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National parties provide a linkage between citizens and legislators in democratic nation states. Monika Mühlböck explores whether they fulfil a similar role in the European Union (EU). Based on qualitative interviews, survey data, and voting records, she finds that national parties exert only little control over their representatives in the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. Their influence on day-to-day EU decision-making is limited as they are often unable to keep up with the pace and the details of EU legislation. The lack of involvement of national parties creates problems for democratic accountability in the EU.

Within democratic nation states, political parties form 'transmission belts' between citizens and legislators. They integrate public demands into policy programs, select individuals for political leadership, ensure cohesive decision-making in order to realize their programs, and repeatedly take part in elections to win support for further action. In this manner, they link the represented with their representatives. At least in theory, national parties could fulfil a similar role in the European Union and provide a link between EU citizens in their respective member states and 'Brussels'. Both legislative EU institutions, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament (EP), are staffed with politicians who belong to national parties. National parties, in turn, compete in national and European elections for the favour of their voters. The general preconditions for a functioning chain of representation and accountability are thus met.

However, there are also two potential obstacles which may prevent national parties from constituting a linkage between the people and EU legislators. First, if both national parliamentary elections – on which government formation and thus minister selection is based – and elections to the EP are taking place in national issue contexts, neither ministers, nor members of the

European Parliament (MEPs), nor their respective parties are held accountable for their actions at the EU level. Traditionally, this has been a major problem for democracy in the EU. However, as EU politics have become more salient during the latest crises, elections are also increasingly fought on issues of European integration. Second, EU representatives are not directly elected but it is the national parties that voters vote for. Yet, the national parties may lack influence over the actions of their ministers and MEPs at the EU level, due to a lack of interest, an information deficit, or other constraints.



National parties are only able to provide a link between citizens and EU legislators if they are able to control the behaviour of their representatives in the Council and the EP



There are different mechanisms by which national parties may control their representatives in the Council and the EP. They can be divided in *ex ante* and *ex post* control mechanisms. One possible *ex ante* control strategy is to choose party representatives that are most likely to pursue party preferences in the future. Thereby, potential candidates are screened (e.g. they have to serve long periods in minor party or

public offices) and are only selected for higher office if their attitudes shown in the past complied with party positions. Additionally, a close hand over the selection of candidates provides the national party leadership with an important tool to ensure loyalty of representatives, because access or refusal of future positions constitute rewards and threats that might help to keep party members in line.

Another form of *ex ante* control is the establishment of prior instructions, which may leave little leeway to party representatives in the Council and the EP, especially when combined with *ex post* control mechanisms such as reporting requirements and monitoring of actions. However, due to the complexity of EU decision-making, it is time intensive and thus costly for national parties to keep track of all the issues on the agenda and to form an independent position on each of them, which would be necessary to ensure effective control via prior instructions on the one hand and monitoring of compliance on the other hand.



National parties differ concerning control over ministers and MEPs, in general, however, only little control is exercised



Comparing control mechanism employed by national parties of the EU-15 countries, I find that **they differ considerably in the amount and type of control employed**. While some parties use only very little control, others employ different means of *ex ante* and *ex post* control. A case of very little control is for example the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Candidate selection for MEPs is extremely decentralized as the CDU runs with separate 'Länder'-lists in EP elections. MEPs thus feel mainly responsible to local party authorities, instead of their national party leadership. Furthermore, CDU MEPs

hardly ever receive prior instructions and are also not required to report about their activities. Party control over CDU ministers in EU affairs is similarly weak, due to the fact that the German position in the Council is formed in a longsome process which needs to incorporate the positions of the individual *Bundesländer*.



National party influence over ministers and MEPs is weak, thereby posing a problem for democratic accountability



A case of relatively strong control is France. Under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, the *Secrétariat général des affaires européennes*, an institution located at the foreign ministry and dealing with EU affairs was strengthened to oversee not only the actions of other ministries in Council decision-making but also the French MEPs, to which it sometimes issues voting instructions via the French Permanent Representation in Brussels. Still, strong control is rather the exception than the rule. Mostly, parties rely on *ex ante* control in the form of control over the selection of candidates, as this is the least costly control mechanism.

Yet, empirical analysis shows that even if parties employ control mechanisms, they have little effect. **The influence of national parties on voting behaviour of their MEPs is weak**, as it is mainly the transnational party groups who influence decision-making in the EP. Similarly, national parties have limited impact on Council decision-making, which is mostly driven by consensus seeking bureaucratic action. The main reason for this lack of power is that most national parties do not catch up with day-to-day decision-making processes at the EU level, but **only get involved once EU laws reach the national implementation stage**. This poses a problem concerning democratic accountability. To ensure accountability of

legislators, the chain of delegation should run from citizens to the parties they are voting for and finally to the representatives of these parties in the legislative assemblies. As the national parties retain little control over their members in the Council and in the EP, there is a gap in the chain of delegation between citizens and EU legislators.

However, this does not necessarily imply that tighter control of national parties over their ministers and MEPs is the best solution, as this may undermine flexibility of legislators to find compromises and impede decision-making efficiency. Rather, additional chains of representation and accountability of EU legislators should be created.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on her book ‘[Voting unity of national parties in bicameral EU decision-making: Speaking with one voice?](#)’ which has recently been published by Springer/Palgrave Macmillan.



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