

One of the central issues for the emerging European polity is whether policy-making at the European level can or has been transformed so that a new political space is available for the articulation of organized social interests that might transcend national borders. In particular, we might ask whether the European Parliament (EP) is a suitable arena for contestation among transnational political interests, where European national political parties re-align themselves in European parties reflecting transnational political conflict and provide voters with an electoral connection to EU policy-making.

This issue is the general focus of this paper. Specifically, we re-examine the conclusion drawn in the literature that party groups—coalitions of national party delegations in the European Parliament—successfully organize legislative behavior in the EP such that rationality is dominated by shared transnational political interests defined mainly along traditional left-right political lines. Based on analysis of a novel set of data regarding EP legislative behavior, we will argue that the empirical basis for these conclusions is dubious.¹ In addition, we discuss how party group management of legislative votes affects the transparency of EU policy-making and therefore the quality of accountability and representation in the EP. The major conclusion on this front is that party groups hide the vast majority of legislative votes from the eyes of voters, therefore obfuscating legislative behavior. Thus, while the EP is often identified as a source of democratic accountability for EU policy-making because its members are directly elected, our findings suggest that in practice party groups significantly obstruct this channel of popular control over policy-making.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section surveys a variety of recent studies of voting behavior in the EP designed to examine positive questions about the level of party group cohesion and the char-

acter of party group competition. They examine whether a supranational party system exists and how it organizes political conflict. These data have also been used to address more general questions of normative democratic theory related to European integration. Adopting a “responsible party” model of democracy for the EU, this research has concluded that party groups, at least in terms of organizing the legislature, function in a manner consistent with normative expectations about party cohesion and competition.

The second section revisits the empirical basis for these positive and normative conclusions. Previous analyses of voting behavior in the EP rely on roll call votes. But roll call votes represent only a small fraction of EP votes and, importantly, the selection of votes for roll call may be endogenous to the level and type of conflict among MEPs. Thus, before we draw conclusions from roll call votes about the character of the party system in the EP, we need to evaluate whether roll call votes are a representative sample of voting behavior. Using a novel dataset of information about votes not decided by roll-call, we conduct such an analysis.²

The third section of the paper discusses how the sampling properties of roll call votes affect our conclusions about party group cohesion and competition. We also discuss how the prevalence and pattern of roll call vote requests affects the transparency of policy-making in the EP. The concluding section discusses what voting behavior and the use of roll calls indicate about whether the EP provide a forum for the articulation and contestation of transnational political interests and an electoral connection between voters and policy-makers in the EP.

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1 The dataset is described more generally and used to address more general issues of roll-call vote analysis in Carrubba, et al. (2003).

2 The EP uses one of four methods for casting votes: 1) voice; 2) hand; 3) electronic; or 4) roll call. Voice and hand votes only record whether the motion passed, electronic votes record the final tally of the vote, and roll call votes record exactly how each legislator voted. The default method of voting is by voice or hand. Electronic votes occur when a voice or hand vote is too close to call, and RCVs occur if a party group or thirty-two members issue a formal request for a roll call. A small number of votes—e.g., the Commission investiture—require a RCV.

Party Groups, Voting Behavior, and the Responsible Party Model

Empirical research on MEP voting behavior has generally supported two conclusions regarding party group (PG) cohesion and competitiveness. First, PG cohesion is higher than cohesion by nationality, is objectively high for the major party groups, and has generally increased over time. Studies of RCVs in the EP in the 1980s and early 1990s showed high PG cohesion (Attina 1990; Brzinski 1995; Raunio 1997). Raunio (1997: 34) showed that, in three-quarters of RCVs for the major PGs, 90% of MEPs voted with the PG line. Kreppel and Tsebelis (1999) used correspondence analysis of 100 RCVs from 1989-1994 to confirm that PGs are a stronger influence on voting coalitions than nationality. Kreppel (2001) analyzed 300 RCVs from 1980-1996, also using correspondence analysis and demonstrated high PG cohesion over this period.

Recent studies confirm these findings. Hix (2001; 2002), analyzing RCV data from July 1999-July 2000, showed that PG was a stronger determinant of voting behavior than nationality or individual MEP ideology. Similarly, Noury (2002) and Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten (2002) showed that PGs were the strongest determinant of vote choice from 1989-1999 and that PG cohesion has increased over time. Finally, Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) have analyzed all RCVs since the advent of direct election to the EP. This comprehensive study showed that PG cohesion has remained high since 1979 and has increased with the legislative power of the EP.

