

# European parties

## A powerful caucus in the European Parliament and beyond

*Tapio Raunio*

Abstract: The party system of the European Parliament (EP) has been dominated by the two main European party families: centre-right conservatives and Christian democrats, on the one hand, and centre-left social democrats on the other, which controlled the majority of the seats until the 2019 elections. In the early 1950s, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) decided to form party-political groups, instead of national blocs, to counterbalance the dominance of national interests in the Council. Over the decades, the shape of the EP party system has become more stable, and traditional levels of group cohesion and coalition formation have not really been affected by the rise of populism and the increasing politicization of European integration. National parties remain influential within party groups, not least through their control of candidate selection. Outside of the Parliament, Europarties—parties operating at the European level—influence both the broader development of integration and the choice of the Commission president.

Keywords: party system; European Parliament; national interest; party group; national parties; Spitzenkandidaten; Europarties; coalition politics; parliamentary committee; electoral accountability

## **Contents**

15.1 Introduction	000
15.2 The Shape of the EP Party System	000
15.3 Internal Organization	000
15.3.1 Group Cohesion	000
15.3.2 Balancing National and Group Interests	000
15.4 Coalition Politics and Parliamentary Committees	000
15.5 Electoral Accountability	000
15.6 Europarties and Their <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i>	000
15.7 Theorizing the EP Party Groups and Europarties	000
15.8 Conclusion	000
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	000
FURTHER READING	000
ENDNOTES	000

## **Summary**

The party system of the European Parliament (EP) has been dominated by the two main European party families: centre-right conservatives and Christian democrats, on the one hand, and centre-left social democrats on the other, which controlled the majority of the seats until the 2019 elections. In the early 1950s, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) decided to form party-political groups, instead of national blocs, to counterbalance the dominance of national interests in the Council. Over the decades, the shape of the EP party system has become more stable, and traditional levels of group cohesion and coalition formation have not really been affected by the rise of populism and the increasing politicization of European

integration. National parties remain influential within party groups, not least through their control of candidate selection. Outside of the Parliament, Europarties—parties operating at the European level—influence both the broader development of integration and the choice of the Commission president.

## **15.1 Introduction**

Compared with parties in the national legislatures of European Union (EU) member states, the party groups of the EP operate in a very different institutional environment. While the Parliament is involved in the appointment of the Commission and can force it to resign, there is nonetheless no real EU government accountable to the Parliament. There are no coherent and hierarchically organized European-level parties. Instead, MEPs are elected from lists drawn by national parties and on the basis of largely national electoral campaigns. The social and cultural heterogeneity of the EU is reflected in the internal diversity of the groups, with around 200 national parties from almost thirty member states winning seats in the Parliament in the 2019 elections. The party groups are thus firmly embedded in the political systems of the EU member states. However, despite the existence of such factors, EP party groups have gradually, over the decades, consolidated their position in the Parliament, primarily through introducing procedural reforms that enable them to make effective use of EP's legislative powers. The shape of the party system has also become more stable, but the recent rise of populism and the increasing politicization of European integration have benefited the smaller groups at the expense of the two traditionally largest groups, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Social Democrats (S&D). The party systems of EU member states have become more fragmented, and the same applies to the EP, where the two largest groups no longer control the majority of the seats after the 2019 elections.

A word on nomenclature is warranted here. EP party groups and Europarties are terms that sound synonymous but are not. Party groups, as the name suggests, exist only within the EP; their purpose is to bring together groups of MEPs to pursue, among other things, a common position on EU legislation. Europarties are extra-parliamentary, which is to say that they exist beyond the EP. Europarties bring together national parties across the EU to pursue shared political objectives and to field candidates for the post of Commission president.

There is considerable scope for confusion here because EP party groups and Europarties can have almost identical names. For example, the European People's Party (EPP) is a Europarty, which brings together centre-right politicians from across the EU, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. The European People's Party Group, in contrast, describes only those MEPs that work together in the Parliament. It comprises MEPs from the national member parties of the EPP but also some MEPs from national political parties that are not aligned with any Europarty.

The chapter begins by examining the shape of the EP party system, the structure of the party groups, and the role of national parties within them. It shows that while the left–right dimension constitutes the main cleavage in the chamber, the dominant coalition is normally formed between the two large groups—the EPP and the S&D. Next, we examine parties at the European level and argue that, without any real executive office at stake in European elections, the vertical linkage function of the party groups—that of connecting voters to the EU policy process—remains poorly developed. However, the *Spitzenkandidaten* initiative, wherein the Europarties put forward their own candidates for the Commission president, represents an interesting step in the direction of European-level parliamentary democracy. Also in horizontal terms, the EP party groups and the Europarties perform an important function by integrating political interests across the Union. Section 15.7 looks at the state of research on the EP party system, highlighting the need to understand how coalitions are

formed in the committees and the plenary, the different strategies of party groups, and how the Europarties and the EP groups contribute to the broader development of European integration.

## **15.2 The Shape of the EP Party System**

The Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the predecessor of the Parliament, held its inaugural session in September 1952. Even in the first important vote held in the Assembly, to elect its president, the members split along group lines instead of voting as national blocs. The decision to form party groups crossing national lines needs to be understood in the light of developments in the early 1950s. First, the creation of the High Authority (the predecessor of the Commission) and the Assembly marked the emergence of more supranational institutions, in contrast to those of the intergovernmental Council of Europe (particularly its Consultative Assembly). Second, national interests in the ECSC were already represented in the Council of Ministers and the Assembly sought to counterbalance this through its party-political structure.

Throughout its history and up to the present day, the EP party system has been based on the left–right dimension, the main cleavage in almost all European countries. The seating order in the chamber reflects this divide, with the social democrats and former communists on the left side of the hemicycle, the greens and liberals in the middle, and Christian democrats and conservatives and Eurosceptics on the right. Box 15.1 summarizes EP groups after Brexit in 2021, while Table 15.1 shows the distribution of seats between party families in the Parliament between 1979 (the date of the first direct EP elections) and 2021. In the 2019 elections, 751 MEPs were elected, but following Brexit there are 705 seats. Initially, the party system consisted of only three groups: socialists/social democrats (the Party of

European Socialists, PES); Christian democrats/conservatives (EPP); and liberals (the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party, ELDR), the three main party families in EU member states. The Christian democrat group was the largest group until 1975, when the British Labour Party joined the socialist group, and the former has been in this situation again since the 1999 EP elections.!

### **BOX 15.1 Party groups in the 2019–24 European Parliament**

## **European People's Party (EPP, 178 seats)**

The EPP is a mix of Christian democrats and conservatives, joining together parties from all EU member states. The largest national party is the German Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). The conservative wing of the group has strengthened over the years, with the entry of parties such as the Italian Forza Italia, the French (Gaullist) The Republicans, and particularly the controversial Hungarian party Fidesz—the Hungarian Civic Alliance, which finally left the EPP group in March 2021, when faced with the prospect of the group actually expelling the Hungarian ruling party. Despite the numerical growth of conservative forces in the group, the EPP has traditionally and consistently been in favour of closer European integration.

## **Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D, 146 seats)**

This group of the Party of European Socialists brings together social democratic and socialist parties from nearly all EU countries. The largest party delegations are the Spanish Socialist

Workers' Party (PSOE), the Italian Democratic Party, and the German Social Democrats. The group supports further integration, primarily because, with monetary union and deeper economic integration, the defence of traditional goals of the left—such as social and environmental legislation and employment policies—require European-level action to complement national measures.

## **Renew Europe (Renew, 97 seats)**

The liberal group consists of various liberal and centrist parties, and has come to occupy a pivotal role between the two largest groups. Most national parties in the group are members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the liberals' Europarty.

ALDE was also the group name before the 2019 elections, after which it was changed to Renew Europe as the liberal group formed a pact with the *La République en Marche!*, the party established by the French President Emmanuel Macron. The group continues to be a firm advocate of deeper integration.

