Indicator 3: Choice and political competition

How far are voters offered choices that allow them to exercise public control as equals?

In practice this indicator comes down to the role of political parties in intermediating between citizens and the political system. Political parties are needed to structure voter choice in elections. In an ideal world voters would have just that choice in elections that allows them to choose in the way in which they want to choose, whether that is a matter of choosing between alternative policies or choosing between alternative leaders. However, even in perfectly competitive party systems, it would be difficult for parties to anticipate exactly how voters want to make their choices; and in practice; of course, most party systems are less than perfectly competitive. Even allowing for the recent success of protest parties, there are significant barriers in many systems to the entry of new political parties to the process of electoral competition or to the reconfiguring or realignment of existing parties. This means that many voters are constrained in their choices by the range of parties, policies and leaders on offer.

In the case of the European Union there is a further complicating factor: in effect the Union depends on a split-level party system. That is to say national parties structure choice even for European Union. Yet the work of the European Parliament itself is structured by European party groups. Table 3.4 shows which national parties belong to which European party groups. For the moment, though, it is enough to note that if we are to evaluate how parties structure voter choice and then translate those choices into the workings of Union institutions we will need data on both national parties and the European party groups.

Amongst measures which could be relevant for measuring choice and political competition are the following: proximity to political parties (3.1); trust in political parties (3.2); inclusiveness of the representation of national political parties in the European Parliament (3.3); fit between the national and European party systems (3.4); and cohesion of party groups in the European Parliament (3.5).

3.1 Proximity to political parties

One measure of whether voters feel they have a satisfactory choice is provided by a question that has long been asked by opinion polls: namely, whether they feel close to a political party. This is a problematic question, since different people may answer it in different ways. Some may interpret the question as asking them whether they identify with a political party. Others may see it as asking them whether there is a political party that has policies they can agree with. Still, it does provide us with some measure of whether voters feel that there is *at least* one party on offer for which they can vote.

Across the Union as a whole, the number of citizens who do not feel close to any one political party outnumber those who do. However, variation across member states is huge, as shown in the last column of the Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Proximity to political parties

	Proximity to political parties		
	Close[1]	**Not close**[2]	**Balance**[3]
MT	78 (36+42)	20 (11+9)	+ 58
NL	62 (21+41)	37 (24+13)	+ 25
CY	60 (35+25)	38 (20+18)	+ 22
IT	59 (22+37)	38 (22+16)	+ 21
SE	59 (14+45)	40 (27+13)	+ 19
LU	57 (19+38)	42 (23+19)	+ 15
EL	56 (26+30)	43 (22+21)	+ 13
AT	55 (22+33)	44 (23+21)	+ 11
BE	54 (15+39)	46 (29+17)	+ 9
ES	50 (19+31)	49 (25+24)	+ 1
DE	49 (13+36)	50 (27+23)	- 1
SK	47 (13+34)	50 (31+19)	- 3
EE	47 (35+12)	49 (20+29)	- 2
FI	46 (13+33)	53 (35+18)	- 7
PT	45 (16+29)	49 (25+24)	- 4
EU ave	43 (13+30)	54 (28+26)	- 11
HU	42 (11+31)	54 (27+29)	- 12
BG	40 (11+29)	55 (21+34)	- 15
LT	40 (12+28)	56 (22+34)	- 16
FR	38 (8+30)	61 (34+27)	- 23
DK	37 (9+28)	62 (41+21)	- 25
LV	35 (6+29)	61 (31+30)	- 26
SI	35 (9+26)	60 (24+36)	- 25
IE	34 (8+26)	62 (26+36)	- 28
PL	31 (7+24)	59 (22+37)	- 28
RO	26 (8+18)	69 (19+50)	- 43
UK	22 (6+16)	76 (41+35)	- 54

Notes
Respondents were asked whether they feel very close to a political party, somewhat close, not really close or not close at all.
[1] Figures in brackets indicate those who feel 'very close' + those who feel 'somewhat close'.
[2] Figures in brackets indicate those who feel 'not really close' + those who feel 'not close at all'.
[3] Balance of those who feel close to a political party over those who do not (column 1–column 2).

