



# The Political Groups as Organisations: The Institutionalisation of Transnational Party Politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Political groups in the European Parliament (EP) are formed on the bases of the ‘political affinity’ of members (MEPs) and national parties. This is enshrined in art. 33 of the EP Rules of Procedure (EPRoP) and, albeit interpreted in a loose sense, it means that ideology is more important than nationality when it comes to group formation (see Ahrens & Kantola in this volume). A theoretically rich and empirically sophisticated stream of research has also demonstrated that political groups mainly compete on the left–right dimension and are highly cohesive. All in all, the EP and its politics are authoritatively described as ‘normal’ (Hix et al., 2007).

Despite all the recent advances made by research on the EP (cf. Brack & Costa, 2018; Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2019), however, there are

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still some areas which have attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. Prominent among them is the internal organisation of the groups. In the chapter dedicated to the organisation of the political groups, in her ground-breaking book on the institutionalisation of the EP, Amie Kreppel noted that this topic was ‘perhaps the least studied aspect of the European Parliament’ (2002, p. 177). Twenty years later, the internal organisational development of the groups remains a largely neglected topic. True, the literature has placed its focus on the capacity (or lack thereof) of the groups to control the internal allocation of positions such as rapporteurs, coordinators or committee chairs (most recently Chiou et al., 2020; Chiru, 2020; Obholzer et al., 2019). However, there is normally little consideration for the groups’ internal rules (but see Bressanelli, 2014).

This is an unfortunate situation, as a more thorough understanding of the organisation of the groups has the potential to cast further light on the internal functioning of the EP. Thus, by addressing the following questions, this chapter aims to bring party organisations back into the picture. Have the political groups institutionalised—i.e. become stronger as organisations—in the four decades that have passed since the introduction of direct elections? If so, is their organisational structure an important factor explaining their (high) voting cohesion? To what extent has the transnational leadership of the groups managed to ‘free’ itself from the control of the national member parties?

Empirically, this chapter focuses on the centre-right Group of the European People’s Party (EPP) and the centre-left Group of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D).<sup>1</sup> Together, they have always obtained an absolute majority of parliamentary seats (until 2019; cfr. Bardi, 2020, p. 264) and existed since the creation of the Common Assembly—the forerunner of the EP—in the 1950s. The chapter relies on their ‘official stories’ (Katz & Mair, 1992); primary sources retrieved from party archives; interviews with senior administrators and secondary sources, like authoritative historical narratives of their organisational development (e.g. Fitzmaurice, 1975; Fontaine, 2009).

The in-depth investigation of the groups’ Rules of Procedure, from the period preceding direct elections (1979) to the start of the ninth legislature (2019), integrated by an empirical analysis of the allocation of committee chairs and legislative reports between 2009 and 2019, reveals several important aspects. The structural institutionalisation of the EPP and the S&D has been quite impressive, and their current rules have little resemblance with those in place in the ‘old days’, when the EP was a

talking-shop with few legislative competences. At the same time, however, the national member parties—or ‘national delegations’, as they are also known—still play a key role, exerting more control on their MEPs than the group leadership.

### EXPLAINING THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF THE POLITICAL GROUPS

The political groups in the EP are not the parliamentary arms of powerful extra-parliamentary organisations, as it is normally the case in domestic politics. In the EU, the creation of the transnational groups in the Common Assembly in 1957 pre-dated by a couple of decades the set-up of the extra-parliamentary parties. With the institutionalisation of ‘political parties at the EU level’ in the Treaty of Maastricht (art. 138) and, later, the provision of EU-funding through Regulation (EC) 2004/2003, the extra-parliamentary parties consolidated their organisation. However, despite the Treaty of Lisbon and its provisions on ‘representative democracy’ (art. 10), they remain relatively weak compared to the parliamentary groups.

The political groups do not receive detailed policy instructions from the extra-parliamentary parties and are, therefore, rather independent in the pursuit of their policy goals. Moreover, the absence of a clear electoral mandate, given the ‘second-order’ nature of the EP elections, makes them relatively free to internally decide on their policy objectives. As Richard Rose (2013) put it, the political groups are largely ‘introverted’ organisations, whose behaviour is largely shaped by rules and considerations internal to the parliamentary institution. Following the legislative empowerment of the EP, the political groups have come to play a key role in organising the law-making process.

They have a similar organisational structure. There is a plenary organ, where all members are represented, and final decisions are taken. More restricted organs are the bureau, where the executive leaders of the group, the leaders of the national delegations, the chairs of the committees and the coordinators may be represented, and the presidency, composed by the chair/president and a number of vice-chairpersons. A secretariat supports the groups’ activities.

This chapter studies the *institutionalisation* of political groups. According to influential definitions, (structural) institutionalisation indicates the ‘process through which an organisation ‘solidifies’ (Panebianco,

1988, p. 49) or ‘acquires stability’ (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). Building on ‘discrete’ approaches, it is argued here that the key factor for party organisational change, and institutionalisation, is ‘external shocks’. The causal chain starts with an external event, impacting upon the party ‘primary goal’. The leadership needs then to re-evaluate the capacity of the party to effectively pursue its key goal(s). Finally, an organisational reform is implemented to guarantee the party’s performance in the new circumstances (Harmel & Janda, 1994; cf. also Harmel, 2002).

