



CIES e-WORKING PAPER N. ° 63/2009

**Bringing Back a Larger Pie from Brussels:  
The Adjustment of National Party Strategy through Party  
Switching in the European Parliament**

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*CIES e-Working Papers* (ISSN 1647-0893)

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## Summary

This paper examines the political dynamics that explain the exceptionally high number of shifts in political group affiliation by members of the European Parliament during legislative mandates. The analysis is built on extensive interviewing with former MEPs and EP staff and on archival research on primary sources. The paper makes an argument on the strategic incentives that drive switching behavior in the EP and investigates its consequences for the evolution of party politics and democracy in the EU.

**Key words:** Political Parties; Party Competition in the European Parliament; European Institutions; Democracy in the EU.

## Resumo

Este trabalho examina os factores que influenciam o elevado número de mudanças de eurodeputados entre Grupos Políticos no Parlamento Europeu. A inconstância de filiação partidária que se detecta nesta instituição contrasta com a estabilidade dos grupos parlamentares nas assembleias nacionais da maioria dos Estados Membros. Através de entrevistas a eurodeputados e funcionários do PE e tendo por suporte a análise aprofundada de diversas fontes documentais, o paper investiga as condições institucionais e políticas que estão por detrás da mudança de identidade política no PE e as suas consequências para a influência partidária a nível supranacional, assim como para a evolução da qualidade da democracia na União Europeia.

**Palavras-chave:** Partidos Políticos; Competição Partidária no Parlamento Europeu; Instituições Europeias; Democracia na UE; Sistema Político Europeu.

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for comments by Peter A. Hall, Thomas Banchoff, Robert Fishman, Andrés Malamud, Catherine Moury, Sebastian Royo, Pedro Leal Rosa, Mark E. Warren, Steven J. Brams. Vera Henriques has provided excellent research assistance since the start of the project, and a steady and welcoming working atmosphere.

A previous version of this work has been presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, Boston, 2008.

I gratefully acknowledge financial support for the research from the *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (project ID: POCI/CPO/61012/2004).

## **The Paradox.**

This paper investigates the factors that influence the fluidity of political group composition in the European Parliament (EP). It analyzes this question by examining the choices by individuals and national political parties for parliamentary affiliation in the EP. The research is driven by the observation that the three decades of legislative activity since the first direct elections for the EP in 1979 have been marked by the occurrence of a great number of changes in the composition of European Political Groups (EPGs) within the course of legislative mandates. There have been over one hundred movements between EPGs in each of the third, fourth, and fifth legislatures, representing between one fifth and one fourth of the seats in the EP in those legislatures. Such volatility is puzzling in view of the fact that national legislative assemblies in Western European democracies are generally characterized by stable patterns of party affiliation and political group configuration within the course of electoral mandates. This study seeks to understand the roots of party switching in the EP and to examine the significance of this behavioural pattern with regard to the development of political competition and democracy in the EU.

Based on extensive interviewing with former Portuguese MEPs and EP staff who have been directly involved in, or who have closely watched, political group switching in different EP legislatures, and drawing upon careful examination of EP archival data on the parliamentary curriculum of all MEPs in the period between the first direct elections in 1979 and the admission of the ten new Member States in 2004, the paper develops a set of key arguments. It suggests that party switching in the EP is an essential aspect of the adjustment to European integration of national party strategy, with the goal to best exploiting the political resources associated with multilevel governance. The choice of parliamentary group affiliation in the EP matters for the development (or not) of party networks that may play an influential role among the high-echelons of the Commission and the Council. Often national party delegations change political group affiliation in the EP so as to improve this kind of inter-party and inter-institutional links which allow them to assess informational resources and policy influence that would be foreclosed through national political institutions. In a similar way, individuals change political affiliation in the EP alone (i.e. not as part of a national party move), in many instances to secure career venues that they would not access through their national party acquaintances. The party passages that link elected and

bureaucratic office in the supranational sphere influence their calculations in this ambit. In short, and in line with previous work on multilevel governance, this study suggests that European integration has opened up new strategic options for domestic political actors which may alter their relative power and change the way politics is played in the EU.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis suggests, more broadly, that studying party competition in the EP in isolation entails substantive and methodological flaws. On the one hand, the inter-institutional play that characterizes co-decision making in the EU plays a determinant role in the way parliamentary groups organise in the EP. On the other hand, the political configuration of the EP at each point in time is influenced by domestic party dynamics too: EPGs are made of coalitions of national party delegations that originate from a wide variety of political cultures which are characterised by different types of party organization and by dissimilar relations between political leaders and party apparatuses. Such diversity shapes different career expectations and the way MEPs reason on how to best manage their time and work in the EP as well as their choices for political alliances during their stint there. The importance of domestic politics becomes all the more evident when one considers the effects of national party realignments on political affiliation in the EP: As we will see, Italian and French MEPs are highly volatile in their EP political affiliation because they take sides in the supranational sphere in line with the evolution of party break-ups and coalition-making at home. In short, one cannot apprehend political competition in the EP without examining the dynamics of party politics and competition in the other institutional layers of the EU.

Before proceeding to contextualize these arguments, I will introduce the problematic of party switching and explain why it is an important political phenomenon, and why the case of the EP merits close examination.

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive synopsis of the literatures on Europeanisation and multilevel governance, see Hix (2005).

## **Political Affiliation and the Development of Democratic Party Systems: Uncertainty, Reputation, Trust, and Governance.**

Political competition in advanced democracies is organized around leaders who pledge commitment to a set of policy goals, easily identified in the form of party labels.<sup>2</sup> Such labels play an important role in allowing voters to assess where alternative candidates stand with reference to their own policy preferences, when voters are faced with the task of electing a new legislature. If one assumes that voters have reasonable lucidity, one would expect elected officers to have incentives to maintain consistent policy positions and to remain faithful to their publicly stated party labels, at least during the course of a legislative mandate.<sup>3</sup> Frequent party switching thus brings back old concerns on the accountability of legislators, more concretely on how their role as representatives of citizens' interests should be defined.<sup>4</sup>

The degree of stability of party affiliation in legislatures reveals essential characteristics of political systems. It points to the extent of party strength and dominion upon members. It reflects how the dilemma between personal ambition and accountability, which underlies important choices of political actors in competitive party systems, is rationalized in the norms of the given system. Patterns of party allegiance by political leaders are also indicators of the role parties play in structuring access to, and distribution of, spoils in a political system.<sup>5</sup> And they provide critical information on reputation and trust, i.e. two elements that are vital for the functioning of effective democracy. The frequency of party switching by political leaders also has powerful effects upon governance capability. Parties in government may lose the ability to rely on steady legislative support.<sup>6</sup> Such uncertainty impairs decision-making processes. Ultimately, as Zielinski, Slomczynski and Shabad (2005) argue, voters lose the ability to evaluate the performance of incumbents.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding all these aspects, which point to its significance, the subject of party switching has not deserved a lot of attention in the literatures on party politics and on comparative political systems. Such relative scarcity of research is probably related

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<sup>2</sup> See Mainwaring and Scully (1995) and Przeworski, Stokes and Manin (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See Fearon (1999). This assumption goes as far back as Downs (1957).

<sup>4</sup> This is the core of the old debates on the delegate vs. trusteeship nature of political representation. See Pitkin (1967), Przeworski, Stokes and Manin (1999), and Warren (2008) for debates on the constitutive elements of legislative accountability.

<sup>5</sup> See Mainwaring and Scully (1995) and Desposato (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See also Mainwaring (1991): 40.

to the fact that party switching is not frequent in advanced democracies.<sup>8</sup> Most commonly, scholars have observed volatile patterns of party affiliation when examining party system institutionalization in new democracies and tend to analyze it as a temporary phenomenon related to the political uncertainty and party organizational weakness that characterizes the early stages of transitional processes.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the facts and figures on political group affiliation in the European Parliament suggest it is not clear-cut switching is a transient phenomenon and make a pressing case for examining it and for assessing its implications for democracy.

One can hardly classify the EP as a nascent democratic institution: It has been operating for over fifty years and three decades have passed since its members started to be directly elected by the citizens of Member States. On the other hand, one may argue that the EP is a rather unique institutional setting, quite different from the legislative assemblies of the EU's Member States in its composition, organization, and *modus operandi*, and that such differences add to the entry of new Member States and new national party delegations in different legislatures, as well as to important changes in procedural and decision-making rules, to uphold an exceptional level of uncertainty for legislators. This does not tell us much, however, on what exactly explains the volatility of party membership in the EP and how we should analyze it in relation to the development of effective party competition and democratic representation in the EU.

These questions are all the more important in view of the fact that an increasing number of supranational legislative acts are enforced in EU Member States, influencing the course of many important policy areas, and of the increasing co-decision role of the EP in this ambit.<sup>10</sup> One line in a supranational act, for example, may induce prohibitive production costs and disrupt an entire national industry. Hence, whereas the political and technical work of MEPs hardly makes the national news, supranational legislative activity exerts powerful effects upon domestic societies. This has made scholars increasingly attentive to the making of party group coalitions in the EP and its impact

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<sup>8</sup> See Desposato (2006). Italy and Japan are notorious exceptions. See Heller and Mershon (2005); Kato and Yamamoto (2005); Verzichelli (1999).

