

‘Going Above and Beyond: A Comparative Case Study of the Multilevel Organisation of National Political Parties in the EU Polity’

PhD by Gilles Pittoors (Ghent University), supervisor: Bram Wauters

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Scholars have long been pointing to the growing crisis of democracy and democratic institutions: trends in global democratic governance point to a shrinking of high-quality democratic systems, while assessments of established democracies point to challenges around legitimacy, public trust and public engagement in democratic processes. While the European Union is only rarely the focus of specific research in democratic studies, it is no exception to these broader observations.

Since its foundation, questions about the democratic nature of the European Union have been ever present. How democratic is the EU? How democratic should it or could it become? What needs to change in the EU to shed the accusation of democratic deficit? The ongoing ‘crisis’ of democratic legitimacy in and of the EU has much to do with the distance between the EU’s politicians and its citizens. Efforts to bridge this gap seem to be moving in favour of the further deepening or of the development of EU-wide parties, even at a time when traditional, national-level party politics seems to be going

through its own crisis, with dwindling membership and a shift in support away from mainstream, traditional parties. Is this euro-particisation the way to diminish the challenge of democratic legitimacy in the EU?

In his PhD thesis, Gilles Pittoors dives headlong into these thorny questions. Rather than taking the blinkered view that the EU needs to be studied either through a supranationalist lens (studying what happens at the EU level to understand the EU) or through a nationalist lens (studying what happens at the national level in member states to understand the EU), Pittoors takes a middle way. He focuses his analysis on assessing transnational, multilevel interactions of national parties and party organisational efforts to reach across boundaries in their dealings with the EU. He asks, ‘[T]o what extent do national party organisations traverse national boundaries, and how can variation in the linkage practices of individual parties be explained?’ Through nine chapters, Pittoors brings us on a fascinating, thorough and reflective exploration of his research into national political parties in a European multilevel context.

Through the first two chapters, we are presented with an impressive re-

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view of several strands of literature. The first chapter discusses literature that forms the foundation of the central research puzzle being explored: that ‘in the absence of a distinct European “demos”, the democratic legitimacy of the EU is ‘derived from the national democracies of member states’ (Pittoors, 2021, pp. 1-2). At the same time, however, we have limited research focusing on national political parties (as the bedrock of most European, national democratic structures) within the multilevel EU context. Drawing out the main connecting threads in past research on political parties, Europeanisation, federalism and the nature of multilevel parties, and party organisation and organisational changes in Chapter 2 (a formidable task in itself), Pittoors presents a robust two-dimensional conceptual framework for analysis. The framework looks for national parties’ vertical integration in the EU polity and organisational links between the national and the EU levels – a previously under-researched area.

However, designing a project to investigate whether, how, to what extent and why national party organisations extend beyond national boundaries is a daunting task. In Chapter 3, Pittoors takes us through his research design and methodology. As the research is here presented as exploratory, driven by a curiosity to understand, Pittoors sensibly takes a mixed methods approach, combining thick description with qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) in a case study approach. He draws on a multitude of data sources, from documents, literature, interviews and semi-structured questionnaires, building up an impressive amount of data for analysis. He is careful to ensure reliability and robustness in his data,

explaining each and every methodological choice with nuance and care: which cases are chosen, how many and why? Pittoors writes with high self-reflection and awareness in this regard.

In Chapters 4 through 6, Pittoors guides us through the deep comparative empirical research at the heart of his work: focusing on Flanders, the Netherlands and Denmark. The core of the analysis here builds on data gathered from 64 semi-structured interviews, including four interviewees from each of the national parties in the study and one from each of the relevant European political groups. This new empirical data is checked with literature and document analysis, and forms a valuable source of new data and study material. A close analysis of comparative cases of parties both within and across countries leads to insights on the variation in the extent to which different party organisations traverse boundaries.

