

# European Parliamentary Factions 'Party Groups'



"How does the European parliamentary factions function, promoting integration and co-operation?"



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<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<i>Thesis</i>	3
<b>2. The composition of the European Parliament</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Struggle for Power</i>	5
<i>Elections</i>	5
<b>3. External Politics of the EP: Important Functions</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4. Internal Politics of the EP: Party Groups</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Organization of Party Groups</i>	8
<b>5. Party Relations</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Ideology</i>	10
<i>Independence of MEPs</i>	11
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>7. Literature</b>	<b>14</b>

## 1. Introduction

After an extensive course, this essay marks the end of the Masterclass, offered to us by the Montesquieu Institute The Hague. From March until June an inquisitive group of young students, became educated on the subject of the European Union.

List of guest speakers	
March 7	Prof. Dr. Koen Koch
	Dr. Bart van Riel
March 28	Dr. Mr. Philipp Kiiver
	Drs. J.A.M. de Bruijn
April 4	Mr. Berend-Jan baron van Voorst tot Voorst
April 18	Drs. Jean J.M. Penders
	Mrs. Marije Laffeber
April 25	Mrs. Balfoort
May 9	Prof. Dr. Wim J.M. Voermans
May 16	Drs. Wilmer Heck

Gladly, we obtained unique first-hand knowledge about the European integration process, the decision making process and future perspectives from several high profile guest speakers. Due to the great variety of their backgrounds, each speaker approached the subject differently. In a multidisciplinary manner, different spheres such as governance, history, politics, law and media glanced light on the subject: The EU as a unprecedented phenomenon.

Especially the experiences shared by professionals, who are accustomed to the written and the unwritten rules, appeared to be valuable. After all, confidants of Europe's mores are allowed on the stage and are not longer allocated 'Behind The Scenes Of The European Union'.

On behalf of all the students I wish to thank our lecturers, our tutors and of course our supervisor from the Montesquieu Institute, Drs. C. Nagtegaal.

## *Thesis*

The main institutions that contribute to the European policy making process are the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament (EP).

One of these institutions, the European Parliament, exists of directly elected members representing over 480 million Europeans. Their representatives usually are part of a national party. Based on common political affinity and a coherent political complexion, national parties could join a party group. The current framework of subsidies and committee seats assignment could bring about increased cooperation between different parties by forming party groups as well. Therefore, the interaction within international party groups - equally between them - supposedly causes a high level of European integration. The result is a political process with a internal and an external dimension, as well as a national and an international dimension. But in order for the EP to execute its external influence, members of European Parliament (MEPs) must be competent and independent. That's why the biggest constrain on MEPs lacking autonomy could be intrusion by national political parties or national interests.

Since the initial subject appointed to me was 'Factions in the European Parliament'. The following thesis was derived from that issue:

"How does the European parliamentary factions function, promoting integration and cooperation?"

In the course of analyzing his phenomenon, the focus remains on the EP; its development, its internal functioning as well as its relations with other international actors will be investigated.

## 2. The composition of the European Parliament

Before we look at the functioning of the parliamentary ractions and the way they promote integration and cooperation, we must look at the way the European Parliament (EP) is structured. Also its historical development is of importance.

Since January 2007 the EP consists of 785 Members (MEPs), divided between the member states on a basis that is approximately proportional to the size of population. The seat distribution is displayed by Table 1).

99	Germany
78	France, United Kingdom, Italy
54	Poland, Spain
35	Romania
27	Netherlands
24	Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Czech Republic
19	Sweden
18	Austria, Bulgaria
14	Denmark, Finland, Slovakia
13	Ireland, Lithuania
9	Latvia
7	Slovenia
6	Cyprus, Estonia, Luxemburg
5	Malta
785	Total

The EP meets in plenary sessions for three of four days every month. Most of the work is channeled through its twenty committees. Furthermore the EP has a President, a Bureau, a Conference of Presidents and a Secretariat. The president is elected by the MEPs for a term of 2,5 years. The Conference of Presidents consists of the President and he Chairs of the Political Groups (Party Groups). Together they compose the agenda for plenary sessions and establish the terms of reference and size of parliamentary committees and delegations (Bache and George, 2006: 295).