<sup>9</sup> For studies on party switching in the young democracies of Eastern Europe, see Kreuzer and Pettai (2003); Mershon and Shvetsova (2005), Shabad and Slomczynski (2004) and Zielinski, Slomczynski and Shabad (2005). See Mainwaring and Scully (1995) and Desposato (2006) for Latin American countries. Tavares de Almeida, Costa Pinto and Bermeo (2006) also observe the fleeting allegiance of political leaders in Southern European democratic transitions.

<sup>10</sup> There have been three critical junctures in the development of legislative power by the EP: The Single European Act, which introduced the co-operation procedure (enforced in 1987) and the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, which introduced, first, and then extended, the co-decision procedure (enforced, respectively, in 1993 and in 1999). See Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton (2005).

on policy outcomes. Yet little has been written on the exceptionally unstable character of political affiliation in the EP and what this means for policy-making and for the development of party politics and democracy in the EU.<sup>11</sup>

My research seeks to address this gap. Based on thorough archival and interview data and on secondary readings as well, I argue that MEPs switch political affiliation in the EP mainly to get for their party or/and for themselves in Brussels and Strasbourg what they would not get through political institutions at home.<sup>12</sup> With low transaction costs on switching, and in an institutional setting characterised by loose ideological bonds and miscellaneous policy representation, national party leaders have found it easy to use political affiliation as a tool to conquer informational and policy resources that make their party more competitive in the domestic sphere. Selfish politicians, in turn, have been able to manipulate their party's affiliation in the EP as a stride of progressive ambition, i.e. as a springboard to high supranational office.<sup>13</sup> At other times, individuals move alone, more like salesmen who simply want to preserve their jobs.

The next section explores how these claims are influenced by previous research on party systems and by the literatures on coalitional behaviour, in particular. The fourth section reports and analyzes the data on political switching in the EP, compiled through exhaustive examination of the published records on the parliamentary curriculum of all MEPs in the period between 1979 and the admission of the ten new Member States in 2004. The fifth section discusses the insights provided by previous work on political affiliation in the EP and establishes complementary assumptions on the rationale of switchers. The subsequent sections explore these assumptions by making a dynamic account of the process of individual and national party affiliation in the EP. The concluding section summarizes the theoretical contributions of the study.

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<sup>11</sup> For research on party affiliation in the EP, see McElroy (2003; 2008); McElroy and Benoit (2007).

<sup>12</sup> This argument is inspired by Ralf Dahrendorf's statement in 1979, with reference to the Common Agricultural Policy: "[The CAP] is little more than an instrument for ministers of agriculture to get for their farmers in Brussels what they would not get at their national cabinet tables." Quoted in *Financial Times Weekend Magazine*, July 26/27 2008, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> This is a well-known phrase among researchers on the U.S. Congress, coined by Schlesinger (1966) See Stewart III (2001): 136.

### **Private Ambition, Political Institutions, and Party Affiliation.**

For the past decades, research on party politics and coalitional behaviour has linked private ambition to party choices through the basic assumption that political leaders are driven by any, or a combination, of three essential goals: the search for electoral gain, the will to enjoy the spoils of office, and the attempt to secure policy.<sup>14</sup> There has been great debate over which of these elements ultimately dominates the choices of individual politicians and translates into the collective decisions of parties, as well as on the trade-offs political elites make when those goals conflict. On the other hand, scholars widely agree that the preferences and strategies of political leaders are heavily constrained by the political institutions that affect the conversion of electoral support into office and by the type of party organization and the patterns of elite recruitment in a given political system.<sup>15</sup> Influential studies in the literature on party politics also suggest that one should examine the influence of certain endogenous factors and exogenous events over the mind-set of politicians and the timing of their choices.<sup>16</sup> Personality traits, for example, may alter the career goals of politicians, as do seniority and time horizons.<sup>17</sup> External events, such as the fall of the Soviet empire and major economic recessions, may also radically change ideological alignments and the posture of national political elites. Historical legacies and political culture add to these factors in influencing the mind-set of party leaders.<sup>18</sup>

The literature on party switching focuses on these basic explanatory categories. The most influential studies in this ambit go back to the research on democratisation in Latin America. While examining the dynamics of institutionalisation of competitive party politics in this region, Mainwaring and Scully (1995) observe volatile patterns of party affiliation in Brazil, which they relate to political institutions that grant politicians

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<sup>14</sup> See Downs (1957); McKelvey and Shofield (1987); Aldrich and Bianco (1992); Strom and Muller (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the rules that determine how votes are translated into parliamentary seats and which influence the size differential of the parties that gain representation in a given legislature, the rules and procedures that structure legislative processes and allocate legislative office among elected candidates, and the distribution of executive spoils and influence among the represented parties, all contribute to structure the opportunities, and therefore the incentives and career choices of entrepreneurial politicians. The degree of autonomy of party structures vis-à-vis the personal desires of leaders and the rules on party financing also influence leaders' choices. See Luebbert (1986); Cox and McCubbins (1993); Aldrich (1995); Laver (1997); Strom and Muller (1999); Laver and Benoit (2003).

<sup>16</sup> See Strom and Muller (1999).

<sup>17</sup> A charismatic leader may be more interested in winning prestige and reputation than in maximizing office, votes, or even policy. Individuals reaching retirement are often less concerned with future office prospects than with their political legacy, as Schlesinger (1966) has observed.

<sup>18</sup> See Strom and Muller (1999), and Heller and Merzhon (2005).



a great deal of autonomy vis-à-vis parties, hence encouraging personalism and factionalism. Accordingly, the federal nature of the Brazilian political system, which makes coordination among the state party apparatuses difficult, adds to the absence of legal restrictions on legislative party switching, to induce and maintain loose relations between leaders and party structures. This pattern is reinforced by weak levels of party identification by electors, and hence by no electoral punishment for switching behaviour.<sup>19</sup> As a result, parties in Brazil have insufficient resources, exert little control over candidate selection, and can be easily used by politicians for short-term electoral goals and for the distribution of pork among local clientele.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, political elites enjoy the benefits of this lack of cohesiveness and thus are interested in perpetuating the system.<sup>21</sup>

Desposato's more recent work (2006) supports these findings, whilst using the case of Brazil to test a set of hypotheses on politicians' incentives for party switching. In essence, he argues that "legislators switch party to maximize their expected career utility, a function of the resources they receive from their party of choice, less a switching transaction cost."<sup>22</sup> More concretely, they use party switching with the view to maximizing pork and/or electoral payoffs. Accordingly, politicians calculate their expected eligibility in any party that may be generally compatible with their policy goals and decide on the electoral benefits of switching.<sup>23</sup> This calculation is influenced, Desposato argues, by the electoral thresholds that candidates expect for each of the possible alternatives, while accounting for the impact of the given electoral system on the anticipated voting results.<sup>24</sup>

Heller and Mershon (2005b) have examined the exceptional volatility of party affiliation in Italy and found out that unclear party labels, which do not provide adequate cues about the content of party policy, add to rules that do not tie candidates to the continuity of affiliation in a given political party to propitiate switching as a tool of

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<sup>19</sup> See Mainwaring (1991): 25; Mainwaring and Scully (1995): 16-27. See also Desposato (2006): 63.

<sup>20</sup> The Worker's Party is not adequately described by this pattern, as Desposato (2006: 70) reminds us: Its leaders have built solid grass-roots organizations and promoted cohesive policy platforms, while trying to encourage partisan votes.

<sup>21</sup> See Mainwaring (1991): 25 and Mainwaring and Scully (1995): 16-27.

<sup>22</sup> See Desposato (2006): 64.

<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, this kind of calculation should be more common in the context of multiparty systems. The latter tend to be characterised by some ideological proximity between adjacent parties, which makes it possible for a given political leader to perceive (or at least make the case that) her/his policy goals are compatible with more than one party.

<sup>24</sup> Heller and Mershon also argue that information about parties' prospects should affect legislators' switching decisions. See Heller and Mershon (2005): 539.

individual political ambition.<sup>25</sup> These scholars also suggest that the amount of office and distributive resources that membership in a given party confers matters for the choice of affiliation: Governing parties (or coalitions) give privileged access to state resources, but opposition parties receive less pork for their constituents. Thus, legislators should stay in, or have incentives to move to, governing parties, until the latter reach a size where new members add negative value.<sup>26</sup> More generally, one would expect legislators from smaller parties to be more likely to switch than do members of larger parties.<sup>27</sup>

Shabad and Slomczynski (2004) make another important analytical contribution to our understanding of inter-party mobility by disaggregating it into types and by establishing a correlation between the direction of flows and the degree of party system development in new democracies. Whilst examining the cases of Poland and the Czech Republic, the authors make a distinction between voluntary switching, which is due to self-interest, programmatic divergences or/and weak political identities, and structural changes within a given party system that leave individuals with little choice but to switch parties. The latter include party dissolutions, party splits, and party mergers. According to Shabad and Slomczynski, party mergers, as well as intense movements to older (vs. new) parties are an indicator of party system consolidation. Prominent shifts to electorally successful parties, in turn, suggest a degree of institutionalization that allows politicians to predict the likely winners of elections. Flows within (rather than across) political families also suggest the consolidation of ideological blocs based on party programmes and elite orientations, which is, they argue, a general trait of developed party systems.<sup>28</sup>

Laver and Benoit (2003) examine a different aspect of the dynamics of switching, namely the incentives on the receiving end. In essence, they argue, a given party is willing to accept defectors from another party when its current members reason that the arrival of new members increases their own expected payoff. Again, institutional factors – in this case the size differentials between parties -- play an important role in such calculation. Accordingly, the number of incoming legislators a party needs to become a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 539-540.

