Party groups and committee negotiations in the European Parliament: outside attention and the anticipation of plenary conflict

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ABSTRACT We study the relationship of the European Parliament's (EP) standing committees and party groups. According to recent studies, committees are the centre of EP policy-making while party groups enable the transmission of policy positions from specialists to generalists through the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' (Ringe 2010). We argue that this view underestimates the importance of party groups during the committee stage if there is outside attention to committee negotiations, or if specialists expect conflict at the plenary stage. Under these conditions, committee members use the party groups to pre-empt the anticipated risk of plenary conflict in an effort to protect their reputation and legislative goals. Finding intra-party coordination at the committee stage is important since the rise of early legislative agreements diminishes the formal relevance of the plenary in EP policy-making. The study of intra-party coordination also speaks to a growing scholarly interest in informal European governance.

KEY WORDS Committees, European Parliament, Legislative negotiation, Party groups

INTRODUCTION

The policy process of the European Parliament (EP) takes place predominantly within strong standing committees and increasingly well-organised party groups. In the party groups, members of the EP (MEPs) from different committees and national delegations exchange information, deliberate and coordinate their behaviour in parliament. The committees are the arenas in which MEPs prepare all of the EP's substantive legislative choices, and in which most legislative negotiations take place. The

aim of this paper is to study the relationship between party groups and standing committees during the phase of policy negotiations in the committees.

We already know from previous studies that the party groups and national party delegations play a crucial role in the allocation of committee assignments and rapporteurships to parliamentarians (e.g., Mamadouh & Raunio 2003). Consequently, the distribution of committee seats and rapporteurships to EP groups largely results from the relative strength of the party groups in the plenary. Committee members also represent the plenary in terms of ideology, although some committees attract disproportionate numbers of parliamentarians with particular backgrounds and interest group ties (e.g., lawyers in the legal affairs committee) (McElroy 2006; Yordanova 2009). During policy negotiations, committee members from the same party group coordinate amongst each other to establish a position for inter-group negotiations (e.g., Jensen & Winzen 2012).

We also know from previous studies that EP policy-making is very de-centralised. In part, this is the case because the EP's heavy legislative workload, which it has to manage in order to capitalise on its strong institutional competences, requires an extensive division of labour (e.g., Bowler & Farrell 1995). Furthermore, the EP party groups, while cohesive in terms of their voting behaviour (Hix *et al.* 2007), are themselves only weakly centralised. Compared to national parliaments, EP group leaders lack instruments to discipline members (Bailer *et al.* 2009). They also lack control over MEPs' re-election prospects and over the legislative agenda (e.g., Rasmussen 2008). Indeed, the EP groups so far lack well-defined legislative agendas of their own to which leaders could hold MEPs. The policy positions of the EP groups and the EP as a whole, thus, emerge to a large extent during the process of deliberating and negotiating legislation in the standing committees (Ringe 2010).

Our argument about the relation of committees and party groups during committee negotiations begins with an appraisal of Ringe (2010) who maintains that committee members define and transmit policy to the rest of their party group via the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence'. Key to this mechanism is the idea that MEPs outside of the committee are uncertain over

what legislative choices satisfy their ideological preferences, and unwilling to invest the time necessary to reduce their uncertainty. They, therefore, trust their co-partisans from the responsible committee. The upshot of this argument is that committee members from the same party group coordinate with each other during the committee stage but otherwise negotiate autonomously from the party group structures outside of the committee.

Building on qualifications that Ringe attaches to his argument, we suggest that the assumptions underlying the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' do not hold either if there is outside attention to committee negotiations or if committee members expect conflict at the plenary stage. Under these conditions, committee members cannot count on the hope that their co-partisans are or remain uncertain over their preferred legislative choices. Thus, in order to pre-empt threats to their reputation and their legislative goals, committee negotiators coordinate and compromise within their party group already during the committee stage. The upshot of this argument is that party groups have a more important role at the committee stage than the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' suggests. They are used by committee members to pre-empt anticipated plenary conflict, which threatens their legislative goals and reputation.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF COMMITTEES AND PARTY GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