Such a ‘discrete’ approach has been used to explain changes in the organisation of the political groups. Three main environmental factors have been identified (Bartolini, 2005; Bressanelli, 2014; Kreppel, 2002): (i) the introduction of direct elections in 1979, leading to a large growth in membership and introducing an electoral connection, albeit weak; (ii) the extension of the EP legislative powers, which started with the Single European Act (1987) and continued through successive rounds of treaty revision in the 1990s and 2000s; and (iii) the mega-enlargement of the EU towards Central and Eastern Europe, concluded in two waves between 2004 and 2007.

Such external ‘shocks’ could be used by the leadership to consolidate the organisational structure of the political groups and enhance their control over the rank-and-file members. Building on the literature on the US Congress, Kreppel (2002) argued that, if the groups could afford defections when voting in the EP was largely un-consequential, this was no longer acceptable as the EP obtained legislative powers through the cooperation and, especially, the codecision procedure. Therefore, she expected the group leadership to make use of the instruments at its disposal—e.g. the allocation of positions in the EP and within the group; the assignment of legislative reports—to boost cohesion, rewarding the loyal members and punishing the rebels.

The expansion of membership has been identified as another important trigger for the institutionalisation of the groups. Samuel Huntington once noted: ‘rapid or substantial expansions in the membership of an organisation [...] tend to weaken coherence’ (1968, p. 21), while Panebianco observed: ‘growth in size is correlated with growth in internal division of labour, multiplication of hierarchical levels, and bureaucratic development’ (1988, p. 83). As the ‘mega-enlargement’ represented a huge expansion in membership of the groups, both an increase in their complexity and a shift of decision-making power towards the group leadership were expected (Bressanelli, 2014).

The further empowerment of the EP with the Treaty of Lisbon could be interpreted as another environmental factor triggering organisational reform and the institutionalisation of the groups. With an increased legislative workload, further organisation changes could be implemented to preserve their smooth functioning and the capacity of the EP to perform as a ‘mature’ legislative chamber in the EU (effectively) bicameral system.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to map the organisational development of the political groups, this chapter uses several indicators suggested by the comparative literature on party change and already employed by the existing research (see Table 3.1; cf. Bressanelli, 2014, pp. 64–66).

*Complexity* is the first element of the structural dimension of institutionalisation. A basic indicator to capture how complex the organisation of the groups has become simply is the counting of the number of rules included in their Rules of Procedure (RoP) (Hix & Lord, 1997, pp. 100–110; Kreppel, 2002, pp. 192–198). Clearly, this measure only provides information on formal changes, and it is therefore of limited validity when much of the group activity is carried out informally. Yet, as complex organisations cannot be entirely based on informal norms, it is a rough measure of the degree of organisational development.

*Differentiation* is the second aspect relating to changes in the groups’ organisation. There are two types of differentiation. *Horizontal* differentiation is about the increased differentiation in the party organs and roles within the same hierarchical level. The related concept of ‘specialisation’

**Table 3.1** Concepts and indicators of institutionalisation

<i>Concept: change in...</i>	<i>Empirical indicators: change in...</i>
Complexity	Number of rules in the RoP
Differentiation	Party organs and roles within the same hierarchical level ( <i>horizontal</i> )
	Institutional layers between hierarchical levels ( <i>vertical</i> )
Autonomy	Decision-making authority shifting upwards ( <i>centralisation</i> )
	Voting rules: from unanimity to majority
	Representation rules: national representation no longer required in executive organs

may also be employed to capture it. *Vertical* differentiation refers, instead, to the creation of additional institutional layers within the organisation (Harmel, 2002, p. 138).

A third important component of structural institutionalisation is decision-making *autonomy*, which should be understood vis-à-vis the national member parties: more autonomous political groups are thus more European groups (cf. Bardi, 1996). Several indicators can be used to observe (changes on) it. First, *centralisation of power*, with decision-making authority shifting from plenary to apical organs; second, changes in *decision-making rules*, with unanimity replaced by majority voting; third, a change in the *rules of representation*, with national representation no longer required in the executive organs of the groups.

This chapter places its empirical focus on two political groups: the EPP and the S&D. The case selection stems out of the need to make a longitudinal analysis of a process (of institutionalisation). While there were seven political groups at the start of the ninth EP in 2019,<sup>2</sup> the ‘core’ of the EP party system is based on the EPP and the S&D, which have been the largest and most influential groups throughout the history of the EP. More pragmatically, the choice to focus on the EPP and the S&D allows one to build on previous research on the organisation of the groups and reconsider its findings in the light of the new evidence.

