The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?

SIMON HIX
London School of Economics and Political Science
AMIE KREPPLE
University of Florida
ABDUL NOURY
Université Libre de Bruxelles

Abstract

This article looks at the development of the two main features of the party system in the European Parliament (EP): the organization of the party groups, and the nature of competition between these groups. On the organizational side, we examine the foundation of the party groups in the Common Assembly and the evolution of party organization from the appointed to the elected Parliament. On the competition side, we focus on the main axis of competition: the relationship between the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the European People’s Party (EPP). We develop a set of competition propositions about PES–EPP collusion, and test these arguments in a statistical analysis of PES and EPP roll-call voting since 1979. We conclude that, contrary to what might be expected, the party system in the EP has become more consolidated and more competitive as the powers of the EP have increased.

Introduction: A Party System for Europe?

A ‘party system’ is a central feature of democratic political systems. A party system has two essential elements: (1) organization – internally hierarchical party organizations; and (2) competition – contestation, rather than collusion, between these organizations (see Sartori, 1976; Ware, 1996). In most accounts of liberal democracy, the two elements go hand-in-hand: democracy works because parties with competing agendas and candidates organize to secure these goals (see Michels, 1961 [1911]; Weber, 1946 [1918]; Schumpeter, 1943; Klingemann et al., 1994). Hence, if parties have underdeveloped organizations, or if they collude rather than compete, voters’ choices will not be
translated effectively into political leadership and/or policy outcomes. For example, the emergence of ‘cartelized’ party systems in several European democracies has led to growing voter apathy, alienation and protest votes (Katz and Mair, 1995).

It is not surprising, then, that many scholars of the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ claim that what the European Union (EU) needs is a ‘competitive party system’. As early as 1978, David Marquand (1978) argued that the emerging pan-European polity would be democratic only if the basic structure of politics shifts from a ‘Europe des patries’, where politics is structured around national identities and governments, to a ‘Europe des partis’, where politics is structured through a party system. Moreover, as in all democratic polities, this party system would have to be based in the main directly-elected institution: the European Parliament (EP).

So, a democratic and effective party system in the EP would mean two things (cf. Attinà, 1992; Andeweg, 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997; Kreppel, 2002). First, the party groups would have to behave in a cohesive way, so that voting would be driven by transnational party membership rather than national affiliation. Second, the parties would have to compete for political office (such as the EP President) and in the EU policy process rather than form ‘grand coalitions’. Also, to translate citizens’ policy preferences in the domestic arena into policy actions at the European level, and to build functional rather than territorial majorities, this competition would need to be along left–right lines rather than between ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ Europe positions (Hix, 1995, 1999). However, this line of reasoning implicitly assumes that the EP is a ‘normal’ parliament. While competition over policy is good in a normal parliament, it may not always be so in an evolving legislature. When the power of the EP is at stake, MEPs have a strong incentive to vote together to acquire more power relative to the other EU institutions.

One could also argue that, as the powers of the EP have grown, such a party system may not be sustainable. It is easy for the party groups to organize their troops when the votes of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not matter ‘back home’. But, as the EP gains power, MEPs can expect growing national pressure, causing potential breaks from their transnational party groups. For example, with a more powerful EP, the national governments have incentives to ensure that the inter-state coalitions in the Council are replicated in votes in the EP.1 Hence, more powers may undermine supranational party cohesion and change the structure of party competition in the EP.

1 As was arguably the case during the EP confirmation vote of Santer as Commission President (Hix and Lord, 1997).
To investigate the level of organizational development and competitiveness in the EP party system, we have organized the article as follows. Section I looks at the foundation of the party groups in the Common Assembly (CA) and the evolution of party organization from the appointed to the elected Parliament. Section II then sets out several possible theoretical explanations of the main axis of competition/collusion in the party system: the relationship between the Socialist Group/Party of European Socialists (PES from now on) and the European People’s Party (EPP). In Section III these propositions are tested in a detailed statistical analysis of PES and EPP voting since 1979. Finally, Section IV contains the conclusions, highlighting the fact that, contrary to what might be expected, the EP party system has become more consolidated and more competitive as the powers of the EP have increased.

I. Evolution of the Party System in the European Parliament

Establishment of the Political Groups

The current predominance of the supranational party groups and their fundamental role within the internal organization of the EP to some extent obscures what a unique and significant innovation they are. There was no reason to expect that the EP, or its predecessor the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), would develop ideologically based internal party groups. In fact, the party groups received no formal recognition outside the EP until 1992. Yet their creation was crucial to the development of the EP and the broader European Community as a whole. Had the EP followed the path of other international assemblies and organized itself solely along national lines it probably would not have evolved to become the effective legislative actor that it is. It is useful then to examine the reasons behind the establishment and development of the party groups.

When the Common Assembly first convened on 10 September 1952, there were no ideologically based groups. Members of the new Assembly sat in alphabetical order, as was the case in other international assemblies such as the Consultative Assembly of the Council or Europe. During the constituent meeting of the CA there were a number of decisions that suggested that the new Assembly would be organized around national rather than ideological or partisan affiliations. It was decided, for example, that there should be five Vice-Presidents so that every Member State could have a representative as either President or a Vice-President on the Executive Bureau of the new Assembly.² Also, the first draft of the Rules of Procedure of the CA included no

² Common Assembly Proceedings, 10 September 1952.