<sup>26</sup> Individuals holding legislative office also enjoy particular benefits of prestige and influence and should therefore be less likely to switch. See Desposato (2006): 70-2.

<sup>27</sup> Heller and Mershon (2005: 549). These authors, as well as the scholars referred above, have found out that switching is more common among conservative than leftist parties. So far I have not found an explanation for why that happens.

<sup>28</sup> See Shabad and Slomczynski (2004): 153-158.

majority party, a plurality party, or a pivotal party – or, on the other hand, the potential number of defections that would make a party fall below that role (or below the threshold of representation in the case of the EP) plays a major role in its willingness to attract defectors. From this perspective, switching induces changes in the dynamics of party competition, i.e. it leads to the formation of new coalitions and alters the location of pivotal parties.<sup>29</sup>

Mershon and Shvetsova (2005) also make an important analytical contribution, by examining if and how different stages of the electoral cycle provide different kinds of incentives for party switching by legislators. Accordingly, the expectation to obtain parliamentary offices and privileges weighs significantly in changes of party affiliation that occur in the early period of legislatures. Switching that occurs in the late stages of parliamentary business cycles is usually a strategy for improving one's electoral positioning. Policy motivations and the attempt to control the agenda may drive changes of party affiliation during periods of the legislative term devoted to major policy decisions.<sup>30</sup>

In short, the literature on party switching relates volatile patterns of party affiliation to institutional conditions and the resources and opportunities they confer upon the career choices of politicians and upon the office prospects of political parties. Electoral rules, party size differentials, the degree of party control over elite recruitment and the clarity of party labels and cleavages add to societal factors such as low voter identity and personal and programmatic divergences among party leaders, to create incentives for switching. These findings constitute important theoretical contributions to comparative studies of party behaviour and the scholars who have established them provide strong empirical evidence supporting their claims. In essence, party switching comes into sight as a tool upon which political entrepreneurs rely to make strides in progressive ambition. Whilst the propensity of individuals to resort to this device is influenced by the institutions that condition access to office and pork in their political system, the choices they make contribute, in turn, to structure party politics and patterns of political competition.

The literature is less fertile, though, with regard to contextualizing the choices of actors and exploring what legislators are actually thinking when they decide to defect from the party that has elected them. Examining the mind-set of switchers is a necessary

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<sup>29</sup> See Kato and Yamamoto (2005).

<sup>30</sup> See Mershon and Shvetsova (2005): 5.

task, though: It allows us to test the propositions developed with the support of quantitative data and it may yield new and overlooked information on the factors that influence individual choice. This constitutes a critical task of my research: I explore the reasoning of the politicians who have changed political group affiliation in the EP, either during the course of a given legislative mandate or at the start of a new mandate (in the case of re-elected politicians). In order to do so, I have first mapped the EP group affiliation itinerary of all MEPs between 1979 and May 2004, and built a data set identifying the switchers and the dates and direction of their respective political moves. Secondly, I conducted extensive interviews with staff of EPGs and the EP and with Portuguese MEPs from all elected political parties and legislatures since the country joined the EU. The goal was to hear accounts from individuals directly involved in EPG switching and/or who have watched closely such processes of change.<sup>31</sup> The results of archival research are displayed next. The subsequent sections situate empirical analysis in relation to the findings of previous research on group affiliation in the EP and develop case analysis.

### **Contextualizing Inter-party Mobility in the EP**

Political Group switching in the EP starts to be significant in the second legislature and expands dramatically in the third and fourth legislatures, somewhat receding in the fifth legislature. There have been 45 movements, representing 8,7% of the total number of seats in the second legislature; raising to 114 movements, representing 22% of seats in the third legislature; increasing further to 152 movements, representing 24,3% of seats in the fourth legislature; and decreasing to 109 movements, representing 14,4% of the seats in the fifth legislature.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Annex I.

<sup>32</sup> Some MEPs switch political group more than once within a given legislature. The figures here refer to the number of movements traced rather than to the number of individuals who change affiliation. They include political group switches by re-elected MEPs who change their affiliation in the EP at the start of the new legislative mandate.

Table 1

Changes	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Total
Total	10	45	114	152	109	430
Individual	7	19	27	44	36	133
Bloc	3	26	87	108	73	563

Table 2

Changes	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Total	2,30%	8,69%	22,01%	24,28%	17,41%
Individual	1,61%	3,67%	5,21%	7,03%	5,75%

In the second legislature, almost 60% of the movements between EPGs were collective switches, i.e. transfers of political affiliation by whole national party delegations or a group of MEPs (as opposed to individual moves). Collective switching represents more than 70% of all movements in the third and fourth legislatures, and decreases to about 67% of switches in the fifth legislature.

Table 3

Changes	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Individual	70,00%	42,22%	23,68%	28,95%	33,03%
Bloc	0,00%	57,78%	76,32%	71,05%	66,97%

In absolute numbers, Italian MEPs are responsible for 37,4% of all the switching that has occurred in the five legislatures under analysis. They are followed by French MEPs, who are accountable for 20,5% of all occurrences. Spanish MEPs occupy the third place in the ranking, with 11% of all switching occurrences, followed by MEPs from the United Kingdom, who are responsible for 10,2% of the total switching. Germany, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands are accountable each for about 3% of all switching. Austria and Ireland feature less than 1% of all switching and Greece is responsible for less than 2%. There are no recorded switchers from Luxembourg, Sweden and Finland.

If we weigh the disparity of seats between Member States, which results of their different population sizes, as well as the fact that some countries have joined the EU at different dates, the only significant and surprising change that emerges from data analysis is the ascent of Danish MEPs from the fifth to the second place in the ranking

of volatile nationalities.<sup>33</sup> Italy remains ahead of all other countries. French MEPs go one step down to the third place in the ranking. They are followed by Spanish MEPs. Portugal goes next, going up slightly in the ranking. Belgium and the Netherlands trail Portugal. Germany goes behind these countries, slightly downwards in the ranking. Greece, Ireland, and Austria remain as the least volatile nationalities.

In short, Italy and France, who hold the same number of seats in the EP and are among the largest Member States, are undoubtedly two of the great champions of switching behaviour. On the other hand, Germany, which tops all Member States in number of seats, is one of the most stable nations in terms of party affiliation in the EP. The United Kingdom, which is also part of the large national delegations' club, is in the middle of the switching chart. Greece, which is comparable to Portugal and Belgium in terms of number of seats, is less volatile than these countries. Denmark is not only the second biggest player in the switching game, but also by far the great champion amidst the smaller member states.

What do these findings mean? Why is political affiliation in the EP highly volatile? What explains the different rates of switching behaviour between the MEPs of different nationalities? To what extent do the institutional factors identified as predictors in the literature on party switching explain the behavioural patterns revealed by these data? The next section will unearth key clues for answering these queries, by looking into the findings of previous studies on political affiliation in the EP. Building on the insights hence provided and on my own field work, I will then proceed to develop the central claims of this study.

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<sup>33</sup> While the national delegations of Italy, France and the UK are comparable in size, Germany has four times more seats than Portugal, Belgium or Greece, and seven and a half times more seats than Ireland. In the 1999 legislature, for example, there were 99 MEPs from Germany, whereas Italy, France and the UK had 78 seats each, Spain had 54 seats, the Netherlands had 27 seats, Greece, Portugal and Belgium had 24 seats each, and Denmark had 14 seats. Austria held 18 seats, Ireland had 13 seats, and Luxemburg held 6 seats. In order to weigh for these differences, I have calculated the ratio between the number of switches by MEPs of a given nationality and the total number of seats that the given country has held since joining the EU.

## **Political Strategies in Multilevel Markets: The Inter-Institutional Dynamics of Party Switching**

One of the puzzling aspects of party switching in the EP is that the determinant factors suggested by the literature do not fully explain it, as McElroy (2003, 2008) has observed. It matters little for gaining electoral advantage whether a candidate is affiliated to a given EPG or to another, Mc Elroy argues, because European citizens have little information on MEPs' activities and on the meaning of European party labels, and use elections for the EP to assess the performance of the current national government, rather than to evaluate European policy.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, EP elections are run between national parties, rather than by European Political Groups, and the latter have no input over the nomination of candidates in each Member State.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore not very plausible to expect candidates to improve eligibility by switching groups in the EP and, consequently, to have incentives to use switching as an instrument for short-term electoral gain.