In terms of data, a longitudinal study of the development of the groups—from the period preceding direct elections (1979) to the start of the ninth legislature in 2019—presents some challenges. As there is very little consistent data available, it is often difficult to pin a specific organisational change down on a time. In addition, much of what is happening within the groups takes place informally—albeit, arguably, increasingly less so—thus limiting the value of what can be inferred from the groups’ ‘official stories’ (Katz & Mair, 1992). Thus, while this chapter relies on the groups’ RoP, it triangulates them with other official documents (e.g. handbooks), historical accounts of their development and original interviews with senior administrators, conducted in the context of a project on the impact of the Central and Eastern enlargement (cf. Bressanelli, 2014, pp. 65–66, 174).

The in-depth, longitudinal analysis of the organisational development of the groups in the section below is followed by an analysis of the allocation of committee chairs and legislative reports post-Lisbon. To assess if the EPP and the S&D punish the disloyal/assent members and reward the loyal/present MEPs, I have collected information on the members

of the EPP and the S&D groups in the 7th and the 8th EP (2009–2019). Specifically, I have retrieved data on membership of the groups and committee chairs from the official EP website, data on voting loyalty from [Votewatch.eu](http://Votewatch.eu) and data on legislative/OLP reports from Reh et al. (2020).

## THE ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL GROUPS

This section identifies three key phases of development of the political groups, which should serve as broad heuristic devices to understand changes often happening in a piecemeal or informal manner. In the first period (1979–2003), following the introduction of direct elections, a (weak) electoral connection was established, and membership of the groups expanded. Through this period, the EP became a legislative actor. In the second phase (2004–2009), the political groups became larger and more diverse organisations as a result of Central and Eastern enlargement. In the third phase, following the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, the EP was placed on a par with the Council in what was, effectively, a bicameral legislature.

### *The Elected Parliament: From Talking-Shop to Co-Legislator*

Kreppel (2002) analysed the organisational changes undertaken by the EPP and (back then) the PES in response to significant changes to their institutional environment. Before direct elections, she observed that they were very collegial organisations. In both the EPP and the PES, the most important political organ was the group plenary, which was simply called ‘Group’ by the PES. According to the RoP of the EPP (1975), the plenary was responsible, among other things, for all nominations to the EP top jobs and in committees, the allocation of committee membership and the election of the group’s bureau and presidency. The bureau was primarily the group secretariat and was in charge of preparing the decisions and overseeing their implementation. The presidency—back then known as ‘Chairman’s office’ (*sic*)—was in charge of the group’s external representation. The 1977 version of the RoP of the PES describes a similar organisational structure, even if it only listed, among the group organs, the group and the bureau. A scholar of the early transnational groups noted that ‘the bureau of the Group is an administrative and

preparatory organ' even if, interestingly, he added: 'it is also for consideration that [its] role should be strengthened so as to place it in a better position to coordinate the political activities of the group' (Fitzmaurice, 1975, p. 89).

The RoP described rather basic organisations. The 1975 version of the RoP of the EPP included 32 rules organised into nine chapters; the 1977 version of the RoP of the PES was made by 21 rules in eight chapters. They did not make specific mention of the decision-making rules either. There were a few exceptions, such as the expulsion of members from the EPP group, requiring a two-thirds majority, but otherwise the groups preferred to decide by consensus. Representation of each and every national delegation was guaranteed by the EPP in both the bureau and the chairman's office, and by the PES in the bureau.

The 1975 version of the rules of the EPP included some instruments to control the activity of its members and 'directly hinder individual action' (Kreppel, 2002, p. 194), such as the duty for MEPs to inform the chairman's office, who had the power to delay action in order to seek consultation with the plenary. Centralisation remained, however, very limited. The rules of the EPP were more detailed than those of the PES, which did not include any specific provision to monitor members, except informing the presidency when members wished to intervene in their own name in the plenary debates.<sup>3</sup> The RoP of the PES even included a 'morality clause', allowing MEPs to vote against the group for 'grave political motives' (Rule 7). This clause was originally meant for individuals, but it became used mainly by the national delegations (Kreppel, 2002, p. 196).<sup>4</sup>

It was the organisational adaptation of the groups to the legislative empowerment of the EP to make the groups more complex organisations. In 1989, the RoP of the EPP listed 34 rules in eight chapters, while in 1986 the RoP of the PES were significantly expanded to 48 articles, organised in eight chapters.<sup>5</sup>

In the EPP, horizontal and vertical differentiation was observed with the official recognition of the group coordinators in committees and of the standing working groups—which, bringing together the MEPs of a number of committees, prepare the group meetings and decide on its political line—'with a view to more effective preparation of the Group's deliberations' (Rule 17, 1989).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the chairpersons of the standing working groups became members of the bureau (Rule 10, 1989). In 1989, the RoP set at five the number of vice-chairs, a number



that was raised to six in 1994 and eight in 1996 (Rule 12), reflecting the expansion of the group, but breaking away from the principle of national representation, with each and every national delegation represented. Simple majority was also recognised as the standard decision-making rule of the group (Rule 20, 1989).

