



European Parliament Political Groups

Standard Note: SN/IA/5031

Last updated: 26 March 2009

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This Note looks briefly at political groups in the European Parliament.

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1 Introduction

Article 191 of the EC Treaty states:

Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are thus encouraged to form alliances in political parties or groups, although they are elected not as members of these groups but as representatives of national parties. European Parliament (EP) political groups are formally constituted, and forming the groups starts at the EP's first session after an election.

A group may be based on a single European political party or can include more than one European party, as well as national parties and independents. The number of political groups has hardly changed since the first direct EP elections in 1979. There were seven then, increasing to 10 in 1989 and falling to seven again in 1999, with eight in 2004. The current EP consists of seven political groups and more than 150 national political parties. No one political group has an overall majority in the EP and there is some switching among groups between EP elections.

Political groups and parties at EU level are mainly coalitions of more or less likeminded national political parties, and studies of voting behaviour in the EP suggest that ideology has more influence than nationality. According to Simon Hix, Abdul Noury and Gerard Roland MEPs vote with their party groups about 90% of the time.¹ Hix *et al* have also looked at whether national parties or EU political groups have more control over MEPs, concluding:

¹ See Simon Hix, Abdul Noury, and Gerard Roland, "How MEPs Vote" (Brighton, U.K.: Economic and Social Research Council), November 2002

We find that MEPs are less likely to vote against their national parties than their European political groups. On balance, one-third of an MEP's voting behaviour is determined by his or her European political group and two-thirds is determined by his or her national party. Hence, growing transnational party politics in the European Parliament must be explained via national political parties. Despite continued policy differences between the member parties in each European political group, national parties have decided to form increasingly powerful transnational political parties and to endow these organisations with leadership and agenda-setting powers.²

2 Structure of EP Groups

2.1 Rules of Procedure

Formal recognition of a group depends on the fulfilment of conditions set out in Rules 29, 30 and 32 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure. Rule 31 provides for MEPs not attached to a political group:³

Rule 29 : Formation of political groups

1. Members may form themselves into groups according to their political affinities.

Parliament need not normally evaluate the political affinity of members of a group. In forming a group together under this Rule, Members concerned accept by definition that they have political affinity. Only when this is denied by the Members concerned is it necessary for Parliament to evaluate whether the group has been constituted in conformity with the Rules.

2. A political group shall comprise Members elected in at least one-fifth of the Member States. The minimum number of Members required to form a political group shall be twenty.

3. A Member may not belong to more than one political group.

4. The President shall be notified in a statement when a political group is set up. This statement shall specify the name of the group, its members and its bureau.

5. The statement shall be published in the Official Journal of the European Union.

Rule 30 : Activities and legal situation of the political groups

1. The political groups shall carry out their duties as part of the activities of the Union, including the tasks allocated to them by the Rules of Procedure. The political groups shall be provided with a secretariat on the basis of the establishment plan of the Secretariat, administrative facilities and the appropriations entered for that purpose in Parliament's budget.

² Simon Hix, London School of Economics and Political Science Abdul G. Noury European Centre for Advanced Research in Economics and Statistics (ECARES), Brussels Gérard Roland University of California, Berkeley April 2007 at <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521694605&ss=exc>

³ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20040720+RULE-029+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

2. The Bureau shall lay down the rules relating to the provision, implementation and monitoring of those facilities and appropriations, as well as to the related delegations of budget implementation powers.

3. Those rules shall determine the administrative and financial consequences in the event of the dissolution of a political group.

Rule 31 : Non-attached Members

1. Members who do not belong to a political group shall be provided with a secretariat. The detailed arrangements shall be laid down by the Bureau on a proposal from the Secretary-General.

2. The Bureau shall also determine the status and parliamentary rights of such Members.

3. The Bureau shall also lay down the rules relating to the provision, implementation and auditing of appropriations entered in Parliament's budget to cover secretarial expenses and administrative facilities of non-attached Members.

