

Values topple nationality in the European Parliament

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Abstract This article shows that the internal unity of EU political groups, the legislative arm of the EU-level parties, is surprisingly high, despite the increasing cultural and geographical diversity among member states as a result of successive EU enlargements. Members of the European Parliament come from 28 countries with very different economic situations, cultural contexts and religious traditions. Some are members of governing parties, while others are in opposition. And yet this article shows that, generally speaking, the socialising effect of being part of a group with shared values contributes significantly to shaping a common vision of what the future of the EU should be and how our societies should function. However, this process is not yet visible enough to the public. This lack of visibility could pose a significant challenge to creating a truly European public space and a genuinely democratic Union. Both are prerequisites to ensuring the EU's key role in the world and the prosperity of its citizens.

Keywords European political groups · Cohesion · Values · Integration · EU public space

Introduction

The political parties from across the European continent have formed transnational political families, based on their values. The 'internationalisation' of political parties started in the late nineteenth century, but it was brought to a completely new level once the European Parliament (EP) came into existence, as

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the parties then had the chance to compare their views and negotiate their positions on the same policy dilemmas at the same time.

From the beginning, the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have formed parliamentary groups not according to their nationality, but according to their ideology—just as in national parliaments parliamentary groups are formed by the members who share similar policy orientations in order to better coordinate, share resources and exert influence on policy.

This article analyses the voting behaviour of these pan-European parliamentary groups, whose cohesion and internal splits are used as indicators of the actual symmetries and divisions between national parties belonging to the same political orientation.

How cohesive are the European parliamentary groups in the new term?

The pan-European parties have long been considered mere consultative bodies, rather than decision-making ones. Power has always remained in the hands of the national party chiefs and the heads of state. Traditionally, the leading political figures within the EU institutions, whether commissioners or MEPs, have been seen as following instructions from their party bosses back home.

But the aftermath of the 2014 European elections may indicate a change of direction. Since the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has become bolder, not only when negotiating legislation, but also when appointing the EU's chief executives. MEPs have been able not only to create a united front among themselves but also to rally support among their colleagues at national level using the structures of the European parties. Ultimately, they submit their candidate for the presidency of the European Commission.

Moreover, as shown by VoteWatch Europe, an organisation that tracks the votes and activities of MEPs, the internal cohesion of the EU political groups is surprisingly high despite the increasing cultural and geographical diversity that has resulted from successive EU enlargements (VoteWatch Europe 2015b).¹ MEPs come from 28 countries with different economic situations, and different cultural and religious traditions. Some come from governing parties while others are in opposition. They speak 24 different languages. Individually, they would say that this makes it difficult and time-consuming for them to understand each other and reach common positions. And yet it seems that, generally speaking, the socialising effect of being part of a group with shared values contributes significantly to shaping a common vision of what the future of the EU should be and how our societies should function. Not least, the increasing security concerns both on the eastern frontier (concerning the conflict in Ukraine) and elsewhere (the emergence of Islamic State in particular) seem to have acted as catalysts for finding communalities within political families.

¹ Measures of cohesion or unity assess the extent to which MEPs belonging to the same political group vote the same way in EP plenary roll-call votes.

Since the 2014–2019 EP term got under way, most of the political groups have shown a high level of internal cohesion. This may be explained by the fact that half of the MEPs are new and have not yet been able to develop their own individual positions. The largest European political group, that of the European People's Party (EPP), has proved better at mobilising its MEPs in this first part of the parliamentary term. As a result it continues to be the leading EP group, despite substantial losses in the May 2014 elections. This can partly be explained by the more fragmented political landscape. This has resulted in the EPP being under increased pressure from both the left and the right, a likely incentive for its backbenchers to support their leaders.

At the end of 2014, the level of internal cohesion of the EPP reached a record 95 %, the highest level since 2004, when VoteWatch began measuring this indicator. Similarly, the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, once the fourth most cohesive group, has moved to second place, having improved its score from 88 % to 91 % (VoteWatch Europe 2015b).

The Conservatives and Reformists Group has, in theory, become stronger after the elections, as it is now the third largest in the parliament. In practice, however, its new structure, in which the British and Polish delegations are almost on a par, has apparently been making it more difficult than before to reach a common position. The group has lost 10 % in cohesion, going from 86 % to 76 %.

On the left, the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats is slightly less cohesive than before the elections. But the biggest negative change belongs to the Group of the Greens and the European Free Alliance; this group lost 6 %, reaching a record low of 88.5 % at the end of 2014. In reality however, these figures are an overestimate as the first six months of a term are a period of adaptation: half of the MEPs are new and many parties face changes in their internal composition as well as changes in the group's leadership. Over time, the disparity in cohesion should narrow within these groups.