National electoral rules do not account much either for the volatility of political affiliation in the EP. All Member States, except for Ireland and the UK until 2004, have adopted proportional methods for the EP elections. There are significant differences between such systems with regard to the number and size of constituencies, and to the existence (or not) of thresholds for representation, as well as to the possibility (or not) that voters choose and/or rank their favourite candidates during the electoral act.<sup>36</sup> The latter aspect is of particular importance, because it reflects the degree to which national party apparatuses control the selection of candidates. As we have seen above, studies on party system development in new democracies have found out that high levels of candidate autonomy vis-à-vis party apparatuses make politicians prone to manipulate political affiliation for strategic reasons.<sup>37</sup> However, in the case of the EP, we find the highest and the lowest rates of switching both among nationalities that adopt closed

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<sup>34</sup> See also Reif and Schmitt (1980).

<sup>35</sup> McElroy (2003): 2-5.

<sup>36</sup> See Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton (2005): 14. Until 2004, Ireland and the UK retained their distinctive national electoral systems in the elections to the EP, namely the single transferable vote (STV) in the case of the former and the majority "first past the post" system in single member constituencies in Great Britain.

<sup>37</sup> See Mainwaring and Scott (1995) above.

party lists and among those that use preference voting.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the rules that structure the eligibility of candidates do not seem to have much effect here.

There is mixed evidence with regard to the assumption by previous studies that legislators from smaller groups should be more likely to switch than do members of larger EPGs and that the largest EPGs would be prone to attract defectors so as to alter the size differential among them.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, the distribution of seats in the EP between 1979 and 2004 shows a tendency for “concentration” in the PES and the EPP.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that, in time, a growing number of MEPs have chosen to affiliate with one of the two largest political groups in the EP.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, if we calculate the percentage of movements into the EPP and the PSE vis-à-vis the total number of switches in each legislature, we get very disparate and inconclusive figures.<sup>42</sup>

Making a distinction between collective flows and individual switches may contribute to sort out these contradictory results, because the incentives on the receiver end are not the same for attracting switchers from each of these categories. Individual movements make a difference for small political groups, particularly when they are close to the threshold of representation or when the entry of one MEP of a new nationality increases the allocation of resources from the parliamentary budget to the given group. In these cases, a group has strong incentives to attract incomers or, at the very least, to act and deter individual defections. In the case of the largest EPGs, however, individual switching would rarely, if at all, alter the size differential or the voting capability of the group or the resources it is entitled to. Collective flows, on the other hand, may affect these aspects, as has happened, for example, when the British Conservatives moved into the EPP in 1992 or when the Portuguese Social Democrats did so in 1996.

In any case, even if one may assume that the will to increase in number and expand financial resources and voting influence creates incentives for groups to covet new members – regardless of whether these mean national party delegations or individuals - this factor is not very illuminating with regard to the reasons that move the defectors. It does not tell us much about the dynamics of switching or about the mind-

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<sup>38</sup> Italy and Denmark (first and second in the ranking of national switching) adopt preference voting in the elections for the EP. France and Spain (third and fourth in the ranking) do not.

<sup>39</sup> See above, Heller and Mershon (2005) and Laver and Benoit (2003).

<sup>40</sup> See *Gabinete em Portugal do Parlamento Europeu* (2004): 28-29.

<sup>41</sup> See also McElroy (2003): 17.

<sup>42</sup> The figures range from 5% in the second legislature to almost 60% in the third legislature, and 15% in the fifth legislature.



set of the politicians responsible for it. McElroy makes a very good case that, in the EP context where the supply of political and financial goods by the parliamentary groups is constrained - because the majorities formed in the legislature do not control the executive and the latter is not formed by parties drawn from the legislature - career incentives internal to the legislature provide an explanatory factor for party switching: Accordingly, the odds of changing affiliation when a legislator is in a position that confers prestige and influence are lower than they are when one does not occupy a power role and legislators should be more prone to moving to groups that confer higher legislative office.<sup>43</sup>

More recently, McElroy and Benoit (2006) have found out that choices of political group affiliation by national parties are strongly influenced by a concern to minimize incongruence between key national party policy positions and the policy platforms of EPGs. Accordingly, the policy positions of national parties are dynamic and frequently change, sometimes in dramatic ways, because of shifts in the nature and importance of national issues. This creates a potential for incongruence with the more static policy principles of EPGs. Hence, McElroy and Benoit argue, when a national party's positions drift away from the median position of their group in the EP and become more proximate to the preferences of a rival EPG, the party may simply opt to leave its current group and move to latter. Conversely, they claim, EP party groups also attempt to maintain a degree of policy coherence among their national party delegations, not only as the result of democratic decision-making within the group but also with the goal to retaining members.<sup>44</sup>

My study supports these findings and provides new insights on the rationale of switchers which complement them. I too have found out that the dynamic character of national party ideology and competitive strategy in the domestic sphere play a determinant role in party switching in the EP, as do the career incentives of national political leaders. Case analysis below will illustrate this in detail. The new and central argument of my research, though, is that important aspects of switching behaviour can be analyzed as a critical, and yet overlooked, element of the adjustment of national party

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<sup>43</sup> See McElroy (2003): 7-8, 17-19.

<sup>44</sup> McElroy and Benoit (2007) support these hypotheses through examination of national party affiliation in EP groups at the time of the 2004 EP elections. The analysis is based on empirical measures of policy positions and the structure of policy contestation in the EU, comparing the national and EU levels. They use a conditional choice model to explain national party affiliation with EP groups as a function of policy.

organisation and strategy to make the most efficient use of the opportunities associated with multilevel governance.<sup>45</sup>

As Hix and Goetz have argued, the establishment of a higher level of political institutions in the EU opens up opportunities for domestic actors to exit from domestic constraints, either to promote certain policies, or to veto others, or to secure information which is vital in policy battles.<sup>46</sup> To an important extent, this claim goes back, in a more general fashion, to Putnam's (1988) claim that national political leaders play a "two-level" game in international bargaining, whereby they are able to make one movement on one level so as to trigger realignments on the other level which secure otherwise unattainable objectives and change their relative power position.<sup>47</sup> However, as Hix and Goetz note with regard to the case of the EU, these propositions have remained largely under-formalized and under-tested, notwithstanding the growing scholarly interest on the institutional and political effects of Europeanization.<sup>48</sup>

My work contributes to fill this gap by exploring how choices of political affiliation in the EP are part of politicians' strategy to exploit the opportunities that arise at the supranational level of politics so as to make party gains in domestic and/or international politics, and/or so as to secure career venues that would not be available through national political institutions. The analysis will provide evidence that political actors who are not endowed with strong political resources at the domestic level can hence gain competitiveness in the context of multilevel governance.

More generally, the study suggests one cannot understand political competition in each institutional layer of multilevel governance in isolation. The participation of domestic parties in the legislative workings of the EP and the need to adapt to the institutions, resources and coalitional practices that make the supranational sphere of authority induces changes in the reasoning of national political leaders. At the same time, the variety of national party systems which breed and socialize the politicians who

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<sup>45</sup> Heller and Mershon (2005) have found out some elements of multilevel strategy (in their case, resulting of the links between national regional and supranational elections) whilst examining party switching in Italy. More concretely, they argue that the highest peaks of party switching in Italy occur in the context of sub-national or supranational elections or close to the fall or to the formation of a new government. Accordingly, "switches abounded as a major non-parliamentary election drew near, declined somewhat during the month of the election itself, rose in the month after the election, and then dropped. Switches clustered around changes in government follow a different rhythm, clustering in the same the cabinet fell. Government changes occurred in rough proximity to major non-parliamentary elections". See Heller and Mershon (2005): 3.

<sup>46</sup> Hix and Goetz (2000): 10.

<sup>47</sup> See also Tsebelis (1990) for the analysis of "nested games" in politics.

<sup>48</sup> Hix and Goetz (2000): 10.

are elected to the EP influences their career expectations and, consequently, their management of time, office and coalitional behaviour, while in the EP. In turn, the intense inter-institutional play between the EP and the Council and the Commission in the process of co-decision making, and the links between the mainstream EPGs and their extra-parliamentary party Federations on the one hand, and high-level cadres of EU institutions, on the other, must be taken into account when one analyzes the way MEPs choose their political affiliation in the EP. The next sections will explore why.

### **The Initial Choice of Group Affiliation in the EP: The Opportunities and Advantages of Loose Ideological Fit**

The first important decision that elected candidates have to make in the EP is which European Political Group they want to join, or whether they prefer to remain non-attached. This is not a trivial decision. On the one hand, national party delegations are concerned with joining a political group that shares their main policy goals and which does not include national party delegations that may clash with them for historic, political or regional reasons. In essence, the goal is to avoid conflicts when (and if) the group establishes voting instructions, as well as to avoid accusations of policy incongruence by rival parties at home. On the other hand, choosing affiliation in the EP matters for the degree of access to high-level legislative office, namely the presidency, the vice-presidency, and the College of Quaestors, as well as for important committee chairmanships and rapporteurships.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, choosing a group makes a difference for the amount of financial and staff assistance national party delegations and members get from the EP.<sup>50</sup>

All these factors have to be weighed, particularly in a context where often there is not a very clear ideological fit between a given national party and *one and only one* Political Group in the EP. Any given EPG may include national parties that represent different tendencies within a broad political family, and a national party's programme may identify with one Group's dominant views on the regulation of the economy, for

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<sup>49</sup> McElroy (2003); Hix (2005): 91 and Corbett et al. (2005): 122 and ff.

