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# Tackling the 'democratic deficit' -
# A 'Europe of Parties' as an intermediate approach beyond a 'Europe of Nations' and a 'United States of Europe'?

Assessed Essay

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Abstract

The 'democratic deficit' of the EU is mainly identified in two ways. One strand of criticism focuses on the weak role of the European Parliament, and argues in favour of strengthening its stake in EU decision-making. A different strand focuses on threats to national sovereignty by transfers of decision-making powers from national state to EU level, thus claiming for stronger control of supranational EU institutions as well as stronger involvement of national representatives in EU decision-making. As both approaches imply far-reaching contrasting answers on the question of the 'finality' of European integration, it is questionable whether they can obtain sufficient support, not to mention consensus.

Therefore, an alternative, *intermediate* approach is suggested, which emphasises the role of political party federations to strengthen the links between Europe and its citizens. It can be shown that 'Euro-Parties' within and beyond the EP a) *exist* and b) *matter* in EU decision-making. The advantage of this approach is that it does not mix tackling the democratic deficit with opting for one position on the finality of European integration.

## 0. Introduction

Since the ratification of the Treaties on the European Union (TEU), better known as the Maastricht Treaties, or even simply - and often contemptuously - abridged to 'Maastricht', the member states' former tacit agreement on building an "ever closer union"[1] has eroded. On the one hand, there has been growing unease about further steps towards further integration; on the other hand, there has also emerged a criticism which focuses on the technocratic elite cartel which has dominated European integration for so long.[2]

Thus, complaints about the lack of popular involvement, the 'democratic deficit', have been raised increasingly often. Criticism of a democratic deficit in the decision-making of the European Communities or Union, respectively, can be traced back up to the time even before the growing uneasiness on European Integration which became apparent during the ratification of the TEU after 1992.[3] This treatise will first outline what the 'democratic deficit' is assumed to be about. In order to differentiate the criticism, it will be presented first referring to the EU's institutions - which, according to Boyce, "can [all] be regarded as democratically deficient"[4]; however, a more fundamental criticism of the process of European integration will be presented, too (1.1.). After that, counter-strategies to overcome the deficiencies will be discussed (1.2.).

In the second part, an alternative, intermediate approach will be developed. European party-federations will be described (2.1.) and evidence will be given for their relevance as carriers of democratising EU decision-making (2.2.).

## 1. The 'democratic deficit' - what is it about?

### 1.1. The criticisms

One of the best-known criticisms concerns the persistently weak role of the European Parliament (EP), the only supranational body among the European Union's (EU) institutions which is composed of directly elected representatives of the peoples of the Union's member states. In contrast to all member states' parliaments, it lacks a usual parliament's crucial competences: It has only a weak stake in European law-making,[5] not being allowed to initiate nor finally decide upon legislation. These tasks are allocated to the European Commission or the Council of Ministers, respectively.[6] Only since the implementation of the TEU has the

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[1] contained in the Treaty of Rome's preamble as well as the TEU's, quoted in: Gaffney, p. 24 (footnote 2); Boyce, pp. 467-8
[2] Boyce, pp. 475-6
[3] Norton, p. 168
[4] Boyce, p. 468
[5] Thomas, p. 5
[6] Pridham/Pridham 1979b, p. 2

EP gained some decisive influence on certain matters in EU policies, namely by the introduction of co-operation and co-decision powers.[7]

In addition, the EP's task of controlling the Commission is built on a weak basis. By allowing the EP to confirm or reject the Commission as a whole[8], but not to have a say on its individual composition, even the TEU have not improved its position significantly. Furthermore, even if the EP were to reject a Commission proposed by the European Council (the summit of EU member states' prime ministers), the latter would be able to immediately appoint a new Commission - which could even be the one just rejected.[9]

Therefore, one has to deduce that there is still the paradoxical situation that the European Parliament is the EU body with the strongest legitimation by Europe's citizens but the weakest stake in EU decision-making[10] in comparison with the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

But these criticisms can also be expressed not only as a lack of powers in the Parliament but also as a lack of accountability in the other involved and more powerful bodies. Generally speaking, the vast majority of European law is still decided upon by intergovernmental bodies[11], mainly the Council, on which criticism is based upon two strands. First, the Council overrates the influence of small countries which, although in qualified majority votes a rough proportionality of votes of each country according to its population is applied, gives them a relatively inappropriate say in decision-making. Secondly and probably even more importantly, the Council's meetings are not held publicly; therefore, Ministers cannot be held responsible for their vote by their peoples nor even by their national parliaments, not to mention the EP. This criticism refers to the democratic requirements of transparency and accountability.[12]