Last but not least, the Eurosceptics of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group have been finding it much more difficult than any other group to agree among themselves. In fact, they vote as a group only about half of the time, while in other instances they effectively cancel out each other's votes. This indicates that in this particular case the reasons for creating a group are much less about values than about logistics and strategy. Being part of a group helps individual members gain access to speaking time, reports, information and financial resources. It is worth mentioning here the failed attempt of the National Front (Front National) and its allies in 2014 to form yet another Eurosceptic, nationalist group. This did not succeed, largely because of the lack of coalition potential; that is, they were unable to find enough members from enough countries to side with their MEPs.

What are the historical trends?

The historical trends seem to confirm that political groups have generally become more organised over time, especially since the last European elections



and the Lisbon Treaty. The role of the EP has also increased. Therefore, to obtain a more accurate assessment, we should look at similar types of decisions. An analysis of cohesive voting behaviour, limited to co-decision issues,² shows a positive trend for most of the political groups (EPP, Socialists, Liberals, Greens, Group of the Conservatives and Reformists/Union of Europe of the Nations) throughout the interval starting with the fourth parliamentary term (which began in 1994) to 2013.

Interestingly, this trend has continued even in the wake of the big-bang enlargement of 2004 when 10 countries joined the EU. Many feared then that the increasing cultural and geographical variety would lead to chaos, both in the EU legislative process and within political groups. The data shows that this did not happen. It stands as solid proof of the importance of shared values and of the capacity of European groups to act as key catalysts for dialogue, consensus building and, ultimately, European integration. (This applies for the groups that support European integration, whose internal cohesion is substantially higher than that of the groups that oppose further integration, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, within the groups, the behaviour of the national party delegations coming from the new member states does not appear to have changed after the first few years of 'learning the ropes', even though the confidence that their constituents—the citizens of the 'new Europe'—have in the EU institutions has decreased during the economic crisis which succeeded the initial wave of enthusiasm.

What divides the members of a political group?

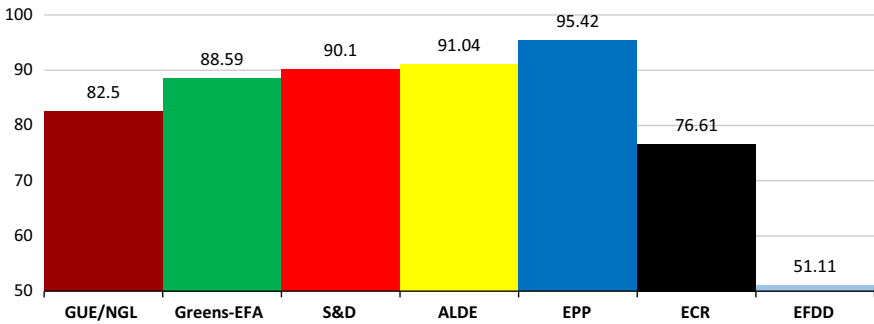
MEPs are agents with two principals: their constituents and their group leadership. An MEP represents the interests of his or her constituents and has to try to shape EU decisions in accordance with the needs and desires of the citizens he or she represents. To be effective, however, an MEP has to build trust among his or her political group colleagues and make trade-offs.

In particular situations, the interests of the constituents in a country or subnational constituency are (or are perceived to be) disproportionately affected by a decision. This gives the MEPs involved a greater incentive to vote differently from the majority of their group colleagues. In other situations, it is ethical topics that are responsible for group divisions. This differs from one group to another, depending on the hierarchy of priorities or values in each group. The impact of the decision, whether it is a simple recommendation or a binding law, also seems to play a role in how cohesive a group is.

For example, EPP Group members usually have a common line on votes that impact directly on the economy (e.g. votes involving the 'Six Pack') and the allocation of funds, the internal market (e.g. strengthening the internal market for services), international trade (e.g. negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), budget matters and even agriculture (which accounts

² The co-decision procedure was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty and is well established.

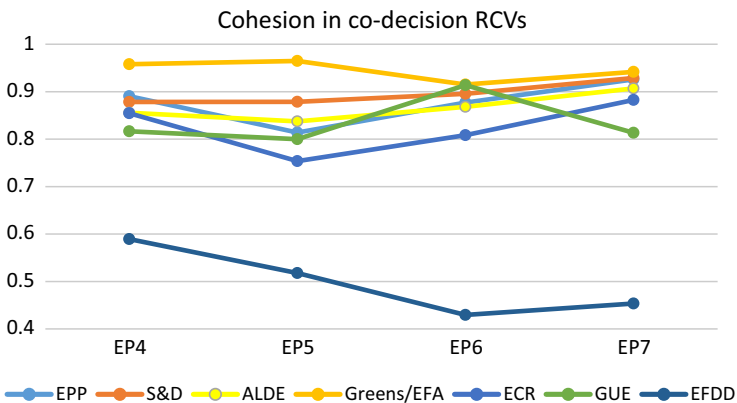
Fig. 1 European political group cohesion rates in all policy areas, 1 July 2014–31 December 2014



Source: Data from VoteWatch Europe (2015b, 8)

Note: GUE/NGL United European Left and Nordic Green Left, Greens-EFA Greens and European Free Alliance, S & D Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, ALDE Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, EPP European People’s Party, ECR European Conservatives and Reformists, EFDD Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy.