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
mention of political or ideological affinity while national identity was mentioned in a number of key rules.  

The first formal recognition of the existence of ideological divisions within the CA did not occur until January 1953. During the discussion and debate over the definitive draft version of the new Assembly’s Rules of Procedure, it was suggested that the nomination of members to committees attempt to balance both representation of the various Member States and ‘the various political traditions’. This small change was, in fact, something of a watershed and by March 1953 there was a de facto division into three political party groupings: Christian Democrat, Socialist and Liberal. These were the primary party families of continental Western Europe at the time. This de facto existence of the political groups led the new Rules Committee to conduct a study on the implications of political party group formation and suggested courses of action. This report was discussed for the first time in March 1953, and the final text of the report was drawn up in June of that year. On 16 June, the Assembly, without discussion, unanimously passed a resolution adopting the report.  

The report from the Rules Committee emphasized the crucial role of political parties in the internal organization of the assembly. The rapporteur noted that the groups had in essence already formed and all that was required was to establish some form of official legal recognition. This recognition took the form of a simple addition to the rules that served to regulate the formation of political groups. The new rule 33bis (later changed to rule 34) stated that members could form groups according to ‘political persuasion’. All that was required to form a group was a declaration of formation including the name of the group, its executive and the signatures of its members. The only restrictions were, first, that groups be politically, not nationally, based; second, that they have at least nine members; and, third, that no individual could belong to more than one group.  

From this point forward the political groups were both a factual and a legal reality. The internal organization of the CA, and later the EP, was increasingly founded on their existence. The political groups were given financial support; each organized independent secretariats and was given office space within the CA’s work places in Strasbourg. Debates in the CA were

---

3 For example, the distribution of nationalities among the different committees was strictly regulated to ensure an equitable balance. See resolution 9, of 10 January 1953, Journal Officiel, February 1953.
4 The proposed text was approved by the Assembly without debate. Common Assembly Proceedings, 10 January 1953, p. 146.
7 Resolution 13, Common Assembly Proceedings, 10 January 1953.
increasingly organized on the basis of official group positions instead of individual member statements.

By the time the CA was disbanded to make way for the new EP in 1957, the political groups had become a significant force in its internal organization. Their role increased still further in the new EP. Because the standing rules of the CA served temporarily as the provisional rules for the new EP, the political groups were automatically recognized in the new Parliament.

Explaining the Establishment of the Party Groups

But, why did the members of the CA decide, contrary to the traditions of all previous international assemblies, to organize on the basis of ideological rather than national affiliation? There are essentially two, potentially complementary, explanations.

First, although not developed explicitly as predictive arguments, a variety of ‘structural’ interpretations of EP party development were implicit in many early studies of the EP. For example, both Henig (1979) and Pinder (1991) suggest that the new European institutions created by the Treaties of Paris and Rome were shaped by the existing domestic political practices of the six Member States. Where the CA was concerned, since the individual members of the Assembly were appointed by their national assemblies, they were established parliamentary politicians. As a result, when faced with the task of organizing themselves within the CA they naturally gravitated towards ideologically-based political associations.

A related explanation was that the political groups were formed in the CA as a symbolic stand against nationalism: a conscious effort to establish a quasi-federal form of political organization in the new European-level institutions, in stark contrast to the national forms of representation of the Council of Europe and the OECD. For example, Van Oudenhove explained the creation of political groups by stating that the grouping of delegates into national coalitions would have been ‘utterly “un-European”, and was therefore ruled out a priori’ (Van Oudenhove, 1965, p. 236). This idea is supported by evidence from early speeches in the CA, where strong arguments were made against the creation of national associations, and even against structuring the internal executive in a way to facilitate national representation.8

Second, an explanation can be developed from the rational choice theories of legislative organization, from the study of the US Congress (especially Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Shepsle and Weingast, 1994). These theories have been applied to the later development of party organization in the EP, but not to the initial establishment of the

parties (see Raunio, 1997, pp. 27–32; Kreppel, 2002, pp. 16–18). One of the basic intuitions in the ‘positive’ theories of legislative organization is that parties enable legislators with similar policy preferences to overcome collective action problems. Each legislator is unlikely to obtain his or her policy objectives acting alone. Legislators could co-operate spontaneously, but each coalition would have to be negotiated separately. By establishing a formal party organization, which binds individuals to a common party position, the ‘transactions costs’ of coalition formation are reduced. The result is a division of labour: backbench members provide labour and expertise, and party leaders distribute committee and party offices and determine the ‘party line’ on complex legislative issues. Also, once these organizations have been set up, the costs of leaving are high.