## **Independence and Democracy (ID, 73 seats)**

Various Eurosceptic forces have, in the past, found it hard to work together, and the 2014–19 Parliament had two such nationalist, anti-EU groups. Hence, the Eurosceptics put a lot of effort into forming a larger group, and the ID is the largest Eurosceptic group in the history of the Parliament. It joins together various nationalist, populist, and far-right parties from ten member states. Two-thirds of its MEPs represent the Italian *Lega* and the French *Rassemblement national*. Other parties include the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Austrian Freedom Party.

## **Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA, 73 seats)**

This group is an alliance between the European Green Party (EGP) and the various regionalist parties of the European Free Alliance (EFA). The regionalist parties—such as the Catalan parties or the Latvian Russian Union—do not have enough seats to form a group of their own and thus sit with the greens. The greens have, in recent years, become strongly pro-EU, for broadly similar reasons to the social democrats. The group also includes MEPs from Czech and German pirate parties and by far the largest party is the German Alliance '90/The Greens.

## **European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR, 62 seats)**

This conservative group was formed after the 2009 elections, after the British Conservatives had broken away from the EPP group. It is the parliamentary group of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR Party). Around 40 per cent of its MEPs represent the Polish Law and Justice party. The group can be categorized as Eurosceptic but it does not share the hard-line anti-integrationist views of the ID.

## **Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic**

### **Green Left (GUE/NGL, 39 seats)**

GUE/NGL brings together a variety of left-socialist and former communist parties, around half of which belong to the Party of the European Left (EL). The main parties in the group are the French *La France insoumise*, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), and the Left Party from Germany. GUE is divided over the desirability of further integration, and as



the word ‘confederal’ in its title implies, the group often does not even try to form unitary positions.

Note: The seat shares are from May 2021. Thirty-seven MEPs did not belong to any of the groups, sitting instead as ‘independent’ or ‘non-attached’ MEPs.

<end feature>

<Insert Table 15.1>

For the first time since the introduction of direct elections, the EPP became, after the 1999 elections, the largest group in the chamber. The EPP has continued to be the largest group since then, a development explained partly by the difficulties that centre-left parties have faced throughout Europe in recent decades. The conservative wing of the group has been strengthened since the 1990s, but the party that had most difficulties in fitting into the group was undoubtedly the British Conservatives, the views of which, particularly on European integration, were quite different from those of the group majority (Maurer et al. 2008).<sup>2</sup> More recently, the position of Fidesz, the Hungarian nationalist party led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, caused heated debates inside the EPP. Referring to Orbán’s government introducing measures that violate EU’s values and human rights, the EPP changed its internal rules in March 2021 so that national parties, and not just individual MEPs, can be expelled from the group. Fidesz responded by quitting the group immediately. Even in early 2019, the Europarty EPP had suspended Fidesz’s voting rights. The centre-left social democratic group was the biggest in the Parliament from 1975 to the 1999 elections. The formation of the centre-left group (S&D after the 2009 elections) presents far fewer problems, because almost every member state has an electorally significant centre-left, social democratic party.

Moving to the medium-sized groups, the liberal group (Renew) has a strongly pro-European philosophy, but the group includes a variety of centrist, social liberal, and more market liberal parties. The greens achieved an electoral breakthrough in 1989 and have since

then formed a group of their own in the Parliament. The regionalist parties of the European Free Alliance (EFA) have never mustered enough seats to form their own group, and hence their MEPs have mainly joined forces with the greens. Communists, or the radical left, have formed a group under various labels since 1973. The title ‘Nordic Green Left’ was added to the group name Confederal Group of the European United Left after the 1995 enlargement, because the Finnish and Swedish left parties wanted to emphasize their separate identity within the then otherwise largely Mediterranean group. The group has traditionally been a quite loose alliance, and it offers a home for various parties and movements that are ideologically to the left of social democrats in their respective member states. The conservatives, a party family that displays a milder version of opposition to further integration, have formed a group under various names ever since the UK joined the then European Community, and, following the 2019 EP elections, almost half of the MEPs in the ECR group represent Polish parties.

Eurosceptic parties have formed groups since the 1994 elections, but such strongly anti-EU political forces have remained very much in the minority in the Parliament. However, in the 2014 elections, Eurosceptical parties performed notably well in a large number of member states, with the Eurosceptics on the right mainly against loss of national sovereignty and multiculturalism, while the vote for the left-leaning Eurosceptics was primarily explained by euro crisis and austerity measures in the Mediterranean countries (Rorschneider and Schmitt 2016; Nielsen and Franklin 2017). Before the 2019 elections, there was widespread speculation about Eurosceptical parties making significant gains throughout the Union, particularly as the refugee crisis had produced heated debates and tensions within and between member states. Various cross-national themes—climate change, immigration, Brexit, authoritarian and populist tendencies in Europe and beyond—received a lot of attention, but amidst the quite substantially increased turnout (see Chapter 6) the beneficiaries

were not just the Eurosceptics but also the greens and other pro-EU forces (De Sio et al. 2019; Treib 2020). The Eurosceptic groups have also tended to be fairly loose alliances of national parties, and this lack of internal cohesion has undermined the influence of anti-EU groups. Finally, the non-attached MEPs have normally represented various far right or nationalist parties which had a group of their own between 1984 and 1994 (and for a short period in 2007) and again from 2015 to 2019 through the Europe of Nations and Freedom group.

The EP party system has, throughout the history of the directly elected Parliament, been effectively dominated by the centre-right EPP and the social democratic PES. After the 2019 election, however, their combined seat share fell for the first time to below 50 per cent of MEPs. This party-political fragmentation of the EP reflects similar developments in the national politics of most EU countries, with established governing parties losing votes to emerging newer parties, not least the populists. Yet EPP and S&D remain the central actors in the chamber. The duopoly is nicely illustrated by the system of electing the president of the Parliament. With the exception of the 1999–2004 Parliament, the EPP and PES have shared the presidency since 1989. For example, in the 2019–24 electoral term, the first president is David Sassoli, the Italian social democrat from S&D, who will be replaced in mid-term by an MEP from the EPP group. The party system has also become more stable and predictable. In addition to the three groups that have been present in the chamber from the 1950s, the groups of the greens (including the regionalists), the conservatives, the (radical) left, and the Eurosceptics have also become ‘institutionalized’ in the chamber since the first direct elections, although particularly the conservative and the Eurosceptical groups have been much less stable in terms of the composition and names of the groups.

### **15.3 Internal Organization**

The EP's Rules of Procedure, the standing orders of the Parliament, set numerical criteria for group formation. Following Brexit, a political group must comprise at least twenty-three MEPs from at least one-quarter of the member states.<sup>3</sup> Apart from ideological ties (McElroy and Benoit 2010; 2012), the availability of considerable financial, material, and procedural benefits has provided further incentives for group formation. While the money from the Parliament may appear inconsequential in absolute terms, it has nevertheless been crucial for certain smaller parties—such as regionalist and green parties—which often do not have access to comparable resources at the national level. Material benefits include, for example, office space and staff.

Group staff perform a variety of duties, ranging from routine administration to drafting background memos, following developments in committees, and drawing up whips in plenaries. In addition, each MEP has several assistants (normally three, financed from the EP budget), and both the committee and the EP staff assist groups and MEPs. Turning to procedural rights, appointments to committees and intra-parliamentary leadership positions, and the allocation of reports and plenary speaking time, are based on the rule of proportionality between the groups. Certain plenary actions, such as tabling amendments or oral questions, often require the backing of a committee, a party group, or at least one-twentieth of MEPs. The larger party groups have thus over time introduced changes to the EP rules of procedure that have further marginalized the smaller party groups and individual MEPs (Kreppel 2002), while, in similar fashion, party groups have reformed their own rules through adopting more centralized procedures (Bressanelli 2014: 57–76). Non-attached representatives in particular are procedurally marginalized in the chamber.