We begin to develop our argument with a discussion of Ringe (2010). Ringe's main question is how EP groups achieve voting unity, yet his mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' speaks directly to the relation of committees and party groups during committee negotiations. In line with the literature, Ringe first highlights the weakness of EP party group leaders. On this basis, he rejects the possibility that party unity is the result of leadership control over party group members. Instead, he shifts attention to the centrality of the committee system in EP policy-making. The argument builds on the recognition that the EP shoulders a large legislative workload. Under these conditions, 'one should not assume or expect that MEPs are fully informed about every piece of legislation'

(Ringe 2010: 32). Following this line of thinking, MEPs do not have the time and resources to form clear policy preferences regarding most issues that pass through the parliament. Thus, they face the two-fold challenge of making informed public policy, and of opting for policy alternatives that they would have preferred, if they had had the time to develop clear policy preferences. MEPs deal with this challenge by specialising narrowly while relying on other specialists in all but their own key concerns (Busby & Belkacem 2013). Specialised MEPs in the EP's committees are, thus, at the heart of policy formation.

Yet, party groups play an important role in the argument (Ringe 2010: 38-42). As Ringe outlines, a party position is first elaborated within the committee by the committee members of the party; the agreed position is then translated into a cohesive plenary position via the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence': unspecialised MEPs 'adopt the position of those expert colleagues with whom they perceive to share a common set of preferences' (Ringe 2010: 33). Generalists rely on party affiliation in order to establish what committee specialists to follow. They first listen to colleagues from their own national delegation, if there are any in the responsible committee, and then to colleagues from their party group. When the party group's committee delegation agrees, the other group members normally follow its view without further consideration. As Ringe (2010: 58) summarises:

> EP party group leaderships neither have well-defined, exogenous policy preferences independent of those formulated by their party colleagues in the responsible committee, nor would they have the ability to enforce them. Party lines are not imposed from above, but created through the committee decision-making process. They result in cohesive party group positions on the EP floor if members of the same party group in the responsible committee are able to formulate a common party position.

Our focus lies with the committee negotiation process itself. If we accept that the positions of specialists at the end of the committee negotiations are (with few exceptions) adopted by fellow

party members, it becomes important to understand what happens during the process in which committee specialists develop their positions. The mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' emphasises the transition from the committee to the plenary stage, while being less explicit about the committee stage itself. At this stage, at which most EP policy choices are effectively made, party groups enable horizontal coordination beyond the responsible committees. Thus, they have a role that is more important than Ringe's perspective allows.

In developing this argument, we acknowledge that, even though Ringe focuses on the committee-plenary link, he notes that already during committee negotiations party groups play a role (Ringe 2010: 58-64). It is uncontested that the active committee specialists from the same group cooperate with each other closely in the negotiations with the other groups' committee delegations (see also Jensen & Winzen 2012). Yet, beyond coordination *within* a committee, each party group has meetings in which committee members and other interested parliamentarians deliberate and resolve disagreement. Ringe (2010: 64) contends that these arenas are particularly important for 'controversial' issues that may be raised by 'attentive members or groups of members, who are not in the responsible committee.'

Building on these remarks, we begin with the observation that the amount of attention that committee outsiders pay to the issues negotiated in committee varies. It also varies whether committee members expect an issue to raise controversy when it is placed before committee outsiders at the plenary stage. Yet, in case there is outside attention to committee negotiations or in case plenary conflict is to be expected, committee members cannot realistically assume that their co-partisans do not have, and are not willing to develop, legislative preferences regarding the choices at stake. On the contrary, committee members have to entertain the possibility that attentive outsiders already have a preferred policy or are ready to invest the time to develop one. In a similar vein, conflict at the plenary stage will encourage even non-specialised MEPs to scrutinise the voting recommendations of their specialised party colleagues rather than follow it without further consideration.

Thus, outside attention to their negotiations and the anticipation of conflict changes the situation of specialists in the committee. If it is likely that other MEPs have, or will develop, policy preferences, committee specialists cannot count on the hope that finding common ground amongst themselves will secure the transmission of their policy position to the rest of their group at the plenary stage. They risk that attentive colleagues disagree with and unravel their policy positions in the plenary, which does not only threaten a loss of legislative influence but also of reputation. A loss of reputation is a problem, however, because, as Ringe (2010: 26) notes, '[the committee specialists] have to retain a basic level of trust among their colleagues, who would no longer follow their lead if they perceived a mismatch of preferences.' It is likely that committee members will actively try to pre-empt the risk of lost legislative influence and reputation.