The key is that national parties with similar policy (ideological) preferences had a greater incentive to organize together in the new CA because, unlike other international assemblies, this new institution had significant powers, with policy implications. The CA could determine its own agenda and offer ‘own initiative’ resolutions to the other institutions of the Coal and Steel Community. Above all, the CA was responsible for scrutinizing the operation of the executive (the High Authority, and later the Commission), and could even censure the executive – a power previously unheard of among international assemblies. These powers lent the CA a unique status, as ‘midway between a national parliament and the classic type of international assembly’ (Van Oudenhove, 1965, p. 9; Lindsay, 1958). As a result, members of the CA argued that a greater level of internal organization was necessary to function successfully and efficiently, and that the creation of party groups would help facilitate this.9

However, the division of labour theory of legislative organization does not explain why it was ideologically- rather than nationally-based parties that emerged in the CA. In the early years, the policy issues at the European level could be expected to divide politicians in the new institutions along national rather than partisan lines. Hence, legislators from the same Member State also had an incentive to organize together. The missing element, then, is the domestic structure of party relations in Europe: because members of the CA from the same Member State competed in the domestic arena along party lines, they had an incentive to organize at the European level with politicians ‘from the same side of the fence’ from other Member States (rather like Southern and Northern Democrats in the US Congress, despite large policy differences). In other words, the rationalist explanation needs the partisan structure of domestic political competition to work.


© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
The early creation of the party groups within the CA was crucial to the evolution of the EP. Today party groups and the interactions between them fundamentally structure the activities of the EP. It is difficult to imagine what the EP and indeed the EU would look like today had not the critical decision been made to structure the internal organization of the EP along ideological rather than national lines.

**Development of the Party System, 1952–99**

Table 1 shows the size of the party groups in the EP as they have evolved through various changes from the early days of the CA to the fifth directly elected EP in July 1999. Three main patterns are evident. First, in absolute terms, there has been growing fragmentation in the party system. The number of party groups increased from three for most of the period of the appointed Parliament to between seven and ten in the five elected Parliaments.

Second, however, this growing fragmentation in absolute terms masks a trend towards declining relative fragmentation (measured by the ‘effective number of parties’ and the fractionalization indices) and a growing consolidation of the party system in the elected Parliaments (measured by the combined votes of the PES and EPP) (Bardi, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997, pp. 156–6; Raunio, 1997, pp. 62–73). New party groups were formed in each of the directly elected Parliaments. But these groups became increasingly marginalized relative to the two main groups, as numerous national parties left these groups to join one or other of the two main party groups. For example, on the left, the Italian Communists joined the Party of European Socialists (PES) and, on the right, the Portuguese Social Democrats and French Republic Party left the Liberals for the European People’s Party, and the Spanish, British, Danish, Italian and French Conservatives all left smaller groups to join the EPP.

Third, in terms of the ideological balance in the EP, whereas the centre-right dominated throughout the period of the appointed Parliament, the centre-left have been in the majority in most of the elected Parliaments. For example, in the appointed EP, in the mid-1950s, the Christian Democratic group held almost 50 per cent of the seats compared to under 30 per cent for the Socialists, and in the mid-1970s the combined total of the Christian Democrats and French, British, Irish and Danish Conservatives was 48 per cent compared to 40 per cent for the Socialists and Communists combined. In the elected Parliaments, the Socialists were the largest group in the first four elected Parliaments (1979–99), but the EPP emerged as the largest group in the fifth elected Parliament (1999–2004).

Not only has there been growing coherence of the party system into a small number of truly transnational party groups, there has also been growing
Table 1: Size of the Party Groups, 1952–99

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialists (SOC, PES)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chr. Dems &amp; Cons (CD, EPP, EPP/ED)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Gaullists &amp; Allies (EPD, EDA, UFE, UEN)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Conservatives &amp; Allies (ED)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Conservatives (FE)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals (LIB, LDG, ELD, ELDR)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Communists &amp; Allies (COM)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Communists &amp; Allies (LU, EUL, EUL/NGL)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regionalists &amp; Allies (CDI, RBW, ERA)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens &amp; Allies (G, G/EFA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Right (ER)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Europeans (EN/EDD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents (TGI)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-attached</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total MEPs</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined SOC+EPP (%)</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>70.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective no. of parties</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractionalization of the party system</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Notes: See the glossary for party group abbreviations. The ‘effective number of parties’ is calculated using the Laakso-Taagepera method (i.e. 1 divided by the sum of the squared % of seats of each party; see Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) and the fractionalization of the party system is calculated using the Rae index (i.e. 1 minus the sum of the squared % of seats of each party; see Rae, 1967).
voting cohesion amongst the members of these groups. Cohesion in the EP can be measured using an ‘agreement index’ (cf. Rice, 1928; Attinà, 1990):

\[
AI_i = \frac{\max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\} - \frac{1}{2}\left[(Y_i + N_i + A_i) - \max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\}\right]}{(Y_i + N_i + A_i)}
\]

where \(Y_i\) denotes the number of ‘yes’ votes expressed by group \(i\) on a given vote, \(N_i\) the number of ‘no’ votes and \(A_i\) the number of ‘abstain’ votes. As a result, the agreement index is equal to 1 when a group of legislators vote as a bloc and is equal to 0 when the group is equally divided between all three of these voting options. For example, if deputies of a party cast 30 ballots on a given vote and if all these deputies vote ‘yes’, then the cohesion index is 1. On the other hand, if these deputies are completely divided – for example, 10 vote ‘yes’, 10 vote ‘no’ and 10 ‘abstain’ – then the cohesion index is 0.

