

5 Public opinion and political participation

■ Introduction

In May 2014 the citizens of the twenty-eight EU member states headed to the polls to elect their representatives for the European Parliament. In the run-up to the elections the EP made every effort to mobilize as many voters as possible. Using the slogan 'This time it's different' it highlighted the fact that the political groups for the first time had put forward candidates for the post of Commission president. The winning political group would be allowed to nominate their candidate. For the first time citizens thus were able to influence the choice of the new Commission president, thereby making the elections more important and interesting to the voters.

These expectations were not fulfilled. With only 42.5% of the voters going to the polls, turnout was even lower than the previous all-time low of 43% that had been reached at the 2009 elections. Moreover, those people that made the effort to vote did not seem to be interested at all in electing the new Commission president. While the mainstream political parties still succeeded in holding on to a large majority of the seats, Eurosceptical parties on both the left and the right made important gains. Some of them, such as the UK Independence Party, the French National Front and the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left, actually won the

The facts outlined above pose important questions about people's opinions on the EU as well as their behaviour in EP elections:

- How do citizens evaluate the EU and how have their opinions changed over the years?
- Which factors explain citizen evaluations of the EU?
- How have citizens voted in EP elections and referendums on European integration and how can we explain their voting behaviour?
- What do these developments tell us about the possibilities for further integration?

In this chapter we show that the EU has, for much of its existence, not figured very prominently in the minds of many citizens. This lack of saliency – not being prominent in people's minds – allowed the member state governments and their politicians to move on with European integration without worrying too much about citizen opinions. The introduction of direct elections for the European Parliament did not make the EU more important in the views of voters. For a long time EP elections were therefore dominated by national issues and did not reflect voters' views on EU politics. In recent years, however, things seem to be changing. People are still reluctant to vote in EP elections, but a larger number of citizens are more critical of the EU, including those that go and vote. As a result further integrative steps cannot rely anymore on the implicit support of EU citizens, but may generate more and more resistance.

European Parliament and in national referendums on some aspect of European integration.

Public opinion and political participation are important for democracies because they connect citizens to the political system. If politicians are able to translate people's demands into policies and if they successfully tackle the most important problems this will most likely increase the **legitimacy** of the political system. Studying public opinion and political participation is crucial to find out to what extent people support their political system and how they try to affect policy-making.

■ Public opinion

Interest in the public's opinion on some kind of cooperation between the nation-states of Europe dates back as far as the Second World War, which witnessed a proliferation of ideas on cementing the nation-states together (see Chapter 1). Political leaders had to be very careful in their plans for seeking new forms of cooperation between the nation-states. If there were to be some kind of cooperation between the different European countries, it was essential to find out to what extent the citizens of these countries supported such moves.

Support for such steps was surprisingly high. Scattered surveys held in the 1950s showed that:

- Between 55% and 75% of the citizens of founding members like France, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy were in favour 'of making efforts towards uniting Europe'.
- Only a small minority was opposed to such efforts.
- Between 20% and 30% had no opinion on the issue.

In 1962, five years after the Treaties of Rome were signed, a Gallup poll concluded that there was 'very widespread support for the idea of European unification' amongst the citizens of the six member states. These general levels of support were accompanied by large majorities of citizens in favour of specific policies. When probed on specific themes a sizeable majority of citizens professed to be in favour of the elimination of tariffs (81%), equalizing social benefits (77%) and a common agricultural policy (69%).

But what to make of the answers to these questions? For a long time public opinion surveys on Europe have been haunted by the problem of **non-attitudes**. In one of the most influential early studies on public opinion, the authors summarized their results as follows:

A **non-attitude** is an expression of opinion which is not rooted in strongly held beliefs and hence can be very volatile.

■ Public opinion, political participation and politics

Public opinion and **political participation** are two key concepts for understanding the relation between citizens and the political system. Public opinion refers to people's attitudes towards a given subject. In

the case of EU politics these opinions may cover a wide range of questions: How interested are citizens in the EU? Do they think European integration is a good thing? Which problems should be tackled at the European level? How trustworthy are the members of the European Parliament? Do citizens support a further enlargement of the EU?

