

FROM “GRAND COALITION” TO LEFT-RIGHT CONFRONTATION

Explaining the Shifting Structure of Party Competition in the European Parliament

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In this article, the authors address the rationalist-constructivist debate head on. They start by discussing a significant empirical phenomenon in contemporary EU politics: the changing pattern of political competition in the European Parliament (EP), from a “grand coalition” of the two main parties in the 1994-1999 EP, to a new structure of left-right competition in the 1999-2004 EP. The authors then illustrate how rational choice and constructivist assumptions offer competing explanations of this shift in the “culture of competition” in the EP, which in turn generate competing empirically testable hypotheses. These propositions are tested using a logistic analysis of more than 400 roll-call votes in a period from the 1994-1999 and the 1999-2004 parliament. The authors conclude that neither basic theoretical framework performs well and that the best explanation needs to incorporate assumptions from both frameworks.

Keywords: *European Parliament; coalitions; rational choice theory; constructivist theory.*

THE ISSUE: A NEW STRUCTURE OF COMPETITION IN THE EP?

Many figures in the European Parliament (EP) had expected that the June 1999 European elections would mark a significant upswing in voter participation and interest in EP politics. The elections came close on the heels of the

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unprecedented resignation of the EU Commission after pressure from an EP investigation into accusations of nepotism and mismanagement.¹ Although the EP did not get the chance to use its power of censure to remove the Commission itself, it was generally understood in the press and the Brussels community that the Santer Commission resigned “in the shadow” of a censure vote by the EP. The fact that the EP was able to sniff out such atrocious mismanagement and was willing to flex its institutional muscles and cause an en masse resignation led many to believe that public interest in the EP would rise and participation in the elections would increase.

But the opposite was the case. In the 1999 elections, voter turnout declined to an all-time low—with less than 50% of Europe’s voters participating. Europe’s media delighted in pointing to an apparent relationship between the collapse in turnout and the parallel decline in support for European integration. The perception was that rather than the EP’s role in the Santer resignation increasing the public’s support for the EP, the whole affair had caused the EP to be viewed as part of the problem—as another of the unaccountable and corrupt “Brussels institutions.”

The historically low turnout distressed many in the EP. Just as the EU was making great strides forward with the currency union, Eastern enlargement, and new joint security and defense policies, and despite the new powers for the EP in the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties, the EP appeared to be receding in the public’s view.

For some, the explanation for this lack of interest seemed to rest with the “unnatural” alliance between the center-right European People Party (EPP) and the center-left Party of European Socialists (PES). This hegemonic coalition had dominated activity within the EP for at least a decade. Since the 1989 “meeting of giants,” when the two large party groups had decided to share the presidency between them, alternating every 2½ years, there had been growing opposition to the EPP-PES coalition within the EP. This did not come to a head, however, until after the 1999 elections. At this point, the perceived lack of strong ideological positions and seeming complicity between “natural” opponents became a scapegoat for the public’s lack of interest in the EP. As a result, there was grumbling for a return to ideological dogmatism and an end to compromise positions that satisfied no one but excluded few.

The newly elected EP reconvened in July 1999 with many MEP’s determined to do something about this state of affairs. As always, the first main item on the agenda was the election of a new EP president. Since the 1989 agreement between the EPP and the PES, the normal routine, based on the

1. Although fraud was alleged against certain commissioners, the final report of the EP avoided the use of the word, generally preferring to refer to “negligent mismanagement.”

numerical supremacy of the socialists, had been for the PES to select the presidential candidate for the first 2½-year period, whereas the EPP chose the president for the second half of the legislative term. Expecting that this would continue after the 1999 elections (in other words, in no way predicting the devastating PES loss at the polls), the socialists were able to recruit the internationally known ex-Portuguese President Mario Soares as their candidate.² The EPP, for their part, did not have a clearly established candidate prior to the elections because it was assumed that the PES would have the first turn as president. But the unexpected electoral gains of the EPP led to significant conflict over who should get to select the president for the first half of the term.³ The PES felt that given the stature of their candidate (and his age), it would be best for the EP as a whole if Soares took the first term as president as had been planned. Understandably, however, the EPP felt that it had a right to name the first president because it was now the largest party group—with 233 seats to the PES's 180. The conflict was obvious and irreconcilable.

In the end, the EPP won the day, after negotiating a deal with the centrist European Liberal, Democratic, and Reformist Group (ELDR). With 51 seats, the ELDR claimed the title of third largest party group (3 seats ahead of the Greens). Either the PES or the EPP would have been able to confidently contest the presidential elections with the ELDR on their side.⁴ The chase for the support of the ELDR began in earnest weeks before the July session but came to a head in the days just before this meeting when it was finally announced that the ELDR and the EPP had come to an agreement. They decided to form a “constituent coalition,” in which the ELDR would support the EPP candidate (the French ex-Vice President Nicole Fontaine) for the first term, and in return, the EPP would support the ELDR group chairman, Pat Cox, for EP president in the second half of the legislative term.