## *Struggle for Power*

By the original Treaties, the forerunner of the present EP was either directly elected nor endowed with significant powers. The Members of the European Parliamentary Assembly (EPA) were full-time national MPs and seconded European MPs. The primary right for the EPA was to be consulted by the Council of Ministers before legislation was agreed. Their advice was frequently ignored. The EPA could also dismiss the Commission in total on a vote of censure, but only if they could achieve an almost impossible degree of unity needed to reach a double majority requirement. Subsequently, the EPA commenced a struggle for power and to get elected directly. The main developments that transformed a weak PA in a stronger EP are summarized by Corbett (2005: 354):

*(...)the budget treaties of 1970 and 1975; the introduction of direct elections by universal suffrage in 1979; the 1980 Isoglucose ruling of the European Court of Justice; giving Parliament a de facto delaying power the Single European Act in 1987; introducing the cooperation procedure and the assent procedure the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993, bringing in the co-decision procedure, and giving Parliament the right to allow (or not) THE Commission as a whole to take office through a vote of confidence; and the Treaty of Amsterdam, which greatly extended the scope of co-decision modified it to Parliament's advantage, and gave Parliament the right to confirm or reject a designated President of the Commission.*

To achieve these remarkable gains, the EP had a number of tactics. First, its members pressed their national parties to allow the EP to get increased powers. Clearly, the most significant change was the introduction of direct elections, which "created a new class of elected representatives in Europe (...) whose career depended on making something of the European dimension" (Corbett, 2005: 356). Secondly, MEPs frequently used the argument that the powers of the EP had to increase in order to counter the 'democratic deficit'. Third, the EP made extensive use of their existing powers, 'on the supposition that anything not explicitly forbidden the EP by the EC treaties is permitted' (Lodge, 1990: 11). Sharing this point of view, the EP got help from the European Court of Justice (ECJ). A number of judgments of the ECJ, on cases brought up by the EP, were giving a far more reaching interpretation of the EP's constitutional powers than many member states had foreseen (Lodge, 1990: 12).

## *Elections*

In 1975 an agreement was reached by the European Council to replace the EPA with a directly elected institution. Proponents like Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries had long favored a directly chosen EP, convinced by the argument that transferring competences to the EC would lead to a democratic deficit unless there were an directly elected parliament at that level that could take over the role of scrutiny that would be lost to national parliaments

(Bache and George, 2006: 324). The first European election was held in 1979, the EP not being merely an indirectly elected body of doubtful legitimacy. The EP's "sense of its own dignity and tactical responsiveness increased with direct election" (Middlemas, 1995: 91). The first directly elected EP immediately showed boldness and challenged the European Council over the annual budget.

### 3. External Politics of the EP: Important Functions

The EP does not function in the same manner as most national parliaments do. Although directly elected, a party or party group cannot form a European government if it gains the majority of seats. The EP does have certain legislative, budgetary and supervisory functions. These powers are summarized in Table 2). The Treaty of Lisbon is supposed to further enhance their external competences.

Table 2) The current powers of the European Parliament

#### *Political*

- Approves appointment of Commission President
- Approves appointment of Commission after public hearings
- Questions the Council and Commission
- Can censure and dismiss whole Commission

#### *Legislative*

- Delivers opinions on Commission proposals
- Shares final decision on most proposals with Council (co-decision procedure)
- Assent requires for enlargement of European Union and agreements with third countries

#### *Budgetary*

- Can modify certain proposed expenditures
- Annual approval required for annual budget
- Budgetary Control Committee Checks expenditure

#### *Budgetary powers*

The first grant of additional powers to the EP came in the Treaty of Luxembourg in 1970, when it was given the right to amend 'on-compulsory' items of expenditure in the budget (Bache and George, 2006: 301).



#### 4. Internal Politics of the EP: Party Groups

In order for the EP to execute its (external) influence, members of European Parliament (MEPs) must be competent and independent. The biggest constrain on MEPs lacking autonomy is intrusion by national political parties or national interests. As an attempt to counter this, the MEPs are not part of national delegations. Gathered in transnational fractions, they form so-called *party groups*. Therefore, when it comes to the internal politics of the European Parliament, scholars tend to pay the 'party group'-dimension the most attention (Bowler and Farrell: 54). The party groups attend to be the most important actors in internal politics of the EP, because they have huge influence on the agenda setting process, as they choose the *rapporteurs* for the committees. They also allocate speaking time in plenary sessions. Current composition of the European Parliament is defined in table 3).

