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Research Agenda Section

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POLITICAL GROUP COHESION AND ‘HURRAH’ VOTING IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Shaun Bowler and Gail McElroy

ABSTRACT This research note re-examines the evidence for the claim that political group cohesion has risen over time in the European Parliament. We first demonstrate that political group cohesion has always been high in the EP and one of the principal reasons for this is owing to the large number of lopsided votes that take place. We next demonstrate that on votes in which the main political groups are opposing, intra-party cohesion is lower than conventional wisdom would have us believe and, furthermore, cohesion on such votes has not systematically increased over time.

KEY WORDS Consensus politics; European Parliament; party cohesion; party discipline; roll call votes.

INTRODUCTION

In this short research note we re-examine the evidence underlying the belief, almost an article of faith, that political group cohesion has risen over time in the European Parliament (EP). We first demonstrate that political group cohesion was surprisingly high even in the Parliament’s earliest days, and that such cohesion is primarily a function of the number of lopsided votes that occur. We then demonstrate that on votes in which the main political groups are opposing, intra-party cohesion is nowhere near as high, nor has cohesion on such votes necessarily increased over time.

We argue that what we can learn about the EP from roll call analysis is heavily circumscribed and must, as other authors have argued, take account of the processes by which votes have been generated and the context of individual votes. Simply treating all roll call votes as equivalent is problematic; it is not necessarily the case that large datasets of votes are inherently more informative than carefully chosen sub-samples. We conclude that it is likely time to embrace other areas of EP research. We outline one broad area in particular – that of consensus politics – which has received considerable attention in other European Union (EU) institutions but relatively little attention within the EP. Following on from this broad topic we suggest some other areas that may offer deeper understanding of the dynamics of policy making in the European Parliament.

ROLL CALL ANALYSIS AND PARTY GROUP COHESION WITHIN THE EP

The study of party cohesion and its close relative, party discipline, have long fascinated political scientists (e.g., Bowler and Farrell 1999; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Krehbiel 1993; Ozbudun 1970). Some of the earliest examples of systematic quantitative work in the field focus on this very issue (e.g., Burton 1936; Rice 1928). Questions that have been addressed include: how party cohesion arises; why is it higher in some legislatures than others; what electoral and legislative institutions are most compatible with high levels of discipline and what are the best measures of cohesion. Scholars of the European Parliament have been no less captivated by the topic, especially as the challenges of building cohesive parties seem so demanding in this extremely diverse environment.

The European Parliament is a particularly testing environment in which to establish discipline. In addition to the problem of co-ordinating members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from dozens of distinct national parties within one group, the structure of the EP and the nature of party competition in European elections further conspire against cohesive political groups. For example, there is no government resting on a vote of no confidence in the EP, thereby eliminating the fear of early elections in the minds of wayward backbenchers. No single party controls the legislative agenda; a factor strongly associated with party unity in Congressional style assemblies (Cox 2000). The absence of an 'electoral connection' (Mayhew 1974), the 'valuelessness' of political group labels and the second-order nature (Reif and Schmitt 1980) of European elections means that incumbents' legislative performance is not a top priority for voters' at the polls. Finally, given that nomination procedures remain firmly in the hands of national parties, threats of deselection ring hollow in the ears of political group rebels. In short, many of the mechanisms identified in the previous literature as means by which party discipline can be produced are absent from the EP. Yet, the EP is home to several seemingly highly disciplined party groups. The puzzle of how this cohesion has been achieved lies at the core of many studies of the EP and party group cohesion and has long been a topic of research within the literature (e.g., Attina 1990; Faas 2003; Hix *et al* 2005, 2007; Kreppel 2002).

Not surprisingly, studies of the EP have employed the standard technique of roll call analysis in order to explore party group unity within the chamber. The resulting literature on party group cohesion may be characterized as sharing two broad conclusions. First, that party groups show 'surprisingly' high levels of cohesion (e.g., Faas 2003; Schmitt and Thomassen 2009) and, second, that levels of cohesion have been increasing over successive Parliaments (Hix *et al* 2005; McElroy 2008). There are some finer-grained analyses that embellish these two broad patterns. A series of papers, for example, has examined the validity of roll call analysis with the result that there are varying levels of caution associated with the selection problems underlying roll call analysis

(Carrubba *et al* 2008; Hug 2010). Taking a different focus, Jensen and Spoon (2010) caution that niche parties will exhibit different patterns of cohesion than the larger parties and so emphasize inter-party differences in levels of cohesion: a focus on the European People's Party (EPP) or Socialists and Democrats (S&D) may well provide a picture that does not apply EP wide. These other analyses to one side, it nevertheless seems to be the case that the broad-brush picture of the EP is that party group cohesion is high and increasing. Consequently the puzzle provided by the EP, the question at the heart of the much of the literature on the legislature, is that of trying to understand how party groups have come to thrive in such a harsh institutional context.

