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A question of trust: intra-party delegation in the European Parliament

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A question of trust: Intra-party delegation in the European Parliament



Much of the European Parliament's work rests on negotiations within parliamentary committees, as well as other informal negotiations that take place behind closed doors. But what determines the selection of the MEPs who participate in these negotiations? Drawing on a new study, [Fang-Yi Chiou](#), [Bjørn Høyland](#) and [Silje Synnøve Lyder Hermansen](#) illustrate that loyalty to the leadership of the transnational parties present in Parliament is the key factor in the selection process. While knowledge about a given policy area is important, parties typically develop a group of experts from which they can select candidates rather than relying on individuals with the most expertise.

The European Parliament provides the only directly elected representation of EU citizens. It is also – on many accounts – the least powerful of the EU institutions. Yet Parliament has proven to be impressive in imposing its influence. One reason is its ability to coordinate. Inter-institutional decision making requires negotiating a consensus among competing interests within the assembly and then presenting a united front before the Council. Individual legislators play a central role in this venture. But how are they selected? And what implications are there for their selectors?

In a [recent study](#), we argue that the transnational party leadership delegates tasks to loyal members and builds a pool of alternative experts within different policy areas. For individual parliamentarians, this means that increasing their party loyalty always pays off, while specialisation is useful – although boundedly so. For the party group as a whole, it means that members can trust each other enough to divide their labour.

Parliament's policy-making capacity derives from its committee system. Most legislative proposals are prepared in a committee before they reach the plenary. This enables in-depth discussions to take place that would be impossible in a mediated 751-member plenary. There are several advantages to this arrangement.

Parliament has less administrative support than the Commission. For most of its history, it has not enjoyed assistance from a full-fledged research service. Proposals may also have redistributive effects that the service might not pick up on. Parliamentarians are therefore better off delegating policymaking to specialised colleagues that they trust. This allows them to shape more and better policies in line with the promises they have made to voters. However, forming an opinion is only one part of this work.

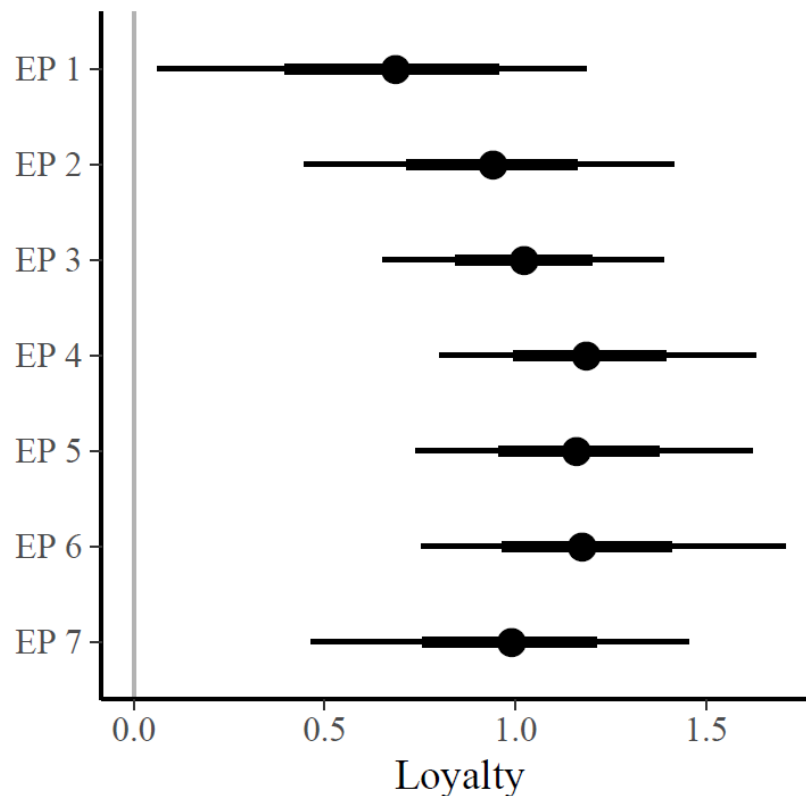
Once members have collected information and assessed a proposal from the Commission, they must build support for their desired amendments. This means acquiring support from a majority in Parliament. That majority must include at least one of the two major party groups (the European People's Party or the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats). Often, it also has to be oversized. As a junior partner to the Council, Parliament must signal political resolve to be successful. In recent years, the proportion of Eurosceptic members that are unlikely to support any European-level policies further implies that mainstream parties must come together across political divides.

Transnational party groups bargain over the responsibility to prepare legislation on behalf of the committee. The winner then appoints a "rapporteur" to incorporate suggested amendments in a report. "Shadow rapporteurs" from the other groups flank this person. Together, they negotiate a consensus in a series of "[shadows meetings](#)". Later, they also monitor whether the rapporteur follows up in relations with other legislative bodies. All participants also report back to the committee and their respective party groups.

The European Parliament is [most successful when negotiations take place behind closed doors](#). This requires members to [rally behind the party label when early agreements are reached](#) with the Council. The informal nature of political bargaining puts extra strain on the trust between colleagues. Much responsibility rests on the rapporteur. When legislation is technical, the rapporteur will coordinate with other experts to find a common solution. When issues are polarised, the rapporteur also has a special duty to be constructive and consensual. The [rapporteur's network](#) is essential to these responsibilities.

Party groups have few means of monitoring the rapporteur's actions given the lack of transparency and the consensual nature of the output. The leadership therefore has to trust that the rapporteur will also tow the party line in the shadows. How can they ensure party discipline in such a context? We argue that party cohesion flows not so much from disciplining tools as from selection. We find that leaders have always selected rapporteurs whose voting record already testifies to their loyalty.

Figure 1: The effect of party loyalty on report allocation in seven legislative terms (1979-2014)



Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in [European Union Politics](#)

The technical nature of policies also leads the leadership to prefer members who have specialised knowledge about a policy area. However, beyond a certain level of expertise, the rapporteur may be able to trick the party into backing amendments it would not otherwise have supported. As the distance between group members' expertise grows, the leadership therefore increasingly looks beyond their foremost expert and selects alternative legislators. In this way, the group can build up a set of alternative experts for any given policy domain. In doing so, the group is also better placed to keep tabs on their chief negotiator during the legislative process. In the next allocation, the group also has a wider choice of alternative experts and can choose the most loyal member.

Figure 2: The bounded utility of specialisation (measured in years of committee service) on the delegation of legislative tasks for members of the European Parliament



Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in [European Union Politics](#)

The consequences of the leadership's choice are far from trivial. Policy-seeking members of the European Parliament must comply with their transnational party's voting instructions to access power. When national parties value policy-impact, this also [has an effect](#) on members' chances of reelection. Further, it means that the existence of transnational party groups in Parliament can be justified in an informational framework because members need to trust each other to divide their labour and influence policies on behalf of their voters.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying study in [European Union Politics](#)

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