

CHAPTER 15

European Parties: A Powerful Caucus in the European Parliament and Beyond

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Introduction

The shape of the EP party system

Internal organization

 Group cohesion

 Balancing national and group interests

Coalition politics and parliamentary committees

Electoral accountability

Europarties and their Spitzenkandidaten

Theorising the party groups

Conclusions

NOTES

FURTHER READING

WEB LINKS

Summary

The party system of the European Parliament (EP) is 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. 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. Since then, the party groups have gradually, but consistently, consolidated their positions in the Parliament, primarily by introducing procedural reforms that enable them to make effective use of the EP's legislative and appointment powers. At the same time, the shape of the party system has become more stable, at least as far as the main groups are concerned. Nevertheless, national parties remain influential within party groups, not least through their control of candidate selection.

Introduction

Compared with parties in EU member state legislatures, 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 twenty-eight member states winning seats in the Parliament in the 2014 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. At the same time, the shape of the party system has become more stable, at least as far as the main groups are concerned. One can thus talk of the 'institutionalization' of the EP party system.

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. They bring together politicians from the EP and beyond to pursue shared political objectives and, in the 2014 EP election, to field candidates for

the post of Commission President. There is considerable scope for confusion here because EP political groups and Europarties sometimes have similar sounding names. The European People's Party is a Europarty, which brings together centre-right politicians from across the EU, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, and European Council President Donald Tusk. The European People's Party Group, in contrast, describes only those MEPs that work together in the EP. It comprises MEPs from national political parties affiliated with the Europarty, the European People's Party, 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 formed between the two large groups—the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left social democrats (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 in the 2014 elections, 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. The theory section 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 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. Already, 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 counter-balance this through its party-political structure.

Throughout its history up to the present day (Box 15.1 summarizes EP groups after the 2014 elections), 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 on the right. 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 2014. Initially, the party system consisted of only three groups: socialists/social democrats (the Party of European Socialists, or PES); Christian democrats/conservatives (the European People’s Party, or EPP); and liberals (the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party, or 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; after the 1999 EP elections, the former overtook the latter once again.¹

BOX 15.1 Party groups in the 2014–19 European Parliament

European People’s Party (EPP, 217 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, the British Conservatives (which left the group in 2009 to form the ECR group—see below), and particularly the controversial Hungarian party Fidesz – the Hungarian Civic Alliance. 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, 190 seats)

This group of the Party of European Socialists (PES) brings together social democratic and socialist parties from all EU countries. The largest party delegations are the Italian Democratic Party, the German Social Democrats, and, until the UK exits the EU, the British Labour Party. 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.

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR, 74 seats)

This conservative group was formed after the 2009 elections after the British Conservatives had broken away from the EPP group. It is affiliated with the European level party the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR). ECR has members from sixteen countries, and it benefited from the wave of eurosceptic vote in the 2014 election. Two largest national parties following this election were the British Conservatives and the Polish Law and Justice party, although the former will exit this group once the UK formally leaves the EU. The group can be categorized as eurosceptic, but it does not share the hard-line anti-integrationist views of the EFDD.

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE, 70 seats)

The liberal group consists of various liberal and centrist parties, and has come to occupy a pivotal role between the two largest groups. After the 2004 elections, the group changed its name from European Liberal, Democrat, and Reform Party (ELDR) to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which is also the official name of the liberals' Europarty. The group brings together MEPs from twenty-one member states and it has traditionally been a firm advocate of deeper integration.

Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL–NGL, 52 seats)

The EUL–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), from fourteen member states. The euro crisis and austerity measures contributed to the success of EUL-NGL in the 2014 elections, and the main parties in the group are the Left Party from Germany, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) and the Spanish Podemos. EUL is divided over the desirability of further integration.

Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA, 50 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 Scottish National Party and the Catalan parties—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 similar reasons to the social democrats. The group unites MEPs from seventeen countries and the largest party is the German Alliance '90/The Greens.

Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD, 45 seats)

The EFDD is the parliamentary group of the Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE). The group is the larger of the predominantly eurosceptic groups in the Parliament, bringing together anti-EU lists and parties from seven countries, including the Italian Five Star Movement.

Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF, 39 seats)

Established in the summer of 2015, ENF joins together various nationalistic far-right anti-immigration parties from eight countries. Over half of the MEPs come from the French Front National, with other parties including the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Austrian Freedom Party and the Italian Northern League.

Note: The seat shares are from September 2015. Fourteen MEPs did not belong to any of the groups, sitting instead as 'independent' or 'non-attached' MEPs.

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 years. The conservative wing of the group has been strengthened since the 1990s, but the party that had most difficul-

ties 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).² 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) presented far fewer problems, because almost each member state has an electorally significant centre-left, social democratic party.

Moving to the medium-sized groups, the liberal group (ALDE) has a strongly pro-European philosophy, and this stance has occasionally created problems between the group majority and the Centre parties from the Nordic countries that are more eurosceptic than the group majority. 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 the group stated in its constituent declaration that EUL–NGL 'is a forum for cooperation between its different political components, each of which retains its own independent identity and commitment to its own positions'.

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 (Treib 2014; Hobolt 2015). The conservatives, however, 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 2014 EP elections, the ECR was the third largest group in the chamber. Finally, the non-attached MEPs have normally represented various extreme 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 summer 2015 onwards

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 2014 election, however, their combined seat share fell to 55 % of MEPs. This duopoly is nicely illustrated by the system of electing the President of the Parliament. With the exception of the 1999–2004 Parliament, the PES and EPP have shared the presidency since 1989. For example, in the 2009–14 electoral term, the first President was Jerzy Buzek from the EPP, with Martin Schultz from the S&D group replacing him at mid-term in January 2012.³ 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.

Internal organization

The EP’s Rules of Procedure, the standing orders of the Parliament, set numerical criteria for group formation. Following the 2014 elections, a political group must comprise at least twenty-five MEPs from at least a quarter of the member states.⁴ 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 at least 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, require the backing of a committee, a party group, or at least forty 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 party groups have in a similar fashion reformed their own rules through adopting more centralized procedures (Bressanelli 2014: 57-76). Non-attached representatives in particular are procedurally marginalized in the chamber.

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.

Second, ‘centralized nomination procedures should lead to greater party cohesion’ (Bowler *et al.* 1999: 8). National parties, and not EP groups or Europarties, control candidate selection. Therefore national parties possess the ultimate sanction against MEPs. This applies particularly to countries using closed lists or mixed systems, in which electors choose between pre-ordered party lists. Interestingly, while links between national parties and their MEPs have traditionally been rather loose (Raunio 2000), there is nowadays greater policy coordination between MEPs and their parties, with case studies on British and German parties in particular confirming this trend, but national parties nonetheless largely refrain from ‘mandating’ their MEPs (Blomgren 2003; Bailer 2009). 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 2002b: 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); 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 twenty-eight member states won seats in the 2014 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, roll-call analyses 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 (Hix *et al.* 2007). 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. 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, in reality, group cohesion has remained stable while EP has gained new powers.

The explanation advanced below 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 much 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 re-

minding 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.

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 2014–19 Parliament, the G/EFA, EFDD and EFN 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 most national delegations representation 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 that is often motivated by national party-political considerations (Proksch and Slapin 2015: 148-162). 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 below), 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.

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 2014–19 Parliament had 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'. 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 method⁵ used for dis-

tributing the chairs. Chair allocation is thus broadly proportional, again reflecting procedures used in most national parliaments (Mattson and Strøm 1995). 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 is 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 are using 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; Daniel 2013; Yordavova 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 (Settembri and Neuhold 2009). Pragmatic scrutiny and cooperation between EPP and S&D means that most issues are essentially pre-cooked at the committee stage – paving thus 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 (by the responsible committee, a party group, or at least forty members) 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 Jensen 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 (Hix *et al.* 2007 see also McElroy and Benoit 2012).⁶ 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 codecision 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. Recent enlargements have not really changed either group cohesion levels or coalition patterns in the chamber. Party cohesion has remained stable, the two main groups continue to vote together around two-thirds or 70 per cent of the time, and representatives from new member states do not defect any more from their group than average MEPs (Hix and Noury 2009; Lindstädt *et al.* 2012; Bressanelli 2014; Bowler and McElroy 2015). But how MEPs vote hardly matters from the point of view of EP elections, as is argued in the next section.