Rule 32 : Allocation of seats in the Chamber

The Conference of Presidents shall decide how seats in the Chamber are to be allocated among the political groups, the non-attached Members and the institutions of the European Union.⁴

2.2 Current EP groups and parties

Political group	Sub-parties	Number of MEPs	Approx. percentage of EP
<u>European People's Party–European Democrats</u> (EPP–ED)	<u>European People's Party</u> (EPP) <u>European Democrats</u> (ED)	286	37%
<u>Party of European Socialists</u> (PES)		217	27%
<u>Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe</u> (ALDE)	<u>European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party</u> (ELDR) <u>European Democratic Party</u> (EDP) + 2 unaffiliated national parties + 2 independent politicians	100	13%
<u>Union for Europe of the Nations</u> (UEN)	<u>Alliance for Europe of the Nations</u> (AEN) + 6 unaffiliated national parties	44	6%
<u>European Greens–European Free</u>	<u>European Green Party</u>		

⁴ EP Rules of Procedure, 16th edition, March 2009, at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20090309+RULE-032+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

Alliance (Greens–EFA)	(EGP) European Free Alliance (EFA) + 2 unaffiliated national parties	43	5%
European United Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE–NGL)	Party of the European Left (PEL) Nordic Green Left Alliance (NGLA) + 5 unaffiliated national parties	41	5%
Independence/Democracy (I/D)	Alliance of Independent Democrats in Europe (AIDE) EUDemocrats (EUD) + 2 unaffiliated national parties	22	3%
Non-Inscrits (NI) Not a member of any group	Euronat + 11 unaffiliated national parties + 3 independent politicians	29	4%

Source: EP website <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert.do?language=EN.eu.int>

3 Benefits of group membership

Each group appoints a leader ('president', 'co-ordinator' or 'chair'), who decides how the group should vote. However, MEPs vote on an individual and personal basis under Article 4(1) of the Act annexed to Decision 76/787/EEC on direct elections to the European Parliament. They carry out their mandate independently and are not bound by the political guidelines of the party for which they were elected or the political group to which they are linked in the EP.

3.1 Material benefits

The material benefits of being in a group include more office space and staff, and more money for organising meetings and distributing information.

In November 2007 a Commission proposal on the statute and financing of European political parties was adopted to allow European political parties to fund the 2009 campaigns.⁵ The funding also allows the creation of political foundations, which provide forums through conferences, public debates and training for national political movements and academic institutions. The aim was to improve communication about Europe and encourage participation in the debate on Europe to help bring the EU "closer" to its citizens. EU political parties receive around €10 million per year via the EP and the 2008 EU budget also included €5 million for the new political foundations.⁶

The new Regulation stipulates that foundations must be formally associated with an existing European party in order to access funding and may receive funds only by applying through

⁵ Regulation (EC) No 1524/2007 of the EP and Council amending Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, OJL 343, 18 December 2007. See *Oeil* at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oil/file.jsp?id=5505072>

⁶ EP press service at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/thematic_note_page/008-46723-019-01-04-901-20090120TMN46722-19-01-2009-2009/default_p001c009_en.htm

the political party to which it is affiliated. The funding is directed only to the European political parties, not to the political groups and cannot be used to finance other parties or national parties and candidates. The funds are set out in the EP section of the 2009 EU budget (line 402, chapter 40, title IV section 1)⁷ and are controlled by the EP.

The following parties receive funding:

European People's Party (EPP)
Party of European Socialists (PES)
European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR)
European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP)
Party of the European Left (EL)
European Democratic Party (PDE/EDP)
Alliance for Europe of the Nations (AEN)
European Free Alliance (EFA)
EU Democrats (EUD)⁸

The “Alliance des Démocrates Indépendants en Europe” (ADIE) was dissolved on 31 December 2008 and the EP Bureau decided in February 2009 not to fund it. The EP also suspended an earlier decision to give €200,000 in EU funds to the anti-Lisbon Treaty group *Libertas*.

