

Empowerment of the European Parliament

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Abstract

One of the most remarkable democratic developments in Europe in recent decades has been the empowerment of the only directly elected supranational assembly in the world: the European Parliament (EP). We first review the development of the legislative powers of the EP vis-à-vis the other European Union (EU) institutions, discussing the theoretical models of the power of the EP and the main empirical methods that have been used to evaluate these models. We then turn to the impact of the growing power of the EP on political organization and behavior inside the legislature. We demonstrate that the “electoral connection” is weak and discuss what this means for understanding legislative politics in the EP. The concluding section demonstrates differences in behavior across policy areas, which have received scant attention, and suggests avenues for further research.

HISTORY OF THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The European Parliament has evolved from the toothless Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community to an equal partner with the European Union (EU) Council in almost all policy areas. There have been two complementary elements to this empowerment: the formal treaty reforms and European Court of Justice rulings relating to the legislative powers of the EU institutions; and the evolution of the European Parliament's own "Rules of Procedure" in response to the treaty changes and judicial rulings. In the 1957 Treaty of Rome, the European Parliament's powers were very limited. The governments had set it up mainly as a scrutiny chamber, which would be consulted by the governments on legislation but could be safely ignored. The empowerment of the Parliament began with a series of reforms of the rules for adopting the annual budget of the EU in the 1970s and from the introduction of "direct elections" to the Parliament in 1979 (before 1979, the Parliament was composed of part-time delegates from national parliaments). The budgetary reforms gave the Parliament veto power on "noncompulsory expenditure," which was essentially all economic and social spending, but not agriculture spending. Then, following the first direct elections in June 1979, the Parliament took the Council to the European Court of Justice for adopting a piece of legislation before the Parliament had issued a formal "opinion" on the bill. The Court struck down the legislative act on the grounds that under the "consultation procedure," the Council must wait for the Parliament to issue an opinion before it acts on a Commission proposal. As a result, the Court established that the Parliament had a power of delay under this procedure, which at that time covered most legislative issues.

The first directly elected European Parliament contained a significant cohort of members who were ideologically committed to the goal of further European integration, with a strengthened role for the European Parliament. Although it is debatable to what extent the Parliament mattered for the push toward the 1987 Single European Act (Sandholtz & Stone Sweet 1998, Corbett 2001, Priestley 2008), throughout the early 1980s the Parliament called for more legislative power. The Single European Act, although signed exclusively by the member-state governments, represented a major step in the empowerment of the Parliament with the introduction of the "cooperation procedure." This new procedure added a second round of "readings" to the consultation procedure, effectively turning it into a *navette* system of alternating offers between the institutions (Tsebelis 2002). Here, the support of the Commission was decisive for the voting rule required at the last stage in the Council. If the Commission supported the Parliament proposal, the proposal could be adopted by only a qualified majority in the Council, whereas a unanimous vote was required to amend a Commission proposal. Conditional on the support of the Commission, it was hence easier for the Council to accept than to reject or amend a legislative proposal from the Parliament. Following the adoption of the Single European Act, the Parliament amended its Rules of Procedure to make the most of its newly won powers (Kreppel 2002a).

In 1993, the Treaty of the European Union, also known as the Maastricht Treaty, introduced what became known as the "codecision procedure." The codecision procedure added a joint committee stage, called the conciliation committee, to the cooperation procedure, if the Council did not accept all the amendments of the Parliament at the second reading stage. If no agreement was reached in the conciliation committee, the Council could then reintroduce its "common position" from the first reading. The Council position would then become law unless a majority of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) voted to reject it. This meant that the Parliament obtained veto power, in that no legislation could be passed under the codecision procedure unless the Parliament agreed. However, the Council would no longer find it easier to accept than amend Commission-supported second-reading amendments from the Parliament.

The Maastricht Treaty also granted new powers to the Parliament in relation to the Commission in a new Commission investiture procedure, whereby a new Commission required the majority support of the Parliament to take office.

As the Parliament amended its Rules of Procedure this time around, the role of the main political group was significantly strengthened at the expense of smaller groups and individual members (Kreppel 2002a). But the amended Rules of Procedure were also meant to maximize the power of the Parliament in its interactions with the other institutions. One of the key amendments was the introduction of Rule 78, which stated that the Parliament would automatically vote to reject the legislation if the Council reintroduced its common position following a failure to agree in the conciliation committee (Hix 2002b). The first time the Council reintroduced its common position, in July 1994, following a failure to agree in the conciliation committee, the Parliament rejected the legislation. Following this precedent, either the Council and the Parliament reached an agreement in the conciliation committee, or the Council and Parliament failed to reach an agreement and the Council then allowed the legislation to fail. As a result, in practice the Maastricht Treaty version of the codecision procedure ended with the conciliation committee. This meant that rather than the Council being able to make a unilateral “take-it-or-leave-it” proposal to the Parliament, the Parliament had a *de facto* power of mutual veto under the main legislative procedure in the EU.

When the Amsterdam Treaty was implemented, in 1999, the final stage of the codecision procedure was eliminated, which brought the *de jure* rules in the treaty into line with the *de facto* practice (Hix 2002b). In addition, the new version of the procedure, which EU scholars often refer to as “codecision II,” opened up the possibility of legislation being adopted at first reading, either if the Council and Parliament both adopted a Commission proposal unamended or if the same amendments (and no others) were adopted in both institutions. At the time, this seemed like a relatively minor change. However, within a few years, adoption of legislation in the first reading of the codecision procedure became the norm (**Figure 1**).

The adoption of such a high volume of legislation with only one reading in a Parliament committee and only one debate in the full plenary of the Parliament raises normative questions about how effective the Parliament and national parliaments can be in scrutinizing EU legislation. The high volume of first-reading agreements, which inevitably involves many behind-the-scenes deals between the key MEPs and the key governments in the Council, also raises challenges for researchers of EU legislative politics when trying to identify “who gets what, when and how” in the EU legislative process, as we discuss below.

Neither the Nice Treaty, in 2003, nor the Lisbon Treaty, in 2009, saw any major changes to the powers of the Parliament in the EU legislative process. Nevertheless, the Lisbon Treaty established codecision as the new “ordinary legislative procedure” of the EU, which is now used for all areas of EU legislation, with only a few minor exceptions. The Lisbon Treaty also introduced a unified budgetary procedure, under which the Parliament had a say in all areas of EU expenditure.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL WORK ON THE IMPACT OF EMPOWERING THE PARLIAMENT

We review how formal modelers have theorized the powers of the European Parliament under the different legislative procedures before discussing the empirical evidence in support of these theories.

