

# ESRC One Europe of Several? Programme

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## How MEPs Vote

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### 1. Why MEP Behaviour Matters

Following the entry into force of the Amsterdam Treaty in May 1999, the newly elected European Parliament (EP) in June 1999 is the first EP with genuine legislative and executive appointment

powers. Put another way, for the first time, how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) vote will have an important impact on political outcomes from the EU system.

### 2. The How MEPs Vote Project

In July 1999, I launched a major project on the motivations and actions of MEPs. This project operates in two stages: (1) data collection - of the attendance and voting records of the MEPs, and (2) data analysis - using a variety of methods, such as statistics and case-studies.

To start the project, we collated and analysed the first 126 Roll Call Votes<sup>1</sup> in the first six months of the newly elected EP (July-December 1999). Using simple cross-tabulations, here are the (very!) preliminary findings from this research.

### 3. Attendance

As Table 1 shows, the least active MEPs are from Italy: who signed the attendance register on only 72% of days when there were votes, and participated in only 59% of the 126 votes (the difference between these figures is the percent of MEPs who were in attendance but chose not to participate in the votes).

Table 1. Attendance, by member state (July-Dec. 1999)

Member state	Attendance (on days of votes) (%)	Participation (in roll call votes) (%)	Difference (%)
Netherlands	87.2	82.6	4.6
Finland	85.2	80.1	5.1
Belgium	81.2	75.8	5.4
Sweden	80.2	74.4	5.7
Germany	86.4	80.1	6.3
U.Kingdom	82.6	75.6	7.0
Spain	85.7	78.1	7.6
Luxembourg	83.6	75.1	8.5
Austria	80.6	71.9	8.7
France	80.6	71.5	9.1
Greece	92.0	82.4	9.6
Denmark	84.8	74.7	10.2
Portugal	78.3	67.5	10.8
Ireland	81.0	68.9	12.1
Italy	72.4	58.9	13.6

In contrast, the Greek MEPs have the highest rate of attendance on days when there are votes (93%), and the Dutch MEPs have the highest rate of participation in votes (83%).

As Table 2 shows, the most active party group is the ELDR: whose MEPs are, on average, in attendance on 82% of voting days and participated in 75% of votes. In contrast, the least active groups are the anti-Europeans (EDD and UEN) or the non-attached MEPs.

Table 2. Attendance, by party group (July 1999-Dec. 1999)

Party group <sup>2</sup>	Attendance (on days of votes) (%)	Participation (in roll call votes) (%)	Difference (%)
ELDR	81.6	75.3	6.3
PES	82.2	75.6	6.6
EUL/NGL	81.4	74.4	7.0
G/EFA	85.6	78.0	7.5
EPP/ED	83.1	74.9	8.2
EDD	80.7	70.8	9.9
UEN	79.9	65.6	14.3
non-attached	73.0	50.7	22.3

These preliminary results suggest several factors that influence participation rates: e.g. whether an MEP has a dual mandate, comes from a constituency close to Strasbourg, has a low base salary (and so needs the expense payments from attendance), is at the beginning or end of their political career, or has a chance to be pivotal in a vote. However, these suppositions will need to be developed and tested at an individual rather than an aggregate level and using more formal methods (such as multivariate statistics).

## 4. Inter-Group Coalitions

Under the EU's decision-making rules, the EP requires an 'absolute majority' of the 626 MEPs (i.e. 314) to amend legislation, regardless of how many MEPs participate in a vote. Hence, with an average turnout of only 461 MEPs, a 'winning coalition' must command 68% of the MEPs participating in the vote.

As Table 3 shows, with average participation, the only feasible absolute-majority coalition is a 'grand coalition' of the EPP and PES plus at least one other party group (i.e. 175+136=311).

Table 3. Effect of varying participation rates on party group size

Party group	No. of MEPs	Average no. of MEPs Participating in votes
EPP/ED	234	175
PES	180	136
ELDR	50	38
G/EFA	48	37
EUL/NGL	42	31
UEN	29	19
EDD	16	11
non-attached	27	14
Total	626	461

However, as Tables 4a-b show, the EPP-PES grand coalition was less prevalent in the first six months of the 1999-2004 EP (in 60% of votes) than in the 1994-1999 EP (in 75% of votes).

Table 4. Percent of times a majority in one party group voted with the majority in another party group.

a. July 1994-June 1999 EP

						European United Left
						Greens 68
						European Radical Alliance 65 56
						Party of European Socialists 76 61 58
						European Lib., Dem. & Reform Party 81 70 58 54
						European People's Party 75 75 64 44 46
						Forza Europa 64 49 53 36 37 37
						Euro. Dem. Alliance 49 51 44 46 34 31 31
						Europe of Nat's 34 48 32 32 34 18 25 36

Source: S. Hix & C. Lord (1997) *Political Parties in the European Union*, London: Macmillan.

b. July-Dec. 1999

						European United Left
						Greens/European Free Alliance 63
						Party of European Socialists 77 62
						European Liberal, Democrat & Reform Party 62 63 44
						European People's Party 70 60 51 41
						Union for a Europe of Nations 67 48 44 67 37
						Eur. Of Dem's & Diversities 45 38 44 41 38 53

Furthermore, Table 5 reveals a growing left-right split in coalition formation in the new EP regardless of the voting rule (simple majority or absolute majority) and type of decision facing the EP (legislative or 'own resolution').