Source
Special Eurobarometer 320/Wave 71.3 'Post-electoral Survey 2009', June-July 2009.

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3.2 Trust in political parties

It is not, however, enough for voters to feel close to at least one political party. They also need to trust political parties to deliver. Table 3.2. shows that there is not a single EU member state in which more citizens trust political parties than do not. The average of those who trust political parties across the Union as a whole is just 15 per cent. Mistrust of political parties is high in several post-communist member states where parties are often seen for historical reasons as instruments of domination, rather than mechanisms for voter choice.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that mistrust of political parties is confined only to post-communist states. A comparison of Table 3.2. with Table 3.1. reveals another pattern: trust in political parties and feelings of proximity to them are by no means always related. In some member states political parties are relatively less mistrusted. Yet voters don't feel especially close to them. Denmark is an example. In other member states, voters feel that close to at least one political party. Yet they mistrust political parties in general. Italy is an example of this.

Table 3.2. Trust in political parties

	Trust in political parties		
	Tend to trust	**Tend not to trust**	**Balance[1]**
NL	39	55	- 16
LU	35	55	- 20
SE	34	63	- 29
DK	31	63	- 32
AT	27	67	- 40
MT	20	63	- 43
FI	26	71	- 45
HU	22	72	- 50
EE	18	75	- 57
BE	20	78	- 58
CY	18	76	- 58
IT	16	77	- 61
DE	15	79	- 64
EU ave	15	80	- 65
BG	13	79	- 66
PL	12	80	- 68
PT	14	83	- 69
UK	13	82	- 69
ES	11	85	- 74
SK	11	85	- 74
FR	10	85	- 75
IE	9	86	- 77
LT	7	88	- 81
LV	7	88	- 81
RO	7	88	- 81
SI	7	91	- 84
EL	5	93	- 88

Note
Respondents were asked whether they tend to trust or not to trust political parties.
[1] Balance of those trusting over those not trusting political parties (column 1–column 2).

Source
Standard Eurobarometer 74, 'Public Opinion in the European Union', Autumn 2010.

3.3 Inclusiveness of the representation of national political parties in the EP

RECON Model 1 would presumably imply that the powers of the European Parliament are best understood as a delegation of powers from national parliaments. That it has, in other words, been delegated with the powers to monitor other EU institutions on behalf of national parliaments. Maybe, for example, national parliaments would face substantial asymmetries of information in seeking to control Union decisions that can be best overcome by delegating the task to a dedicated European Parliament that can specialise in following Union decisions and building up the expertise needed to do that. If, however, the EP is best justified as 'standing in for national parliaments' – as a body that monitors Union decisions on behalf of national parliaments – then it would presumably be helpful if it also represented a similar range of national parties to those found in national parliaments.

The third column of Table 3.3. shows that it does, indeed, include a wide range of the national parties found in most member states. The first and second column of the table compares the effective number of parties represented in national parliaments and the EP. In other words, it also allows for variation in the size of the representation given to different national parties at the two levels. Here member states vary. In some cases, the effective number of parties represented in the EP is higher than in national parliaments. In others it is lower.

Table 3.3. How inclusive is the representation of national parties in the European Parliament?

	Effective number of parties represented in national parliaments	Effective number of national parties represented in the EP	Number of national parties with seats in the EP
AT	4.24	4.19	5
BE	8.42	10.08	12
BG	3.34	4.90	6
CY	3.90	3.60	4
CZ	4.51	3.23	4
DE	4.83	4.55	6
DK	5.33	4.83	6
EE	4.37	4.50	5
EL	2.59	3.51	6
ES	2.36	2.55	6
FI	5.13	5.83	7
FR	2.49	3.89	7
HU	2.00	2.18	4
IE	3.03	4.00	5
IT	3.07	3.61	6
LT	5.78	4.50	6
LU	3.63	3.00	4
LV	6.00	5.33	6
MT	2.00	1.92	2
NL	6.74	7.35	8
PL	2.82	2.75	4
PT	3.13	3.72	5
RO	3.60	4.11	6
SE	4.15	5.59	8
SI	4.23	4.45	5
SK	4.01	4.33	6
UK	2.57	4.71	11
EP		4.51	8

Source
European Parliament, 'How to Create a Transnational Party System', Luciano Bardi, Edoardo Bressanelli, Enrico Calossi, Wojciech Gagatek, Peter Mair and Eugenio Pizzamenti, Brussels: European Parliament, 2010: 55.