THE MYTH OF RISING GROUP COHESION:

In this section we re-examine all roll call votes in the European Parliament to demonstrate that political group cohesion was surprisingly high from the very start. Even in the pre-legislative assembly when parties had few disciplinary tools at their disposal, MEPs from the three main political groups (Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats) voted with their co-partisans exceptionally frequently. Party group cohesion does not rise significantly as the EP becomes more powerful. We do not witness discontinuities in cohesion scores, as one might expect, with the 'shocks' of new legislative powers (e.g., the enactment of the Single European Act) or following elections. Cohesion starts puzzlingly high and remains so across the 35 years we examine.

To demonstrate this, we examined all available roll call votes for the period September 1979 to May 2014, collated into six-month periods.¹ Cohesion scores are calculated for each of the main political groups that have been in existence since the first directly elected for each time interval (i.e., there are 10 observations per parliamentary session, per party, to give a total of 70 observations for each group). We utilized the two standard measures of internal political group agreement, the Rice Cohesion Index and the Index of Agreement (AI) favoured by Hix *et al* (2007), which takes account of abstentions. Not surprisingly, the two measures closely track each other, though the AI index inflates cohesion scores slightly and tends to be flatter in practice.

Figure 1 plots the trend in cohesion scores over time and demonstrates that both Rice and AI scores for the three main political groups have remained stable and high throughout the entire 1979–2014 period. The Socialists reveal a slight upward movement, but high levels of cohesion for all groups were established by the mid-1980s, from whence they have been rather static. Despite the huge changes in both the EP and the European Union (EU) during the time period, the mean AI and Rice scores for the EPP, for instance, are exactly the same in 2013 as 1983.

While the basic point of surprisingly high cohesion (given the context) remains, there simply is little support in roll call data for the contention that party cohesion has risen over time in the EP: the party groups have always been cohesive – there is no significant trend upwards.

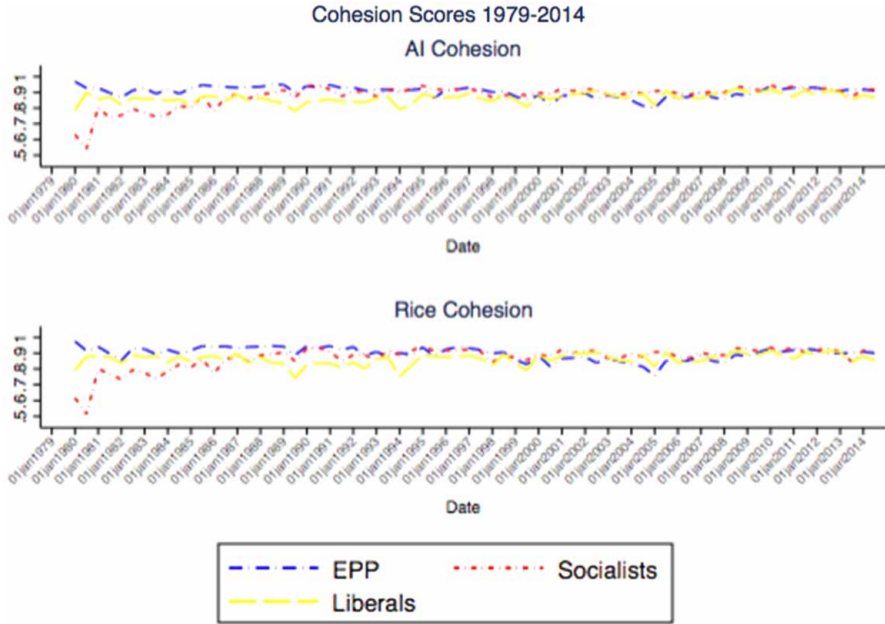


Figure 1 Cohesion scores over time

WHY ARE COHESION SCORES SO HIGH TO BEGIN WITH?