Although not explicitly mentioned by the Rules, a new function for monitoring the members' participation—the 'chief whip'—was introduced in this period and assigned to a vice-chair. As a former senior member of the EPP, secretariat explained: 'each national delegation had to appoint a whip. This network of whips had to monitor member's attendance, reporting on it to the federal whip, and to collect information, passing this on to the presidency and the heads of delegation' (Fontaine, 2009, p. 273). Incidentally, this also shows that the rules provide a non-complete picture about the organisation of the political groups.<sup>7</sup>

The PES also adapted to the new legislative functions attributed to the EP. Both the horizontal differentiation and the vertical differentiation of the group grew: the new rules spelt out the functions of coordinators in some detail, including their power of 'overseeing the allocation of reports' (Rule 35 in the 1986 version of the RoP), and included 'temporary' or 'permanent' working groups.

There was a centralisation of decision-making power, with some empowerment of the bureau (e.g. appointing replacements in committees) and the recognition of simple majority as the group's standard decision-making rule. Some limited monitoring provisions were added, such as the need for members to transmit written questions to the group. The vice-presidents were attributed specific portfolios—allocated by the bureau—'working closely' with the coordinators, when needed, in the performance of their roles (Rule 17).<sup>8</sup> Albeit absent in the rules, a whip list, ranking votes according to their importance, was also established, and it was mentioned in the PES Guide for Procedure (1995). Yet, all national delegations were still represented in the bureau, with an additional seat awarded to those with at least 11 members, and members were allowed to introduce their own amendments.

### *The Enlarged Parliament: Legislative Empowerment and More Diversity*

With the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), the legislative empowerment of the EP continued, while the Treaty of Nice (2001) prepared the Union

to its ‘mega’ enlargement. In two waves, twelve new countries joined the EU, almost doubling its membership. With the exception of Malta and Cyprus, all new members were post-communist countries. Expansion was not only extraordinary in terms of sheer numbers, but also in terms of diversity, as most of the new members had distinct national histories and cultures compared to the ‘old’, West European countries.

The major political groups were expecting a large expansion. Research on the impact of enlargement has shown that the groups could not remain passive when facing such a potentially disruptive ‘shock’. Enlargement was therefore likely to trigger broad organisational change, with the group leadership taking the chance to centralise decision-making power and strengthen its control over the members (Bressanelli, 2014).<sup>9</sup>

For the EPP, the process of expansion beyond the boundaries of the ‘old’ Christian-Democratic family continued. With membership of the Italian Forza Europa/Forza Italia, and the alliance with the British and the Danish conservatives, the EPP had undergone both a significant expansion in terms of numbers, becoming the largest group in the EP since the 1994 elections, and internal diversity, which was further accentuated by the 2004/7 enlargement.

If the RoP of the EPP had remained untouched for ten years—from 1979 to 1989—through the 1990s they were amended four times. *Prima facie*, changes in complexity appear to be very limited: the RoP had 34 articles in 1989 and 35 in 1999. However, the substantive changes were significant.

First of all, the group became a more autonomous organisation. What used to be known as the ‘Chairman’s office’ (Rule 12, 1996) became the group’s ‘Presidency’ (Rule 13, 1999). This was far more than a nominal change, though. The new rules made clear that the vice-presidents were also responsible to chair the standing working groups and, therefore, of coordinating the political work of the group. As a senior administrator of the EPP recalls: ‘before 1999 the presidency was a sort of honorific body [...] it was the senior ‘politburo’. It was decided in 1999 that we needed to strengthen our presidency’ (Interview #5). Interestingly, the new political role of the presidency, consisting of the chairman (*sic*), a maximum of eight vice-chairs and the treasurer, bringing to a centralisation of decision-making power in the group, had to be counter-balanced by a new organ. This was the ‘conference of the group presidency and heads of the national delegations’, which was expected to meet ‘regularly’ and ‘prepare decisions of major importance for the political strategy

of the group' (Rule 12, 1999). The new rules of the EPP(-ED), adopted in March and amended in July 2004, were longer—being constituted by 37 rather than 34 articles—but also quite similar to the previous version. They changed the composition of the bureau, now including the group coordinator within each standing committee, possibly reflecting the need to coordinate more closely the policy-making process within the group. What was then simply called 'the Group Presidency and Heads of National Delegations' was expected to meet 'at least once a month' to discuss key strategic issues and, it was added, 'questions of special internal relevance' (Rule 13, 2004). There was also an expansion in the number of vice-presidents (as they were finally called in 2004), whose number was set to a maximum of eight in 1999, nine in 2004 and 10 in 2006. Notwithstanding the large expansion in the number of national delegations, therefore, the presidency remained a rather small body.<sup>10</sup>

The PES approved a significant reform of its RoP in 2003. The nature of the changes is not dissimilar from those implemented by the EPP. There was a further, if limited, increase in complexity with 52, rather than 48, rules. Further centralisation was observed with the empowerment of the bureau—note that there is no separate 'presidency' in the PES—which became the 'key strategic player' (Rule 28, 2004). The reformed bureau was made up only by the president, seven vice-presidents and the treasurer. In the former bureau, each national delegation was represented, with an extra-seat for the largest ones (cf. above). The RoP further indicated that the members of the bureau should all be of a different nationality, and that there should be a balance between men and women, the EU macro-regions and the size of the national delegations. Also, the RoP prescribed that the bureau should take decisions by simple majority and a 'vote of no confidence' could be tabled against it by either a national delegation or at least 10 per cent of the group MEPs (Rule 14).

