Political representation and
government in the European Union
Peter Mair and Jacques Thomassen

ABSTRACT This paper addresses two particular aspects of the much debated democratic deficit in European Union (EU) governance – the absence of a system of party government at the European level, whereby parties in the Parliament lack the capacity to effectively control the governing bodies of the EU, and the apparent failings in the capacity of parties at the European level to represent the will of the citizens of Europe. We question the self-evidence of the recommendation that the Union adapt to conventional party government models at the national level and argue that since many of the conditions facilitating the effective fusion of the functions of representation and of control of the government no longer pertain, it may actually prove unwise to seek to replicate this process at the European level. We go on to take issue with the traditional view that the European process of political representation fails mainly because political parties do not compete on so-called European issues. Despite a poor process of political representation at the European level, European elections and political parties appear to serve quite effectively as instruments of political representation. We conclude by suggesting that the effectiveness of political representation at the European level owes much to the absence of party government, such that, paradoxically, one of the most commonly cited aspects of the democratic deficit thereby appears to alleviate the other.

KEY WORDS Democratic deficit; European Union; party government; representation.

This paper offers a reconsideration of two specific aspects of the much discussed democratic deficit in European Union (EU) governance: the lack of ability of parties at the European level to control the governing bodies of the EU on the one hand, and their capacity to represent the will of the citizens of Europe on the other. Although not presenting new data, this paper breaks new ground by linking an evaluation of the problems of political representation and party government at the national level to the ongoing discussion of the limits and possibilities of political representation and party government at the European level. In brief, while it sometimes argued that party government at EU level is desirable but not really feasible, we argue that even if party government were feasible at this level, it is not really desirable. This is not because, as Moravcsik (e.g. 2002) in particular has argued, the EU is already tightly constrained by institutional checks and balances and by national democratic actors, and thereby does not require greater democratic input and control.
Rather, we argue that party government as such is losing the capacity to manage and make effective contemporary processes of political representation at the national level, and hence it may well prove counter-productive were it to be introduced at the European level. Moreover, despite a poor process of political representation at the European level, European elections and political parties do appear to serve quite effectively as instruments of political representation, and we suggest that this may well be due to the absence of party government. Paradoxically, it appears that one of the most commonly cited aspects of the democratic deficit thereby alleviates the other.

In our view, there are at least two aspects of the problem of the European democratic deficit that need to be distinguished. The first of these addresses the lack of European Parliamentary (EP) control over the EU executive, and derives from the assumption that a system of political representation at the European level requires a system of party government. Indeed, the solution to this aspect of the democratic deficit is often assumed to lie in the adoption of a conventional ‘national’ model of democracy, in which the outcome of elections is not only decisive for the composition of Parliament but directly or indirectly for the composition of the Commission as well, and in which representation is combined with accountable government through a full-blooded parliamentary system, by which the Commission becomes accountable to the EP. We question the self-evidence of this solution. We argue that the traditional systems of party government at the national level are no longer shining examples of effective and legitimate systems of representative government. A main characteristic of party government is the fusion of the functions of representation and executive control, and we suggest that the conditions that facilitated the effective fusion of these functions may no longer pertain in contemporary democratic settings. In these circumstances, it may actually prove unwise to seek to replicate this process at the European level and may eventually hinder the capacity of European elections and parties to ensure representative outcomes. An alternative solution, the adoption of a full-blooded presidential system, in which the Head of the Commission becomes electorally accountable to the citizenry, is briefly discussed in the final section of the paper.

The second aspect of the problem of the democratic deficit concerns the lack of representation in the European Parliament (EP) itself. According to the dominant perspective in the literature, the democratic deficit in this regard derives from the fact that European political parties as such do not compete for the votes of a European electorate on the basis of ‘European’ issues. Rather, these elections are fought by national political parties and on mainly national issues, with voters making their choices on the basis of their opinions on national issues and their perception of the position of national political parties on these issues. Voters also ‘abuse’ European elections by using these elections to express a judgment on the incumbent national government. Seen in these ‘second-order’ terms, European elections fail as an instrument of democracy at the European level in that they fail to express the will of the European people on European issues. In this paper we take issue with this
interpretation, which we see as being based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and function of both the EP and the national parliaments.