Theoretical Models

The relationship between the EU institutions in the legislative process is typically theorized within the framework of the spatial model, where the relevant actors are represented as locations in a

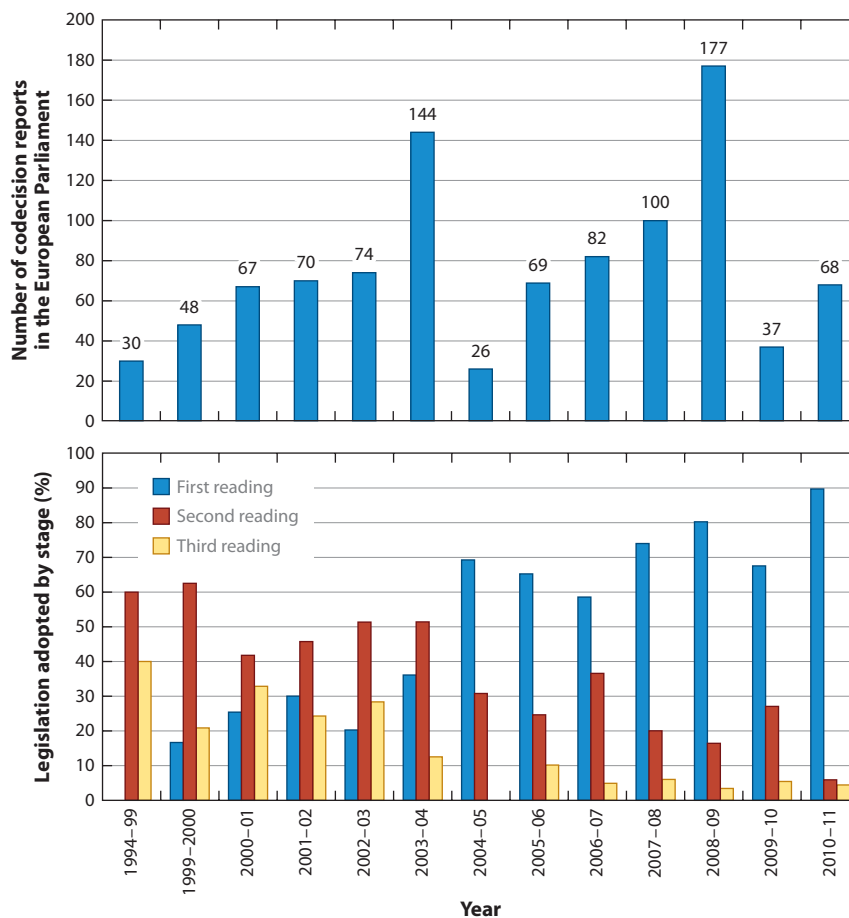


Figure 1

Legislative activity of the European Union under the codecision procedure. Source: European Parliament Annual Activities reports and http://ec.europa.eu/codecision/concluded/concluded_1st_en.htm#table14.

single- or multidimensional space. Typically, the European Parliament is assumed to be a unitary actor because decisions are made either by simple majority of the members present or by absolute majority of all MEPs. Under the assumption that all MEPs who intend to vote in favor show up to vote, these two decision rules produce the same outcome: for example, at the location of the median MEP in a single-dimensional space. The Commission is also usually assumed to be a unitary actor because it makes its decisions by simple majority (although decisions in the Commission are rarely made by a formal vote). In contrast, the Council has an oversized-majority requirement, which makes it necessary to identify the relevant actors depending on the direction of change and the size of the oversized-majority requirement (qualified-majority voting or unanimity). In the one-dimensional, pro/anti-EU integration framework, the Parliament and the Commission are usually assumed to be more integrationist than the pivotal actors in the Council. Under the consultation procedure, when the Parliament formally had power to delay legislation, the assumption that the Commission and the Parliament are more integrationist than the pivotal voter in the Council means that most formal theorists of EU decision making conclude that the Parliament had very

little power under this procedure because it would prefer anything the Commission proposed and the Council accepted to the status quo (e.g., Crombez 1996).

As already noted, the cooperation procedure made it easier for the Council to accept a Commission-supported second-reading amendment of the Parliament (by a qualified majority vote) than to amend or reject an amendment (by a unanimous vote). This asymmetry leads Tsebelis (1994) to argue that the Parliament obtained conditional agenda-setting power under the cooperation procedure. Moser (1996) argues that this claim rested on incomplete modeling of the cooperation procedure, since agenda-setting power still resides squarely with the Commission while the Parliament remains comparatively weak. Moser claims that, at best, the Parliament obtained conditional veto power under cooperation (see also Moser 1997). Crombez (1996) and Steunenberg (1994) reach similar conclusions.

As a result of this disagreement about the powers of the Parliament under the cooperation procedure, the shift to the codecision procedure led to a rich debate about whether the Parliament gained or lost power with the Maastricht Treaty. The absolute veto power the Parliament obtained under the Maastricht version of the codecision procedure—the ability to reject a Council common position after a failure to reach an agreement in the conciliation committee—represented a loss of power to Tsebelis (1997), but an increase in power (compared to conditional veto power under cooperation) to Crombez (1997).

In contrast, there is a general consensus that the reform of the codecision procedure in the Amsterdam Treaty, with the removal of the Council's ability to make a unilateral proposal to the Parliament after the conciliation committee, represented a strengthening of the Parliament vis-à-vis the Council and a weakening of the role of the Commission, whose role Crombez (2000) finds almost ignorable. However, Hagemann & Høyland (2010) argue that the Parliament's absolute-majority requirement for amending the common position of the Council in the second reading still gives the Council a slight advantage in the early stages of the procedure.

The usefulness of a formal model depends, at least in part, on its ability to highlight the key features of a process as well as its ability to predict outcomes (Clark & Primo 2012). The formal models of the EU legislative process have certainly improved our understanding of the role of the Parliament in EU legislative politics. In terms of predicting outcomes, however, different empirical approaches have led to different conclusions about the power of the Parliament under the various legislative procedures.

