Towards a partisan theory of EU politics

Simon Hix

Online Publication Date: 01 December 2008

To cite this Article Hix, Simon(2008)'Towards a partisan theory of EU politics',Journal of European Public Policy,15:8,1254 — 1265

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13501760802407821

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760802407821

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Towards a partisan theory of EU politics

Simon Hix

ABSTRACT A decade ago parties were largely absent from research on and theories of EU politics. The role of parties is now a central part of the research agenda, particularly in the area of EU legislative politics. The new research on parties in EU politics has made significant theoretical contributions, led to the collection and dissemination of new datasets, and employs some of the most advanced statistical methods in contemporary European political science. What is still missing, however, is a general theory of the role and impact of political parties, which helps to explain actors’ behaviour in EU politics in a range of situations. This paper sketches some of the basic elements of what might be called a ‘partisan theory of EU politics’, starting from a discussion of how the policy and office incentives of national parties are shaped by the EU’s ‘upside-down polity’.

KEY WORDS EU; integration theory; political parties.

1. INTRODUCTION: A DECADE OF RESEARCH ON PARTIES IN EU LEGISLATIVE POLITICS

When Chris Lord and I (Hix and Lord 1997) suggested just over a decade ago that political parties should be regarded as the central actors in European Union (EU) politics, many people thought we were crazy! The standard view at that time was that there were two types of actors in the EU, neither of whom were political parties or behaved like political parties. On one side were governments in the Council, who were regarded as unitary actors and behaved on the basis of national rather than partisan preferences. On the other side, the Commission and the European Parliament were supranational actors, who usually represented the interests of the EU as a whole and/or tried to promote further EU integration. So, the standard view was that political parties were relevant in national politics but were not particularly important in EU politics.

By focusing on political parties, however, we attempted to highlight two aspects of EU politics which we felt were absent in the traditional literature. First, a common characteristic of all the main players in the EU – ministers in the Council, and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), and even Commissioners – is that they are partisan politicians, who owe their positions and their future careers to political parties. Second, as the policy agenda of the
EU moves beyond institutional design issues to regulatory and redistributive policy outputs, the main dimension of EU politics should shift from ‘integrationists’ against ‘nationalists’ to traditional left–right divisions, where actors’ preferences are shaped in some way by which political party they belong to. Hence, to understand how EU politics works, we argued that we should look at what parties want in the EU, and how the design of the EU system shapes how parties achieve these goals.

Until the mid-1990s, there was not much research on the role of political parties in the EU institutions. Several people had written about the political groups in the European Parliament and the development of the transnational party federations (e.g. van Oudenhove 1965; Pridham and Pridham 1981; Niedermayer 1983; Attina 1990; Bardi 1994). However, as far as I am aware, no one had looked for party alignments in the Council (cf. Hix 1995), or whether the behaviour of Commissioners was influenced by party preferences, or whether party-political linkages played a role in policy-making between the three EU institutions.

Ten years later, the terrain is very different. The last decade has seen an explosion of research on the role and impact of parties in all three of the EU’s legislative institutions, as the introductory chapter to this volume describes (Lindberg et al. 2008). This new body of research has made significant strides in terms of theory-building, data collection and dissemination, and research methods.

On the theoretical side, the main innovation has been the import of theoretical ideas from the study of the role of parties in US legislative politics. For example, a popular import is Cox and McCubbins’ (1993) partisan theory of legislative politics (cf. Raunio 1997; Hix et al. 2007; Lindberg 2008b). Cox and McCubbins argue that parties primarily form to resolve collective action problems for politicians. These collective action problems exist in the electoral arena, in terms of how to mobilize the electorate and how to communicate policy positions efficiently to voters. This aspect of the theory is largely irrelevant in EU politics, since European Parliament elections are still fought primarily by national parties rather than European parties. However, Cox and McCubbins also identified collective action problems inside the legislature, and it is these problems that are relevant in the EU context – namely, the need to co-ordinate actors’ behaviour on a range of complex (multi-dimensional) policy issues in a repeated game. Parties can hence emerge in legislative politics irrespective of electoral incentives; as division-of-labour contracts which enable actors to secure policy outcomes close to their ideal points. As at the national level in Europe, where élite-based parties formed in legislatures before the onset of mass electoral politics, to articulate the policy preferences of rival groups of élites, partisan linkages are beginning to develop at the European level as a result of the policy-seeking behaviour of EU politicians.