3.4 Fit between the national and European party systems

As seen, the EU operates a two-level party system. National parties structure voter choice in European elections. Yet European party groups exercise the powers of the European Parliament once it is elected. That raises the question of the 'goodness of fit' between party systems at the two levels. One possible measure is provided by how often national party delegations are able to vote the same way as their European party groups.

VoteWatch (www.VoteWatch.eu) provides an invaluable resource to researchers in compiling all the roll-call votes of the European Parliament in an easily searchable form. Table 3.4. shows each European Party group in the 2009-14 Parliament and each of its component national parties. The table shows how often the majority of each national party delegation voted with the majority of its European Party Group in the roll-calls taken during the first two years of the 2009-14 Parliament. Only those national party delegations highlighted in blue failed to vote with their party groups in 90 per cent of roll-calls or more. Only 67 MEPs – or less than 10 per cent of the Parliament – belong to those national party delegations, and 36 of those 67 MEPs are concentrated on just two groups: the far left group and the Eurosceptic group. For the most part, then, there would appear to be a fairly good fit between the national party delegations and the European party groups.

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Table 3.4. National party delegations in the European Parliament and their 'fit' with the European party groups as measured by how often they vote with the latter in roll-calls

European People's Party		A	B	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats		A	B
Slovenksá Demokratická	SK	2	99.49	Socialdemokratu partija	LT	3	99.34
Slovenska Demokratska	SI	2	99.24	SDP	DE	23	99.09
Krest'anskodemokratické hnutie	SK	2	99.03	SMER-Sociálna demokracia	SK	5	98.92
Strana mad'arskej-Magyar Koalició	SK	2	98.97	Česká strana sociálně demokratická	CZ	7	98.89
CDU	DE	34	98.95				
Tévynés-Christian Dems	LT	2	98.75	Coalition for BG	BG	4	98.78
Erakond Isamaa	EE	1	98.36	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	PL	6	98.75
Nova Slovenja	SI	1	98.23	Suomen Sosialdemokraattinen	FI	2	98.68
Partidul Democrat-Liberal	RO	11	98.14	Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond	EE	1	98.57
Krest'anská a demokratická unie	CZ	2	98.11	Labour Party	IE	3	98.51
Citizens for the European development of Bulgaria	BG	5	98.04	Partidul Social Democrat	RO	12	98.33
				Socialni demokrati	SI	2	98.25
Blue Coalition	BG	1	98.00	Parti Socialiste	BE	3	98.21
Christian/Centre Democrats	IT	5	97.97	Independent	LV	1	98.14
Io amo l'Italia	IT	1	97.95	Magyar Szocialista	HU	4	97.83
Stronnictwo Ludowe	PL	3	97.89	SPA	BE	2	97.77
CSU	DE	8	97.89	Partito Democratico	IT	21	97.59
Il Popolo della Libertà	IT	25	97.69	Partido Socialista	PT	7	96.67
Demokratikos Synagermos	CY	2	97.61	Dimokratiko Komma	CY	1	96.65
Partido Popular	PT	2	97.52	PASOK	GR	8	96.17
Pilsoniskā Savienība	LV	2	97.47	SPÖ	AT	4	95.97
Partido Social Democrata	PT	8	97.37	Sosialdimokraton	CY	1	95.71
Partit Nazzjonalista	MT	2	97.23	Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya	ES	1	95.70
Partido Popular	ES	23	97.21				
UMP-Parti Radical	FR	3	97.20	Labour Party	MT	3	95.56
Futuro e Libertà	IT	3	97.17	PSOE	ES	20	95.51
Südtiroler Volkspartei	IT	1	97.16	Parti Socialiste	FR	14	95.39
Parti chrétien social	LU	3	97.02	Partij van de Arbeid	NL	3	95.32
Fine Gael	IE	4	96.49	Unia Pracy	PL	1	93.74
UMP	FR	21	96.33	Socialdemokratiet	DK	4	92.40
Jaunais Laiks	LV	1	96.30	*Labour*	*UK*	*13*	*89.78*
Uniunea Democrată Maghiară	RO	3	96.26	*Arbetarepartiet-Socialdemokraterna*	*SE*	*5*	*89.58*
Unione dei Democratici	IT	1	96.16	*Independent*	*IT*	*1*	*89.56*
ÖVP	AT	6	95.54	*Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Luxembourgeois*	*LU*	*1*	*88.23*
Christian Democrats	NL	5	95.28				
Fidesz	HU	14	94.93				
Nouveau Centre	FR	3	94.75				
Kansallinen Kokoomus	FI	3	94.48				
Gauche Moderne	FR	2	94.13				
Flemish Christian Democrats	BE	2	93.09				
New Democracy	GR	7	91.66				
Christliche Soziale Partei	BE	1	91.88				
Konservative Folkeparti	*DK*	*1*	*89.59*				
Centre Démocrate Humaniste	*BE*	*1*	*84.84*				
Moderata Samlingspartiet	*SE*	*4*	*83.29*				
Suomen kristillisdemokraatit	*FI*	*1*	*81.73*				
Kristdemokraterna	*SE*	*1*	*77.08*				

