For all the changes in European governance in recent decades, which some suggest have left the old ‘boundaries’ of the state out of sync with each other (Bartolini 2005), national democratic systems remain the centrepiece of politics. Moreover, despite their frequently alleged decline (see Daalder 1992), parties remain absolutely central to political competition. It is hard to envisage a genuine alternative to them so long as parliamentarism remains the democratic system of choice in the majority of European countries.

Yet the conditions in which parties operate have unquestionably changed. Party-based democracy – which, in practice, is a reasonable synonym for parliamentary democracy – has been firmly associated with the national state. Nationally delimited elections mean nationally delimited parties. But what happens when the national parliament is no longer unequivocally the highest political authority in the state, as is the case in the modern European Union?

Since the European Court of Justice established the primacy of European law over national law, and since the Single European Act introduced the real possibility of member states being outvoted in the Council of Ministers, accountability through parties has been harder to exercise. A minister can hardly be sanctioned by his or her government if he or she strove to pursue the preferences of both parliament and government in negotiations with counterparts from other member states, but failed to win them over. Nevertheless, the policy that those other member states’ ministers preferred will become law in the recalcitrant state all the same. This, in essence, is a big part of the much-discussed ‘democratic deficit’ in the EU. It is deepening in tandem with the expanding policy competencies of the Union (Follesedal and Hix 2006: 534–7). In short, the EU is creeping into ever more areas of public
policy, but its authority is not being held properly to account – not, at least, according to traditional democratic measures.

A great deal of research, both normative and empirical, has been devoted to this democratic deficit. The vast majority of it focuses on the institutions of the Union. Only a small, albeit growing, section takes up the effect of European integration on national political parties, and only a small proportion of that looks inside the parties at the internal mechanisms of democratic accountability that they contain.

This book is part of an attempt to help fill that gap. It reports the findings of a research project that investigates the state of delegation and accountability in Nordic political parties – that is, the parties represented in the national parliaments of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The aims of the project are threefold.

First, it seeks to peer into the black box of party organisation, and to do so through a distinct conceptual lens. In doing so, we hope to derive a clearer understanding of how power within parties is delegated and accountability exercised. Second, the project compares these mechanisms of delegation and accountability according to how they work at two different levels: at the customary national level and at the EU level. Of course, such a comparison will be of limited scale in the parties operating in one of the two Nordic non-EU member states, Norway. But it is far from meaningless even in those cases, thanks to the two countries' involvement in European integration via the European Economic Area (EEA). Third, the project aims to compare these mechanisms across cases – that is, to shine a comparative light on the way that parties operate across the Nordic region, with particular emphasis on the effect of European integration.

In sum, ours is a study of political parties' role in the multi-level polities – or perhaps even polity, in singular – that much of Europe has become, with our empirical material drawn from the Nordic region. The study draws inspiration from previous research that models modern representative democracy as a chain of relationships. Each of these relationships involves one actor delegating tasks to another actor, with the first actor then holding the second accountable for executing the tasks satisfactorily. In other words, the basic model that we start from is one of principals and agents (Lupia 2003; Miller 2005). The role of institutions in these relationships is to help to minimise ‘agency loss’. Lupia (2003: 35) defines agency loss as ‘the difference between the actual consequence of delegation and what the consequence would have been had the agent been “perfect”’, with perfection conceived as the agent doing what the principal itself would have done, given unlimited information and resources.