

Political Parties in Deeply Multilingual Polities: Institutional Conditions and Lessons for the EU¹

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Introduction

Over the past few years, a number of political theorists have begun to examine the normative dimensions of partisanship and the pivotal role that political parties can play in representative democracy (e.g. Bonotti, 2017; Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White and Ypi, 2016). Within this growing body of literature, however, little (e.g. White, 2014) if any attention has been devoted to the question of whether linguistic diversity poses an obstacle to partisan mobilization within and beyond the nation-state, or whether it might in fact constitute a resource for it. This is a serious shortcoming

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since language is central to democratic life and multilingualism increasingly characterizes most liberal democracies as well as, *a fortiori*, the *transnational* sphere.

In this paper we address the challenges posed by multilingualism to parties and partisanship by focusing on a key political actor, i.e. the European Union (EU). There is a well-established empirical literature on transnational political parties in the EU (e.g., Bardi et al., 2010; Bell and Lord, 1998; Bressanelli, 2014; Day, 2014; Gagatek, 2016; Hanley, 2008; Hix, 1995; Van Hecke, 2010). Yet this literature too has mostly neglected, if not utterly ignored, the challenges posed by linguistic diversity to transnational EU parties and partisanship. But why should this be a reason for concern?

To answer this question, we need to understand the importance that political parties have in the process of European integration. Article 8A-4 of the Lisbon Treaty (2007/2009), for example, states that ‘[p]olitical parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union’.² In 2012, a European Commission proposal stated that ‘[t]ruly transnational European political parties (...) are key to articulating the voices of the citizens at European level’ (Day, 2014, pp. 5-6). Such statements succinctly capture a key function of political parties, i.e. their being the sources of integration and political ‘linkage’ between society and the state, i.e. a bottom-up channel that conveys citizens’ views and demands into the political sphere, both in national and transnational contexts (Dalton et al., 2011; Lawson, 1988; Wolkenstein, 2016). Parties’ linkage function is ‘the main standard according to which their legitimacy as representative institutions is evaluated’ (Wolkenstein, 2016, p. 297). We fully embrace this normative understanding of parties and partisanship and, on this basis, in this paper we develop a twofold argument.

² <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:FULL&from=EN>

First, we claim that truly multilingual transnational Europarties (i.e. parties which operate and allow deliberation in all the various languages spoken by their members, especially at the grassroots level, and which resort to interpreting and translation) would perform their linkage function better than transnational parties employing a lingua franca. Second, we argue that for multilingual transnational parties to flourish and accomplish their democratic and legitimating linkage function in the EU certain favourable institutional conditions would have to be in place. More specifically, by drawing on evidence from Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, we argue that the presence of multilingual parties is facilitated in polities that rely on ‘centripetal’ political institutions: electoral incentives such as country-wide electoral districts, presidentialism, and direct democracy. Based on the evidence concerning these three deeply multilingual democracies,³ we then advance some thoughts on the kind of institutions that might enable multilingual partisanship across nation-states and, more specifically, within the EU.

³ By ‘deeply multilingual’ we mean polities where there are two or more official languages, but most citizens are predominantly *monolingual* (i.e. hardly able to participate in debates in other languages) and there is *no lingua franca*.