3.2 Procedural benefits

The political group chairs meet in the Conference of Presidents to decide what issues will be dealt with at the EP’s plenary session. Groups can table motions for resolutions and amendments to reports. Under Rule 82.2 a political group can propose a debate with the Commission and the Council before accession negotiations with an applicant state are opened.⁹ Under Rule 83, on the proposal of a political group the EP can ask the Council not to issue a mandate for negotiating an international agreement before the EP has stated its position. Rule 108 provides that a political group can put questions to the Council or the Commission.

The procedural advantages include committee leadership appointments and the allocation of reports and speaking time in plenary sessions, based on the rule of proportionality. Under Rule 142 of the Rules of Procedure:

1. The Conference of Presidents may propose to Parliament that speaking time be allocated for a particular debate. Parliament shall decide on this proposal without debate.
2. Speaking time shall be allocated in accordance with the following criteria:
 - (a) a first fraction of speaking time shall be divided equally among all the political groups;

⁷ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/data/AP2009_VOL2/EN/nmc-titleN50400935180-50/nmc-chapterN50400935180-51/index.html#N50400935180-51

⁸ These parties are not the same as the seven political groups in the EP, which include MEPs affiliated to an EU party (or parties) via their national party membership.

⁹ “Parliament may decide, on a proposal from the committee responsible, a political group or at least forty Members, to request the Commission and the Council to take part in a debate before negotiations with the applicant State commence”.

(b) a further fraction shall be divided among the political groups in proportion to the total number of their members;

(c) the non-attached Members shall be allocated an overall speaking time based on the fractions allocated to each political group under subparagraphs (a) and (b).¹⁰

3.3 Committee composition

The composition of EP Committees and sub-committees reflects the composition of the EP groups under Rules 177 and 181:

1. Members of committees and committees of inquiry shall be elected after nominations have been submitted by the political groups and the non-attached Members. The Conference of Presidents shall submit proposals to Parliament. The composition of the committees shall, as far as possible, reflect the composition of Parliament.

When Members change political groups they shall retain, for the remainder of their two and a half year term of office, the seats they hold in parliamentary committees. However, if a Member's change of political group has the effect of disturbing the fair representation of political views in a committee, new proposals for the composition of that committee shall be made by the Conference of Presidents in accordance with the procedure laid down in paragraph 1, second sentence, whereby the individual rights of the Member concerned shall be guaranteed.¹¹

For the smaller parties, joining together in political groups is advantageous. For example, the European Free Alliance, which has five MEPs, and the European Greens, with 37 MEPs, is more powerful and influential in the European Greens-European Free Alliance Group than the two parties would be on their own. They are entitled to more funding from the EP and are guaranteed seats on committees.

3.4 Decision-making using co-decision

The powers accrued by the EP over the years have made the EP more influential in EU decision-making, largely through the increased use of the co-decision procedure, in which the EP makes legislation together with the Council of Ministers.

Co-decision gives the EP the opportunity to amend Commission proposals and ultimately to veto them in certain circumstances. The procedure is as follows:

A Commission proposal is presented to the European Parliament and the Council

First reading

Parliament adopts or does not adopt amendments to the Commission proposal.

If it does not adopt amendments and if the Council also accepts the Commission proposal, the act is adopted by the Council by qualified majority

¹⁰ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20090309+RULE-142+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

¹¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20090309+RULE-177+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>

If Parliament adopts amendments:

If the Council approves all the amendments and does not change the Commission proposal otherwise, the act is adopted by the Council by qualified majority

If the Council does not approve all the amendments or rejects them, the Council adopts a common position by qualified majority, which is forwarded to Parliament. It must provide a full explanation of its reasons for adopting its common position. The Commission informs Parliament of its opinion.

Second reading

Parliament has three possibilities for action within three months:

if it approves the Council's common position or if it does not deliver an opinion within that period, the act is deemed adopted in accordance with the common position.

if it rejects the common position by an absolute majority of its Members, the act is deemed not to have been adopted.

if it adopts amendments to the common position by an absolute majority of its Members, the text is forwarded to the Council and Commission for their opinion on the amendments. In the last case:

either the Council approves all Parliament's amendments by qualified majority, in which case the act is deemed adopted and signed by the Presidents of Parliament and the Council

or the Council informs Parliament that it does not approve all its amendments to the common position, in which case the President of the Council and the President of Parliament agree on a date and place for a first meeting of the Conciliation Committee within a six week period.