These were radical changes about the powers, the decision-making rules and the composition of the bureau which, taken together, made the group more autonomous from the national delegations. The bureau used to be led by the heads of the national delegations. Yet, with more and more delegations represented in the group, 'that was becoming very large and unwieldy. So, we changed the structure to have a more compact bureau which, you could say, it is also a more supranational structure' (Interview #2). Indeed, a rule was added to impede a head of a national delegations, unless small (from 1 to 5 MEPs), to also be member of the bureau.

Not only was the reformed PES group more centralised, it also became more differentiated, both horizontally and vertically. Five vice-presidents were assigned specific policy responsibilities, chairing one of the ‘horizontal working groups’, bringing together the members of different committees in connected policy areas (Rule 31). This structure, which was required to manage the legislative workload in a context of changing and enlarged membership, formalised an intermediate decision-making layer between the committee and the full group. There was the need to ‘have a structure to reconcile differences. That is because with the volume of work it is impossible for everything to be taken in the group. The agenda would be too overloaded’ (Interview #2). Because of this new structure, ‘it probably meant that the group coordinators had a bigger role’ (Interview #1), although this is a difference not captured by the RoP (cf. Rule 35, 1994 and Rule 39, 2003).<sup>11</sup>

### *The Normal Parliament: A Legislative Powerhouse*

The Treaty of Lisbon marked a fundamental stepping-stone for the legislative empowerment of the EP. After Lisbon, the Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP) was used for the vast majority of legislation concluded by the EU. In other words, the EP was effectively placed on a par with the Council as the lower chamber of an (almost) symmetric bicameral legislature. With the accession of Croatia in 2013, instead, the enlargement fatigue became evident. Further expansions of membership were frozen, while Brexit came to represent the first instance of disintegration in the EU’s history.

With the legislative role of the EP growing further, the political groups reformed their organisations to keep up to the new demands. In the RoP of the EPP (2009), the new Rule 6 on ‘voting in Plenary and in the Committees’ disposes that ‘Members commit themselves to support, as a rule, the Group line during votes; however, they have the right to vote according to their conscience and political convictions’. The wording of the article is important, as it explicitly introduces—much in the same vein as the PES’s ‘morality clause’—an opt-out for members, which are not bound to follow the line of the political group in each and every circumstance. On the other hand, however, specific provisions prescribe that MEPs shall inform the president or the group if they intend not to vote along the group line on important issues, and one of the vice-presidents if they cannot participate in a vote. Rule 6 makes clear that the above rules

apply both to the plenary and to committees. Moreover, another new rule also compels MEPs to inform the presidency and the responsible coordinator about legislative initiatives (Rule 23). If anything, the new rules provide a stark illustration of the tension between (more) centralised control by the group leadership and the freedom of members.

The 2009 version of the RoP, despite being shorter than the previous version—with 32 rather than 36 rules organised in six rather than eight chapters—described in reality a more complex organisation. Among other things, it spelt out in more detail the rules for the meetings of the plenary, the elections of the Presidency (Rules 13 and 19),<sup>12</sup> as well as those on coordinators and standing working groups. On this latter aspect in particular, the new rules introduced further differentiation. The previous version of the RoP simply mentioned that the members of the group in a committee form a working group and appoint a coordinator, and the plenary sets up the standing working groups (Rules 18 and 19, 2006). The new RoP, instead, formally introduced the role of deputy coordinator and specified that the coordinator is the ‘responsible spokesperson of the Group with respect to the remit of the Committee Working Group’ (Rule 20). In addition, they prescribed that each standing working group is chaired by a vice-president, who acts as the responsible spokesperson, and indicate that it is the working groups proposing the list of MEPs speaking in the plenary on behalf of the group (Rule 21).

Changes in the RoP of the S&D were less prominent. The most recent version of the rules (2014, amended in 2017) included 52 articles in eight chapters plus an annex, exactly as the 2003 version. There was a new preamble on the political values behind the group and much more specific rules on membership, modified in 2011. Members were formally expected to accept the ‘individual and collective’ values of the group and adhere to them. Moreover, members should not represent interest groups but citizens, should not use their position to obtain economic advantages and should prioritise their job as representatives over any other activity. The power to sanction members violating the rules was granted to the group which, on a proposal from the bureau, may suspend or expel the member. The bureau may also temporarily suspend the member, while waiting for the plenary to convene (Rule 2).

Aside from this limited centralisation, further changes in the RoP (i.e. on differentiation) were rather modest. There were nine vice-presidents (Rules 9 and 28) but the same five horizontal working groups. A new article (Rule 39bis) described the role of a ‘special’ coordinator for

debates on cases of violations of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, chosen by the bureau and reporting to the vice-president in charge of human rights and foreign affairs.