On the other hand, the democratic deficit can also be expressed as a lack of involvement of the national parliaments. International, or, strictly speaking, inter*governmental* decision-making in European matters might have been tolerable as long as the European Community (EC) did not cover policy areas which are usually considered domains of the national state or national parliaments, respectively. Indeed, Hix even argues that questions of national sovereignty and international integration are better expressed and dealt with by governments than by left-right party competition.[13] But the decisive change[14] that has taken place with the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaties at the latest, is that the Union now also covers policies

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[7] Boyce, p. 470; Lodge, p. 356; Norton, p. 168
[8] Smith, p. 277
[9] Boyce, p. 469
[10] Norton, p. 168
[11] Jansen, p. 161
[12] Boyce, p. 470; Lodge, p. 343
[13] Hix 1995, pp. 535-6, 540
[14] Ladrech 1997, p. 170

which have previously been regarded as core domains of nation state politics,[15] e.g. Economic Policy[16]. In these areas, the national legislatures' decisions are now significantly restricted by EU law. Therefore, the intergovernmental way of decision-making can no longer be regarded as appropriate, at least not in these areas, and must be accompanied by increased parliamentary control and influence.[17] However, this also raises the question of how sufficient parliamentary influence should and can be secured - by stronger involvement of national parliaments or by giving the EP more powers[18] - a question which inevitably leads to the discussion on whether European integration should remain at its current level or move forward towards an ever closer union.

This relates to another crucial problem of European democracy, which is, at least at first sight and in contrast to the ones already outlined, less directly linked with the Union's institution or its political system. By far more fundamentally, this strand of criticism claims that there cannot be any true European democracy without one European people. In addition, the latter's current existence is called into question or even completely denied.[19] Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that the democratic deficit is impossible to tackle on a supranational, European scale; only by raising the influence of national representatives, i.e. governments and national parliaments on the decision-making process can further damage to democracy be avoided.

However, this criticism is heavily dependent on its particular assumption of the characteristics of a people. As embodied by the Maastricht verdict by the German *Bundesverfassungsgericht* (Federal Constitutional Court) in October 1993[20], the underlying notion of a people, a *Demos*, is based on the ethno-cultural understanding of nation, the *Volk*. This implies the conviction that there has to be a people existing before a democratic political system can be established; any attempt to build up democracy upon a people that does not share one ethnicity or at least a reasonably cohesive culture referring to a common language, history and traditions, will inevitably fail.[21]

In contrast to that, one might object that there is the possibility that a people might also be built upon a democratic political system.[22] The 'common good' that brings about that certain level of cohesion that is needed to ensure a stable democracy does not need to be an ethno-cultural 'common sense', but a consensus about general but binding rules of democratic self-government: i.e. the recognition of rights, elections and the rule of law.[23]

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[15] Norton, p. 170; Weiler et al, p. 7
[16] Gaffney, p. 22
[17] Boyce, p. 458
[18] Weiler et al, p. 7
[19] ibid., pp. 9-14; Gaffney, p. 6
[20] Ladrech 1996, p. 302
[21] Weiler et al, pp. 14-16
[22] Tsatsos, p. 48
[23] Weiler et al, pp. 17-24

Furthermore, the rejection of the possibility of European democracy on the grounds of the ethno-cultural notion of nation can even be called into question within its own logic. One might claim that what in fact characterises an existing common European tradition is the assumption of the need of a basic level of social justice to ensure the stability and the survival of a democratic political system.

## 1.2. Suggested strategies

On the question of how to tackle the democratic deficit, the approaches suggested so far differ significantly through the various diagnoses of the democratic deficit and through each discussant's point of view on the long-term direction of European integration. However, it will be argued that one can generally distinguish between two approaches, a pan-European, federalist approach whose proposals to tackle the democratic deficit mostly include a strengthening of the supranational character of the EU, and a Euro-sceptic, intergovernmentalist approach which wants to increase national governments' and parliaments' influence on EU decision-making, often accompanied by the wish to restrict and sometimes even take back steps of integration.[24]

To overcome the lack of influence of the European Parliament, enlarging its competences is usually proposed by Europhile discussants.[25] This involves the construction of a nation state-like relationship between the EP as the main legislative body of the EU and the Commission as the EU 'government'; the election of the Commission by the European Parliament as well as the latter's right to recall an incumbent Commission are often regarded as indispensable elements of this approach.[26] In order to strengthen the Parliament's role as a true representative of *a* European people - in contrast to its real current status of a represen- tative of *the* European people*s* -, harmonisation of the electoral systems for EP elections in the member states is postulated[27] (a claim contained in the Maastricht Treaties![28]). This mainly implies the abolition of the First-past-the-post plurality EP electoral system as applied in Great Britain and its replacement by a proportional representation (PR) system. In addition, some calls have even been made to draw up cross-national, all-European party lists in future European elections as soon as these are run by PR only.