Notably, these studies show that nationality is not a strong determinant of voting behavior among MEPs. This is true on roll call votes generally, and across issue areas that one might consider relevant to national as opposed to ideological interests. The clear implication from these findings is that party groups appear to manage their membership—either through enforcing some form of discipline or managing cross-national logrolls—so as to dilute national conflict over policy.

The second general conclusion is that legislative politics in the EP is competitive, with PGs generally distinguishing themselves along one main ideological dimension that reflects traditional left-right political conflict found at the domestic level in the EU member-states. That is not to say there are no other cleavages in voting behavior. Most studies identify minor cleavages that are distinct from the left-right dimension. But the basic conclusion is that this left-right dimension is the major source of conflict among MEPs and the predominant characterization of party group competition.

This conclusion is based on several analyses of vote patterns among MEPs across a variety of issue areas. The basic methodology of these analyses is to evaluate how PG affiliation relates to these vote patterns. If MEPs of the same PG commonly vote together and they vote differently from MEPs of other PGs on some issues, then this indicates competitiveness. And, if the policy areas that account for whether and which PGs differ in voting behavior are those that commonly define the left-right dimension, then the character of this competition is left-right.

A broad set of studies, based on RCVs, shows that indeed PG ideological distinctions affect MEP voting behavior and PG coalition behavior. Raunio (1997) showed that coalitions of PGs on RCVs are explained by their proximity on the left-right dimension. Kreppel and Tsebelis (1999) and Kreppel (2000; 2001) add important context to this conclusion, showing that the level of left-right ideological competition varies temporally. In particular, the frequency of “grand coalitions” between the two largest PGs has increased over time. But left-right ideology remains an accurate characterization of policy differences and competition in the EP. Based on a larger number of RCVs, Noury (2002) and Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten (2002) identify four dimensions to competition in the EP, but show that the dominant dimension is left-right. Hix (2001), analyzing RCVs from 1999, and Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002), using the full set of RCVs from 1979-2001, show that inter-PG competition in the EP has been along a single left-right ideological dimension. This pattern has been stable over time.

This characterization of the EP, if accurate, has important implications for our understanding of legislative politics in the EU, the development of a European-level party system, and the quality of representation in the EU. It also speaks to the prospects for a well-functioning parliamentary democracy at the EU level. With the growth in the scope of EU competency at the expense of national legislative authorities, a variety of academics, journalists, and politicians have expressed concerns about the quality of democratic control over EU policy-making (Weale and Nentwich 1998; Blondel, Sinnott, and Svensson 1998; Schmitt and Thomassen 2000). Many scholars consider the PGs as essential to improving the quality of democracy in the EU. In different forms, these scholars appeal to a “responsible party” model when evaluating the quality of democratic control in the EU (e.g., Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten 2002; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999).³ Accord-

3 Note that our purpose here is not to advocate or critique this normative model. We describe the model because it is the

ing to this model, parties serve as the crucial connection between voters' interests and policy-making. To do this, they must provide different policy programs to voters, voters need to vote based on their preferences over policy programs, and parties must behave cohesively in executing their programs when involved in policy-making.

These RCV results suggest that PGs meet the requirements of the responsible party model in terms of legislative behavior. MEPs vote according to their PG affiliations – resulting in high internal PG cohesion – and PGs differentiate themselves from each other according to their ideological positions on the Left-Right dimension. Consequently, Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) conclude that the EP functions as a “normal” parliament, resembling the legislatures of the EU member-states in terms of party cohesion and the character of competition. And, as Thomassen (2002:18) argues, a single left-right dimension to policy conflict is important, as it facilitates voter-party correspondence in policy positions. To see this, note that representation is facilitated if voters' preferences across the range of policy areas under EU authority are captured by particular parties. This is difficult to attain if the policy space is multidimensional. But if voters and parties share a common ideology, which serves as a shorthand for different packages of policies, then voters can more easily connect their policy preferences with the policy programs on offer by parties. Thus, the apparent commonality between the left-right ideological dimension characterizing voters in the national arena and party groups in the EP is advantageous from the view point of the responsible party model.⁴

In sum, the recent empirical studies suggest that party groups in the EP have successfully developed a transnational party system in the legislature, with ideological interests dominating national interests in policy-making. What is more, these findings indicate that, if European elections were reformed to allow PGs, rather than national parties, to organize and contest the elections, we could imagine a dramatic improvement in the connection between voter preferences and policy-making in the EU. However, as we argue in the next section, the reliability of these conclusions hinges critically on the quality of RCV data.