Figure 1 shows the mean agreement index in all roll-call votes in each of the five Parliaments for the six party groups that were present in most of these Parliaments. The results shows that the three main transnational parties – the Socialists, EPP and Liberals – are relatively cohesive party organizations: with an average score of 0.84 in the first Parliament, rising to 0.89 in the fifth Parliament. These scores are lower than in domestic parliaments in Europe, where the executive commands a majority in the Parliament, and parties in government can threaten a vote of ‘no confidence’ to enforce party cohesion (cf. Huber, 1996; Diermeier and Feddersen, 1998; Bowler and Farrell, 1999). But, the parties in the EP are more cohesive than the parties in the US

Figure 1: Cohesion of the Party Groups

Source: Hix et al. (2002).

Notes: See the text for the calculation of the agreement index. See the glossary for party group abbreviations.
Congress, where there is also a separation of powers between the executive and the legislature. For example, the agreement indices for the Democrats and Republicans in the 106th Congress (1999–2000) were 0.78 and 0.82, respectively.\footnote{We calculated these scores for the US Congress from the data available on Keith Poole’s website («http://voteview.uh.edu/default_nomdata.htm», accessed 12 February 2003).}

Furthermore, the general trend in party cohesion has been upwards (Attinà, 1990; Quanje1 and Wolters, 1993; Brzinski, 1995; Hix and Lord, 1997, pp. 134–9; Raunio, 1997, pp. 106–17). This is most striking for the Socialists, whose cohesion level has risen in every Parliament. The Liberals and Greens are also more cohesive in the fourth and fifth Parliaments than in the earlier Parliaments. Cohesion in the EPP has fallen as the group has expanded, but from a very high starting level. Only in the two more extreme parties, the Radical Left and the main group to the right of the EPP, has internal cohesion fallen dramatically.

In other words, the organizational element of the party system in the EP has developed into something akin to a consolidated democratic party system. The party system has evolved into a settled ‘two-plus-several’ model: where politics in the EP is dominated by the main groups on the centre-left and centre-right (with almost 70 per cent of the seats between them), and four or five smaller groups fill the gaps to the left, right and between the two main parties. Moreover, evidence from roll-call votes shows that the members of the two main parties are willing to toe the party line as dictated by the party group leaderships. The question remains, however, of whether this organizational consolidation operates alongside or against party competition in the policy process.

II. Is there a Grand Coalition in the Elected Parliament?

A common perception of party competition in the EP is that the PES and the EPP prefer to collude rather than compete, forming a ‘grand coalition’ or virtual ‘cartel’. Hix et al. (2002) find that the majorities of the PES and EPP voted the same way in 61 per cent of roll-call votes in the first Parliament (1979–84), 68 per cent in the second Parliament (1984–89), 71 per cent in the third (1989–94), and 69 per cent in both the fourth Parliament (1994–99) and the first half of the fifth Parliament (1999–01). So, at an aggregate level, the PES and EPP collude more than they compete. But, in contrast to other parliaments (such as the US Congress), where unanimity is rather rare, many issues in the EP involve all parties voting together. What is more important for a competitive party system is how the two dominant parties behave on vital policy issues or pieces of legislation. In the existing literature on the EP,
there are four main explanations of PES–EPP behaviour that might help answer this question.

The first explanation is that there is an ideological similarity between the PES and EPP on many issues on the EU agenda. These two groups, together with the Liberals, incorporate almost 90 per cent of the mainstream and moderate political parties in Europe. Except for the British Conservatives, all mainstream parties in Europe are at least moderately ‘pro-European’, with only the extreme parties on the left and right advocating more explicitly ‘anti-European’ positions (Taggart, 1998; Hix, 1999; Ray, 1999; Marks and Wilson, 2000; Aspinwall, 2002). This is reflected in voting in the EP, where spatial analysis of MEP behaviour reveals that the members of the EPP and PES are much closer together on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension of EU politics than on the classic left–right dimension (Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999; Hix, 2001, Noury, 2002). Hence, on many items on the EP agenda, for example relating to the reform of the EU’s institutions, the majorities of the EPP and PES can be expected to have similar positions. But on other issues such as the economic, social and environmental regulation of the single market – where the party groups are likely to split along left–right lines – one would expect the PES and EPP to compete rather than coalesce.

The second explanation is that the technical rules of the EU’s legislative procedures force the two parties to vote together (Nugent, 1999, p. 230; Westlake, 1994, p. 186; Corbett et al., 2000, p. 91). Under the second reading of the co-operation, second and third readings of the co-decision procedures and in the budgetary procedure, an ‘absolute majority’ of all the MEPs (i.e. 314 out of the current 626) rather than a ‘simple majority’ of those taking part in a vote is required to amend legislation. When this is combined with an average attendance in the EP of between 65 and 75 per cent of MEPs, a coalition between the PES and EPP is the only viable way of ensuring enough votes to meet the absolute-majority threshold: for example, if 70 per cent of MEPs participate in a vote, a three-quarters majority is required to secure an absolute majority. Nevertheless, on most votes in the EP – including all votes on internal matters, on resolutions, under the consultation and assent procedures, the first reading of the co-operation procedure, and the first and third readings of the co-decision procedure – only a simple majority is required.

