Political parties, voter mobilisation and the 1979 European elections

SUMMARY

As part of its 'New Push for European Democracy', the European Commission has proposed a revision of Regulation No 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of the European political parties and European political foundations. The European Parliament (EP) is currently discussing the Commission proposal, with the Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) Committee having appointed Rainer Wieland (EPP, Germany) and Charles Goerens (Renew, Luxembourg) as co-rapporteurs.

This activity surrounding the governance of European political parties (or 'Europarties') reveals a widely held belief that they play a crucial role in transnational democracy in the European Union (EU), in particular as intermediaries between the EP and the European citizen. Indeed, Article 10(4) of the Treaty on European Union explicitly states that they 'contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union'.

However, in the years preceding the first EP elections in 1979, while the concern to connect with and mobilise citizens was widespread, there was less agreement on the need for European parties. As this briefing shows, though it was universally accepted that political parties were necessary to prepare the public for the first European elections, the idea that self-standing European parties were a pre-requisite for successful European elections eventually gave way to the notion of European parties as a coordinating structure for national parties' autonomous campaigns. Strikingly, this debate over the nature of European parties and their relationship to European elections continues to this day, highlighting its importance for European integration.

This briefing traces the debates in the European Parliament on the role of political parties in preparing the European electorate for the first direct European elections in 1979, starting from the preparation of the 1960 Draft Convention on European elections. The briefing concludes with a short discussion of the evolution of Europarties and EP elections after 1979, in the light of the pre-1979 debates.

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Introduction

As part of its 'New Push for European Democracy', the European Commission has proposed a revision of Regulation No 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations. Accordingly, the European Parliament (EP) has been discussing the governance of the party organisations that play such an important role in its own functioning and, crucially, the election of its Members. As Johansson and Raunio have argued,[1] these party federations, established in the 1970s, for many years had no proper legal basis, and it was only with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty that they were officially acknowledged as playing a key role in EU democracy. In their present shape, they are governed by Article 10(4) of the Treaty on European Union, and Article 12(2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, though even today their governance is not yet settled. Particularly since Maastricht, the EP has been vocal in stressing the importance of supporting the development of political parties at the European level, also known as 'Europarties'.

Looking at debates today, it is clear that European political parties are increasingly accepted as key elements of European politics. Every major ideological family in Europe nowadays has its own Europarty, even Eurosceptical ones. In its November 2021 resolution on European parties, the EP explicitly stated that, 'European political parties should play a more central role in the European elections process and contribute to forming EU political awareness and expressing the will of EU citizens'. Furthermore, it stated that, 'strong political parties and foundations at EU level are essential for the development of a truly EU public sphere'.

However, although such support seems a given among many EP groups today, this has not always been the case. In the late 1970s, two decades after the Rome Treaties had made the direct election of the EP a constitutional obligation,[2] MEPs finally found themselves preparing for the very first European elections in June 1979. Prior to that, delegates in the EP were selected from and appointed by their respective national parliaments. Yet, so the thinking at the time went, this was an insufficient basis upon which to build a democratically legitimated European unification, which required a stronger connection with the peoples of Europe. In the words of a European Parliament resolution from 1975, 'the process of European unification cannot succeed without the direct participation of the peoples affected'.[3]

This is where political parties come in. They were considered crucial in preparing public opinion and mobilising voters for the European elections. It was in this spirit that the first European party federations were established during the 1970s. Yet, while hardly anyone would argue against the importance of parties as such, there was (and is) much less agreement on: (i) the shape such parties should take in the EU's political system; and (ii) the importance of political parties as pre-existing organisations for the emergence of a (new) political system of democratic politics, such as the European Communities and the present-day EU.