<sup>50</sup> Corbett et al. (2005): 96. Groups receive appropriations from the EP's budget for secretariat, administrative expenditure and information activities. Each Group's share is determined by a complex formula, where the number of members of the Group weighs heavily and is adjusted according to the languages used by the Group. See Corbett et al. (2005): 95 and Hix (2005): 93.

example, and yet be closer to another EPG with regard to European integration and/or to immigration policy, and/or to social values, and/or to environmental concerns and/or to a range of specific sectoral matters. Moreover, the wide panoply of national and regional parties, citizens' movements, single-issue movements, alternative movements, personalistic lists, and geographical, cultural, historical and political tendencies represented in the EP entails much greater ideological diversity than one finds in national legislatures. Hence, elected MEPs and national party delegations are confronted with different possibilities for political affiliation when they start work in the EP.<sup>51</sup>

Although the vast majority of candidates run for the European elections through national party lists, their mandates in the EP are individual, which means that, from the perspective of the EP, all elected individuals have the right to behave as independent candidates: They may decide to seat with a different Group from the one chosen by the leaders of their national party delegation or to remain non-attached. Whether or not the MEPs from a national party list affiliate to the same EPG is important because of the benefits of numerical strength within a given Group: Generally, the Groups apply the proportional d'Hondt method to allocate internal leadership positions and to ponder nominations for committee chairmanships and other leadership posts in Parliament.<sup>52</sup> Hence, the largest national party delegations within an EPG usually dominate key leadership positions in the Group as well as the assignment of important committee roles, and have a sway over the Group's voting line in important matters. This has been the case, for example, of the German MEPs elected under the CDU and CSU lists, who have traditionally sat together in the EPP, hence making the largest national delegation in the Group and securing leadership posts and great influence in the EP. In contrast, as many analysts note, French centre-right parties have had a disproportionately low influence in EP politics, a result of their intense dispersion across EPGs.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A relevant amount of shifting occurs at the beginning of the EP legislature, when national parties and MEPs affiliated to a given EPG in the former legislature decide to switch to a different group at the start of the new legislature. Some of these shifts result from non-voluntary factors, namely electoral losses by the parties that had formed a smaller EPG in the previous legislature and their consequent inability to gather the number of necessary seats to pass the threshold of group representation in the new legislative term.

<sup>52</sup> See Corbett et al. (2005): 97.

<sup>53</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). In 1979, 1984 and 1989, MEPs from the UDF parted between the EPP and the Liberals. The Gaullists, who had created their own separate Group of European Progressive Democrats (DEP) before 1979 - renamed as the Group of the European Democratic Alliance (RDE) in 1984 - only joined the UDF in the EPP in 1999. In turn, the MEPs elected under Philippe de Villiers' list in the 1994 EP elections created another separate Group of the Europe of Nations (EDN), renamed as the Group of the Union for a Europe of Nations (UEN) in the 1999 EP elections, when de

In reality, most MEPs join their national party colleagues and it is mostly in the case of pre-electoral coalitions that one observes splits in affiliation at the start of a new EP legislature, often agreed to during pre-electoral negotiations.<sup>54</sup> Notwithstanding the incentives for forming the largest possible national delegation in a EPG, it may be in the interest of a national party to have MEPs elected under its banner join a different Political Group in the EP. The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), for example, included Green candidates in its 1989 list for the European elections and agreed before the elections that the latter would join the Greens, rather than the Communist Group, in the EP. The leadership of the party reasoned that, in exchange for making a Green candidate eligible and free to choose her affiliation in the EP, the PCP would gain “green” votes in the elections and would subsequently secure inside information on Green political activities in the EU as well securing a friendly contact in a different European Group.<sup>55</sup> In short, the party used its affiliation strategy to attain informational resources that would otherwise be out of its range.

How do national delegations proceed to choose their Group affiliation in the EP at the start of a new legislature? For a start, there is a key distinction between mainstream, usually older parties which have been long-standing members of international political families, on the one hand, and newer political parties that may not find a clear ideological fit with any one specific group in the EP, on the other hand. In the former case, affiliation generally follows a standard, simple procedure: The elected candidates of the given national party form a national delegation and join other sister parties in the Group that corresponds to the EP parliamentary “arm” of their respective international party family. This is the case, for example, of the Portuguese Socialist Party, which has been affiliated to the Socialist International since 1972 and which joined the Group of the Party of European Socialists (PES) in the EP when Portugal entered the (then) EC in 1986, remaining in the PES until the present date. In such “standard” cases, usually the leader of the outgoing national delegation helps the new leader with bargaining with the largest national delegations represented in the forming Group for the allocation of posts

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Villiers and the former Gaullist leader Charles Pasqua run together for the EP through the *Rassemblement pour la France* (RPF) list.

<sup>54</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>55</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted). The Green candidate elected in alliance with the PCP (Maria Santos) was subsequently elected to lead the Green Group in the EP. She was in fact the only Portuguese leader of a Political Group in the EP between 1986 and 2004.

that are particularly important for the party and its MEPs.<sup>56</sup> Such process of intra-group bargaining unfolds most intensely during the weeks that mediate between the outcome of the EP elections and the first plenary session of the new legislative mandate and is repeated at the half-way point of the legislative mandate, i.e. after two-and-a-half years.

Paradoxically, national parties that are not full members of an international political family and which may fit ideologically in more than one EPG – because different Groups match different parts of their policy program - can gain disproportional bargaining leverage when bargaining for their political affiliation in the EP. This happens most often in the case of relatively new and generally smaller party delegations that may bring extra resources for more than one EPG - either because the given national delegation represents one extra working language for those Groups or/and because the number of MEPs it would add to the given Groups would allow them to get one more senior parliamentary post, namely a committee chairmanship or even a vice-presidency. In the case of smaller EPGs, the entry or continuity of a national delegation in the Group may constitute a question of survival.<sup>57</sup> Hence, in the absence of resistance to the party's entry by any of the core national delegations of the forming Groups that constitute alternative options for the incoming party, its leaders may “sit and wait” for offers and secure benefits (be they financial, staff, or office perks) that are disproportionate to the party's numerical weight, by making the case that the party is entitled to have a share in the benefits it brings for the Group.<sup>58</sup> According to former leaders of the *Partido Renovador Democrático* (PRD), this happened when the party's delegation joined the EP. The PRD was a very young party when Portugal joined the EC in 1986. It had been created by supporters of President Eanes in the run-up to the 1985 national elections, with the goal to weaken the Socialist party in the elections and to undermine the presidential ambitions of his rival Mário Soares. The party claimed to be located in the center-left of the political spectrum in Portugal but had a heterogeneous support basis. When the country joined the EC in 1986, and after

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<sup>56</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). One should note that the official leader of a given national delegation may not be the person who actually conducts affairs in the EP. It often happens that a popular politician is the head of a party's list in the EP's elections, so as to appeal to voters but in reality that person is too busy and the party leaders agree informally on who will lead daily business in parliament.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in the 1994 EP elections, the Group of the European Right disappeared because the Alleanza Nazionale (AN) did not want to remain affiliated and hence the group did not have sufficient members to pass the threshold of parliamentary representation. See Corbett et al. (2005): 74.

<sup>58</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). Usually, internal resistance to the entry of a new national delegation happens because of conflicting ideological views or/and national interests, or/and because of the concern by the current members that the incoming party will dominate the group and will steal away parliamentary office and financial and staff resources.

surveying the offers from the EP's internal market, its leaders decided to join the Gaullists in the RDE.<sup>59</sup>

Although ideological unclearness is an asset that small national delegations can exploit to gain disproportionate resources in the EP, national parties that do not identify with any EPG because of their extremist views are, on the contrary, disadvantaged, as the Italian Radical Party illustrates: Its highly-seasoned leadership, anti-systemic character, and extreme claims on feminism, pornography, drugs, pacifism, and abortion always created resistance upon potential partners in the EP and made it hard for the party to identify with, and integrate, any EP parliamentary group.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) found it difficult to join any EPG because of its claims against the party system, neo-fascist tendencies, and ultra-conservative views on state intervention in social affairs. The MSI eventually benefited from the election Le Pen's *Front National* list in the 1984 EP elections, with whom its MEPs allied to create the new Group of the European Right.