Third reading

The Conciliation Committee, which comprises members of the Council and an equal number of MEPs, considers the common position voted at second reading on the basis of Parliament's amendments. It has six weeks to draw up a joint text.

If the Conciliation Committee does not approve the joint text within the agreed time period, the act is deemed not to have been adopted and the procedure is terminated.

If the Conciliation Committee approves the joint text, it is presented to the Council and Parliament for approval. The Council and Parliament have six weeks to approve it; the Council takes a decision by qualified majority and Parliament by a majority of the votes cast. The act is adopted if the Council and Parliament approve the joint text.¹²

Under the EP's Rules of Procedure the political groups are instrumental in many respects during co-decision. For example, under Rule 62 a political group can table amendments on the Council's common position. Under Rule 64 the members of the Conciliation Committee

¹²<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/expert/staticDisplay.do;jsessionid=8F773C5FFB00BF97EE343306922CA670.node2?id=55&pageRank=3&language=EN>

are appointed by the political groups and the composition is proportional to the size of the groups.

3.5 Comment

Ralf Grahn, who hosts an EU law blog, *GrahnLaw*, argues that the political groups are the power base of the EP:

Group and strength

The Rules of Procedure make it quite clear that the political groups run the show. After a recent amendment – Resolution P6_TA(2007)0499 – only one of the non-attached members (non-inscrits, NI) is allowed to attend the meetings of the Conference of Presidents, without a vote.

Among the political groups, the bottom line is that the larger ones decide. Even if each group is represented in the Conference of Presidents, the chairs of the political groups vote according to the parliamentary strength of their groups:

Rule 23 Composition of the Conference of Presidents

1. The Conference of Presidents shall consist of the President of Parliament and the chairs of the political groups. The chair of a political group may arrange to be represented by a member of that group.
2. The non-attached Members shall delegate one of their number to attend meetings of the Conference of Presidents, without having the right to vote.
3. The Conference of Presidents shall endeavour to reach a consensus on matters referred to it.

Where a consensus cannot be reached, the matter shall be put to a vote subject to a weighting based on the number of Members in each political group.¹³

3.6 Comparison with Westminster

The London office of the EP has responded to various questions about the way the EP groups operate compared with the Westminster Parliament and the whipping system:

The political groups within the Parliament are allocated speaking time in proportion to their numbers of MEPs and it is up to them how that time is divided between their MEPs.

One minute is the minimum, not the norm. The most common speaking time is 5-6 minutes for a party or group spokesperson and 2 minutes for other speakers. Some MEPs are allotted only 60-90 seconds by their political groups, but this is not the majority.

Detailed discussion takes place at committee stage, where there are no constraints on how long an MEP can speak, or how often he/she can take the floor.

In the 2005 debate on the proposed European Constitution, a total of 119 MEPs spoke in the debate for periods ranging from 1-7 minutes.

¹³ http://grahnlaw.blogspot.com/2009/02/european-parliament-political-groups_28.html

Filibustering is not possible in the European Parliament, unlike in the House of Commons. The strict allocation of speaking time is necessary because of the working hours of the European Parliament and of its interpreters - debates never go beyond midnight.

[...]

The party "whip" systems in the European Parliament and the House of Commons are very similar. MEPs are urged to follow their party and/or group line in any vote and will tend to follow the indications of their party spokesperson (or rapporteur/shadow rapporteur) in the course of a vote. Staff of the political groups go to great pains to provide Members of their groups with detailed voting lists showing which way the group has decided to vote on every amendment. There is far more likelihood of Members not knowing what they are voting about in the House of Commons, where some divisions involve one vote on several pieces of legislation at a time!¹⁴

¹⁴ <http://www.europarl.org.uk/section/media/things-they-say-about-us>