Empirical Evidence

There have been two main empirical methods for assessing the power of the European Parliament in the EU legislative process: amendment analysis and the use of expert interviews to locate actors and outcomes. The latter method was developed partly in response to growing recognition of the methodological problems with amendment analysis.

Amendment analysis as applied to the EU legislative process was pioneered by Amie Kreppel as a graduate student of George Tsebelis. The method developed by Kreppel involved identifying each legislative amendment proposed by the Parliament and tracking whether the amendment was then accepted by the Commission and ultimately by the Council, and so became law. Kreppel also developed a method for identifying whether an amendment was a simple clarification, proposed to extend the legislation, or proposed to substantively change a policy. Clearly the third of these types was most significant. In a study of 24 legislative acts and >500 amendments under the cooperation procedure, Kreppel (1999) found that 37% of the Parliament's amendments, and 28% of the amendments that changed policy, were accepted by the Commission, whereas 20%, and 19% of policy-change amendments, were accepted by the Council. She also found that the

Parliament was more successful on environmental issues and also when the two largest political groups in the Parliament—the center-right European People’s Party and center-left Socialists—worked together (more on this below).

Kreppel (2002b) then extended her study to the codecision procedure and found that more Parliament amendments were accepted by the Commission and the Council under the codecision procedure than under the cooperation procedure. For example, 27% of policy-related amendments were accepted by the Council under the codecision procedure compared to 19% under the cooperation procedure. At face value, this result seemed to refute Tsebelis’s proposition that the Parliament was weaker under the Maastricht version of the codecision procedure than under the old cooperation procedure. However, in a subsequent collaborative study of 231 legislative acts under cooperation and codecision and >5,000 parliamentary amendments, Kreppel and Tsebelis found that “the Commission’s behavior predicts the overall fate of an amendment 85% of the time under cooperation and 70% of the time under codecision” (Tsebelis et al. 2001, p. 595). They concluded that when the Commission and Parliament worked together, they were more powerful under the cooperation procedure than under the codecision procedure, as Tsebelis had predicted.

Kasack (2004) extended this amendment-based research to look at the reformed codecision procedure following the Amsterdam Treaty. She failed to find support for the notion that the Parliament was more successful under codecision II than under codecision I, which is consistent with Crombez (2000) and Hix (2002b) and contradicts Tsebelis (1997).

Nevertheless, by the early 2000s, there was growing skepticism toward the amendment analysis method. One problem, as Michael Shackleton, a senior official in the Parliament administration, once put it at an EU studies conference in the late 1990s, was that “as in life, it is much easier to know the maternity than the paternity of amendments.”¹ A legislative amendment may come from the Parliament, but that does not mean that the Parliament was the source of the amendment. An amendment could come from an interest group, a national government, the Commission, or even the Council. Marshall (2010) demonstrates that interest groups know which MEPs to supply with an amendment if they want to see it proposed by the Parliament. In fact, for the Parliament and the Council to reach a first-reading agreement, which was the norm by the 2004–2009 Parliament, the two institutions have to perfectly coordinate the texts of the amendments they adopt: all Council amendments must be proposed by the Parliament and all Parliament amendments must be proposed by the Council. The growth of first-reading amendments has made amendment analysis almost completely moribund as a method.

A second problem with the amendment analysis method for assessing the power of the Parliament is the variance in information across policy issues and legislative bills. With perfect information, no amendments would be adopted, as the Commission should be able to predict the preferences of the Council and Parliament and so strategically make a proposal that is acceptable to both institutions without further amendment. Hence, observing a large number of amendments proposed by the Parliament and accepted by the Council on one legislative act and no amendments proposed or accepted on another legislative act may simply mean that there was lower information about the Parliament’s preferences on the former issue than the latter issue. In the latter issue, the Parliament may not have needed to propose amendments because the Commission and the Council had already incorporated the Parliament’s views in the draft legislation. Hence, in these two cases, the Parliament’s “power” may actually be inversely related to the number of amendments it successfully secured in the final act.

¹This quotation is recalled by Simon Hix, who was present at the conference, and so might not be perfectly accurate.

Limitations of amendment analysis at least partly explain the motivation of the main alternative method for assessing the power of actors in the EU legislative process. This method involves using structured expert interviews to locate legislative actors, policy outcomes, and the status quo on the key dimensions on a legislative issue. This method, as applied in the EU context, adapts a method developed for analyzing complex decision making (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita & Stokman 1994). The method is to interview all the key actors involved in a decision-making issue and ask them to identify two things: (a) the key issues in the passage of a given piece of legislation and the saliency they attach to each of these issues; and (b) the location of themselves and all the other actors on each of these issues.

The main project using this method was the Decisionmaking in the European Union (DEU) project, which looked at the positions of actors and outcomes on 66 pieces of legislation (Thomson et al. 2006). Thomson (2011) then extended the method to 125 pieces of legislation covering the period before and after the 2004 and 2006 enlargement of the EU from 15 to 27 member states.

Several findings from this project are related to the impact of the European Parliament and are worth highlighting (cf. Stokman & Thomson 2004, Thomson et al. 2006, Thomson & Hosli 2006, König et al. 2007, Thomson 2011). First, a simple weighted mean of the positions of the actors (weighted by the voting power of the actors, e.g., the voting weights of the governments under qualified-majority voting in the Council) outperforms all of the formal “procedural models” of EU legislative politics, such as Tsebelis’s or Crombez’s theories of the codecision procedure. This result suggests that EU decision making is perhaps far more consensual than some models of EU decision making suggest, in that the “average” outcome on a legislative issue appears to have some collective normative value.

Second, and related to the first finding, the Parliament is less powerful than the Council—even under the revised codecision procedure, where the formal powers of the two institutions are identical—in that no legislation can pass without a positive (oversized) majority vote in both institutions. More specifically, policy outcomes tend to be closer to the pivotal member state in the Council than the median MEP. Having said that, Thomson (2011) estimates that the Parliament is more powerful than any individual member state represented in the Council. Hence, empowerment of the Parliament has led to policy outcomes that are (slightly) closer to the preferences of the Parliament, which tends to be more prointegrationist than the average member-state government, than would be the case otherwise.