Two main opposing theoretical perspectives compete with each other. On the one hand, authors such as Kalypso Nicolaïdis argued that the existence of system-wide political parties is a pre-condition for successfully holding democratic elections and establishing a common political sphere. By aggregating public preferences and competing for people's votes, political parties mobilise the public across the entire polity, giving shape and voice to a public sphere. There can thus be no meaningful election – and hence democratic polity – without the pre-existence of a party system sufficiently robust to carry it.[4] On the other hand, the opposing argument, made for example by Simon Hix, states that it is the democratic praxis of holding elections in itself that brings about public mobilisation, leading to the emergence of political parties. By providing citizens with a venue in which to engage in political competition, elections give birth to a public sphere, which in turn provides the opportunity for political entrepreneurs to establish political parties. No coherent party system will thus emerge without the continued praxis of holding democratic elections.[5]

This question already troubled many politicians in the decades prior to the 1979 elections. This briefing traces the debates in the EP on the role of political parties in preparing the European electorate for the first direct European elections in 1979. It shows that, in the years preceding these elections, while recognising the importance of parties, many were unconvinced of the need for the institutionalisation of parties at the European level prior to the elections, arguing that the EP's direct elections would spontaneously bring about their creation and development. Instead, the focus lay on getting the EP's direct election by universal suffrage on the rails first. The crucial role of parties during such elections, chiefly in establishing a connection with and mobilising citizens, was attributed to national parties, whose Europeanisation was heralded as unavoidable. This briefing then concludes with a discussion of the evolution of the European political system after 1979, in light of these pre-1979 debates.

No elections without parties; or no parties without elections?

While EP political groups already existed in one form or another, their extra-parliamentary counterparts at the European level only formed in the run-up to the 1979 elections. The first to be established was the Confederation of Socialist Parties in 1974, renamed the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 1992, relying heavily on the experience of the Socialist International.[6] Two years later, in 1976, both the European People's Party (EPP), and the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in Europe, later named the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) and today called the Alliance for Liberals and Democrats in Europe Party (ALDE), were established. Like the Socialists, these Christian-Democratic and Liberal party federations could also build on similar experiences with international cooperation.[7]

Even before the coming into force of the Rome Treaties, the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community had already debated its own potential election by direct suffrage, and from the very early stages, the question of voter mobilisation and political parties was raised. As early as 1953, a report for the Constitutional Committee noted that several European representatives stressed that, if elections were held before there were joint European parties and electoral programmes, 'public opinion would not be ready for European elections'.

Figure 1 – Fernand Dehousse speaking in European Parliamentary Assembly, May 1962

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

One of the key documents used to push the Member States to organise direct elections, was the EP's 1960 Draft Convention on the Election of the European Parliament by Direct Universal Suffrage, the preparation of which started in the late 1950s. The Draft Convention was proposed by the Subcommittee on Direct Elections of the Political Affairs Committee, and prepared by a Working Group on European Elections.

This Working Group was chaired by Belgian Socialist and European federalist Fernand Dehousse. A professor of international law and human rights at the University of Liège, Dehousse was heavily involved in the construction of European and international organisations after 1945. For example, from 1956 to 1959 he chaired the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

As president of the Working Group, Dehousse led its members through several rounds of intense debate on the future of the European elections. Starting in 1958, the Working Group gathered several times in Brussels, The Hague, Rome, Luxembourg and Paris, and held discussions inside the EP, while also actively involving academic experts, civil society, and national politicians in its

deliberations on how best to organise and prepare for the elections. It was in these exploratory and preparatory debates that the different views on the need for political parties at the European level came explicitly to the fore.

The idea that the formation of European parties should precede European elections was strongly present at the very early stages of the debate. One of the most explicit arguments made in favour of this idea came from Belgian Christian-Democrat Pierre Wigny. A doctor in law from Harvard University, Wigny served as minister in the Belgian government on several occasions (including Minister of the Colonies from 1947 to 1950, and of Foreign Affairs from 1958 to 1961) and was an MEP throughout most of the 1950s, temporarily chairing the Christian Democratic Group in February 1958.

Figure 2 – Pierre Wigny during a session in Strasbourg, January 1961.