In each of these empirical chapters, Pittoors minutely discusses, describes and analyses the main parties in each country. Pittoors’ ability to synthesise and analyse huge amounts of data for each of these cases is highly impressive and, with each chapter, a subheading gives the reader the final assessment at a glance. In Chapter 4, the case of Flanders is summarised in the question ‘indifference at the heart of Europe?’. In Chapter 5, we learn that political parties in the Netherlands can be said to engage in efforts, in the multilevel EU context, towards ‘conditional leeway in an uneasy relationship’. In Chapter 6, we note that the multilevel context is ‘tugging at the threads of sovereignty’ in Denmark. With detailed analysis, Pittoors already provides some deep and detailed responses to the research

question on the extent to which national party organisations traverse boundaries, but the analysis shows interesting variation among the three case studies and also within the cases among different parties.

Not content with demonstrating variation among national cases, Pittoors sets out, in Chapter 7, to expose the variation across the different parties' approaches to the EU. Here, he categorises the strength of national parties' linkages in the multilevel EU context along a four-step scale from very weak, to very strong, over weak and strong, allowing him to place parties from the different national case studies together. He then applies a model to further categorise the strength of these parties' multilevel linkages accounting for four dimensions of organisational approaches to the EU: federation, integration, consolidation, and separation (what Pittoors brands the 'FICS' model, an ideal-type categorisation model). Using this model, Pittoors is able to reveal the variation in the way in which parties deal with the EU organisationally, exposing the fundamentally different approaches taken. For example, parties differ in their internal organisation for multilevel interactions: some national parties have strong connections with their relevant Member of the European Parliament, MEP, such as the Flemish N-VA party, other parties have no internal formalised structure to follow-up at the EU level, such as the Dutch SGP. Parties also differ in the external linkages, for example in whether or how they prepare for or participate in Europarty events, or in how they connect with their multilevel network.

In Chapter 8, Pittoors attempts to explain the variation in multilevel link-

ages by applying QCA. QCA is uniquely suitable for studying complex interactions in a search for causality or explanation, helping to identify a combination of factors that lead to particular outcomes. Investigating both party and country-level conditions, Pittoors pinpoints several key conditions. An overarching key finding is that traditions of European cooperation and a Europhile/Eurosceptic view on the integration project are at least as important for parties' multilevel organisation as the 'rational' opportunity structures generated by government participation and EU politicisation... (pp. 438-439)

To conclude this robust and in-depth study, in Chapter 9, Pittoors brings us back to his original motivation and to the many strands of relevant literature that formed the foundation of this piece of work. If we understand political parties to be intermediary powers in democratic systems, and if we understand the EU as a system of party politics in its own right, then such a study of the organisation and behaviour of national parties in the EU is crucially necessary. As scholars, we simply cannot be satisfied with the existence of such a research gap.

Thankfully, Pittoors' work provides an excellent contribution. With a thoughtful, thorough, robust and nuanced piece of research, and with his self-reflective research approach, Pittoors' contribution is not in doubt. Future scholars can build on his work on multilevel party studies, applying, testing and further refining the FICS model proposed. Unanswered questions include the appropriateness of Pittoors' approach and model to studies of other national political party contexts – how are multilevel interactions organised in

Southern, Eastern or Central European states? Do other Northern or Nordic countries have a different approach? Can we identify a dominant pattern of action across national parties?

Theoretically, his work adds further to the move away from strict supranational or national-focused analysis of the EU towards a middle ground, where the supranational and national are understood to interact. Practically, Pittoors provides a framework for analysing and categorising party approaches to the EU, allowing for the identification of strategies in case organisational change is desirable. Beyond these contributions, the PhD thesis is simply an example of excellent research. Students and researchers of the EU and/or of party politics would do well to study Pittoors' work.

References

- Pittoors, G. (2021). *Going above and beyond? A comparative case study analysis of the multilevel organisation of national political parties in the EU polity*. PhD thesis: Ghent University.