The leaders of both groups were careful to underline that this was not a true coalition in that both felt free to form coalitions on legislative matters as they saw fit. Despite these frequent assurances, the ideological die had been

2. Although not previously a member of the EP, Soares ran and was elected to the EP during the 1999 elections with the understanding that he would be the socialist candidate for the first presidential term.

3. It is interesting to note that in an article written in 1997 and first published in 1998, Kreppel and Tsebelis predicted this electoral outcome based on an interpretation of EP elections as a kind of midterm ballot similar to the U.S. model (Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). Other academics, in describing the EP elections as essentially “second order” elections, have followed a similar path (see Lodge, 1984, 1994; Reif, 1984; Smith, 1994).

4. Although, in both cases, a guaranteed victory in the first ballot would not be possible without additional assistance and support from the smaller party groups on their flanks. This was more of a problem for the PES because the Green Group already had plans to run its own candidate.

cast and many external observers of the EP as well as internal actors felt that the dispute over the presidency marked a transition point for the EP and an end to the "grand coalition." In part, this belief was connected to the broader concerns about the low turnout and voter apathy during the 1999 elections. Many within the EP, particularly within the ELDR and Green group, felt that the collusion between the two large groups was both undemocratic and deleterious to the EP's broader public image. It was believed that the lack of ideological debate and discussion lent credence to the popular public perception of the EP as a bureaucratic or technocratic behemoth doing little and costing a great deal.⁵

The combination of these various events seems to have led to a new and much more ideologically charged EP after the 1999 elections (cf. Hix, 2001). The battle over the presidency caused severe tensions between the EPP and PES leaderships. Rhetorically, there was a notable shift away from the previous norm of compromise and inclusion. The result, at least superficially, was a very different kind of EP. If the public statements and assertions of the MEP's were true, the cozy bipartisan politics and lowest-common-denominator deals of previous EP's were about to be replaced by a new "culture of competition." In this "new" EP, contests would be ideological in nature and divide the EP into clearly identifiable left and right camps. In this way, it was argued, Europe's voters would be able to see the EP as a "real parliament," ideologically driven and comparable to their domestic parliaments for the first time. This, in turn, many hoped, would convince the citizens of Europe to see the EP as the true location of democracy and accountability in the EU system. The desired end result would be an increase in the legitimacy of not only the EP but of the EU as a whole.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS OF THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF COMPETITION IN THE EP

This shift in the pattern of interparty competition in the EP can be conceptualized from both a constructivist and a rationalist perspective. It is important to bear in mind that neither of these theoretical frameworks are monolithic blocks. Within both the rationalist and constructivist frameworks, there is considerable variation in how scholars define and apply their theoretical assumptions. Moreover, certain variants of the rational choice and construc-

5. Stories in the press at this time focused on the infamous \$20,000 showers in the new Brussels building of the EP and the architectural blunders of the new Strasbourg building of the EP paid for by French taxpayers.

tivist camps are not as far apart as is often assumed, particularly when thinking about how to apply the theories at an empirical level. For example, the Bayesian approach to operationalizing how actors update information in the rationalist school is almost impossible to differentiate at an empirical level from most constructivist theories of preference formation and change (e.g., Checkel, 2001; Fearon & Wendt, 2001; Moravcik, 2001).

To generate competing empirical predictions, we deliberately present these two frameworks in their simplest and starkest forms, as diametrically opposed frameworks for understanding social action and interaction. We accept that these are unfair caricatures of sophisticated theoretical positions. However, this strategy is justifiable. Once we have judged how much empirical leverage the crudest variants of these theories offer, we can then make a judgment about whether extra levels of theoretical sophistication are necessary for a fuller explanation.

THE RATIONALIST VIEW: PARTY COMPETITION AS OFFICE-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Rationalist theories of party competition often start with the assumption that parties, as the primary political actors in modern democracies, are fundamentally driven by the desire to be reelected. As Anthony Downs (1957) put it, “parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies” (p. 28). As a result, parties pursue policy goals that are most likely to secure reelection and result in other benefits for their political leaders, such as the prestige of political office or financial rewards (Mayhew, 1974).

Taken to its extremes, this understanding of the goals and actions of political parties leads to several subsequent expectations. It follows, for example, that in electoral competition, parties will often modify their policy promises to the electorate in response to changing electoral preferences or to attract new voters and increase their chances of winning government office.⁶ Similarly, in coalition bargaining, pure rationalist arguments predict that parties will be willing to go into office with any other party in the party system to secure the benefits of government office, assuming that these are larger than the costs associated with participation in the coalition (Riker, 1962). Once in political office, the expectation is that parties will seek those policy portfolios that are most salient for their supporters so they can achieve policy outcomes

6. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, as the unskilled working class declined and the number of white-collar workers increased, with very different policy preferences, socialist parties repositioned themselves as champions of the middle-class public sector employees (e.g., Kitschelt, 1993).

that are beneficial to their political constituencies (e.g., Laver & Shepsle, 1995).