Even among mainstream parties, though, choosing Group affiliation in the EP may not be always straightforward, due to potential resistance by rival delegations who do not want to share office or financial spoils or who fear they will be dominated by the potential incoming party. Ideological differences and conflicting national, regional or sectoral interests may add to this factor in making it hard for certain "establishment" parties to find a match in the EP. The British Conservatives, for example, found it very difficult to integrate any group in the EP when the country became a member of the EC in 1973 (before direct elections for the EP): The party's antagonism to state intervention in economic activity, strong support of the market, and Euroskeptic stance, were far from the EPP's strong Christian-democratic identity and pro-integrationist goals.<sup>61</sup> The Tories decided to join with the Danish Conservatives and form a separate Group of the European Democrats (EDG). After Margaret Thatcher stepped down in late 1990 and under the new leadership of John Major, the party in government became less antagonistic of European integration and willing to support the Maastricht Treaty and to

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<sup>59</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). The emergence of this short-lived party in Portuguese party politics is regarded by analysts as the single significant challenge to the near bipolarity of the Portuguese party system and to the tradition of strong and stable party organization that has characterized the three and a half decades of democracy in the country. See Jalali (2007): 208 and 250.

<sup>60</sup> Corbett et al (2005: 72) support this statement, by claiming that when the Rainbow group formed in 1984 joining Green parties, regionalist parties and left alternative parties, the Italian Radicals were not able to join in because of the Group's wariness of Marco Pannella's overpowering personality and of the party's extremist views.

<sup>61</sup> See Corbett et al.: 78-9.

lessen its distance from European partners. To this had added the move of the Spanish Christian Democrats away from the EDG and into the EPP in the 1989 EP elections, which had left the Group under-staffed.<sup>62</sup>

The British Conservatives hence had plenty incentives to break with their isolationist position and move closer to their European governing peers in the EP.<sup>63</sup> Notwithstanding important differences in a significant number of policy areas, the policy platform of the EPP was closer to the Tories' national positions at that point than were the PES' (or the Liberals') policy views. Negotiations intensified between the two camps but some of the core delegations in the EPP were not supportive of the entry of the British MEPs. While the latter were enough in number to bring considerable financial and staff resources and office positions for the Group, as well as greater leverage in negotiations with the PES at the time of important voting, some of the EPP's national delegations feared the Tories would dominate the Group.<sup>64</sup> The two-sides eventually settled on the freedom for the British Conservatives to opt-out from the Group's voting whips on areas that conflicted with important policy for the party at the national level and negotiated the inclusion of the term "European Democrats" in the EPP's official name, as well as other perks. The British Conservatives joined the latter on May 1992.<sup>65</sup>

### **Playing Domestic Politics in EP through Political Switching**

Once the legislative term starts, the new MEPs are confronted with a new institutional setting and must adapt their behaviour and choices accordingly. In many

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<sup>62</sup> Interviewees attribute the departure of the Spanish MEPs from the EDG on July 1989 to the fragmentation of the CDS in Spain and the move of a good number of its leaders to the PP. This was followed by the ascent of Aznar to the Vice-presidency of the latter party.

<sup>63</sup> The EPP, the PES and the ELDR together include almost all the governing parties in the EU. Because of this, smaller groups in the EP regard them as the "parties of the establishment". According to interviewees, the smaller Groups are usually made of national parties that have small representation at the national level or which have recently emerged as strong forces in the national sphere but do not identify with any of the mainstream Groups in the EP. Author's interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>64</sup> Corbett et al.: 78-9.

<sup>65</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). McElroy and Benoit (2007) make a very interesting account of the now ongoing process which may lead to the exit of the British Conservatives from the EPP. The long stint of the party in domestic political opposition and the attempt by its leadership to realign ideological positioning back towards Euro-skepticism has increasingly conflicted with the group's policy platform. Accordingly, the Conservative party is thus trying to forge a new party grouping with like minded potential defectors from the EPP such as the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS). See McElroy and Benoit (2007): 8.



important aspects, legislative activity in the supranational sphere does not conform to the *modus operandi* of national parliaments in Europe and even those MEPs who have previous parliamentary experience at the national level have to go through a learning process when they start work in the EP. Comparative research on EU institutions and politics offers rich accounts on how the rules that structure the flow of decision-making at the supranational level and which determine the role played by different actors in this process, namely the cooperation and co-decision procedures, the system for allocating senior posts and committee assignments in the EP, and the rules that set voting majorities influence coalitional patterns in the supranational legislature.<sup>66</sup> There is plenty of evidence that these institutions induce a highly consensual *modus* of legislative proceeding in the EP and, more generally, encourage intense cooperation between the Commission, the EP, and the Council at all stages of the legislative process.

My research suggests, in turn, that party switching is a central aspect of the role domestic political competition plays in the EP: Unlike the parliamentarians of national legislative assemblies, MEPs originate from different types of party systems, characterized by varying party organization and goals and diverse political cultures. The variety of national patterns of political competition and party organization induces diversity in the behaviour of MEPs, amidst the institutional pressure for standardization imposed by the rules and norms that regulate supranational legislative activity.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, national political parties exert a strong influence over the career prospects for individuals, not only in the domain of elected national and supranational office but also with regard to non-elected staff posts in the upper echelons of the EU's institutions, including the EP. The party passages that link the elected and bureaucratic arenas in the supranational sphere influence the calculations that make individuals switch between political groups in the EP.

It is easy to understand the extent to which national political cultures matter in this ambit: As Zielinski, Slomczynski and Shabad (2005) accurately argue, French MEPs, for example, originate from and are socialized in a political system where enduring

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<sup>66</sup> See Marsh and Norris (1997): 155; Hix (2005); Kreppel (2004); McElroy and Benoit (2007).

<sup>67</sup> One of the aspects of the diversity of political cultures in the EP, usually overlooked by analysts, is that one may not assume that MEPs and national delegations are consistently interested in prestigious assignments in the EP. Rather, the different kinds of national political systems where MEPs are "bred" nurture different incentives for, and levels of commitment to, legislative work in the EP. While some MEPs have vested interests in certain sectors and use their long-standing experience and connections with different EU echelons in the given policy area to make the most advantage of committee work towards influencing legislation on the given sector, other MEPs are primarily concerned with nurturing their home party-base and delegate their committee work upon staff. Author's interviews (sources omitted).

party identities that have emerged around charismatic leaders of the post-war era compete with volatile party movements that are created as electoral machines in the run-up to highly personalized campaigns and which often evaporate or merge quickly with other parties. Italian MEPs, in turn, develop their political skills in a fluid and fragmented party system, where politicians are primarily concerned with cultivating clientelistic networks and with the ability to deliver particularistic goods.<sup>68</sup> Danish MEPs come from a multiparty system governed until recently by unstable and often changing coalitions, which elect very small party delegations to the EP. One would expect individuals originating from such fragmented political systems, where politicians are used to manipulating party life cycles for their own advantage, to be more prone to switching in the EP than are MEPs originating from political systems such as Germany and Portugal, where party organization tends to be strong, cohesive and long-lasting, and where one finds enduring patterns of alternation in government between two or three parties.<sup>69</sup>

As we have seen above, the ranking of nationalities in the account of group switching until the entry of the new Member States in 2004 supports this assumption. Additionally, the information I have gathered through interviewing suggests that French and Italian political leaders who have orchestrated collective switches of affiliation in the EP are often motivated by the attempt to boost their personal visibility at the supranational level and/or to position themselves well for subsequent electoral contests at home. One example frequently pointed out is that of the former French President Valérie Giscard d'Éstaing who left the Liberals for the EPP on December 1991, along with French MEP supporters. According to interviewees, d'Éstaing ambioned for a top post in the EP and hoped to play a very visible role in European politics but he reasoned his chances would be lower if he remained in a Group that did not enjoy significant representation across the largest Member States.<sup>70</sup>

Some of his colleagues in the Group reacted to d'Éstaing's departure with great indignation, because he was the chair of the Liberals and they considered that losing the chair would be particularly detrimental for the Group in the play of EP party politics. In their view, d'Éstaing's posture was selfish and a continuation of some of his key domestic political strategy: Like other French Presidents after him, d'Éstaing was

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<sup>68</sup> See Zielinski, Slomczynski and Shabad (2005).

<sup>69</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>70</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted).

known for playing on the access to high-level international politics conferred by his institutional vest so as to gain credibility at home (for example through his role in the creation of the G6 in 1975) and for using parties as electoral machines supporting his presidential ambitions.<sup>71</sup> D'Éstaing's switching strategy in the EP did not seem to work right away. However, some claim that this move was crucial to allow for the kind of visibility and international party networking across the EPP political family in Europe, which he needed later to become the chair of the Convention that prepared the draft constitution for the EU.<sup>72</sup>

More generally, my research suggests that a significant number of MEPs who switch EPGs alone (rather than together with national party colleagues or with their national delegation as a whole) are driven by self-centred career goals, and use switching as a strategy to counter national party control over their career prospects. According to interviewees, often it happens that domestic political realignments during a MEP's five year mandate bring about a new leading team to head the party at home and/or a new line of internal and/or external party "clients" waiting for an eligible place in the lists for the subsequent EP elections. Individuals who calculate they will not be chosen for a second mandate in the EP and who are eager to remain in Brussels frequently search for alternative ways to extend their stay. As stated by interviewees, the most common options are either to approach rival parties at home and see about the possibility of gaining an eligible candidacy through their lists, or to develop strong connections with influential colleagues in the EP (who may be not be affiliated to the same Group) and hence try to be sponsored for a non-elected staff position either in the EP or in another EU institution.<sup>73</sup>

Other particularistic, albeit less self-centred, reasons which also contribute for individual switching are associated with MEPs' closeness to specific sectoral interests.

