

Can a European democratic system exist without European parties?

According to Art. 10(4) TEU “Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.” Although in 2003 the status of European parties has been clarified by the Parliament and the Council, up to today the European parties have remained in a “proto-party” stage. European Parliamentary elections are held on a national basis, with national lists and national election campaigns. Neither are there deep and comprehensive European party programs, nor are the parties guided by a strong party leader.

This leads to the question, whether such proto-parties can effectively contribute to a European political discourse, concerned e.g. with the Union’s geopolitical, socio-economic and environmental policies. To which extent are the proto-parties victims of their national structure, condemned to internal disputes along national lines? Assuming that such disputes exist, aren’t they necessarily enchained by minimum consensus party lines, limiting the room of maneuver in the political discourse with other parties?

Now, one could make the argument that national representation in the parliament, when equally representing the citizens’ opinion, is not a bad thing. Nonetheless, it shall be remembered that the equal representation is a highly disputed issue, given the distribution of seats to the member states’ respective parliamentarians. Moreover, the representation of national interest is already institutionalized in the Council. Reaching beyond these concerns, the process of European elections itself has to be questioned. Do 27 independent nationally oriented election campaigns contribute to a political discourse, oriented at the entire Union’s concerns rather than each Member State’s? Particularly the findings related to European elections being characterized by sanction votes against the respective national governments’ parties is alarming.

How to overcome these problems; the problem of parliamentarians elected by national sanction votes, the problem of citizens’ equal representation, the problem of Parliament weakening itself by intra-party inconsistencies? Fully fledged European parties would be the only way out. It is a far reaching proposal, no doubt. Who could imagine electing a list to the European parliament lead by a strong leader of a nationality different to one’s own? Who could imagine electing a list, potentially not including a single parliamentarian of one’s own nationality? As difficult it is to imagine, as far reaching could be its consequences. Thematic debates disentangled from national questions. Europe wide election campaigns with European topics.

This leaves us with the important question, whether the European electorate is ready for these parties. If the answer is no, one has to ask why? Is it the lacking public discourse on European topics? Is it the fact that media reporting is still national, European citizens consequentially living in a world of 27 different national perceptions of European politics? Without doubt this is the case. Therefore, the first important step towards fully fledged European parties is in the making this very moment. From European journalistic and academic internet platforms the logical follow ups are European print media, European radio and TV. A more Europeanized daily political discourse will enable the evolution of more “European” European parties, enchained by strengthened European parliamentarism, cornerstone of a more democratic European Union.