

Titel:

What's new in the EP? EU-issue parties and the Europeanization of national party systems

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Kurzzusammenfassung

Focusing on the three preceding elections to the European Parliament, this contribution means to challenge the traditional understanding that the concept of Europeanization has not yet reached the stage of national party systems. Contrary to earlier studies, we find that both the significant rise of successful EU-issue parties and the resulting erosion of the arena-issue inversion favour the Europeanization of domestic party systems throughout EU member states.

Schlagworte

Europeanization, European Parliament election, party systems, EU-issue parties, European integration

The political environment in the months leading to the 2019 European Parliament (EP) election led many to believe: This time it will be different. The unprecedented degree to which the *EU* as a political subject had become salient for political parties and people alike suggested that 2019 would yield the first genuine *European* election, in which EU issues, instead of domestic politics, dominate the election campaigns. This prediction stood in stark contrast to established scholarly knowledge. Already the first direct EP election in 1979 had been characterized as nine national second-order elections instead of one European-level election (Corbett 2014; Hix & Marsh 2011; Reif & Schmitt 1980; Reif et al. 1997; Schmitt 2007). Ever since – despite ever-growing competences for the EP, politicization and Spitzenkandidaten – all analyses painted a similar picture: European Parliament elections always ranked second.

Generally, European integration is said to have a tremendous impact on national, regional and local political environments. Yet, the rather restrained attentiveness bestowed upon EU elections entailed that national party systems remained largely unaffected by Europeanization. Analyzing national party systems in the 1980s and 1990s, Peter Mair (2000), for instance, concludes that the EU has hardly changed national party systems and is unlikely to do so in the future: “Spillover from the European to national electoral arenas will always remain limited and for this reason, national party systems are likely to remain relatively impervious to any direct impact of European integration” (Mair 2000, p. 41).

Following first studies that found evidence running contrary to this assumption, we dare to challenge Mair's claim. Assuming that the perpetual crises hitting the EU since 2008 and their related politicization will also come to affect national party systems, we take the 2019 EP election to examine if Europeanization finally leaves its marks on EU member states' party systems.

1. Theoretical framework

The concept of Europeanization refers to “responses by actors – institutional and otherwise – to the impact of European integration” (Ladrech 2002, p. 389) and has been applied to a plethora of different questions, political systems and aspects thereof, for example national party systems (Braun & Schmitt 2018; Ladrech 2002, 2008; Mair 2000). One of the most renowned scholars of party politics presumes the first European election in 1979 to be a logical juncture, that “offered the first opportunity for parties to attempt to establish formal cross-national links as part of their direct efforts to appeal to voters”, and thereby might have triggered an increase in any Europeanization effect on national party systems (Mair 2000, p. 29).

According to Mair, any direct effect of the EU on national party systems will first and foremost manifest itself in the system's *format*, i.e. the number of emerging EU-issue parties “with the explicit and primary intention of mobilizing support for or against the EU” (2000, p. 30).¹ Analysing domestic parliamentary elections in the period between 1979 and 1998, Mair however found that the influence of Europeanization on national party systems was practically non-existent. Whereas he identified 120 new parties, only three of them could de facto “be linked directly to the issue of European integration” (Mair 2000, p. 32): The Austrian No-Citizens Initiative, the Finnish Alliance for a Free Finland and the British Referendum Party (p. 49). Considering that the first EP election had opened up a wholly new electoral arena for the expression of political preferences, the limited interest appears rather puzzling.

Following Mair, the non-appearance of new EU-issue parties can be traced back to a detrimental inversion of electoral issues and electoral arenas. Based on the competences of national parliaments and the European Parliament respectively, the European electoral arena would be the appropriate field to campaign and vote for specific EU-wide *policy* issues. In contrast, “any questions concerning the constitution of Europe [*polity*] are likely to fall most firmly within the

¹ Next to the format of party systems, Mair has originally also analysed possible changes to the mechanics of party systems, i.e. “the modes of interaction between the (relevant) parties”. Since a thorough analysis of both factors is beyond the limited scope of this study, it seems reasonable to take a look at the format first and interpret the underlying assumptions. For information on party system mechanics, see Mair 2000.

national electoral arena” (Mair 2000, p. 37) and should thus be discussed during national election campaigns. In reality, however, Mair identified an inversion of this issue-arena relationship: European elections are habitually exploited to campaign for *polity* adaptations (such as EU membership or treaty changes), whereas national elections are used as arenas to promote *policy* change. It follows that both arenas are largely depoliticized. This further hampers the Europeanization of national party systems, as the depoliticized EU issues remain for the distant elites to quarrel with and do not enter the electoral arena. For political parties, and especially new ones, campaigning mainly around EU issues therefore does not pay off: Voters make their choices on the basis of domestic issues which are often highly politicized; no matter the electoral arena (Mair 2000).

