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### Book section (Published Version)

**Original citation:**

Originally published in Hix, S.; Noury, A. and Roland, G., *Democratic politics in the European parliament*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 1-11. ISBN 0521694604

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Available in LSE Research Online: March 2012

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Democratic Politics in the European Parliament

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Book DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491955>

Online ISBN: 9780511491955

Hardback ISBN: 9780521872881

Paperback ISBN: 9780521694605

Chapter

Introduction pp. 1-11

Chapter DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491955.001>

Cambridge University Press

# Introduction

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'I have come to the conclusion that if a vote were to take place today, the outcome would not be positive for the European institutions or for the European project. In these circumstances I have decided not to submit a new Commission for your approval today. I need more time to look at this issue, to consult with the Council and to consult further with you, so that we can have strong support for the new Commission. . . . These last few days have demonstrated that the European Union is a strong political construction and that this Parliament, elected by popular vote across all our member states, has a vital role to play in the governance of Europe.' *José Manuel Durão Barroso, Commission President designate*

'Today this House on the river Rhine has grown in stature. Its will was tested, its will has prevailed. . . . Mr Barroso, you suggested yesterday that it was anti-European to vote against your Commission. . . . [but] today, Euroscepticism loses because the voice of democracy in Europe has risen by an octave and has made itself heard in every national capital and beyond.' *Graham Watson, Leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (the liberal party in the European Parliament)*

On 27 October 2004 the European Parliament refused to elect the new Commission, the European Union (EU) executive. There was no vote, as 10 minutes before the vote the Commission President designate, José Manuel Durão Barroso, announced that he was withdrawing his team of Commissioners. He simply did not have the numbers: the Party of European Socialists, the second largest party in the Parliament after the June 2004 elections, was backed in its opposition to the proposed Commission by the smaller liberal, green, and radical-left parties. This coalition, with a combined force of 371 out of the 732 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), was easily larger than the pro-Commission bloc of the European People's Party (EPP), with 268 seats, and the small conservative national party to its right, with 27 seats.

If it was so clear that the Parliament would reject the Commission, why did Barroso not withdraw his team earlier? It had been known for

some time that many liberal, socialist and green MEPs were unhappy with the nomination for the justice and home affairs portfolio of Rocco Buttiglione, a devout Catholic with ultra-conservative views on immigration, women's rights and homosexuality.

Barroso and the governments thought that they could railroad the Parliament. The governments expected the Parliament to support a Commission that was composed of politicians nominated by the twenty-five governments of the EU member states, as it had always done before. The Parliament does not have the right to reject individual Commissioners, but only to reject the whole team, and rejecting the whole team was thought of as the 'nuclear option'. Moreover, a cross-party coalition in the Parliament had voted for Barroso in July, and the proposed Commission contained a reasonable balance of conservatives, social democrats and liberals. Above all, Barroso did not place Buttiglione in another portfolio or force the Italian government to nominate someone else, because the governments were convinced that they could force 'their' MEPs to support the Commission.

This time, however, the European Parliament did not bend to the will of the governments. Only the night before the vote did it become clear that the overwhelming majority of MEPs would side with the leaders of their supranational parties in the Parliament rather than with their national party leaders, who were lobbying them heavily to support the Commission. It was now too late to reshuffle the team. Barroso hence decided that delaying the vote was the only option.

The media heralded this climb down by Barroso and the governments as a founding moment for democracy at the European level.<sup>1</sup> A coalition of supranational political parties was able to rally their troops in the Parliament to block the will of the supposedly sovereign governments of twenty-five nation-states. With cohesive parties that are independent from national government pressures, the formal powers of the European Parliament, to amend legislation and the budget and to elect and censure the Commission, were now a reality. Democratic politics had finally arrived in the EU.

Most commentators failed to realise, however, that parties and politics inside the European Parliament had been developing for some time.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Wolfgang Munchau in *The Financial Times* declared that it was 'a great day for European democracy' (28 October 2004, p. 17). Adrian Hamilton in *The Independent* wrote: 'Europe's leaders . . . cannot just continue taking the Union's institutions or its voters for granted . . . But the other great lesson of this week may well prove more beneficent in the long term . . . we are seeing in [the European Parliament's] manoeuvrings the beginnings of cross-national parties and Europe-wide politics' (28 October 2004, p. 41).