Third, building on the DEU dataset and method, König et al. (2007) looked specifically at bargaining between the European Parliament and the Council on 73 pieces of legislation that reached the conciliation committee between May 1999 and July 2002. They found that the Parliament did systematically better than the Council if legislation reached this stage of the procedure: outcomes were closer to the position of the Parliament in 56% of cases, closer to that of the Council in 26% of cases, and halfway between the two institutions in 18% of cases. They also found that the Parliament was more likely to “win” at this stage if it was supported by the Commission.

Nevertheless, the expert interview method used in these studies also faces some limitations. The main problem is that experts are interviewed after the legislation has passed. Experts have an incentive to claim credit for particular outcomes, so they are likely to adjust their recalled preferences to claim that they were closer to the legislative outcome on an issue than they actually were. This problem is only partially corrected by asking governments to locate each other, because collectively the governments in the Council are likely to claim that outcomes are closer to the Council’s position than the Parliament’s.

This bias may explain the contradictory results in Thomson (2011) and König et al. (2007) related to the Parliament. The Thomson dataset contains many more experts in the Council than in the Parliament, with several experts per government from the Council on each issue and only

a few experts from the Parliament. In contrast, König et al. add a number of experts from the Parliament for every issue to the DEU data. The balance of interviews in the Council relative to the Parliament in the two studies may consequently be the reason why Thomson finds outcomes closer to the Council than the Parliament and König et al. find outcomes closer to the Parliament than the Council.

Formal models of who has power in the legislative process are not easy to test empirically. Moreover, first-reading agreements in the main EU legislative procedure make it difficult for researchers to identify the positions of key actors and who won and who lost in legislative bargains. In future projects to assess the European Parliament's influence on legislative outcomes, collecting facts that are hard to manipulate post hoc—such as statements of interest groups', governments', and MEPs' opinions during the passage of legislation—may be a good way to supplement and test the reliability of the preference-based data collected in the DEU project (e.g., Klüver 2011).

POWER INSIDE THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: PARTIES AND COMMITTEES

The two main aggregating institutions in the European Parliament, as in many democratic legislatures, are parties and committees.

Party Politics

Politics in the Parliament is dominated by transnational “political groups.” The centrality of the political groups is not a new phenomenon. Already at the first meeting of the European Assembly in 1952, the members of the assembly chose to sit by political orientation rather than by nationality (Haas 1958). The membership of political groups has evolved over time. Group membership based on a traditional European “party family” has proved most stable. The main center-left group, currently labeled the Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (SOC), is composed of the social democratic or labor parties for each of the member states. Its membership has been more stable than that of the main center-right group, the European People's Party (EPP), where tension between Christian democratic and conservative parties has led to repeated mergers and splits over time. Ideology, understood as an aggregate of national parties' policy positions, is a strong predictor of political group membership (McElroy & Benoit 2010, 2012). This suggests that the purpose of these political organizations is policy oriented (Van Oudenhoove 1965, Hix & Lord 1997, Pridham & Pridham 1981, Niedermayer 1983).

This policy orientation is also reflected in the patterns of coalition formation in the chamber. Research on roll-call voting has revealed three main types of winning coalitions in legislative votes: (a) a “grand coalition” of the EPP and SOC, often with the centrist Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) joining these two parties in a “super grand coalition”; (b) a “left coalition” of SOC, ALDE, and the two groups to the left of the socialists, the Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA) and the radical left European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL–NGL); and (c) a “right coalition” of EPP, ALDE, and the main group to the right of the EPP, which is currently the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

When deciding which coalition to form, the leaders of the groups trade off the incentive to present a unified front, which maximizes the Parliament's impact vis-à-vis the other EU institutions, against the desire to take a clear stand on an issue (Kreppel & Tsebelis 1999, Kreppel 2000). Because of the absolute-majority requirement (in the second-reading stage of the codecision procedure), and the need to find solutions acceptable to the oversized majority of the Council as well as the Commission, while at the same time operating as a chamber for contestation between

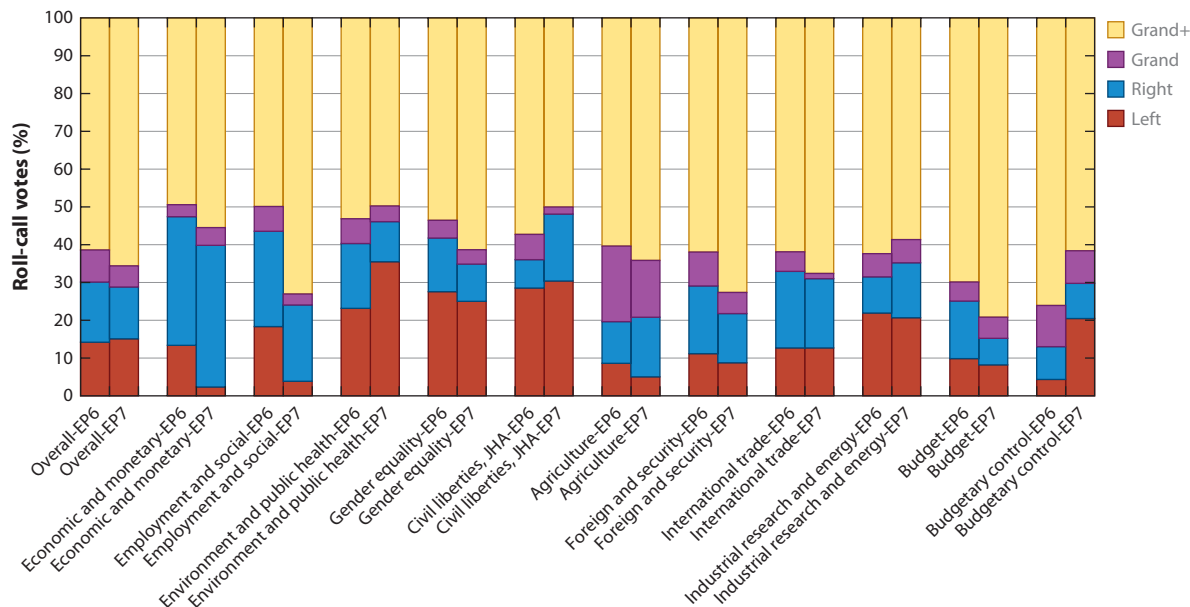


Figure 2

Coalition patterns in the 2004–2009 (EP6) and 2009–2014 (EP7) European Parliaments. Source: <http://www.VoteWatch.eu>. “Grand+” = EPP + SOC + ALDE; “Grand” = EPP + SOC against ALDE; “Right” = EPP + ALDE against SOC; “Left” = SOC + ALDE against EPP. The figure shows the proportion of times each type of coalition occurred in roll-call votes between July 2004 and June 2009 and between July 2009 and May 2012. Two political groups were deemed to have voted the same way if the plurality of members in each group voted the same way (e.g. Yes, No, or Abstain). The votes are grouped by issue area according to the origin of the committee reports. Only those committees were included where >100 votes took place in both sessions of the European Parliament.