Nearly 20 years have passed since Mair’s investigation. Since then, the EU has been afflicted by several (partly ongoing) crises that keep on influencing the lives of EU citizens. Further, the EU treaties adopted since 2000 granted more and more competencies to the EP. First studies show that parties have turned to genuine European policy campaigns in the EP elections, thereby rectifying the arena-issue inversion (Braun et al. 2016; Senninger & Wagner 2015). This study therefore aims to examine if both, the limited Europeanization of party systems as well as the arena-issue inversion, still hold after the 2019 European election.

In order to answer these questions, we proceeded in two consecutive steps. First, we checked if the number of newly founded EU-issue parties has increased, and thereby influences the format of national party systems. Against this background, three clarifications are necessary. (1) *New parties* are defined as all parties that have been founded since 2008 and entered the European Parliament for the first time in one of the following European elections.² (2) *EU-issue parties* are parties whose central reason for foundation was the EU or any EU-related issue. While these parties might also stand for other political goals, the EU ought to be its *raison d’être*, and the party would not have been brought to life if it was not for Europe. (3) We assume the number of new EU-issue parties to have increased since the EU has been hit by a series of crises; the widely accepted starting year for which is 2008. For our analysis, we hence focused on the European elections in 2009, 2014 and 2019. In a second step, we took a closer look at the

² Mair (2000) chose to focus on national elections, arguing that parties only have an impact on the national party system if they take part in national elections. We decided to focus on European elections. First of all, since the early 2000s the political importance of EP elections has increased, despite the fact that they are still widely considered second-order. Second, we believe that trends of Europeanization will first be visible in elections at the EU level. We do, however, refer back to the repercussions on national party systems later in the text.

identified new EU-issue parties and their party manifestos, and scrutinized their actual demands: Is the parties' major focus on adapting policies or changing polity?

2. Party system format: The number of new EU-issue parties

Our analysis revealed that the number of successful new parties in general has been constantly rising. While in 2009, nine new parties have been identified, the 2014 EP election already involved 21 new parties and in 2019, 25 new parties entered the EP for the first time. In this sense and just considering temporality, we could assume that Europeanization and the ramifications of the crises can be associated with a considerable increase in the number of new parties in the EP.

However, the way more important question is how many of these newly founded parties have been set up for purely EU-issue reasons. Remember that for the period 1979-1998, i.e. 19 years, Mair had identified merely three EU-issue parties. For our period of analysis, nine of the identified new parties could be categorized as EU-issue parties: Five in 2019, four in 2014, and none in 2009 (Table 1). We can hence observe a clear increase in the foundation of successful EU-issue parties after 2008. While their success at the European level has been established, it remains to be examined if these EU-issue parties have any repercussion on their respective national party systems, as well.

For some parties, such as the only recently established *VOLT* or the *Brexit Party*, we simply do not know yet. While the *Brexit Party* is a paramount example of a successful EU-issue party (as was the *British Referendum Party* already identified by Mair), it will be considered a special case for this analysis since it is hard to tell how the party will develop in the post-Brexit future and if it will in fact keep influencing the national party system. The Czech *Svobodní*, emerging in 2009 after general disagreement over the Lisbon Treaty, was so far not able to pass the 5% threshold in any election at the national level. While the party's main goal was to establish itself on the national level, its "presence in the EP rather reinforced its two main topics – hard Euroscepticism and libertarian ideology. Both issues are, however, not considered as salient for the mainstream voters" (Kaniok 2017, p. 434).

Table 1: New EU-issue parties: 2009, 2014 and 2019

	Name	Translation	Abbr.	MS	Year	EU-issue	Seats
EP20	Alternative für Deutschland	Alternative for Germany	AfD	DE	2013	Euro rescue package	7

	Unidas Podemos	United we can!	Podemos	ES	2014	Austerity measures and legitimacy	5
	Strana svobodných občanů	Free Citizens' Party	Svobodní	CZ	2009	Lisbon Treaty	1
	Anexartiti Ellines	Independent Greeks	ANEL	EL	2012	EU austerity policy	1
EP2019	Fratelli d'Italia	Brothers of Italy	FdI	IT	2012	Eurozone	5
	Forum voor Democratie	Forum for Democracy	FvD	NL	2016	Eurozone, EU membership	3
	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	Freedom and Direct Democracy	SPD	CZ	2015	EU membership	2
	VOLT	VOLT	VOLT	DE	2017	European solutions	1
	Brexit Party	Brexit Party	BP	GB	2019	Brexit	29

Source: Own illustration

All other EU-issue parties identified in the analysis (used to) have quite an influence on their respective national party systems. The Czech *SPD* appears to be more successful than *Svobodní* in this regard. Founded in 2015 with a “very hard-line Eurosceptic program, which included open calls for a referendum on the Czech Republic’s withdrawal from the EU” (Just 2016, p. 96), the party won 30 seats (4.67%) in the 2016 regional elections and over 10 percent (i.e. 22 seats) in the 2017 election to the Czech Chamber of Deputies.