Third, several scholars argue that there is a collective institutional interest of the PES and the EPP to increase the influence of the EP as a whole (Attinà, 1990; Raunio, 1997; Hix and Lord, 1997; Kreppel, 2000, 2002). As the weakest of the three main EU institutions, the political leadership in the EP has

---

11 This is the average attendance since the fourth Parliament. Attendance rates for the first, second and third Parliaments were even lower, rarely rising above 50 per cent.
usually acted together to promote the interests and powers of the EP against
the Council and Commission by presenting a united front (see, especially,
Corbett, 1998). This is particularly true in treaty reform negotiations, when
all the main groups in the EP agree to a collective list of demands relating to
the powers and role of the EP. However, the EPP and PES also have an insti-
tutional incentive to co-operate in legislative and budgetary bargaining with
the other institutions, to show a united front in favour of the amendments
proposed by the EP. Amie Kreppel (2000, 2002) formalizes these ideas into a
strategic model of PES and EPP behaviour, which predicts that the two main
groups are more likely to coalesce in later rounds of the legislative proce-
dures (the first reading of consultation, second reading of co-operation and
second and third reading of co-decision) and on final votes on whole propos-
als (as opposed to individual amendments). Competition in the earlier rounds
and on individual amendments allows the groups to stake out their diverse
ideological positions for later compromise deals without undermining the need
to present a united front against the Council and Commission to secure the
policy goals of the EP as whole.

Fourth, the EPP and PES collude to prevent the smaller groups from sec-
curing influence in the internal workings of the Parliament (see Westlake,
1994, pp. 187–8). As Corbett et al. explain:

Representatives of the two Groups meet with each other to strike deals over
political or patronage issues without smaller Groups to left or right always
being consulted. These latter may then be forced to conform on a take-it or
leave-it basis. (Corbett et al., 2000, p. 91)

For example, the system of allocating committee chairs, using a system of
proportional representation and seat allocation which favours larger groups
over smaller groups (d’Hondt method), was specifically designed by the lead-
erships of the EPP and PES to ensure that they could obtain all the key com-
mittee chairs. Similarly, between 1989 and 1999, the two groups agreed to
take turns proposing candidates for the EP President, to ensure that they would
share the office across the term of each Parliament. But, in the 1999–2004
Parliament this PES–EPP bargain over the EP President broke down, with the
EPP agreeing a deal with the Liberals, whereby the two parties would support
the EPP candidate (Nicole Fontaine) for the first half of the term and the
Liberal candidate (Pat Cox) for the second half of the term. Hence, under
this explanation, the EPP and PES are more likely to co-operate on internal
EP issues than any other issues.

12 The term of office of the EP President is 2.5 years, so that, by co-operating with each other, the EPP and
PES could each be assured of controlling the office for half of the legislative term.
13 For a more detailed discussion of the breakdown of the EPP–PES agreement and its effects on coalition
So far, however, these explanations of the central feature of the EP party system have not been rigorously investigated. Most claims relating to PES–EPP co-operation derive from the evolved collective wisdom of close followers of the EP. Only Amie Kreppel has tested these competing explanations against empirical data from roll-call votes, using selected data from the third, fourth and fifth Parliaments (Kreppel 2000, 2002; Kreppel and Hix, 2003). What we do in the next section is extend this work, undertaking the first ever analysis of PES–EPP competition and collusion in all roll-call votes in the elected EPs, from the first vote in July 1979 to the last vote in December 2001.

III. Statistical Analysis of PES–EPP Collusion/Competition

To explain variation in the intensity of PES–EPP competition/co-operation, and to test the relative explanatory powers of the alternative views of party competition in the EP, we use regression analysis to estimate the following equation: 14

\[ Y_{jt} = \alpha + \beta'X_{jt} + EP_{jt} + \text{CONTROL}_{jt} + \epsilon_{jt} \]

where \( Y \) is the dependent variable, and \( X \) is the set of the variables of interest, \( EP \) is a dummy variable indicating the relevant legislature and \( CONTROL \) is the set of other control variables such as time trend. Each legislature is indexed by \( t \), and each roll-call vote in a given legislature by \( j \).

The dependent variable is a measure of competition/collusion between the PES and EPP. We use two measures of voting similarity/dissimilarity between the two political groups. The first measure is the ‘Rice index of party dissimilarity’ (Rice, 1928), which measures the intensity of PES-EPP competition/collusion, and is defined as follows:

\[ \text{RICE} = \left| \frac{Y_i}{Y_i + N_i} - \frac{Y_2}{Y_2 + N_2} \right| \]

where \( Y_i \) and \( N_i \) are the number of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ votes of political group \( i \) (1=PES, 2=EPP). Thus the Rice dissimilarity index is the absolute value of the difference between the share of ‘yes’ votes by the two groups. As a result the index varies between 0 (complete agreement) and 1 (full disagreement). Note that abstentions of all kinds are discarded from the analysis.

---

14 Hix, Noury and Roland collected and coded all roll-call votes in the EP from 1979 to the end of 1999, i.e. all the votes where the position of each MEP (voting either ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘abstain’) is recorded in the EP’s minutes.
The second measure of party competition/collusion is a simple binary variable, indicating whether both parties’ majorities voted the same way. This dummy variable is related to the first two measures presented above. For instance one can define this index as follows:

\[
PLURAL = \begin{cases} 
1 & \text{if } RICE \leq 0.5 \\
0 & \text{if } RICE < 0.5 
\end{cases}
\]

The two indices are different measures of party collusion/competition. Thus, though they are quantitatively different, they are to some extent qualitatively equivalent. The first index is a famous dissimilarity index, whereas the second is an inverse discrete version of this index. As a result, the (inverse) correlation between the two indices is high: –0.94.