Gender balance has tended to vary between party groups, with a higher share of female MEPs in the left-wing groups. Ever since the first direct elections held in 1979, the share of female MEPs has both increased steadily and has also been above the level of female MPs in

national legislatures (Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín [2019](#); Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín 2019). In 2020, 40 per cent of the MEPs were women, while at the same time 29 per cent of their colleagues in the national legislatures of EU member states were female. The highest shares of female MEPs were in the G/EFA (49 per cent), S&D, Renew, and GUE (44 per cent each), with a lower presence of women in the ID (38 per cent), EPP (33 per cent), and ECR (31 per cent) groups.

### **15.3.1 Group Cohesion**

Three factors tend to work against cohesion within party groups in the Parliament: the balance of power between the EU institutions; the rules for candidate selection; and the internal heterogeneity of the groups. A key element in producing unitary group action in national legislatures is the fact that governments depend on the support of the parliamentary majority. The EP party groups lack this motive. While the Commission has to be approved by the Parliament and can be brought down by it (as happened indirectly in 1999), the composition of the Commission is only partly based on the outcome of the European elections (see Chapter 6).

Second, more centralized nomination procedures should lead to greater party cohesion. National parties, and not EP groups or Europarties, control candidate selection in EP elections. Therefore national parties possess the ultimate sanction against MEPs. This applies particularly to countries using closed lists or mixed systems, in which parties present pre-ordered lists and the electors vote either for a party or an individual candidate. While national parties largely refrain from ‘mandating’ their MEPs, there is nowadays greater policy coordination between MEPs and their parties. Voting behaviour in the Parliament provides further evidence of the influence of national parties. Research indicates that when MEPs receive conflicting voting instructions from national parties and their EP groups, they are

more likely to side with their national party, particularly in parties in which the leadership has more or better opportunities to punish and reward its MEPs (such as through more centralized candidate selection or closed lists).

---

Despite the fact that the parliamentary principals in the EP control important benefits—such as committee assignments and speaking time—it is the principals that control candidate selection (the national parties) who ultimately determine how MEPs behave. When the national parties in the same parliamentary group decide to vote together, the EP parties look highly cohesive. But when these parties take opposing policy positions, the cohesion of the EP parties break down.

(Hix 2002: 696)

Hence, we can expect that MEPs who are seeking re-election will be particularly reluctant to ignore national party guidelines, and that this attentiveness to national party positions will be more evident in the run-up to European elections (Lindstädt et al. 2011; Koop et al. 2017); in addition, MEPs seeking to return to domestic politics will defect from group positions more often (Meserve et al. 2009).

Finally, of all legislatures, the heterogeneity of the Parliament is probably matched only by that of the Indian Congress. Around 200 national parties from almost 30 member states win seats in the elections. Such a high level of geographical and ideological diversity, not to mention the problems involved in communicating in over twenty official languages, presents a formidable challenge for the groups.

However, analyses of roll-call votes show that the groups do achieve high levels of cohesion, with average cohesion levels of around 85–90 per cent and some groups even

above 90 per cent. Levels of group cohesion exhibit stability across the five-year legislative terms and policy areas. Nor have subsequent enlargements of the Union influenced group cohesion or coalition patterns, with MEPs from the new member states thus quickly adjusting to the operating norms of the groups and the whole Parliament (Hix *et al.* 2007; Bressanelli 2014; Bowler and McElroy 2015; Raunio and Wagner 2020).<sup>4</sup> In comparative terms, the EP groups are on average less cohesive than party groups in the EU member state legislatures but have tended to be more cohesive than parties in the US Congress. The cohesion of national delegations—that is, all MEPs elected from a single member state—is also much below that of the party groups. What accounts for this relatively unitary behaviour? Until the 1990s, one could argue that because most votes in the Parliament had little, if any, impact, it did not really matter how MEPs voted. According to this line of reasoning, the fragile foundations of group cohesion would be put to the test once the Parliament acquired real legislative powers. However, group cohesion has remained stable despite—or indeed because of—the empowerment of the Parliament.

The explanation advanced in section 15.3.2 for high cohesion levels focuses on policy influence, and on how group organization is tailored to face the twin challenge of internal heterogeneity and the strong position of national parties. Decision-making within groups can be described as rather consensual, with groups putting considerable effort into building positions that are acceptable to all, or nearly all, parties in the group. Unlike national party leaders, EP group chairs do not control, or even influence, candidate selection, nor can they promise lucrative ministerial portfolios or well-paid civil service jobs. Groups have whips but their main job is reminding MEPs of group positions and indicating which votes are important. While the groups have fairly similar organizational structures to their counterparts in national parliaments, with leaders, executive committees, and working parties, the groups can nevertheless be characterized as non-hierarchical and non-centralized.

### 15.3.2 Balancing National and Group Interests

At the start of the five-year legislative term, the groups elect their leaders (chairpersons/presidents), who usually occupy the post until the next elections, or even longer. The chairs represent their group in the Conference of Presidents, the body responsible for setting the Parliament's agenda and for organizational decisions. In the 2019–24 Parliament, the G/EFA, ECR, and GUE groups have two co-chairs. The number of vice-chairs varies between the groups. The executive committee of the group is the Bureau, which normally includes the group chair and vice-chairs, heads and possible additional members of national party delegations; other potential members include the treasurer or committee coordinators. The Bureau is responsible for organizational and administrative issues, and prepares policy decisions for group meetings. It plays a key role in facilitating group consensus. In their discussion on factionalism within national parties, Bowler et al. (1999: 15) argue that:

there are reasons for thinking that factions can help rank-and-file members discipline their leadership, either by providing faction leaders to take part in policy discussions (reporting back to their members) or by making it clear to party leaders that a block of votes will desert if some policy line is crossed. In this sense, factions help party leaders understand where their support or opposition lies within the party and the levels of this support or opposition.

The same dynamic is at work in the EP groups. When one replaces factions with national party delegations, we see that, by guaranteeing the representation of most national delegations in the executive committee, the group leadership learns about the positions of



national parties and the intensity of their preferences. The groups convene regularly in Brussels prior to the plenary week, as well as during plenaries. The meetings in Brussels constitute a 'group week', usually lasting two or three days. When individual MEPs or national parties feel that they cannot follow the group position, they are expected to make this clear in the group meetings. MEPs also use plenary speeches for explaining why they dissented from the group line, defending their behaviour, which is often motivated by national party-political considerations (Proksch and Slapin 2015: 148–62). Party groups have also established working groups for examining specific policy areas and for coordinating group policy on those issues.

National party delegations are the cornerstones upon which the groups are based. Some smaller groups are indeed no more than loose coalitions of national parties, while even in the older and more organized groups, one can occasionally see divisions along national lines. Most national delegations have their own staff, elect their chairpersons, and convene prior to group meetings. However, the impact of national parties is mitigated by two factors. First, national parties are seldom unitary actors themselves. National parties throughout the EU are, to a varying extent, internally divided over integration, and these divisions are reproduced in the Parliament. Second, the majority of bills and resolutions do not produce divisions along national lines. Much of the Parliament's agenda is taken up by traditional socio-economic matters, such as internal market legislation, not by constitutional matters or redistributive decisions such as the allocation of structural funds.

But the most important reason why MEPs and national party delegations vote with their group most of the time is policy influence. After all, the main rationale for group formation in any parliament is that it helps like-minded legislators to achieve their policy goals. Cohesive group action is essential for achieving the group's objectives, while cooperative behaviour within groups helps MEPs to pursue their own policy goals. Moreover, given the huge

number of amendments and final resolutions voted upon in plenaries, the voting cues provided by groups and their whips, and particularly group members in the responsible EP committee, are an essential source of guidance for MEPs (Ringe 2010).

To summarize, the desire to influence EU policy and the relatively non-hierarchical group structure, based on institutionalized interaction between the leadership, the committees (see section on coalition politics and parliamentary committees), and the national party delegations, facilitates group cohesion. It is occasionally claimed that the accommodation of national viewpoints leads to lowest-common-denominator decisions. However, these policy compromises are a prerequisite for the Parliament to influence EU legislation.