Since the first direct elections in 1979, beyond the attention of the mass media and the voters, and even off the radar screens of most of the EU's governments, the MEPs had gradually fashioned a well organised and highly competitive party system at the European level. What actually happened in October 2004 was that Europe's political class was finally forced to wake up to the new reality, where supranational party politics is a key aspect of policy-making in the emerging European polity.

What we do in this book is explain how this process developed: why MEPs chose to organise as supranational parties in the European Parliament in the first place, why these parties then evolved as powerful agenda-setting actors, why voting along supranational party lines gradually replaced voting along national party lines as the dominant form of behaviour in the Parliament, and ultimately how democratic politics emerged in the only directly elected institution at the European level.

We argue that increases in the power of the European Parliament have played a crucial role in shaping supranational parties in the European Parliament.<sup>2</sup> In a rather short space of time, a matter of decades rather than centuries, the European Parliament has evolved from an unelected consultative body to one of the most powerful elected assemblies in the world. Today, a large proportion of social and economic legislation applied in the member states of the EU is adopted at the European rather than the national level. The European Parliament not only has the power to amend and reject most EU laws but also influences the make-up and political direction of the body that initiates these laws: the European Commission. We argue that this increase in powers has made the European Parliament look increasingly like a normal parliament with cohesive parties who compete to dominate legislative outcomes and who form coalitions with other party groups for that purpose.

### **Summary of the argument and the main findings**

We analyse all of the nearly 15,000 recorded votes by individual MEPs (roll-call votes) in the first five elected European Parliaments, covering the 25-year period between 1979 and 2004. We show that voting in the European Parliament has become increasingly structured. Contrary to a widespread popular perception, this structure is based around the transnational European parties, and not nationality. A German conservative is more likely to vote with a Portuguese conservative than with

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of the explanations for the development of the powers of the European Parliament, see, in particular, Rittberger (2005).

a German social democrat or a German green. The voting behaviour of MEPs is thus based on party rather than nationality.

We build a theory to explain why this is the case in the European Parliament and also in other democracies. Our argument is based on the idea that in a democracy political conflicts (over redistribution, legislation, and so on) inside a parliament between representatives of different territorial units are best solved by federalism; in other words, by the appropriate devolution of power to the territorial units themselves, when these conflicts are important. The costs of devolution can then be minimised by keeping some powers centralised, such as jurisdiction over free trade and other areas (some key environmental competences, for example) where externalities between territorial units are important and would have a negative effect under decentralisation. We argue that it is more difficult and less efficient to organise the devolution of powers to socio-professional groups or economic sectors, or other functional interests in the economy, because this would entail potentially very negative economic consequences. If conflicts between territorial units can be solved more easily by devolution of powers than conflicts between socio-economic groups, then it follows quite naturally that the conflicts one ends up observing in national parliaments or federal legislatures are conflicts between socio-economic groups. This explains why parties form along the left–right axis and not along territorial lines. The theory applies to other advanced democracies as well as to the European Parliament.

We show that party cohesion has increased as the powers of the European Parliament have steadily increased. This suggests that higher stakes in decision-making have given MEPs with similar policy preferences the right incentives to solve their collective action problems inside the parliament, to form European-wide parties, to delegate increasing powers to the leaders of these organisations, to come up with unified positions to compete with the other European parties and to discipline their members into voting with the European party line. We show, for example, that cohesiveness of parties does not decrease in the long run even when the parties become more ideologically heterogeneous. However, higher fragmentation of the European parties is associated with a somewhat lower cohesion. In other words, when the European parties are composed mostly of many small national party delegations, they have a harder time to agree on a common position than when the European parties are composed of some large national delegations and some smaller ones.

