

Just What Might an Eventual Euro-Party System Look Like (with apologies to Stein Rokkan and His Many Followers)

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Stein Rokkan in a seminal article once analyzed the emerging party systems of Europe by juxtaposing the generic cleavage structures of each national society with its geo-political location on the continent.ⁱ While he, self-admittedly, had the advantage of hindsight – i.e. he knew what configurations had emerged prior to the First World War and, hence, could **retrospectively** trace their emergence backwards in time – it might be interesting to use some of the same assumptions and variables to reflect **prospectively** on what sort of party system could eventually assert itself at the level of the European Union.

For, *grosso modo*, the EU is presently in a situation roughly analogous with the national polities of its member states in the mid-1800s. Something like a party system already exists exclusively within the Euro-Parliament and is used to structure its internal processes, but these cleavages and alliances do not yet extend to the embryonic Euro-citizenry in the form of stable identifications, shared symbols and common platforms. The Euro-citizens have been voting directly since 1985 for supra-national representatives, but they have been oriented primarily by national identifications, symbols and platforms. Moreover, since the general perception is that these Euro-elections “do not count,” these linkages have been “opportunistic” and they have produced results that are typically more polarized than in national elections -- either because only the zealously motivated have bothered to vote

(and, even then, in decreasing numbers), or because moderate voters have used these elections to send a message of dissatisfaction back to their national politicians by choosing “fringe candidates” that they would never have supported in their more “meaningful” national or sub-national elections.

What is more, Rokkan’s second major hypothesis might just be proven by the EU experience. He observed that, once national party systems had emerged around a pattern of initial societal cleavages and geo-political locations, they tended to “freeze” the subsequent identities and behaviors of citizens – even when the founding interests and passions declined in salience and other conflicts became stronger. If we could successfully capture the factors that are going to condition the emergence of such a supra-national party system, then, we have some reason to suspect that this configuration will endure for some time and, hence, continue to play a major role in consolidating whatever type of democracy will be formed. All this, of course, presumes something that is not yet apparent – namely, that the cleavages behind a Euro-party system have some degree of autonomy from those that are embedded in the experiences of its member-states. If, as so far seems to be the case, the organizations that call themselves European parties are merely loose confederations adopting a least-common-denominator program and possessing virtually no organizational distinctiveness, then, our exercise in speculation will have proven irrelevant.

Focusing on European societal cleavages

It is difficult to know what to make of Rokkan’s geo-political distinctions, since the present EU encompasses almost all of them. It has a “core area” consisting of the ancient city belt that extended from London to Florence with

its Rhineland corridor; various economic and cultural peripheries with their distinctive languages and/or systems of production; differing legacies of colonialism and empire; land-locked and maritime-oriented units; and even an extensive (if yet to be defined) set of “Marches” to the East. From a Rokkanian point of view, one can begin with the proposition that this heterogeneity in basic historical structures is a major obstacle to the formation of a viable Europe-wide party system – just as it was on a lesser scale in those national states such as France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland and Italy that also were composed of distinctive, even previously independent, regions. These countries, however, had the “advantage” of having at their disposition the periodic use of coercion, either to suppress internal dissidence or prosecute external war. Waging war and keeping the peace not only helped to produce a more unified sense of national identity, but it also contributed to nationalizing the party system. One can scarcely imagine the EU doing either, although the recent experience of participating in a common armed struggle against Yugoslavia/Serbia might just contribute something to overcoming mutual suspicions and instilling a sense of shared fate that did not exist before. The additional (and completely unprecedented) fact that the governments of the major protagonists (except for the USA) were all composed (at the time) of politicians nominally linked to the same European Socialist Party may also be of some future importance.

In Rokkan's original model, these differences in historical points of departure for the national state-building experience interacted in a variety of ways with the main axes of internal societal cleavage. These cleavages can still be found (to differing degrees) in almost European states: (1) **class**

conflict between capital and labor; (2) **regional competition** between center and periphery; (3) **sectoral clashes** between agriculture, industry and services; and (4) **religious struggles** between Catholics and Protestants.

Were he alive, Rokkan would certainly acknowledge that their contemporary salience is not what it was during the heroic founding epoch of the late 1800s and early 1900s – which implies that were these same countries to create *ex novo* their party systems today, they would come out with very different configurations. This, I suspect, holds even more for the EU.

Religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants have lost much of their intensity and capacity for citizen mobilization – either as the result of a general process of secularization or as a product of ecumenical convergence.ⁱⁱ Their orientation has, moreover, shifted to the contrast between “European-Christian” denominations versus “Non-European” ones, with various forms of Eastern Orthodoxy occupying an uneasy position in between. Some of the statements made (especially, by Christian Democrats) in relation to eventual Turkish membership reflect this cleavage. Even more salient, however, has been the resistance within some member-states to the growing numbers of Islamic immigrants within Europe and the role played by Islamic political militants. “Nativists” in these national contexts have tended to identify European integration as a key factor restricting their respective countries from following exclusionary policies and, to the extent that they manage to mobilize across national borders, they could provide a solid basis for a trans-national, extreme rightwing and militantly anti-EU party. At present, they are significantly underrepresented in the European Parliament (as are all anti-EU forces), but their numbers are growing and they could very

well form a “Fascistoidal” alliance with dissatisfied groups generated by other societal cleavages.

One of these, ironically, might be agriculture. Despite being one of the groups that has benefited directly the most from EU policies, they have to be numbered among the EU’s firmest opponents. Since farmers are no longer numerous enough (at least, in the present 15 member states) to establish their own party and since the historical opportunity to form a “Red-Green” alliance with urban working class-based parties does not seem available, they might just be tempted to enter into a broader coalition of “integration losers” – provided that its leaders can come up with an ideology that is not too manifestly “fascist” and does not exacerbate nationalist tensions between member states.

Other sectoral clashes seem either very diffuse or fragmented into so many cross-cutting systems of production that they fail to produce the classic “we-they” pattern that seems so central to the dialectics of party formation and reproduction. One could imagine, however, some relatively stable interest coalitions between the more dynamic “open” industries and services, on the one side, and the more traditional “sheltered” ones they are progressively displacing, on the other, but this is more likely to take the form of momentary campaigns over specific issues involving sectoral associations and sub-national regions than to provide a stable basis for partisan identification.

Center-periphery remains a significant line of cleavage within and across European states. Even a brief glance at the territorial distribution of results in the referendums that were held at the time of the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty would reveal common patterns of pro-European support in

the core areas and anti-European resistance in the peripheries. Of course, some former national peripheries, such as Flanders, Catalunya, Languedoc, the Alto Adige and Voralberg have become increasingly part of the core, thanks to their strategic location in the integration process. Some of these have even entered into so-called *Euro-Regios* that cross national borders and seek to exploit their special status in order to attract industries and services for the emerging market. Presumably, with enlargement to the East, some of Europe's most locationally disadvantaged areas are going to find themselves in the midst of new networks of exchange. So, "peripheral peripheries" will continue to be a problem and they too may join a mega-alliance of losers, but the sheer economic dynamism of the integration process itself, coupled with periodic incorporation of new members, will be constantly shifting the basis of the calculation.

Class conflict in its classical Left-Right configuration is still the mainstay of most national party systems, but its intensity has declined considerably. Not only has "class-voting" diminished everywhere, but also parties have tended to be less and less preoccupied with attracting their historical core-voters (*Stamwähler*) and more and more oriented to catching the shifting voters in the middle. Centripetal competition has replaced centrifugal competition -- with the result that party platforms are increasingly hard to distinguish from each other. And their policies once in office are only marginally different.

Speculating about the Implications

From the above sketch based on variations in Rokkan's original analysis, I come to the following speculative observations:

1. The cleavage patterns in Europe are even more multiple than was historically the case at the national level and, hence, the emerging European party system will be less uniform and, even when the politicians do manage to adopt the same symbols and programs across all member states, the parties running on this common basis will be much more fragmented into factions and less capable of exerting party discipline, either in parliament or in the nomination process.
2. The cleavages may be more multiple, but they are a lot less salient and capable of inspiring polarized attraction and repulsion. Hence, Euro-parties will be even more “centripetal” in their competition with each other (and bland in their respective platforms) than their national counterparts, many of whom are still living off a past political capital of strong antagonism.
3. Class conflict will continue to provide the major cleavage to the emerging Euro-party system, but it will be profoundly crosscut by alliances along sectoral and center-periphery lines. Left and Right will persist as general orienting labels, but as we have already seen at the national (and, very lately and embryonically, at the supra-national) level it will be preceded by various modifiers designed to appeal to the vast public in the middle.
4. New cleavages that were not envisaged by Rokkan may prove more salient in the emerging Euro-polity, even if they will tend to align themselves with the basic underlying Left-Right continuum. Many of these are rooting in generational conflicts, exacerbated by an aging population that is reserving an increasing proportion of total resources to itself and a young population that is bound to find less attractive job prospects than their elders. To the extent that many environmental issues are also “age-graded,” they will reinforce the tendency toward generation-based cleavages.
5. I suspect that what will emerge in the near future is a “2+2” party system in which two pro-European parties (one on the Left and the other on the Right) will compete for most of the votes and collude in the management of EU affairs -- as they now do in the internal politics of the European Parliament. Anti-European parties will gradually increase in popular appeal (especially if little or nothing is done to democratize EU institutions), but they will be initially divided along Left-Right lines. What is not yet clear is whether these parties will compete for Euro-votes and Euro-seats in the EP or whether they will increasingly resort to “extra-parliamentary” tactics to express their resistance to further integration.
6. If the “Anti-Europeans” do choose to play according to EU rules in order to oppose it from within and if the Left-Right cleavage continues to decline in salience, then, the longer run prospect will be for the emergence of a two party system in which two very

heterogeneous coalitions (one Pro and the other Anti) will dominate – an outcome that superficially resembles the American party system even if the central issue will be “state’s rights” rather than social class.

The underlying message of all this should be rather obvious. If Euro-elections continue to be held regularly (and abolishing them would be very difficult), **they will tend to produce results that will be increasingly at odds with the distribution of preferences registered in national and sub-national elections.** The emerging Euro-party system will be significantly different from the national ones: more fragmented and less disciplined; more centripetal for most voters but with centrifugal minorities increasing their strength on the extreme Left and Right; more open to the expression of new interests and causes, but less capable of breaking into the cartel of dominant parties.

Most problematically, unless major institutional reforms are introduced, these elections will attract an increasingly “unrepresentative sample” of citizens. With the monotonic decline in turnout already observed in each successive Euro-election, those who bother to vote will be ever more purposively (not randomly) distributed. The moderates will be less and less likely to take the trouble (and those who do so out of habit will be more aged) on the grounds that the EP has little or no relation to government or accountability; the extremes will see this more and more as an opportunity to get into the political game and to embarrass national governments at low cost without bearing any responsibility for their actions.

My hunch is that should this scenario materialize and national governing parties and coalitions be repeatedly and overtly disavowed by their

respective Euro-electoralates, the pressure could become so intense that these politicians might be tempted to introduce democratic reforms, if only, in order to convince ordinary voters that Euro-elections are worth the effort. So far, it is these very same parties and coalitions that have been most wary about establishing a competing supra-national representative assembly that would not only diminish the role of the Council of Ministers, but might even undermine that of national parliaments. If, however, it is precisely the meaninglessness of Euro-elections that is having the indirect (and unintended) effect of calling the legitimacy of national politicians into question every five years, then, they may decide to change their minds – and to take Euro-democracy seriously.

i. "Nation-Building, Cleavage Formation and the Structuring of Mass Politics,": in S. Rokkan, Citizens Election Parties (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1970), pp. 72-144; also Seymour Martin Lipset & Stein Rokkan, "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: an Introduction," in S. M. Lipset & S. Rokkan (eds.), Party Systems and Voter Alignments (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 1-64.

ii It has been the source of some controversy the fact that all but one of the politicians who played a founding role in the original EEC were public representatives of Catholic parties. Since then Christian or Christian Democratic parties have been the most consistent supporters of the integration process, whether at the national or the supra-national level. Protestant parties (where they exist) and protestant countries (most prominently in the North of Europe) have been markedly more reluctant to join the EC/EEC/EU or to accept enhanced powers for its institutions. Gary Marks and Carole J. Wilson have suggested that this may be due to differences in their ecclesiastical structure: the Roman Catholic Church is already a supra-national organization; virtually all of the Protestant denominations are national. "The Past in the Present: A Cleavage Theory of Party Response to European Integration," unpublished paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, no date, p. 10-11. However much this historical cleavage may persist within the member countries (and there are abundant signs that it is declining), I find it implausible that it will be replicated at the level of Europe as a whole.