## **15.4 Coalition Politics and Parliamentary Committees**

Committees are established to make parliaments more efficient. They facilitate specialization, and thereby enhance a parliament's ability to influence legislation and hold the government accountable. While there is much variation among European legislatures, most parliaments have strengthened the role of committees in order to reduce the informational advantage of the executive (Mattson and Strøm 1995; Martin 2014).

The same applies to the EP (Mamadouh and Raunio 2003; Whitaker 2011; Yordanova 2013). Unlike many national constitutions, the EU treaties leave it up to the Parliament to design its internal rules. The EP has structured and reformed its internal organization so as to make the most of its hard-won powers in the EU political system (Kreppel 2002). As the EP has gained new powers, the full chamber has delegated more authority to committees. The thrust of legislative work is done in committees that are also key forums for holding institutions such as the Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) to account and in shaping the EU's budget and monitoring its implementation. Committees are well resourced

in terms of staff, and when we include also party group staff, MEPs' personal assistants, and a research service that provides assistance to MEPs, it is clear that the Parliament has prioritized policy expertise when deciding its internal organization and rules. Importantly, committees and obviously the plenary meet in public and hence inject much-needed transparency to EU decision-making. The 2019–24 Parliament has twenty committees.

Parliament's positions are, in most cases in practice, decided in the committees before the plenary stage. As committees enjoy extensive procedural rights inside the Parliament, both party groups and national parties have stronger incentives for influencing committee proceedings. Representation on committees is roughly proportional to group size, with committee memberships and chairs reallocated at mid-term (after two-and-a-half years). Research on committee appointments by Bowler and Farrell (1995: 227) shows that 'the share of committee places is proportional by both nationality and ideological bloc. Within these limits, set by allocations along ideological or national lines, there is scope for the kinds of specialized membership and recruitment made in the US Congress' (see also McElroy 2006; Yordanova 2013). Within committees are four positions of authority: chairperson; vice-chairs; party group coordinators; and rapporteurs. Committees elect their own chairs but in practice party groups decide the allocation of chairs and vice-chairs, with the d'Hondt method<sup>5</sup> used for distributing the chairs. Chair allocation is thus broadly proportional, again reflecting procedures used in most national parliaments, but seniority also matters (Mattson and Strøm 1995; Chiru 2020). Party group coordinators are responsible for coordinating the work of their groups in the committees. Together with the committee chair, the coordinators negotiate the distribution of rapporteurships between the groups.

Turning to the passage of legislation, when the draft act arrives in the Parliament from the Commission, a committee is designated as responsible for producing a report on the issue, with one or more committees assigned as opinion-giving committees. Committees use an

auction-like points system for distributing reports to the groups, with group coordinators making bids on behalf of their groups. The allocation of reports is also roughly proportional to group strength in the Parliament. However, because the total points of each group are proportional to its seat share in the chamber, the most expensive reports (those that ‘cost’ the most points), such as those on the EU budget or on important pieces of co-decision legislation, often are drafted by MEPs from the two largest groups, EPP and S&D. While both EP party groups and national parties use rapporteurships for achieving their policy objectives, the policy expertise of MEPs is also taken into account when allocating reports to MEPs. (Bowler and Farrell 1995; Mamadouh and Raunio 2003; Yoshinaka et al. 2010; Whitaker 2011; Yordanova 2013)-.

The rapporteur must be prepared to make compromises. Majority-building as early as the stage at which reports are drafted helps to facilitate the smooth passage of the report in the committee and in the plenary. The draft report, together with amendments (tabled by any member), is voted upon in the committee. Committee decision-making has been characterized as consensual, with bargaining and deliberation between the party groups in a key role (Settembri and Neuhold 2009; Roger 2016). Pragmatic scrutiny and cooperation between EPP and S&D means that most issues are essentially precooked at the committee stage—paving the way for plenary votes adopted by ‘supermajorities’ (Bowler and McElroy 2015; Bressanelli 2014: 148–62). Before the plenary, the groups decide their positions: what amendments to propose, and whether or not to support the report. National party delegations often hold their own meetings prior to the group meetings. Finally, the report and amendments are voted upon in the plenary.

Party groups monitor committee proceedings, with group coordinators and perhaps working parties playing key roles. The procedures for allocating committee chairs, seats, and reports, all roughly based on proportionality, can also be seen as mechanisms for the party

groups to control committees. Importantly, national parties are key players in allocating committee seats and reports, and there are signs that they are, to an increasing extent, using committee assignments to achieve their policy goals. Nonetheless, party group influence within committees is ultimately based on coordination mechanisms instead of hierarchical structures for controlling MEP behaviour in the committees. Delegating authority to backbenchers through committee work and reports can also be understood as a key way of rewarding group members and tying them into the formation of group positions. (Mamadouh and Raunio 2003; Settembri and Neuhold 2009; Ringe 2010; Whitaker 2011; Yordanova 2013; Roger and Winzen 2015)

Coalition-building at the plenary stage is more clearly driven by partisan concerns. Roll-call analyses show that the main cleavage structuring competition in the Parliament is the familiar left–right dimension, with the anti/pro-integration dimension constituting the second main structure of competition in the Parliament, particularly since the start of the euro crisis (Otjes and van der Veer 2016; Blumenau and Lauderdale 2018). This means that any two party groups are more likely to vote the same way, the closer they are to another on the socioeconomic left–right dimension. While the primary decision rule in the Parliament is simple majority, for certain issues (mainly budget amendments and second-reading legislative amendments adopted under the co-decision procedure), the EP needs to have absolute majorities (50 per cent plus one additional MEP). This absolute majority requirement facilitates cooperation between the two main groups, EPP and S&D, which between them controlled around two-thirds of the seats until the 2014 elections. Cooperation between EPP and S&D is also influenced by inter-institutional considerations, because the Parliament has needed to moderate its resolutions in order to get its amendments accepted by the Council and the Commission (Kreppel 2002). Competition on the left–right continuum has benefited the smaller groups. This advantage has applied particularly to the liberals:

situated ideologically between the EPP and S&D, the liberals have often been in a pivotal position in forming winning coalitions. While the combined seat share of the two main groups fell below 50 per cent after the 2019 elections, they continue to vote together around two-thirds or 70 per cent of the time, and a lot of the votes are adopted with even larger majorities, with opposition often restricted to the Eurosceptical MEPs. It has been argued that such broad cooperation between party groups makes the Parliament less interesting in the eyes of the media and the citizens but, as argued in section 15.5, how MEPs vote hardly matters from the point of view of EP elections.

## **15.5 Electoral Accountability**

Voting decisions in EP elections are heavily influenced by the domestic party-political environment. The primacy of domestic factors results in part from the strategies of national parties, which control candidate selection and carry out the electoral campaigns. Most of the national parties are mainly based on the traditional social cleavages recognized in political science literature, and because the anti/pro-integration dimension tends to cut across these cleavages, parties often experience internal fragmentation on EU questions (Hix and Lord 1997; Hix 1999; Marks and Wilson 2000; Almeida 2012; Prosser 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hobolt and Rodon 2020). Moreover, survey data shows that parties are, on average, more representative of their voters on traditional left–right matters than on issues related to European integration, with the parties more supportive of integration than the electorate (Mattila and Raunio 2012). Hence, established parties have an incentive to contest the elections along the familiar left–right dimension and to downplay contestation over integration. Indeed, in most member states, parties have preferred not to engage in debates over the EU—and where such debates have taken place, this contestation has often benefited

smaller parties at the expense of mainstream governing parties (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008).