While public opinion is about everything that people *think*, political participation focuses on what citizens *actually do*. In principle citizens have the same opportunities to be active in EU politics as in their own national politics. First, there is a full range of forms of *non-electoral participation* stretching from contacting the European Parliament or Commission, sending letters to the European Ombudsman and signing petitions, to joining a national protest or even attending one in Brussels. While there is an almost infinite number of possibilities to do this, only a small minority of citizens actually engage them. At the EU level these activities are mostly undertaken by organized groups

Legitimacy: the condition of being in accordance with the norms and values of the people.

relevance to their daily lives. By and large they do not think about it very often, cannot answer simple questions about it, and do not list European issues per se as very salient ones.

Leon N. Lindberg and Stuart A. Scheingold, Europe's Would-be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community (Prentice Hall, 1970: 257).

For most people Europe and the European institutions were so distant that questions on European integration were rather novel to them and did not tap well-developed opinions. All in all, Lindberg and Scheingold characterized the public's mood towards the European project as a 'permissive consensus': permissive because the mood was supportive, and consensual because this was shared by a very large part of the population. The consensus enabled political elites to proceed with the integration project relatively unrestrained.

Briefing 5.1

Gauging public opinion in the EU: Eurobarometer

Since 1974 the European Commission has systematically monitored public opinion on Europe through its Eurobarometer surveys. They followed up on a 1972 report by the European Parliament (the Schuitem report) which pressed for a more active and effective information policy on the part of the European Commission in order to educate the public about Europe.

Every spring and autumn surveys are carried out in all member states amongst 1,000 randomly selected citizens from the age of fifteen upwards. This makes it possible to analyse and compare developments in public opinion across the member states as well as over time. The bulk of the questions focus on evaluating the EU: their country's membership, the speed of the integration process, attachment to the European Union, trust in the different EU institutions, citizen knowledge of and interest in EU affairs and their attitudes towards further expanding the EU. To put these into perspective more general questions on people's personal situation and their evaluation of policies in general are included as well.

The standard Eurobarometer is supplemented by special Eurobarometers which are held at the request of specific directorates of the Commission to gauge public opinion on issues as diverse as animal welfare, the Euro, radioactive waste or the Common Agricultural Policy. Results of these surveys often find their way into official policy documents of the Commission and speeches by European Commissioners, usually in order to signal support for a specific policy or indicate the need to further develop policies. Most of the standard Eurobarometer data as well as the reports are made public after a small embargo period. Academic scholars frequently use the data in all kinds of scholarly publications on the EU.

More information can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

In the early 1970s three of the member states which had applied for admission – Denmark, Ireland and Norway – submitted their application to a popular vote by means of a referendum in order to get popular approval for membership. In order to monitor the public's mood and predict their behaviour the European Commission started polling public opinion in these countries in the run-up to those referendums. It did not take long before such surveys were to be conducted on a regular basis in each of the member states: the Eurobarometer studies were born (see Briefing 5.1).

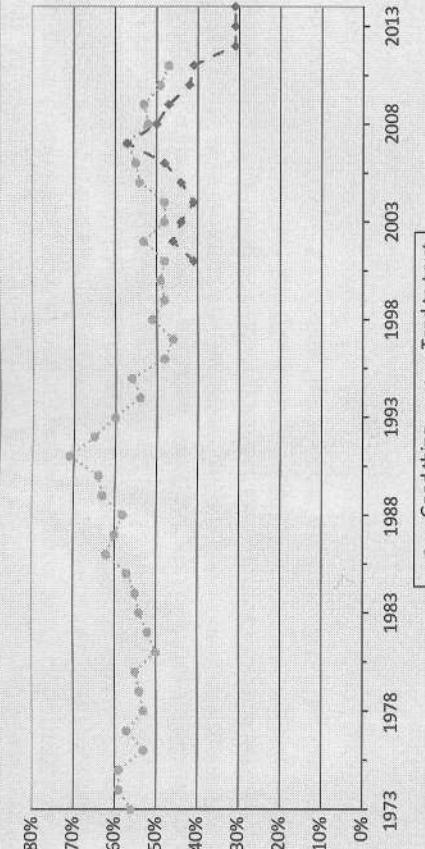
One question which was included from the start of the Eurobarometer survey series asks citizens whether they consider their country's membership a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad. The question has become one of the most prominent tools to assess the public's mood on European integration over time. Figure 5.1 charts this support up until 2012, the last year in which this question was asked. The figure also depicts the percentage of people that 'tend to trust' the EU. This question has been asked since 2001 and its trend roughly follows that of the other support question, allowing us to monitor the most recent developments in support for the EU. The figure shows a number of things:

- For the EU as a whole support steadily increases in the 1970s and 1980s and declines at the beginning of the 1990s. At the beginning of the 2000s support increases and peaks in 2007, after which it declines substantially to the lowest trust levels measured so far.
- Important EU-related events such as the accession of new member states or the outcomes of the 2005 referendums do not suggest a clear impact on approval rates.
- Important external events such as the oil crisis in 1973 or the fall of the Iron Curtain also do not seem to have affected approval rates. However, the 2008 financial crisis seems to have clearly impacted levels of support.

Figure 5.2 displays the trust levels in 2014 amongst the citizens of the different member states. Citizens from some of the new member states such as Romania, Lithuania and Bulgaria express the highest levels of trust in the EU, whilst those in countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK show very low trust levels. The findings above provide an important first insight into the nature of public opinion formation in the EU. Opinions on the EU are predominantly formed within national contexts. It is therefore hard to talk about the public opinion in the EU. It varies considerably between the member states and it may be strongly affected by country-specific events and circumstances. We can see the same amount of variation when we look at people's opinions on the types of policies the EU should deal with. Table 5.1 lists different policy areas and the percentage of citizens that want some EU involvement in this.

At the top of the list of topics that should jointly be decided by the EU and member states are those with a clear cross-border dimension such as fighting

Figure 5.1 Public support for the EU. The lines represent the percentage of voters considering their country's membership to be 'a good thing' (1973–2012) and the percentage of citizens that 'tend to trust' the EU (2001–14).



Source: Eurobarometers, 1973–2014.

Table 5.1 Support for the involvement of the EU in different policy areas

Policy area	Percentage in favour of decisions being made jointly		
	Average	Highest score	Lowest score
Fighting terrorism	78	92 (DK/LU)	62 (UK)
Scientific and technological research	73	92 (CY)	61 (UK)
Protecting the environment	68	86 (DE)	48 (MT)
Energy	66	86 (CY)	49 (UK)
Defence and foreign affairs	65	80 (LU)	23 (FI)
Fighting crime	62	81 (SK)	34 (UK)
Immigration	60	79 (MT)	28 (FI)
Competition	59	72 (CY)	41 (UK)
Reform and supervision of the financial sector	59	73 (BE/DE)	34 (UK)
Economic growth	57	75 (LT)	37 (UK)
Fighting inflation	56	73 (DE)	32 (UK)
Support for regions facing economic difficulties	56	80 (MT)	43 (UK)
Consumer protection	52	73 (CY)	33 (UK)
Transport	51	73 (BE)	26 (UK)
Agriculture and fishery	49	70 (CY)	22 (FI)
Reducing public debt	44	62 (LV)	17 (SE)
Tackling unemployment	39	59 (SK)	20 (UK)
Health	38	77 (CY)	14 (FI)
The education system	34	54 (LV)	14 (FI)
Social welfare	29	56 (CY)	11 (DK/F/SE)
Taxation	28	43 (LT/PT)	8 (DK/F)
Pensions	24	45 (PT)	5 (FI)

Percentage of respondents answering 'jointly to the following question: 'For each of the following areas, do you think that decisions should be made by the [Nationality] Government or made jointly within the EU?'

Source: Eurobarometers 72 (2009), 74.2 (2010) and 76.3 (2011).

of Maltese citizens believe so. The table thus once again underlines the great amount of variation in public opinion when we compare citizens from different member states. This is not the only source of variation, however. Within every member state there are important differences between citizens as well. We explain these in the next section.

considerable transfer of money between citizens such as pensions, taxation, and health and social welfare. The second and third column of the table show the range of support by listing the countries where support for these policies is highest and lowest. Differences between countries can be as large as 50 percent (see points). For example, 'households less than a third of the size of the average household' in Luxembourg support the EU more than those in Malta.

