



Pulling the Strings: Party Group Coordinators in the European Parliament

Dr Michael Kaeding, Senior Lecturer, EIPA Maastricht

Lukas Obholzer, Ph.D. student, European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science

13

Since its post-Lisbon increase in (legislative and non-legislative) powers, the European Parliament (EP) is more relevant than ever in the geographically diversified multilevel system of the EU. Party group coordinators occupy a crucial position in collective decision-making within the EP. However, knowledge about these pivotal actors is absent. This raises the question as to who these party group coordinators are, what they do, and what indeed makes a good coordinator. A new data set shows that in 2012, more than one-fifth of coordinators of the three largest and most influential groups are German, with British and Spanish coordinators ranking a distant second before Romanians. Among coordinators from NMS, only one-eighth were newcomers.

Introduction

Who establishes the speakers' lists for plenary sessions in Strasbourg and decides that *Claude Turmes*, a Green Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from Luxembourg, becomes the rapporteur for the controversial Energy-efficiency Directive; or that *Angelika Niebler*, a German centre-right MEP who chaired the Parliament's Industry, Research and Energy committee (ITRE) between 2007 and 2009, is appointed rapporteur for the Mobile-phone roaming charges Directive; and that *David Martin*, a senior British MEP from the Socialists & Democrats group (S&D), is put in charge of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA)? Who acts as so-called 'whips' maximising voting cohesion among party groups' contingents in committee and full plenary meetings? Who prepares the organisation of the hearings of Commissioners-designate in parliamentary committees and decides whether the Commissioners-designate are qualified both to be members of the Commission's College and to carry out the particular duties they have been assigned?

These decisions are taken by a small group of highly influential MEPs; so-called party group coordinators. These individuals, such as *Jean-Paul Gauzès*, a French European People's Party (EPP) member on the Economic and Monetary Affairs committee (ECON) with a firm grip on the complicated and fast-changing world of finance and *Ingeborg Grässle*, a German centre-right MEP on the Budgetary Control committee (CONT), occupy a crucial position in collective decision-making in the European Parliament (EP). Political coordinators are the nexus mediating between individual MEPs, national party delegations that citizens voted for, and the European party group. They are members chosen to represent their groups at preparatory discussions on policy guidelines, on the strategy pursued by the parliamentary committee and on organising the practical side of the committee's work. They convene short meetings in closed session, where they assign rapporteurships to groups and each of them compiles voting instructions along which MEPs of their group vote very cohesively.

Political coordinators are the nexus mediating between individual MEPs, national party delegations that citizens voted for, and the European party group.

However, knowledge about these pivotal actors is absent. This raises the question as to who these coordinators are, what their role is, and what makes a good coordinator. This article seeks to answer these questions. It is structured as follows: first, we outline the various important tasks carried out by party group coordinators in the EP. Drawing on a novel dataset comprising information on EP6 (2004-2009) and EP7 (2009-2012), we formulate a number of lessons regarding the distribution of party group coordinator posts. Eventually, we conclude by providing a first analysis of the qualities coordinators should have.

What is the role of political party group coordinators in the European Parliament?

Most of the parliamentary work is carried out in the EP's committee structure. There are 20 standing parliamentary committees, two sub-committees (on human rights; security and defence) and one special committee (on organised crime, corruption and money laundering). Within every parliamentary committee a significant part is played by party group coordinators. Only recently recognised in the EP's rules of procedure (Rule 192), party group coordinators considerably influence the work of the EP's committee system, while often rivalling the committee's bureau (chair and vice-chair persons). In particular 'the balance of power between chairs and party group coordinators appears to vary in terms of personality and size of the groups from which the holders of these offices are drawn' (Whitaker, 2011, 91; 2001).

Rule 192: Committee coordinators [. . .]