(Continued)

Table 3.4. (Continued)

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe				The Greens–European Free Alliance			
		A	B			A	B
Flemish Liberals	BE	3	99.35	*Grünen*	DE	14	99.81
Eeeti Keskerakond	EE	2	99.16	*Grünen*	AT	2	99.70
Partidul National Liberal	RO	5	99.08	*Écologistes*	BE	2	99.65
Lietuvos liberalu Sajūdis	LT	1	98.91	*Europe Écologie*	FR	13	99.23
Liberal Democrat	SI	1	98.74	*Piratpartiet*	SE	1	99.18
Latvijas Pirmā Partija/Celš	LV	1	98.42	*Green Party*	UK	2	98.94
Stability & progress	BG	2	97.99	*Catalunya Verds*	ES	1	98.63
Rights & freedoms	BG	3	97.95	*Virhreä litto*	FI	2	98.59
Democraten 66	NL	3	97.73	*Les Verts*	LU	1	98.28
Mouvement Réformateur	FR	2	97.44	*Groen*	BE	1	98.20
L'udová strana – Hnutie Slovensko	SK	1	96.65	*Groen Links*	NL	3	98.05
				Partitu di a Nazionale Corsa	FR	1	97.81
Eesti refomiererkond	EE	1	96.92	*Vienotā Latvijā*	LV	1	97.39
ZARES Nova Politica	SI	1	96.59	*Socialistisk Folkeparti*	DK	1	97.23
Liberal Democrats	UK	12	96.24	*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*	ES	1	97.17
Svenska folkpartiet	FI	1	95.94				
Convèrgencia Democràtica di Catalunya	ES	1	95.81	*Üksikkandidaat*	EE	1	96.78
				Oikologoi	EL	1	96.28
Suomen Keskusta	FI	3	95.60	*Plaid Cymru*	UK	1	96.23
Parti démocratique	LU	1	95.22	*Miljöpartiet de gröna*	SE	1	89.45
VVD	NL	3	94.50	*Scottish National Party*	UK	2	86.7
Liberal Peoples Party	SE	3	93.76	*NVA*	BE	1	79.04
Venstre	DK	3	93.62	*Independent*	PT	1	72.88
FDP	DE	12	93.50				
Centerpartiet	SE	1	92.90				
Dimokratiki Symmachia	EL	1	92.78				
Partido Nacionalista Vasco	ES	1	92.68				
Italia dei Valori	IT	4	91.51				
Independent	IE	1	90.86				
Independent	IT	1	90.01				
Fianna Fáil	IE	3	89.43				
Mouvement Démocratique	FR	5	88.06				
Alleanza per l'Italia	IT	1	86.64				
Darbo partija	LT	1	85.98				
Citoyonnneté participation pour le 21èmé	FR	1	80.96				

