

# The 2014 Elections to the European Parliament :

Why is it different this time, and why should we care?



**Prof. Dr. Thomas Christiansen**

Jean Monnet Professor  
of European Institutional Politics  
Maastricht University

and

Visiting Senior Research Fellow  
East Asian Institute  
National University of Singapore

# Outline of the Presentation



- **European Integration: From International Diplomacy to Supranational Democracy**
- **The Role of the European Parliament in EU Politics**
- **Multi-Party Politics v. National Interest in EU Decision-making**
- **Limits of Political Integration in Europe: The 'Democratic Deficit'**
- **'Constitutional' Changes through the Lisbon Treaty**
- **The Impact of the Crisis on EU Democracy**
- **The New Dynamics of Leadership Change in 2014**

# European Integration: From International Diplomacy to Supranational Democracy



- **Origin of the European Union as an international organisation**
- **Founding treaties start life as international agreements, but are over time transformed into quasi-constitutional documents**
- **Part of a wider transformation of Europe**
  - Common European institutions acquire increasing authority that is independent from the member states
  - Development of a supranational legal order that has direct effect and primacy over national laws
  - Nation-states in the EU are transformed into ‘member states’ subject to powerful processes of Europeanisation
  - EU not replacing member states, but jointly with these constituting a ‘post-Westphalian’ multi-level polity

# The Role of the European Parliament in EU Politics



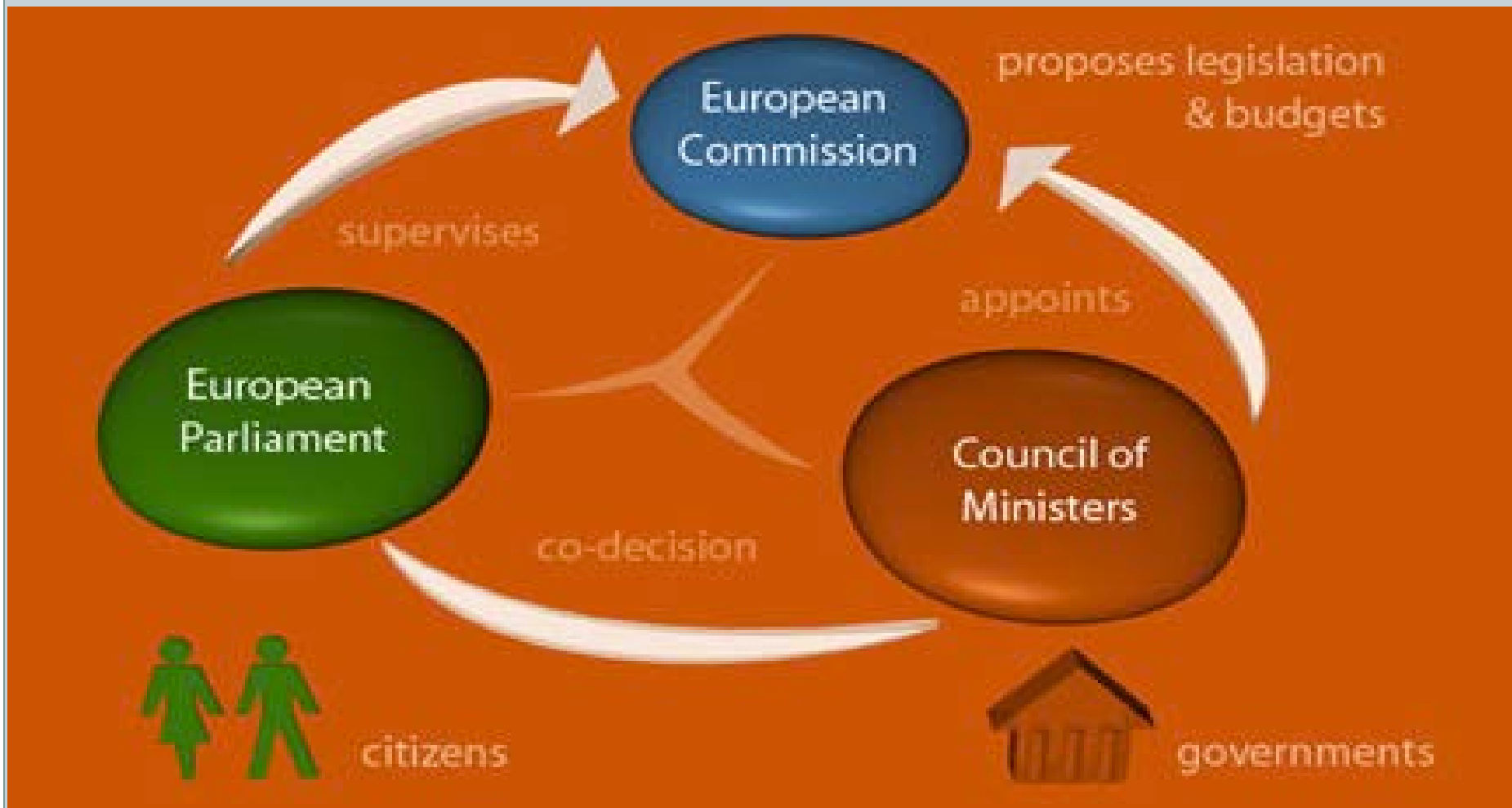
- Started its life as an advisory body of appointed national MPs taking up a temporary, secondary role at the European level
- Huge transformation of its role after the introduction of direct elections in 1979
- Newly elected Parliament is led by politicians with strong anti-fascist roots
  - Simone Veil, a French politician and survivor of the Holocaust, elected as first President
  - Altiero Spinelli, Italian Federalist and democracy campaigner already during the Second World War, becomes one of the leaders of group campaigning for more parliamentary powers
- Begin of a 30-year long quest for greater power and equal say over EU decision-making
  - Direct elections increase the democratic legitimacy and self-confidence of the Parliament
  - “Co-decision”, now re-named as the “Ordinary Legislative Procedure” has become the norm in EU decision-making (legislation, budget, international agreements, appointments)
- Within the EP, politics are more similar to national rather than to international politics
- EP becomes a distinctive voice in EU politics, including in the external relations of the Union, developing its own track record on issues such as civil rights, humanitarian aid, environmental protection, etc.