A particular case of the rationalist view about party competition is bargaining in legislatures. Here, rationalists view legislative bargaining as fundamentally a process of “gains from exchange” (e.g., Mayhew, 1974; Shepsle & Weingast, 1994). In this view of legislative politics, individual legislators decide to form political coalitions—such as “parliamentary party groups”—with politicians who have similar strategic and policy interests (Cox & McCubbins, 1993). For example, legislators that come from constituencies with similar economic interests have an incentive to cooperate to secure policies that promote the interests of both their constituencies.

Following the same logic, interparty coalitions may be formed on an issue-by-issue basis, commonly referred to as “logrolling.” Parties may also have an incentive to cooperate in the collective organization of the chamber if, through cooperation, they can secure higher payoffs for themselves than would otherwise be possible (Krehbiel, 1991; Shepsle, 1979). This type of strategic cooperation can include both policy and institutional collaboration. For example, some parties within a legislature with the power to muster the necessary majority may cooperate to create decision-making rules, set the agenda, or construct a committee system that benefits themselves above the other parties. These institutions, despite being the result of strategic action, generally serve to promote the collective efficiency of parliamentary bargaining by reducing the transaction costs of decision making and allowing all parliamentary parties to focus on the business of competing over policy outcomes: or, in other words, allow all parties to promote the interests of their voters, which in turn increases their chances of reelection.

This rationalist understanding of strategic party action can be applied to the EP and used to predict MEP and party group voting and coalition behavior both before and after the June 1999 elections based on their previous actions.

Prior to the 1999 elections, most of the party groups in the EP had common incentives to cooperate on policy issues when pitted against the Council. It is generally accepted that the Council and the EP lie at opposite ends of the anti- and pro-integration spectrum, regardless of the partisan majorities within each institution. As a result, party groups within the EP tend to cooperate to support prointegration policies (Kreppel, 2002; Tsebelis, 1994). In addition, cooperation between the groups served to increase the influence of the EP as a whole (as measured by amendment success) by presenting a united front to the other institutions (Kreppel, 2002). The result of this generally prointegration stance has been to effectively mitigate ideological differences

between the two largest groups during *interinstitutional* battles (i.e., during final votes).

This cooperation has occurred, despite the fact that ideologically the two parties might be expected to oppose each other more often than not, because the interinstitutional battle occurs most often along a pro- and anti-integration axis and not the standard left-right ideological spectrum (Hix, 1999).⁷ Ideological conflict between the PES and EPP has tended to occur during the fight over the individual amendments that determine the character and shape of the proposal that the EP will ultimately send to the other institutions (Kreppel, 2000, 2002; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). In other words, these two groups may disagree over the form and even the extent of future integration, but they both prefer some integration to none and generally more to less. The result has been cooperation precisely when it is most visible to the public during final votes.

Moreover, as expected by the rationalist model, the PES and EPP, as the two largest groups in the EP, historically have shared a common interest and had the power to create internal organizational structures within the EP that benefit only large party groups (Kreppel, 2002). By cooperating with each other, the PES and EPP have effectively excluded or minimized the role of the smaller party groups in the governing structures of the EP over the last decade.⁸ Basically, by cooperating with each other, these two groups were able to control most of the activities of the EP and ensure that they divided the majority of institutional spoils to the near exclusion of the smaller party groups.⁹

In the post-1999 elections era, the picture is somewhat different but not completely so. In the area of legislative bargaining, the two main party groups still share similar policies toward the general question of European integration and on “interinstitutional issues,” which pit the EP as a whole against the Council and Commission. On many issues then, the two groups would prefer to cooperate than compete. However, now both party groups would have to be concerned about how their continued collaboration would affect the EP as a whole. Given the general interpretation of the dismal EP electoral turnout in

7. It should be noted that although the two groups frequently cooperated, there were some legislative areas in which compromise could not be achieved (or put another way, ideology could not be overcome). See Kreppel (2000).

8. For example, the PES and EPP designed a committee chair allocation system using the d’Hondt counting method, which is broadly proportional but nonetheless heavily favors the interests of the two largest party groups. They also created a conference of presidents (of the EP groups), where votes are weighted according to the size of the party groups.

9. In fact, due to a high rate of absenteeism, only if the PES and EPP cooperated could the EP generally achieve the absolute majority needed during the second reading of the cooperation procedure or the second and third readings of the codecision procedure.

1999, the EPP and PES were faced with a new dilemma. The previous norm of conflict over amendments and cooperation during interinstitutional battles was now perceived as being deleterious to the prestige and influence of the EP as a whole because it led to a decrease in electoral turnout and a reduction in the legitimacy of the EP.

