



PADEMIA PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Research Notes on Parliamentary Democracy 3/2017

The European Parliament's political groups: between high cohesion and recurrent breakdowns

Lorenzo Cicchi

Series Editors: Katrin Auel and Resul Umit

This research note series is published by the
PADEMIA: Parliamentary Democracy in Europe.

The European Parliament's political groups: between high cohesion and recurrent breakdowns

Lorenzo Cicchi

The political groups in the European Parliament (EP) have been generally described as cohesive actors: members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from the same political group are likely to vote together, regardless of their nationality. Based on his recently published book on MEPs' voting behaviour, Lorenzo Cicchi analyses those roll-call votes where political groups of the European Parliament (EPGs) are exceptionally divided, reaching partially counter-intuitive results. He argues that what is generally overlooked is that the high levels of party cohesion in the EP may be a 'statistical artefact', in the sense that a substantial number of divisive votes are drowned out by a large majority of votes where party groups are highly or almost completely cohesive.

Over the past thirty years, one of the most remarkable democratic developments in Europe has been the gradual empowerment of the EP, the only directly elected supranational legislative chamber in the world. From its first gathering in 1952 as the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, in its sixty-year history the EP has evolved from a mere consultative body into a full-fledged legislative chamber. Consequently, understanding the decisions of the EP on legislative proposals has become more and more important for explaining the legislative production of the EU.



The EP, overall, is a parliament where votes are defined by political membership



Interest in the general question 'how do MEPs vote?' has attracted increasing academic attention since the early 1980s, following the first direct elections to the EP. From that point on, a consolidated stream of literature, relying mainly on quantitative analyses of recorded roll-call votes (RCVs), has treated EPGs as highly cohesive actors and described

voting patterns as almost exclusively defined by the left-right cleavage.

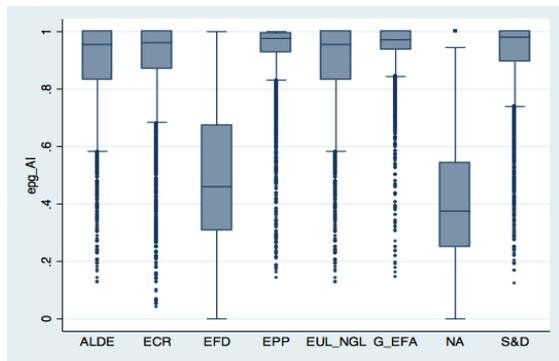
However, when discussing party-group cohesion in the European Parliament, existing studies usually look at numerical indexes of cohesion (such as the Agreement Index, AI) and presents the scores calculated not for the single vote, but aggregated over a certain time span. I argue that this may lead to the underestimation of some of the EP's internal dynamics. In other words, a high average cohesion of European political groups may be the result of every vote where EPGs are highly cohesive, or the result of a large number of votes where EPGs are completely united and a minority of votes where EPGs are completely divided.

Are EPGs always cohesive or do they break down from time to time?

A useful exercise, in order to assess the effective cohesion of EPGs and to give a brief idea of the complexity of voting behaviour of MEPs, is to look at the statistical outliers of EPGs' cohesiveness. An outlier in Agreement Index scores represents a vote where EPG cohesion deviates markedly from the general cohesion. In the first 4684 roll-call votes cast

in the last completed 7th legislature of the EP (2009–2014), my analysis shows that there were 1433 outliers. This means that, on average, for every 3.2 cast there was one vote where at least one EPG was so divided to be considered a statistical outlier. Taking into account the high number of votes cast in a single plenary session, this means that there was no plenary where all EPGs were cohesive on every vote.