288	European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED)
215	Party of European Socialists (PES)
101	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
44	Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN)
42	European Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA)
41	European United Left-Nordic Green Left (GNU-NGL)
24	Independence/Democracy (I/D)
30	Non-Incites (NI)
785	Total

##### *Organization of Party Groups*

The party group must comply to the conditions written down in the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure. This Rule (#29) dictates that one party group can be erected by twelve MEPs, originating from at least three member states; eighteen MEPs, originating from two member states or twenty-three MEPs, originating from one member state (Bache and George, 2006: 306). The Rule also makes clear that the party groups must have a common political affinity and a coherent political complexion.

The party groups are coordinated by a presidency, which is elected by the party group members from their own circle. The president or chair ultimately decides the voting behavior of the entire party group. All the chairs meet at the Conference of Presidents to determine the issues to attend at the plenary sessions of the EP.

Co-operation clearly benefits the political groups. As one can see in Table 3), the European Greens and the European Free Alliance are combined (Greens-EFA) in order to enhance their influence and fight their cause with additional support. A lure of financial subsidies and committee seats awards party groups and therefore increasingly supports co-operation between them. But this also throws up an anomaly, as independent MEPs are excluded from committees and funds. This is why sometimes a number of independent MEPs (Non-Inscrits) erect a Technical Group or 'Group for the Technical Coordination and Defense of Independent Groups and Members'. These groups are not adhere to the same set of core principles, but aim to gain collective party group resources and privileges. In 1999 though, the Constitutional Committee ruled that a Technical Group (TGI) was not actually a cohesive political bond, because it contained far right MEPs as well as far left ones. According to the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure, the party group TGI was the first group forced to dissolve.

## 5. Party Relations

As stated before, the EP functions quite differently from most national parliaments, in which a party should gain the majority of seats in order to form a government. First of all, European politics have always been more about consensual decision making rather than contentious. Second of all, a solid majority of one party group is unprecedented. Since the EP was erected, two party groups were able to form a joint domination: Permanently occupying fifty to seventy percent of the seats, the European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED) and Party of European Socialists (PES) are traditionally the two biggest party groups. And since the Single European Act (SEA) was enforced in 1987 - which meant an even bigger majority became necessary to execute maximum influence - the *Grand Coalition* was semi-officially founded (Bache and George, 2006: 306). The positions of President of Parliament, President of Commission and President of Council used to be distributed among the prominent ones of the two parties. Indeed, many rivaling MEPs were disgruntled by this manner and during the 5<sup>th</sup> term the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) forced a break in the Grand Coalition as they joined up with the European People's Party and European Democrats (EPP-ED), excluding the Party of European Socialists (PES). However, the immediate cause of the break up was incidental rather than structural. The specific reason was the persistent support of the PES for its socialist commissars Marin and Cresson, despite the severe allegations of financial mismanagement in 1998. The PES interpreted the accusations as a way to discredit their party ahead of the elections. The EPP was unwilling to vote in favor of the Commission Budget and in the end the Commission Santer was forced to resign. The Grand Coalition was put to the test again in 2004 as a proposed Commissioner Buttiglione for Justice was both supported by the EPP-ED and rejected by the PES.

### *Ideology*

The party groups are not to be seen as parties, but as looser coalitions of national parties. These coalitions come into existence due to common core principles, arranged in categories that cover the whole range of political thought.

On first sight, the individual groups could look quite homogeneous, but internally you'll find a large variety of divergent ideological positions. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) for example include economic liberals with a fierce belief in free trade and conservative thoughts on social issues. But the ALDE also includes social liberals, who are closer to social democrats on social security issues and market regulation than members of their own party group. The French and Italian Communists faced an even bigger dispute. As the Italian Communists were in favor of the European integration process, the French rejected the European project thoroughly. As mentioned before, even ideologically more cohesive groups, like the European People's Party (EPP) and The Party of European Socialists (PES), regularly face divergence, especially when there is a national sentiment. In 1999 for

example, when the EP voted on the Commission Santer, the PES officially stated it would vote against the censure motion. The German fraction of the PES voted in favor of the censure because Santer-bashing was become a truism in German press.

Clearly, a discrepancy in national perspective can be expressed by a disharmonious voting by any party group. But also national interests weight heavily on the voting behavior of the MEPs, because their national parties can pressurize them. Since many member states embrace the proportional representation (PR) electoral system in combination with a closed party list, national parties have a huge influence on the composition of their fraction. The list of candidates presented to the voter is ranked by party preferences and has an unchangeable order. The chances of being elected are dependent on the place the individual candidate is placed on the list. Therefore, MEPs who has proven themselves disloyal to their party policies or otherwise aggrieve their political leadership are dropped down the party list.