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 national parties have so far fought EP elections on domestic issues, although the euro crisis introduced a stronger ‘European element’ to the 2014 elections. 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 (see, for example, Hix and Lord 1997; Hix 1999; Marks and Wilson 2000; Marks and Steenbergen 2004). 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 (Szczurbiak 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 system⁷ or EU-wide candidate lists, constituency boundaries do not cross national borders, and campaigning is conducted by national parties on the basis of largely national agendas.⁸ So national politics is reproduced in EP elections, with the same set of actors and largely also the same set of issues. But, interestingly, recent evidence points in the direction of the EU, as an issue, becoming increasingly politicized and salient. This has also become apparent in European elections, as demonstrated by the increasing importance of the EU as an issue in explaining citizens’ voting behaviour. Analysing the 2004 and 2009 EP elections, Hobolt *et al.* (2009: 111) showed how preference congruence between parties and their supporters over EU impacted on the vote shares of national parties:

governing parties may lose votes because of the disconnect between major governing parties and their voters

on the issue of EU integration, and the fact that EP elections make this issue, and therefore this disconnect, more prominent. On both the contextual and individual levels, it appears that Europe can matter when voters go to the polls. Governing-party voters who are more sceptical about further integration are more likely to defect or abstain in EP elections. (See also De Vries *et al.* 2011; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hong 2015)

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; Manow and Döring 2008; Schmitt 2009; Hix and Marsh 2011; Hong 2015).

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.). Art. 138a of the Maastricht Treaty assigned political parties a specific role to play in the political system of the European Union: ‘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 Lisbon Treaty (Art. 10, para. 4): ‘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 Maastricht Treaty contributed to the consolidation of Europarties. With the exception of the EPP, which had already 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, such as ADDE, AECR, EFA, and EL, have been established since the introduction in 2004 of public funding of Europarties from the EU’s budget (Johansson and Raunio 2005).

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 centralized and hierarchical parties found at the national level. 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.⁹ 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 that has been the largest Europarty since the turn of the millennium (see below). Moreover, Europarties 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; Ladrech 2000; Johansson and Zervakis 2002; Lightfoot 2005; Hanley 2008; Bressanelli 2014; Timus and Lightfoot 2014; Johansson 2016)

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 his or her government, with the other party groups forming the parliamentary opposition.¹⁰ 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 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 (see also Chapter 6). Jean-Claude Juncker, the lead candidate of the largest party group, EPP, was eventually appointed as the new head of the Commission.¹¹ 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.¹² Cameron was certainly right in claiming that the Spitzenkandidaten process will strengthen 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 not be ignored in the make-up of the Commission. Hence the wording of the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 17, para. 7), according to which the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the Parliament a candidate for Commission President after ‘taking into account’ the election results merely gave Treaty status to a practice dating back to mid-1990s. Because the EPP is the largest group and centre-right groups control the majority of the seats (and centre-right cabinets dominate the Council), the partisan composition of the Commissions appointed since 2004 has leaned toward the centre-right, with a clear majority of the Commissioners and the president representing either EPP or ALDE member parties. Not surprisingly, there has con-

sequently been a firm centre-right grip on EU politics that has unquestionably left its mark on legislation. Whether this undermines the role of the Commission as a neutral upholder of EU law and common interest is open to debate, but at least the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, and more broadly the politicization of the Commission, has the potential to strengthen the ‘electoral connection’ between voters and Brussels, thus making it easier to assign credit and blame in EU decision-making (Hobolt 2014; Schmitt *et al.* 2015). Euro-parties may thus not be familiar to European voters, but party politics clearly matters in EU politics.

Theorising the EP party groups

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 (see Yordanova 2011; Hix and Høyland (2013), party groups 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 possibly other groups (Bowler and McElroy 2015). 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 two large groups work routinely together beyond cooperating in individual issues, probably mainly at the committee stage. Uncovering the mechanisms of such regular cooperation, and its linkages to decision-making inside EPP and S&D groups, would result in much better understanding of how the 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 ALDE, G/EFA or ECR, whereas the eurosceptic groups (especially EFDD and ENF) and the radical left (EUL-NGL) more often 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 2015). Future research should thus delve deeper into such variation between groups, both in terms of their coalition strategies and internal dynamics.