The extremely Eurosceptic *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) was founded in 2013 as a direct reaction to the proposed measures to tackle the Euro crisis. After its success in the 2014 EP election, the AfD also gained ground at the national level. By now being represented in all German state parliaments and scoring 12.6% and winning 94 seats in the 2017 election to the German Bundestag, there is no doubt that the AfD has influenced the German party system.

Similarly, the *Forum for Democracy* (FvD) constantly extends its influence on the Dutch party system. Founded in 2016 and starting with a mere 1.8% in its first national parliamentary election in 2017, it even came to challenge Geert Wilder’s PVV as the main Eurosceptic force in the Netherlands. The party scored its so far greatest success in March 2019, where it was the clear winner of the provincial elections with 15.9%.

The Spanish *Podemos* was founded shortly before the 2014 European election and strongly criticized a profound crisis of legitimacy in the EU, which made it necessary to create a common

party, aiming to oppose the austerity measures and other policies assigned by the EU (Podemos 2019, p. 2). After entering the European Parliament in 2014, Podemos' popularity increased considerably. When the party began accepting members in July 2014, 32.000 people registered within the first 48 hours, and after 20 days, Podemos counted 100.000 members rendering it the third largest party in Spain (Huffington Post 2014). These numbers were reflected both in the Andalusian regional election (15%) and the following 2015 parliamentary election, in which it ranked third. In 2017, the party supported the minority government of Pedro Sánchez.

The *Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)*, a highly Eurosceptic party, rejecting the Treaty of Lisbon and explicitly proposing to leave the Euro zone (Segatti et al. 2015, p. 313), was also able to increase support since its foundation in 2012. Coalescing with the centre-right around Berlusconi, it gained nine seats (2%) in the 2013 parliamentary elections, 17 seats (4.4%) in the Chamber of Deputies, and seven seats in the Senate of the Republic in 2018. In between the general elections, the FdI was able to increase its support in the local elections, especially so in central and Southern Italy. In the 2016 municipal elections, the FdI's president, Giorgia Meloni, even ran for mayor of Rome, strongly supported by Salvini's League, and made the third place (20.62%).

Finally, the *Independent Greeks (ANEL)*, turning against the austerity policy in Greece's sovereign debt crisis, had quite an impact on the Greek party system – at least for a limited amount of time. In the 2015 general elections, the party received ten seats in the Hellenic Parliament and built a government coalition with the incumbent Syriza. It thus represents the only new EU-issue party with actual government experience. When Tsipras entered into dialogue on the Macedonian name dispute, ANEL decided to leave the coalition. However, while largely influential at this instance, this was more or less the end of ANEL's electoral success.

Accordingly, we can conclude that Mair's finding that "Europe has had virtually no direct or even demonstrable effect on the format of the national party systems" (2000, p. 31) does no longer hold true; as does his assumption that they "are likely to remain relatively impervious to any direct impact of European integration". While Mair identified three EU-issue parties in 20 years, we were able to unveil the origination of nine EU-issues parties in the past ten years – most of which did indeed have an impact on their respective national political arena. It hence appears that Europeanization has in fact influenced the format of national party systems and most likely will continue to do so.

3. Zooming in: Arena-issue relationship – still confused?

The second step of our analysis examines the state of the arena-issue inversion in the 2019 elections, focusing on the identified EU-issue parties. These parties' European manifestos differ considerably. Five parties had an EP election manifesto, while the Independent Greeks, Svobodní and Freedom and Direct Democracy have not put together a specific program for the EP elections. For these three parties, positions have been extracted from general manifestos (which in part entailed sections on the EU or Europe in general). Consequently, also the detail of positions on the EU differs across party manifestos. This naturally holds between parties with and without EP election manifestos, but also within the latter group there are considerable differences. Podemos, Volt and AfD are the parties with the most comprehensive political programs and ideas for the European Union. First, hence, there is a clear and evident difference in the quantity of positions on EU issues in the eight parties under investigation.³

Second, the arena-issue inversion identified by Mair still largely applies. All of the parties analysed campaign around *polity* issues. Most envision a change in the institutional setup, either on the divide of competences between the supranational and the national level, the electoral system, the power relation between the different EU institutions or the decision-making power of European people beyond electoral mechanisms. It is only in the three most comprehensive manifestos that polity issues do not dominate over policy issues. Still, the analysis also revealed that most of the parties do not entirely neglect policy issues. Only two out of the eight parties (Independent Greeks and Svobodní) do not formulate concrete policy demands in fields where the EP has important competences.