Before going on to discuss these issues, however, it is useful to first set them against the background of the EU’s explicit ambitions to be a representative democracy. These ambitions are clearly stated in the Treaty on European Union as amended in the draft Lisbon Treaty of 2007, and the two aspects of the democratic deficit that concern us in this paper are directly connected to the different clauses of Article 10A:

10A, 1. The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy.
10A, 2. Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. Member states are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens.
10A, 3. Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.
10A, 4. Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.

In Article 10A, 1, two different channels of political representation are distinguished: the supranational channel that operates via the EP and through which citizens are directly represented at Union level, and the intergovernmental channel that operates via the national systems of political representation. There is a clear lack of symmetry here, however. Whereas the heads of states or governments of the member states in the Council are said to be democratically accountable either to their national parliaments or to their citizens, nothing similar is said about the Council as an institution, or about the European Commission, which is the second key component of government at the European level. This, of course, reflects the reality of the present European institutions. In contrast to the national systems of representative democracy there is no European government that is democratically accountable either to the European Parliament or to the European people. At most, we can speak of the Commission as being in a limited sense accountable to the European Parliament in that the Parliament — in the words of the new Treaty — ‘shall elect’ (Articles 14, 1 and 17, 7) the President of the Commission on the basis of a proposal put forward by a qualified majority in the European Council; in that it approves the membership of the Commission as a whole; and in that it may force the resignation of the Commission by passing a vote of censure. This creates the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby the Commission, as a body, ‘shall be responsible to the European Parliament’ (Article 17, 8) while at the same time ‘in carrying out its responsibilities, [it] shall be completely independent’ (Article 17, 3).

It is perhaps appropriate that Article 10A therefore refers to representative democracy rather than to representative government. Citizens acquire voice at
Union level through direct representation in the EP, but they are not offered a means of mandating or holding electorally accountable the key institutions of Union government. The body that facilitates democratic representation, the EP, has no direct control over the actions of the bodies that govern. What we see here, then, and exceptionally in European political traditions, is the separation between representation on the one hand, and government on the other. Indeed, the very notion that we can have representation as such, or representation without an intimate connection to government, is quite alien to a European tradition of political representation in which representation and government are combined through the aegis of party, and in which representative government takes the form of party government and representative democracy operates as party democracy. Parties in this model represent citizens and control government, thus fusing the two functions, and since this is the model of representative government most people in most European countries are used to, the absence of an intimate connection between the parties (representing a working majority) in Parliament, on the one hand, and the separated government, on the other, is therefore seen as contributing substantially to the democratic deficit.

Article 10A, 4 also pertains directly to the democratic deficit. Here, with a phrasing that was already included in the Maastricht Treaty, it is stated that ‘political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’. Despite its phrasing as an empirical statement, this is obviously meant in a normative sense. At the same time, however, as the ample literature on the functioning of the European Union polity appears to attest, this may be wishful thinking. However desirable their role in this regard may be seen by the drafters of the various European treaties, the practice of party democracy at the European level seems to tell a different story.

PARTY GOVERNMENT AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

It can probably be taken as axiomatic that the process of political representation in contemporary democracies requires the involvement of political parties, however minimally defined. Electoral democracy and party democracy are intimately linked. As Dahl has repeatedly emphasized, the sheer scale of the modern democratic polity – and this is true in particular for the European polity – precludes an exclusive reliance on direct democratic procedures and requires instead the presence of intermediaries who can act on behalf of the citizenry. Democracy requires representation, and parties become inevitable once the choice is made to select representatives by means of electoral contests – this choice itself following from the conviction that the ‘only feasible solution’ to meeting democratic requirements in a large political unit is that citizens ‘elect their top officials and hold them more or less accountable through elections by dismissing them, so to speak, in subsequent elections’ (Dahl 1998: 93). In other words, it is by virtue of the sheer fact of electoral contestation that we
can speak of the presence and involvement of parties as being a necessary element within representative democracy. As Schattschneider (1942:1) famously put it, ‘political parties created democracy and . . . modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties.’

The link between electoral democracy and party democracy is also reinforced by two additional considerations that are particularly relevant in the European context. In the first place, electoral democracy and party democracy have always gone together in practice. Full-scale electoral democracy in Europe is scarcely a century old, with the large majority of European polities admitting universal male suffrage in the decade leading up to 1917–1918, and with universal female suffrage usually following shortly after. In all cases, without exception, this occurred within a context of more or less established party competition. Indeed, the formation of European parties, and often also the establishment of strongly structured mass parties, pre-dated or coincided with the final completion of electoral democracy. If only for this reason, it is difficult to conceive of an electoral process which does not involve political parties and hence which is not also channelled alongside the system of party democracy. To put it another way: to conceive of elections without parties in a European context is to conceive of something of which we have no real-world experience.