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<sup>71</sup> D'Éstaing was responsible for the creation of two new political movements in France - respectively the *Fédération nationale des Républicains Indépendants* (RI/FNRI) and the *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) - which claimed to occupy a political vacuum left by the Gaullists in the defense of liberal, centrist and pro-European values but which analysts viewed primarily as an instrument to support his competition for the presidency.

<sup>72</sup> The Convention worked between February 2002 and June 2003 and included European and national parliamentarians, national governmental representatives and Commission representatives. Author's interviews (sources omitted). See also Corbett (2005): 344.

<sup>73</sup> Usually, these are positions formally allocated by contest but which have been increasingly dominated by, and shared on an informal basis between, political parties. According to interviewees, there is hardly any top-level position in the EP's secretariate-general currently attainable if individuals have not previously worked for an EPG through national party sponsorship or as elected MEPs. As stated, the politicization (or partitocracy) of bureaucratic progression in the EP has intensified since the mid-1990s and plays a central role in shaping the career prospects and calculations of EU bureaucrats and politicians who want to make a career in Brussels. Author's interviews (sources omitted).

For example, national party delegations that are sufficiently large to do so frequently include a representative of national agriculture, one or more representatives of important regions in the country and maybe one or more MEPs linked to key economic sectors. As a rule, these individuals are members of the given national party but their primary professional activity may be entrepreneurial rather than political and usually includes previous lobbying in the EU.<sup>74</sup> Such individuals have a vested professional interest on the pursuit of specific policy goals and often aim continue their professional activities in their home country and regard their stint in the EP as a matter of prestige. They tend to be less dependent on national party leadership for the advancement of their careers than the usual legislator is. Interviewees have pointed out several instances in which these individuals pragmatically switch political affiliation in the EP (and they may often do so without opposition from the national party) if they reason such move will be beneficial for the pursuit of their sector's interests.<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, the most common other motive for individual switching is the emergence of political or personal divergences vis-a-vis the leadership of one's national delegation or Group in the EP, or vis-à-vis the party leaders at home. This may result of conflicting policy or personal interests or of dissatisfaction with the allocation of EP work assignments and/or financial assistance.

On the other hand, party mergers and break-ups in domestic politics are key determinants of party switching by factions of national parties. National party ideology and the competitive strategy of political leaders in the domestic sphere are dynamic, and evolutions in this sphere quickly transpire to the European level. The high rate of switching by Italian MEPs, especially during the nineties, illustrates this. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-down of the Soviet ideology led to severe internal dissension in the Italian Communist Party (PCI). While some of its leaders aimed to bring the party towards socialist reformism, others opposed such move as excessively rightist and claimed the party should remain faithful to its old-time, hard-core constituents. The inability by the leadership to reconcile such divergences led to the scission of the party into two new party organizations, namely the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS) and the *Rifondazione Comunista* (RC). This cleavage quickly showed in European

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<sup>74</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>75</sup> While none of the switchers I have interviewed admits to either self-centred or particularistic motives – all claim ideological divergences have driven their decision to change groups – a good majority of interviewees have told specific stories of colleagues they knew well in the EP who, accordingly, have switched between EPGs when necessary (and in some cases changed their national party label too) so as to secure a post in Brussels after the term of their mandate or so as to defend more effectively the interests of the sector they represented.

politics. The PDS joined the Confederation of the Socialist Parties of the European Community, rather than becoming a member of the Socialist International. On January 1993, the Italian MEPs who had been elected to the EP in 1989 under the PCI and who joined the new PDS left the Group of the Unitarian European Left (GUE) for the Socialist Group in the EP. The failed attempt to accommodate these national divergences was one of the major challenges of the GUE during the third EP legislature and the exit of the Italian MEPs represented an important loss for the group, i.e. missing the political and financial resources associated with the departing 17 members.<sup>76</sup>

The break-down of the Christian-Democratic party (CD) under allegations of rampant political corruption and clientelism and links to organized crime, which constituted the second major upheaval in the Italian political system during the nineties, quickly leaked out to the EP too. Taking advantage of the general loss of faith in the traditional party system, Silvio Berlusconi created a new, transversal political movement i.e. *Forza Italia* (FI). Under a federalist banner, the party elected 25 members to the EP in 1994.<sup>77</sup> Rather than joining the EPP, to which the Italian Christian Democrats had been traditionally affiliated, the MEPs elected through the FI created their own separate political group in the EP, i.e. *Forza Europa* (FE). Analysts claim this was a tactics for Berlusconi to reinforce the perception at home that he was a powerful player in international politics and could move forces on his own at the European level.<sup>78</sup> One year later, *Forza Europa* merged with the Group of the European Democratic Alliance, whose core was formed by French Gaullists, and formed the new Union for Europe Group (UPE).

Interviewees suggest that, like other recently-formed national parties elected to the EP, the leaders of the FI reasoned the party would increase its capacity for legislative intervention without losing visibility (as a result of “diluting” amidst the largest national delegations in the big EPGs), if it allied with a small set of national parties in a relatively small parliamentary group.<sup>79</sup> To this added the fact that, like other recent incomers in the EP, the FI found it hard to find acceptance from, and to fit in, any of the Groups representing the “establishment” (mainstream) parties of the EU. As the FI consolidated his role in domestic politics and its leaders gradually developed relations

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<sup>76</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>77</sup> For more on the breakdown of traditional party system in Italian politics, see Stephen Gundle and Simon Parker (1996); Kreppel (2004).

<sup>78</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>79</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

with European colleagues, they searched for closeness to the “establishment” parties represented in the EPP. The FI eventually moved to the latter group at the start of the following legislature, i.e. on July 1999.<sup>80</sup>

### **Group Switching as a Venue for National Party Empowerment**

Political Groups in the EP constitute a vital international network for national parties: The close and sustained contact between the MEPs of the party delegations represented in a Group allows those MEPs who dedicate time to their work in the EP to develop solid channels of communication and to amass privileged information about key policy issues and the development of party politics in other Member States. Corbett et al. have observed, for example, that EPGs play a critical role for parties in national government, as they provide an alternative source of information to national civil servants.<sup>81</sup> In other words, EPGs provide an external venue through which national governments may expand their power vis-à-vis national bureaucracies. Statesmen who have understood this organize regular meetings with their national delegations in the EP.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the scholarly literature has not dedicated much attention to examining how national political parties (both government-holders and opposition parties) use the network resources provided by membership in EPGs to gain political advantage.<sup>83</sup>

In broad terms, national parties gain from affiliating to one of the largest groups in the EP, more concretely the EPP and the PSE. Not only do these groups enjoy numerical strength in voting negotiations, they also get many important committee chairmanships and rapporteurships, and they represent most of the largest national party delegations of nearly all Member States. These elements on their own provide a communications network that cannot be matched by the smaller EPGs. By cultivating good political and personal relations with influential leaders of the largest national delegations represented in either (or both) the EPP and the PES, as well as with the group’s coordinators and rapporteurs in committees that are of vital policy interest, the party delegations of medium-sized, periphery states like Portugal, which would

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<sup>80</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>81</sup> See Corbett et al. (2005): 110.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: 318.

<sup>83</sup> See Bardi (1994) and Poguntke et al. (2007) for exceptions to this statement.

otherwise hardly exert any sway, are able to gain policy influence in the rounds of negotiations which precede the writing and voting of legislative reports.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, the extra-parliamentary “arms” of the EPP and PES Groups (i.e. their Party Federations in Europe) also provide important venues for thriving in the process of inter-institutional consensus-making that characterizes EU politics. For the past two decades, the EPP and PES Federations have organized summits before meetings of the European Council, which gather the national party leaders, the heads of governments, the chair of the EPG and the Commissioners from the same party family, with the aim to building common positions on key policy issues before the EU heads of government meet.<sup>85</sup> These political families have also developed the practice of gathering their ministers and Group coordinator in a given EP committee prior to sectoral Council meetings too, with the goal to coordinating positions on important policy issues.

In short, belonging to either the EPP or the PES provides closeness to the major players in Council decision-making and an essential venue for regular contact with top decision-makers in the Commission and in other echelons of the EU. This was a critical factor influencing the exit of the Portuguese Social Democrats from the Group of the Liberals to the EPP in 1996. When Giscard d’Éstaing and his supporters left the Liberals in late 1991, the PSD was left as the largest party in the Group. At that time, the Liberals did not have the tradition of organizing European summits and the Group had little representation from the large delegations of major Member States, as well as weak representation in the European Commission. Hence, in the view of party leaders, the Liberals did not provide much of a channel for information and party networking.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the exit of the French delegation had left the PSD delegation without fellow southern European MEPs who would share key policy preoccupations, namely with the allocation of funds through the CAP for the support of agricultural produce that traditionally made the livelihood of southern European farmers, such as olive oil and wine, and the support of fisheries as well. The PSD was the single party in national government and had the opportunity to meet with its European partners in the Council

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<sup>84</sup> Usually these negotiations include one representative of the Commission and one representative of the Council’s Presidency.