Elections to the Parliament are therefore scarcely ‘European’—they are held during the same week, and the candidates compete for seats in an EU institution, but there is no common electoral system or EU-wide candidate lists,<sup>9</sup> constituency boundaries do not cross national borders, and campaigning has, at least until now, been conducted by national parties on the basis of largely national agendas.<sup>6</sup> So national politics is reproduced in EP elections, with the same set of actors and largely also the same set of issues. But, interestingly, the euro crisis introduced a stronger ‘European element’ to the 2014 elections and the 2019 elections saw increased contestation between the Eurosceptics and those in favour of the EU and international cooperation. Thus, the increased politicization and salience of European integration also matters electorally, with questions related to the EU explaining citizens’ voting behaviour to at least a somewhat larger extent than before (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Carrieri 2021). However, while parties thus have a good reason to take the EU seriously, these developments need to be understood in the context of the second-order logic of EP elections, with smaller and opposition parties gaining votes at the expense of mainstream and government parties (e.g. Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Hix and Marsh 2011; Rorschneider and Schmitt 2016; van der Brug and de Vreese 2016; Nielsen and Franklin 2017; De Sio et al. 2019).

## **15.6 Europarties and Their *Spitzenkandidaten***

The main party groups in the Parliament are either officially, or in practice, the parliamentary wings of their Europarties (see Box 15.1). Article 138a of the Treaty of Maastricht assigned political parties a specific role to play in the political system of the EU: ‘Political parties at

the European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.’ This ‘Party Article’ was subsequently included in the Treaty of Lisbon:<sup>7</sup> ‘Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.’

The constitutional recognition in the form of the Party Article in the Treaty of Maastricht contributed to the consolidation of Europarties. With the exception of the EPP, which had been founded back in 1976, the other federations of national parties were quickly turned into Europarties. The Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community (CSP), founded in 1974, was transformed into the PES in November 1992. The Federation of European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Parties, founded in 1976, became the ELDR in December 1993, changing its name to ALDE in 2012. The European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP) was established in June 1993, changing its name to the EGP in 2004. In addition, a number of other Europarties have been established since the introduction in 2004 of public funding of Europarties from the EU’s budget.

It is still more realistic to describe Europarties as federations of national parties or as party networks, at least when comparing them with the often quite centralized and hierarchical parties found at the national level. Europarties have introduced membership for individuals, but in her pioneering study, Hertner (2019) showed that the Europarties had only very small numbers of individual members, with national member parties often against giving individual members stronger participation rights. At the same time, there can be no doubt that the Europarties are a force to be reckoned with in European politics, and their influence extends beyond the Parliament. Internally, Europarties have introduced organizational changes that reduce their dependence on individual member parties. In particular, (qualified) majority voting is now the standard decision rule in the main organs of the Europarties. The



policy influence of Europarties is difficult to measure and depends on their internal cohesion and the willingness of national member parties to pursue and implement the agreed policy objectives. The empowerment of the Parliament, in terms both of legislative powers and of holding the Commission accountable, means that the Europarties' EP groups are in a key position to influence the EU policy process. More broadly, the Europarties serve as important arenas for the diffusion of ideas and policy coordination. Particularly, the meetings of party leaders, held usually at the same venue as the summits of the European Council, enable national parties to coordinate their actions prior to the summits.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Europarties have influenced treaty reforms and other major European-level policy decisions, as well as appointments to top jobs in EU institutions. This applies especially to the EPP, which has been the largest Europarty since the turn of the millennium. Europarties also prepare the ground for future enlargements by integrating interests from the prospective member states. Through their membership in the Europarties, parties from the applicant countries engage in partisan cooperation that is important in nurturing wider, pan-European political allegiances. (Hix and Lord 1997; Hanley 2008; Timus and Lightfoot 2014; Johansson and Raunio 2019)

Advocates of EU-level democracy have argued that Europarties should be elevated to a decisive role in European governance. Indeed, there has emerged quite a lively debate about whether the EP should become a fully fledged 'federal' parliament that elects and controls a genuine EU government. The defenders of such a parliamentary model argue that because the EU already possesses significant authority over a broad range of policy areas, the choice of who exercises such authority should be based on competition between political forces—in this scenario, essentially Europarties contesting the EP elections (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008). In this parliamentary model, the government (the Commission) would be accountable to the EP and could be voted out of office by the latter—as already happens. Europarties would put forward their candidates for the Commission president (the EU's

‘prime minister’). These candidates would campaign on the basis of their Europarties’ manifestos. After receiving the support of the Parliament, the winning candidate would form her or his government, with the other party groups forming the parliamentary opposition.<sup>9</sup> More cautious voices argue that this is not the right way in which to address the democratic deficit, partly on account of the lack of common European identity and partly because issues that are most salient to voters are still decided nationally (Moravcsik 2002). Others have pointed out that installing party government at the EU level may not be a good solution in an era during which political parties are facing serious difficulties in the context of national democracies (Mair and Thomassen 2010).

In the 2014 elections, the Europarties and their EP groups took a bold and controversial step in this direction by putting forward ‘lead candidates’ for the Commission president. Jean-Claude Juncker, the lead candidate of the largest party group, EPP, was eventually appointed as the new head of the Commission. The other lead candidates were Ska Keller and José Bové (EGP), Martin Schulz (PES), Alexis Tsipras (EL), and Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE). This *Spitzenkandidaten* initiative was criticized heavily by Eurosceptics, with the EP (again) accused of over-stepping its formal competences. For example, the British Prime Minister David Cameron talked of ‘a power grab through the back door’ that was never agreed upon by member states and would both shift power from the European Council to the Parliament and politicize the Commission.<sup>10</sup> Cameron was certainly right in claiming that the *Spitzenkandidaten* process strengthens the role of party politics in the Commission, but again the change should not be exaggerated, as party politics already influences strongly the composition of the Commission. Because both the Commission and its president must be approved by the Parliament before they can take office, the EP has explicitly demanded that the voice of the voters must not be ignored in the make-up of the Commission. Hence, the wording of the Treaty of Lisbon,<sup>11</sup> according to which the European Council, acting by a

qualified majority, shall propose to the Parliament a candidate for Commission president ‘taking into account’ the election results merely gave treaty status to a practice dating back to mid-1990s.

In the 2019 elections, the Europarties again put forward their own lead candidates: Manfred Weber (EPP), Frans Timmermans (PES), Jan Zahradil (ECR), Ska Keller and Bas Eickhout (EGP), Violeta Tomič and Nico Cué (EL), Oriol Junqueras (EFA), while ALDE put forward seven candidates. Many of these candidates ran very active campaigns, touring across Europe and taking part in various public debates. Much to the disappointment of the Parliament and the Europarties, the European Council effectively ignored the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism and nominated Ursula von der Leyen—who was not the lead candidate of any Europarty—as the new Commission president. While studies suggest that Europeans have remained largely unaware of the lead candidates, the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has, nonetheless, the potential to both increase the visibility of the EP elections and to develop a stronger link between voters and EU decision-making (Schmitt et al. 2015; Braun and Popa 2018; Braun and Schwartzbözl [2019](#); Hamřík and Kaniok 2019).

## 15.7 Theorizing the EP Party Groups and Europarties

The EP has become one of the most researched parliaments in the world; it is certainly the EU institution we know the most about. This is in large part explained by the openness of the Parliament, which enables scholars to gather data on various aspects of the Parliament’s work. However, while scholars have developed sophisticated theoretical models for understanding voting behaviour and party performance in European elections, the empowerment of the EP, the distribution of committee positions and rapporteurships, and roll-call voting in the plenary, party groups still remain something of a black box, both

theoretically and empirically. This applies to both their internal decision-making and coalition formation.

Longitudinal analyses of both party group cohesion and coalition formation indicate stability: groups have maintained their rather high levels of unity (as measured by voting in the plenary) and most resolutions in the chamber are passed by comfortable ‘supermajorities’ or ‘grand coalitions’ between EPP and S&D, and often other groups as well. The grand coalition is numerically the safest way for building winning coalitions in the chamber (especially when the decision rule is absolute majority), but the dominance of the grand coalition suggests that the party groups have established routine forms of cooperation extending beyond individual issues, with much of this coalition-building probably occurring at the committee stage. More specifically, how do the two main groups, the EPP and S&D, work together in the committees and behind the scenes (Roger and Winzen 2015)? Uncovering the mechanisms of such regular cooperation, and its linkages to decision-making and division of labour inside party groups, would result in better understanding of how the whole Parliament forms its positions.