While we have demonstrated that the conventional wisdom that cohesion has risen over time is inaccurate, the puzzle of why cohesion is (and always was) so high remains. In this section, we explore this issue further by focusing on the sample of votes typically used to calculate Rice and AI scores.

When voting is (almost) unanimous in a chamber, by definition, voting unity scores will be high for any individual subset of representatives (even a randomly chosen group). If all MEPs across all parties are voting together, internal group cohesion has little meaning. In the European Parliament, the number of such lopsided votes is very high and this largely accounts for cohesion scores that are in excess of those witnessed in, for instance, the US Congress, where such ‘hurrah’ votes are more rare (Gaines and Sala 2000). In the European Parliament there are large numbers of roll call votes on issues that are non-legislative and uncontroversial (e.g., motions for resolution condemning human rights abuses in country X) and there are many legislative votes in which consensus has already been achieved, particularly amongst the main political groups. However, the extent of these lopsided votes is worth highlighting.

Taking all votes in each legislative session, we first examine what is the proportion of total votes for which all (or almost all) MEPs in the chamber vote together. To arrive at this figure we use a measure of vote closeness from

Carey (2008), where the degree of consensus on an individual vote is defined as follows:

$$CLOSEVOTE = (1 / Threshold * |Threshold - \%Ayes|) \quad (1)$$

Here, *Threshold* is the percentage of votes required to pass the bill (e.g., if it is a simple majority this figure is 50 per cent but it can be higher where absolute or qualified majorities are needed) and *Ayes* is simply the percentage voting ‘Yes’. Using this simple equation reveals that for unanimous votes *CLOSEVOTE* equals 0. However, where the winning margin is very small and the chamber is divided *CLOSEVOTE* approaches 1.

Figure 2 displays a histogram of this measure of lop-sidedness for all seven parliamentary sessions (1979–2014). Specifically, it examines how often all, or nearly all, MEPs from the three main parties vote together. The most striking element of this figure is how frequently the three main political groups vote together. These groups not only have high internal levels of cohesion, they also have surprisingly high levels of agreement with each other. The modal *CLOSEVOTE* figure in all seven Parliaments is 0. In EP7, there was absolutely no division amongst the voting members of the three main groups on 36 per cent of all roll call votes. Furthermore, for these groups, 87 per cent of roll call votes had a margin of passage of at least 80 per cent in EP7.

The standard advice in the party cohesion literature is to only include all votes in which at least 25 per cent of members oppose the winning side (Mainwaring

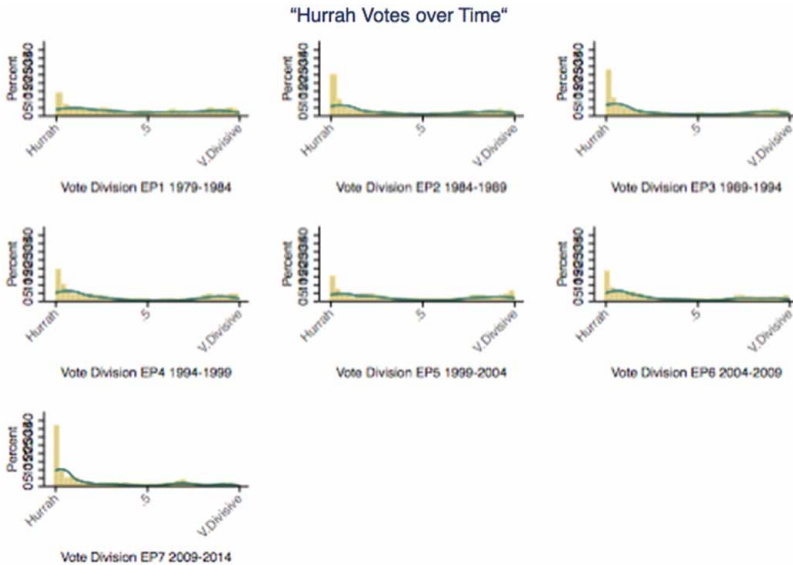


Figure 2 Closeness and cohesion for the main political groups

and Liñán 1997) or where the leadership of the two main parties oppose each other (Cox and McCubbins 1993). But in the case of the EP, this results in such a small number of the overall votes on which to base cohesion scores that one has to question the meaning of cohesion itself in this setting.