According to the rationalist interpretation of legislative party behavior, power and the benefits that it encompasses are more important than policy outcomes, which are perceived to be primarily a means to an end (the assumption of power), or of secondary consideration at best.¹⁰ If continued cooperation between the EPP and the PES to achieve policy outcomes will lead to a reduction in the overall power and influence of the institution they control, then cooperation (or, in this case, the public perception of cooperation) must cease. Elected office within and control over a lame-duck institution is far from an ideal outcome in any rationalist model.

Thus, according to the rationalist perspective on party competition and strategic action in legislative bargaining in the EP, we should expect to observe the following behavior:

Rationalist Hypothesis 1: In the pre-1999 Parliament, the EPP and PES should compete in the early stages of legislative proposals yet coalesce in the final stages when the battle can be interpreted as interinstitutional. However, in the post-1999 EP, the EPP and PES should compete more often in all stages of the legislative process because continued cooperation will diminish the importance of the EP in the eyes of the public and thus in reality as well.

Nonetheless, from a rationalist perspective, little has changed when it comes to EPP-PES cooperation or competition on internal issues in the EP. The PES and EPP still have a common interest to share the spoils of the EP's office system and to cooperate in the general organization of the EP's internal rules and agendas. In other words, on these issues, the rhetoric following the 1999 elections is truly "cheap talk." Put simply,

Rationalist Hypothesis 2: The PES and EPP should (on average) collude on internal issues in both the pre- and post-1999 parliaments.

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PARTY INTERACTION

We are not aware of any explicit "constructivist" theories of party competition or legislative behavior. Nevertheless, many of the implicit assumptions

10. Again, we reiterate that we are presenting the most basic and unnuanced interpretation of these theories for ease of explication and comparison.

behind the more “purposive” (as opposed to party-interest) approaches to party behavior share the primary tenets of constructivist views of international relations.

James Fearon and Alexander Wendt (2001) set out three main empirical arguments that are common to most constructivist approaches to international relations.

1. Constructivism is centrally concerned with the role of ideas in constructing social life,
2. Constructivism is concerned with showing the socially constructed nature of agents and interactions between agents,
3. Constructivism is based on a research strategy of methodological holism rather than methodological individualism.

Each of these arguments can be applied to party competition in general and the behavior of the two main party groups in the EP in particular.

First, in terms of the role of ideas, there is a long tradition in the parties’ literature of seeing parties as purposive organizations. In other words, political parties are understood to be forces that exist to promote a particular ideological worldview rather than autonomous and calculating agents (e.g., Duverger, 1954; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). In modern European politics, these ideological positions tend to be collapsed into the single spectrum of left-right conflict. From a constructivist perspective, this is not simply a matter of convenience, pursued because competition in one dimension is more “efficient” for both parties and voters (as some rationalists claim). Instead, the left-right spectrum is a powerful and enduring social construct. It enables politics to be simultaneously conceptualized as dichotomous and continuous as well as summarizing fundamentally opposing assumptions about how the social, economic, political, and cultural worlds should be organized (Bobbio, 1995/1996).

Second, the structure of relations between political parties is not easily changed. Rationalists tend to see party leaders as conscious, calculating, autonomous actors who carefully select between different strategies and can change their behavior on a day-to-day basis if this is deemed the best way to secure a particular set of goals. For constructivists, actors are more “bound” by exogenous institutional, cultural, or sociological forces that the actors themselves have only a limited ability to change. As a result, from a constructivist point of view, interaction between actors tends to be “sticky” rather than free-flowing, making rapid and/or frequent strategic change infeasible. This is particularly true of actors with established patterns of social interaction, as opposed to “novice agents,” who are more able to

change their preferences and behavior. For example, established political parties cannot simply “jump into bed” with any other party in a party system simply to secure short-term policy or office benefits as the rationalist party theorists suggest. From a constructivist perspective, coalitions can only be formed with parties that share basic ideological views on a clear set of policy issues. Similarly, in a constructivist interpretation of the government-opposition conflict in most parliaments, opposition parties tend to vote against the government parties “as a matter of principle.” This would be illogical from a rationalist perspective if the policy proposal on the table is closer to the “ideal-point” of the opposition party leadership.

Third, and related to this point, constructivists would argue that party competition cannot be understood by simply focusing on the micro-level interests of the individual party leaders. The bigger, “macro,” or “holistic” picture must be taken into account in a complete explanation of political outcomes. For example, the outcome of an election can be constructed in different ways. The raw figures may tell one story (i.e., exactly how well the parties have done vis-à-vis each other and their previous performances), and party leaders will often try to “spin” a result a particular way, either to emphasize their gains or underplay their losses. Frequently, however, the long-term impact of a particular election on coalition patterns, government performance, and even future voter choices is not related to the raw figures or political “spin doctors.” Instead, the long-term influence of an election depends on how changes in the underlying political, social, and cultural forces behind the election result are perceived by the voters, the media, and the political elites.