We suggest that the strategy of committee specialists to reduce the risk of lost influence and reputation is to involve committee outsiders already from the start of the committee negotiation process. Thus, committee members do not develop a policy position that their generalist colleagues then adopt. Instead, they involve group members from outside the committee in the process of forming a party line. In this way, committee members can inform themselves of the policy preferences of committee outsiders, build support for their views and, if necessary, forge intra-party compromises. By involving attentive outsiders into the position formation process, policy specialists avoid the risk that the group position that comes out of the committee negotiations fails in the transmission to the plenary stage.

It should be clear that this argument by no means disagrees with the observation that the position that comes out of the committee stage largely determines the behaviour of the party group at the plenary level. Yet, the committee position has so much influence because it already *anticipates* the policy preferences of interested committee outsiders. Moreover, the successful anticipation of plenary preferences is not simply the result of the foresight of committee members. On the contrary, it is actively engineered through intra-party group negotiations among specialists and committee

outsiders. Specialists initiate these negotiations already from the start of the committee proceedings to pre-empt the risk of lost influence and reputation at the plenary stage.

Our argument follows Ringe's in the essential point that the committee system is the centre of EP policy-making. However, we note that the conditions under which specialists set party policy in the EP are unlikely to hold if there is outside attention to legislative negotiations or if the specialists expect conflict at the plenary stage. In such a situation, Ringe's explanation of the relationship between committees and party groups underestimates the importance of intra-party negotiations that take place from the start of committee negotiations.

It is important to note that we do not think of the anticipation of plenary conflict by committee members as a replacement for the 'perceived preference coherence' mechanism. Rather, and here we build on remarks that Ringe also notes, anticipation and perceived preference coherence are both relevant ways of thinking about party-committee relations. The relative importance of the two mechanisms depends on the political context of committee negotiations: the extent of outside attention and the perception of specialists that their views might raise controversy in the plenary. Under these conditions committee members anticipate conflict and engage in horizontal intra-group negotiations. Absent of these conditions, they can rely on "perceived preference coherence".

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to substantiate our argument, we study three cases that differ with regard to attention beyond the committee, and the expectation of plenary conflict among committee members. As argued, the levels of attention and of expected conflict determine whether committee specialists use the party groups already during committee negotiations. We note that it is not our goal in this paper to explain why some committee negotiations provoke outside attention or warrant the expectation of plenary conflict among negotiators. We study whether these conditions motivate MEPs to negotiate differently. To this end we investigate not only whether party groups mattered in

committee negotiations but also what motivated committee members to make use of them. While we acknowledge that the external validity of our findings is necessarily uncertain, we focus on whether our arguments capture the negotiation processes in the cases. Table 1 summarises our case selection. As the Table indicates, we do not study a case that combines outside attention with a lack of expected plenary conflict. We doubt that this combination occurs in practice. We are also more interested in how negotiations that take place in the presence of either one or both conditions differ from negotiations that lack both outside attention and the expectation of plenary conflict.

---Table 1 about here---

The first case that we discuss below is the so-called victims directive[1] that aims at strengthening the rights of victims in the EU. The directive is part of the 'victims package', a package of three legislative proposals aimed at ameliorating the rights of victims: victims should be given access to justice and be assisted in legal proceedings, be protected from further intimidation from the offender, and get appropriate access to compensation. Committee members negotiated the victims directive without noteworthy interaction with committee outsiders.

The second case, the common provisions proposal[2], sets out the common rules for cohesion policy in the budgetary period 2014-2020. The regulation outlines the goals of cohesion policy and determines the rules governing the distribution of the budget between the European regions, whereby the actual distribution of the funds was to be revised. The common provisions proposal was debated at the same time as the Multiannual Financial Framework (2014-2020) in Parliament. The negotiations on the common provisions proposal were closely related to the negotiations on the MFF, as the MFF determined the general budget attributed to cohesion policy in the cohesion program 2014-2020. Even though European regions paid considerable attention to the committee negotiations in the EP, attention within the parliament beyond the responsible committee was low and the committee specialised initially negotiated exclusively amongst each other. As negotiations proceeded, it became clear, however, that the negotiators' preferred budgetary outcome was likely to raise conflict in the

plenary, in the context of a broader parliamentary conflict over the distribution of a tight EU budget. The expectation of conflict motivated committee members to reach out to other MEPs through their party groups in order to build compromises that protected their most important legislative goals.