Basically, in post-1999 EP there are two main types of coalitions, with several variants in each:

(1) Coalitions were the EPP and PES vote together (in 60% of votes):

- the EPP-PES 'grand coalition', perhaps with one or two other groups (48%), and
- the 'super coalition' of all parties (12%); and

(2) Coalitions were the EPP and PES are opposed (a Left-Right split) (40%), of which:

- EPP-UEN vs. PES-EUL-Greens-ELDR (14%),
- EPP-ELDR-UEN vs. PES-Greens (13%),
- EPP-ELDR vs. PES-EUL-G-UEN (6%), and
- EPP-ELDR-Greens vs. PES (3%).<sup>3</sup>

Table 5. Coalition frequency by vote rule and decision type (as a % of all coalitions under each rule/decision type) in the post-1999 EP

Type of Coalition	All coal's	Voting Rule		Decision Type	
		SM	AM	LD	OR
Super coalition (all groups)	12	13	5	6	16
Grand coalition (EPP+PES)	48	50	48	53	45
R>L 1 (EPP-ELDR-G vs. PES)	3	4	0	2	4
R>L 1 (EPP-ELDR-UEN vs. PES-G)	13	11	21	8	16
(All Right > Left)	(16)	(15)	(21)	(10)	(20)
L>R 2 (PES-EUL-G-ELDR vs. EPP)	14	12	26	25	8
L>R 2 (PES-EUL-G-UEN vs. EPP)	6	7	0	4	7
(All Left > Right)	(20)	(19)	(26)	(29)	(14)
Total	96	95	100	98	95

Note: SM = simple majority rule, AM = absolute majority rule, LD = legislative decision, OR = own resolution.

Also, Table 5 suggests that the decision type (legislative or non-legislative) is more important for determining the type of coalition than the decision rule (simple or absolute majority). In legislative decisions, the EP tends to be split along Left-Right lines. But, in own resolutions, often on non-legislative issues (such as global events), the main parties tend to vote together.

But not all Left-Right coalitions are 'winning coalitions'. For example, when an absolute majority is required, the EPP can successfully block a legislative proposal supported by the PES, ELDR, Greens and EUL. Hence, in the most common Left-Right split, despite all the other main party groups voting against the EPP (26% of the time when an absolute majority is required), the EPP will still be on the 'winning side'.

Table 6. Which party group gets most in the post-1999 EP?

Party Group	% of times on the winning side
European People's Party/European Democrats	87
European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party	79
Party of European Socialists	77
Greens/European Free Alliance	63
Union for a Europe of Nations	63
European United Left/Nordic Green Left	60
Europe of Democracies and Diversities	57

Consequently, as Table 6 shows, the EPP is more often on the winning side (either voting 'yes' and winning or voting 'no' and blocking) than any other party group (in 87% of votes).

Also, despite being only the third largest group, the ELDR is more successful than the PES (79% to 77%). This reflects the powerful position of being 'pivotal' between the EPP and PES - which allows the ELDR to choose which party to vote with (and turn a losing coalition into a winning coalition).

This reinforces the results in Tables 4a-b, above, which shows that the ELDR votes more with the EPP than the PES in the post-1999 EP (70% and 62%, respectively) than in the 1994-

99 EP (75% and 81%, respectively). But, this does not necessarily mean an ideological coalition between the EPP and ELDR. It simply suggests that the ELDR is likely to vote with whichever of these two parties is larger - to form a majority in return for concessions.

Either way, these results suggest a shift from a coalition structure dominated by grand coalitions with some centre-left coalitions in the 1994-99 EP, to a coalition structure balanced between grand coalitions and centre-right coalitions in the post-1999 EP.

Once again, through, these findings will need to be investigated at the individual level behaviour and with more sophisticated statistical tests.

## 5. Intra-Party Cohesion

As Table 7 shows, the party groups are less cohesive in the post-1999 EP than in any of the previous three parliaments.

This is mainly because the new EP faces more important decisions than the previous EPs. With more power, there is more pressure from outside interests (such as governments, national party leaders, and national interest groups) to break from the transnational party position if it conflicts with a domestic interest. As a result, group cohesion is lower in legislative decisions, where the outcome has an immediate impact (66% on average, 75% for the EPP and 80% for the PES), than in own resolutions, where there is no immediate effect (72% on average, 85% for the EPP and 88% for the PES).

Table 7. Party cohesion in the last four parliaments (IA scores)<sup>4</sup>

	84-89	89-94	94-99	99-04
PES	62	79	89	85
EPP	84	88	90	81
ELDR	70	86	80	88
Greens / G/EFA	--	88	85	75
European Radical Alliance	68	70	99	--
EDA / UPE / UEN	76	65	93	58
European Democratic Group	83	92	--	--
Forza Europa	--	--	81	--
Europe of Nations	--	--	71	--
EUL / EUL/NGL	71	92	84	61
Left Unity	--	94	--	--
EDD	--	--	--	41
European Right	96	99	--	--
Average (non-weighted)	76	84	86	70

Source: S. Hix (1999) *The Political System of the European Union*, London: Macmillan, and this research.