All other parties promote policy issues to different degrees. Again, the most comprehensive manifestos entail the widest range of policy issues. In general, issues from many different policy fields are covered. Fratelli d'Italia, for instance, strives to establish a European plan for public investment in infrastructure, VOLT aims at introducing a "minimum income above poverty level in all Member States" (Volt 2019, p. 4), and especially Eurosceptic parties often propose changes to economic and monetary policies. These changes centre around the distribution and accessibility of EU funding (Fratelli), a smaller EU budget and review of different economic legislation (AFD) and abolishing the European Monetary Fund (FvD). But also the pro-European parties VOLT and Podemos propose several elementary changes to the current economic policies of the EU, such as increasing public spending and changing fund distribution, setting up a European Labour Platform, or different EU-level taxes. Overall, while parties

³ The Brexit Party has not published an official party manifesto.

especially promote policies in areas they focus on politically, economic policy is one of the most prominent policy fields in which changes are demanded.

According to literature on campaigning in EU elections in general and on the polity-policy-nexus in particular, we would expect a clear difference to be witnessed between Eurosceptic and pro-European parties. VOLT and Podemos, as the two least Eurosceptic of the eight parties analysed, indeed show a very high ratio of policy issues in their manifestos, while many Eurosceptic parties rather tend to focus on polity issues. The big exception here is the German AfD, which is strictly Eurosceptic but at the same time proposes changes on a whole range of policy issues. Just considering our sample, therefore, we find that the longer the European party manifestos, the more they feature policy issues. Parties with short or no European manifestos concentrate on the popular, grand issues of EU membership, such as common currency, border control and institutional setup, while those parties which did take an effort and develop a long program for the EU elections always introduce complex policy visions. The fact that the AfD as a strongly Eurosceptic party has a large focus on policy issue in its manifesto contrast some of the findings of earlier research on EU campaigning (Braun et al. 2016; Senninger & Wagner 2015).

4. Conclusion

EP elections have gained in importance over the last decade, and the 2019 elections have been judged by some as the first genuine European elections in the history of the Union. Our findings suggest that with this growing importance, Europeanization begins to affect national party systems. Our analysis has firstly revealed that the number of parties founded primarily on the basis of one or several EU issues has increased in light of the multiple political crises faced by the EU, and that these EU-issue parties have repercussions on national party systems. While Mair found that “of the many areas of domestic politics that may have experienced an impact from Europe, party systems have perhaps proved to be most impervious to change” (2000, p. 28), our analysis indicated that the current trend points to the opposite direction.

Second, also the arena-issue inversion seems to loosen up. As already suggested by other studies testing Mair’s argument, we have shown that policy issues gain in importance in EU election manifestos. However, polity issues maintain an important, often dominant, role in manifestos, so that the arena-issue inversion cannot (yet) be considered a relic of the past. If anything, this analysis hints at a starting shift towards actual policy-campaigning at the European level.

Of course, the answers provided in this analysis are not set in stone and need to be tested more thoroughly. First, the European campaigns of established parties need to be analysed in the

latest elections in order to see if the same effects apply to established parties. Second, while manifestos are an important part of electoral campaigns, they are by far not the only source of analysis. Public campaigning, for example through speeches, but also print and online media appearances might deliver a more fine-grained picture of which issues the parties actually use to generate public support. Third, future inquiries should examine the fact that parties which start becoming successful actors in the national party systems often lose their EU-issue focus. Does this phenomenon have any implications towards conclusions on the Europeanization of national party systems?

Lastly, and importantly, we have only been able to scrutinize the first of two aspect of party system Europeanization. Accordingly, it will be crucial to scrutinize in how far these new parties might change their respective party system *mechanics*, i.e. the ways parties relate and interact within national party systems. Only when a clear change in mechanics can be traced, as well, we can actually talk about a genuine Europeanization of party systems. There are manifold questions to be asked and studies to be conducted in this field. Our findings suggest that the Europeanization of national party systems is well underway and thereby provide good arguments for further investigating the subject.

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