Given that the first dependent variable (\textit{RICE}) is truncated and that the second (\textit{PLURAL}) is discrete, the normal linear regression model, which assumes that the dependent variable takes any value between minus and plus infinity, is inappropriate. As a result, one should use the relevant estimation method that takes into account the non-linearity in the data. We first estimate our equation by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, because of its simplicity and familiarity. But, to take into account the truncated nature of the \textit{RICE} index, and as a check for the validity of the OLS estimates, we also use a TOBIT model. And, since \textit{PLURAL} is a binary variable, we estimate the function of this variable using a LOGIT model.

Our specifications contain the following independent variables in order to test different explanations of collusion/competition between PES and EPP:

- \textit{TURNOUT}, a continuous variable measuring the level of participation (‘yes’ plus ‘no’ plus ‘abstain’) in a vote as a proportion of all MEPs in each vote;
- \textit{UNANIMOUS}, a dummy variable indicating unanimous votes, to control for the effect of all the party groups voting the same way as opposed to just the PES and EPP voting together against the smaller parties;
- \textit{ABS\_MAJORITY}, a dummy indicating the majority rule applied to the roll-call vote;
- seven dummy variables, each indicating a policy area of the vote: (1) \textit{ECONOMIC} (such as regulation of the single market, competition policy or economic and monetary union), (2) \textit{ENVIRONMENT} (such as the harmonization of environmental and product standards), (3) \textit{SOCIAL} (such as the harmonization of labour market standards), (4) \textit{EXT\_TRADE} (such as EU trade agreements with third countries), (5) \textit{AGRICULTURE} (such as the setting of market rules under the common agricultural policy), (6) \textit{EU\_INSTITUTIONAL} (such as the investiture and censure of the Commission and reform of the EU treaties), and (7) \textit{EP\_INTERNAL}
(such as changing the EP’s rules of procedure, the election of EP officers, and changes to the order of business);

- *RESOLUTION*, a dummy variable indicating that the vote is on a non-binding EP ‘own resolution’, as opposed to a binding legislative or budgetary issue;
- five dummy variables indicating the corresponding legislature (because the model contains a constant we exclude the dummy corresponding to the first legislature);
- *TREND*, a trend variable, where the first vote is coded 1, the second is coded 2 and so on;
- *IDEO_DIST*, a continuous variable measuring the ideological distance between the two parties in each six-month period between 1979 and 2001;\(^{15}\)
- two dummy variables indicating whether the vote was under the *CO-DECISION* or the *CO-OPERATION* procedures;
- *WHOLE*, a dummy indicating whether the vote was on an amendment or a resolution or piece of legislation as a whole; and
- *FINAL*, a dummy variable indicating whether the vote was on a final reading (first reading of the consultation or assent procedures, second reading of the co-operation procedure, or third reading of the co-decision procedure).
- three control dummy variables to measure the impact of who called the roll-call vote (as these votes must be requested), when either the PES or EPP requests a roll-call vote independently (PES_CALL and EPP_CALL) and when they jointly call for the roll-call vote (JOINT_CALL).

Tables 2 and 3 report the results of the estimations of *RICE* and *PLURAL*, respectively. In each case we estimated three or four different specifications. In Table 2, M1 estimates the model by OLS with a unique time trend for all legislatures, M2 allows for different time trends across legislatures, M3 is the results of the estimation by TOBIT mode, and M4 is similar to M2 but with the variable indicating unanimous votes added. Given that the second index (*PLURAL*) is a binary variable, Table 3 reports the estimates of our index by LOGIT model. When interpreting the results, the measurement of the indices means that a negative sign on a coefficient in one table should correspond with a positive sign on the same coefficient in the other table.