The second consideration which is relevant here is that most long-established European democracies are parliamentary democracies, and hence involve parties as key actors in the organisation of the legislature and in the formation and maintenance of government. Executives are formed out of Parliament and require the – contested – support of a majority or a working minority in Parliament that is delivered by political parties. The parties also provide the members of the Cabinet, develop at least the initial formulation of the policies that are to be implemented by government, and ensure the passage of legislation. Without parties it is difficult to conceive of the proper functioning of Parliament, and hence it is also difficult to conceive of the proper functioning of most European democracies.

For all these reasons, the assumptions inherent in the conventional national conception of democracy seem relatively robust: who says democracy says elections; who says elections says parties. To translate these assumptions on to the level of the Union therefore seems to imply not only a need for parties as representatives, which is already the case (see below), but also, and most crucially, a need for parties as governors. That is, it implies that parties not only enjoy an ‘expressive’ role, whereby the party serves ‘as the agency which typically communicates the demands of the society to the state, as the basic link or connector between a society and its government’ (Sartori 2005: 24); but also a governing role, whereby, in the sense emphasized by Dahl (1998), they serve to ensure the accountability of ‘top officials’.

Seen in these terms, one of the key aspects of the democratic deficit is therefore owing to the fact that parties have a single function (representation) in Union politics whereas they enjoy a double function (representation and government) in national politics. This also makes the deficit obvious to the citizens.
It then follows that an easy remedy is to accord the parties that double function also in Union politics, and thereby to build a system of representative government as well as a system of representative democracy. This is, after all, how the member states operate and how the model of party government is supposed to work, and this is often the solution offered by those observers pleading for a means of overcoming the democratic deficit.

The remedy may be more problematic than is suggested by many of these observers, however, particularly in the contemporary era. As we suggested above, the traditional systems of party government at the national level are themselves no longer shining examples of effective and legitimate systems of representative government, and are often characterized by their own democratic deficits (Mair 2008a). Moreover, the conditions that initially fostered the effective fusion of the functions of representation and of control of the government by parties at the national level have also changed. Parties in the past were able to assume a key role in modern systems of representative government precisely because they integrated under one single tutelage two key roles: the offer of representation to the citizenry on the one hand, and the capacity to organize government within the polity on the other. More specifically, they were almost obliged to play both roles at the same time, in that the most effective way of legitimizing their role in government was by emphasising their capacity to represent. Combining a strong presence on the ground with a dominant role in public office, parties offered to democratic polities a unique capacity which remained unchallenged by any other groups or associations. This is how party democracy and party government gained both strength and legitimacy.

With time, however, and for a variety of interrelated reasons, this unique contribution has come unstuck, and parties have begun to search out a new equilibrium between their core functions. With time, parties at the national level have begun to lose their capacity and/or their willingness to function as representative organizations, and have begun to lay commensurately more emphasis on their role as organizers of government within the polity and as part of the state apparatus.

There are three main factors involved here. In the first place, from having been largely ‘private’ and voluntary associations which developed within civil society, and which drew their legitimacy from their roots within civil society, parties have increasingly subjected themselves to a regulatory framework which has the effect of according them a (quasi-) official status as part of the state. As the internal life and even the external activities of parties become regulated by public law, and as party rules become constitutional or administrative rules, the parties themselves became transformed into public service agencies, with a corresponding weakening of their own internal organizational autonomy (see Bartolini and Mair 2001: 340). Moreover, as public service agencies, the parties are no longer experienced by voters as being part of civil society, and hence are no longer viewed as organizations through which popular representation can be effectively channelled.

Second, although some of these changes have been more or less forced on the parties, they have also often been welcomed and even fostered by the parties, or
at least by their leaders. The catch-all and later cartel organizational styles adopted by parties in the last decades of the twentieth century freed party leaders from the constraints imposed by strong electoral constituencies and demanding party memberships and thereby made it easier for these leaders to enter public office and manage government. By facilitating the ascendancy of the party in public office within the party organization as a whole, the new modes of party organization afforded leaders more strategic flexibility and made it easier for office-seeking motivations to predominate. This also tended to seal party leaders off from the wider society, and to foster a ‘cartelized’ culture in which the different party leaders shared more in common with one another through public office than any of them did with their own supporters in civil society. In this sense also, the parties experienced a weakening of their representative capacities.