Reconsidering MEP Voting Behavior

For most legislative years, over 3/4 of votes in the EP have not been by roll call. This obviously raises the question of whether roll call votes tell us anything meaningful about party group organization of MEP voting behavior, the character of legislative conflict, or the importance of nationality as a political cleavage in the EP. Clearly, roll call votes are an attractive source of information about behavior, precisely because the behavior is observable. But what if the selection of votes for roll call is based on exactly those characteristics of voting behavior and legislative competition that we wish to study? Specifically, what if party groups, which are the most common source of roll call vote requests, have select votes for roll call based on their expectations of the level of party group cohesion and of the type of political conflict associated with the vote? If so, then the votes that are hidden from view—i.e., those not decided by roll call—may be very different from roll call votes in terms of party group cohesion and the character of political conflict. Consequently, roll call votes may not provide a reliable source of information about legislative behavior and the impact of ideology and nationality on EP politics.

We are concerned that party groups do indeed select roll call votes based on strategic considerations that would generate misleading inferences about legislative behavior. Previous research on the EP provides several arguments about the selection of votes for roll call. Here we highlight two of the most common ones.⁵ First, PGs use RCVs to influence legislative outcomes. As Kreppel (2001:128) states, PG leaders have the ability to reward or punish their membership through a variety of means.⁶ However, PG leaders cannot exercise party discipline without some way of monitoring their members' behavior. Thus, PG leaders have an incentive to request RCVs when they want to enforce party discipline. They will try to employ this tactic on legislation they consider important, for which the outcome of the vote is uncertain, and where they anticipate inducing party cohesion.⁷

Second, PGs use RCVs to signal their or other groups' policy positions to a third party, such as a national electorate or another EU institution (Kreppel 2002: 128). In particular, a PG may want to publicize its policy agenda, to embarrass a rival PG by revealing

motivation for much of the empirical analysis we discuss below.

4 But see Gabel and Anderson (2002) and Gabel and Hix (2002), as well as Marks and Steenbergen (2003), for a more thorough discussion of the level of correspondence between party conflict in the EP and voter preferences over EU policy.

5 See Kreppel (2002: 128-9) for an extremely thorough discussion of these possible strategic motivations.

6 For example, PG leaders control the granting of committee seats.

7 One could also imagine that PG leadership might use roll calls to monitor whether members honor vote-trades.

its low cohesion on a particular policy, or to distinguish themselves publicly from other PGs on particular policies they deem significant.

If these arguments are correct, selection bias is likely to undermine inferences about intra-party group unity, national conflict, or inter-party group cleavages based on RCVs. For example, one of the main findings in the EP literature is an objectively high level of PG cohesion. If the arguments presented above are correct, we cannot trust such conclusions because the decision to request a roll call is endogenous to the expected level of cohesion. Furthermore, the signaling arguments imply that the sample of RCVs is endogenous to the policy agendas of the PGs requesting roll calls. That is, PG leaders, pursuing their political agenda, choose among votes for roll call so as to highlight or conceal policy conflict or consensus among PGs or MEPs. This behavior could cause RCV samples to lead to incorrect inferences about the character of policy conflict and the dimensionality of voting cleavages.

Is this a serious problem? Obviously, we cannot examine this question directly, since we cannot observe how individual MEPs voted on legislation that was not decided by roll call. And, although theory suggests we might expect a selection bias due to strategic concerns by party groups, one could imagine these effects being small or actually canceling each other out. For example, some roll call votes might be requested because party group leaders want to induce or demonstrate high cohesion in their own party group while other time party groups might request a roll call to display disunity in another party group.

As a result, previous studies, while sometimes recognizing the possibility of selection bias, dismiss the issue. For example, Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) state:⁸

We cannot exclude the possibility that MEP behavior is different in roll call votes than in other votes.