Fig. 2 Cohesion in co-decision roll-call votes (1994–2013)



Source: Data from VoteWatch Europe (2013a, 4)

Note: EPP European People’s Party, S & D Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats and its predecessors, ALDE Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe and its predecessors, Greens/EFA Greens and European Free Alliance, UEN/ECR Union of Europe of the Nations and European Conservatives and Reformists, GUE United European Left, EFDD Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy.



for around 40 % of the EU budget). On the other hand, EPP MEPs generally agree to have free voting on ethical issues. Here, cultural factors play a more important role. Moreover, voting is generally non-binding and more a matter of sending a political message. The issues involved include those linked to abortion; the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community; and gender equality.³

On the left side of the political spectrum, we observe a somewhat different pattern. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group has been more cohesive on civil liberties and social issues and less cohesive on dossiers that deal with economic policies, trade and, during the last term, agriculture. This trend could be explained by the fact that matters based on religion—such as traditional family values—play a lesser role for the MEPs of this group and the left in general (compared with the EPP). Moreover, members of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats are likely to be influenced more by local trade unions and show a comparatively higher level of protectionist behaviour.

The policy area of environment and public health has proved to be among the most divisive for both the centre–right and the centre–left. This is explained by the greater diversity of environmental regulations in various member states and the fact that the EU has strong prerogatives in this area. For example, many of the documents voted on are legally binding and have to be implemented across the EU.

What is the impact of vote tracking?

Since 2009, VoteWatch Europe has been tracking, in real time, all votes of the MEPs in the EP plenary. Individual MEPs and political groups seem to find our web platform helpful. They use it as a tool to track developments in voting behaviour in the EP. VoteWatch also measures the level of loyalty to the political group and the national party delegation to which MEPs belong.⁴ However, it does not make value judgements, loyalty in this case being simply a measurement of the extent to which an MEP votes in the same way as the majority of his or her colleagues. This calculation does not rely on the voting lists of the political groups. As mentioned above, it is understood that an MEP has to vote according to his or her conscience and in line with the interests of his or her constituents. But he or she also has to show solidarity with political colleagues, since they can prove useful in defending common interests when negotiating with, or voting against, other groups.

The leaderships of the groups show interest in the way their groups are perceived by the public, for example whether or not they are seen as united. This being the case, one would expect internal debate to be generated by the publication of both results related to the cohesion of the groups and, more

³ For a full table of cohesion scores for the period from 2004 to the present, see the VoteWatch Europe website (www.votewatch.eu).

⁴ For the ranking of the loyalty rates of the MEPs for the current EP term, see VoteWatch Europe (2015a).

specifically, the rankings by degree of cohesion. Regardless of whether these statistical results come from outside sources or the internal monitoring of the groups, the groups in favour of EU integration are likely to aim to be more cohesive, in order to demonstrate to citizens that they are a strong force and for the practical purpose of winning votes in the EP. Consequently, one can expect their leadership to try to find ways to accommodate the interests of the MEPs who are likely to break away from the group line. This can be done with both 'carrots' and 'sticks'. For example, the leadership can pave the way for an MEP to gain more visibility and influence within the group and in the EP as a whole—through rapporteurships, key posts, speaking time, and support for amendments and other personal initiatives. But the leadership can also refrain from providing such opportunities.

On the other hand, the national bosses, home party leadership and constituents have their reasons for wanting to influence an MEP's voting behaviour and to hold him or her to account. They have ways of achieving this end that go even beyond those available to the group leadership—provided they are constantly aware of the MEP's activity. They can provide visibility and influence in the local arena, as well as support for re-election.

It seems reasonable to believe that MEPs would have a greater inclination to vote in line with the interests of that segment of their constituents, bosses and allies that follows and scrutinises their activity the most closely. Think of a situation where an MEP knows that the European group leadership is highly aware of his or her voting behaviour, while his or her national party or constituents in the member state are completely unaware of it. One would expect that, all other things being equal, the MEP would be more motivated to vote along the European group line than if the situations were reversed.