#### *Independence of MEPs*

Knowing this, the issue of the supposed MEPs independence is raised. In a system dominated by national parties, the MEPs and the EP appear to be denied a greater electoral legitimacy. It's an indication of a democratic deficit, whereas the system 'fails to fulfill the principles of parliamentary democracy'. The status quo has been widely discussed.

*The central aim of domestic political parties in any electoral contest is gaining control of national government offices. European elections are thus fought on the performances of the parties holding national government offices. (...) As long as national parties decide who are the candidates in the elections and control the attention of the media during campaigns, there is little the EP groups or the party federations can do to break their hold over the process.*

(Hix and Lord, 1997: 211)

Despite the thesis that national parties dominate the political process, research (Faas 2003) demonstrates that the internal bond of party groups has generally tightened. Continues analysis of the EP voting results prove that:

*In terms of party cohesion, the studies have revealed a surprisingly high degree of party group cohesion. An exception is those party groups that exist for mere technical reasons, like the Technical Group of Independent Members in the 1999 European Parliament. Large, as well as leftist, party groups were usually found to be more cohesive than smaller or rightist ones.*

(Faas, 2003: 850)

In addition, Kreppel (2002: 16) correlated the increasing party group cohesion with the increased powers of the EP. He states that the party groups tend to become more cohesive under successive revisions of the Treaties in order to become more effective. The intended

Treaty of Lisbon supposes to be a legal base calling for a co-decision procedure on several disciplines such as agriculture, structural funds, commercial policy, justice and migration. Along this process, party groups declined their ideology to make way for alliances amongst each other. For example, after the Treaty of Maastricht was signed, the two biggest party groups (PES, EPP) joint forces. They cooperated by implementing rules of procedure to make them a dominant fraction in the current EP (Kreppel, 2002: 3). But the increases of power made national parties and national governments extend their pressure on MEPs and the party groups even more. Hix and Lord (1997: 34) point out that this explains a undoubted statistical breakage in the level of party group cohesion in 1999. However, Faas (2003: 860) makes clear that national actors will only jeopardize party group unity by pressurize their MEPs on topics that are of special national interest. This will mean a steady base of common conventions stays intact and therefore Faas expects party group cohesion in general will remain quite high.

The strength of party group cohesion was put to the test during the confirmation crisis of 2004 (Bache and George, 2006: 214). Some national governments pushed their MEPs to vote in favor of the confirmation of the proposed European Commission (EC) as a whole. Several party groups managed to withstand national pressure and established the withdrawal of the most controversial nominee, forcing Barroso to reshuffle his proposed Commission composition. This incident endorses the argument made by Kreppel (2002) that MEPs tend to unify when it comes to gaining more influence in the European decision making process. This could indicate that the EP as a whole acquires more authority and autonomy along the way.

In order for the EP to extend its power it is necessary for the MEPs to gain more and more independence from national influence. When the EP came into existence, only few MEPs had the incentive to act autonomously. Most of them were older politicians who had exhausted their career options and were serving out the remaining years until retirement. The younger politicians were keen to pursue a national political career, but concluded that it was easier to get a European rather than a national seat.

The appeal for a European career is used to be lacking because there is no obvious route to follow in order to reach the highest European level. For example, different to the national level, at the European level government executives are usually not recruited from the parliament. Nevertheless, Hix and Lord (1997: 117) state that eleven out of seventeen members of the Commission Santer used to be MEPs before. Considering the practice in the United States, the government executives also are not derived from Congress. Due to that reality members of Congress (MC) mainly aspire senior committee chairs. European career progression could develop in a similar way as the powers of the EP and it's committees emerge, attracting young and ambitious politicians. Due to these prospects, various scholars already identify an increased professionalism and careerism among MEPs.

## **6. Conclusion**

The European Parliament is the only directly elected institution of the EU. Since a long time there has been a struggle to expand the EPs power and influence. Party groups tend to become more cohesive under successive revisions of the Treaties in order to become more effective. The intended Treaty of Lisbon supposed to be a legal base calling for a co-decision procedure on several disciplines, massively increasing the EPs powers and decreasing the democratic deficit. Due to the Irish failure to ratify the Treaty and the temporary hold-down of the process it causes, we already have seen a considerable increase in the EPs powers.

Meanwhile, in order to enhance their influence and fight their cause with additional support, party groups cluster. It proportionally pays out, receiving more financial subsidies and gaining committee seats. Besides, the proportion of European career politicians is steadily rising. They become more professionalized and MEPs increasingly independent of their national parties.

## 7. Literature

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