However, it is reasonable to assume that roll call votes are used for the most important decisions. Also, roll call votes are the only votes we can study in detail, the number of roll call votes has increased over time, roll call votes are called on the full range of issues in the European Parliament, and roll call votes do not appear to be called disproportionately by any party group. We can thus be confident that the systematic analysis of roll call votes provides an accurate picture of the European Parliament.

Therefore, according to Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002), one cannot draw reliable inferences about EP

legislative behavior from RCVs if the italicized conditions do not obtain. Thus, we would like some empirical evidence regarding these conditions.

Fortunately, some relevant information is available about non-RCVs. Carrubba, et. al. (2003) collected descriptive information about non-RCVs for the 1999-2000 legislative year. These data allow one to compare RCVs with non-RCVs on several dimensions relevant to the level of party cohesion and the character of policy conflict. Carrubba, et. al. (2003) present these data and provide the statistical analysis supporting the ensuing discussion. Here, we simply summarize the analysis and focus on the implications for our understanding of parties in the EP and the previously described conclusions regarding the party system at the European level. We divide the discussion into three parts, organized around different characteristics of EP votes. Note that our conclusions apply whether one focuses on simply final legislative votes or on votes over amendments and final legislative votes in the EP in that year.

Roll Call Votes and the Type of Motion

Votes in the EP vary by the type of motion, which varies with legislative procedures. Some votes are on non-binding legislation while other votes could effectively veto legislation. Clearly, if we are interested in how MEPs vote on legislation, we want to know whether RCVs show us that type of behavior. Comparing RCVs with non-RCVs on type of motion allows us to address two important questions: Are RCVs representative of legislative votes? And, as Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) claim, are all important votes by roll call?

First of all, RCVs are disproportionately called on non-legislative resolutions (58.9% of all RCVs on final votes and 86.7% of RCVs on final votes and amendments). That is, RCV analyses of legislative behavior are based on many votes that are not on legislative texts that are part of the formal EU legislative procedure. Carrubba, et. al. (2003) describe this distinction further and consider different ways of defining legislative votes. But the simple story is that much of MEP legislative voting behavior is not by roll call and that much of their non-legislative voting behavior is by roll call. This is an important finding since we might imagine that party groups and MEPs approach non-legislative votes differently than legislative votes. Furthermore, the policy agenda is probably different on non-legislative resolutions than on legislative votes, which can only be initiated by the European Commission.

Second, among legislative votes, RCVs are disproportionately called on texts for which the EP vote has

⁸ Hix (2001a; 2002a) provides a very similar defense of RCVs as a reasonable sample of MEP legislative behavior.

little or no consequence. The most obvious evidence of this is that a disproportionately large share of roll call votes are on measures decided under the Consultation procedure and a disproportionately small number of texts considered under the latter stages of the Codecision procedure are decided by roll call.⁹ Specifically, only one out of sixteen Assent votes and three out of 619 Codecision II votes had roll calls requested.

Table 1. Percent and Number of Votes and RCVs by Type of Legislative Vote

Type of Motion	All Final Votes	RCVs on Final Votes	All Votes	All RCVs
Consultation	45.83	60.00	45.24	59.54
	176	36	1088	103
Assent	4.17	1.67	0.67	0.58
	16	1	16	1
Codecision I	18.75	31.67	27.90	37.57
	72	19	671	65
Codecision II	12.76	1.67	25.74	1.73
	49	1	619	3
Codecision III	2.86	1.67	0.46	0.58
	11	1	11	1
Codecision II, III, and Assent	23.5	5.2	26.9	3.9
	76	3	646	5
Total	324	58	2405	173
Chi-Square	22.02 (p < .001)		88.57 (p < .001)	

⁹ Resolutions are EP motions not directly associated with any piece of legislation, for example, general statements of position on some issue of the day. Consultation procedure votes are also largely symbolic. While the EP can slow down the legislative process by delaying consideration of legislation, the EP can only issue non-binding opinions on the legislative proposals under this procedure. Under the Assent procedure, the EP can veto the motion under consideration. Under the Codecision procedure, the effect of an EP vote depends on whether it is a round I, II, or III vote. Codecision I is similar to the Consultation procedure in that the EP issues an opinion. However, if the EP and Council of Ministers do not reach an agreement, a second round of deliberation occurs. At that point, the EP can amend or reject the Council's common position. If agreement is still not reached, then Codecision III begins with the bill being referred to a Conciliation Committee, which is comprised of members of the Council and EP. If a compromise is reached in the form of a joint text, it is referred back to the EP and Council for a final vote. If an agreement cannot be reached, the bill falls.