Eventually, the relationship between the EP and the Council of Ministers will require a change within these approaches. Whereas currently the Council is, although with some limitations, still the decisive body in European law-making, at least a balance of power is

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[24] Boyce, pp. 471-4
[25] Norton, p. 172; Hix 1995, p. 528; Ladrech 1996, p. 297
[26] Boyce, p. 474
[27] Juliet Lodge/Valentine Herman, Direct elections to the European Parliament: a supranational perspective, referred to in: Smith 1996, p. 276
[28] Boyce, p.471

postulated. This suggests a bicameral legislature made up of the EP embodying the unitarian assembly of the European Union and the Council[29] as a kind of a chamber of nations or regions, respectively, or an Upper House.[30]

However, these proposals can be regarded as ineffective, insufficient or problematic. On the one hand, there have already been cautious steps towards a strengthening of the EP by the implementation of the TEU in the first half of the 1990s. For instance, the co-operation and the co-decision procedures in EU law-making have been introduced to give the EP a greater stake. Furthermore, the EP is enabled to vote in a confirmation ballot on the Commission appointed by the European Council. Thus, one might argue that claims for a constant widening of EP competences have already been met, but have proven to be unsuccessful and inadequate means of overcoming the shortcomings of the EU polity. But on the other hand, those measures have evidently been very half-hearted ones and have hardly met the more radical claims for institutional reform raised by pro-Europeans. From this point of view, the steps already taken to strengthen the EP could never really have helped to democratise the EU because of their limited character.

Nevertheless, a greater interest among the European public in EU decision-making does not seem to have been achieved, and as a result, neither has a strengthening of a European identity[31] among the European people(s). The 1994 European elections, with a turnout which fell again, suggest that a stronger link between the EU citizens and its representatives has not been achieved by the careful improvement of the EP's role by the TEU.

Over and above that, one might question whether the reforms proposed - mainly by the EP or individual MEPs themselves - do not also imply some underlying difficulties on which consensus has not been reached among EU member states, i.e. the 'finality' of European integration. Constructing a nation-state-like relationship between the Commission as the executive and the Parliament as the legislature can be regarded a decisive step towards a federal European state. But it cannot be presumed that there is a clear agreement (not to mention a consensus) about the aim of a 'United States of Europe' among its current member states; furthermore, one could even find strong evidence that during and since the painful ratification process of the TEU in EU member states[32], there has developed growing scepticism[33] about further steps of integration. This can be illustrated by the renewed popularity of the notion of de Gaulles' "Europe de patries" (Europe of nations)[34], a resolute rejection of a federal Europe. Obviously, this more fundamental criticism raises the question of whether there are ways of democratising the EU beyond further integration.

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[29] Lodge, p. 345
[30] Boyce, p. 473
[31] Smith, pp. 284-5
[32] Gaffney, p. 15; Ladrech 1997, p. 171
[33] Gaffney, p. 13; Smith, p. 279
[34] Hix/Lord, p. 199

Within the latter restrictions, claims for stronger involvement of *national* parliaments might attract more interest and support. In the main two different approaches to overcome the lack of involvement of or at least the lack of information for elected national representatives are suggested.

First, enhanced co-operation between the European Parliament and the European national parliaments has been aimed at, and indeed has taken place. The Rome Assizes, the Conference of the Parliaments, which brought together MEPs with thrice as many member state MPs, adding up to a total number of 300 delegates in November 1990, succeeded in gaining support for the EP's proposals in the debate on the (then) future European Union. However, British MPs described the Conference's results concerning steps towards a steady institutionalisation of national parliaments' consultation as weak. This negative summary has been confirmed by the total lack of any further Conferences of Parliaments since 1990. Even when the Belgian parliament offered to host a second Conference in 1993, no assembly was held. It just seems that the national MPs served as useful supporters for the EP's policies against the governmental proposals for the establishment of a European Union; not surprisingly, the EP did not seem to be interested in even sharing its limited, but hard won powers.[35]

The other approach cannot be recounted and generally evaluated as easily as the former. Gradually, all EC or EU member states have introduced one or more parliamentary committees dealing with European matters by the 1990s at the latest. This should at least attempt to compensate the loss of national influence and parliamentary control caused by the significant transfers of formerly national policies to the European level which were introduced by the SEA and the TEU. Often, such European Committees regularly consult MEPs, thus trying to establish a link between the EP and national parliaments on an individual level rather than through the collective approach which had obviously proven unpromising.[36]

However, as with the supranational approach, the success of the attempts of national parliaments to keep up with the increasing scope of EU decision-making must be regarded as limited. With Delors predicting that in post-Maastricht Europe, "around 80 per cent of legislation in... member states would have a supranational origin"[37], it seems quite doubtful whether there is, realistically, any way to maintain national parliamentary influence.