\(^{15}\) Here we used the Budge et al. (2001) party manifestos data to calculate the left–right position of each national party in the two groups in each six-month period between 1979 and 2001. From these national party locations we calculated the mean left–right position of the PES and EPP groups by multiplying the position of each national party by the percentage of MEPs of that national party in the group. We then calculated the absolute distance between the mean left–right location of the EPP and the PES in each six-month period.
Table 2: Results 1 – Rice Voting Dissimilarity Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable: RICE (RICE Index of Voting Dissimilarity, 1.00 = most dissimilar, 0.00 = most similar)</th>
<th>M1(OLS)</th>
<th>M2(OLS)</th>
<th>M3(TOBIT)</th>
<th>M4(OLS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEO_DIST</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.40)</td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TURNOUT</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.185</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.02)**</td>
<td>(2.83)**</td>
<td>(6.78)**</td>
<td>(1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNANIMOUS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(48.38)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABS_MAJORITY</td>
<td>-0.070</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
<td>-0.092</td>
<td>-0.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.49)**</td>
<td>(5.55)**</td>
<td>(5.96)**</td>
<td>(4.65)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESOLUTION</td>
<td>0.116</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.14)**</td>
<td>(8.09)**</td>
<td>(7.20)**</td>
<td>(7.82)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO-DECISION</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.55)**</td>
<td>(5.80)**</td>
<td>(4.93)**</td>
<td>(5.67)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO-OPERATION</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.93)**</td>
<td>(4.49)**</td>
<td>(4.11)**</td>
<td>(4.32)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINAL</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.11)**</td>
<td>(3.98)**</td>
<td>(3.61)**</td>
<td>(3.92)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOLE</td>
<td>-0.148</td>
<td>-0.148</td>
<td>-0.197</td>
<td>-0.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14.61)**</td>
<td>(14.65)**</td>
<td>(15.99)**</td>
<td>(12.86)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PES_CALL</td>
<td>0.149</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>0.156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPP_CALL</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15.54)**</td>
<td>(15.57)**</td>
<td>(13.73)**</td>
<td>(17.38)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOINT_CALL</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>-0.057</td>
<td>-0.100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.38)*</td>
<td>(2.47)*</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(3.33)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECONOMIC</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.93)</td>
<td>(2.03)*</td>
<td>(2.84)**</td>
<td>(1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.20)**</td>
<td>(6.22)**</td>
<td>(6.61)**</td>
<td>(6.54)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.25)</td>
<td>(1.41)</td>
<td>(1.15)</td>
<td>(1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXT_TRADE</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>-0.060</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.89)**</td>
<td>(2.70)**</td>
<td>(2.94)**</td>
<td>(2.57)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGRICULTURE</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.57)**</td>
<td>(4.75)**</td>
<td>(5.36)**</td>
<td>(4.19)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU_INSTITUTIONAL</td>
<td>-0.113</td>
<td>-0.109</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.26)**</td>
<td>(9.86)**</td>
<td>(6.84)**</td>
<td>(9.95)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP_INTERNAL</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.52)</td>
<td>(1.18)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTANT</td>
<td>0.355</td>
<td>0.342</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>0.394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(14.78)**</td>
<td>(10.60)**</td>
<td>(6.31)**</td>
<td>(12.42)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>11592</td>
<td>11592</td>
<td>11592</td>
<td>11592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADJ_RSQ</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Robust t-statistics in parentheses, * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%, dummy variables for each EP are included but not reported. ADJ RSQ is the adjusted R-square statistic for M1, M2, M4 and pseudo R-squared for M3. M1 includes a unique time trend for all periods, M2, M3 and M4 include different time trends for each EP.
Table 3: Results 2 – Both Majorities Voting Together Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable: PLURAL (Binary index: 1= parties voted together, 0 = parties voted against each other)</th>
<th>M1 (LOGIT)</th>
<th>M2 (LOGIT)</th>
<th>M3 (LOGIT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IDEO_DIST</td>
<td>−0.004</td>
<td>−0.013</td>
<td>−0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TURNOUT</td>
<td>−0.478</td>
<td>−0.344</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABS_MAJORITY</td>
<td>0.472</td>
<td>0.486</td>
<td>0.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESOLUTION</td>
<td>−0.657</td>
<td>−0.657</td>
<td>−0.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO–DECISION</td>
<td>−0.628</td>
<td>−0.670</td>
<td>−0.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO–OPERATION</td>
<td>−0.449</td>
<td>−0.498</td>
<td>−0.478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FINAL</td>
<td>−0.354</td>
<td>−0.351</td>
<td>−0.340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOLE</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>0.791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PES_CALL</td>
<td>−0.843</td>
<td>−0.865</td>
<td>−0.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPP_CALL</td>
<td>−0.844</td>
<td>−0.853</td>
<td>−0.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOINT_CALL</td>
<td>0.322</td>
<td>0.344</td>
<td>0.466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECONOMIC</td>
<td>−0.124</td>
<td>−0.128</td>
<td>−0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>−0.356</td>
<td>−0.358</td>
<td>−0.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL</td>
<td>−0.094</td>
<td>−0.106</td>
<td>−0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXT_TRADE</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>0.242</td>
<td>0.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGRICULTURE</td>
<td>−0.490</td>
<td>−0.498</td>
<td>−0.464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU_INSTITUTIONAL</td>
<td>0.709</td>
<td>0.689</td>
<td>0.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP_INTERNAL</td>
<td>−0.159</td>
<td>−0.172</td>
<td>−0.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTANT</td>
<td>0.657</td>
<td>0.596</td>
<td>0.344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>11593</td>
<td>11593</td>
<td>11023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo_RSQ</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Robust t–statistics in parentheses, * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%, dummy variables for each EP are included but not reported. In all models time trend is included but not reported. In M3 unanimous votes are discarded. Pseudo_RSQ is the pseudo R–squared statistic.
The results can be summarized as follows. First, on the issue of party ideology, the results concerning the policy area of the votes indicate that the two parties tend to vote together on EU institutional issues, hence confirming the argument that the two parties share similar positions on basic attitudes towards European integration. But, on the socio-economic issues that form the left–right dimension, the results are less clear. The parties compete on environmental and agricultural issues, and vote together on external trade issues. The results also suggest that the two parties compete more than they collude on economic and social issues, though the effects for these issues are not significant. Surprisingly, though, changes in the ideological distance between the two parties do not affect their propensity to compete or collude.