Third, parties at the national level have also been transformed by the manner in which the demands of efficient government have come increasingly to outweigh those of representative government. In the classic model of party government, governments could be seen as agents with just one key principal: the voters, as mediated by Parliament (e.g. Strom et al. 2003). In contemporary politics, by contrast, they face many different constraints. On one side, they now face an increasingly modernized and fragmented electorate (Thomassen 2005), which is difficult to treat as a coherent source of mandates. On the other side, their actions are limited by an increasingly complex legislative and policy-making process, by the external controls and commitments deriving from the WTO, the EU, the UN, and various international agreements and protocols, and by the increasingly numerous domestic and often autonomous veto players who are now to be found within the wider institutional order and within the private sector. In other words, the agent which is government has seen a fragmentation of its traditional principal and its replacement by a host of different principals, not all of which are easily understood or reconcilable. It is therefore hardly surprising that parties in government become wholly engaged with the demands of governing, and that the space for their representative role is squeezed.

The result is that while parties at the national level traditionally combined representative and procedural roles, and while party democracy and party government was built on that double-headed foundation, the balance has now begun to change. By the end of the twentieth century, parties throughout Europe could mainly be characterized as governing organizations, or even as public utilities (van Biezen 2004; van Biezen and Kopecky 2007), while their representative role had become more marginalized and ineffective, or had been passed on to other agencies, movements and the media.

But this is not currently the case at the European level, and this is the crucial qualification. Given the distinct circumstances whereby parties and elections are disconnected from governing at the European level, and given the distinct circumstances in which a notion of representative democracy is promoted in the absence of representative government, there is much less constraint on the
representative role of parties at the Union level than there is at the national level. In other words, precisely because they don’t govern, parties at the European level have a much greater capacity to act as representatives. To be sure, parties at the European level will suffer from some of the same problems as those at national level by virtue of the fact that representation as such now proves more difficult (Andeweg 2003). But other problems will not be evident, and in particular parties at the European level do not currently run the risk of being weaned away from their representative roles by the demands (and appeals) of governing in Europe.

In other words, an EU system that, as now, forces a wedge between representation and government – between legislature and executive – may end up being capable of offering more substance to representative democracy. Freed from the demands of governing, parties at the European level may be able to provide a more robust channel of representation than that currently on offer within the democratic polities of the member states. At the same time, freed from the need to sustain an executive, the European Parliament as an institution may be able to provide a more independent scrutinizing role than can many of the more constrained national parliaments. It is in this sense that the absence of party government may well help to enhance rather than undermine representative democracy at the European level. Given that the conditions for effective party government no longer prevail, the promotion of such a model at the European level may well lead to perverse outcomes.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

At first sight, this conclusion that parties at the European level may be able to provide a more robust channel of political representation than their counterparts at the national level seems to be at odds with the empirical facts. In a party democracy elections serve as an ‘instrument of democracy’ (Powell 2000), i.e. as a mechanism to connect the policy preferences of the voters to public policy. Political parties play a key role in this connection process (McDonald and Budge 2005: 3). At election time they offer alternative programmes to electors, and by voting for the party that best represents their policy preferences, voters assure that the composition and indirectly the decisions of Parliament reflect their policy preferences.

This does not seem to be the case at the European level, however, and in this sense it may be argued that European level elections are thereby failing as an instrument of democracy, i.e. they are failing to connect people’s policy preferences to the decision-making process in the European Parliament and European public policy. For example, the outcome of the referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in France and The Netherlands and on the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland in 2008 suggested that these polities are now characterized by a widespread Eurosceptic gap between the political elites and the mass public, a gap that probably also exists, albeit less visibly, in many other member states. The existence of such a gap is also suggested by the few
studies that compare the opinions of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and their voters on issues of European integration, and that show MEPs being much more favourably disposed towards European integration than their voters (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999). In this sense, at least, it seems we can hardly speak of a robust channel of representation.