competing political ideas, there is a tension between forming a grand coalition and competing along political lines. Indeed, Kreppel & Hix (2003) find that a grand coalition was more likely to form on legislative votes where the institutional rules required an oversized majority, and more likely to form on final votes, thereby sending a strong signal to the Council and the Commission. Meanwhile, Hagemann & Høyland (2010) question the ability of the Parliament to present a united front if the Council is divided, finding that the Parliament is less likely to be able to pass second-reading amendments when at least one government is opposed to the “common position” of the Council.

Although the focus of most research has been on coalitions in roll-call votes in the plenary sessions, Finke (2012) investigates proposal-stage coalitions in the Parliament’s committees. He finds that the *rapporteur* is the key actor at this stage and that the size of the coalition varies by legislative procedure. Although it is often a minority coalition under procedures where the Parliament has only a consultative role, larger coalitions form in the codecision procedure. Many proposal-stage coalitions form around policies that differ from the median-voter outcome.

Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that coalitions in the Parliament vary by policy area and that these policy coalitions are relatively stable over time. This is illustrated in **Figure 2**, which shows the coalition patterns in the 2004–2009 Parliament (EP6) and so far in the 2009–2014 Parliament (EP7). Overall, grand coalitions or super grand coalitions form in ~70% of roll-call votes, whereas a center-right coalition wins in ~15% of votes and a center-left coalition wins in the other 15% of votes.

However, this overall pattern masks significant variation across policy areas. For example, in the EP6 and EP7, a center-right coalition occurred more often than a center-left coalition on

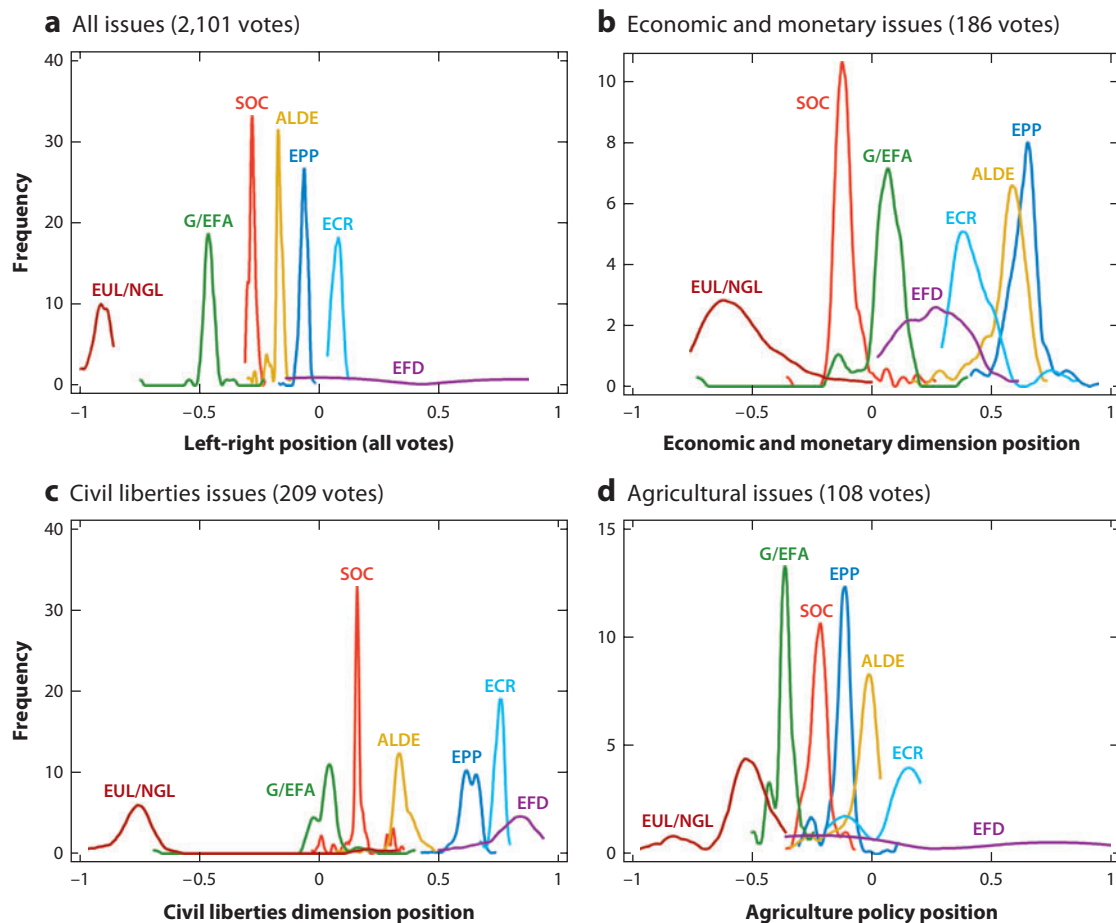


Figure 3

Voting behavior of Members of the European Parliament and political groups by policy area, 2009–2011. These are kernel density plots of the first dimension scores extracted from applying W-NOMINATE to all roll-call votes between July 2009 and December 2011 in each policy area separately.

economic and monetary affairs, employment and social affairs, and international trade. In contrast, a center-left coalition occurred more often than a center-right coalition on environment and public health, gender equality civil liberties, and justice and home affairs.