The ‘grand coalition’ indicates, in turn, substantial differences between party groups. Considering the strong influence of EPP and S&D, the smaller groups may either choose to cooperate with them or to offer a parliamentary ‘opposition’ by voting against them. The former option is mainly exercised by more centrist groups such as Renew, G/EFA, or ECR, whereas the left-wing GUE, and particularly the Eurosceptic groups, have tended to favour the latter alternative, voicing their opposition to the adopted measures or using the Parliament and the job of an MEP primarily as a platform for providing information about the EU (and its failures) to their electorates (Jensen and Spoon 2010; Whitaker and Lynch 2014; Brack 2018; McDonnell and Werner 2018). Future research should thus delve deeper into such

variation between party groups, both in terms of their coalition strategies and internal dynamics.

Moving to the Europarties, existing research grapples with the question of impact. Do Europarties matter, particularly in terms of treaty changes and other key integration milestones? The evidence is somewhat mixed but points in the direction of Europarties and their EP groups wielding, under the right circumstances, even decisive influence in the Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC) and the European Council summits. On average, Europarties matter more when they are numerically stronger in the EU institutions (especially among the national heads of government or state in the European Council), relatively cohesive, and able to mobilize their networks of political parties and leaders. Informal, even personal, partisan links can be crucial. For example, individuals with close ties to the German Christian democratic chancellor and her or his assistants have often wielded strong influence within the EPP party and group (Tallberg and Johansson 2008; Johansson 2017). Treaty reforms are thus not just about national interests and national governments: the partisan dimension of constitutional politics at European level, no matter how weak or strong, deserves to be recognized. There is also a need to investigate partisan links in the more day-to-day decision-making between the Parliament, the Commission, and the Council/European Council (Lindberg et al. 2008; Mühlböck 2017) and how Europarties coordinate such linkages. And, as with the EP groups, scholars should adopt a comparative perspective, also including lesser-known Europarties in their research designs.

## **15.8 Conclusion**

The Europarties and the EP party groups are transnational actors, with both bringing together like-minded national parties from the member states and ultimately deriving their authority

from the voters. Through representing different ideological worldviews, they shape EU legislation and the future of European integration.

The party groups in the EP are often underestimated, or even ridiculed, by national media. Certainly, from the outside, these groups may appear to be somewhat strange creatures. After all, they bring together representatives from as many as twenty-seven countries, with a plethora of languages spoken in the Parliament's meeting rooms and corridors. However, such characterizations are quite simply not accurate. The Parliament as an institution has structured its internal organization so as to maximize its influence in the EU. The thrust of legislative work is done in the committees, in which individual rapporteurs draft reports that form the basis for parliamentary resolutions. In a similar fashion, the party groups have designed their internal organization and divided labour within them so as to balance the interests of the whole group, the national parties, and the individual MEPs. And research clearly shows that the EP groups have indeed mastered the art both of bargaining with other EU institutions and of achieving unitary group behaviour and, at least so far, the rise of populism and the increased politicization of integration have not caused any major changes to levels of group cohesion or patterns of coalition formation.

Another often-aided claim is that the EP groups and their national parties live in different worlds, with lack of will and conflicting preferences over integration preventing meaningful cooperation. While there is some truth to such arguments, these divisions do not mean that MEPs, many of whom have previously served in the national parliaments of their member states, are divorced from their national parties or constituencies. On the contrary, instead of living inside a 'Brussels bubble', MEPs remain firmly connected to national politics through a variety of channels, with most of them holding simultaneously various offices in their parties (either at the local, district, or national level) and maintaining active links with their party organizations and voters. The design of the electoral system impacts on such contacts,

with MEPs from countries using more candidate-centred systems paying more attention to individual voters and constituency interests (Farrell and Scully 2007, 2010; Poyet 2018). Moreover, it is interesting to note that, overall, the preferences of national MPs and MEPs over integration are quite similar, and that, contrary to much accepted wisdom, MEPs do not ‘go native’ in Brussels—that is, become considerably more pro-European than their party comrades back home (Scully 2005). At the same time, we see more European politicians building their careers in the EP, with these individuals also more likely to wield influence in the Parliament through holding leadership positions or acting as rapporteurs (Whitaker 2014; Daniel 2015). This should contribute both to the policy expertise of the party groups and to the influence of the EP vis-à-vis the other EU institutions.

Overall, the biggest, and most demanding, challenge for the Europarties and their EP party groups is to connect with EU citizens. Despite the increased turnout in the 2019 elections, the Parliament as whole remains a contested institution, with particularly Eurosceptic forces questioning the democratic legitimacy of the EP and its party groups. Europarties may not be familiar to European citizens, but they clearly wield strong influence in European politics and integrate interests across the Union and beyond. Considering the weakness of a common EU-wide identity, the sporadic coverage of the EP in national media, and the absence of any real European government, the integrative function takes place almost exclusively among national political elites, with most Europeans thus continuing to focus mainly on national or local politics. The need to establish a stronger connection between citizens and the EU was a key argument behind the *Spitzenkandidaten* initiative, but for now most Europeans do not know how and to what extent the Europarties and their EP party groups influence EU policies.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Does it make sense for Eurosceptic parties to be present in the European Parliament when they are opposed to the EU?
2. How visible are EP party groups or Europarties in media coverage of the EU?
3. How have MEPs from across the Union managed to work together so cohesively in the EP plenary and committees?

## **FURTHER READING**

The first book to focus on the role of political parties in the EU, Hix and Lord (1997) remains relevant today, with chapters on national parties, EP party groups, and Europarties, while Bressanelli (2014) offers a more recent analysis of Europarties and EP party groups. Kreppel (2002) provides a data-rich account of the development of the EP's party system. Comparing the electoral systems used in EP elections, Farrell and Scully (2007) analyse how the design of the electoral systems impacts on the composition of the Parliament and the attitudes and behaviour of the MEPs. Based on a large data set of roll-call votes since the 1979 elections, Hix et al. (2007) explain party group voting in the chamber, with particular focus on voting cohesion and coalition formation. Ringe (2010) examines how MEPs make decisions in the Parliament, with particular focus on the interaction between committees and party groups. Whitaker (2011) and Yordanova (2013) offer systematic treatments of the EP's committees, analysing how EP party groups and national parties use the committees to further their policy objectives. Brack (2018) provides an in-depth analysis of how Eurosceptical MEPs and party groups operate in the Parliament.

Brack, N. (2018), *Opposing Europe in the European Parliament: Rebels and Radicals in the Chamber* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Bressanelli, E. (2014), *Europarties after Enlargement: Organization, Ideology and Competition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).



Farrell, D. M. and Scully, R. (2007), *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hix, S. and Lord, C. (1997), *Political Parties in the European Union* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).

Hix, S., Noury, A. G., and Roland, G. (2007), *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Kreppel, A. (2002), *The European Parliament and the Supranational Party System: A Study of Institutional Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Ringe, N. (2010), *Who Decides, and How? Preferences, Uncertainty, and Policy Choice in the European Parliament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Whitaker, R. (2011), *The European Parliament's Committees: National Party Control and Legislative Empowerment* (Abingdon: Routledge).

Yordanova, N. (2013), *Organising the European Parliament: The Role and Legislative Influence of Committees* (Colchester: ECPR Press).

## REFERENCES

Ahrens, Petra, and Lise Rolandsen Agustín eds. 2019. *Gendering the European Parliament: Structures, Policies and Practices*. London: ECPR Press.

Almeida, Dimitri. 2012. *The Impact of European Integration on Political Parties: Beyond the Permissive Consensus*. London: Routledge.

Blumenau, Jack, and Benjamin E. Lauderdale. 2018. "Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste: Agenda Setting and Legislative Voting in Response to the EU Crisis." *The Journal of Politics* 80: 462-78.

Bol, Damien, Philipp Harfst, André Blais, Sona N. Golder, Jean-François Laslier, Laura B. Stephenson, and Karine Van der Straeten. 2016. "Addressing Europe's democratic deficit: An experimental evaluation of the pan-European district proposal." *European Union Politics* 17: 525-45.