Two factors are often cited to explain why European elections fail as an instrument to connect people’s attitudes on European integration to the decision-making process in the European Parliament. The first and most familiar is the finding that European elections are second-order national elections which are fought by national political parties on mainly national issues, and at which voters make their vote choice on the basis of the same national issues (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Van der Brug and Van der Eijk 2007). European elections therefore fail to express the will of the European people on European issues, i.e., on issues dealing with the process of European integration as such. The remedy for this failure, according to many observers, is therefore for political parties to organize themselves at the European level and to fight elections on issues that concern European integration.

The problem with this proposal, however, as we have suggested elsewhere (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999; Mair 2004, 2008b), is that political representation with regard to a specific issue dimension needs to be realized at the same level where decisions on this issue are taken. In this case, the European level is not the place where formal decisions are taken on typical ‘European issues’, and in particular on such issues as the further transfer of sovereignty from the national to the European level, or further enlargement, and so on. These are European ‘polity’ issues, and hence are subject to the intergovernmental rather than the supranational level of European decision-making. In other words, they require the consent of national governments and, at least in principle, are subject to the control of national parliaments and national electorates. Insofar as parties fail to offer a meaningful choice to the voters on these issues, it is therefore a problem of representation at the national rather than the European level.

This argument does not hold for other issue dimensions, however, and these latter are also arguably more important in the European Parliamentary context. For example, analyses of roll calls in the EP have made it perfectly clear that decision-making in Parliament is largely constrained by the left–right dimension, whereas the dimension of European integration is of relatively minor importance (Hix et al. 2006; Voeten 2009). It follows from this that if elections are to serve as an instrument of democracy connecting the will of the European people to decision-making in the European Parliament, party competition and voting behaviour in those elections should be organized around the same left–right dimension. But even this might hardly change the pessimistic verdict on the European system of political representation. In other words, even if we are talking about the left–right ‘policy’ dimension rather than the pro–anti integration ‘polity’ dimension, it remains true that European political parties as
such do not compete for the votes of a European electorate, that European elections are fought by national political parties on mainly national issues, and that voters make their choice on the basis of their opinions on national issues.

This does not necessarily mean that these confused European elections necessarily fail as an instrument to ‘express the will of the citizens of the Union’, however. For even when national parties dominate European elections and when voters vote on the basis of national issue dimensions, the aggregation of these national systems of political representation at the European level can still prove effective in representing the will of the European people as a ‘true’ European process of political representation. This will be the case when (and if) these national systems are compatible, that is, when (and if) the party systems across the member states of the Union are congruent and when voters across Europe vote for similar reasons for similar parties belonging to a particular party family. In other words, this will be the case when, for example, left-wing voters across Europe vote for left-wing parties across Europe with more or less the same intentions and preferences, or when religious voters vote for religious parties, and so on.3

To a surprisingly strong degree, and right across the political spectrum, the available empirical evidence shows that this is indeed the case. Thanks largely to the standardizing effects of the left–right dimension, the evidence also shows that the compatibility of national party systems is relatively pronounced. Aggregating the positions of national parties on this dimension to the European level leads to distinct and cohesive party groups (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999, 2009), these party groups are organized according to their position on the left–right dimension, and these positions largely explain roll call votes (Thomassen et al. 2004; Hix et al. 2006; Voeten 2009). This means that political parties across the member states not only compete along the left–right axis, but also that the aggregation of the main dimension of contestation from the national to the European level has proved relatively successful. Indeed, in all the countries of the European Union, including the newer member states, left–right positioning is one of the most important factors explaining party choice, while the effect of left–right is about the same in all countries. It is in this sense that we can speak of ‘a single European electorate’ (Van der Brug et al. 2009), even when it is composed of 27 independent units.

This also means that the left–right dimension can provide a suitable vehicle for meaningful mass-elite communication across the European Union (Van der Eijk et al. 1999), and this in turn implies that we can expect the process of political representation at the level of the European Union to be particularly effective with regard to the left–right dimension and the issue domains with which it correlates. This is indeed the case, with a variety of empirical evidence suggesting that the party groups in the European Parliament represent their voters (i.e. the voters of the national parties comprising those party groups) relatively well on the left–right dimension and related issues (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999).