Figure 3 shows that the main political groups, which are crucial for determining which set of coalitions form, are highly cohesive across these policy areas. Here, we scaled the roll-call votes between July 2009 and December 2011 in each policy area separately, using W-NOMINATE. What is striking is that the extracted ideal points of the MEPs, and the resultant locations of the political groups, vary considerably by policy area. For example, the line-up of the political groups from left to right shifts between the four plots in the figure. For example, on average, the greens (G/EFA) are to the left of the socialists (SOC), whereas the liberals (ALDE) are approximately halfway between SOC and EPP. However, on economic and monetary issues, where a center-right coalition tends to prevail, ALDE and EPP find themselves very close to each other, and G/EFA are slightly to the right of SOC. In contrast, on civil liberties issues, where a center-left coalition often

prevails, ALDE are closer to SOC than EPP. And on agriculture issues, where a grand coalition prevails, ALDE vote to the right of EPP, but the three main political groups (EPP, SOC, and ALDE) are all close together.

Furthermore, this policy-based pattern of winning coalitions seems to be relatively stable across EP6 and EP7. This stability has two implications. First, the liberals (ALDE) are pivotal in many policy areas, as they are often able to decide whether a center-right coalition (with EPP) or a center-left coalition (with SOC) is going to win on a particular policy issue. Second, the stability of the coalitions suggests that on average the EU produces a particular set of policy outcomes that is close to the preferences of many European liberal parties and centrist voters: free-market economic policies (such as deregulation of the single market) and liberal social policies (such as open immigration policies, high environmental standards, and gender equality).

But how is the internal cohesion of the political groups maintained? Application of various scaling metrics to roll-call votes in the European Parliament suggests that the main dimension of voting there is the left-right dimension. The main dimension extracted from roll-call votes highly correlates with the left-right preferences of MEPs or political parties, as measured by expert survey data on party positions or party manifestoes data or MEP survey data (Kreppel & Tsebelis 1999, Thomassen et al. 2002, Hix et al. 2006, Han 2007, Hix & Noury 2009).

This suggests that MEPs are ideologically motivated. However, the left-right positions extracted from roll-call votes are more strongly clustered around the political groups than the commonality of the ideological positions of the national parties composing the groups would indicate (Hix 2002a, McElroy & Benoit 2010). The main explanation for this sort of behavior is that MEPs are engaged in a repeated game in which each MEP carefully calculates whether voting against his group is likely to pay off in the future (Hix et al. 2009). As the political groups have become more institutionalized in terms of internal division of labor and organizational structure, voting cohesion has increased. The main political groups are more cohesive than parties in the US Congress but less cohesive than parliamentary parties in most of the EU member states. Bigger groups are more cohesive than smaller groups, and cohesion has increased as these groups have become ever larger, despite growing ideological and national heterogeneity (Hix et al. 2005). Although larger groups can allow for more specialization and division of labor, which aids cohesion, Bailer et al. (2009) show that some party leaders are indeed more able to unite their groups in roll-call votes than others.

In other words, the European political groups behave in a more cohesive manner in recorded votes than their party manifestoes or expert opinion surveys predict. The groups enable MEPs to organize with like-minded politicians to influence the policy agenda of, and the policy outcomes from, the European Parliament. The political groups establish a division of labor between the MEPs, between leaders and followers, and between policy specialists in the committees. In return, MEPs are willing to follow voting instructions from the group, in the knowledge that collectively each group can be more influential than any single MEP acting alone. National parties and MEPs whose policy positions are not completely congruent with the median position of the political group to which they belong are usually willing to face the costs of sometimes following group instructions against their own policy preferences in the knowledge that other MEPs and national parties in their group will do the same.

Nevertheless, there is some skepticism about the claims relating to the powers of the political groups to enforce voting cohesion in the Parliament. One concern is that there may be a selection bias in roll-call votes, as these votes only constitute a minority of all votes (MEPs often vote in plenary by a show of hands). Roll-call votes are held only if requested by a political group, and a political group might request a roll-call vote for various reasons, such as the desire to signal the position of the group to outside interest groups or the other EU institutions, or to show how the other groups vote, or to enforce group cohesion (Carrubba et al. 2006, 2008). Such strategic

incentives may mean that the political groups are more cohesive on recorded than unrecorded votes (Hug 2010). In addition, roll-call requests are not proportional to the policy issues on the agenda; they are called predominantly on nonlegislative issues (Carrubba et al. 2006). Political groups are more cohesive on nonlegislative issues, where the Parliament controls the agenda, than on legislative issues, where the Parliament is forced to take positions on issues that are proposed by the other EU institutions (Hix et al. 2007, Høyland 2010). Political groups are more cohesive when requesting a roll call than when a roll call is requested by another political group (Hix et al. 2007).

Although selection bias in roll-call votes deserves consideration, it may be overstated. The number of roll-call votes has increased over time, roll calls are requested on most salient votes, and because any political group can request a roll-call vote, it is difficult for any one party to restrict roll-call votes to issues where they can enforce cohesion. Even if there may be selection effects going into roll-call votes, the policy outcomes in the European Parliament, and hence in the EU as a whole, would have been different in the absence of the political groups and the patterns of coalition formation between these groups.

Committee Organization and Behavior

As in the US Congress, in the European Parliament most legislation is prepared in one or more committees before being debated and voted on in the plenary. This section discusses the role of the committees in the Parliament's interactions with the other EU institutions. The committees play a key role in the process of screening potential new Commissioners as well as in the day-to-day legislative process.

In discussing the rationale for establishing the committee system in the European Parliament, the literature has followed the theoretical debate about whether committees in the US Congress are best explained by distributive, informational, or partisan rationales (Shepsle & Weingast 1994). Yordanova (2009) tests the three congressional committee theories on committee seat allocation in the 2004–2009 European Parliament. She finds that on average the political groups' seat shares in the committees are broadly proportional to their seat shares in the plenary. There are, however, clear differences across committees. The composition of some committees seems to be best described as heterogeneous, in line with an informational logic, whereas the composition of other committees seems to be fairly homogeneous, in line with what we would expect from a distributive logic. In contrast, Yordanova fails to find much evidence for the partisan rationale. In accordance with the distributive perspective, Whitaker (2001) finds that MEPs claim to be able to self-select into committees. McElroy (2006) finds that MEPs in the environmental committee tend to have closer links with environmental groups than the average MEP. However, McElroy also finds that in terms of policy preferences, using ideal-point estimates from roll-call votes, the committees are representative of the Parliament as a whole. This is consistent with the classic study by Bowler & Farrell (1995), which found that although MEPs may be allowed to specialize in their favorite policy area, their behavior in the committees is controlled by the political groups.

