western European parliamentary systems. In fact, the full parliamentarization of supra-national government in the EU today seems farther from realization than ever (see Joerges et al. 2000).

As for the effectiveness of federal interest intermediation through general elections, we know that European elections provide an only partially convincing congruence between electors and elected, and then only in general political questions. In terms of EU constitutional matters, the preferences of the voters and the politics of their representatives diverge widely, just as in the national electoral arena.⁸

If we draw conclusions from this brief sketch of interest intermediation in the EU, then two main points stand out. In terms of scope, elections and referendums are vastly superior to all other mechanisms. In terms of effectiveness, particularly over questions concerning matters of the future shape and functioning of the European Union, grave differences remain between voter preferences and the actions of those they elect.

⁸ This stems from the fact that European policy preferences of members of the European Parliament are not appreciably different from those of their colleagues in the national parliaments (see Katz und Wessels 1999).

III.

The cause for this lies in evident defects in the formation of public opinion about European Union politics. Opinion formation is the process by which the political preferences of citizens, but also their valuation of the political system and even their perception of the political community to which they belong, is created or formed. The actors in this process are political elites, widely understood, in particular party elites, but increasingly also the media. The mechanisms in opinion formation are those of political communication, both interpersonal communication within and around political organizations, and mass communication. As the political importance of mass communication has been increasing, the media – and in particular television – is potentially becoming more important as an independent force, in the process of opinion formation (see Schulz 1997).

Opinion formation takes place in the public sphere. The public sphere is understood as an "in principle freely accessible forum of communication for all who wish to communicate something, or who wish to be aware of what others communicate" (Neidhardt 1998: 487). In the European Union, such a freely accessible communication forum for all exists only in the individual member countries. A Europe-wide public sphere does not exist and, owing to language barriers, can only exist in quite limited form. In our context, we need to ask whether this fact stands in the way of a comprehensive and effective opinion formation regarding European Union politics.

We contend that a European public sphere need not necessarily be a Europe-wide public sphere. With reference to the Dutch and Swiss political systems Neidhart, Koopmans and Pfetsch have argued that a system-wide public sphere is not indispensable for effective opinion formation (Neidhart et al. 2000). If system-wide communication is assumed by political elites, a system-wide pub-

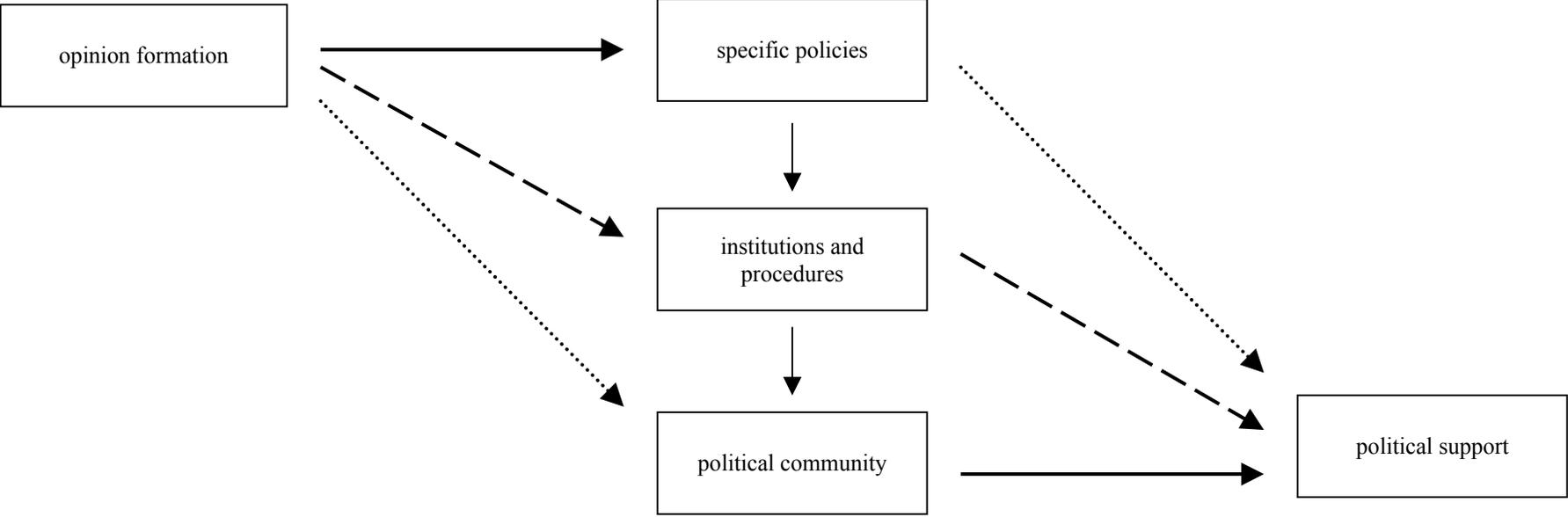
lic sphere can be supplanted by partial public spheres, like in Swiss cantons – or, possibly, in the member countries of the EU.

Neidhart *cum suis* also draw attention to the fact that in strongly segmented polities a system-wide public sphere may even be disadvantageous for effective interest intermediation. In such polities, socio-political conflicts tend to be regulated on the elite level through negotiation mechanisms capable of producing broad political agreements. The European Union certainly belongs to the class of strongly segmented polities. In its intergovernmental mode in particular, political decisions tend to be reached not by majority vote but in a consensual way. Consensual politics are afraid of publicity and public conflict. A Europe-wide public sphere, as desirable as it may be in normative terms, is therefore not only unnecessary for opinion formation, it could even endanger the effectiveness of interest intermediation in the European Union.