Thus, this evidence strongly suggests that PG leaders are making sure that these most important votes are specifically not decided by roll call. Thus, if we are interested in understanding MEP legislative behavior, this RCV dataset is simply inappropriate. We would be trying to infer legislative behavior from a sample of votes that are procedurally the least legislatively important votes.

Roll Call Votes and Issue Areas of Legislation

Votes in the EP vary by issue area. A simple proxy for issue area is the identity of the responsible committee for the legislative text. Thus, we can examine whether EP votes are representative of all legislative votes by issue area by examining the distribution of RCVs and non-RCVs by responsible committee. This is particularly important for whether RCVs are reliable sources of information regarding the character of policy conflict in the EP. If legislation for some issue areas is rarely decided by roll call, then we might expect RCVs to fail to capture policy conflict related to these issue areas.

The distribution of votes across responsible committees indicates that RCVs are substantially biased toward legislation from particular committees (see Table 2, p.6). Three committees (Constitutional Affairs; Citizen's Freedoms and Rights, Justice and Home Affairs; Economic and Monetary Affairs) account for almost two-thirds of RCVs on legislation, but less than one-third of all legislative votes. Furthermore, some issue areas receive roll call votes very rarely. For example, there were fifty votes on amendments or final texts from the committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, but none by roll call.

This finding is clearly important for understanding legislative behavior. Because some issue areas are totally unrepresented in the RCV sample, 1) RCV analysis necessarily will miss dimensions defined by those issues, and 2) if those issues happen to have unusually high or low levels of intra-party conflict, cohesion will be mischaracterized as well. And, clearly, this evidence is contrary to the assumption of Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) regarding the distribution of votes across issue areas.

Party Group Requests for Roll Call Votes

Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) also claimed that roll call votes are not disproportionately called by any one party group. While we could imagine defining "proportional" in a variety of ways, under any reasonable

Table 2. Responsible committee by all votes and RCV (Legislative Final Votes and Amendments)

Committees	All votes	RCVs
Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI)	5.26% 212	5.99% 65
Budgetary Control (CONT)	2.36% 95	3.87% 42
Budgets (BUDG)	10.79% 435	6.82% 74
Citizens' Freedoms and Rights, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)	13.22% 533	16.04% 174
Parliament's delegation to the Conciliation Committee	0.27% 11	0.09% 1
Conference of Presidents	0.20% 8	0.00% 0
Constitutional Affairs (AFCO)	9.20% 371	33.00% 358
Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport (CULT)	2.16% 87	0.00% 0
Development and Cooperation (DEVE)	1.54% 62	0.09% 1
Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON)	5.93% 239	14.84% 161
Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL)	2.58% 104	1.47% 16
Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy (ENVI)	19.02% 767	0.55% 6
Fisheries (PECH)	3.67% 148	2.76% 30
Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence	4.74% 191	2.76% 30
Industry, External Trade, Research and Energy (ITRE)	8.87% 358	5.81% 63
Legal Affairs and the Internal Market (JURI)	4.61% 186	3.50% 38
Regional Policy, Transport and Tourism (RETT)	4.36% 186	2.40% 26
Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities (FEMM)	1.24% 50	0.00% 0
Total	4033	1085

definition the pattern of RCV requests is not proportional. Furthermore, if you compare requesting patterns between final votes and amendments, different groups are using RCVs for different purposes. The PPE requested almost half of the RCVs on final votes, while the Verts/ALE, the TDI, and the ELDR requested the bulk of the RCVs on amendments (see Table 3). The PSE makes only very limited use of RCV requests, compared to its relative importance in the EP.