This leads us to conclude that the system of political representation at the European level functions much more effectively than is often assumed to be
the case. Despite the fact that there is no real process of political representation at this level, in that there are no European parties competing for the votes of a European electorate, the aggregation of the outcomes of national processes still leads to a reasonable congruence between the European electorate and the European Parliament. Of course, the empirical evidence we cite in support of this claim refers only to the left–right dimension which, while dominant, does not constrain all of the policy preferences of voters and political parties. Nevertheless, and somewhat ironically, this evidence does suggest that the outcome of the system of representation at the European level works much better for policy issues relating to left and right than for polity issues relating to European integration. This is not necessarily a problem. Since the polity issues are largely intergovernmental issues, it is perhaps better that they be debated in national elections. The left–right policy issues, by contrast, are often characterized by a distinct European dimension, and hence fit well to the real competences and concerns of the EP. It also bears repeating that our rather positive conclusion on the process of political representation refers to the outcome of the process rather than to the process as such, and in this sense a full-fledged system of political representation at the European level would still require European political parties to compete for the votes of a European electorate, albeit perhaps more exclusively on left–right policy issues. Nonetheless, the positive conclusion still stands. The parties in the European Parliament appear to function relatively effectively as representatives. In terms of outcomes, in other words, the deficit is not so pronounced as is commonly believed to be the case.

**REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNMENT AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL**

There is one crucial sense in which the notion of representation that has come to be associated with the contemporary party government model differs from that which prevailed in the early phases of representative government. Then, the emerging political parties and the Members of Parliament worked to represent somebody to somebody else (Sartori 1968; Birch 1971). In other words, representation formerly involved three elements: those who were represented, those who did the representing, and those to whom representation was made. With the advent of party government, by contrast, this was reduced to just two elements: those who are represented, and those who both do the representing and to whom representation is made – with the latter two elements being fused within one system of party government. In other words, those who do the representing have now also become those to whom representation is made, and the two elements are no longer distinguishable.

If voters see no difference between government and their representatives, then they might begin to wonder who is representing them to their representatives. This is a question perfectly understood by those populist parties and politicians who appeal to these feelings of being excluded by a closed conglomerate of
government, political parties and the state bureaucracy. In effect, Parliament within this model of party government loses the capacity to function in the way that Edmund Burke once favoured: ‘The virtue, spirit and essence of a house of commons consists in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation. It was not instituted to be a control upon the people. ... It was designed as a control for the people’ (as cited in Sartori 1976: 19). If one wants to avoid these anomalies in the nascent system of representative democracy at the European level one may therefore want to design a system of government in which once again three different actors may be distinguished in the process of political representation, and hence one may want to design a system in which Parliament focuses more exclusively on its traditional tasks of representing the people and overseeing the government on behalf of the people, i.e., a system in which the institutional separation of powers between Parliament and government prevails rather than a political separation of powers between the governing party or parties and the opposition parties. It is of course beyond the scope of this paper to present a blueprint of such a system, but there are at least three alternatives to be considered for Europe, each with its own pros and cons.

The first is a continuation of the present situation. The least one can say of it is that it prohibits a fusion between the tasks of representation and governing. Although there has been some movement towards the parliamentary model, the relationship between the Commission and Parliament is far removed from a parliamentary system or a system of party government. The main differences are that a parliamentary majority cannot ‘hire and fire’ the executive at will (Hix et al. 2007: 13) and that there is no direct relationship between the outcome of the elections for the European Parliament and the composition of the Commission. This, of course, is what we referred to above as the first aspect of the democratic deficit. But in light of our argument thus far, this present situation may be seen as a blessing in disguise, in that it offers no incentive to the Commission to seek to control the majority in Parliament and it gives the parliamentary groups ample leeway to focus on the task of representing the European people.

A second possible solution is more in line with parliamentary history in several European countries, that is, in those countries which may be characterized as reflecting a consensus rather than a majoritarian type of democracy (see Lijphart 1999). Whereas the majoritarian model may be seen as the institutional embodiment of the party government model, a consensus model is in several respects its opposite, and may therefore prove more appropriate at the European level. The most important difference is the more balanced relationship between Parliament and government in the latter: instead of the legislature being dominated by the executive, it enjoys a greater autonomy and scope to act as a representative body as well to control the government and hold the executive accountable. As the original prototype of a consensus democracy, the development of the Dutch political system offers an interesting example here. Although formally a parliamentary system it is often described as a system of ‘limited
dualism’, with dualism being taken to mean that government and Parliament have distinctive roles and responsibilities, and a balance that is more akin to the separation of powers that one would expect to find in a presidential system. This is in contrast to ‘monism’ which refers to the absence of a clear distinction between Parliament and Cabinet and which is characteristic of majoritarian systems (Andeweg and Irwin 2005: 130). In other words, the institutional separation of powers between executive and legislature is more important than the political separation of powers between government and opposition parties.