And even if national European Affairs Committees can keep up with the EU agenda in terms of information and scrutiny, they more or less continually suffer from a lack of control *over* as well as *by* their fellow nationals in the decisive bodies, i.e. the Council of Ministers and the European Council, not to mention the Commission.

This shortcoming is not only caused by the secrecy of these bodies' meetings. The weak accountability of each countries' members in the latter institutions almost completely dis-

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[35] Norton, p. 169
[36] ibid., pp. 169-71
[37] Lodge, p. 344

appears when one considers that in each EU body a state's representatives at most make up ten per cent of its total seats: one of fifteen in the Council of Ministers and the European Council; one or two of the 20 Commissioners. This means that in decisions which are taken by qualified majority voting, national parliaments hardly exercise any significant influence, not to mention *control* on European legislation.

Besides, one also has to acknowledge that the influence and impact of national European Committees varies quite significantly; as Norton puts it, even "to talk of European Affairs committees is to convey an impression of a uniformity that does not exist"[38]. Therefore, the extent to which these Committees compensate the loss of direct influence via national legislation is quite different among EU member states. In addition, there is no cross-national parliamentary consensus on how far the lack of parliamentary accountability of EU decision-making must be addressed by strengthening the *national* or the *European* Parliament's influence. In contrast to the British notion of *national* parliamentary sovereignty, for example, the Dutch position on how to tackle the democratic deficit has traditionally tended to emphasise the internal democratisation of supra-national decision-making, especially by strengthening the European Parliament. The latter view stresses the need to solve the problems of European democracy in Brussels[39].

Furthermore, there has also been some evidence of a certain degree of mutual mistrust in the relationship between MEPs and national MPs: The fear of further interference of 'Europe' in national politics on the one side and the perception of a total lack of interest in European matters by national MPs on the other side. As a consequence, enhanced reciprocal consultation and exchange of views between MEPs and national parliaments is inhibited not only by institutional barriers but also by a psychological resistance from both sides.

Thus, Norton judges the chances of overcoming the democratic deficit of the EU by strengthening the role of national parliaments' role as not only limited for practical reasons, but also as questionable in principle:

> "...national parliaments not only remain marginalised within European law-making but are increasingly marginalised. It is a situation which parliaments are unable, and in many cases, unwilling to challenge... If national parliaments are to contribute to remedying the [democratic] deficit... then it is far from clear what they can do in order to achieve that".[40]

## 2. <u>An alternative approach: Increasing the influence of Euro-Parties</u>

Both main approaches proposed so far have proven either theoretically unconvincing or practically ineffective. But above all else, underlying their suggestions to overcome the

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[38] Norton, p. 172
[39] ibid., p. 172
[40] ibid., pp. 171, 173

democratic deficit, they all imply a particular answer to the question of the 'finality' of European integration, i.e. whether Europe should finally become one federal state ('United States of Europe') or whether it should stop at the stage of a confederation of nation states ('Europe of nations'). At least since the uneasy ratification process of the Maastricht Treaties in EU member states in 1992 and 1993, it has become evident that a broad consensus on the finality question cannot be assumed any longer. Hence, each of the approaches outlined above could prove quite divisive, if they were to be applied.

Therefore, an alternative way to establish a stronger link between EU citizens and EU politics will now be suggested. This approach differs from the former in so far as it does not rely inevitably upon a broad-range institutional reform of European Union decision-making. However, neither does it try to shift the EU back to having a pure International Relations character, i.e. a confederation in which independent nation states are overwhelmingly dominating. What it actually aims at might be best described as filling the present EU institutions with life, with politicisation.

Whilst the EU has long been predominantly regarded as a mere federation of states, one can, at least since the TEU, speak of a „European political system"[41]. Within such a „Europolity"[42], there is, according to Gaffney, still no better feasible alternative to political parties fulfilling the task of linking citizens with its political institutions. Although especially since the 1960s and 1970s, Western European societies have become more complex, people more individualist and, as a consequence, traditional party alignments looser[43], the "political party remains the best organisation to express and channel politically the conflicts between classes, religious groups or regions"[44]. However, it required the political party to adapt to new circumstances to remain a significant actor on the political stage; for example, the increasing need for specialised expertise which could not be satisfactorily met by political parties has led them to increasingly consult external advice.[45]