1. The political groups may designate one of their members as coordinator.
2. The committee coordinators shall if necessary be convened by their committee Chair to prepare decisions to be taken by the committee, in particular decisions on procedure and the appointment of rapporteurs. The committee may delegate the power to take certain decisions to the coordinators, with the exception of decisions concerning the adoption of reports, opinions or amendments. The Vice-Chairs may be invited to participate in the meetings of committee coordinators in a consultative role. The coordinators shall endeavour to find a consensus. When consensus cannot be reached, they may act only by a majority that clearly represents a large majority of the committee, having regard to the respective strengths of the various groups.
3. The committee coordinators shall be convened by their committee Chair to prepare the organisation of the hearings of Commissioners-designate. Following those hearings, the coordinators shall meet to evaluate the nominees in accordance with the procedure laid down in Annex XVII. [. . .]

Source: Rules of procedure of the European Parliament (April 2012)

Despite the importance of party group coordinators for the EP's day-to-day decision-making, much is not known about these influential individuals. Elected by each party group's members on every committee at the start of each legislative term and mid-term, in line with other committee and EP leadership positions, their powers cover a considerable range of activities. They can mainly be divided along three categories:

In each committee they *act as the party group's spokesperson* in the subject area concerned, *debate the committee's future agenda*, *allocate reports* to one of the party groups, *discuss forthcoming plenary votes* and possible compromise amendments, *establish the speakers' lists* for plenary sessions, *prepare the organisation of the hearings* of Commissioners-designate, and *decide* whether the Commissioners-designate are qualified.

Among the members of their party groups, they play a key role in formulating the party group's policy, allocate (shadow) rapporteurships for legislative and non-legislative acts, and convene preparatory meetings before the start of the committee meeting.

At the full plenary they *maximise their party group's presence* during key votes in committee and the full plenary, and ensure voting cohesion among their party group's contingent in committee and full plenary meetings.

The distribution of party group coordinators in the European Parliament

In order to shed light on who the coordinators are, we compiled a novel data set covering the four largest political groups – EPP, S&D, ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), and Greens/EFA (European Free Alliance) – across all standing committees and their subcommittees for the sixth and seventh legislative terms, that is from 2004 until 2012. It comprises almost 250 MEPs who served as coordinators for at least part of the last eight years. We thus obtain unique insights into the MEPs effectively 'running the show'. Here, we focus on the nationality of some of these coordinators.

Analysing the Nationality of Coordinatorships

The nationality of MEPs holding leadership positions is relevant as national interest might influence MEPs' preferences. On the ECON committee dealing with issues such as financial regulation, for instance, a French MEP might have different views than a British MEP seeking to protect the City. In addition, within party groups, nationality represents a proxy for different constituent national party groups, to which committee work is of increasing importance following the increase in powers of the EP (Whitaker, 2011). In order to agree on a party line within a political group, conflicts between different national party delegations, such as British Labour, German Social Democrats or the French Socialist Party, needs to be settled. Coordinators hold a party group role which requires independence, acting as brokers seeking to avoid divisions. It is hence reasonable to expect that they have some room for manoeuvre so as to influence the party group line. Research has established that MEPs vote very cohesively along that line once it has been set (Hix *et al.*, 2007).

In 2012, more than one-fifth of coordinators of the three largest and most influential groups are German, with British and Spanish coordinators ranking a distant second before Romanians. The strong presence of German MEPs in these positions can partly be explained by the strength of their national party delegations within the three groups (see Figure 1a-c).

research has highlighted that many German MEPs commit to long-term work in the EP rather than short stints before returning to positions in their home countries (Scarow, 1997). The lower turnover is thus arguably reflected in the share of coordinator positions, with which MEPs can be rewarded for building up long-term experience and expertise.

New Member States versus old EU 15 Member States

When considering the experience of MEPs as an explanatory factor in the election of coordinators, the presence of new Member States (NMS) as opposed to the old EU15 in+ these posts is interesting. Kaeding & Hurka (2010) find that MEPs from NMS are underrepresented in the allocation of rapporteurships, which implies that the group of rapporteurs is clearly no microcosm of the full plenary. The allocation of reports appears to be a self-selection process where MEPs seek reports that reflect their particular interests. This is astonishing if we acknowledge the growing importance of informal trilogues, in which rapporteurs are the key parliamentary negotiators with essential legislative and non-legislative powers. This time, we therefore ask how MEPs from NMS are represented amongst the coordinators that allocate rapporteurships.

