

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

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Abstract

The EU has long been suffering a legitimacy crisis. In this article we argue that multilingual Europarties, that is, European political parties operating in all the various languages spoken by their members via interpreting and translation, rather than resorting to a lingua franca, could contribute to providing an effective democratic linkage between EU citizens and EU institutions. Moreover, drawing inspiration from an analysis of Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, we argue that centripetal institutions such as an EU-wide electoral district, presidentialism, and direct democracy could provide favourable institutional conditions for the development of such multilingual Europarties.

Keywords: multilingualism; centripetalism; European Union; political parties; party linkage

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 (for example, Bonotti, 2017; Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White and Ypi, 2016). Within this growing body of literature, however, little (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 as language is central to democratic life and multilingualism increasingly characterizes most liberal democracies as well as, a fortiori, the *transnational* sphere.

In this article we address the challenges posed by multilingualism to parties and partisanship by focusing on a key political actor, that is, the European Union (EU). There is a well-established empirical literature on transnational political parties in the EU (for example, 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 important role 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

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