The cohesion of European parties is quite surprising for several reasons. First, the degree of agenda control by the European party leaders

is more limited than in most national parliaments. Indeed, the European Commission has the exclusive right of initiative of nearly all EU legislation. Hence, legislation that comes on the floor of the European Parliament emanates from outside the parliament and not from a majority coalition inside the parliament. This inability to control the agenda should reduce party cohesion, as the leaders of the parties in the parliament cannot filter out proposals on which their members have divergent political opinions. We do find some evidence of lower cohesion due to the lack of agenda control – for example, the parties are slightly more cohesive on non-legislative issues, which are initiated internally in the parliament, than on legislative issues, which are initiated externally. However, we also find evidence suggesting that the European parties are able to overcome the lack of agenda control and vote cohesively. For example, we find that a European party is as cohesive in a vote on a ‘hostile amendment’ (where an amendment is proposed by another party on a bill where a member of the first party is the *rapporteur*) as in all other votes.

A second reason why cohesiveness should be lower in the European Parliament is that European parties do not have many instruments to discipline their members. They do not control the selection of candidates in European Parliament elections, as this is controlled by the national parties who make up the European parties. The European parties also have no control over the future career of MEPs, as it is again the national parties who control the allocation of ministerial portfolios and other jobs in the domestic arena and the selection of European Commissioners. The only instruments European parties have to discipline their members are the allocation of membership of legislative committees, rapporteurships and other positions of influence within the European Parliament. These instruments are relatively weak in terms of their disciplining power. They are definitely weaker than the ones available to parties in parliamentary regimes. However, to the extent that it is national parties that develop common positions in their European parties, it is national parties that play a key role in enforcing European party discipline. Individual MEPs nearly always vote with their national party delegation, independently of their own preferences. If one adds this to the fact that it is rare that a national party votes against its European party, one understands that national parties play a key role in determining the cohesion of the European parties. European parties are able to mobilise their members to participate more in votes that are expected to be closer and the outcome more competitive.

We consequently argue that the incentive to form and maintain powerful transnational party organisations is fundamentally related to

political competition inside the European Parliament to secure policy outcomes from the EU that are as close as possible to the ideological (left–right) preferences of the MEPs and national parties. It pays to be cohesive because this increases a party’s chance of being on the winning side of a vote and thus to influence its final outcome. It is thus natural that the increases in the powers of the European Parliament have led to a stronger and more democratic structure of politics in the European Parliament, based around left–right competition between genuine European parties.

### **Outline of the book**

Chapter 1 provides some essential background material on the development of the powers of and parties in the European Parliament. Chapters 2 and 3 then present the two basic elements of our theory: that political parties are essential for the functioning of democratic politics, and that these political organisations are more likely to emerge around ideological (left–right) divisions than territorial divisions.

The remainder of the book contains a series of empirical tests of our ideas, using a unique dataset of all roll-call votes in the European Parliament between 1979 and 2004. Chapter 4 starts the analysis by looking at the increasing participation of MEPs in roll-call votes and how participation varies with the powers of the European Parliament on the issue of the vote. We find growing levels of participation, more growth in more organised parties, and more participation where the Parliament has more power.

The next three chapters focus on partisan politics inside the Parliament. Chapter 5 looks at the ‘cohesion’ of the political parties. We introduce a cohesion index for measuring the cohesion of parties and national delegations. We show that while voting along transnational party lines has increased, voting along national lines has decreased. We then investigate the determinants of party cohesion, and find that the transnational parties are increasingly cohesive despite growing internal ideological and national diversity.

We then investigate two possible explanations of growing partisan politics in the European Parliament. Chapter 6 focuses on whether the parties in the European Parliament can enforce party discipline by controlling the agenda. We find that parties are more likely to be cohesive where they have some control over the agenda, on non-legislative resolutions, for example. Because agenda-setting rights are shared amongst the parties and because legislation is initiated externally by the Commission, this limited agenda control in the European Parliament

should lead to a lower cohesion than what we observe. We also show that parties are not less cohesive when facing hostile amendments on bills they sponsor. There is thus strong suggestive evidence that European political groups are able to discipline the voting behaviour of their members even when they do not control the agenda.

Chapter 7 focuses on whether national parties or the European political groups have more control on the MEPs. We find that MEPs are less likely to vote against their national parties than their European political groups. On balance, one-third of an MEP's voting behaviour is determined by his or her European political group and two-thirds is determined by his or her national party. Hence, growing transnational party politics in the European Parliament must be explained via national political parties. Despite continued policy differences between the member parties in each European political group, national parties have decided to form increasingly powerful transnational political parties and to endow these organisations with leadership and agenda-setting powers.