Our third case is the so-called two-pack[3] on European economic governance, establishing enhanced economic surveillance of member states' economic and budgetary policies. The first proposal applies to all member states but contains specific provisions for member states subject to an excessive deficit procedure. The second proposal sets out the rules for an enhanced surveillance of member states facing severe financial difficulties. More generally, the proposals were aimed at enhancing the monitoring processes of national economies at a European level. In the context of the financial crisis, attention to the negotiations extended well beyond the confines of the responsible committee. There was no doubt about the prospect of conflict at the plenary stage, among party groups as well as national delegations. Under these conditions, the committee negotiators coordinated intensively within their party groups from the start of the negotiations in order to establish what positions they would be able to defend without losing support at the plenary stage.

Our information comes from interviews with the rapporteurs, shadow rapporteurs and coordinators involved in each negotiations process.[4] The interviews were transcribed and coded in MaxQDA. We asked our interviewees general questions on how the EP decision-making process operates. Moreover, we focused on the motivations of the senior group actors and policy specialists to engage in negotiations over a common position within their party group at the committee stage. We then turned to the three case studies: The interviewees were asked to describe the legislative negotiations on the specific proposal, and to explain their negotiation activity within their party group and with fellow policy specialists in the committee.

We developed a coding scheme that we applied to the transcribed texts.[5] Key indicators that committee members engaged in negotiations within their party groups were: the development of a clear group position at the start of the negotiations; and a clear demarcation of intra- and inter-

group negotiations. Whereas intra-group negotiations take place to find out whether committee members' views and possible compromises are acceptable for other group members, inter-group negotiations take place to promote a group's position in negotiations with the other groups. Indicators that suggested committee negotiations autonomous from coordination with outsiders, besides the absence of the aforementioned indicators, were: low relevance of party group arenas, extensive cross-group interaction and agreement among policy specialists in the committee.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

We summarise the responses to the general questions on how party groups and negotiations operate in the EP before we turn to the three case studies.

Party groups and legislative negotiations in the EP

The interviews suggest that the committee members of a political group discuss new issues in a working group but they do not coordinate beyond their committee unless an issue is of interest beyond the committee. As an MEP stated, 'the whole group relies on the fact, even has to rely on the fact that those that especially deal with [the issue] made a good job.'[6] In line with our argument, interviewees maintained that the committee members seek a common group line when they suspect an issue to raise problems.[7] As a coordinator pointed out:

> [The topic] is debated in the working group of [the committee], the same MEPs that are full members and the substitutes, we form a working group together with the staff, and then we take a topic and debate it. […] When we think this is a tricky topic, we will ask for a mandate of the group in plenary. If we think this is easy peasy, this is party line, we are fine. We only get to the people at the point they need to take a vote at the plenary.[8]

The interviews also shed light on how and why group coordinators and policy specialists establish a party line in committee negotiations. Coordinators stressed that maintaining unity is their task, yet, one they normally have to pursue without the use of sanctions. Instead, they rely on the spread of information and discussions, including the distribution of voting recommendations and the organisation of group meetings. As two interviewees described:

> It is not my personal authority to oblige someone to vote in a way he does not want to, but to convince him to do so, or to convince him not to be the one that makes the group lose the vote. This is important.[9]

> As a coordinator, first of all, I need to report to my group everything that is discussed within the committee. [...] Especially if I know that one topic is controversial for my group, if it is controversial for my group, I must announce it to the group and put it on the agenda to be discussed. Because me, as a coordinator, I need to be sure when I propose a voting list for a report, I need to be sure that that's according with the group line political view. So if I know that something is controversial I need to discuss it in the group.[10]

To make use of their influence, coordinators have to make sure to maintain a good reputation with the MEPs.[11] Otherwise, they fear the risk of losing their authority, which is mainly based on coordination and information rather than strong 'carrots' and 'sticks'. More generally, according to the interviewees, the party position is not imposed from "above" by the coordinators but the policy specialists in the committee seek a common party group line to ensure support for their policy advice.

> If I want to obtain something, I know how to do. Of course, I do argue in the committee, but then I go to the coordinator, the shadow rapporteur, the vice-president of the group responsible of those question, the group advisors who deal with these questions, the president of the group, but, well, this also happens in the other groups. And etc…. It is true that knowing the people is essential.[12]

Summing up, political groups always are arenas for discussion. Committee members promote intra-group coordination and seek backing for a common group line when an issue is perceived to be controversial beyond the committee. Committee members do so to secure support for their policies. The case studies shed further light on how committee negotiations change depending on expectations of conflict and attention of MEPs beyond the committee.