Despite this, our data shows that MEPs are more loyal to their national party delegation than to the European political group. If there is a difference between the position of their fellow countrymen coming from the same party and the majority of their European group, they tend to follow the national party line. But how has the cohesion of the groups increased at the same time? The likely answer is that the differences between various national party delegations within a group have become fewer. This could mean that there has been a decrease in the number of situations where an MEP has to choose between the position of the national party delegation and that of the European group as a whole.

What does the public think about European party cohesion?

Reactions from the public have been mixed. We have encountered quite a few people who are still surprised to find that MEPs form coalitions largely according to their political families and not on the basis of nationality. (This finding may come as a surprise to political experts.) There are some who expect that MEPs from their country will stand united, regardless of the political family, to defend the perceived national interest. The latest Parlemeter finds that only 48 % of the public know that MEPs sit in transnational groups, and only 40 % believe that



the decisions in the EP are made according to political affinities. The results differ considerably between countries in the north and west (the older EU members) and those in the east and south (newer members)—with the newer EU members being more inclined to think that nationality prevails (European Parliament Directorate-General for Communication Public Opinion Monitoring Unit and TNS Opinion 2015, 32–5).

This perception may be at least partly generated by the rhetoric during the electoral campaigns, when some politicians resort to statements such as ‘Choose me to represent our country in Brussels.’ It is likely that this perception is intensified because many people fail to understand that what counts as being in the national interest can differ greatly from person to person. For example, one group may think that being part of a stronger EU is in the national interest, while another might believe it to be in the national interest to take an anti-European stance. Similarly, for one citizen it may be in the national interest to have a more social Europe, while for another it could be to have more open markets. This combination of choices means that EU debates are conducted on what is largely a two-dimensional basis: pro-EU or anti-EU, and left versus right. There seems to be a natural inclination that leads individual citizens to believe that *all* politicians should do what he or she thinks best. In reality, what one citizen thinks to be the optimum socio-economic arrangement is unlikely to be the same for another with a different profile. It is here that the need for political pluralism fits in.

This difference in the views of various political forces is more easily seen by the citizens at the national level, thanks to the continuous political debates, which are communicated better than those at the European level. The lack of exposure to the EP debates via the media prevents large sections of the public from understanding that EU politics are very similar to those at national level. Consequently, in the absence of public debates about the EU, a part of the public is unaware that pan-European political groups exist. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process, through which the European political parties nominated their candidates to the European Commission presidency at the start of the electoral campaign in 2014, included debates between the leading candidates in several countries and in three languages. To some extent this has helped communicate the idea of political pluralism at EU level, particularly in the countries that put forward candidates. For example, centre-right oriented citizens in Germany probably realised that their views more closely matched those of a non-German, Jean-Claude Juncker, than those of a centre-left German, Martin Schulz. And of course, the opposite applies for centre-left oriented citizens in Luxembourg.

Citizens who tried out the unique tools developed by VoteWatch Europe in the run-up to the 2014 elections had a similar experience. Two websites, MyVote2014 and Electio2014, included a ‘vote match’ tool that allowed users to vote on 15 items on which MEPs had also voted and then to compare their own views against those of each MEP. These tools are the only ones of their kind at EU level, as the matching is not based on the party agenda but on actual MEP votes. As a result, the tools can indicate not only the party but also the individual MEP who comes closest to a user’s views. In many instances the best match for a participant was an MEP from another country. Even though the user cannot vote

for that person, the result demonstrates to the public the power of values and ideology, which go beyond country borders. It also helps people understand why MEPs sit in political groups and why they usually vote in line with the majority in those groups. Moreover, this exercise would become even more useful were a pan-European constituency to be created (in addition to the national ones). Such a constituency was proposed in a report by former MEP Andrew Duff during the 2009–14 term but did not rally enough support at that time (European Parliament, Committee on Constitutional Affairs 2011).

Conclusions

The tracking of voting behaviour in the EP could prove extremely useful for understanding trends in EU politics. The surprisingly high level of unity among MEPs belonging to the same European political family can be seen as a key indication of the growing integration of European political elites and of the increasing desire and incentive to find communalities across topics. The members of individual groups are finding that the issues that bring them together greatly outnumber those that divide them.

However, this trend is not yet obvious to the larger public, particularly in the countries that have joined the EU more recently. This continues to pose a serious impediment to correctly communicating the developments, debates and decision-making processes in EU politics. It is still difficult for the public to perceive that EU politics is about more than various national governments fighting each other for their own interests, that it is also about values and alternatives put forward by the transnational political families. In such circumstances, it is imperative that the European parties, EP groups and national parties find ways and resources to educate the electorate and to effectively communicate their political agendas, priorities and achievements—as well as to explain why these are better than those of the competing political actors. This is the only way in which a true European democratic space can be created. And this democratic space is required as a precondition to the strengthening of a political Union capable of engaging and uniting the citizens in 28 countries (or more).

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