But although dualism may be associated with consensus democracies in theory, the practice is often contrary. This is certainly true for the prototypical Dutch case, where the ‘two-body image’ (King 1976; Andeweg and Nijzink 1995) no longer fully corresponds to Dutch realities. Indeed, since the 1960s the formal separation of powers between government and Parliament has gradually yielded to a more political separation of powers between the parties in government, on the one hand, and those in opposition, on the other, thereby approximating more closely in practice to the monism of majoritarian systems. Coalition agreements have become more important, binding not only the ministers but also the parliamentary parties making up the government majority. In effect, the Dutch experience offers ample proof that a fusion of the tasks of representing and governing seems to be inevitable if the separation of these tasks is not institutionally defined, and this would also be the risk at the European level if Parliament were given more control over the Commission.

A third and more radical institutional solution is therefore to keep government and Parliament apart by the introduction of a directly elected president of the Commission, modelled after the American presidential system. There seems to be a general agreement in the literature that the US Congress plays a more powerful role vis-à-vis the Executive than most European parliaments, not despite but because of the separation of powers. For the same reason the representative function is less easily confused with the governing function. At the same time the objections against the adoption of a presidential system are obvious and are already well rehearsed. In the first place, it contrasts with the parliamentary systems of most members of the European Union and hence will be difficult to mesh with the national democratic traditions and cultures. Second, the direct election of the president of the Commission by the European people will enormously increase the legitimacy and standing of the successful incumbent, and will therefore also enhance his or her powers with respect to both Parliament and the member states. And while this might be welcomed by Euro-enthusiasts, it will also inevitably provoke further opposition among Euro-sceptic publics.

CONCLUSION

Although none of these three solutions seems wholly satisfactory, they do serve to emphasize that an understanding of the nature of Europe’s democratic
deficiencies is not so straightforward as much of the literature seems to indicate. On the one hand, the deficiencies themselves are not so pronounced as is commonly believed. As has been generally recognized, the EP itself has accumulated substantial co-decisional power, and has become an important legislative assembly – both in terms of its power to decide as well as in terms of its capacity to set the agenda at the European level. Moreover, and this is less often recognized, the parties and MEPs within Parliament do seem to serve an effective representative role, with the congruence between the European electorate and Parliament being much more pronounced than is generally credited. On the other hand, the arguments presented in this paper, though briefly outlined, point quite firmly against the notion that a solution to Europe’s democratic deficit may be found in the translation of a traditional national party government model on to the European level. Parties in the national polities are already finding it increasingly difficult to combine their representative and governing functions, with the result that the mainstream parties often lack legitimacy and find themselves subject to the constant challenge of populist outbidding. To attempt to effect a similar combination of functions at the European level may provoke even more difficulties. To advocate a fusion of representation and government at the European level may not only fail to solve Europe’s problems, it may also compound what are already substantial legitimacy problems in the domestic politics of the member states.

Biographical notes: Peter Mair is Professor of Comparative Politics at the European University Institute in Florence, and co-editor of West European Politics. Jacques Thomassen is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Twente.

Addresses for correspondence: Professor Peter Mair, SPS Department, European University Institute, Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014, San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy. email: peter.mair@eui.eu/Professor J.J.A. Thomassen, Department of Political Science and Research Methods, School of Management and Governance, University of Twente, PO Box 217, 7500 AE, Enschede, The Netherlands. email: j.j.a.thomassen@utwente.nl

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NOTES

1 A third aspect, which we don’t address here, is the perceived lack of power of the European Parliament (EP) in the legislative process. Indeed, the term ‘democratic deficit’ was first coined in a study of the European Parliament and its weaknesses
(Marquand 1978). In fact, this has changed substantially since the time of Marquand’s original analysis, with the formal powers of the EP increasing to a degree that has even encouraged one group of analysts to claim that ‘the European Parliament has evolved . . . to one of the most powerful elected assemblies in the world’ (Hix et al. 2007: 3).

However, as has recently been argued (Marsh 2007; Hobolt et al. 2009), European issues can enter the equation by affecting attitudes to incumbents, with disaffection from Europe translating into disaffection from the (usually more pro-European) governing parties.

See Thomassen (2009) for a full discussion of these issues.

REFERENCES