This vote divisiveness information does, however, offer another intriguing window onto political cohesion, whether it is real or whether it has changed over time. If party cohesion is real and rising in the EP, we would expect it to be strongly related to vote closeness. Specifically we would expect to witness a U-shaped relationship between the closeness of a vote and the levels of party cohesion on the vote. By definition, ‘hurrah’ votes will mean all parties have high cohesion scores, but cohesion should decline as vote closeness decreases up to a point but rise again where votes are very divisive between parties, if parties are disciplined. That is, we would expect where the winning majority is narrow that party members toe the line.

In Figure 3 we plot Rice scores against closeness scores for the three main groups for all votes by Parliament (using a smoothed quadratic fit plot). By and large, Rice scores decline as voting divisiveness increases, but then begin to rise as the votes become very close, but the patterns that emerge are very varied and it is not the case that on close votes the political groups are highly cohesive. Interestingly, there is no evidence that close votes are more cohesive in EP7 compared with earlier legislative sessions. If anything, very divisive votes show lower degrees of intra-party cohesion in EP7. Also, from Figure 3, it is clear that the Liberals struggle more than the other two parties to get

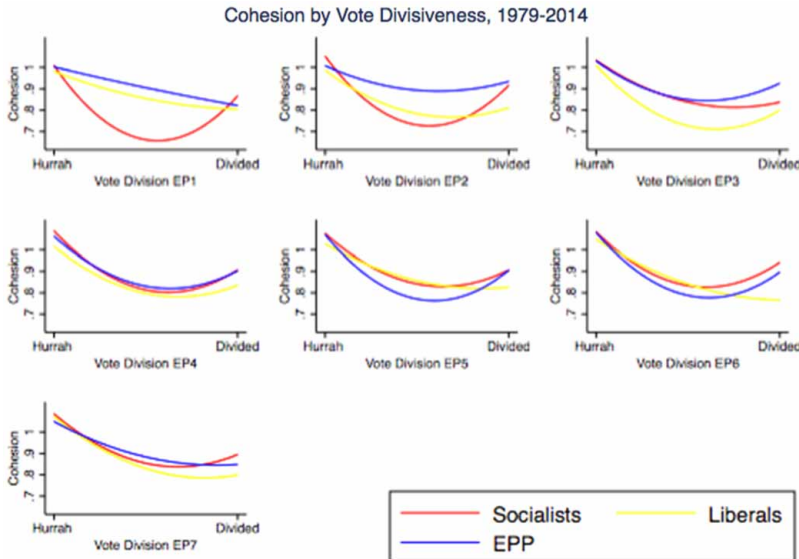


Figure 3 Cohesion and vote divisiveness

their members to vote together on divisive votes, and this has not changed with the passage of time.

The big takeaway from [Figures 2 and 3](#) is surely that the divisions and partisan battles amongst the main three political groups have been settled long before bills get to the floor of the house in Strasbourg. How the three main parties are able to manage this degree of consensus is clearly a question of some interest, especially given they have managed to do so for a long period of time. Even the large exogenous shocks of successive enlargements and several major revisions to the Treaties are not seen to have had much effect on party control. Also, it is worth emphasizing that, for the handful of bills which cannot be agreed upon beforehand, the main political groups are not as cohesive as global Rice and AI figures would have us believe.

DISCUSSION: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK ON THE EP

Roll call data themselves show the limitations of roll call analysis in the context of the European Parliament. This in turn means that future work on the EP should pay less attention to roll calls themselves and more attention to other factors.

Plainly, we believe that greater examination of how consensus may be built is a key topic of research. These patterns of consensus have been well documented in other EU institutions (e.g., Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace [2006], Heisenberg [2005] and Mattila and Lane [2001] find this in the Council), but have less frequently been addressed in the EP (for notable exceptions see Ringe [2010] and Settembri and Neuhold [2009]). We currently have little understanding of how those high levels of consensus within or between groups may be built or maintained within the EP, yet consensus is clearly a hallmark of the EP (and the EU generally). The organizations, norms or other institutions that support such a process are not well-understood. Part of this may stem from the Anglo-American skew in studies of legislatures. Actors familiar from European experience – notably rapporteurs – do not feature in Westminster or Washington life and, hence, do not feature in United Kingdom (UK) or United States (US) models. But institutions such as the rapporteur would seem to be one mechanism by which consensus is built and maintained. Other features of EP life – the Bureau and party group co-ordinators – are also ones that either do not appear in the US/UK or appear in different forms. Arguably, it is the Bundestag and not Parliament or Congress that provides a model for the EP, as it does in terms of institutional structure (Bowler and Farrell 1999). An alternative, of course, is to move upstream in the policy-making process to examine the very early stages of policy formulation rather than the downstream final point of roll call.

