CHAPTER 2

Dynamic Representation: The Case of European Integration*

Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen

Introduction

This chapter raises two questions: Why are party voters less favorable toward specific EU policies than are party elites? Second, how does political representation of EU preferences actually work? Is it an elite- or a mass-driven process? The data sets of the European Election Studies 1979 and 1994 are analyzed, which involve both an elite and a mass survey component. In contrast to earlier research, it appears that political representation of EU preferences works rather well regarding the grand directions of policymaking, and that party elites behave responsively in view of changing EU preferences among their voters.

Political Representation in the European Union: What We Know About It

Empirical investigations into the effectiveness of political representation in the European Union are scarce.¹ The relevant literature includes part of the work of the European Election Studies research group (mostly van der Eijk and Franklin, 1991 and 1996; and the contributions to Marsh and Norris, 1997), a few other studies based on Eurobarometer (Niedermayer and Sinnott, 1995; Blondel et al., 1998), and data on party manifestos (Carrubba, n.d.). Recent additions to these empirical investigations of EU democracy are the results of the European Representation Study 1994–1997, published in two companion volumes (Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999; Katz and Wessels, 1999).
It is a complex undertaking to assess the effectiveness of political representation in the multitiered polity of the European Union. Depending on the policy area concerned, EU governance oscillates between an intergovernmental and a supranational mode. Due to this, the European Representation Study was designed to investigate the preconditions and effectiveness of electoral representation regarding both European elections and first-order national elections. (Nonelectoral mechanisms of political representation such as lobbying, while arguably of particular importance at the EU level, could not be considered.) The criteria being tested for these two channels of electoral representation are derived from the “responsible party model.” This model assumes that competitive and cohesive parties exist; that voters have policy preferences and perceive the policy options on offer correctly; and that voters in the end base their electoral choice on these preferences. If these conditions are met, the process of political representation should result in a close match between the preferences of party voters and the policies of party elites.

Large-scale representative surveys among the mass publics and among members of the European Parliament and of national parliaments were conducted to assess the validity of these assumptions. The results can be summarized as follows: EU party elites are no less cohesive than national party elites. Voters hold policy preferences. They also recognize where the parties stand with regard to the grand lines of policymaking, while the more detailed EU policy positions of political parties escape many voters. It is hardly surprising, then, that those EU policies are largely irrelevant for the vote, while general policy views (as expressed, e.g., in terms of left and right) are significantly related to it.2

As a consequence, political representation in the European Union works fairly well as far as general policy views are concerned; if it comes to the specifics of European Union policymaking, the congruence between voters and their representatives is remarkably poor. Political elites are much more European-minded than their voters regarding questions such as the abolition of border controls or the elimination of national currencies in favor of a new common European currency. It is striking that this representative deficiency is not specific to the EU channel of electoral representation. National representatives are no less European-minded than their colleagues in the European Parliament, and are thus equally distant from their voters on these specific EU policies.

Compared to the results of earlier work, these findings evoke a number of further questions. One is whether the apparent ineffectiveness of political representation with regard to EU policies is caused by the “Europeanness” of these issues or by their specificity. Phrased in somewhat less obscure terms, the question is whether voters are less integrationist than their representatives,