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

During a debate in the Subcommittee on Direct Elections in the same year, he suggested postponing the direct elections of the EP until European parties existed to support such an endeavour. His main concern was that 'voters, largely unfamiliar with European issues, would show little interest in the elections in the absence of European parties and that they would be able to choose their candidates only on the basis of national considerations'. Moreover, he stated, 'this presented the great danger that the parliament thus elected would not be representative and that it would get off to a bad start'. He further warned that this would also allow extremist parties to enter the EP. He repeated these ideas again a year later, when he participated, as Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in an exchange of views with the Working Group, stating: 'I do not believe the elections in themselves will suffice to rouse enthusiasm with the people at large'.

However, despite these arguments, the contemporary majority in the EP did not consider postponing the European elections a good idea. In the same 1958 debate, heavyweight French MEP Pierre-Henri Teitgen – former French minister and leader of the French Mouvement Républicain Populaire, a close collaborator of Robert Schuman and later ardent critic of Charles de Gaulle – argued strongly in favour of the catalytic qualities of elections, warning against a 'vicious circle' that would indefinitely postpone the direct elections to the EP:

> There will be no European parties as long as no European elections are held. If one were to wait for the former before organising the latter, one could wait forever to organise them. … The first election is cancelled because it contains a danger of abstentions, but the next election will then be the first and perhaps it should be cancelled for the same reason.

Teitgen was supported by several others during the debate, including former French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud, a staunch European federalist, who argued that European elections would in fact force national parties to take a clear stance on European issues. Moreover, it would be 'unacceptable to let the European people wait [for political participation] any longer'. In the late 1950s, many MEPs therefore considered holding European elections as more urgent than having European parties.

Moreover, many MEPs expressed a strong faith in the elections as a catalyst for stimulating public interest and generating a European public sphere. For instance, in his Introductory Report to the Draft Convention, Dehousse countered the argument that 'elections are only justified when the voters first have a better understanding of European questions', by stating, in reference to the

formation of national states, that it is 'precisely through their participation in public life that [voters] have gradually matured' – thereby connecting holding EP elections to European nation-building.

Similarly, in his Report on the Constitution of the Elected Parliament (one of the reports accompanying the Draft Convention), French Socialist politician Maurice Faure – who in 1958 briefly held the position of French Minister for European Institutions – expressed the conviction that – 'the election of the Parliament by general elections will mobilise the electorate of the six member countries'. He further reiterated that raising awareness of European issues in public opinion was the main purpose of the election, which would be obtained through the 'salutary shock and deep penetration of the [people's] mind' that a European electoral campaign would bring about.

Mobilisation takes centre stage

All this does not mean that MEPs were indifferent to or ignorant of the role of political parties. Yet, their main focus was to convince the Member States to organise European elections in the first place, for which they raised important arguments in terms of democratic representation and the legitimacy of the European project. Indeed, the direct representation of the European people was at the same time a major objective of, and a key argument for, holding direct European elections. More broadly, MEPs expressed strong faith in the elections as a catalyst for stimulating public interest and generating a European public sphere.

Figure 3 – Voter entering a polling station for the European elections, 1979.

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

For instance, the Draft Convention and its accompanying reports, which later served as key reference points for discussions and resolutions on the preparation of the European elections, stressed on several occasions the need for public engagement with European integration. It stated explicitly that 'the point [of the elections] is to involve the peoples in the construction of Europe, and thus to strengthen the democratic character of the institutions'.

Furthermore, MEPs explicitly connected these arguments to the EP's own powers and position as a key institution of the European Communities. It tried to position itself as the main, if not the only, institution capable of giving the European project a democratic foundation and ensuring its durability as a democratic polity. Most explicitly, in its 1975 Resolution on European Union, the EP emphasised 'its essential role and its responsibilities as an institution representing the peoples joined together in the Community', and stated that 'the progressive achievement of the Union must be based on the active and conscious participation of the peoples'. It followed from this reasoning that, as the main representative institution, 'a European Parliament elected by direct universal suffrage [is] an indispensable element in achieving further progress towards integration'.[8]