# Multi-Party Politics v. National Interest in EU Decision-making



- State interests are – in principle – being represented through Council of Ministers and European Council (Heads of State and Government)
- Sectional interests are represented by political parties in the EP (European party groups or “families”)
- Initial emergence of a ‘grand coalition’ of pro-integrationist parties (Christian-Democrats, Socialists, Liberals) uniting for more powers for the EP
- Recent development of a more traditional left/right split in the EP
- Shift from politics *about* European union to politics *within* European Union
- Party political dynamics also becoming apparent in the European Commission and in the Council of Ministers (indirectly through elections in the member states)
- But: Outcomes of EP elections do *not* form the foundation for stable coalition government, but instead provide the arena for a continuous search for ad hoc majorities (actually for super-majorities/consensus)
- EU politics more like the US federal system than the ‘fused’ system of parliamentary democracy common in Europe

# Challenges to the Legitimacy of EU Decision-making

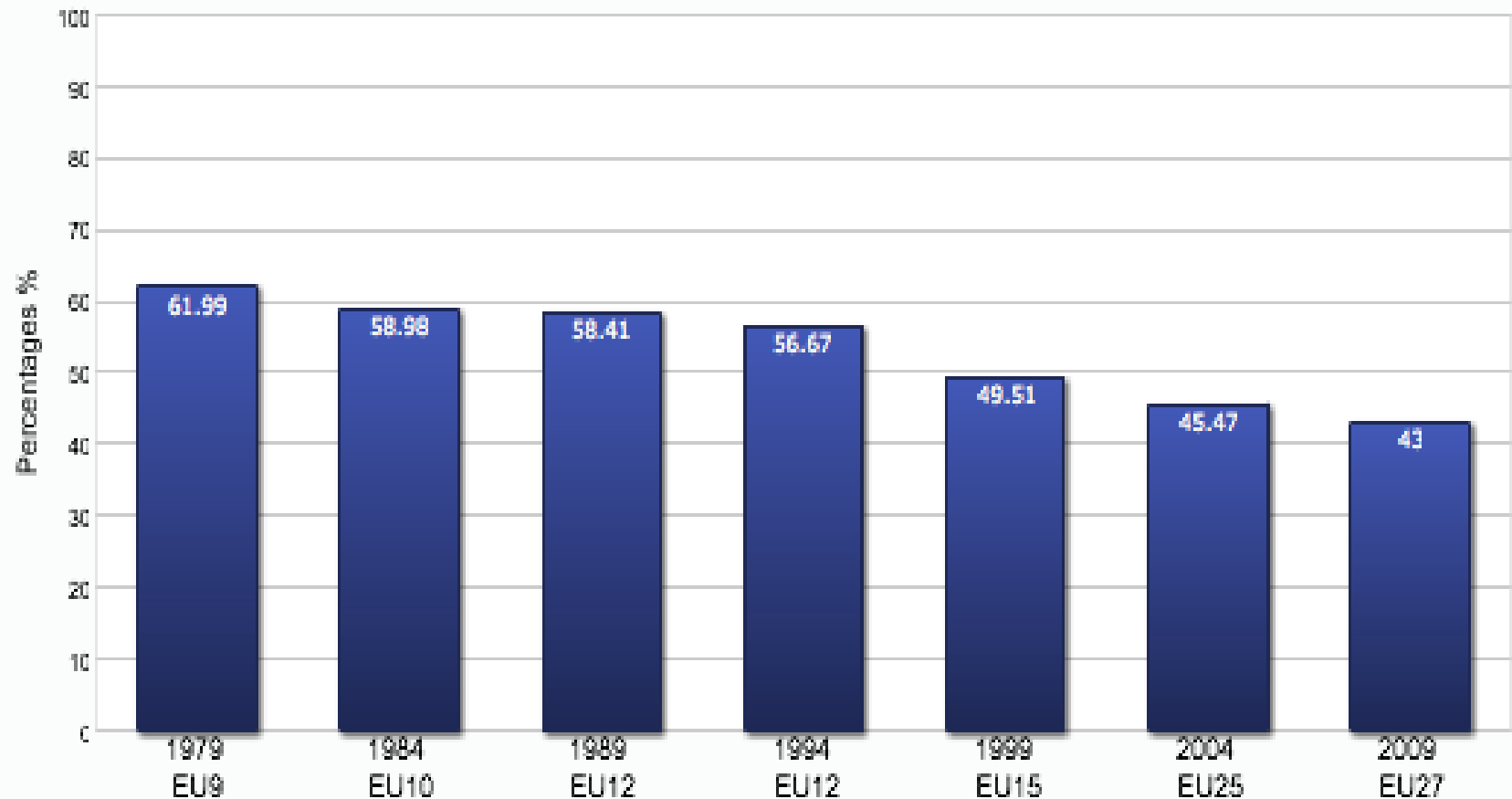


# Limits of Political Integration in Europe: The 'Democratic Deficit'



- **The weak link between the citizens and the Euro-polity**
  - Low and declining turn-out at EP elections
  - EP elections considered as “second-order” elections in most member states
  - No apparent link between election result and formation of EU ‘government’
- **The unelected nature of the European Commission**
  - Commissioners appointed by national governments
  - Appointment of the Commission President result of behind-the-scenes deals among governments
  - Commission generally seen as technocratic/administrative rather than political (‘Eurocrats’)
- **General lack of awareness and involvement of EU citizens**
  - Very limited and uneven media attention to EU politics
  - Lack of transparency in EU decision-making processes
  - ‘Blame Games’ played by national elites
- **Problems with indirect accountability of national representatives**
  - Majority-voting means individual member state cannot block decisions
  - Technical nature of decision-making
  - Most decisions decided by unelected officials rather than ministers
- **Disenfranchisement of domestic political institutions**
  - EU decisions empower national executives to bypass national parliaments
  - Laws negotiated in Brussels are merely ‘rubber-stamped’ within member states
  - Integration – like globalisation – mean that more and more decisions are ‘imposed’ on the national level