Putting these arguments together, from a constructivist perspective, the result in the June 1999 European elections was a fundamental turning point for the EP in terms of both its internal and external political and partisan activity. In terms of the raw figures, if several external factors are controlled for (i.e., the timing of national elections, compulsory voting, the decline in national electoral turnout, and the lower turnout of many new EU member states), then turnout in EP elections has actually remained stable between 1979 and 1999 (Franklin, 2001). Also, in empirical terms, turnout and results in EP elections have almost nothing to do with the EP because these elections are “second-order national contests.” This means that voters are actually responding to events, personalities, and issues in their national political systems rather than in the EP or the EU as a whole (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996).

However, the elites in the EP had a more holistic interpretation on the 1999 EP election results. The fall in turnout to below 50% for the first time was a symptom of a deeper malaise in the politics of the EU. It highlighted the growing problems resulting from the perceived lack of democratic account-

ability and legitimacy in EU governance. In a sense, this turns the second-order elections argument on its head. After 20 years of direct elections to the EP and a dramatic increase in the powers of the EP in the previous 10 years, EU citizens should not think that EP elections are unimportant and “second-order.” The fact that they do suggests a fundamental problem in the representation chain from voters’ choices in EP elections, via party behavior in the EP, to policy outcomes from the EU. With this construction of the meaning of the elections, the leaders of the EP party groups were determined to change the element of the representation chain that they have control over: the structure of competition in the EP.

According to this line of reasoning, the existing underlying ideological structure of European politics—the left-right conflict—provides an ideal environment within which the two party groups can construct this transformation. In a constructivist interpretation of previous party group behavior prior to the 1999 elections, the EPP and PES group leadership constructed their behavior in the EP around the notion that they existed to secure the common goals of European integration and the promotion of the authority of the only directly elected EU institution (the EP). Following the 1999 elections, the EPP and PES leaderships constructed a new dominant discourse: of “competition,” “conflict,” and “contestation” between rival ideologically driven agendas for the EU, based around the classic “center-left” and “center-right” sociopolitical orientations. Before the 1999 elections, the “them” in the “us-versus-them” contest in the EP referred to the Council and, in some cases, the Commission in the interinstitutional battle to promote increased integration and increased EP influence. Now the “them” were the members of the other main party group in the EP, reflecting the shift to an intrainstitutional battle along the traditional left-right spectrum.

Once a new social reality is constructed and reinforced by deeper ideational and macro-political foundations, this new reality should dominate all interactions between the EPP and PES groups. In other words, there should not be any strategic differentiation between legislative bargaining, amendments or final resolutions, or internal organizational issues. In contrast to the rationalist approach, in a constructivist view, the party groups are not able to make autonomous choices about whether to cooperate here and compete there; the shift is holistic and real, not strategic and selective. Hence, we should expect to observe the following:

Constructivist Hypothesis 1: In the pre-1999 Parliament, the EPP and PES should (on average) cooperate in all aspects of the legislative process (i.e., amendments and whole resolutions), but in the post-1999 Parliament, the EPP and PES should (on average) compete in all aspects of the legislative process.

Constructivist Hypothesis 2: In the pre-1999 Parliament, the PES and EPP should collude on internal organizational issues (i.e., the election of the EP President, rules, reforms, etc.), but in the post-1999 Parliament the EPP and PES should compete on all internal issues.

DATA ANALYSIS

To ascertain whether the rationalist or constructivist interpretations do a better job of explaining and predicting coalition behavior before and after the June 1999 election, we analyze 420 roll-call votes from 1996 and 1999. Of these, 294 are from 1996 and represent nearly the entire universe of roll-call votes held during that year. The remaining 126 votes are from the last 6 months of 1999 (i.e., after the June elections) and also represent nearly a complete sample.¹¹ This means that this analysis covers all legislative and nonlegislative roll-call votes, including votes on resolutions, internal organizational matters, calls for urgent discussion, and so on. This was done to allow us to examine voting behavior across the spectrum of possibilities and differentiate where necessary to test the various rationalist and constructivist hypotheses.

The years 1996 and 1999 were not selected at random. Between June 1996 and July 1999, there was a dramatic shift in the relative strength and the internal relationship between the two largest party groups of the EP. In 1996, the PES was by far the largest group, with the EPP in second place. As was noted above, despite their apparent ideological differences and frequently conflictual relationships at the national level, these two party groups were perceived to work together in bipartisan cooperation quite frequently within the EP up until the 1999 elections. As a result, it is important to have some before-and-after measure to accurately gauge the full impact of these elections and the ability of the two theoretical models to accurately predict any resultant change in voting and coalition behavior.

At the same time, it can be argued that very little else changed for the EP between these 2 years. The 1995 EFTA enlargement had already occurred, the Maastricht Treaty had been in force for 2 years by 1996, and the new Amsterdam Treaty (passed in 1997) had a relatively modest impact on the EP in comparison to these other two events.¹² As a result, through an analysis of

11. In both cases, the roll-call votes from the extensive budgetary process are excluded. This was because they were not yet available for 1999 and were thus excluded from 1996 to make the cases comparable.