Regarding data, the volume of data relating to EU legislative politics is now vast. Not only are there large datasets of roll-call votes in the European Parliament (Hix et al. 2007), but there are also several datasets on voting in the Council (Mattila 2004; Hagemann 2007). And, there are also several competing datasets of the
policy preferences of governments, MEPs and Commissioners, using either exogenous measures of actors’ positions (from party manifestos or expert judgments) (Franchino 2007; Warntjen et al. 2008), semi-endogenous measures (from surveys of policy-makers) (Thomson et al. 2006; Farrell et al. 2006), or fully endogenous measures (from scaling roll-call votes) (Hagemann 2007; Hix et al. 2007). These advances in data collection are the result of the growing availability of data (via the internet), the collaborative efforts of scholars to collect the data, and the willingness of colleagues to disseminate datasets widely. In this regard, research on EU legislative politics is a model of collective scientific progress.

The new theories and the new datasets have gone hand in hand with methodological advances. The use of multivariate statistics to test theoretical propositions is now standard practice in the literature on EU legislative politics whereas a decade ago this method was rare in the pages of EU studies journals. Also, many scholars of parties and politics in the EU have gone well beyond standard regression techniques, to use methods such as multi-level modelling, geometric scaling, or Bayesian estimation. In some respects, research on legislative politics in the EU is at the methodological cutting edge of political science in Europe.

Put together, we have come a long way in a short space of time. What I do in the rest of this concluding article is discuss what I feel we have learned and what we still do not know or have not yet tried to find out about parties in EU legislative politics. I then sketch the basic elements of what might be called a ‘partisan theory of EU politics’, which could perhaps be the basis for a more general theory of how parties shape political organization and behaviour in the EU.

2. WHAT WE DO AND DON’T KNOW ABOUT PARTIES IN EU LEGISLATIVE POLITICS

Starting with the European Parliament, where research on parties in the EU has made the furthest advances, we already have a reasonably established understanding of several empirical regularities (e.g. Raunio 1997; Kreppel 2002; Hix et al. 2007). First, the transnational political groups in the European Parliament have become more cohesive, especially since the early 1990s. Second, the two largest groups in the European Parliament – the European People’s Party and the Socialists – vote against each other more often today than in the late 1980s or early 1990s. We also know that the left–right policy preferences of national parties predict the voting behaviour of the MEPs, both between and within the European political groups. But, when there are conflicts between the preferences of a national party and a European political group, MEPs are more likely to vote with their national parties than with their European political groups. This consequently suggests that national parties are the driving force behind the growing cohesion of, and competition between, the European political groups.

While these empirical regularities are well established, our theoretical explanation of these regularities is less well developed. We know that growing European party cohesion cannot be explained by growing ideological homogeneity inside the European parties, as enlargement of the EU and expansion of the largest
groups have led to larger and more ideologically heterogeneous parties in the European Parliament. We also know that growing party cohesion cannot be explained by agenda control by the leaderships of the political groups, as the legislative agenda of the European Parliament is largely set externally (by the Commission and the Council), which means that the European political groups are forced to vote on matters which they may have preferred to avoid because of internal divisions.

Hence, we are usually left with a default explanation of political parties in the European Parliament. This argument, building on Cox and McCubbins, is that the growing power of the European Parliament has led to growing incentives for a division of labour inside the European parties, which results in certain autonomous powers being delegated to the political group leaderships and constraints on the behaviour of national parties. This seems plausible. Indeed, there is some evidence of autonomous influence of the European political groups on national party behaviour in the European Parliament; for example, in the allocation of committee assignments and legislative reports (e.g. Benedetto 2005; Hauser 2006; McElroy 2006; Lindberg 2008a).

Nevertheless, we do not have a good understanding of why national parties are willing to give up autonomous powers (such as the ability to vote against the party) for uncertain medium-term rewards (such as the right to write a legislative report in the future). We do not have, for example, a formal model of the interaction between the two principals of the MEPs: their national party and their European political group. The comparative statistics of such a model would help us to understand the conditions under which the European political groups are highly cohesive and the conditions under which national parties will choose to be independent from the European political groups, and so cause the collapse of political group cohesion. These predictions could then be tested using the existing datasets on roll-call voting, the subjects of the roll-call votes, and the characteristics of individual MEPs and national parties.

Turning to the Council, we have conflicting evidence about the role of party preferences on the behaviour of the governments in the Council. On the one hand, Mattila (2004), Hagemann (2007) and Hagemann and Hoyland (2008) find that left–right positions of governments influence their voting behaviour in the Council. On the other hand, evidence from surveys of governments’ positions on legislative issues suggests that national interests and pro- / anti-integration preferences are more significant than party-political preferences (e.g. Zimmer et al. 2005). Similarly, empirical evidence on voting patterns in the Council since the 2004 enlargement suggests that north–south and east– west divisions may now be stronger than left–right divisions (e.g. Hagemann and De Clerck-Sachsee 2007; Naurin 2008).