Inside the committees, the key actor on legislative issues is the *rapporteur*: the MEP who is responsible for writing a report on a piece of legislation and steering the legislation through the committee and the plenary. As a general rule, rapporteurships are allocated to MEPs on the basis of an auction-like points system between the political groups in each committee (Corbett et al. 2000). However, the committee chairs are given some discretion on this matter, so the practice has varied across committees and over time (Wurzel 1999).

Consistent with the distributive perspective, Kaeding (2004) finds that MEPs from member states with higher environmental standards tended to be overrepresented as *rapporteurs* in the environmental committee. Mamadouh & Raunio (2003) find that the allocation of reports is

not fully proportional between political groups and between the national delegations within the groups. Their results also highlight the role of the national delegations within each group. But perhaps the clearest rebuttal of the power of political groups in the allocation of *rapporteurships* is Kreppel's (2002a, p. 202) argument:

[A]lthough the Rules of Procedure of the EP, the Rules of Procedure of the two largest groups, and the bulk of current literature suggest that the power to decide the allocation of such benefits as committee chairs and *Rapporteurships* lies with the group leaders, the fact is that it does not. The unwritten norms of both party groups delegate this authority to the national delegations in their midst.

Along similar lines, Whitaker (2005) finds that, on codecision legislation, the committees are largely representative of national party delegations.

The political group-centric, rather than national delegation-centric, view is perhaps best represented by Yoshinaka et al. (2010), who find that distance from the median of the political group is a strong and robust predictor of report allocation, whereas distance to the median in the national party does not seem to matter. Along similar lines, Hausemer (2006) finds that reports are allocated to MEPs who are representative of the political group as a whole. He also shows that MEPs from smaller national party delegations are more likely to write reports than MEPs from larger delegations.

At the individual level, there is evidence of self-selection into the role of *rapporteur*. Yoshinaka et al. (2010) demonstrate that reports are allocated to an active subset of MEPs, since participation in roll-call votes is positively associated with writing reports. Kaeding (2004, 2005) finds that *rapporteurs* in the environmental committee tend to have ties with environmentalist groups, suggesting that reports are not allocated proportionally among MEPs, a finding that supports the distributive theory.

However, Jensen & Winzen (2012) evaluate the distributive, informational, and partisan perspectives in terms of patterns of participation in legislative negotiations. Relying on social network analysis, they find least support for the distributive approach and somewhat more support for the informational perspective. Overall, they find that the partisan perspective provides the best fit with the patterns in the data. Yordanova (2011) distinguishes between codecision and consultation reports. For the former, she finds a strong seniority effect, whereas the latter is more open to expertise and special interests. In line with Yoshinaka et al. (2010), Yordanova also finds that members who are disloyal to their political group (in roll-call votes) are less likely to be allocated reports.

In short, although distributive and informational aspects may be present in the operation of the committee system in the European Parliament, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the committee system is controlled by the political groups and the national party delegations within them. However, the balance of power between national party delegations and political groups remains disputed.

Separate from the debate about why the committees exist, there is a debate about whether *rapporteurs* are mainly oriented toward institutional, partisan, or national interests. Benedetto (2005) describes the *rapporteur* as a "legislative entrepreneur," highlighting the tasks of consensus building within the Parliament and defending the interest of the Parliament when interacting with the Council and the Commission during the legislative process. Høyland (2006), meanwhile, finds that MEPs from national parties represented in the Council are more likely to act as *rapporteurs* on codecision reports, perhaps because these MEPs have easier access to information about the position of the government inside the Council. Related to this view, Costello & Thomson (2010) find that early agreements (in the first-reading stage) enable *rapporteurs* to bias Parliament opinions

toward the positions of the *rapporteurs*' member states, while finding no bias toward the political groups.

It has long been warned that the possibility for the *rapporteur* to present a first-reading agreement with the Council as a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the committee and the plenary allowed a substantial amount of discretion to the *rapporteur* (Shackleton & Raunio 2003, Farrell & Héritier 2004). The finding of Costello & Thomson (2010) suggests that this discretion is used to promote national interests. However, if this is the case, it is not clear why the Parliament would allow the *rapporteur* to promote her national interests at the early stages of the codecision procedure. Rasmussen & Toshkov (2011) show that the Parliament allocates disproportionately more time to first-reading codecision legislation than to legislation passed under other procedures. Furthermore, it is the *rapporteurs* whose revealed preferences are close to the Parliament median that are most likely to conclude first-reading agreements (Rasmussen 2011).

THE WEAK ELECTORAL CONNECTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

So far, the role of the European Parliament in the EU's multicameral legislative system and the internal politics of the European Parliament, based on parties and committees, look remarkably similar to the role of the House of Representative in the US system of government. Not surprisingly, many of the theoretical approaches and empirical techniques developed for understanding organization and behavior in the US Congress have been successfully applied to the European Parliament. However, there remains one glaring difference between the US Congress and the European Parliament: in the former there is a powerful "electoral connection" between citizens and elected legislators, whereas in the latter this connection is extremely weak.

In fact, it is not a major overstatement to claim that the electoral connection in the European Parliament is almost nonexistent! Specifically, the election and reelection prospects of almost all MEPs have more to do with the position of the MEPs' national party in the domestic arena—such as the party's governing status, the timing of the European Parliament election in the national electoral cycle, and the performance of the national government—than with how the MEP has behaved or what the MEP has done inside the European Parliament (e.g., Hix & Marsh 2007). The lack of an electoral connection is mainly due to the incentives of national parties to treat European Parliament elections as midterm polls on the policies and performance of the current domestic government. These incentives mean that most national parties would rather campaign on their policies and candidates for domestic office rather than on the record of their politicians, or the behavior of the political group to which they belong, in the European Parliament.