However, as the years passed and the date of the European elections was postponed repeatedly by the Member States, MEPs became increasingly worried about the lagging public interest in European affairs, as well as about the EP elections' capacity to raise it. While in the 1950s and early 1960s, MEPs were aware of low public interest in European affairs but convinced that holding elections would spark such interest, their faith in the catalytic qualities of the elections began to wane. Therefore, throughout the later 1960s and during the 1970s, the EP adopted several resolutions and reports stressing the importance of preparing public opinion and ensuring voter mobilisation for the European elections. The main cause for concern was that a lack of public engagement and low turnout in the elections would be a major blow to the EP's ambitions, as this would undermine the purpose of the elections and the claims they made of representativeness.

As the 1979 elections drew nearer, MEPs became ever more acutely aware of this risk. In a debate in 1977, Dutch Christian-Democrat MEP, Wim Schuijt, cautioned that, 'the authority and legitimacy of this Parliament, and consequently the improvement of the democratic structures of the Community … depend considerably on the size of the poll [voter turnout] in these elections'. In the same debate, Irish Fianna Fáil MEP, Brian Lenihan, a member of the Liberal Group in the EP, issued the blunt warning that 'we are facing the very serious problem that, if we do not succeed in motivating a reasonable percentage of our people to vote, then the whole experiment of direct elections will have been a failure'.[9]

Acting upon their concern, MEPs repeatedly called on the European Commission to develop a comprehensive programme both to inform citizens about the upcoming elections (and European integration in general), and to mobilise them to actually come out and vote. The 1960 Draft Convention had already included a report on 'an information policy for preparing public opinion for the European elections', written by Italian Christian-Democrat Enrico Carboni. In his report, Carboni explained the necessity of 'arousing with the peoples the desire to be directly represented in the European Parliament'. Many years later, in 1977, Schuijt stressed that the preparation of public opinion by means of an information programme 'is an indispensable precondition for the success of the political election activities, which should induce as many European voters as possible to [go to] the polling booths'.[10] He warned that 'the awareness and motivation of large parts of the population are still so small that intensification of basic information must be the very first priority'.

Europeanisation of national parties as a fail-safe?

However, those involved in these debates were not convinced that an information campaign by the European Commission alone would suffice, if only because it was severely under-funded. In the plenary debate of 8 February 1977 on the Commission's information policy, the rapporteur Schuijt called the budget 'quite insufficient', a sentiment that was later echoed more forcefully by several of his colleagues from the major political groups. For instance, Italian MEP Michele Cifarelli, speaking on behalf of the Liberal Group, said, 'it would really be absurd to imagine' that the apportioned information budget would suffice to reach the entire European electorate. Similarly, German MEP Hans Edgar Jahn, speaking for the Christian Democrat Group, asked, 'quite frankly how can you possibly expect to provide systematic information to all these 250 million people in our Community with amounts such as those'?

For that reason, MEPs asserted that the campaign must not only be executed by the European institutions, but must also be carried out by national political actors, with political parties most prominent among them. In the 1977 Resolution on the European Community's information campaign, the EP highlighted 'the need for political parties and movements to step up their activities during the actual electoral campaign by engaging in a democratic contest'.

In the same year, the European Commission, through its Vice-President Lorenzo Natali, who was responsible for the information campaign, stated during an EP debate that the Commission 'hope[d] that it will be possible for movements with their own traditions, guaranteeing ability, seriousness and faith in European ideas, to collaborate effectively in this campaign to make the people of Europe aware of the issues involved'. One of the most explicit statements emphasising the importance of political parties came from Bavarian Christian-Social MEP, Hans-August Lücker, leader of the Christian Democrat Group from 1969-1975, when in a plenary debate in 1978 he stated on the issue of informing and mobilising voters:

> This is where the political parties in particular will have an important task, for they are the ones who in the end will be out in the field. In this electoral campaign, all the political parties will go out to the people in, I hope, proper democratic fashion, and explain to them what visions, what intentions they entertain and what specific policies they intend to pursue in Europe. It will be a democratic race for the political majority in the directly elected Parliament of the future. I think it is essential that we, too, in the institutions of the European Community support the parties in this task in appropriate fashion.