If we take as our starting point the stylized fact that the EP is dominated by consensus then this does generate a number of quite specific research topics.

First, and most narrowly, if the 'Big Three' have indeed decided most things in the chamber between them, then it should not be surprising that the smaller groups within the chamber have to pursue different strategies. Jensen and Spoon's (2010) finding, then, makes sense, and we should see other distinct ways in which the smaller party groups operate. In some sense, the lower case 'o' opposition of the EP is found within these smaller party groups. The smaller groups seem not to be invited to the party, as the Big Three make deals. How these groups respond in terms of parliamentary behaviour to what seems to be a near permanent exclusion from decisions is plainly a topic of interest. These groups therefore offer a case of minority political action within a legislative setting.

Second, this lack of scope for MEPs may, in part, explain the high turnover rates, especially in the smaller groups. On the face of it this can be added to the laundry list of factors that are stacked against the EP institutionalizing and developing strong party groups. Why and how politicians choose the EP as a career path remains something of a mystery. There would seem to be scope for greater study of legislative careers, possibly along the lines of the earlier work of legislative scholars. Such studies would, in turn, inform models of representation.

Related to the question of turnover is abstention. How MEPs do *not* vote may be as consequential as how they vote when they do – especially given that most roll calls inside the Chamber seem more consistent with an interpretation of being stitch ups rather than being exercises in individual legislative will. There are different reasons for examining the two types of 'non-voting' – abstention and absenteeism. Abstention could quite easily be folded into a model of individual MEP level rationality: especially when abstentions can be counted as Nays (Hix *et al.*'s [2005] rationale for counting abstentions within the AI speaks exactly to this point). Absenteeism is more interesting, since it speaks to the institutionalizations of the legislature as a whole and, while there probably is an individual level model of motivations to absent oneself from the chamber, it is not clear that the makings of such a model are present in existing literatures. Broader still is the general question of non-decision and the power to keep divisive issues off the agenda. The point of work by Carrubba *et al.* (2008), Hug (2010) and others is to highlight the endogeneity of roll calls in general. Some roll calls in the EP are essentially triggered by the actions of the Council and Commission, but to the extent that the EP leadership of the Big Three, or perhaps more precisely the Big Two, can shape the agenda of the Parliament, then there is scope for them to squash controversial or divisive roll calls early on in the process. Again, this pushes the point of study of the EP further 'upstream' from roll call itself.

Third, the patterns of consensus do raise the question of the role of the representational model of party groups in the EP. Again, the consensus suggests that this is not a model of representation founded in 'delegate' terms. There is little here to suppose that party groups are representing electoral constituencies in the sense of Mayhew's (1974) model. Otherwise, we would have to

believe that the three main party groups have faced the same constituency pressures Europe wide for a generation. Who or what the representational goals of party groups are is therefore worth some more thought. Similarly, the persistently high degree of consensus suggests a shift away from a level of analysis focusing on the individual level MEP. Quite bluntly, the individual MEP seems to have little freedom of manoeuvre if the votes are 'hurrah' votes. What it means is that the goals of party groups would seem to trump the goals of individual MEPs and that an individual level analysis of vote behaviour is consequently limited.

In short, once the central 'fact' to be explained becomes the overwhelming consensus with the EP, then a number of consequences follow. Consensus becomes a topic of interest in itself. The mode of analysis shifts away from roll calls and towards some different kinds of data – possibly to more interview and case study analysis. Not only that, but it generates a series of quite specific newer research questions – turnover, career choice, minority political action and a new 'ideal type' in the Bundestag.

To be sure, not all of these topics and approaches are absent from the literature on the EP. After the US Congress and UK Parliament, the EP probably constitutes the third biggest literature in political science on a single legislative body. It would be surprising indeed if the topics we have identified were absent from such a large literature. Indeed, we have identified some of the examples where scholars have explored some of these issues. In a way, too, there is not an immediate rallying cry here to a single broad-brush theme other than 'enough already with roll call'. Still, moving away from roll call analysis may well imply there is a value in some different tools of analysis as much as different topics of study.

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NOTES

- 1 We also analysed different subsets of votes, e.g., collated in three months, one month, and the results remain unchanged.

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