Having said that, there is some evidence that the rules guiding the electoral connection do matter for the type of candidates that are elected to the European Parliament and for their behavior inside the Parliament once elected. There is no uniform electoral rule for the Parliament. Although all member states use a system of proportional representation (PR), about half of the member states use a preferential system, i.e., "open" list PR or single transferable vote. In these countries, voters can choose between candidates from the same party as well as between parties. In contrast, the "closed" list operating for the European Parliament elections in the other half of the member states only offers voters the chance to choose between preordered lists of candidates from each of the parties. For example, MEPs elected under preferential systems tend to spend more time campaigning directly to voters and representing the interests of their constituencies in the Parliament than MEPs elected under closed-list systems (Farrell & Scully 2007). Furthermore, voters are more likely to be contacted by candidates and be better informed about the elections under open-list electoral rules (Hix & Hagemann 2009). Inside the Parliament, MEPs elected under preferential electoral systems tend to be more independent from their national parties and more responsive to

the instructions from their European political groups (Hix 2004). The attention paid by national parties to politics inside the European Parliament has varied over time (Raunio 2000). Within each legislative term, there is evidence that national monitoring is strongest close to national elections (Lindstädt et al. 2011). Also, newly elected MEPs may take some time to learn to balance the competing demands from national parties and European political groups (Lindstädt et al. 2012).

But, in general, the lack of an electoral connection in the European Parliament means that political organization and behavior in the Parliament cannot be motivated by strict reelection incentives. For example, the voting behavior of MEPs, the assignments and activities of MEPs in committees, the formation of political parties in the Parliament and coalitions between these parties, and the way the Parliament and MEPs behave in legislative bargains with the EU Council and Commission must be explained by other political motivations, such as the policy objectives or career incentives of MEPs.

Regarding policy objectives, MEPs are motivated to secure policy outcomes in the Parliament as close as possible to their personal preferences. This helps explain the development of the political groups, for example. The political groups in the Parliament do not help MEPs get reelected but do enable them to organize with politicians with similar preferences across a range of policy issues to influence the policy agenda and policy outcomes in the Parliament. From this perspective, the political groups in the European Parliament are rather like the parliamentary factions that formed in many national parliaments in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, prior to mass democratic elections, which emerged to promote their members' policy positions rather than to fight election campaigns (cf. Hix et al. 2007).

Regarding career incentives, in an early study of MEP careers, Scarrow (1997) identifies three main roles of the European Parliament in career trajectories: (a) as a stepping stone and training ground for a career in national politics; (b) as a reward after a career in national politics; and (c) as a long-term career in EU politics. Whether an MEP is trying to return to national politics, regards the Parliament as a "retirement home," or sees it as a permanent career should have a significant influence on both how active that MEP is likely to be in the Parliament and which types of activities the MEP is likely to prioritize. The career path of an MEP is also likely to influence how he or she campaigns in European Parliament elections. For example, Hobolt & Høyland (2011) find that MEPs who have already pursued a career in domestic politics tend to be more successful in European Parliament elections, in that they receive a higher share of votes than do inexperienced national politicians or Brussels-based careerists.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the only directly elected supranational assembly in the world, the European Parliament, from a toothless consultation chamber to a powerful legislative institution is a remarkable development. Historians, political scientists, and political economists will no doubt continue to argue about how and why this happened for many years to come. Instead of focusing on this debate, we have focused our review on what political scientists have learned about the impact of the empowerment of the European Parliament on legislative politics in the EU as well as inside this relatively new and fascinating legislature.

In terms of the policy impact of the Parliament on the operation of the EU, both the theoretical models of the EU legislative process and the empirical evidence support the view that the Parliament now has a significant impact on policy outcomes in Brussels, particularly under the codecision (ordinary legislative) procedure. There is an unresolved theoretical debate about whether the different majority requirements in the two institutions—qualified majority in the

Council and simple majority in the Parliament (at least at first reading)—means that the Parliament has to compromise more than the Council. Also, the new norm of passing legislation at first reading represents a new challenge for empirical researchers when trying to figure out “who gets what, when and how” in the EU legislative process. However, we now have some excellent EU legislative datasets, which can be supplemented with detailed documentary and other qualitative evidence. A further challenge for the next generation of researchers in this area is to shift the focus from the power of the European Parliament in the EU to a focus on what the Parliament has actually done with this power. For example, are EU policy outcomes more or less integrationist or further to the left or the right than would be the case without the Parliament, and how has this changed over time?

This question leads to the second area we focused on: internal politics in the European Parliament. We now know that the Parliament, like almost all other democratic legislatures, is dominated by political parties, both as organizations and as political coalitions of like-minded legislators. We also know that majority coalitions in the Parliament tend to be policy specific, with a center-left majority forming on some issues and a center-right majority forming on other issues. How and why this occurs has not been thoroughly investigated yet.

The issue of shifting policy coalitions is of general interest in comparative politics. In one sense, shifting policy coalitions are unique to the European Parliament; such shifts do not happen in most national parliaments, where the majority party or coalition of parties tends to be able to control the agenda and so dominate on all policy issues (e.g., Cox & McCubbins 2005). On the other hand, shifting party-based policy coalitions may be more universal in legislative politics than one might initially think. Under minority government in both parliamentary and presidential systems, for example, governments have to build majorities issue by issue (Strøm 1990, Cheibub 2007). Also, in multiparty systems where different coalition governments form over time, the policy content of the various governments shifts depending on the party-political make-up of each coalition (e.g., Laver & Shepsle 1996). And, given the policy preferences of centrist parties in many democracies, some policy coalitions might be more likely to form across all democracies than others, such as a center-right coalition (between liberals/centrists and conservatives) on economic issues and a center-left coalition (between liberals/centrists and social democrats) on social issues.

Hence, what we might be observing in the European Parliament could in fact be a case of a general political phenomenon in modern democratic politics. In that case, a better understanding of the causes and consequences of these policy-specific coalitions would produce a more sophisticated understanding of the politics in, and power of, Europe’s elected assembly. Also, understanding how and why politics in the European Parliament varies across policy areas may shed new light on legislative politics more generally.

Finally, the lack of a strong electoral connection in the European Parliament is both a challenge for researchers and an opportunity. The fact that MEPs are unlikely to be rewarded or punished in elections for their actions inside the Parliament means that theoretical models cannot simply be taken “off the rack” from the study of the US Congress, where a strong electoral connection is a standard underlying assumption. But the lack of an electoral incentive also provides an opportunity for European Parliament scholars to develop different theoretical underpinnings of some of the standard explanations for legislative behavior. If the formation of parties or the division of labor in committees cannot be explained by electoral incentives, then other motivations—such as policy concerns or career paths—need to be taken more seriously. If we can understand how career and policy motivations shape legislative behavior in the European Parliament, this knowledge will supplement or perhaps even challenge the general models of legislative behavior that assume that reelection is the dominant goal of legislators.

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