The "victims directive"

The "victims directive" illustrates how the EP negotiates issues that negotiators expect to be uncontroversial and that do not raise attention beyond the policy specialists in committee.[13] The committee negotiators dominated the decision-making process. They did not make noteworthy use of their party groups. There was no clear party line or separation between intra- and inter-group negotiations.

The interviewees admitted that the general interest paid to it was low. The topic raised no broad attention even in the committees beyond the (shadow) rapporteurs.[14] In the absence of interest in the negotiations beyond the confines of the committee, neither political group actors nor policy specialists deemed intra-group coordination worthwhile. The rapporteurs preferred to settle the issue amongst themselves, stressing their own expertise, personal experience and interest in the legislation.[15] The party groups did not debate the directive before the committee vote, leaving the elaboration of the committee's position to the (shadow) rapporteurs.[16]

Cross-group interactions were common in the negotiations on the "victims directive". In order to achieve good quality legislation, MEPs cooperated with their colleagues in the committee: 'The objective of our committee is to achieve a text that is easily transposable, rapidly transposed, and which effectively and concretely applies to the victims.'[17] The (shadow) rapporteurs co-signed amendments with colleagues from other groups.[18] Describing the key actors in the negotiations, our interviewees focused more on the personal characteristics of the involved shadow rapporteurs and

rapporteurs than on the political groups.[19] Bilateral meetings between committee members served to exchange information and make compromises:

> You talk with your colleagues and I met yesterday with the rapporteur […] so we were thinking of what we want and what she wants and how can I propose my amendments in such a way that she likes them.[20]

The cross-group interactions were facilitated by the fact that the issue was neither controversial within the committee, nor expected to raise controversy in plenary. The shadow rapporteurs agreed on the main points of the directive, focusing on the common interest of European victims:

> It is true that when we are talking about victims it is very difficult that there is not a consensus. Why? Because who is the one who dare to say something against victims? Because there are a lot of victims and also everybody could be a possible victim.[21]

Under these conditions, it was clear that the negotiating policy specialists would be trusted by their colleagues at the voting stage. As one interviewee mentioned with regards to their national delegation:

> They [the national party] would never say anything against it because they agree, yes, yes, you are right but I don't know anything, but yes, you are right so I think it's the same thing in the [political group] they should never go against me, […] they might not fight for it so much but they really say, of course, that's true, that's true.[22]

In sum, the relationship between the committee negotiators and the EP groups resembled what Ringe's (2010) mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' suggests: most MEPs were not aware of the issue but were willing to follow the position elaborated by their committee colleagues. In turn, as policy specialists did not expect controversy in plenary, they had no reason to take the issue to their groups but were confident that their position would be followed in the vote.

The "common provision proposal"

One may contend that the "victims directive" was such a low-profile issue that negotiations naturally rested in the hands of a few dedicated policy specialists. The "common provision proposal", however, was important for a number of national governments and European regions as it concerned the distribution of cohesion funds. We should add that inter-institutional negotiations were still on-going at the time of data collection. Yet, the decision-making process has progressed sufficiently far so that we are able to comment on how the EP's committee negotiations have worked.[23] Initially interest in the negotiations was confined to the responsible regional committee. As negotiations progressed, the EP party groups became important, as a means for committee members to protect their most important legislative goals under conditions of expected plenary conflict over the distribution of the budget.

There was a broad consensus in the committee of regional development on the need to protect the budget of cohesion policy in the context of the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework. Consequently, the (shadow) rapporteurs agreed that the main conflicts on the topic were not within the REGI committee, but rather with the Council and with other committees[24]: 'The most important thing is not with the people in the regional committee, because together we fight to have enough money to do a good outcome.'[25] Even though distribution of the budget between the regions was controversial also in the committee, the members of the committee cooperated with each other with the common aim to protect the budget for cohesion policy against the will of governments and other committees.[26]

These important regional interests within each EP political group facilitated cross-group interactions, as the following statement illustrates:

> One focuses on the regions one stems from, but one always has several demands to deal with, of course, the region I come from, then the party, the fundamental position the party defends… And then, sometimes, alliances arise that one does not expect, also oppositions

one does not expect, so it is not the case that everything is universal in the own political group, and that everything is seen in the same way, but that one judges things from the perspective of the region, but this is of course also the case in any other political groups.[27]

Yet, notwithstanding the controversy between regions, the negotiations raised only little attention in the EP at the beginning of the process. The interviewees emphasised a gap between the importance of cohesion policy and the lack of awareness both within the Parliament and in the general public. Consequently, the policy specialists in the committee initially negotiated without noteworthy outside involvement. Yet, as negotiations progressed and voting approached, the conflicts over the size and allocation of the EU budget in general, the distribution of funds between regions, and the demands of different committees raised concerns among the regional policy specialists over the viability of their legislative goals. The negotiators in the committee, together with the group coordinators, saw the risk of conflict in the plenary[28], and with the Council. Thus, they carried discussions over the common provisions proposal into the political groups in order to secure support. In this context, inter-group negotiations became important then as well to secure voting majorities beyond the committee. As a (shadow) rapporteur outlined,

> I know what [political group A is] willing to do or [is] thinking, and this helps me enormously because together with [political group A] you have, with some support of [political group B], you have a big chance of majority. So this is the architecture behind. This is really the most important thing.[29]

The committee members from each group worked together to overcome potential opposition from other committees, and to secure the group support for their policy position. As a coordinator explained, the negotiators already successfully used intra-group coordination to prevent plenary conflict on the earlier EP resolution on cohesion policy (2010), in which the main points of the common provisions proposal were outlined:

> Within the group there was a strong opinion in the last year against the cohesion policy

coming from budget committee. But in the end, we had discussions within the group and we agreed in the end. […] So that's why we agreed to keep at least theme amounts for the budget and to keep it as a main priority, main policy of the European Union. So we managed within the group to change a bit the perspective, the approach, because in the beginning it was against.[30]

In sum, in the context of little outside attention, committee members initially developed their policy positions free from party group involvement from beyond the committee. However, the party groups became important vehicles for gathering policy support when committee members perceived the risk of plenary conflict due to controversies related to the distribution of the funds and the EU budget more generally.

The "two-pack" proposals

The "two-pack" is made up of two regulations: a proposal on an enhanced economic surveillance of member states in risky situations and a proposal on a better oversight on economic and budgetary policy. The proposals affect the core of national and European economic governance, and consequently were widely discussed by voters and parties across Europe. The regulations took 15 months to finalise; during that time, the inter-institutional negotiations between the EP and the Council were even suspended due to important conflicts on the question related to the mutualisation of a depth. National interests were strongly at stake and many MEPs beyond the responsible committees were prepared to defend these interests. This high level of parliamentary mobilisation inspired intense intra-group coordination, especially between national delegations with different views, and agreement on common group positions early in the negotiations. Negotiations then took place primarily between united party groups and within the party groups between national delegations.

MEPs were strongly oriented towards national publics and parties. As a shadow rapporteur put it, 'the most important now is to put questions, or let's say, to bring the problems of my country in the European Union or the European Parliament.'[31] Hence, the national delegations were very united on the two-pack.[32] The national delegation leaders were in contact with their national parties, and promoted a common position within their delegations.[33] Thus, from the start of the negotiations, debates extended well beyond the policy specialists in the responsible committee. Yet, with a widely mobilized parliament and many MEPs with interest and stakes in the issue under negotiations, the only chance even for united national delegations to exert influence is to cooperate with the other national delegations in their EP group. As an MEP explained:

> [A united national delegation] is the minimum! Because otherwise, one cannot be right alone, but one has to aim at getting it best possibly heard within the group. Because the only way to win […] one has to make sure that it is most shared by the whole group.[34]

All interview partners on the two-pack emphasized on the necessity to ensure a common group position. Otherwise, they feared a risk of being excluded from the compromise, and being overruled in the vote.[35] Consequently, intra-group negotiations played an important role in the decision-making process: the topic was debated at the group meetings; and informal discussions took place between the committee members, the (shadow) rapporteur and the coordinator.[36] The EPP and S&D made their respective committee coordinators the rapporteurs, underlining the importance of a common group position.[37] In general, deviating from the group line was considered to be difficult, and especially in case the votes would be needed for a majority vote. Thus, national delegations tended to follow the group line, and – if not possible for domestic reasons – justified their deviation before the plenary vote.[38]