# Turnout at European elections (1979-2009)

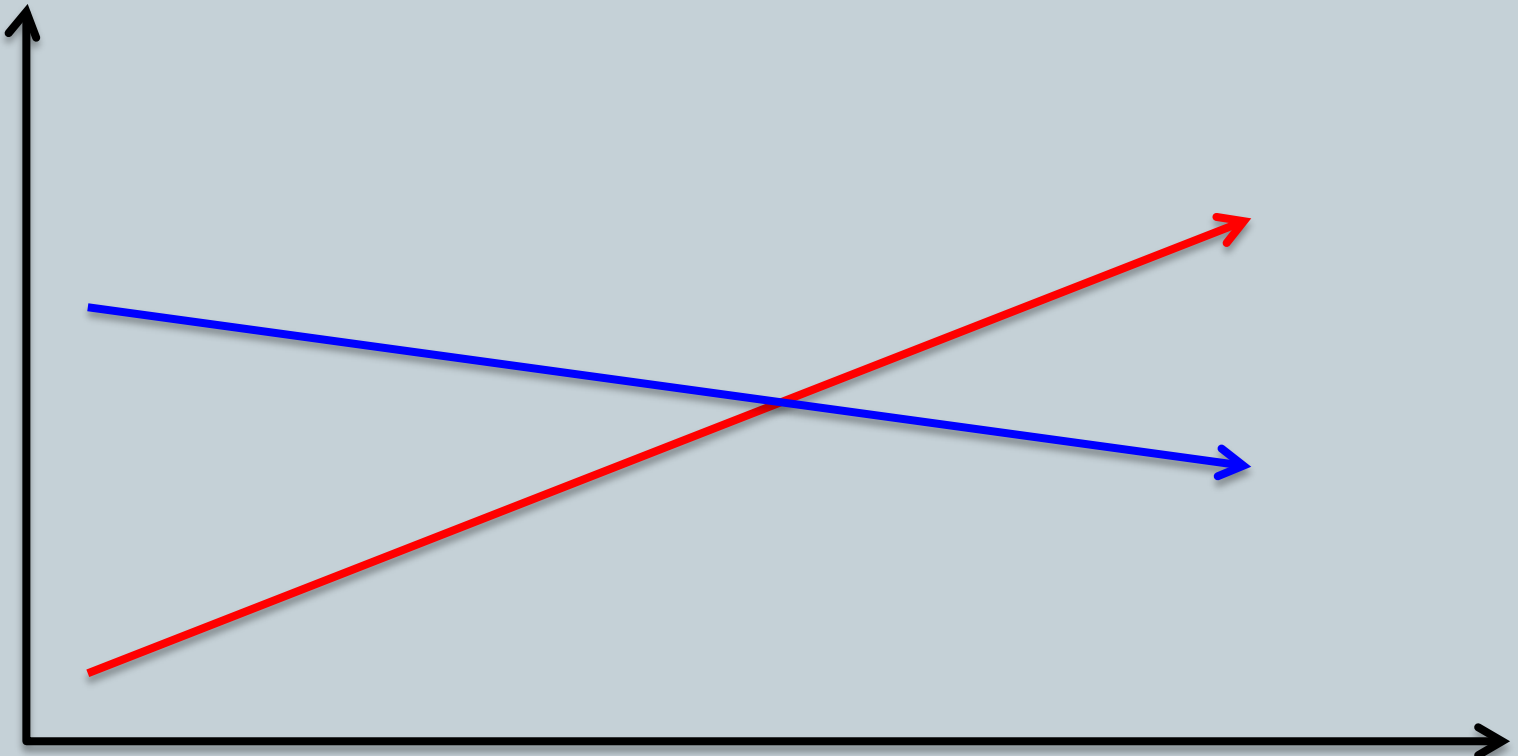




# The Paradox of EU Electoral Participation



Power/  
Turnout



Time

# Democratising the EU: 'Constitutional' Changes through the Lisbon Treaty



- **(Yet) more powers for the European Parliament**
  - Further expansion of the co-decision procedure
  - Equal powers in decisions on annual budget and multi-annual financial framework
  - Election of the President of the European Commission
- **Strengthening the role of national parliaments**
  - Early Warning System to enable national legislatures to raise objections to draft legislation
  - Better access to documents and legislative proposals
  - Permanent role in the treaty revision process (Convention method)
- **Introduction of new participatory elements**
  - Creation of the European Citizen Initiative to facilitate petitions from citizens
  - New procedure for (min) 1million citizens to demand new EU laws

# Effects and Management of the Eurozone Crisis



- **Sudden global financial crisis**
  - demonstrates global interdependence and further limits capacity for domestic action
  - requires fast and coordinated action – no time for public debate and parliamentary deliberation
- **Eurozone – integrated monetary policy but decentralised fiscal policy – faced with particular challenges**
  - ‘free-riding’ member states unable to service their sovereign debt
  - Fears about a ‘domino effect’ that might unravel the entire single currency
  - Banking, financial and sovereign debt crisis impacts on ‘real’ economy through austerity programmes, negative growth and rising unemployment
- **Combination of short-term and long-term measures**
  - Short-term: bail-outs become the only way of maintaining stability in the Eurozone
  - Long-term: agreements on binding rules to impose fiscal discipline are seen to be required

# The Impact of the Crisis on EU Democracy



- **Dominance of executive and technocratic decision-making**
  - Creation of the 'Troika' composed of Commission, IMF and ECB officials in developing and managing bail-out programmes
  - Lack of transparency and of opportunities for political debate about priorities of structural reform
- **Creation of legal agreements outside the institutional structure of the European Union**
  - Absence of agreement among member states and missing provisions in the EU treaty require solutions outside the treaty framework