Table 7 also shows that the decline in internal cohesion is higher for the EPP than the PES. This is probably because the EPP is now the largest group. As the main agenda-setter, the decisions of the group are more critical than for

any other group, and hence the pressure on its members is greater (the PES was less cohesive than the EPP in the 89-94 and 94-99 EPs).

But, Table 8 shows another reason for the lower cohesion of the EPP in the post-1999 EP.

Table 8. Voting patterns within the groups in the post-1999 EP

Party group National delegation	% of times a national party votes against the group majority
European People's Party / European Democrats	
Forza Italia (IT)	0.0
Union pour la démocratie française (FR)	0.8
Rassemblement pour la Rép.-Dém. Lib. (FR)	1.2
Christlich Demokratische Union (GE)	1.6
Partido Popular (SP)	5.6
Conservative Party (UK)	31.0
Party of European Socialists	
Parti socialiste (FR)	0.0
Partido Socialista Obrero Español (SP)	2.0
Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (GE)	2.4
Democratici della Sinistra (IT)	3.2
Labour Party (UK)	13.5
European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party	
Venstre (DE)	0.8
Liberal Democrats (UK)	1.6
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (NE)	2.4
I Democratici (IT)	2.4
Greens (G) / European Free Alliance (EFA)	
Die Grünen (Ger)	- G 1.6
Groen Links (Net)	- G 3.2
Ecolo (Bel)	- G 4.0
Agalev (Bel)	- G 4.8
Green Party (UK)	- G 5.6
Les Verts (Fra)	- G 5.6
Plaid Cymru (UK)	- EFA 17.5
Scottish National Party (UK)	- EFA 25.4
Volkswunie (Bel)	- EFA 26.2

In the first six months of the 1999-2004 EP, the majority of British Conservatives voted against the EPP position in almost 1/3 of votes.

In the PES, the British Labour Party was also the most likely to vote against the group line (on 14% of occasions). But, in the ELDR, the British Liberal Democrats were firmly aligned with their fellow liberals.

In the new coalition between the Greens and regionalists (EFA), there is a clear split between these two forces - with the main regionalist parties (PC, SNP and VU) voting against the Green position in approximately 1/4 of votes.

Some of these figures might result from the fact that we can only study how MEPs vote in Roll Call Votes. For example, the British Labour

MEPs tend to call a Roll Call Vote whenever they want to demonstrate to their national party leadership that they oppose the majority PES position.<sup>5</sup> If parties vote against the group line in normal electronic votes, this will not show up in the figures.

However, one could argue that there is only ever a need to vote against the majority position in Roll Call Votes, as these are the only occasions when how a national delegation votes vis-à-vis the group can be signalled to outside interests.

## 6. Summary

- Only 75 percent of MEPs tend to participate in votes in the post-1999 EP.
- But, attendance levels and the need for absolute majorities do not force the EPP and PES to form 'grand coalitions'.
- The EPP and PES compete more than in the previous EP, especially on legislative issues.
- The ELDR is pivotal in determining whether a centre-left or centre-right coalition wins.
- Party cohesion in the post-1999 EP is lower than in previous parliaments.
- This is mainly due to the increased competition on legislative issues.
- The British Conservatives break from the majority EPP position in almost 1 in 3 votes.
- The ELDR is most internally cohesive group of the main four parties.

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<sup>1</sup> In a Roll Call Vote (RCV) how each MEP votes (i.e. 'for', 'against' or 'abstain') is recorded in the minutes of the EP. RCVs are only a sample of all votes in the EP. Most votes are simply by Electronic Vote, where the positions of the individual MEPs are not recorded. However, under the EP's Rules of Procedure, 14 MEPs may call for an RCV on any vote. As the EP has gained power, and the salience of voting in the EP has increased, the proportion of votes that are by RCV has also increased.

<sup>2</sup> The party group abbreviations stand for: EPP/ED = European People's Party/European Democrats, PES = Party of European Socialists, ELDR = European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party, G/EFA = Greens/European Free Alliance, EUL/NGL = European United Left/Nordic Green Left, UEN = Union for a Europe of Nations, EDD = Europe of Democracies and Diversities Group, na = non-attached MEPs.

<sup>3</sup> As occurred in the election of the EP President, Nicole Fontaine, in July 1999.

<sup>4</sup> IA = Index of Agreement. An Index of Agreement is a way of measuring the cohesion of legislative parties. An IA is calculated by taking away the percentage of a group that voted one way (e.g. 'No') from the percentage that voted another way (e.g. 'Yes'). For example, if Party A has 100 MEPs and 75 vote one way while 25 vote another in every vote, the IA for Party A is 50 (i.e. 75-25=50), and if Party B has 100 MEPs and they are split 50-50 in every vote, the IA for Party B is 0 (i.e. 50-50=0).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Richard Corbett MEP.