While (Western) European economic and social integration is quickly increasing, the process of political integration has not so far kept up the pace. Thus, "the political equivalents of these integrative processes - transnational parties"[46] have to be fostered to regain democratic control of the increasing amount of EU decision-making:

> "[The EC's] growing legitimation crisis highlights the missing ingredient that would allow the EU 'to move from a system essentially concerned with the administration of things to one concerned with the governance of people', democratic and accountable linkages to

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[41] Ladrech 1997, p. 167
[42] ibid., p. 167
[43] Gaffney, pp. 19-21
[44] ibid., p. 22
[45] ibid., p. 21
[46] ibid., p. 23

citizens (...) The time is propitious for party organisations adapted to the intricacies of this Europolity to begin legitimizing its activities."[47]

Gaffney names two main characteristic traits of political parties, often circumscribed as the 'input' and the 'output' function. This means that parties should express different values and interests - 'cleavages' - (input) as well as they should aim at influencing legislation and governmental policy (output).[48] In this respect, political parties have two main tasks: on the one hand, they represent their constituencies, on the other, they aim at exercising governmental power. They are intermediate bodies - located within the social as well as the political system. In contrast to this, Hix regards the political parties' role as agents of social interests and cleavages as disappearing; this "classic (representative) theory of democracy" would give way to Schumpeter's "'competitive theory of democracy'... [of] responsible party competition". This means that parties compete on the basis of alternative policy proposals rather than social groups.[49] However, as even Hix explicitly proves, the three major European party federations can be located quite clearly within two socio-economic cleavages[50], which hints that the parties still have strong roots in social groups.

Both interpretations do not therefore need to be regarded as incompatible. Both suggest that a crucial characteristic and task of a political party is its objective to influence governmental policies. In other words: Are European party federations relevant actors in EU decision-making? This question will be dealt with in section 2.2. Firstly, it will be examined whether or not one can already speak of European 'parties': How far has transnational party co-operation progressed?

## 2.1. The formation of Euro-Parties - from EP groups to EU parties

When the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was established in 1952, its Common Assembly, the predecessor of the European Parliament, displayed a considerable, even "un-precedented"[51] difference to other international assemblies. Unlike e.g. the UN General Assembly, the ECSC's six founding member states' representatives decided not to organise according to national delegations, but to Europe's political 'families'[52] right from the beginning. This means that the dominant ideological streams of the member states' democratic political systems were mirrored in the organisation of the ECSC assembly: Christian Democrats, Liberals, Socialists. When the Common Assembly was transformed into the European Parliament

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[47] Ladrech 1997, p. 172
[48] Gaffney, pp. 1-3
[49] Hix 1995, pp. 530-4
[50] ibid., pp. 537-42
[51] Van Oudenhove, p. xiii
[52] Gaffney, pp. 4-5

in 1958, it also officially dropped the former alphabetical seating order in favour of a political one.[53]

Among the major national parties represented in the assembly, only the French Gaullists decided not to belong to one of the three traditional groups anymore, although this did not happen before late 1962, until when they had been members of the Liberal Group. In 1965, the Gaullists' parliamentary strength had swollen to 15 just as the minimum number of MEPs required for an EP group had been lowered to 14, thus enabling the Gaullists to form a group of their own, the European Democratic Union Group.[54]

Furthermore, following the 1969 The Hague summit which committed the European Community to introduce direct elections to the European Parliament, the national parties represented in the EP began to strengthen or to build up extra-parliamentary links with ideologically similar parties from within the EC. Some time before, the Socialist International (SI) had already initiated a 'Liaison Bureau' in 1957[55] to ensure a steady flow of information between the EP Socialist Group and the national party organisations represented within the Group. The Bureau was accompanied by a congress to decide on general political questions, to be held every two years.[56]

The Bureau was transformed later into the Office of the Social Democratic Parties in the EC. This enabled and prepared the European (i.e. the EC) Socialists to become the first European Party organisation, the *Confederation of Socialist Parties in the EC* (CSP) to be established in April 1974, preceding even the Brussels EC summit at the end of that year which finally decided to hold the first direct elections to the EP in 1979. The Brussels summit is generally regarded as the main impetus which induced the two other major "families of parties"[57] to strengthen their internal links with the *Federation of European Liberals and Democrats* (ELD) and the *European People's Party* (EPP) having been founded in March and April 1976, respectively.[58] Both federations' internal structure roughly mirrored the CSP's: It included a congress and an executive committee (the latter analogous the CSP bureau).[59]

Originally, the party federations' main task was to prepare for European election campaigns, i.e. mainly to draw up a manifesto for the federation's member parties. Although the CSP had been the *first* federation to be established in 1974, and despite the fact that its group's voting cohesion in the EP had been significantly higher than the Christian Democrats' and the Liberals' up to the first wave of EC enlargement in 1973[60], the Socialists were not able to agree on a manifesto for the first direct elections in 1979. They first postponed their regular