12. Although an important addition to the growing constitutional heritage of the European Union, the Amsterdam Treaty was directly significant for the EP only in so far as it modified and expanded the application of the codecision procedure.

voting behavior during these 2 years, it is possible to hold many potentially intervening variables constant.

The main item of interest here is the relative ability of the two different theoretical approaches to accurately describe the voting and coalition behavior of the PES and EPP before and after the 1999 elections. As a result, the dependent variable analyzed is the formation of the grand coalition between the EPP and PES. This coalition will be deemed to have formed when a majority of these two groups participating in the vote act together. There are no restrictions on vote turnout, subject matter, minority/majority dichotomy, and so forth. All votes during the periods covered, with the exception noted above, are included.

The independent variables to be examined are more complex. The task was to try to create a set of variables that could test for the predictions of the four hypotheses outlined above. To test the predictions of these hypotheses, it is necessary to separate votes on interinstitutional votes from those not involving the other institutions, votes on internal matters from those on legislative proposals and, as a control, votes that require an absolute majority from those that do not. By examining the voting behavior of the PES and EPP on each of these types of votes both before and after the 1999 election, we can test the predictions of the rationalist and constructivist models and examine the potentially intervening impact of institutional constraints.

The first dichotomous variable created measured the impact of a vote's interinstitutional nature. We considered all "final votes," either on resolutions or legislative proposals, to be interinstitutional in nature on the grounds that it is the final legislative package or position taken by the EP in a resolution that is forwarded to the other EU institutions.¹³ What occurs within the EP during the battle over amendments may get little to no attention from the public and probably only minimally more from the Council or Commission. In addition, although neither the Commission nor the Council is required to consider the final version of an internal EP resolution, these do often get significant press attention, forcing the other institutions to at least informally consider them. This means final votes on all resolutions, consultations, cooperation, and codecision votes as well as a few assent and budget-related votes were included in this dummy variable. Votes on a whole proposal were scored as 1 and everything else was a 0.

The second dichotomous variable measured the impact of internal versus legislative content on voting behavior. All votes on internal matters (i.e., rules

13. Votes under the assent and budget procedure were extremely few and therefore not statistically relevant on their own but were included here because they do represent final votes that will be formally or informally considered by the other EU institutions.

Table 1
Results of Combined Years Logistic Regression

Logit estimates	Number of Observations = 840 Likelihood Ratio (LR) $\chi^2(4) = 58.80$ Prob. > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$ Log likelihood = -499.55436 Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0556$					
Grand Coalition	Coefficient	SE	z	$P < z $	95% Confidence Interval	
Internal	-1.679836	.4343921	-3.867	0.000	-2.531229	-0.8284429
Absolute majority requirement	-0.3201113	.1855982	-1.725	0.085	-.6838771	0.0436546
Interinstitutional	1.195841	.2146279	5.572	0.000	.7751781	1.616504
Year 1996	0.4513879	.1670777	2.702	0.007	.1239216	0.7788542
Constant	0.3084223	.1527289	2.019	0.043	.0090792	0.6077654

of procedure, internal organization, etc.) were scored as 1 and everything else (i.e., legislative votes) was scored as 0. The requirement for an absolute majority was controlled for by the addition of a third dichotomous variable. All votes occurring during the second or third reading under the cooperation and codecision procedures, as well as all votes under the assent procedure, were labeled 1, and everything else was codified as 0. In our sample, the grand PES-EPP coalition formed a total of 284 times out of a possible 420. There were 103 interinstitutional votes, just 34 internal votes and 82 absolute-majority votes.¹⁴

To analyze the data, we used a simple logistic regression to test for significance and then used first differences as the means of measuring the comparative impact of the variables under discussion. We first ran the whole data set with a dummy variable for year to see if indeed there was any increase or reduction in the overall likelihood of grand coalition formation between the two periods under examination. These results are shown in Table 1. We then examined each year independently to test for the changes predicted by the rationalist and constructivist models, including first differences. These results are given in Tables 2 through 5 below.

The overall results from the combined data, although generally significant, are not helpful in testing the two explanations as they group together the 2 years, and we are interested in determining whether there are differences

14. The small number of "internal" votes does pose a problem for the statistical validity of our conclusions as regards this variable.

