Fifty Years On: Research on the European Parliament*

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Abstract

This introductory article reviews our current state of knowledge about the European Parliament (EP). First, we review the major accomplishments of previous studies of the EP, highlighting four principal areas of work: general studies of the chamber, work on EP elections, studies of the internal politics of the Parliament, and research on the EP’s institutional relations with the Council and Commission. Second, we consider what has yet to be learnt: what are the major unanswered questions about the EP, and how do the articles in this special issue respond to this agenda?

Introduction

September 2002 saw the 50th anniversary of the first meeting of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community. For much of the half-century since its humble beginnings, the European Parliament (EP, as the Common Assembly became known) was marginal to the development of European integration and the politics of the European Union (EU). Initially, the institution was essentially a consultative body composed of delegates from national parliaments. Fifty years on, the elected Parliament has significant legislative and executive investiture/removal powers and all the trappings of a

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democratic parliament that flow from such powers: powerful party organizations, highly-organized committees, a supporting bureaucracy and constant lobbying from private interest groups. Indeed, given the EU’s separation of powers system – where a majority in the EP is not tied to supporting the Commission or the Council – it is reasonable to claim that the EP is one of the world’s more powerful elected chambers. And as the EU embarks on further treaty reform, the EP is central to the ‘constitutional’ debate. This is not to claim for a minute that the Parliament is a perfect institution: aspects of its internal organization appear deeply problematic, while its standing with much of the public it putatively represents appears low. Nonetheless, to ask today whether the European Parliament offers potential solutions to problems of democratic accountability and legitimacy facing the EU seems a sensible and logical question. Fifty, or even 20, years ago the question would not have been taken seriously by most political scientists or political leaders in Europe.

This introduction to the special issue accomplishes two tasks. First, we review the development of research on the European Parliament, considering how scholars have approached the study of the institution, and identifying some of the key contributions in the evolution of our understanding. Second, we consider what we do not know – the major questions that remain unanswered (or even unasked) and which, by implication, form much of the agenda for this special issue and for future research.

I. What We Know about the European Parliament

The development of academic writing and research on the EP has broadly been a function of the powers and prestige of the chamber. As the Parliament has risen in importance, not only has analysis become more sophisticated; in quantitative terms, the amount of academic writing on the EP has grown dramatically. Figure 1 shows the number of articles and books on the Parliament listed in the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* (IBSS) from 1965 (the date of the first listed publication) to 2001.¹ IBSS lists 583 total academic publications in this period. As the figure shows, after a couple of books in the mid-1960s, no publications appeared until the mid-1970s. There was then a brief explosion of research and analysis around the first direct elections in 1979. Attention subsequently declined, as it became clear that the elections would not usher in a new period of democratic and parliamentary-

¹ These are academic articles and books only, and exclude publications by the EP and pamphlets by think-tanks or other private organizations. These data include articles or books where the phrase ‘European Parliament’, or its equivalent in French or German, is either contained in the title of the publication or listed as one of the ‘key words’ of the publication.
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based governance at the European level. The elections in 1984 and 1989 still attracted attention, but between elections little research was being undertaken on the EP. However, the new powers granted to the Parliament in the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty stimulated a rebirth of research interest in the early 1990s, an interest that has continued to grow.

In qualitative terms, research on the EP has evolved from largely descriptive work on the internal institutions of the Parliament (in the 1960s and 1970s), through more detailed empirical work on EP elections, to highly theoretically and empirically sophisticated research in many areas, including behaviour within the EP, the chamber’s internal institutional structures, and the powers of the EP relative to the other EU institutions. Overall, we can classify contemporary research on the EP into four interrelated areas: (1) work on the general development and functioning of the EP; (2) research on political behaviour and EP elections; (3) research on the internal politics and organization of the EP; and (4) examinations of inter-institutional bargaining between the EP, the Council and the Commission.

First, on the general development and functioning of the EP, the two tours de force are Corbett et al. (2000) and Westlake (1994c) (see also Jacqué et al., 1984). Drawing on years of observation of, and participation in, the work of the Parliament, these books contribute an enormous amount to our understanding of the development and internal workings of the EP.