## HOW THE GROUPS ORGANISE: COORDINATION RATHER THAN SANCTIONS

The internal organisational development of the two major political groups shows that they have adapted their organisation to the functional needs of the EP, particularly its transformation from a talking-shop into a legislative powerhouse. Groups have become more differentiated and centralised organisations. The counting of the number of rules has proven to be a poor indicator of complexity but, reading the different versions of the rules, there can be little doubt that they have become more detailed and specific over time.

One aspect which can be easily overlooked from reading the rules has to do with the sanctions that the group leadership can use to discipline the rebels. This is a very important aspect of party organisation—to the extent that, for Keith Krehbiel (1993), party organisations only matter when they can discipline members. As a matter of fact, the rules do not extensively talk about sanctions and, if anything, are much more explicit at guaranteeing the freedom of the member to vote against the group line (Rule 6, EPP 2013; Rule 36, S&D 2014). Even in the absence of sanctions, however, there can be rewards that the group leadership uses as an incentive for loyal behaviour, such as speaking time, posts within the group and in Parliament, legislative reports. Yet, the official rules do not provide much information on them either.

This section makes a step beyond the groups' 'official stories' to assess what use the group leadership makes of the available sanctions and benefits to punish (respectively, reward) members' behaviour. In theory, the group leaders have several 'benefits' to allocate to the group members: it is for the groups to decide on nominations to the EP top jobs (president and VPs, quaestors) and in the groups (president and VPs), chairs and vice-chairs of committees and sub-committees, legislative and non-legislative reports, and speaking time in the plenary.

The point of departure of this section is, once again, Kreppel's work (2002), when she analysed the distribution of committee chairmanships between 1979 and 1997 and reports between 1989 and 1994 (under

the cooperation procedure) and between 1994 and 1996 (under codecision). Through a comparison of the average loyalty and participation rates in plenary sessions of those members of the EPP and the PES groups who received a disproportionate share of benefits—labelled ‘super-rapporteurs’ and ‘super-chairs’—to the average levels of participation and loyalty of the other members, she demonstrated that there was very little evidence corroborating a ‘benefits for behaviour’ hypothesis (Kreppel, 2002, p. 200).

Of course, the EP has significantly changed since then. As the previous sections have shown, both the EPP and the S&D implemented major reforms. In parallel, academics have looked at the drivers of ‘benefit allocation’ in the EP more systematically. Recent research on the allocation of committee chairs has concluded that voting loyalty towards the political group ‘does not influence committee chair selection in the EP at all. This is consistent with previous analyses on data from earlier terms’ (Chiru, 2020, p. 622). The drivers behind the selection of a particular chair depend on a number of factors, including the need to take into account the size of the national delegations within groups, and the experience and expertise of their individual candidates (Corbett et al., 2011, pp. 147–149).

Other scholarship has focused on the allocation of reports. Responsibility for the nomination, once a report has been allocated to a political group, is in the hands of the coordinator in a specific committee (Ripoll Servent, 2018, pp. 251–253). What are the criteria that guide the coordinators in the selection of a particular member? The literature has come up with several suggestions. For practitioners like Clark and Priestley, it is a balance between ‘the size of national delegations, expertise and constituency interests’ (2012, p. 243); for Obholzer et al., the coordinators tend to select rapporteurs with preferences closer to those of their national party, proving that national parties ‘continue to exert strong influence over policy-making in the EP’ (2019, pp. 244–245); for Yoshinaka et al. (2011), mainstream MEPs have more chances to become rapporteurs than more extreme group members. Chiou et al. (2020) argue, instead, that voting loyalty plays a major role.

In order to provide a preliminary test on the validity of a ‘benefits for behaviour’ hypothesis post-Lisbon, I make use of plenary participation and voting loyalty as indicators of ‘appropriate’ behaviour that the leadership may want to reward. Comparing the average voting loyalty and participation rates of those members who did receive more than their fair

share of committee chairs and legislative reports to the average share for the other members, the former are expected to have significantly higher scores, should a ‘benefits for behaviour’ model apply.

Table 3.2 provides some descriptive information on the distribution of benefits. Committee chairs are distributed at the beginning of a legislature and at mid-term. In the 2009–2019 period, there were four rounds of allocation, with a total of 62 committee chairs distributed to either EPP or S&D members. The average length of service in the chair is less than a full legislature. Therefore, any chair who managed to serve for at least a full legislative term is considered to be a ‘super-chair’. Over the same period, 665 OLP reports were distributed. The majority of members who managed to become rapporteurs did so only once. Therefore, any member who was chosen as rapporteur at least twice is a ‘super-rapporteur’.

The results are reported in Table 3.3, where the participation and loyalty with the political group of super-rapporteurs and super-chairs, and the other members, are compared. There are only a few comparisons where the averages are significantly different: plenary participation is higher for super-rapporteurs, particularly in the EPP, while loyalty with the political group is slightly higher for the EPP super-chairs. Notwithstanding such results, differences are small, and the two categories of members look much more similar than it could have been expected a priori. About twenty years after Kreppel (2002), a replication of her exercise leads to similar conclusions.