This all goes to show that the EP and European politicians were crucially aware of the key role of political parties in preparing the electorate for the upcoming European elections. However, their call for the involvement of political parties differed notably from the arguments of those like Pierre Wigny almost two decades earlier, in the sense that they did not explicitly call for European parties to take on this role. Rather, as Natali's quote above also indicates, they pinned their hopes on the Europeanisation of national parties.

The formation of Europarties (as extra-parliamentary party federations) during the 1970s indicates that the ambition to form European parties was far from abandoned. For instance, the 1975 'Patijn Report' – named after its author, Dutch Socialist Schelto Patijn, who would later become mayor of Amsterdam – made a powerful argument for the development of European parties:

> The European Parliament emphasises the great importance of the parties in the preparation for European elections. Not until the parties succeed, within the Community framework, in establishing close links between themselves, developing joint programmes and creating supranational party structures can direct elections to the European Parliament become a key factor in the process of political integration.[11]

Similarly, in a plenary debate two years later, Cifarelli ambitiously called for national parties to ensure that the EP elections were a truly European election:

> I, for instance, will not be standing in the elections as a representative of the Partito Repubblicano Italiano, but as a representative of one of the 14 parties which have joined in the European Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the Community. … I hope that my party colleagues will invite me to speak in their own areas and I, in my turn, invite my colleagues to come to my constituency and speak as Europeans in this joint electoral campaign.

Yet, even these calls started from the idea that national parties were the fundamental actors in electoral campaigns, and European initiatives existed to support them. It is not a coincidence that both the Liberal and Socialist political families established (con)federations of part*ies*, rather than a European part*y*. Indeed, far from the idea that parties at the European level were a necessary precondition for EP elections, MEPs increasingly voiced doubts about the feasibility of realising such an endeavour.

For example, in a direct response to Cifarelli, Lenihan stated that EP candidates indubitably had a better idea how to campaign in their constituency than 'any bureaucrat, administrator or propagandist … preparing propaganda leaflets in an office in Brussels or Luxembourg'. Similarly, Scottish Nationalist Winnie Ewing argued that voters in Lossiemouth, a 'long way away' in her constituency in Scotland, could hardly be convinced to show an interest in European elections dominated by unfamiliar names, as 'much of what we do here goes unremarked, unread, unsung, and uncomplained about'. Though neither of these MEPs were opposed to European elections, their perspectives illustrate a realisation about the limits of European parties at the time.

Figure 4 – Campaign poster during the European elections, 1979.

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

As such, by the time of the first direct elections, the argument that parties at the European level were a necessary condition for successful European elections had largely made way for the argument that European campaigns by national parties needed to be supported and coordinated by, and at, the European level. In other words, European elections were seen as a catalyst in the development of European parties, as it was expected that 'national political parties will be obliged to form definite

groupings at European level in order to contest these direct elections'.[12] No longer were such parties considered a pre-requisite for organising European elections. However, the argument that transnationally constituted political parties were needed regained traction in the decades after 1979, when MEPs were seeking an answer to the dwindling turnout in European elections.

Developments after 1979

In the run-up to the 1979 elections, the idea of self-standing parties at the European level had its ardent supporters. Yet, national parties were eventually confirmed as the key political actors and partisan organisations to carry elections, competing with each other and mobilising voters through electoral campaigns – though many were convinced that the direct EP elections would spur ever closer cooperation between national parties. The pre-1979 debates thereby set the stage for the later development of European parties and democracy as a largely top-down process. By holding European elections and calling for a stronger EP, it was expected this would set in motion a trickle-down democratisation of the European project, Europeanising national politics and hence eventually reaching the individual citizen.