Figure 1. Box plot of EPG cohesion, 7th legislature



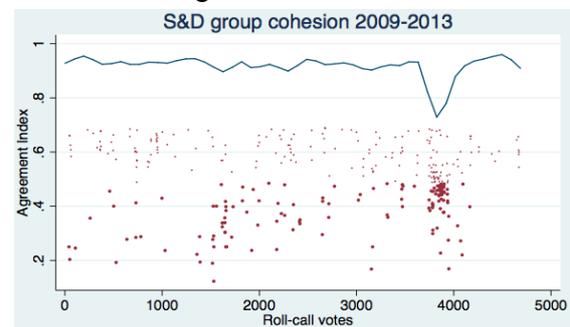
As it can be seen in Figure 1, the variation between groups shows that Euro-sceptic groups and non-attached members are generally quite divided EPGs, while the other, bigger, and generally more pro-EU groups tend to be much more cohesive, as most of the literature acknowledges. This is partially disconfirmed by the group of European Conservatives and Reformists, which despite its ‘Euro-realism’ shows highly cohesive parliamentary behaviour. What my outlier analysis highlights is the fact that even if this high cohesion reflects the great majority of votes where EPGs are completely cohesive (because, in practice, all their members vote in the same way), there is a significant minority of votes where they are completely divided, showing AI scores close to 0. This pattern strikes one as quite surprising: even the mainstream, more organised, pro-EU political groups can bluntly fail to discipline their members, letting them vote in a way that makes the group perfectly divided. So, it can be misleading to look only at the mean

cohesion of EPGs, because it does not illustrate the distribution or the standard deviation, thus giving the impression that all the votes have AI scores close to this value, without substantial variance. By contrast, to have a more comprehensive knowledge of MEPs’ voting behaviour, it is important to bear in mind that EPGs’ high cohesiveness is the result of almost all votes where EPGs are voting harmoniously together, but a few where they completely fail to be cohesive.

Common Agriculture Policy reform: more breakdowns than ever

My analysis also shows that three groups (Liberals, Socialists & Democrats and European United Left/Nordic Green Left) have in common a particularly evident negative peak of the Agreement Index during the 7th legislature.

Figure 2. General trend and outliers in S&D cohesion, 7th legislature



As it can be seen in Figure 2, relative to the S&D group alone, this peak lasts for a short period of time/votes, after which cohesion scores return to ‘normality’. The interesting element is that all three groups share the same lack of cohesion at the same time, leading alternatively to an abnormal rise of outliers. An in-depth analysis of these votes show that all these uncommonly dividing votes refer to the same issue: CAP reform. CAP reform, as already widely recognised by EU practitioners and experts, albeit less so by the academic literature, has witnessed different voting patterns than those defined by

the left-right cleavage. Here, nationality-based divisions are more likely to emerge (e.g. MEPs from the same country voting together, regardless of EPG membership), therefore leading to extremely low party cohesion. Moreover, existing studies usually look at the final vote that takes place in the plenary session, where the divisions and contrasts have in fact usually been resolved. By looking at the previous votes too, however, the picture changes substantially: EPGs can be extremely divided for a long series of votes, before returning to the “usual” cohesion.

The European Parliament’s internal dynamics: EPGs’ centrality, ‘revised’

European political groups are certainly the ‘internal political engine’ of the Parliament, and most of its daily work revolves around them. The importance of political groups has been evident since the very beginning of the EP’s history, so their centrality should not be dismissed. But this does not mean that their members cannot decide, from time to time, to vote along patterns that completely break (such as outcomes of CAP reforms) their unity as political groups. And since, as most of

the scholars acknowledge, European political groups (or even more, political parties at the EU level from outside the EP) have very little power to ‘whip’ them, their election being ultimately in the hand of the national parties, no consequences arise from these ‘rebellious votes’. The reason of such understatement is based on a perspective that looks only at the mathematic mean of EPG cohesiveness over five years, but does not deepen the analysis to what really happens if these statistical indexes are disaggregated.

It is worth stressing, however, that this analysis does not render any claims of causal effects. Rather, the substantive goal is to show that EPGs’ high cohesiveness is actually the result of the combination of (frequent) complete cohesion and (rare) complete division, instead of the sheer consequence of systematic high cohesion. From a methodological point of view, this reinforces the already existing claims by some authors circa the explanatory risks of aggregate-level analyses on voting behaviour.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on Chapter 2 of his book ‘Is Euro-Voting truly Supranational? National affiliation and political group membership in European Parliament’, which has been recently published by Pisa University Press (2016).



Lorenzo Cicchi (PhD IMT Institute for Advanced Studies, 2013) is currently teaching assistant at the University of Pisa and visiting fellow at the Schuman Center for Advances Studies, where he coordinates the activities of the Observatory on Political parties and Representation. Prior to that he was research associate at the European University Institute. His research focuses on political parties and party systems, elections and EU politics and institutions, in particular the European Parliament where he has previously worked as parliamentary assistant for an Italian MEP.