Figure 1: Number of Academic Articles and Books on the European Parliament
Source: International Bibliography of the Social Sciences.
Second, on political behaviour and EP elections, research has been led by the successive European Elections Studies (EES), by Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, Mark Franklin, Cees van der Eijk and their collaborators (see Reif and Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). The central argument of this research is that, since the first elections in 1979, EP elections have essentially been ‘second-order national contests’: fought by national parties (and covered by national media) largely on national issues rather than on European integration. The ‘second order’ phenomenon helps explain why, despite the EP’s powers having grown substantially, turnout in elections has continued to fall since 1979. National parties have generally convinced voters that EP elections are essentially ‘super opinion polls’, and have little substantive impact. Thus, the EP has an uphill battle to raise its profile amongst the citizens it represents and the national media (Blondel et al., 1998).

Related to this research is work on the ‘electoral connection’ between voters and behaviour inside the EP. For example, Bowler and Farrell (1993) found MEPs from single- or multi-member constituency systems (the UK and Ireland) to be more sensitive to constituents’ demands than those from proportional-list systems. However, this area remains largely neglected, perhaps because of widely-held assumptions that any electoral connection to the EP is weak because of the way EP elections (do not) work.

Third, there is a large body of literature on political organization and behaviour inside the EP. Much of this research has been on the development and power of the ‘party groups’ who are central to the workings of the EP: setting the political agenda, organizing committee assignments, competing for leadership positions, allocating staff resources and speaking time, co-ordinating committee behaviour and co-ordinating voting (see van Oudenhove, 1965; Fitzmaurice, 1975; Pridham and Pridham, 1981; Niedermayer, 1983; Bardi, 1992, 1994; Hix and Lord, 1997; Raunio, 1997; Kreppel, 2002). This research maps the development of these party groups from relatively loose transnational alliances into more developed parliamentary party organizations: with a division of labour between leaders and backbenchers, leadership bodies to set common policies, and structures to enforce these policies on party members (such as ‘group co-ordinators’ and ‘party whips’).

Building on this research is a growing literature examining the impact of these parties on voting in Parliament – in ‘roll-call votes’, where each MEP’s vote is recorded in the minutes. This research finds high levels of voting ‘cohesion’ within party groups (Attinà, 1990; Brzinski, 1995; Raunio, 1997, pp. 79–124). Moreover, spatial analysis of roll-call voting behaviour reveals that MEPs vote more along party than national lines, with the main dimension of
political competition in the EP being the traditional left–right cleavage (Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999; Hix, 2001; Noury, 2002).

The other key internal institutions in the EP are committees. However, these have received much less attention. Bowler and Farrell (1995) produced a rare piece of theoretically informed research in this area when finding that both national/party interests (distributional concerns) and policy expertise (information needs) are key determinants of committee membership in the EP.

There has been some research into other aspects of political behaviour inside the EP (Costa, 2001). Two large-scale empirical studies on individual MEP and party group behaviour from the first directly elected Parliament (1979–84) showed representatives making active use of various parliamentary instruments to influence Community matters (Kirchner, 1984; Grabitz et al., 1988). Raunio’s (1996) study of written questions (to the Commission and the Council) reveals MEPs representing multiple interests: regional, sectoral, partisan, national and pan-European. Scully (1997a) finds that MEP participation (in votes) is higher under legislative procedures where the EP has more influence on outcomes (i.e. the co-operation and co-decision procedures). And Scarrow (1997) suggests that MEPs have three main ‘career paths’: exclusively at the European level; an EP seat as a means to a position in domestic politics; or the last job at the end of a career. Despite considerable variation between Member States, the proportion of ‘European careerists’ is gradually increasing. Scarrow thus suggests that MEPs will become increasingly independent of domestic politics.

A number of studies have examined MEPs’ attitudes and behaviour, and whether representatives become ‘socialized’ into being more pro-European (see Kerr, 1973; Bardi, 1989; Abélès, 1992; Westlake, 1994a; Scully, 1998). The 1994–97 EES surveys showed national electoral and political settings shaping how MEPs see their ‘representational roles’ (Wessels, 1999), but also indicated transnational partisan bonds among MEPs to be highly significant (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). Franklin and Scarrow (1999) find that national parliamentarians and MEPs share broadly similar views about Europe; an examination of several sources of attitudinal and behavioural evidence leads Scully (forthcoming) to endorse a rationalist explanation of why MEPs are not socialized in a more pro-integration direction.