To be sure, both Europarties and the EP have seen their role expanded and position strengthened over the decades that followed 1979. Having acquired initial budgetary powers in the 1970 and 1975 Luxembourg and Brussels Treaties, the EP saw its powers gradually increase with every major new treaty – from the introduction of the cooperation procedure in the 1986 Single European Act, to co-decision, introduced in the Maastricht Treaty, and then becoming the widely used 'ordinary legislative procedure' in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty.

Figure 5 – Lead candidates for the 2019 European elections.

Source: European Parliament Multimedia Centre.

Yet, this increase in power occurred concurrently with decreasing voter turnout in EP elections, and did little to undo the elections' persistent second-order status. From 1979, the turnout in European elections saw a consistent sharp decline. Whereas more than 60 % of the European electorate participated in 1979, barely 40 % did so in 2014. The 2019 elections were the first elections to actually see an increase in turnout, with just over half of eligible European voters casting their vote. Despite mobilisation efforts such as the introduction of *Spitzenkandidaten*, scholars such as Katjana Gattermann and colleagues[13] have only recently been finding indications that the European elections' second-order status is beginning to wane, arguably following the EU's politicisation over recent years.

Europarties similarly underwent a double evolution. On the one hand, not only has the number of Europarties increased over time (there are now 10 registered Europarties across the entire ideological spectrum), they also institutionalised. As Wouter Wolfs has recently described,[14] the Member States introduced Article 138a in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty following pressure particularly from the heads of the three main political parties at the time – Belgian politicians Wilfried Martens (EPP), Guy Spitaels (PES), and Willy De Clercq (ELDR). Article 138a stated that Europarties 'contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union' – a role now formally acknowledged by the Member States. This sparked an increasing push from the EP towards regulating the funding and operation of Europarties, of which the Commission proposal now being discussed by the EP is the latest stage.

Yet, on the other hand, scholars like Daniela Braun, Sebastian Poppa and Anna-Katharina Wurst have recently shown that Europarties effectively remain marginal players in terms of electoral campaigns, even during EP elections, where national parties continue to be dominant.[15] At the same time, the expected Europeanisation of national political parties has also stayed fairly limited. As the late Peter Mair stated in 2000, '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'.[16] A recent study by Gilles Pittoors and Niels Gheyle has shown that even today national parties continue to show only partial signs of Europeanisation.[17]

In conclusion, the development of European democracy after 1979 has not fully lived up to pre-1979 expectations. Indeed, the warnings of Wigny that, without genuine European parties, voters would show little interest in European elections, and decide their vote based on national rather than European issues, proved to be well founded. For sure, the direct election of the EP had important catalytic qualities: spurring the development of European transnational political groups and parties, bolstering the moral and political authority of the EP as an institution, and providing a basis for the development of a political side to European citizenship. Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) all these developments at the top, EP elections cannot be said to have triggered the much-anticipated 'salutary shock and deep penetration of the [people's] mind'.[18] The developments since 1979 have made clear that, while parties do not make Europe, Europe cannot be made without parties.

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ENDNOTES

[1]   Johansson & Raunio (2005).

[2]   Salm (2019).

[3]   European Parliament Resolution. 11 February 1975.

[4]   Nicolaïdis (2013).

[5]   Hix (2008).

[6]   Hanley (2008); Salm (2016).

[7]   Pridham & Pridham (1981); Kaiser (2007).

[8]   Draft Convention on the Election of the European Parliament by Direct Universal Suffrage. February 1960.

[9]   Plenary Debate of the European Parliament. 8 February 1977.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Report on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee. 13 January 1975.

[12] Opinion expressed by Dutch Christian-Democrat Willem Scholten during a plenary debate of the European Parliament. 14 January 1975.

[13] Gattermann et al. (2021).

[14] Wolfs (2022).

[15] Braun & Popa (2018); Wurst (2022).

[16] Mair (2000).

[17] Poguntke et al. (2007); Pittoors and Gheyle (2022).

[18] Report on the Constitution of the Elected Parliament. February 1960.

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