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[53] Van Oudenhove, pp. xiii, 138-40
[54] Forsyth, p. 478-9
[55] ibid., p. 482
[56] Van Oudenhove, pp. 150-1
[57] Wilhelm Dröscher (first CSP President), quoted in Hix 1996, p. 315
[58] Hix 1996, pp. 313-4
[59] Hix/Lord, pp. 173-5
[60] Forsyth, pp. 486-7; Pridham/Pridham 1979a, p. 250ff.; Hix/Lord, pp. 140-56 accounts the current patterns

1977 congress and finally failed at the second attempt at a special 1979 election congress and achieved only a joint declaration of a meeting of the member parties' leaders, a body not even formally established in the CSP's 1974 constitution. In this respect, the ELD as well as the EPP were more successful, agreeing upon common manifestos (even unanimously in the case of the EPP) for the 1979 European elections.[61]

While this indicates that in the run-up to the first direct elections the ELD and the EPP had improved their cohesion in contrast to the CSP, one has to differentiate concerning the period after 1979.[62] While the Liberal EP Group in particular has *always* been and is still suffering from divisions between its three main strands - Radical, Economic as well as 'agrarian' -,[63] the Socialists later have latterly managed to decide on common manifestos in all three EP elections since 1984 and have been able to recover from their internal setbacks, which had been caused by internal factionalism within the French PS and the Euro-sceptic Labour Party of the 1970s and early 1980s[64], and to almost close their 'cohesion gap' between themselves and the EPP that had arisen in the 1980s[65].

The Christian Democrats have been the most cohesive group for many years since the 1970s. Nevertheless, agricultural and more abstract economic policy have proved to be divisive within the group[66] and one of the main obstacles to prevent Conservative parties from Britain, Portugal and Scandinavia from joining the group. Thus, the EPP could not draw as much advantage from the northerly and southerly enlargement of the EC in 1973, 1981 and 1986 as the CSP; absenteeism by most Conservative MEPs prevented it from restoring the lead (in seats) over the Socialists which it had enjoyed from the Common Assembly's establishment in late 1952 up to 1975 - and which they have never subsequently regained.[67] However, one should not draw the conclusion that enlargement of the groups represents growing divisions. For example, the growth of the Socialist EP Group since the 1970s has seen eleven parties joining between 1973 and 1995 (including the former Communist Italian PDS) and has witnessed the improvement of its internal cohesion at the same time.[68]

The late 1980s and, even more, the early 1990s have seen a third upswing for European party politics. The shift of crucial areas from the national to the EC or EU level, has also urged national politicians to shift more attention to European politics.[69] Hence, the influence of the three major European party federations - which were all transformed into or at least renamed

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[61] Hix 1996, pp. 316-7

[62] ibid., p. 317

[63] Van Oudenhove, pp. 118-9; Forsyth, p. 490; Pridham/Pridham 1979a, pp. 258-61; Hix/Lord, pp. 32-35

[64] Gaffney, p. 14; Ladrech 1993, pp. 202, 204-5; however, the 1984 and 1989 CSP Manifestos still contained 'opt outs' from some of its policies by some member parties.

[65] Hix/Lord, pp. 142-3

[66] Forsyth, pp. 489-90; Pridham/Pridham 1979a, p. 256; Hix/Lord, p. 150

[67] Pridham/Pridham 1979a, p. 254

[68] Hix/Lord, p. 144

[69] Ladrech 1993, p. 200

'parties' in 1992 - was strengthened in two ways. First, the 'Euro-Parties' were increasingly consulted by their national member parties to give advice especially on those European matters[70] which were still decided on by national governmental representatives. Furthermore, the party federations succeeded in influencing, for example the drafts for the TEU: The 'party article' 138a TEU would not have been included in the final treaty signed in Maastricht without common pressure by the three major party federations whilst the strongly monetarist approach of the EMU can also be seen as a result of EPP tactics - in the Council of Ministers and the European Council.[71] For those member parties which were opposition parties, the party federations were an "important back-door into"[72] and more or less the only chance of influencing European decision-making. While it can be stated that the EPP's dominance lasted until the ratification of the Maastricht Treaties, the gradual upswing of Socialist or Social Democratic Parties, bringing them into power in (currently) twelve of the fifteen EU member states[73], might initiate a new upswing of the Party of European Socialists (PES; the successor of the CSP), too (it will be illustrated in the following section how the strengthening of a party family's members within the Council also strengthens their transnational federation).