These findings strongly reaffirm our concerns that the policy space may not be accurately characterized. Unless we assume the legislative agendas of all the party groups are identical, the characterization of the

Table 3. RCV Requesting Groups on Final Votes and Amendments (% and raw numbers)

RCV Requesting Group	Party Group Size	Final Votes	Amendments	Total Votes
Europe of Democracies and Diversity	16	2.33% 4	6.81% 48	5.88% 52
European Liberal Democratic and Reform Parties	53	9.50% 17	11.77% 83	11.31% 100
Far Left	50	5.59% 10	7.80% 55	7.35% 65
Party of European Socialists	175	16.20% 29	9.79% 69	11.09% 98
Technical Group of Independent Members	32	3.35% 6	12.91% 91	10.97% 97
Union for a Europe of Nations	22	2.23% 4	9.79% 69	8.26% 73
Greens	45	11.73% 21	26.95% 190	23.87% 211
European Peoples' Party	233	47.49% 85	9.93% 70	17.53% 155
President	-	1.12% 2	0% 0	.23% 2
MEPs	-	1.12% 2	2.41% 17	2.15% 19
Not Available	-	0% 0	1.84% 13	1.47% 13
Total	626	179	705	884

policy space almost certainly is being distorted. The EPP disproportionately dominates the sample consisting only of final votes and small parties like the Greens and TDI disproportionately dominate the RCVs on amendments.

Implications for Existing Findings Regarding the Party System in the EP

In describing these characteristics of roll call votes, our main priorities were to demonstrate the existence and severity of the sampling problem. These findings both provided systematic evidence that there is a major strategic component in the decision to request RCVs and demonstrated that RCVs are likely to be misrepresenting legislative behavior. In this section, we evaluate specific results in the EP literature in light of what we learned from this RCV analysis. As we will demonstrate, the results of our analysis completely undermine the central findings in the literature.

First, all three sets of findings are inconsistent with the conditions Hix, Noury, and Roland (2002) assume in justifying the use of RCVs to study MEP voting behavior. RCVs are not used for the most important decisions, they are not called on the full range of issues, and they are not called proportionately by party group. Thus, according to their own standards, their evidence of a “normal” EP party system is highly suspect.

Second, one of the two major conclusions regarding voting behavior in the EP is that policy conflict in the EP is predominantly over left-right issues. Our results indicate this is, at best, dubious. To see this, consider a recent study by Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten (2002). This study assessed the congruence between the dimensionality of MEP attitudes regarding different policies, as reported in surveys, and MEP voting behavior, as indicated by RCVs. They found that MEP policy attitudes are structured by three issue domains: integration-independence, socio-economic Left-Right, and libertarian-traditional. In contrast, like previous RCV studies, they found only a single left-right dimension underlying MEP voting behavior. Why this difference in dimensionality?

Our analysis provides an explanation for part of this incongruence in findings. To see why, consider the fact that only the surveys found a libertarian-traditional dimension. One of the policy issues that defined the “libertarian-traditional” issue domain involved women’s rights—specifically, a woman’s freedom to decide on abortion. In the 1999 EP, there were 50 votes on legislation for which the responsible committee was the Women’s Rights and Equal Opportunity

Committee, none of these votes were by roll call. Consequently, it seems extremely unlikely that RCVs would capture a cleavage among the MEPs characterized by this libertarian-traditional dimension. But, given that the survey of MEPs revealed such a dimension, we might well expect that, had these 50 votes been recorded, an analysis of RCVs would reveal a different dimensionality of policy conflict. That is, a libertarian-traditional issue domain may indeed characterize legislative policy conflict, but the selection bias in requesting roll-calls would hide it from view. Consequently, our analysis provides an explanation for this aspect of incongruence in the findings reported in Thomassen, Noury, and Voeten (2002). And, even more importantly, this demonstrates how the observed RCV bias by responsible committee could generate the general finding of one dimension of conflict in RCV studies.

Third, the other major conclusion in the literature is that intra-party cohesion is high, national divisions are low, and inter-party cohesion is relatively low. There are several reasons to doubt this conclusion. The first point is a recapitulation and extension of a point made previously. Simply put, most scholars are interested in studying RCVs because they want to understand how the EP does or might influence legislative outcomes in the EU. Answering this question requires examining behavior on votes that actually have legislative consequences. Without such consequences, MEPs could easily be engaging in cheap talk. And, by implication, what we can learn from those votes is highly problematic. Thus, any study interested in explaining cohesion and conflict in the EP necessarily should be examining votes MEPs care about casting. However, the analysis by types of motion demonstrated that legislatively important votes are a very small proportion of the pool of votes and are systematically selected out of the RCV sample. Thus, conclusions over levels of intra-party cohesion and inter-party conflict are being drawn from a particularly bad sample of data.