There is no reason why the formation of public opinion about European Union politics must be a system-wide process. Citizens' opinions could and probably should be moulded within national borders. It might be useful to discuss the process of opinion formation with an eye on the objects of political support. Following Easton (1975), we distinguish three such object categories: specific policies, political regimes, and the political community. We start from the proposition that processes of opinion formation – together with effective interest intermediation – are central preconditions for political support. In this view, all three objects of political support are not objectively "predetermined" but are instead defined through the relative success of processes of political linkage between society and politics (see Graph 2).

This is most obvious for specific policies. The influence of opinion formation on citizens' policy preferences is often relatively strong and immediate. It might be

Graph 2
On the Relationship between the Opinion Formation and Political Support



Note: Solid lines designate a strong (immediate), broken lines a somewhat weaker (medium-term), and dotted lines a much weaker (long-term) influence.

weaker and more mediated in the case of the more remote and diffuse support objects of the political system and political community. These diffuse sources of political support, the political community in particular, are then of greater importance for the legitimacy beliefs of the citizenry. Legitimacy beliefs enable citizens, even for those who do not agree with the outcome, to accept political decisions as democratic.

In consolidated democratic systems, political campaigns are the culminating point of opinion formation. At their center, typically, are controversies over the success of the previous government and the alternative policy proposals put forward by possible future governments. Institutions and procedures of the political system are less often the object of political controversy. Normally, political competitors would only refer to the democratic system of government in order to "redirect" some part of the abounding support it enjoys onto their own claims. The political community in consolidated democratic systems is itself not in question and electoral competitors would again only refer to it to divert some of its legitimacy.

The European Union today is not such a consolidated democratic system. Owing to the fragmented structure of political decision-making and the diffusion of political responsibility that stems from it, electoral competition in European Parliament election campaigns does not follow the government-opposition-scheme so well known from national elections (see Reif 1985). (Traces of this mechanism only in countries with notable opposition to European integration and the EU political system, as in the Scandinavian member states and in the U.K.). This fragmentation and diffusion cannot but lead to a situation where the political goals of parties competing in European election campaigns remain imprecise. Instead, and to compensate, electoral communication centers on the past successes of European unification – on peace, prosperity, and democracy in particular – as well as on the legitimacy of the European political community.

The right half of Graph 2 indicates that such a communication strategy must remain not entirely unsuccessful. We know from analyses of political support for the European Union that the majority of its citizens feel they belong a European "political community" and that this sense is increasing. We also know that political elites are ahead of EU citizens and that citizen notions of a European political community at this point clearly excludes the countries of Eastern Europe (Scheuer 1999).

Turning to the political institutions and procedures of the European Union, we know that citizens' hopes and expectations in the problem-solving capacity of the EU political system are high, and that they would like to give more rather than less political responsibility to Europe (Schmitt and Scheuer 1996; De Winter and Swingedouw 1999). At the same time we also know that the functioning of EU democracy receives perceptibly worse grades compared with democracy at the nation-state level (Norris 1999).

Actual EU policies are for the most part barely noticed; if they are, they often seem to citizens to be unnecessary bureaucratic monsters. This fragmentary, and in part false perception clearly springs from deficiencies in opinion formation about EU politics.

The contents and mechanisms of such opinion formation processes can best be studied during European election campaigns. Unfortunately, there is not much established knowledge here. Although the parties' campaigns for the first direct European Parliament election were carefully studied (see Karnofsky 1982; Reif 1985), no systematic analysis of the contents of party programs for European elections has yet been conducted. We simply do not know which issues parties address, nor do we know which elements therein are picked up by the mass media and communicated to the citizens, and why. We also know little about whether and under what conditions such reporting has an influence on

the orientation and behavior of citizens. These questions are currently being taken up in the framework of the 1999 European Election Study.

IV.

The full results of this study are yet unknown. What we do know, however, speaks clearly to the scope and effectiveness of socio-political linkage in the European Union. A democratic deficit in the EU originates in deficiencies of opinion formation, which in turn results in problems of political representation in EU constitutional matters.

Thus, the question remains how to remedy this defect. According to our analysis, it is imperative to improve the preconditions of opinion formation. This necessitates a more sharply contoured structure of political responsibility and control in the political system of the European Union. The incremental strategy of extending powers of the European Parliament vis-à-vis the Council can not accomplish this, or at least not alone.

In this context, the suggestion made some time ago by German Foreign Minister Fischer is worth noting. According to him, the *finalité* of European integration should be pursued, among other things, by presidentializing the supranational mode of EU government (Fischer 2000). Hix (2001) has thought out a strategy to bring this about which is particularly notable since it follows the incremental way in which the institutional structure of the European Union has developed thus far. His proposal does not demand a fundamental reconstruction of present institutional build-up, but can be realized as an addition to it.

According to this, the President of the European Commission is indirectly elected. The election is held in close connection to and shortly after the election of the members of the European Parliament. Electors are the members of the national parliaments of the EU member countries. The campaign of the candi-

dates for the office, which runs parallel to the established European Parliament election campaigns and adds life to them, will force the European party groupings into a 'government vs. opposition' mode of political communication. Not the same, but a parallel, comparable election campaign takes place in the various nationally segmented publics and transforms them into a European public sphere.

At this point we should switch back into the subjunctive: in this manner the structure of political responsibility and control in the political system of the Union *could* be made more transparent to citizens and voters. The platforms that the presidential candidates would have (and which the party groupings that would support them would endorse) could become more significant for the electoral behavior of European voters. The formation and structuring of mass opinion about EU politics would be encouraged, and the democratic deficit could be diminished.

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