Table 3.4. (Continued)

European Conservatists and Reformists		A	B	European United Left/Nordic Green Left		A	B
Conservative Party	UK	24	96.25	Die Linke	DE	8	95.93
Ulster Unionist	UK	1	94.11	Izquierda Unida	ES	1	95.04
Občanská Demokratická Strana	CZ	9	94.07	Synaspismos tis Rizospastikis Aristeras	EL	1	93.50
Magyar Demokrata Forum	HU	1	93.44				
Lijst Dedecker	BE	1	91.70	Saskanas Centrs	LV	1	93.49
Polska Jest Najważniejsza	PL	4	91.03	Bloco de Esquerda	PT	2	93.46
Lietuvos lenkų Rinkimų akcija	LT	1	90.49	Laou – Aristera – Nees Dynameis	CY	2	90.59
Prawo i Sprawiedliwoźć	PL	11	89.90	Komunistická	CZ	4	90.59
Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK	LV	1	89.42	Front de Gauche	FR	4	89.96
ChristenUnie	NL	1	84.59	Socialist Party	IE	1	88.80
Løsgænger	DK	1	84.26	Partido Comunista	PT	1	88.18
				Sinn Fein	UK	1	88.01
Europe of Freedom and Democracy				Vanster Partiet	SE	1	87.45
Lega Nord	IT	9	82.67	Democrática Unitária	PT	1	86.50
Slovenksá národná strana	SK	1	66.62	Socialistische Partij	NL	1	85.79
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij	NL	1	65.72	Onafhankelijk lid	NL	1	84.79
				Folkebevægelsen mod EU	DK	1	84.48
Dansk Folkeparti	DK	1	63.62	Parti communiste réunionais	FR	1	83.51
Laikos Orthodoxos	EL	2	62.45	Kommounistiko Komma Elladas	EL	2	64.71
Perussuomalaiset	FI	1	58.09				
Mouvement Pour la France	FR	1	55.31				
Partija Tvarka ir teisingumas	LT	2	51.03				
UK Independence Party	UK	12	50.44				

Notes
A: Number of MEPs
B: Percentage frequency with which national party delegations vote with its European parliamentary group.

Sources
VoteWatch: http://www.VoteWatch.eu

3.5 Cohesion of party groups in the European Parliament

It is a matter of some dispute how far cohesive and disciplined political parties are desirable from a point of view of democratic standards. Party disciplines can stifle political debate and constrain individual representatives in the representation of their own voters.

Yet from at least one point of view party disciplines can be helpful. Individual representatives come and go. Yet political parties often continue for a long time. This may mean that political parties can be held accountable over long periods of time in ways in which individual representatives cannot. On top of that, parties compete around broad programmes of government. Thus they can be held accountable for how they aggregate individual issues. This provides voters with some choice control over how value trade-offs are made across the range of public policies.

For these reasons, many have argued that representative democracy is really a system of 'party responsible government'. Parties need to be able to control individual representatives if parties as a whole are to be responsible to the voters. At least from this point of view it may be desirable that representatives are able to form coherent party groupings in the European Parliament. Table 3.5. uses roll-call data to show cohesive the EP party groups are.

Table 3.5. Party groups in the European Parliament and their cohesion

2009-2014 Parliament *Data based on first 133 votes*		2004-09 Parliament *Data based on 6,149 votes*	
GREENS/EFA	0.95	GREENS/EFA	0.90
S&D	0.92	PES	0.88
EPP	0.90	ALDE	0.86
ECR	0.90	EPP	0.85
ALDE	0.89	UEL	0.82
UEL	0.82	ID	0.41
EFD	0.48		