Conclusions

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-eight 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 organisation 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.

Another often-aided claim is that MEPs 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 are divorced from their national parties or constituencies. On the contrary, 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. 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 at the EU level. No doubt linked to the empowerment of the Parliament (see Chapter 6), turnover of MEPs has decreased with a higher share of politicians building 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.

The biggest, and most demanding, challenge for the party groups is to connect with EU citizens. This point applies to both connecting vertically with the citizens in individual EU countries and to forging horizontal cross-national linkages. First, considering the lack of a common EU-wide identity and the absence of any real European government, EP elections are bound to remain ‘second-order’ contests in comparison with elections to national parliaments. This status means also that the party groups in the Parliament will remain unknown to most Europeans. Second, while the Europarties and their EP groups undoubtedly perform an important role by integrating political interests across the Union, this integrative function takes place almost exclusively among national political elites, thus leaving the electorate 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 Europeans do not know how and to what extent the Europarties and their EP party groups influence EU policies.

NOTES

1. For analyses of party groups in the pre-1979 Parliament, see van Oudenhove (1965), Fitzmaurice (1975), and Pridham and Pridham (1981).
2. 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 inte-

gration. This deal caused a lot of controversy in the group—and in the end resulted in a section of MEPs defecting to the ELDR 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.

3. Schultz continued as the President after the 2014 elections. This cosy pact was temporarily suspended after the 1999 elections, when a centre-right coalition elected Nicole Fontaine (EPP) as the new President in July 1999. Imitating the deals between EPP and PES, the EPP and ELDR struck an agreement according to which the Liberals would support Fontaine and the EPP would, in turn, back the candidacy of ELDR group leader Pat Cox at mid-term in January 2002.
4. Groups comprising MEPs from only one country (such as Forza Europa in 1994–95) have not been permitted since the 1999 elections.
5. 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 number 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.
6. See also McElroy (2006); Yordanova (2013).
7. See also McElroy and Benoit (2012). There is also a debate concerning 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 that sample is a crucial matter (Carrubba *et al.* 2006; Finke 2015; Yordanova and Mühlböck 2015).
8. The design of the electoral system impacts on MEPs' contacts with their electorates, with MEPs from more 'open' systems paying more attention to individual voters and constituency interests (Farrell and Scully 2007; 2010).

9. Europarties have already now election manifestos, but these can be counterproductive for national parties. In their discussion on parties in the US House of Representatives, Cox and McCubbins (1993) argue that members of Congress have an incentive to be loyal to their party groups, because the reputation of their groups is important in terms of re-election. Distancing oneself, or the national party, from the Europarty can hence be a wise electoral strategy for national parties, especially in those member states in which the public is less supportive of European integration.
10. While scholars have paid more attention to the role of parties and party preferences in EU decision-making since the late 1990s, this strand of research is still quite undeveloped, particularly in terms of measuring and explaining party links between the EP, Council, the Commission, and even the European Council (see Lindberg *et al.* 2008).
11. For a more detailed illustration of how such a parliamentary model would work, see Hix (2008: 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).
12. The other lead candidates were Ska Keller (EGP), Martin Schulz (PES), Alexis Tsipras (EL) and Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE).
13. David Cameron, ‘No one voted for Mr Juncker’, *European Voice* 13.6.2014, <http://www.politico.eu/article/no-one-voted-for-mr-juncker/>.

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 elec-

tions, 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.

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).

WEB LINKS

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe: <http://www.aldeparty.eu>

European People's Party: <http://www.epp.eu>

European Green Party: <http://europeangreens.eu>

Party of European Socialists: <http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/>

The homepages of the four main Europarties provide a brief history of the parties, their election and policy programmes, and links to national member parties, the EP party group, and affiliated organizations.

<http://www.votewatch.eu>

Votewatch is a constantly updated website using statistics from the EP's homepage to provide comprehensive data on the attendance, voting, and other activities of MEPs, party groups, and national parties. Includes also data on member state government behaviour in the Council.