Moreover, the analysis shows that standard statistical analysis of RCVs cannot accurately evaluate cohesion. To begin with, note that traditional measures of party cohesion (e.g., agreement scores) should be treated as sample statistics, because RCVs are only a sample of legislative votes. But when we infer general characteristics of voting behavior from this sample, we should report some indication of the uncertainty of our estimates. By way of analogy, notice that public opinion polls generally report confidence intervals around the estimate of, say, the popularity of the governing party.

This is important because, we are unaware of any published studies that report party cohesion scores and

report a standard error for the estimate. Lacking a measure of sample variability, we cannot assess with confidence the level of our inferences regarding party cohesion or make meaningful comparisons of cohesion across time or across PGs.

This problem would be easy to correct if RCVs were a random sample of legislative votes. All one would need to do is calculate a standard error for the estimate of party cohesion and then re-interpret the findings accordingly. But the analysis indicates that, for RCVs in the EP, this solution is unavailable because the sample of votes is not random. This means that, even if we were to calculate standard errors for the estimates of party cohesion, we have no reason to believe they are accurate. Indeed, they would likely be underestimates of the uncertainty in the level of party cohesion. Thus, lacking any measure of uncertainty, we simply cannot learn very much about the level of party cohesion or its differences over time or across party groups from roll call votes.

Finally, the analysis has important implications for whether policy-making in the EP contributes to the transparency and accountability of EU authority. As discussed above, many journalists and scholars identify the EP as a critical source of democratic legitimacy for the EU, at least in part because it allows public scrutiny of policy-making and it provides voters with an electoral connection to policy-making. As in democracies generally, roll call votes are an important institution for transparency and accountability in the EP (Carey forthcoming-a, b).

The results of our analysis suggest otherwise. Most of EP votes are not available for scrutiny, thus denying voters the opportunity to monitor the behavior of their elected representatives. That is not to say that party groups obfuscate all legislative behavior—e.g., speeches or committee reports. But party groups selectively reveal – and hide – one of the most important legislative acts, voting. Our results indicate that the selection of votes is far from random, thereby providing voters with an atypical view of behavior. Obviously, the biased selection of votes for roll-call also limits the transparency of policy-making.¹⁰

Conclusion

Given these findings, we are far from confident that the EP is a “normal” parliament, where parties are co-

hesive in voting behavior and competition is along traditional left-right lines. In addition, we cannot confidently claim, as the existing literature has, that nationality is of little importance in structuring EP legislative behavior. Instead, what our evidence shows is that PG leaders are strategic in how they use roll calls. This may indicate some organizational sophistication, but it means that much of the important legislative voting occurs out of public view. This is bad for the study of EP legislative behavior and bad for normative concerns regarding the responsible party model described earlier.

Recall that RCV studies have indicated that PGs fit the responsible party model in terms of legislative parties. This evidence has been used to support arguments for institutional reforms to strengthen the EP so as to improve the link between voters and policy-makers in the EU. Our analysis indicates that such conclusions and arguments are suspect. We really do not know very much empirically about how nationality or transnational political interests affect legislative behavior in the EP. Under these conditions we cannot distinguish one good theoretical argument from another, and it seems reasonable that national interests could, at least in theory, be relevant to MEP behavior.

The study also has an important implication regarding the value of roll call votes as a tool to enhance democratic accountability. Our results show that the selection of roll call votes by party leadership can undermine this transparency. In the EP, we see that PG leaders seldom request roll calls on the votes that are presumably of greatest import to voters and instead often request roll calls on the votes that have the least legislative impact. Clearly, this does not enhance transparency. Indeed, it undermines it, by allowing party leaders to hide legislators’ behavior selectively from voters, which may be more insidious than holding only secret votes.

As a final note, we support using RCVs to analyze EP legislative behavior. We believe the next logical step is to derive and incorporate an explicit model of RCV requests that will allow scholars to control for these biases when they analyze RCVs. Fortunately, previous studies provide valuable information about the motivations and context of roll call vote requests (e.g., Krepel 2002) that inform a model of roll call vote requests. The appropriate theoretical model of roll call vote request could then be used to estimate Heckman selection bias models of legislative voting behavior that rely upon RCV data. Such models would temper our inferences about party cohesion and the dimensionality of party conflict in light of the selection process.

¹⁰ Of course, one might consider this sort of obfuscation a necessary evil, allowing party groups to maintain cohesion in the face of divisive pressures from varying constituent demands (Carey forthcoming-a).

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