Second, confirming the intuition of many EP watchers, the two parties collude more when an absolute majority is required than when only a simple majority is required.

Third, confirming the view that the two parties like to present a united front to the other institutions, the PES and EPP collude when voting on the resolution/legislation as a whole and compete on individual amendments. However, contrary to this view, we find that the two parties compete more on final readings than on earlier readings.

Fourth, on the issue of the collusion of the two main parties against the smaller groups, the two parties compete as much as they coalesce on internal EP issues – in other words, the results for this variable are small and insignificant.

Fifth, when turnout in a vote is high, the two parties compete rather than coalesce. Although this issue is not addressed in the existing work on PES–EPP co-operation, we know from the work of Scully (1997) that there tends to be a higher turnout in votes where the Parliament has more power. It is also reasonable to assume that MEPs participate more if it is an important issue.

Sixth, and related to the issue of the importance of a vote, the PES and EPP compete more under the co-decision and co-operation procedures than under the consultation procedure or when voting on non-binding resolutions. Nevertheless, the two parties compete more in votes on non-binding resolutions than in all votes under all the legislative or budgetary procedures. Together, these results might suggest that the two parties collude more on budgetary issues than on either legislative issues or own resolutions – although this has not been directly tested here.

Seventh, concerning the strategic interests of the parties in the vote, when one or other of the two parties calls a roll-call on their own, the parties tend to oppose each other in the vote. But, when the two parties both call for a roll-call, they will collude rather than compete in the vote – suggesting that the
two parties call for roll-calls at the same time only if they both seek the same result in the vote.

Finally, these results are robust to the effect of whether the PES and EPP are voting together against the smaller parties or whether all the parties in the EP are voting the same way. The only exception is that turnout becomes non-significant when the dummy variable indicating unanimity of votes is included.

Conclusion: A Party System Ready for Power

The party groups in the EP constitute a highly developed, relatively stable, and reasonably competitive party system. The three largest party groups, currently representing over 40 national parties, have existed in one form or another for over 50 years, and account for almost 80 per cent of the seats in the EP. The addition of the Greens in the 1980s looks to be permanent, adding still further to the stability of the system, with only the small extreme groups on the right and left showing marked volatility. Although we have not addressed the issue directly, enlargement of the EU to central and eastern Europe should further stabilize the party system in the EP, by further strengthening the incentives for MEPs to organize along party rather than national lines, by increasing the size of the two main party groups against the smaller groups, and by strengthening the bi-polar nature of competition in the EP.

Also, in voting behaviour, the EP parties are highly cohesive, and increasingly so. This is particularly surprising given that the EP parties do not have a government to maintain (unlike their cousins in domestic party systems). But, unlike most democratic parliaments, there is a comparatively high number of unanimous or near unanimous votes in the EP.

Despite this high level of near unanimous votes, the two main party groups in the EP – the PES and EPP – compete more than is often assumed. We found that the propensity of these parties to compete or collude is determined by their policy preferences, the internal rules of the EP, and the institutional structure of relations between the EP and the other EU institutions. Where the parties have similar policies (on EU integration and external trade) they tend to vote together, and where they have differing positions (on environmental, agriculture, economic and social issues) they tend to vote on opposite sides. Despite these policy preferences, however, when an absolute majority is required and turnout is relatively low, there tends to be high level of collusion between the EPP and PES. And, on final votes on legislative issues, when a united front helps the EP bargain with the other EU institutions, the PES and EPP prefer to vote together. We found no support for the notion that the two main groups deliberately collude to protect their interests against the smaller groups in the EP.
These results suggest that the party system in the EP has been strengthened rather than weakened by increased powers. As the powers of the EP have grown, party cohesion and competition have also grown. Furthermore, in the main legislative procedures for adopting EU legislation after the Amsterdam Treaty, where the EP has equal power with the Council, only a simple majority is required for legislation to be adopted in the EP. Our results consequently suggest that, when exercising these powers, we can expect less collusion between the EPP and PES, and more competition on some of the key subjects of EU politics – such as regulation of the single market and agricultural reform.

Finally, our findings on the development of the parties are in line with the theoretical argument we outlined when discussing the establishment of the party system. As the ability of the EP to influence policy outcomes grew, and as the agenda of the EP expanded, there were increased incentives for individual members to develop more powerful party organizations and to use these organizations to compete over policy outcomes. With more at stake and more to do, the EP party system is more, not less, able to structure transnational ideological positions and to translate these positions into competition over policy outcomes. This bodes well for the future of the EP, as the only directly democratic institution in the EU.

Correspondence:
Simon Hix
Department of Government
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK
Tel: (+44) 0 20 7955 7657
email: s.hix@lse.ac.uk

Amie Kreppel
Department of Political Science, University of Florida
234 Anderson Hall, Box 117325
Gainesville, Fl, 32611-7325, USA
Tel: 00 1 352 392 0262 ext.283
email: kreppel@polisci.ufl.edu

Abdul Noury
ECARES, Université Libre de Bruxelles
50 avenue Roosevelt, B-1050 Bruxelles, Belgium
Tel: 00 32 2 650 4133
email: anoury@ulb.ac.be

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003
References


© Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2003