  - new arrangements exclude EU institutions incl. EP from involvement in decision-making
- **Role of national parliaments potentially eroded by the crisis**
  - In bail-out countries, terms for economic policy imposed externally
  - In entire Eurozone, new frameworks (European semester, Fiscal Compact) create supranational supervision over national finances

# The New Dynamics of Leadership Change in 2014



- **EP elections against the background of economic and institutional crisis in Europe**
  - Shifting debates in the member states about the right balance between austerity and growth
  - Need to establish a lasting institutional framework that provides democratic legitimacy for economic governance
- **New powers arising from the Lisbon Treaty empower the EP to 'elect' the President of the Commission**
  - Departure from the past culture of behind-the-scenes deals among member states
  - Main political parties putting forward candidates for Commission Presidency
  - Intra-party primaries and inter-party debates among leading candidates
- **Different party strategies for rising to the new challenge**
  - Socialists with early and determined candidacy by EP President Martin Schulz
  - Liberals with two contenders until candidacy of Guy Verhofstadt confirmed
  - European Greens running primary to select two candidate team (one man, one woman)
  - Several candidates in the Christian-Democrats (Michel Barnier, Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk, Enda Kenny) but without clear strategy (Merkel problem)

# Public choice, more complexity, greater legitimacy?



- **Prospects for genuine party-political choice about the leadership of the European Union**
- **Transparent and public debate about the policy-options facing Europe – potential for greater engagement with EU citizens**
- **Competition for Commission Presidency also impacts on other important leadership choices**
  - President of the European Council (Hermann van Rompuy)
  - High Representative for Foreign Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (Catherine Ashton)
  - President of the Eurogroup (Jeroen Dijsselbloem)
- **The need to balance nationality, party-politics and gender in EU appointments bound to become more complex in the future**
- **New dynamics increase the complexity of leadership change, but also increase the chances for greater legitimacy of EU decision-making**