## 2.2. Do they matter?

The sheer existence of European party federations is in no respect sufficient to prove that they are relevant participants in European decision-making. Therefore, some evidence has to be given to show if and in how far their influence has become visible up to the present time. Basically, the impact of European parties can be found most readily in two EU institutions, the European Parliament and the European Council.

As already mentioned, party groups within the ECSC Common Assembly emerged almost immediately after its establishment in 1952. Since then, they have structured the parliament's organisation and agenda: "[Party groups' spokesmen's] speeches, together with those of the committee *rapporteurs*... dominate the debates"[74], are given priority and longer speaking time than non-attached MEPs.[75]
Right from the beginning, the party groups have been represented in the Assembly's committees according to the partisan composition of the plenum. Pridham/ Pridham state that "Party groups clearly dominate the organisation and procedures of the European

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[70] Hix 1995, pp. 544-5; Gaffney, p. 7
[71] Hix 1995, p. 545; Hix 1996, pp. 319-320; Hix/Lord, pp. 170, 188-95
[72] Ladrech 1996, p. 319
[73] Currently, PES member parties are opposition parties in only three EU member states: Germany (SPD), Ireland (Labour Party), Spain (PSOE).
[74] Forsyth, pp. 477 (Italics in the original text)
[75] Van Oudehove, pp. 140-42; Pridham/Pridham 1979a, p. 248

Parliament."[76] This also becomes evident in the nomination and election of the EP President (although this position rotates between the EPP and the PES) and his deputies who draw up the EP's agenda; nominations and voting coalitions emerge along party group lines.[77]

Moreover, a comparison between the EP's national delegations' and the political groups' voting cohesion shows that the latter's is significantly higher.[78] Thus, it can be proved that it is *party group*, not *national* affiliation which structures voting in the European Parliament.

However, one has to appreciate that votes in the EP do not generally reveal clear-cut right vs. left-wing confrontation, but often common voting by the EPP and the PES group. Three arguments can be made about this. Firstly, such 'oversized majorities' are often indispensable due to the institutional requirements of absolute majorities (currently, this means 314 MEPs), i.e. a majority among all *elected*, not only *present* MEPs. With an overall MEP attendance rate in votes of below 70 per cent and an aggregate EPP-PES share of seats of around two thirds, only a grand (voting) coalition between both major groups, often even including the European Liberal Democratic Reform group (ELDR; the successor of the ELD), is most likely to enable the EP to express its points of view against other EU bodies.[79] Furthermore, the fact that the vast majority of EP decisions are taken by agreement of both major party groups only mirrors the dominant voting patterns of government and major opposition parties in national parliaments. Secondly, the mere existence of voting coalitions presumes the *existence* of groups which can organise common voting behaviour; thus the stable 'centrist alliance'[80] in the EP does not contradict, but proves the relevance of party groups in the EP. Finally, the admission of the British and Danish Conservatives to the EPP Group in 1992[81] hints at a growing 'anti-socialist' stance within the group which was traditionally coined by the dominant Christian Democratic tendency towards compromise; thus, voting coalitions with the PES can be expected to become less frequent.[82]

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the influence of the *extra-parliamentary* EuroParties has grown and become increasingly visible. In particular the December summits of the European Council in the 1990s saw a rise in the importance of the federations' party leaders' meetings (i.e. meetings of the leaders of each federations' member parties).[83] The quantity of these leaders' meetings as well as the attendance of party leaders at the meetings has significantly

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[76] Pridham/Pridham 1979a, pp. 247-8

[77] However, in the EP's early years, agreement on the EP President was much rarer than today. Nevertheless, the President was always a 'party candidate', never a 'national candidate'; see Van Oudenhove, pp. 144-148

[78] Forsyth, p. 486

[79] Hix/Lord, pp. 135, 137-8, 160-1; Ladrech 1996, p. 295

[80] Hix/Lord, p. 137

[81] ibid., p. 163

[82] Ladrech 1996, p. 301

[83] Hix/Lord, pp. 188-9

increased. Furthermore, meetings of the EPP and the CSP leaders now generally take place immediately before each European Council as well as in the same venue.[84]

What is more important is the growing impact of these meetings on the European Council as regards contents and decisions. In this respect, the December 1990 Rome summit and especially the preceding October EPP leaders' meeting in Brussels can be regarded as a prelude. Having previously co-ordinated and agreed on a common stance on the timetable and agenda of the future Intergovernmental Councils and being represented within the Rome summit by six of twelve European Prime Ministers (against two Conservatives, two Socialists and two Liberals), the EPP was able to push through its proposals "almost in their entirety".[85] Similarly, the final draft of the TEU, prepared by leaders' meetings and adopted by the December 1991 Maastricht Council, only contained one item (European citizenship) that was not approved by the EPP's preceding meeting. The 1992 Edinburgh summit saw Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzales' resistance to EU enlargement without increased finances overcome. This had already happened in the preceding PES meeting, not in the summit: "...under the new statutes of the PES, a majority of the Socialist leaders could impose their wishes on the Spanish party. Under this PES pressure, Gonzales agreed to back down."[86] Remarkably, Gonzales backed down to Austrian Social Democratic leader and chancellor Franz Vranitzky, then only a member of the PES, but not yet of the European Council (Austria only joined in 1995).