However, the non-findings of Table 3.3 are more interesting than they could appear at first sight. The second column shows very high levels of loyalty (or cohesion) across categories and groups. Such high levels of voting agreement may appear surprising, particularly given that a system

**Table 3.2** Distribution of benefits (2009–2019)

	<i>Committee Chairs*</i>	<i>OLP reports</i>
Total available	62	665 (EP7: 378; EP8: 287)
Availability per MEP	<1	<1
Average per recipient	1.7	1.8
Maximum per recipient	4	20 (EP7: 20; EP8: 6)



**Table 3.3** Behaviour of super-rapporteurs and super-chairs in the EPP and the S&D

		<i>Participation</i>	<i>Loyalty with the group</i>
EPP	Super-rapporteurs	88.1*	94.7
	Other MEPs	86.4*	95.1
S&D	Super-rapporteurs	88.5	94.4
	Other MEPs	86.9	94.2
EPP	Super-chairs	88.5	95.9**
	Other MEPs	86.7	95**
S&D	Super-chairs	87.6	94.5
	Other MEPs	87.1	94.3
All	Super-rapporteurs	88.2**	94.5
	Other MEPs	86.6**	94.7
All	Super-chairs	88.1	95.3
	Other MEPs	86.9	94.7

*Note* Scores are averages. Two sample t-test with unequal variance:  
\*  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$

of ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ does not appear to be extensively used by the leadership. However, this puzzle has already been addressed. According to McElroy and Bowler, it has to do with the large number of uncontested votes that take place in the EP. As they put it, ‘if all MEPs across all parties are voting together, internal group cohesion has little meaning’ (2015, p. 1359). The number of lopsided votes is very high in the EP, as issues are not divisive, or consensus is already achieved before voting in the plenary.

For a different but complementary explanation (cfr. Bressanelli, 2014), voting agreement has to do with the way in which the political groups ‘negotiate’ cohesion (see also Elomäki et al. in this volume). Both the EPP and the S&D have developed a decision-making structure that, moving from the lower up to the upper lever, seeks to ensure the agreement between their members. In other words, rather than a top-down structure through which the leadership seeks to impose or enforce voting loyalty, the groups have an effective bottom-up organisation designed to maximise internal agreement. Issues are first debated in the working groups at the committee level. If important divergencies remain, the issue is brought up to the ‘standing’ (EPP) or ‘horizontal’ (S&D) working group, bringing together a number of policy-connected committees, under the aegis of a vice-president. Should significant divergencies remain, the bureau or the presidency, with the heads of the national delegations,

considers the issue. If tensions remain present, the group plenary is the stage of last resort. Careful preparatory work ahead of the votes smooths effectively out disagreements: in short, there is ‘negotiated consensus’ within the group (Interview #3).<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the role of the national delegations should not be forgotten. Kreppel (2002) had insightfully noted that the real decision-making power within the groups was in the hands of the national delegations. Although her conclusions could now be somewhat qualified in the light of the process of centralisation of the political groups, the fact is that the national delegations still play an important and often overlooked role. The national delegations are fully recognised in the RoP of the groups—and this is a key difference compared to the period that Kreppel (2002) analysed—for instance, ‘national delegations’ are mentioned six times in the most recent version of the RoP of the EPP (2013), and five times in the RoP of the S&D (2014). The handbook of the EPP explicitly acknowledges that ‘on important issues, the EPP Group tries to negotiate compromises among its National Delegations before taking a decision in order to ensure its cohesion’ (EPP, 2019, p. 16). As we have seen, the EPP even institutionalised the meetings between its presidency and the heads of the national delegations in a specific organ, which is expected to meet at least once per month, but in practice more often.

The national delegations—or, at least, some of them—are often formally organised as ‘mini-groups’, with specific organs, rules about membership, elections and voting. It is the national delegations that have the power to sanction their members. Clearly, the most important instrument of control is the electoral list, which is managed by the national party rather than by the transnational group. For instance, the delegation of the Italian *Partito Democratico* (PD), one of the largest in the S&D group, lists in its RoP a number of sanctions which are not to be seen in the RoP of the group. The bureau of the delegation, on a proposal from its head, can propose to the plenary the following sanctions: an oral reprimand; a written reprimand; a suspension of the member (up to 10 days); economic sanctions; and, finally, the expulsion from the national delegation *and from the group* in case of ten unjustified absences or a grave violation of the regulations (Rule 7, PD 2015; my emphasis). Moreover, the national delegation also plays a fundamental role to internally select its members when it is allocated a position in the EP or within the group. It seems, therefore, that while the political groups can use some ‘carrots’,

the real ‘sticks’ to control members are still in the hands of the national parties.<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown, placing its focus on the ‘core’ of the EP party system, that the EPP and the S&D groups have significantly consolidated their organisations over time. ‘External shocks’ such as the introduction of direct elections in 1979, the legislative empowerment of the EP and the ‘mega’ enlargement of the EU in 2004/7 prompted the groups to undertake organisational reforms, making the current EPP and S&D groups strong organisations, pursuing a key role as legislators.