Fourth, theoretical models of inter-institutional legislative bargaining have shown that the EP’s power has increased substantially with successive treaty reforms. However, most such models make three ‘heroic’ assumptions about the EP: that the main policy dimension is ‘pro-/anti-European integration’; that the EP is at the opposite extreme of this dimension to the status quo; and that the EP is a unitary actor (see Tsebelis, 1994, 1995, 1996; Steunenberg, 1994; Garrett, 1995; Crombez, 1996, 1997, 2000; Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996;
Tsebelis and Garrett, 2000). However, if the relevant dimension is different (such as left–right), or if EU legislation already exists, the EP may be closer to the status quo and hence more likely to veto Council positions (Scully, 1997b). Empirical studies confirm that the EP’s legislative impact has increased (see Judge and Earnshaw, 1994; Judge et al., 1994; Kreppel, 1999), and also tend to refute the Garrett and Tsebelis argument that EP power is less under co-decision than under the co-operation procedure (see Earnshaw and Judge, 1997; Garman and Hilditch, 1998; Rittberger, 2000; Shackleton, 2000; cf. Tsebelis et al., 2001). Similarly, empirical work confirms that the EP has used its powers of scrutiny, investiture and censure to influence the executive actions of the Commission (Westlake, 1994b, 1998).

To summarize, as the EP has grown in importance, it has received growing scholarly attention. We now know much about the EP: in addition to superb general descriptive accounts, we have developing bodies of analytical literature in many areas. But, inevitably, our knowledge remains far from complete. And the 50th anniversary of the Parliament’s tentative creation is a good time to take stock by reflecting on what are the major remaining unanswerd (or even unasked) questions about the EP, and how this volume can address at least some of them.

II. What We Need to Know

Without seeking to impose a single, dominant perspective on studying the EP, it is clear that there are substantial lacunæ – things that citizens and scholars approaching the EP from various perspectives could affirm – where we require more knowledge. Among the major unanswered questions are:

**Why has the EP gained greater powers?** As indicated above, study of the EP has been stimulated by the growth in Parliament’s prerogatives. Much of the work has analysed the impact of these powers. But an important – and logically prior – question has received far less attention: why did national governments change the treaties to enhance the EP’s powers? Despite analysis of Parliament’s own campaigns (Corbett, 1998; Delwit et al., 1999) and attempts at partial explanation (Moravcsik and Nicolaïdis, 1998; Hix, 2002), a fully-developed and broadly tested explanation of the empowerment of the EP has been lacking. The article by Berthold Rittberger in this issue constitutes the most substantial contribution yet in this direction.

**What has Parliament done with the powers it has?** The substantial body of research on the powers of the EP must surely be developed further. Work in this area concerns the EP’s most direct impact on the EU, and important issues regarding the parliament’s use of its powers remain understudied. The article here by Andreas Maurer is the most complete single empirical exami-
nation yet of the impact of the EP’s powers on EU legislation. And the analysis by Christopher Lord assesses the role of Parliament in an important area where its powers are rather less obvious – the ‘economic governance’ of Europe.

What representative role does the EP play? Though nominally the ‘voice of the people’ within the EU, Parliament has generally been seen as a failure in representative terms. But such conclusions are generally drawn without much understanding of the representatives themselves, the MEPs. We know relatively little about their activities and priorities as individual representatives, or how they see their collective role. The article by Roger Scully and David Farrell attempts to develop our knowledge about such matters.

Does the Parliament help legitimize European governance? We know very little about public perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the EP. Thus, we also know little about whether Parliament does or can help legitimize the EU in the manner attributed to elected legislatures in other contexts. The article here by Matthew Gabel constitutes the first substantial attempt to understand such questions by examining the factors behind public support for the EP at an individual level.

How does the internal politics and organization of the EP shape what it does? The key organizational structures of the EP are parties and committees. This issue seeks to develop our knowledge of both. Hix et al. advance significantly our understanding of the development of the party system in the EP, not least through conducting their empirical analysis on a unique data-set of roll-call votes since 1979. Mamadouh and Raunio also make an important contribution to understanding the committee system of the EP. Building on the sparse previous literature, their analysis of appointments and report allocations demonstrates the importance of parties (particularly national party delegations) to the functioning of committees.

How much has the EP changed over time? Finally, we turn to three individuals who have, for some years, observed from close quarters the development of the Parliament, to place this evolution in historical perspective. Richard Corbett, Francis Jacobs and Michael Shackleton examine three areas of parliamentary development: general advances in the powers and status of the chamber, changes in ‘budgetary politics’ over time, and the evolution of an EP role in policy implementation and scrutiny of other EU institutions.

Conclusion

The 50th anniversary of the EP’s creation provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on the development of both the institution and its study. This introductory article has sought to outline what has been accomplished by those who
study the Parliament, and also to consider the many challenges that remain. The following articles in this issue address much of this research agenda.

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