Thus, it can be concluded, that a) the party federations' positions became visible in the European Council's summits' outcomes by co-ordinating each of 'their' Prime Ministers' positions, and that b) Prime Ministers were even willing to give way to intra-federation majority opinion even before the EU summits.

## 3. <u>Conclusion</u>

Traditionally, there are two different major approaches on how to tackle the EU democratic deficit. Although both suggest some detailed reform proposals, both must be regarded as problematic because of their 'side effects': They imply quite far-reaching points of view on how European integration should develop. Therefore, applying either one of these could arouse animosity between as well as within EU member states; currently, one cannot rely on a consensus over the 'finality' question. Thus, one has to search for an approach to tackle the democratic deficit which can keep open this latter question.

This treatise has therefore argued in favour of 'Euro-Parties' as a 'finality-neutral' means to overcome the democratic deficit. It has given evidence that one can now speak of (as Hix describes the current state of integration of the party federations) "nascent European parties".

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[84] ibid., pp. 183-6
[85] ibid., p. 545
[86] ibid., p.191

Furthermore, Hix even tends towards a 'maximalist' view, regarding them as "fully-fledged political parties", because they show all three essential characteristic traits

> "of party organization: the party as a membership organization (the corporate membership of the national parties, and the introduction of procedures for 'individual membership' in the 1992 federation statutes), ...a governing organization (the policy development during the IGCs), ...a bureaucratic organization (the increased number of staff in the federations' central offices)."[87]

Nevertheless, one should not neglect problems that Hix' focus on the study of Euro-Parties in particular hints at. Within his approach, the cause of democratising the parties themselves loses importance compared to the cause of *efficient* party federations. A little bit exaggerated, one could perhaps even get the impression that Hix does not primarily care about democratising the EU by strengthening parties, but rather about strengthening parties regardless of whether the means are contributing to democratising the EU or not. Thus, he welcomes the shift of intra-federation policy-making away from the congresses to the party leaders' meetings in order to increase the federations' efficiency.

If one were to unrestrictedly adopt that approach, some serious doubts about the sense of a strategy of a "Europe of Parties"[88] would have to be raised: Is it only a zero-sum game of politicising and democratising EU decision-making on the one hand and de-democratising its central actors on the other? Are Euro-Parties becoming 'governmentalized' rather than the EU's intergovernmental bodies becoming 'party-democratised'?

In contrast to this, the author of this treatise is convinced that one *can* escape this zero-sum trap. Within the Euro-Party approach, additional emphasis has to be laid on the internal democratisation of the Euro-Parties. To maintain a true representative character, the party federations have to make sure their international policy formulation does not become too centralised.

This treatise therefore finally argues in favour of *both* the following developments: 1. To enhance democracy in EU decision-making, more emphasis has to be laid on increasing involvement in Euro-Parties. As has been shown, these are decisive agents of decision-making. As they are also more deeply rooted in Europe's societies than the EU institutions, their chance to link the European people(s) with the 'Europolity' can be regarded as much more promising than the previous attempts at establishing such a link between the institutions and citizens. 2. Equal emphasis has to be laid on democratising the internal structures of the Euro-Parties. The conflict between the *efficiency* of and *democracy* in the Euro-Parties must not be solved by simply opting for one of these options but by finding a

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[87] Hix 1996, pp. 322-3
[88] Marquand, p. 25

proper balance that ensures party members' influence on party policy as well as facilitating party influence on EU decision-making.

## 4. Literature

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## 5. <u>List of abbreviations</u> (in alphabetical order)

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|---|---|
| CSP(EC) | Confederation of Socialist Parties (in the EC) |
| EC | European Community |
| ECSC | European Coal and Steel Community |
| ELD | Federation of European Liberals and Democrats |
| ELDR | European Liberal Democratic Reform Party |
| EP | European Parliament |
| EPP | European People's Party |
| EU | European Union |
| MEP | Member of European Parliament |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| PES | Party of European Socialists |
| PR | proportional representation |
| SEA | Single European Act |
| SI | Socialist International |
| TEU | Treaties on the European Union |
| UN | United Nations |