What we need is a theory of voting in the Council which could explain when coalitions in the Council will form along ideological lines and when they will form along some other dimension of conflict, such as pro-/anti-integration, east–west, or net contributors versus net beneficiaries to/from the EU budget. This could be related to the issues at hand. However, it could also be related
to the differential saliency of issues, the preferences of the agenda-setter (the Commission) at a particular point in time, and the relative location of the agenda-setter and the status quo policy on a particular issue.

Such a theory could be tested with the existing data on the preferences of the governments on particular pieces of legislation, in the Decision-Making in the EU (DEU) dataset, or using one or other of the Council voting datasets. However, neither of these two datasets is ideal for testing a theory of government behaviour in the Council. The DEU dataset contains the positions of governments in the negotiations rather than a record of how they actually behaved. Under certain conditions, the exogenous posited preferences of EU governments might be the same as their revealed preferences. However, as in most legislative settings, strategic behaviour and institutional constraints (such as agenda-setting power and restrictive amendment rights) mean that the revealed bargaining space is significantly different from the exogenous preference space – for example, the revealed space is usually of much lower dimensionality than the exogenous preference space (cf. Poole 2005).

Meanwhile, the roll call voting datasets from the Council suffer from significant selection bias. There is certainly some selection bias in the European Parliament roll-call voting data, since political groups can strategically decide which votes are held by roll-call (Carrubba et al. 2006). However, the selection bias is even greater in roll-call votes in the Council than in the European Parliament. This is because most issues are resolved at the level of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) before they even arrive on the agenda of the ministers in the Council, then only a small percentage of issues on the Council agenda are voted on, only positive votes (where a qualified majority is in favour of an issue) are recorded in the Council minutes, and the incentives for an actor to vote with the majority even when they are actually opposed (knowing that an issue will pass even if they voted against) are much higher for governments in the Council than for MEPs in the European Parliament because governments have to take responsibility for implementing the legislation that the Council passes. Hence, with Council voting data, we can only observe a small and biased sample of the true legislative behaviour of the member state governments.

There are possible ways to get around this problem. One way would be to gather data on amendments in the Council: on which governments proposed what amendments to which bills. This information is not yet in the public sphere. However, I am convinced that persistent lobbying of the Council secretariat by prominent EU scholars would enable us to obtain this information, especially if we promise to keep it anonymous. This would be an extremely useful dataset, as we would then be able to observe the revealed positions of governments on legislative proposals from the Commission and the Council Presidency. This would be particularly interesting in the post-2004 enlargement period, when the new rules of procedure of the Council mean that governments must club together to propose joint amendments and to nominate one government to speak on behalf of the governments which support a particular
amendment (cf. Hagemann and De Clerck-Sachsee 2007). The sponsorship and co-sponsorship of amendments in the EU legislative process could then be studied using techniques that have been developed in the study of bill sponsorship in the US Congress (e.g. Krehbiel 1995; Woon 2008).

Finally, on the Commission, we are starting to understand the influence of party affiliations or partisan preferences on the way the Commission behaves. The partisan colour of the potential candidates has always been a factor in determining who became Commission President. Hence, a centre-left politician would be followed by a centre-right politician, who in turn would be followed by a centre-left politician, and so on. This is not true of every Commission President, but is generally the case. We also know that the overwhelming majority of individual Commissioners are party politicians, who owe their appointment to party political considerations of the governments who appointed them (Wonka 2007). Also, more senior party politicians are now appointed to the Commission than in previous eras (Döring 2007). And, below the level of the College of Commissioners, Hooghe (2001) found that partisan affiliations are strong predictors of the policy preferences of senior officials in the Commission administration. Researchers have also started to look at how the political make-up of the Commission and the political affiliation of particular Commissioners affect the legislative behaviour of the Commission — although the early results from this research suggest only a limited partisan effect (e.g. Thomson 2008; Wonka 2008). Nevertheless, we now know that, at least in part, the Commission is and probably always has been a party-political body.

What is missing on the empirical side, however, is a more detailed study of how the partisan composition of the Commission affects the long-term legislative behaviour of the Commission. For example, the median member of the Prodi Commission was significantly to the left of the median member of the Barroso Commission. Does this mean that the legislative proposals of the Prodi Commission were on average more to the left of the legislative proposals of the Barroso Commission? This seems a fairly straightforward proposition to investigate, and existing datasets (such as the DEU data) could be used to test exactly this.