Table 2
Results of 1996 Logistic Regression

Logit estimates	Number of Observations = 588 LR $\chi^2(3) = 19.45$ Prob. > $\chi^2 = 0.0002$ Log likelihood = -347.75627 Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0272$					
Grand Coalition	Coefficient	SE	z	$P < z $	95% Confidence Interval	
Internal	-1.245658	.7343143	-1.696	0.090	-2.684888	0.1935717
Absolute majority	-0.4706467	.2203121	-2.136	0.033	-.9024505	-0.0388429
Interinstitutional	0.8097941	.2610434	3.102	0.002	.2981585	1.32143
Constant	0.8407609	.1152095	7.298	0.000	.6149545	1.066567

Table 3
First Differences for 1996

Variable	Sign of Coefficient	First Difference
Internal topic	(-)	.29563
Absolute majority requirement	(-)	.10178
Interinstitutional	(+)	.14854

Table 4
Results of 1999 Logistic Regression

Logit estimates	Number of Observations = 252 LR $\chi^2(3) = 38.55$ Prob. > $\chi^2 = 0.0000$ Log likelihood = -149.56486 Pseudo $R^2 = 0.1142$					
Grand Coalition	Coefficient	SE	z	$P < z $	95% Confidence Interval	
Internal	-2.054369	.5854338	-3.509	0.000	-3.201798	-0.9069395
Absolute majority requirement	-0.0402111	.3543978	-0.113	0.910	-.7348181	0.6543959
Interinstitutional	1.805148	.373081	4.838	0.000	1.073923	2.536373
Constant	0.136641	.1723611	0.793	0.428	-.2011806	0.4744626

Table 5
First Differences for 1999

Variable	Sign of Coefficient	First Difference
Internal topic	(-)	.47637
Absolute majority requirement	(-)	.0095
Interinstitutional	(+)	.36127

between them. The dummy variable for year (yr1996) does measure the impact of time and is significant at the 95% threshold. The first difference for the year dummy variable is just under 10% (.0995), and the coefficient is positive. This tells us that the grand coalition formed, on average, 10% more often during 1996 than after the 1999 elections. This confirms that there was some change in voting and coalition behavior and that it was statistically significant. To test the competing explanations of this change, however, we need to disaggregate the years and look at each one individually. We will examine the situation in 1996 and then compare it to 1999 to see what, if anything, changed in terms of voting and coalition behavior and then compare the statistical outcomes to the predictions of the two models.

The most striking aspect of the 1996 results is the strong significance of both the absolute majority (absmaj) and interinstitutional (inter-i) variables. The negative coefficient of the absolute majority variable tells us that contrary to popular belief, in 1996 at least, the EPP and PES were actually significantly less likely to vote together when there was an absolute-majority requirement than when there was not. However, they were much more likely to vote together on final resolutions or proposals regardless of the stage of the process or the procedure involved. Also interesting is the comparatively low statistical significance of the "internal" variable and its negative coefficient. This suggests that the EPP and PES were less likely to form a coalition on internal matters. However, the small *n* of vote on internal matters and the lower statistical significance (90% threshold) should make us wary of imparting too much significance to these findings. To more easily quantify these results we give the first differences for each variable above in Table 3.

Essentially first differences measure the change in the likelihood of the dependent variable occurring as the selected variable shifts from its maximum to its minimum value (in this case, 0 and 1) while holding all other variables constant. So in 1996, for example, the grand coalition was almost 30% less likely to occur when votes were on internal matters than when they were not. Similarly, when there was an absolute majority requirement, the EPP and PES were actually about 10% less likely to vote together than when there was

no special majority requirement. Finally, the grand coalition was almost 15% more likely to occur when voting was on a whole proposal of any sort and therefore arguably interinstitutional in nature. Before discussing how these results coincide with the expectations of the two theoretical models, we discuss the results from 1999 to see if there are any significant changes in the impact of the variables on the likelihood of EPP-PES collaboration.

The results from 1999 are both similar and different from those of 1996. In 1999, once again the interinstitutional variable is the most significant and positive, meaning that in 1999, as well as 1996, the EPP and PES were more likely to form a coalition when voting on final resolutions or proposals. However, the grand coalition was much less likely to form in 1999 for votes on internal matters and whether a vote requires an absolute majority is no longer significant (although the coefficient remains negative). The relative change in the impact of these variables on the voting behavior of the two groups can be seen more easily through a comparison of the first differences. Those for 1999 are shown in Table 5.

The numerical limitations of the data sets make a well-grounded comparison of the relative impact of the variables across time somewhat risky. Despite this, it is helpful to examine the first differences to compare the strength of the influence of our three independent variables. The first differences for 1999 are shown in Table 5. The negative impact of the absolute majority requirement on the eventual formation of the grand coalition is extremely small (less than 1%), although given the lack of statistical significance of this variable in the 1999 data set, this is not surprising. More striking are the other variables—in particular, the negative impact of internal roll-call votes. On internal issues compared to all other votes, the EPP and PES were 30% less likely to vote together in 1996 and 48% less likely to vote together in 1999. For both years, interinstitutional votes were positively correlated to the formation of the grand coalition, although much more so in 1999 (a 36% increase compared to the almost 15% increase in 1996). It does need to be kept in mind that the results for roll-call votes on internal matters in 1996 and absolute majority requirement votes in 1999 are statistically suspicious because of the very small *n*.

DISCUSSION

What do these results tell us about the relative ability of the competing rationalist and constructivist understandings of coalition formation in the EP and the impact of the 1999 elections on this process?