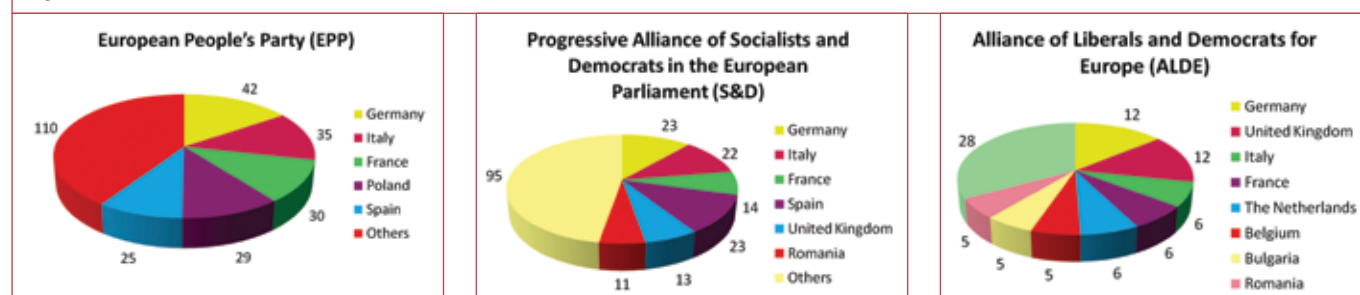
Figure 2

	EP 6: MEPs		EP 6: Coordinators		EP7: MEPs		EP7: Coordinators	
	NMS	Old MS	NMS	Old MS	NMS	Old MS	NMS	Old MS
EPP	31%	69%	6%	94%	33%	67%	44%	56%
S&D	22%	78%	3%	97%	27%	73%	7%	93%
ALDE	32%	68%	3%	97%	22%	78%	25%	75%
Plenary	28%	72%			27%	73%		

The data show that the 2004 and 2007 enlargements were not yet fully reflected among coordinators during EP6. This holds for all three party groups during the sixth legislative term when their countries joined the EU; this is also in line with expectations, since this was the first term for these MEPs, with those from Romania and Bulgaria only joining after mid-term. The picture changes dramatically in the current term, when many of the Members had already gained parliamentary experience.

However, the representation of MEPs from NMS among coordinators differs vastly among groups. The EPP, in which representatives from new Member States make up a third

Figure 1a-c



Other national delegations, such as from the UK or Poland, have larger contingents in less influential fringe groups such as the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists), which we do not focus on here (but see Figure 1). In addition, previous

of the faction, has seen a steep increase in coordinators from NMS, up by 38 percentage points to 44 per cent. For ALDE, while the share of MEPs from NMS decreased by 10 percentage points, the share of coordinators defied the

trend and increased by 22 points. Remarkably, MEPs from NMS are thus better represented in EPP and ALDE among coordinators than in their faction at large. For S&D, in contrast, the share of MEPs from NMS is still very low in EP7. This suggests that more MEPs clung on to their positions.

Experience of coordinators

When we consider the experience of the coordinators as a factor influencing their election as coordinators, it is first notable that almost one-third of the coordinators of the three groups were newcomers to the Parliament at the outset of the 7th legislative term. Among coordinators from NMS, only one-eighth were newcomers, pointing to a group of MEPs from these countries who came to stay, even though the EP is often only considered a transit station qualifying them for national-level positions.

Among coordinators from NMS, only one-eighth were newcomers, pointing to a group of MEPs from these countries who came to stay, even though the EP is often only considered a transit station qualifying them for national-level positions.