Above all, though, we do not yet have a good theory of the partisan composition of the Commission and how this shapes EU policy outcomes. Crombez (1997) and Hug (2003) go some way towards endogenizing the preferences of the Commission. I would go a step further, however, and argue that the Commission should be seen as a party-political coalition between the parties in government at the time of the appointment of the Commission and, since the Maastricht Treaty, the majority party coalition in the European Parliament. Because of the high decision-making threshold in the Council for appointing the Commission (unanimity until the Nice Treaty, and a qualified majority since) and because of the different structure of representation in the Council and the European Parliament, the Commission is likely to be a very broad partisan coalition. However, a party-based theory of the appointment of the Commission should be able to tell us the conditions under which the location of the
Commission President and the median voter in the Commission will be offset significantly to the left or to the right of some notional European-wide median voter. This would then have implications not only for understanding the changing behaviour of the Commission in the legislative process, but also for the direction of EU policies in different periods, and even public support for the EU amongst different groups of voters.

3. A THEORY OF PARTIES IN THE EU: OFFICE AND POLICY IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN POLITY

What is also missing is a general ‘partisan theory’ of EU politics. What I mean by this is a theory of the behaviour of and the interactions between the main aggregate actors in the EU: national political parties. This would be comparable to the so-called ‘partisan theory’ of US legislative politics (e.g. Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), although starting from a rather different point.

A starting point for such a theory could be some assumptions about the hierarchy of office and policy goals for political parties in the EU, and how these goals interact. For example, if one considers the prestige and policy-making powers of the various executive and legislative offices in the EU system, the hierarchy of offices is something like this: (1) national prime minister, (2) Commission President, (3) national cabinet minister, (4) Commissioner, (5) member of a national parliament, and (6) Member of the European Parliament. In general, executive offices are more desirable for political parties than legislative offices, since executive offices at both the national level and the European level give politicians agenda-setting powers. However, when any two similar offices are compared, the office at the national level is more desirable, since the extent and salience of the policies that can be influenced are greater at the national level and the European level. A wide range of policies have been delegated to the European level. Nevertheless, the bulk of public expenditure remains at the national level. Also, national government office, particularly in the medium-sized and larger member states, allows politicians to play a significant role in international affairs, via foreign and defence policies, which are still predominantly conducted at the EU level through intergovernmental mechanisms.

Hence, national political office offers politicians greater opportunities to secure policies in the direction they desire than EU political office. So, being a national prime minister is more desirable than being the European Commission President, except perhaps for some of the very smaller member states. Similarly, a senior ministerial position in a national cabinet is more desirable than a position as a Commissioner. Most Commissioners tend to be former cabinet ministers towards the end of their political careers. However, if the opportunity arises to return to a senior national ministerial position, Commissioners are unlikely to remain in Brussels – for example, in 2008 Franco Frattini gave up one of the most important portfolios in the Commission (Justice and Home Affairs) to become the Italian foreign minister.
The choice between being a member of a national parliament and being an MEP is less clear-cut. In pure power terms, a politician is far more likely to be able to shape policy as an MEP than as a backbench member of a national parliament. This is because of the way the European Parliament works relative to national parliaments. MEPs are more independent politicians than national members of parliament because the Commission does not command a majority in the European Parliament in the same way that national governments usually command a majority in their national parliaments. Neither the Commission nor national governments can force the MEPs to support legislation or to drop particular amendments to bills, whereas national governments are often able to force their members of parliament to support them or to withdraw amendments. As a result, whereas MEPs are able to force the Commission and the governments in the Council to accept approximately 50 per cent of their legislative amendments, backbench members of parliament are rarely able to force a government to accept an amendment which is not supported by the government.

Nevertheless, if given the choice between being a national member of parliament and being an MEP, many young opportunistic politicians choose the former rather than the latter. It is true that an increasing number of MEPs regard themselves as ‘Brussels careerists’, who intend to build their political careers inside the European Parliament rather than in domestic politics (Scarrow 1997). But, if a young politician would like to reach the highest levels of political power – of national government office, and perhaps eventually national prime minister – they will choose to be a national member of parliament rather than an MEP. For example, several highly prominent young MEPs – including Helle Thorning-Schmidt (of the Danish social democrats) and Nick Clegg (of the British liberal democrats) – have left the European Parliament in the past few years to become national members of parliament, and have gone on to become leaders of their parties.