<sup>85</sup> See <http://www.epp.eu/subsubpagina.php?hoofdmenuID=1&submenuID=1&subsubmenuID=6> See also Hix (2005): 192; Corbett et al (2005): 106-107. The European Liberal, Democratic and Reformist Party (ELDR) have begun this practice much more recently.

<sup>86</sup> Author’s interviews (sources omitted).

meetings. The party's leadership started to develop an interest in moving closer to its European peers in the EP too.<sup>87</sup>

The entry of the UK Liberal Democrats in the Group of the Liberals following the 1994 EP elections and the adhesion of Finnish and Swedish parties from the Liberal and Centre party traditions on January 1995 accentuated the weight of northern parties in the Group.<sup>88</sup> When the PSD lost the elections on October 1995, the new national party leaders considered it was urgent to join a European political family that would secure strong international connections. Changing affiliation to the PES – to which the British Labour and the German SPD were affiliated – would not be viable because the Portuguese Socialists (PS) had always resisted the entry of the Social-Democrats, arguing that a joint affiliation of the two parties in the same European federation would be detrimental for their claims of ideological distinction at home. The obvious alternative was the EPP: The PSD leaders reasoned they needed to be integrated in the network of large national parties represented in the Group and to participate in the summits it organized before Council meetings, so as to regain the information resources and inter-institutional links at the supranational level which the party had lost when it was replaced by the Socialists in the national government.<sup>89</sup>

A former leader of the Portuguese Christian-Democrats (CDS), Lucas Pires, who had been affiliated to the EPP since 1989 and who had run as an independent candidate under the PSD's lists for the 1994 EP elections, conducted the negotiations with the EPP.<sup>90</sup> The latter was interested in having the PSD join in, because this would increase the number of MEPs in the Group and therefore expand the financial and legislative office resources it was entitled to, even if it would not change the balance of power between the EPP and the PES, as the former would remain the second largest group in the EP. The PSD eventually joined the EPP on November 1996.

Social Democratic leaders who have been closely involved in defining the party's strategy at the European level claim that the choice to move into the EPP had a much bigger impact for the party's international standing than one would immediately have comprehended. Accordingly, this switch was crucial to make it possible for José

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<sup>87</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. and Corbett et al. (2005): 83-84.

<sup>89</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted).

<sup>90</sup> Until the previous legislature, the Portuguese Christian-Democrats (CDS-PP) had been members of the EPP, and the leaders of the PSD were not very keen on mixing up with them, much in the same vein that the Socialist Party resisted their own entry in the PES. But the CDS had left the EPP, as a result of changes in the party direction at home which implied a strong posture against European integration which the EPP had found unacceptable.



Manuel Barroso - who later became the leader of the PSD in the opposition before his brief stint as Portugal's prime-minister – to build a strong international network and the kind of consensus and support that would eventually pave his way for the Presidency of the European Commission.<sup>91</sup> In short, choices of political affiliation in the EP can play a critical role in making it possible for national parties that have a relatively small representation in the supranational legislature to attain highly desired supranational office and secure disproportionate influence in EU politics.

### **The Institutionalization of Democratic Party Politics in the EU.**

Studies on the politics and institutions of the EU have long observed that domestic political cleavages strongly influence the outcomes of EP elections. As Reif and Schmitt have argued in their seminal work of 1980, “[a]s long as the national political systems decide most of what there is to be decided politically, and everything really important, European elections are additional national second order elections”.<sup>92</sup> This study suggests that after almost three decades of institutional development and despite the dramatic expansion of supranational legislative authority, national ideological cleavages and personal differences continue to play a determining role on the behaviour of elected representatives during their mandates in the supranational legislature. Without political alternatives and formal party structures originating at the European level, domestic politics dictates the access of individuals and political parties to European governance and this has a major impact on the make-up of the structures that are responsible for organizing the flow and contents of legislative production in the EU.

The analysis calls our attention for the fact that the three decades of legislative politics since the first direct elections to the EP in 1979 have been marked by high volatility of political group affiliation, uncharacteristic of developed democratic systems. The unstable pattern of group affiliation in the EP reminds us of the transient character of political allegiance in embryonic stages of party system development. Nascent parties suffer from low levels of institutionalization and weak organizational support, which combine with high levels of political uncertainty and fleeting allegiance,

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<sup>91</sup> Author's interviews (sources omitted). This claim agrees with Hix's remark that “party leaders' summits could potentially serve as vehicles for organizing the selection of candidates to the post of Commission president”. See Hix (2005): 192.

<sup>92</sup> Reif and Schmitt (1980): 3.

to limit their capacity to act as gate-keepers of governance.<sup>93</sup> Yet it takes less than a quarter of a century to have a consolidated party system operating in national settings where transitions to democracy are not subject to major setbacks. This has not happened in the supranational setting, though. Parliamentary groups in the EP lack the engine that drives the institutionalization of national party structures, namely the direct involvement in electoral contests and the control over the selection of the elites that fill up legislative and executive office. Rather, political competition in the EP relies on the behaviour of political actors that are recruited in the national sphere, by national political parties.

In line with recurring findings of comparative research on party behaviour, this study suggests the behaviour of political actors is conditioned (and socialized) by the institutional context in which they operate.<sup>94</sup> The rules that set the conditions on political group formation in the EP, the system of office allocation in its working structures, and the relative agenda-setting capability of EPGs add to the inter-institutional and cooperative modus of decision-making in the EU, to influence the behaviour of political actors in the EP. All that happens in the EP is intensely related to the workings of the other great institutional pillars of supranational politics and legislation. Without a thorough examination of the modus operandi of these different authority layers, one cannot apprehend the choices legislators make in the EP. On the other hand, national political culture mediates between the homogeneous institutional pressures to which legislators are subject and the way they adapt and respond to such pressures. Hence, one cannot understand patterns of political competition in the EP without a comprehensive knowledge of the history and party culture of the nations that are represented there.

By combining archival examination with copious enquires to the actors involved in decision-making in the EP, my research will contribute to advance our knowledge of the nature of political representation and of the prospects for democracy in the EU, as well as of the evolving nature of party politics in the EP. The analysis suggests that the concern of the EU founders with safeguarding individual autonomy and the separation of spheres of authority between a highly-trained corps of European bureaucrats and elected representatives in the EP and the Council has not prevented unintended forms of political manipulation: As national political delegations have mastered supranational legislative proceedings, so have effective national parties learned how to increase their

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<sup>93</sup> See Tavares de Almeida, Costa Pinto and Bermeo (2006).

<sup>94</sup> See Hall and Taylor (1996).

share of the spoils of (elected and non-elected) office in the EU and made the most advantageous usage of political group affiliation for expanding informational and policy resources.

Many national political leaders and party delegations in the EP are not keen on the development of effective European party organizations directly competing for the EP elections, because national party apparatuses would lose control over the kinds of payoffs that make them (and MEPs) switch political groups in the EP. That might explain why, after thirty years of democratic practice, EPGs maintain the character of (un)structured coalitions of national party delegations, formed after elections and subject to the will of domestic actors, rather than evolving towards autonomous political organizations with their own set of political leaders and directly subject to the scrutiny of voters.

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## Annex I

The following tasks have been executed so as to trace all movements by individuals and national parties between EPGs since the first direct elections in 1979 and until the end of the fifth legislature (2004) and so as to analyze the reasoning underlying such moves:

1. Mapping the itinerary of group affiliation of each and every MEP elected to the EP between 1979 and 2004. This information was researched on the archives of the EP, more concretely, on the records the EP publicizes on the parliamentary curriculum of all elected MEPs.<sup>95</sup>

2. Identification of changes of group affiliation in chronological order and for each legislature, indicating for each occurrence the name, nationality age and gender of the MEP, the group from which the MEP departed and the one to which the MEP moved, the national party affiliation of the MEP, the number of times the MEP has made a movement between groups.

3. Comparing the data hence collected with the figures compiled by the EP on the composition of each political group (number of MEPs per country and national party in each group) at the beginning and at the conclusion of each legislature.<sup>96</sup>

4. Conducting a battery of in-depth interviews with former MEPs and staff of the EP who have held office in different legislatures and in all Portuguese parties with representation in the EP. I showed each interviewee the data with the names, nationalities and national party affiliation of the MEPs who have switched political group affiliation. The data was ordered chronologically, by legislature, indicating the political group from which each MEP departed and the one to which the MEP moved to. I asked each interviewee if s/he can remember what drove their friends, colleagues or national parties (or themselves, if that was the case) to switch political group affiliation. I also asked them why, in their opinion, there was a dramatic rise in the rate of switching since the third legislature (i.e. after the 1989 elections to the EP) and why Italian and French MEPs are the leading actors in this show. I asked them if they would distinguish between any categories of switching behaviour and, if so, what the reasons for such differences are. More generally, I asked interviewees if they would like to talk about their experience in the processes of negotiation (for political group affiliation, voting, office allocation, committee staffing and report drafting) during their stay in the EP and, if possible, to compare and contrast such experience with their knowledge of national legislative politics.

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<sup>95</sup> See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/archive.do?language=EN> .

<sup>96</sup> Parlement Européen (2004a and 2004b).