Table 6
Rationalist and Constructivist Prediction of EPP-PES Voting Behavior

Vote Type	Rationalist 1996	Rationalist 1999	Constructivist 1996	Constructivist 1999
Amendments	Compete	Compete	Cooperate	Compete
Whole proposals	Cooperate	Compete	Cooperate	Compete
Internal matters	Cooperate	Cooperate	Cooperate	Compete

Table 7
EPP-PES Voting Behavior Results

Vote Type	1996	1999
Amendments	Compete	Compete more
Whole proposals	Cooperate	Cooperate more
Internal matters	Compete	Compete more

First, the fact that the absolute majority variable fell below the 95% threshold in all cases (and only reached the 90% threshold in 1996) tells us that the formal institutional requirement for what is an effective super majority does not appear to have significant impact on the voting or coalition strategies of the EPP and PES. In fact, the coefficient in all cases was negative, suggesting that, if anything, the vote requirement led to less cooperation, not more. The absence of an overbearing institutional constraint allows us to look more closely at the predictions of the two theoretical models.

The predictions of the rationalist and constructivist models are summarized in Table 6. The only change in coalition behavior expected by the rationalist approach is a shift from cooperation to conflict on final proposals. The previous level of conflict over amendments and cooperation to usurp the benefits of office on internal votes remain unchanged. The constructivists, however, predict a more dramatic shift. In fact, this interpretation of voting behavior predicts complete cooperation across amendments, whole resolutions and internal matters in 1996, and complete conflict in all three arenas after the 1999 elections.

As we can see in the results presented in Table 7, neither theory was successful in either explaining voting and coalition behavior prior to the 1999 elections or predicting the changes afterward. In fact, just looking at Table 7, one might think that nothing had actually changed, yet we know this is not true. The truth is the grand coalition did form on average 10% less often after

the 1999 elections. In addition, the probability of EPP-PES cooperation on final votes (whole proposals) actually increased by approximately 20%, contrary to the expectations of both theories. The tendency to conflict over internal matters before the 1999 elections (not initially predicted by either theory) increased still further after the elections. In other words, in their starkest interpretations, neither theoretical interpretation of voting behavior is very convincing. The question is: Why? And, given this inadequacy, how are we to understand voting and coalition patterns in the EP (and elsewhere)?

CONCLUSION

The results, which are against our basic characterizations of the rationalist and constructivist interpretations, certainly teach us to be wary of the explanatory power of simple assumptions. Part of the problem of these theories, as we have constructed them, is that in their simplest form they do not capture the rather complex structure of interests, preferences, and institutions in the EP. It is not that the EP is unique. It is rather that parties in the EP face multiple pressures—their short-term policy preferences on a particular legislative issue, their medium-term preferences for particular offices and rules in the EP, and their collective long-term preference of increasing the power of the EP and the legitimacy of the EU system as a whole. An additional problem for the two main EP party groups is that they themselves are aggregations of subactors: the national party delegations that make up these parties. And these national party delegations often have different preferences over these short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

Nevertheless, a possible solution would be a more nuanced theory of behavior in the EP, which integrates short-term preferences and choices (based on rationalist assumptions) with the long-term preferences (in which behavior may be less immediately rational and often based on broader “constructed” meanings about the nature of legitimacy and power in the EU). For example, in the short term, the EPP and PES have different policy preferences over socioeconomic policies but similar policy preferences over integration policies. In the medium term, the EPP and PES have different preferences over who should get what in the internal power structure of the EP but share an interest in maintaining an institutional status quo—which in general favors their own MEP’s at the expense of the smaller groups. In the long term, the PES and EPP overwhelmingly share the same interests in seeing the institutional power of the EP increase vis-à-vis the other EU institutions (i.e., being able to elect the Commission president and being able to amend all

areas of the EU budget) and in trying to improve the legitimacy of the EU institutions as a whole in the eyes of Europe's voters.

The difference between the pre- and post-1999 parliaments was how the two main groups chose to trade off these short- and long-term goals. Before 1999, the focus was on the short and medium term: competing to secure different amendments in EU legislation while maintaining a common front against the Council and Commission in the final round of negotiations; and competing over internal decision-rules while retaining a broad, internal, institutional status quo (e.g., over the presidency of the EP). After 1999, in contrast, the focus began to shift toward the long term: with a tension between a desire to compete more vigorously on legislative and internal issues to signal to the outside world that the EP is a "real" parliament and a desire to cooperate more vigorously when dealing with the Council and the Commission to promote the institutional interests of the EP.

This "mixed model"—which incorporates some of the rationalists' assumptions about how the EP groups make strategic calculations, as well as some of the constructivist assumptions about what ultimately explains where the party groups preferences come from—goes some way toward explaining our findings. However, this alternative model could only be fully tested with more sophisticated data on the precise short-term policy preferences of the two main groups on every issue before the EP. Only then would we be able to see how and under what conditions the EP groups are willing to compromise short-term policy goals for longer-term institutional or legitimacy interests.

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