In most multi-level polities, offices at the higher level of government offer parties and politicians more policy powers, public recognition and career prestige than offices at the lower level of government. In the US, for example, politicians would rather be the US President than a Governor of a state, or a member of the US Congress than a member of a state legislature. The EU, in contrast, is an ‘upside-down polity’, since offices at the lower level of government (at the national level) are more desirable for politicians and parties than comparable offices at the higher level of government (at the EU level).

This has significant implications for how parties work in the EU. In particular, the upside-down nature of the office hierarchy means that if a party faces conflicting incentives in its attempts to capture a comparable office at the EU level and the national level (for example, in the type of policies a party should advocate), the policy positions that favour the capture of domestic office will prevail. For example, in the European Parliament, if a national party has a policy position which is significantly different from the position of its European party group, and if the issue is salient enough that how the
national party behaves in the European Parliament would have an impact on the
domestic electoral fortunes of the party, then rather than the national party
changing its domestic position to bring it into line with the European group
position, the national party is likely to instruct its MEPs to vote against the pos-
tion of the European party group.

Nonetheless, national parties are not completely free to set out and pursue
their policy positions in the domestic arena irrespective of what happens at
the EU level. This is because the single market, the single currency, and the
flanking policies adopted by the EU to create and regulate the single market
(such as social and environmental regulations and competition rules) constrain
the policy choices that national parties can make in their pursuit of domestic
government office. Parties on the left, for example, can no longer promise to
protect national champions from competition (as this would breach EU com-
petition rules), to run up deficits to fund major expansions in public spending
(as this would breach the excessive deficits provisions of economic and monetary
union), or to pursue restrictive regulatory policies in labour markets or services
markets (as this would risk capital flight to other member states in the single
market). Parties on the right, meanwhile, can no longer promise to remove
social protections or costs for small businesses (as this would go against EU
social regulations), to apply restrictive immigration policies (as this would go
against the free movement of persons in the single market and EU asylum pol-
icies), or not to grant equal treatment in the workplace to ethnic minorities or
homosexuals (as this would breach EU non-discrimination legislation).

As a result of these constraints, national parties have an incentive to try to
influence EU policy outcomes in the direction they prefer. Each individual
national party has very little chance of being able to do this alone, even if the
party is a major governing party from one of the larger member states. As a
result, national parties have an incentive to organize with parties from other
member states who share their basic policy preferences, to try to collectively
influence the EU policy agenda. The policy constraints set at the European
level consequently help to explain why national parties have organized together
to form the political groups in the European Parliament, and have gradually del-
egated agenda-setting power to the leaderships of these legislative party organ-
izations. This may also explain partisan alignments in the Council and the
Commission.

However, parties are not only constrained by their institutional environment.
They also play a role in shaping their environment. Riker (1975) argued, for
example, that the organization of power in federal systems is endogenous to
the incentives and organizational structures of parties. For example, if the
main political office that party leaders want to win is government office at
the higher level of government, parties will have an incentive to centralize can-
idate selection to achieve this goal. In turn, if party leaders at the centre then
control the selection of candidates standing in elections at all levels of govern-
ment, they can prevent candidates taking different policy positions in different
arenas, and so enforce party cohesion. Then, if the main political parties are
highly centralized, this will lead to the gradual centralization of policy competences in a polity.

Regarding the balance of policy powers between the member states and the EU level, the basic architecture of the EU is that a continental-scale market is created and regulated in Brussels while most areas of taxation and spending remain at the national level. This design should be seen as a conscious choice of the major political parties on the centre-left and centre-right in the EU. As the latest round of treaty reforms have demonstrated, there is little appetite amongst national party leaderships to change this basic architecture in any dramatic way – either to pass major new areas of policy up to the European level, or to bring back any major area of EU policy to the member states. Clearly, then, national party leaderships in most member states in Europe see this design as the optimal policy balance.

As long as the major political parties in Europe prefer to keep this upside-down allocation of office and policy powers between the European and national levels, there will be significant limitations on the development of autonomous pan-European political parties. I do not mean to suggest that party organizations and partisan policy preferences are unlikely to play a major role in the EU legislative process or in EU politics more generally. However, this does help to explain why national parties, rather than pan-European parties, remain the major aggregate actors in EU politics and why these actors jealously protect the powers they have to control ‘their’ agents in the EU institutions: their national party delegations of MEPs, their ministers in the Council, and their Commissioners.

Biographical note: Simon Hix is Professor of European and Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

Address for correspondence: Simon Hix, Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK. email: s.hix@lse.ac.uk

REFERENCES