Bowler, Shaun, and David M Farrell. 1995. "The Organizing of the European Parliament: Committees, Specialization and Co-Ordination." *British Journal of Political Science* 25: 219-43.

Bowler, Shaun, David M. Farrell, and Richard S. Katz. 1999. "Party Cohesion, Party Discipline, and Parliaments." In *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Government*, eds. Shaun Bowler, David M. Farrell, and Richard S. Katz. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 3-22.

Bowler, Shaun, and Gail McElroy. 2015. "Political Group Cohesion and 'Hurrah' Voting in the European Parliament." *Journal of European Public Policy* 22: 1355-65.

Brack, Nathalie. 2018. *Opposing Europe in the European Parliament: Rebels and Radicals in the Chamber*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Braun, Daniela, and Sebastian A. Popa. 2018. "This time it was different? The salience of the Spitzenkandidaten system among European parties." *West European Politics* 41: 1125-45.

Braun, Daniela, and Tobias Schwartzbözl. 2019. "Put in the spotlight or largely ignored? Emphasis on the Spitzenkandidaten by political parties in their online campaigns for European

- elections.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 26: 428-45.
- Bressanelli, Edoardo. 2014. *Europarties after Enlargement: Organization, Ideology and Competition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bright, Jonathan, Diego Garzia, Joseph Lacey, and Alexander Trechsel. 2016. “Europe’s voting space and the problem of second-order elections: A transnational proposal.” *European Union Politics* 17: 184–98.
- Carrieri, Luca. 2021. *The Impact of European Integration on West European Politics: Committed Pro-Europeans Strike Back*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carrubba, Clifford J, Matthew Gabel, Lacey Murrain, Ryan Clough, Elizabeth Montgomery, and Rebecca Schambach. 2006. "Off the Record: Unrecorded Legislative Votes, Selection Bias and Roll-Call Vote Analysis." *British Journal of Political Science* 36: 691-704.
- Chiru, Mihail. 2020. “Loyal soldiers or seasoned leaders? The selection of committee chairs in the European Parliament.” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27: 612-29.
- Daniel, William T. 2015. *Career Behaviour and the European Parliament: All Roads Lead through Brussels?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Sio, Lorenzo, Mark Franklin, and Luana Russo eds. 2019. *The European Parliament Elections of 2019*. Rome: Luiss University Press.
- De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt. 2020. *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Decker, Frank, and Jared Sonnicksen. 2011. "An Alternative Approach to European Union Democratization: Re-Examining the Direct Election of the Commission President." *Government and Opposition* 46: 168-91.
- Farrell, David M, and Roger Scully. 2007. *Representing Europe's Citizens? Electoral Institutions and the Failure of Parliamentary Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2010. "The European Parliament: One Parliament, Several Modes of Political Representation on the Ground?". *Journal of European Public Policy* 17: 36-54.
- Fitzmaurice, John. 1975. *The Party Groups in the European Parliament*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Follesdal, Andreas, and Simon Hix. 2006. "Why There Is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 44: 533-62.
- Hamřík, Lukáš, and Petr Kaniok. 2019. “Is it all about European Democracy? The Motives behind the Institutionalisation of the Spitzenkandidaten.” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15: 354-77.
- Hanley, David. 2008. *Beyond the nation state: Parties in the era of European integration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hertner, Isabelle. 2019. “United in diversity? Europarties and their individual members’ rights.” *Journal of European Integration* 41: 487–505.
- Hix, Simon. 1999. "Dimensions and Alignments in European Union Politics: Cognitive Constraints and Partisan Responses." *European Journal of Political Research* 35: 69-106.
- . 2002. "Parliamentary Behavior with Two Principals: Preferences, Parties, and Voting in the European Parliament." *American Journal of Political Science* 46: 688-98.
- . 2008. *What’s Wrong with the Eu and How to Fix It*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hix, Simon, and Christopher Lord. 1997. *Political Parties in the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hix, Simon, and Michael Marsh. 2011. "Second-Order Effects Plus Pan-European Political Swings: An Analysis of European Parliament Elections across Time." *Electoral Studies* 30: 4-15.
- Hix, Simon, Abdul G. Noury, and Gérard Roland. 2007. *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hix, Simon, Abdul G. Noury, and Gérard Roland. 2018. “Is there a selection bias in roll call votes? Evidence from the European Parliament.” *Public Choice* 176: 211–28.
- Hobolt, Sara B., and Toni Rodon eds. 2020. Domestic Contestation of the European Union. *Journal*

- of *European Public Policy* 27:2 (Special Issue).
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2018. "Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25:109-35.
- Jensen, Christian B., and Jae-Jae Spoon. 2010. "Thinking Locally, Acting Supranationally: Niche Party Behaviour in the European Parliament." *European Journal of Political Research* 49: 174-201.
- Johansson, Karl Magnus. 2017. "The role of Europarties in EU treaty reform: Theory and practice." *Acta Politica* 52: 286–305.
- Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Tapio Raunio. 2019. "Political parties in the European Union." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1153>.
- Kantola, Johanna, and Lise Rolandsen Agustín. 2019. "Gendering the representative work of the European Parliament: A political analysis of women MEP's perceptions of gender equality in party groups." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57: 768-86.
- Koop, Christel, Christine Reh, and Edoardo Bressanelli. 2017. "When politics prevails: Parties, elections and loyalty in the European Parliament." *European Journal of Political Research* 57: 563–86.
- Kreppel, Amie. 2002. *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System: A Study in Institutional Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lindberg, Bjorn, Anne Rasmussen, and Andreas Warntjen eds. 2008. The role of political parties in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy* 15:8 (Special Issue).
- Lindstädt, René, Jonathan B Slapin, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen. 2011. "Balancing Competing Demands: Position Taking and Election Proximity in the European Parliament." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36: 37-70.
- Mair, Peter, and Jacques Thomassen. 2010. "Political Representation and Government in the European Union." *Journal of European Public Policy* 17: 20-35.
- Mamadouh, Virginie, and Tapio Raunio. 2003. "The Committee System: Powers, Appointments and Report Allocation\*." *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41: 333-51.
- Marks, Gary, and Carole J Wilson. 2000. "The Past in the Present: A Cleavage Theory of Party Response to European Integration." *British Journal of Political Science* 30: 433-59.
- Martin, Shane. 2014. "Committees." In *The Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies*, eds. Shane Martin, Thomas Saalfeld and Kaare Strøm. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 352-68.
- Mattila, Mikko, and Tapio Raunio. 2012. "Drifting Further Apart: National Parties and Their Electorates on the Eu Dimension." *West European Politics* 35: 589-606.
- Mattson, Ingvar, and Kaare Strøm. 1995. "Parliamentary Committees." In *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, ed. Herbert Döring. Frankfurt: Campus. 249-307.
- Maurer, Andreas, Roderick Parkes, and Markus Wagner. 2008. "Explaining group membership in the European Parliament: the British Conservatives and the Movement for European Reform." *Journal of European Public Policy* 15: 246-62.
- McDonnell, Duncan, and Annika Werner. 2018. "Respectable radicals: Why some radical right parties in the European Parliament forsake policy congruence." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25: 747–63.
- McElroy, Gail. 2006. "Committee Representation in the European Parliament." *European Union Politics* 7: 5-29.
- McElroy, Gail, and Kenneth Benoit. 2010. "Party Policy and Group Affiliation in the European Parliament." *British Journal of Political Science* 40: 377-98.
- . 2012. "Policy Positioning in the European Parliament." *European Union Politics* 13: 150-67.
- Meserve, Stephen A., Daniel Pemstein, and William T. Bernhard. 2009. "Political Ambition and Legislative Behavior in the European Parliament." *The Journal of Politics* 71: 1015-32.