16

This is a particularly interesting result, especially when compared with the findings of Kaeding & Hurka (2010) on the rapporteurship selection in the EP. They showed that the chances of becoming rapporteur in the sixth term were significantly lower for MEPs from the accession countries than for MEPs from the long-standing Member States. Curiously, this even remained true when they held seniority to be constant and considered only MEPs who had served for exactly the same time period. First-timers from the 'old' Member States were clearly at an advantage in the report allocation process in comparison with their colleagues from the accession countries. This bias towards nationality does seem to hold for coordinators.

Once elected and doing a good job, coordinators and their colleagues might not wish to change successful arrangements. A party's successful management of a policy area stands and falls with the coordinator, so members of the committee have a strong incentive to select the person they deem most fit for the job.

More generally speaking, the election of coordinators (for the biggest party groups) does seem to be influenced by party groups, which control leadership positions, or national party delegations, which ascribe different levels of importance to expertise in the European Parliament. So what makes a good coordinator in the eyes of committee members and their party group? The answer is, the task of coordinators is challenging and requires a certain set of skills.

Conclusions

Coordinators are usually very committed MEPs, characterised by expertise, interpersonal and negotiating skills, paired with credibility to represent the party group line. Particularly in large groups, the post is often hotly contested and MEPs canvass and enmesh their colleagues in series of personal meetings. While there are some horizontal skills that coordinators require across the board, there are some differences across party groups.

Coordinators face different challenges when comparing small and large groups. While for the Greens/EFA, there are currently two members sitting on the International Trade committee, there are eleven from the EPP group representing eight national delegations. In order to find a common party position, coordinators for large groups need to mediate between individual MEPs and various national party delegations. Those for smaller groups will often need to find compromises without immediate feedback from colleagues, and thus need excellent knowledge of their colleagues' preferences in order for their group to support the deals and to protect their very own credibility. While coordinators from large groups will thus spend much of their time in meetings with MEPs from their own group, they can rely on colleagues' support for (shadow-) rapporteurships. Their counterparts in smaller groups, in contrast, often need to engage in these themselves, and thus take part in many informal trilogues with the Commission and Council to draft amendments and negotiate with them.

Regardless of the party group, thorough expertise in the policy area is indispensable in order to credibly negotiate on these matters. Knowing the ins and outs of parliamentary work, *i.e.* EP experience, is likewise crucial. And here nationality does not seem to matter; first-timers from the 'old' Member States were at an advantage in the selection process when compared with their first-timer colleagues from the NMS.

Regardless of the party group, thorough expertise in the policy area is indispensable in order to credibly negotiate on these matters.

When executing these responsibilities, personal networks matter, and national party delegations are key components of these. Pulling the strings from behind the scenes, coordinators are thus key players in the Parliament, and a better understanding of their role will help us to better understand EU policy-making.