Against the background of intense intra-group coordination, interaction between (relatively) united party groups then was at the heart of the two-pack negotiations. Interviewees regularly identified

and referred to the positions of the different party groups and discussed coalitions among the groups.[39] In the words of an MEP,

> The Gauzès-Ferreira reports go in the right direction. […] we will substantially amend but the idea is to say: ok, if the others accept the essential of what we propose, then – that's what I have always said – if I negotiate, it is not to withdraw at the last moment. So if I tell them, under these conditions you will get the votes [of my group], they fulfil the conditions and they get our votes.[40]

In sum, the "two-pack" negotiations took place in a highly mobilised parliament. In the committee, the EP groups negotiated on the basis of common party lines developed in intra-group negotiations. Committee members played an important role in initiating intra-group coordination in an attempt to secure policy influence. Their autonomy during the committee negotiation stage was circumscribed in turn by the necessity to engage with attentive committee outsiders and to find viable policy positions in a context in which plenary conflict appeared certain. The common party group positions that emerged were the result of intensive intra-party coordination from the start of the committee phase, involving MEPs well beyond the confines of the committee membership.

CONCLUSION

We have studied the relationship between committees and party groups during the committee phase of the EP policy process. According to recent arguments, EP policy negotiations predominantly take place in committee, while party groups enable the transmission of policy positions from committee members to the plenary via the mechanism of 'perceived preference coherence' (Ringe 2010). We have argued that party groups play an important role already during the committee stage provided that there is either outside attention to committee negotiations or the expectation of plenary conflict. In either case, committee negotiators use their party groups to compromise with other MEPs in an effort to pre-empt plenary conflict so as to protect their legislative goals and reputation. We have provided empirical support for these arguments on the basis of three case

studies of committee negotiations in the EP, although we acknowledge that the external validity of our findings is necessarily uncertain.

The findings suggest that in the EP's highly de-centralised policy process, party groups provide important arenas for horizontal coordination between committee members and other MEPs on matters that raise attention beyond policy specialists, and on matters that the specialists suspect they might not otherwise manage to shepherd through the plenary. Party groups enable their specialists and generalists to forge compromises and, thus, make sure that the policies that eventually come out of the committee stage are rarely overthrown by the rest of the group.

Informal coordination between policy specialists in the committees and interested outsiders is particularly important in view of the observation that the use of formal mechanisms of coordination has been declining over time. Whereas moving a dossier up and down between committee and plenary level over several readings would facilitate exchange between specialists and generalists, the EP and the Council have increasingly relied on early agreements that diminish the relevance of parliamentarians not directly involved in legislative negotiations (e.g., Héritier & Reh 2012; Costa *et al.* 2011). Coordination within party groups during committee negotiations affords interested committee outsiders the chance to influence legislation that is still in the making, rather than being confined to approving or rejecting done deals that result from informal early negotiations. Indeed, we would expect that informal intra-party coordination has become increasingly important because MEPs outside of the responsible committees have gradually become more attentive to what is being negotiated in informal early negotiations within committees, and between the EP and the Council (Héritier & Reh 2012).

Nevertheless, we finally note the need to study the informal coordination processes that we highlight in this paper further, so as to allow us to assess better in what way they affect the relationship between policy specialists and other parliamentarians. Our understanding is currently limited as regards, first, the extent to which committee insiders and outsiders disagree over legislation during

intra-party negotiations; and, second, the question as to how and in whose favour such disagreements are resolved. Further study of intra-party coordination in EP committee negotiations would also fall into line with a general tendency of the literature to take a greater interest in informal politics in EU governance (Christiansen & Neuhold 2013).

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

1. Two-Pack

  1. Interview n°17, 14.02.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  2. Interview n°25, 16.02.2012, EP Brussels.

  3. Interview n°28, 20.02.2012, EP Brussels.

  4. Interview n°36, 06.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  5. Interview n°50, 13.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  6. Interview n°51, 14.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  7. Interview n°53, 14.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  8. Interview n°52, 14.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  9. Interview n°61, 21.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  10. Interview n°70, 27.03.2012, EP Brussels.

2. Victims directive

  1. Interview n°23, 26.02.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  2. Interview n°27, 28.02.2012, EP Brussels.