The next two chapters then look at the ideological structure of politics in the European Parliament, within and between the European parties. Chapter 8 focuses on coalition formation between the European parties. We look at the proportion of times the majority in each political group voted the same way as a majority in another political group. We show that coalitions in the European Parliament are increasingly along left–right lines. We also investigate the determinants of coalition formation, and find that the left–right ideological distance between any two political groups is the strongest predictor of whether they vote together in a given period and over time.

Chapter 9 then looks at the dimensions of voting in the Parliament. We apply a scaling method to the roll-call votes and find that the classic left–right conflict is the main dimension of voting in the European Parliament, between as well as inside the European parties. In other words, the further an MEP is from the average left–right preferences of his or her European party, the more likely he or she will vote differently from the other members of the party. We also find that, although less salient, the second dimension captures MEPs' preferences on European integration as well as conflicts between the parties in the European Parliament and the parties represented in the Council and Commission.

The next two chapters supplement the aggregate analyses in the previous empirical chapters with two detailed case studies. Chapter 10 investigates the parliament's executive-control powers, by analysing MEP behaviour in four key votes in the fourth parliament (1994–1999) on the investiture and censure of the Santer Commission. We find the

emergence of ‘government-opposition’ politics in the European Parliament: where the European parties who dominate the Commission tend to support the Commission, while the parties who are either not represented in the Commission or who are marginalised in this institution tend to oppose the Commission. From this perspective, at the start of the Barroso Commission in 2005, there was ‘unified government’ in the EU, where a centre-right coalition controlled the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council.

Chapter 11 turns to the parliament’s legislative powers, by investigating MEP behaviour in the fifth parliament (1999–2004) on the Takeover Directive. We find that even when the political stakes are extremely high, European parties and left–right preferences have a significant influence on MEP behaviour. Where an issue is highly salient for a particular member state in a vote, the MEPs from this state may vote together and against their European parties. However, because this only affects one or two member states in any vote (as was the case with German MEPs on the Takeover Directive), and because this only occurs in a small number of votes on any bill, European parties’ positions and left–right preferences of MEPs are the main determinants of legislative outcomes in the European Parliament.

Finally, Chapter 12 concludes by drawing out the implications of our argument and findings as well as discussing avenues for future research.

### **Lessons for political science and European politics**

The research presented in this book contains insights both for political science in general and for the sub-field of European politics. We spell them out briefly here but will come back to these issues throughout the book.

From the point of view of political science, our book contributes to the study of legislative behaviour in a comparative perspective. A first important question refers to the role of parties in democracies. Why do we generally observe party formation in democracies? Along what lines do they form? What is the effect of party systems in legislative decision-making? In Chapter 2, we provide a synthesis of these questions and provide a systematic analysis of the advantages of strong party systems in democracies relative to weak and fragmented party systems. We distinguish between the role of parties in solving collective action problems *external* and *internal* to the elected legislature. Collective action problems external to the legislature refer to electoral politics. Parties play a crucial role in mobilising the electorate to vote, a key question in political science. They also provide brand names with well-known and recognisable

platforms and a reputation that has value with voters and is therefore valuable to preserve, which enhances the reliability of politicians. Collective action problems internal to the legislature refer to legislative politics. Cohesive parties reduce the volatility and increase the predictability of legislative decisions. They allow for specialisation of parliamentarians in specific issues, which improves the quality of bills. They increase the efficiency of policy-making by screening out inefficient programmes that only bring benefits to small groups and costs to the general public. They also reduce the dimensionality of politics by creating correlations between the different dimensions of politics.

We contribute to the theory of parties by proposing a theory, briefly summarised above, for why parties in stable democracies form mainly along the left–right axis and not along territorial lines. Our theory is a complement to the ‘cleavage theory’ of Lipset and Rokkan. The cleavage theory does not ask why parties do not generally form on a territorial basis, except in countries where the borders and the territorial organisation of the state remain contested. In the context of the European Parliament, it is especially important to ask that question. On the other hand, the cleavage theory gives content to our notion that parties form on a functional and not on a territorial basis.