- Moravcsik, Andrew. 2002. "In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit': Reassessing legitimacy in the European Union". *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40: 603-24.
- Mühlböck, Monika. 2017. *Voting unity of national parties in bicameral EU decision-making*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nielsen, Julie Hassing, and Mark N. Franklin eds. 2017. *The Eurosceptic 2014 European Parliament Elections: Second Order or Second Rate?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Otjes, Simon, and Harmen van der Veer. 2016. "The Eurozone crisis and the European Parliament's changing lines of conflict." *European Union Politics* 17: 242-61.
- Poyet, Corentin. 2018. "Working at home: French MEPs' day-to-day practice of political representation in their district." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 24: 109-26.
- Pridham, Geoffrey, and Pippa Pridham. 1981. *Transnational Party Co-Operation and European Integration: The Process Towards Direct Elections*. London: Harper Collins.
- Proksch, Sven-Oliver, and Jonathan B. Slapin. 2015. *The Politics of Parliamentary Debate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prosser, Christopher. 2016. "Dimensionality, ideology and party positions towards European integration." *West European Politics* 39: 731-54.
- Raunio, Tapio, and Wolfgang Wagner. 2020. "Party Politics or (Supra-)National Interest? External Relations Votes in the European Parliament." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16: 547-64.
- Reif, Karlheinz, and Hermann Schmitt. 1980. "Nine Second-Order National Elections—a Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results." *European Journal of Political Research* 8: 3-44.
- Ringe, Nils. 2010. *Who Decides, and How?: Preferences, Uncertainty, and Policy Choice in the European Parliament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roger, Léa. 2016. *Voice(s) in the European Parliament: Deliberation and Negotiation in EP Committees*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Roger, Léa, and Thomas Winzen. 2015. "Party Groups and Committee Negotiations in the European Parliament: Outside Attention and the Anticipation of Plenary Conflict." *Journal of European Public Policy* 22: 391-408.
- Rorschneider, Robert, and Hermann Schmitt eds. 2016. Special Symposium on the 2014 European Elections. *Electoral Studies* 44: 429-551.
- Roos, Mechthild. 2019. "Intra-Party Group Unity in the European Parliament Prior to its First Direct Elections in 1979." *Parliamentary Affairs* 72: 464-79.
- Schmitt, Hermann, Sara B. Hobolt, and Sebastian Adrian Popa. 2015. "Does Personalization Increase Turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament Elections." *European Union Politics* 16: 347-68.
- Scully, Roger. 2005. *Becoming Europeans? Attitudes, Behaviour, and Socialization in the European Parliament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Settembri, Pierpaolo, and Christine Neuhold. 2009. "Achieving Consensus through Committees: Does the European Parliament Manage?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47: 127-51.
- Szczerbiak, Aleks, and Paul Taggart eds. 2008. *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism: Volumes 1 and 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tallberg, Jonas, and Karl Magnus Johansson. 2008. "Party politics in the European Council." *Journal of European Public Policy* 15: 1222-42.
- Timus, Natalia, and Simon Lightfoot eds. 2014. Europarties between "deepening" and "widening." *Acta Politica* 49:1 (Special Issue).
- Treib, Oliver. 2020. "Euroscepticism is here to stay: what cleavage theory can teach us about the 2019 European Parliament elections." *Journal of European Public Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1737881.
- Van der Brug, Wouter, and Claes H. de Vreese eds. 2016. *(Un)intended Consequences of European Parliamentary Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Van der Eijk, Cees, and Mark N. Franklin eds. 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Van Oudenhove, Guy. 1965. *The Political Parties in the European Parliament: The First Ten Years, September 1952-September 1962*. Leyden: Sijthoff.
- Whitaker, Richard. 2011. *The European Parliament's Committees: National Party Influence and Legislative Empowerment*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.
- . 2014. "Tenure, Turnover and Careers in the European Parliament: MEPs as Policy-Seekers." *Journal of European Public Policy* 21: 1509-27.
- Whitaker, Richard, and Philip Lynch. 2014. "Understanding the formation and actions of Eurosceptic Groups in the European Parliament: Pragmatism, principles and publicity." *Government and Opposition* 49: 232-63.
- Yordanova, Nikoleta. 2013. *Organising the European Parliament: The Role of the Committees and Their Legislative Influence*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Yoshinaka, Antoine, Gail McElroy, and Shaun Bowler. 2010. "The Appointment of Rapporteurs in the European Parliament." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 35: 457-86.

**Table 15.1 Party groups in the European Parliament, 1979–2021**

<b>Party family</b>	<b>1979</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2021</b>
Social democrats/socialists	113	130	180	198	180	200	184	191	146
Christian democrats/conservatives	107	110	121	157	233	268	265	221	178
Liberals	40	31	49	43	50	88	84	67	97
Conservatives	86	79	54	53	21	27	54	70	62
Left	44	41	42	28	42	41	35	52	39

Greens/regionalists	–	20	43	23	48	42	55	50	73
Eurosceptics	–	–	–	19	16	37	32	48	73
Extreme right	–	16	17	–	–	–	–	–	–
Others	11	–	–	19	20	–	–	–	–
Non-attached	9	7	12	27	16	29	27	52	37
Total	410	434	518	567	626	732	736	751	705

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> For analyses of party groups in the pre-1979 Parliament, see Van Oudenhove (1965), Fitzmaurice (1975), Pridham and Pridham (1981), and Roos (2019).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the title ‘European Democrats’ was added to the EPP’s group name after the 1999 elections so that the Tories could maintain their separate identity in the otherwise strongly pro-integrationist EPP group. Before the 2004 elections, the group struck a deal with the Conservatives, who had threatened to leave the group and ally with other conservative parties that are critical of further integration. This deal caused a lot of controversy in the group—and, in the end, resulted in a section of MEPs defecting to the liberal group after the 2004 elections. According to that deal, the Conservatives had a right to voice their own views on European constitutional and institutional matters and had more favourable financing and staffing terms within the group, including the right to one of the group’s vice-presidencies.

<sup>3</sup> Groups comprising MEPs from only one country (such as the Italian Forza Europa in 1994–95) have not been permitted since the 1999 elections.

- 
- <sup>4</sup> Normally, MEPs vote by show of hands, whereas in roll-call votes the voting positions of the individual representatives are recorded and published afterwards. A roll-call vote must be taken, if requested by a party group or at least one-twentieth of all MEPs. Since 2009, all final votes on legislation have been taken by roll call. There is also debate over the validity of the roll-call data. Because recorded votes represent only a sample of the totality of votes in the Parliament, the representativeness of the sample is of crucial concern (see Carrubba *et al.* 2006; Hix *et al.* 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> Named after its inventor, Belgian mathematician Victor d'Hondt, the method is used for allocating seats in electoral systems based on proportional representation. The party group winning most seats in the Parliament gets the first committee chair, and the share of seats held by that group is then divided by two and compared with the seat shares of the other groups. The group with most seats at this point receives the second committee chair. The process continues until all committee chairs have been allocated.
- <sup>6</sup> An interesting proposal, which has been put forward several times both by scholars and the EP itself, involves transnational lists for European elections, whereby a certain share of MEPs would be elected from such EU-wide lists, thus giving voters the opportunity to vote for candidates from other member states. On the potential consequences of such transnational lists, see Bol *et al.* (2016) and Bright *et al.* (2016).
- <sup>7</sup> Article 10.4, TEU.
- <sup>8</sup> Europarties do have election manifestos but these can be counterproductive for national parties. For individual candidates and the national parties in EP elections, it may be a wise electoral strategy to distance themselves from the Europarties and EP groups, especially in those member states in which the public is less supportive of European integration.
- <sup>9</sup> For a more detailed illustration of how such a parliamentary model would work, see Hix (2008a: 166–78). An alternative approach would be that of having a direct election of the Commission president. In such a 'presidential' model, the candidates would also be put forward by Europarties (Decker and Sonnicksen 2011).

---

<sup>10</sup> David Cameron, 'No one voted for Mr Juncker', *European Voice*, 13 June 2014,  
<http://www.politico.eu/article/no-one-voted-for-mr-juncker/> (accessed on 25 February 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Article 17.7, TEU.