Both groups have become more complex—with more, and more detailed, rules—differentiated—both vertically, formally introducing new institutional layers, such as the horizontal/standing working groups, and horizontally, with specific roles allocated to vice-presidents or coordinators—and autonomous—due to the empowerment of the apical organs (presidency or bureau), simple majority as the main decision-making rule and a break away from the system of national representation. At the same time, tensions between the national member parties and the group transnational leadership are evident, and specific institutional structures have been created *ad hoc* to manage conflict (i.e. the EPP’s presidency and heads of the national delegations).

It may appear *prima facie* surprising that the leadership of the groups does not appear to systematically use a system of rewards and sanctions. Yet, both the EPP and the S&D groups operate in a bottom-up rather than a top-down manner. When conflicts arise, voting cohesion is moulded and negotiated within the group, starting at the lowest (committee) level and, if and when necessary, moving up the group hierarchy. Cohesion is not imposed by the group leadership and, from an analysis of the RoP, it is clear that it cannot be imposed: members are free to vote against the group and are only asked to inform the group leadership of their intention to do so.

Members can be sanctioned, instead, by their national party. While the political groups have become more autonomous from the national parties, it is the national delegation that still has the power, controlling the electoral list, to re-select a member. It is, again, the national delegation to have the ultimate word on the selection of its members for EP and group posts.

This chapter has shown that, organisationally, national parties remain crucial for the functioning of the transnational groups. Recent research has also shown that the voting loyalty of the national delegations is lower when the delegation's national elections and the EP elections are approaching (Koop et al., 2018), and that on salient matters national interests may matter more than transnational allegiances to explain voting behaviour in the EP (e.g. Vesani & Corti, 2019). In line with such recent findings, this chapter has further substantiated that national politics still matters in Europe's Parliament, and significantly so.

## NOTES

1. This chapter labels the groups EPP and S&D, as they are currently (2022) known. Whenever appropriate, however, the chapter also makes use of the old labels (EPP-ED and PES, respectively).
2. Besides the EPP and the S&D, the newly formed EP in July 2019 included the European Conservative and Reformists Group (ECR), the Renew Europe Group (RENEW), the Confederal Group of the European United Left—Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) and Identity and Democracy (ID), plus the non-attached (NI) members.
3. In addition, the RoP required the active participation of Members (Rule 17, 1977).
4. As Kreppel further observes, such a rule was part of the regulations 'as early as 1977 and perhaps earlier' (2002, p. 196). In the 2014 version of the RoP (as amended in 2017), this clause is still present (Rule 36.2).
5. The length of the subsequent versions of the rules (EPP: 1994 and 1996; PES: 1994) remained very similar.
6. At the time, the EPP had four standing working groups: A (political affairs), B (economic affairs), C (budgetary affairs) and D (internal affairs) (Fontaine, 2009, pp. 175, 181, 220).
7. Comparing the 1975 and the 1989 version of the RoP, Kreppel concludes that 'the extent to which the internal organisation of the EPP group has remained the same is quite extraordinary given the dramatic changes it underwent' (2002, p. 194). Possibly, the qualification '*formal*' should be added to the statement, as the RoP did not change significantly between 1975 and 1989, but other important developments characterised the group (cf. Fontaine, 2009).
8. This change in the RoP was still debated at the end of the third legislature, when one of former VP of the group (1989–1993), Lelio Langorio, stated in a letter addressed to the President: 'I am in favour of the idea that the Vice-presidents are assigned specific competences [...] I would have been

able to achieve something more for the group than I had been able to do as a simple Vice-president without portfolio' (Langorio, 1994).

9. Bressanelli (2014) also includes the Liberal Group in his analysis.
10. In the bureau, instead, each national delegation was represented, with an additional seat every ten members (Rule 11, 2004). However, the 'key strategic decisions are taken by the presidency and by the presidency with the heads of the national delegations' (Interview #5; also Interview #6).
11. Enlargement has also led to a huge expansion in the number of staff of the two largest groups (cf. Salm, 2019, p. 43).
12. Since 2013, the electoral rules include a gender 'quota' for office holders within the group ('at least one third of members belonging to another sex than the majority of members'; Rule 19.6).
13. While both groups have a whipping system to monitor the members' attendance, attendance lists do not automatically explain who gets the legislative reports. In the EPP, for instance, they seem more important for 'technical' rather than 'political' committees (Interview #7).
14. Not all national delegations—including some of the largest ones—seem to have formalised RoP. In addition, such rules are not normally published. Mapping systematically how the national delegations organise, and differences across groups, is a fascinating endeavour, but clearly beyond the scope of this chapter.

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## INTERVIEWS

- Interview #1. 09/11/2009—Former Deputy Secretary General—*S&D*.
- Interview #2. 19/11/2009—Head of Department, Deputy Secretary General—*S&D*.
- Interview #3. 27/11/2009—Former Secretary General—*S&D*.
- Interview #4. 02/12/2009—Special Counsellor—*EPP Group*.
- Interview #5. 01/07/2010—Deputy Secretary General—*EPP Group*.
- Interview #6. 01/07/2010—Senior Political Adviser—*EPP Group*.
- Interview #7. 02/07/2010—Head of Unit—*EPP Group*.

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