Figure 3: European Parliament party group coordinators (2012)*

	Committee	EPP	S&D	ALDE	Greens	ECR	GUE/NGL
AFET	Foreign Affairs	Salafranca (ES)	Gomes (PT)	Neyts-Uyttebroeck (BE)	Lunacek (AT) and Brantner (DE)	Tannock (UK)	Meyer (ES)
AFCO	Constitutional Affairs	Trzaskowski (PL)	Gualtieri (IT)	Duff (UK)	Häfner (DE)	Fox (UK)	Sondergaard (DK)
AGRI	Agriculture and Rural Development	Dess (DE)	Capoulas Santos (PT)	Lyon (UK)	Häusling (DE)	Nicholson (UK)	Rubiks (LV)
BUDG	Budgets	Garriga Polledo (ES)	Färm (SE)	Haglund (FI)	Trüpel (DE)	Ashcroft (UK)	Portas (PT)
CONT	Budgetary Control	Gräßle (DE)	Geier (DE)	Mulder (NL)	Staes (BE)	Czarnecki (PL)	Sondergaard (DK)
CULT	Culture and Education	Scurria (IT)	Kammerevert (DE)	Takkula (FI)	Benarab-Attou (FR)	Migalski (PL)	Vergiat (FR)
DEVE	Development	Kaczmarek (PL) and Mitchell (IE)	Cortés Lastra (ES)	Goerens (LU)	Grèze (FR)	Deva (UK)	Le Hyaric (FR)
ECON	Economic and Monetary Affairs	Gauzès (FR)	Ferreira (PT)	Goulard (FR) and Schmidt (SE, deputy)	Giegold (DE)	Swinburne (UK)	Klute (DE)
EMPL	Employment and Social Affairs	Óry (HU)	Cercas (ES)	Hirsch (DE) and Harkin (IE, deputy)	Lambert (UK)	Cabrnock (CZ)	Händel (DE)
ENVI	Environment, Public Health and Food Safety	Liese (DE) and Seeber (AT)	McAvan (UK)	Davies (UK)	Hassi (FI)	Rosbach (DK)	Liotard (NL)
IMCO	Internal Market and Consumer Protection	Schwab (DE)	Gebhardt (DE)	Manders (NL) and Chatzimarkakis (DE, deputy)	Rühle (DE)	Bielan (PL)	De Jong (NL)
INTA	International Trade	Caspary (DE)	Lange (DE)	Kazak (BG)	Jadot (FR)	Sturdy (UK)	Scholz (DE)
ITRE	Industry, Research, Energy	Del Castillo Vera (ES)	Riera Madurell (ES)	Rohde (DK)	Turmes (LU)	Chichester (UK)	Matias (PT)
JURI	Legal Affairs	Zwiefka (PL)	Berlinguer (IT)	Wikström (SE)	Lichtenberger (AT)	Karim (UK)	Mastalka (CZ)
LIBE	Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs	Busuttil (MT)	Moraes (UK)	Weber (RO)	Sargentini (NL)	Kirkhope (UK)	Triantaphyllides (CY)
PECH	Fisheries	Antinoro (IT)	Rodust (DE)	Gallagher (IE)	Lövin (SE)	Grobarczyk (PL)	Ferreira (PT)
PETI	Petitions	Jahr (DE)	Bostinari (RO)	Valean (RO)	Auken (DK)	Chichester (UK)	Chountis (EL)
REGI	Regional Development	Van Nistelrooij (NL)	Krehl (DE)	Manescu (RO)	Alfonsi (FR)	Vlasak (CZ)	Omarjee (FR)
TRAN	Transport and Tourism	Grosch (BE)	El Khadraoui (BE)	Meissner (DE)	Cramer (DE) and Lichtenberger (AT)	Zile (LV)	Kohlicek (CZ)
FEMM	Women's Rights and Gender Equality	Nedelcheva (BG)	Thomsen (DK)	Parvanova (BG)	Cornelissen (NL)	Yannakoudakis (ECR)	Zuber (PT)
DROI	Human Rights	Tókécs (RO) and Vaidere (LV)	Howitt (UK)	Donskis (LT)	Tavares (PT)	Tannock (UK)	Vergiat (FR)
SEDE	Security and Defence	Gahler (DE)	Koppa (EL)	Van Baalen (NL)	Cronerg (FI)	Van Orden (UK)	Lösing (DE)

* Unfortunately, we were not able to retrieve the respective information for the EFD.

References

Corbett, R., F. Jacobs and M. Shackleton (2011) The European Parliament (8th edition), London: John Harper.

Hix, S., A. Noury and G. Roland (2007) Democratic Politics in the European Parliament, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaeding, M. and S. Hurka (2010) Where are the MEPs from the accession countries? Rapporteurship assignments in the European Parliament after Enlargement, *Eipascope*, 2010(2): 19-24.

Kaeding, M. (2004) What drives rapporteurship allocation in the European Parliament?, *European Union Politics*, 5 (3): 355-373.

Scarrow, S. (1997) Political Career Paths and the European Parliament, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 22 (2): 253-263.

Whitaker, R. (2001) Party control in a committee-based legislature? The case of the European Parliament, *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 7: 63-88.

Whitaker, R. (2011) The European Parliament's Committees. National party influence and legislative empowerment, London: Routledge.