  3. Interview n°43, 08.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  4. Interview n°54, 14.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  5. Interview n°71, 27.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  6. Interview n°22, 16.02.2012, EP Strasbourg.

  7. Interview n°35, 06.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  8. Interview n°33, 06.03.2012, EP Brussels.

  9. Interview n°73, 28.03.2012, EP Brussels.

3. Common provision proposal

1. Interview n°44, 08.03.2013, EP Brussels.

2. Interview n°47, 13.03.2013, EP Strasbourg.

3. Interview n°59, 21.03.2012, EP Brussels.

4. Interview n°58, 20.03.2012, EP Brussels.

5. Interview n°74, 28.03.2012, EP Brussels.

6. Interview n°60, 21.03.2012, EP Brussels.

7. Interview n°49, 13.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

8. Interview n°37, 06.03.2012, EP Strasbourg.

NOTES

[1] Proposal for a directive establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime. COM (2011) 275 final, Brussels, 18.05.2011.

[2] Proposal for a regulation laying down common provisions, on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund covered by the Common Strategic Framework and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund and the Cohesion Fund and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006, COM (2011) 615 final.

[3] Proposal for a regulation on common provisions for monitoring and assessing draft budgetary plans and ensuring the correction of excessive deficit of the Member States in the euro area COM (2011) 821 final, Brussels, 23.11.2011; Proposal for a regulation on the strengthening of economic and budgetary surveillance of Member States experiencing or threatened with serious difficulties with respect to their financial stability in the euro area COM (2011) 819 final, Brussels, 23.11.2011.

[4] The interviews have been conducted as part of Léa Rogers' dissertation project on „Deliberation and negotiation in EP committees: How to agree?". N = 27. See appendix 1 for the list of interviews.

[5]Available from the authors.

[6] Interview n° 53. The selected citations are representative for the other text passages of the category they were attributed to.

[7] Interview n° 59, Interview n° 54.

[8] Interview n° 23.

[9] Interview n°50.

[10] Interview n°59.

[11] Interview n° 50.

[12] Interview n° 61.

[13] For more information on the cases, see Léa Roger's dissertation on "Deliberation and negotiation in EP committees: How to agree". Different to this paper, Léa Roger's focus lies on a discourse analysis but she also considers the situation of decision-making, including the attention paid to the topic of debate, as well as the conflicts within the committee, and within political groups.

[14] Interview n° 27.

[15] Interview n°27, n°33, n° 43, n°71, n°73.

[16] Interview n°54.

[17] Interview n°71.

[18] Interview n°58.

[19] Interview n°23, n°27, n°22.

[20] Interview n°23.

[21] Interview n°27.

[22] Interview n°22.

[23] Data collection does not cover the entirely decision-making process, as negotiations still continue (the committee adopted a mandate for the inter-institutional trilogue in July 2012). However, several debates took place in the committee during data collection, and negotiations on the proposal took place previously in the EP in the context of a resolution on cohesion policy reform. Additionally, the interviewees were asked how they expect the negotiations to develop in the future.

[24] Interview n°44, n°58, n°59.

[25] Interview n°44.

[26] The reform of the cohesion policy happens in parallel to the negotiations on the Multiannual framework (MFF) for the EU budget 2014-2020. Hence, the cohesion share in the budget was crucial in the parliamentary negotiations.

[27] Interview n°47.

[28] Interview n°44, n°47, n°59.

[29] Interview n°44. To safeguard anonymity, we removed the names of the party groups.

[30] Interview n°59.

[31] Interview n°36.

[32] With regard to the concrete legislative proposals, some MEPs admit that their parties pay only limited attention to the European legislation. As the interviews show, the involvement of the national party differs, depending on the country and on whether it is a government or an opposition party.

[33] Interview n°50, n°61.

[34] Interview n°61.

[35] Examples have been given in interviews (Interview n° 28, Interview n° 51).

[36] Interview n°61, n°53, n°50, n°51, n°28.

[37] Interview n°50.

[38] Interview n°61, n°50. The interviews were made before the plenary votes. To give examples, many interviewees referred to the vote on the six-pack.

[39] Interview n°28, n°50, n°51, n°52, n°53,

[40] Interview n°28.

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Table 1. Case studies

	Expectation of plenary conflict	
Outside attention	Yes	No
Yes	"Two-pack" on economic governance	/
No	"Common provisions proposal"	"Victims directive"