Political scientists have made much progress in recent years in trying to understand what causes voting behaviour inside elected legislatures. The European Parliament is an especially interesting institution to verify political science theories. With members from multiple nation-states, who are organised into national as well as transnational political parties, and with dramatic changes in the powers of the institution, the European Parliament is a unique laboratory for testing general theories of political parties and legislative behaviour. Most political science theories of parties and legislative politics have been developed in very particular institutional contexts, such as the US Congress or the British House of Commons. If these theories are truly generalisable, however, they should also hold in the European Parliament. Different theories highlight different causes of party cohesion. Many traditional theories emphasise the ‘carrots and sticks’ used by party leadership to discipline their representatives to toe the party line. One alternative theory, associated mostly with Keith Krehbiel, emphasises the preferences of the members of a party. Cohesion in voting is related to closeness in political and ideological preferences. Politicians sort themselves into parties on the basis of their preferences, and it is this sorting that fundamentally creates cohesion. Another theory, put forward in a recent book by Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins, emphasises the role of agenda control in explaining party cohesion. Parties use their control over the legislative

agenda to only put forward bills on which there is strong support from their party in the parliament.

In this book, we find that ideology alone cannot explain party cohesion. While European parties tend to form coalitions on the basis of ideological closeness, variation in cohesion within the European parties is not related to variation in ideological preferences in the European parties. Similarly, compared with other legislatures, European parties have relatively little control over the agenda. Nevertheless, cohesion is relatively strong. Overall, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the European parties are able to discipline their representatives in the European Parliament. However, our findings suggest that this happens mostly via the influence of national parties, which voluntarily choose to form European parties to promote their own policy goals, and then act collectively to secure these goals.

From the point of view of European politics, our work builds on the research of scholars in this field in the last decade. Scholars not only have been closely observing the functioning of the European Parliament, but have also collected samples of voting data to try to understand better the patterns of voting behaviour. By putting together and making available the complete population of roll-call data in the history of the European Parliament, we hope to contribute to bringing the level of research on the European Parliament to the level of existing research in American politics, where roll-call data from the whole history of the US Congress are used in a standard way to analyse issues of American politics.

Our research shows that the European Parliament cannot be understood as a unitary actor engaged in strategic games with the Commission and the Council. It shows how and why cohesion of the European parties has changed over time. It shows that left–right politics is the main dimension of contestation in the European Parliament, but a second dimension has also emerged, which relates to the speed and nature of European integration and battles between the European Parliament and the Council and Commission.

More broadly, the European Parliament is fundamentally important for the future of the EU and democratic governance in Europe. The EU was probably the most significant institutional innovation in the organisation of politics and the state anywhere in the world in the second half of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, there is growing concern about how viable this organisation is in the long term if it cannot be made more democratically accountable. The European Parliament is uniquely placed, as the only directly elected institution at the European level, to operate as the voice of the people in

the EU governance system. If democratic politics does not exist in the European Parliament, then the future of the EU may be bleak. However, if democratic politics has begun to emerge inside the European Parliament, in terms of being based around political parties that articulate the classic ideological divisions of democratic politics, then perhaps democracy beyond the nation-state is possible after all.

This is all the more important in the light of the constitutional fiasco triggered by the failed referendums on the European Constitution project in France and the Netherlands. Opposing arguments have been voiced that the Constitution went too far or not far enough in the European integration process. It is doubtful, however, that a new constitutional project would gain more support within the European population if it does not strengthen the democratic accountability of European institutions. The European Parliament is the only directly elected body in the EU. While being often criticised or vilified by some national politicians and national media, one should not forget that it is also the European institution that is most trusted by European citizens. In the Eurobarometer opinion poll survey in the Autumn of 2004, 57 per cent of respondents in the 25 EU member states said that they trusted the European Parliament, while only 52 per cent said that they trusted the European Commission, and 45 per cent said that they trusted the European Council – which is composed of the heads of government of member states. One can argue that these figures are relatively low, but our research shows that there are good reasons for citizens to trust the European Parliament! The European Parliament is a real parliament, with real parties and real democratic politics.