■ Explaining public opinion

In order to explain differences between citizen opinions on the EU it is useful to

also determine support for the EU. This applies by and large to all the aspects of integration we just discussed: the general evaluation of a country's membership, trust in the EU and the EU's involvement in different policy areas. Three groups of factors play a role: socio-demographic factors, general political evaluations and, finally, a group of EU-specific factors.

Socio-demographic factors

- Education:** people with higher levels of education are more supportive of the EU.
- Occupational class:** people in professional and managerial jobs are more supportive of the EU than manual workers or unemployed people. An important explanation for this is that those highly skilled workers benefit more from integration compared to those other categories.
- Income:** support for the EU tends to be higher among people with higher disposable incomes.

Religion: Catholics are more supportive than Protestants. While Catholicism has always been characterized by a strong transnational and internationalist tradition which sought to unite its followers, Protestantism developed in an opposite way and puts a strong emphasis on national sovereignty.

General political evaluations

- Interest in politics:** people who are more interested in politics and who follow politics more actively in the media are more supportive of the EU than those with lower levels of political interest.
- Political trust:** people who are more trusting of political institutions, such as their parliament, government, the police and the courts, are more supportive of the EU.
- Support for government in office:** people who have voted for parties which are currently in their national government tend to be more supportive of the EU than those who voted for opposition parties.
- Left-right:** after having taken into account the above factors, the impact of being conservative or progressive is relatively limited and differs from country to country. In some countries voters on the left and right are less supportive than those in the middle, while in others support is stronger among leftists or among rightist voters. This all depends on the position national political parties take towards the EU: voters take cues from their parties in order to determine what to think about the EU (see Briefing 5.2).

Briefing 5.2

Cues

Many citizens do not make the costly and time-consuming effort to process all the information on the pros and cons of European integration, but rather rely on cues to make up their minds and decide what to think of certain issues. Cues are cognitive short-cuts which may be provided by trusted third parties such as political parties (party cue) or the media (media cue). They are especially important in the context of the EU given the complex, distant and abstract nature of many issues. The role of cues can be illustrated by looking at the behaviour of French voters in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty. The table below shows the position of the different French political parties and the percentage of voters who voted in favour of the Treaty in the referendum. In those cases where the party line was clear, a clear majority of party supporters voted accordingly. The picture is different for the Socialist Party and the Greens. While officially in favour, these two parties faced strong internal division on the issue. As a result, voters were also mixed on the issue. These figures teach us an important lesson on the effect of cues: strong and unambiguous cues have a greater impact than those containing mixed messages.

Party	Party stance	% voters in favour
UMP	In favour	80
UDF	In favour	76
Socialist Party	Mixed	44
Greens	Mixed	40
MPF	Against	25
Front National	Against	7
Far Left	Against	6
Communist Party	Against	2

Source: Henry Milner, "YES to the Europe I want; NO to this one": Some Reflections on France's Rejection of the EU Constitution, *PSOnline*, April 2006 (www.apsanet.org/imgtest/PSA06Milner.pdf).

- Economic benefits:** if people believe the EU yields economic benefits, they are more supportive. This applies both to personal economic benefits from EU membership (so called 'egocentric' evaluations) and to evaluations of the benefit for the country as a whole ('sociotropic' evaluations).
- Identity:** if people exclusively identify with their own country and do not consider themselves to be 'European', they are less supportive of the EU. The role of identity in shaping attitudes towards the EU is also reflected in people's evaluation of the further expansion of the EU. People tend to be

EU-specific factors

- Knowledge and interest:** higher levels of knowledge of the EU and its institutions and more interest in the EU's affairs are related to higher levels of support.

countries threaten their culture and their way of life. We further discuss this role of identity at the end of this chapter, because its impact has increased over time.

All in all, then, public opinion on the EU in a very large part is driven by the same factors as those factors that determine opinions towards the national government. This so-called 'logic of extrapolation' underlines the importance of national contexts for explaining public opinion about the EU. Rather than evaluating the EU as a separate entity, people assess it in close relation to their general evaluation of politics. Consequently, the recent decline in trust in the EU that we noted in Figure 5.1 is accompanied by a similar decline of people's trust in their national government.

■ A gap between citizens and elites

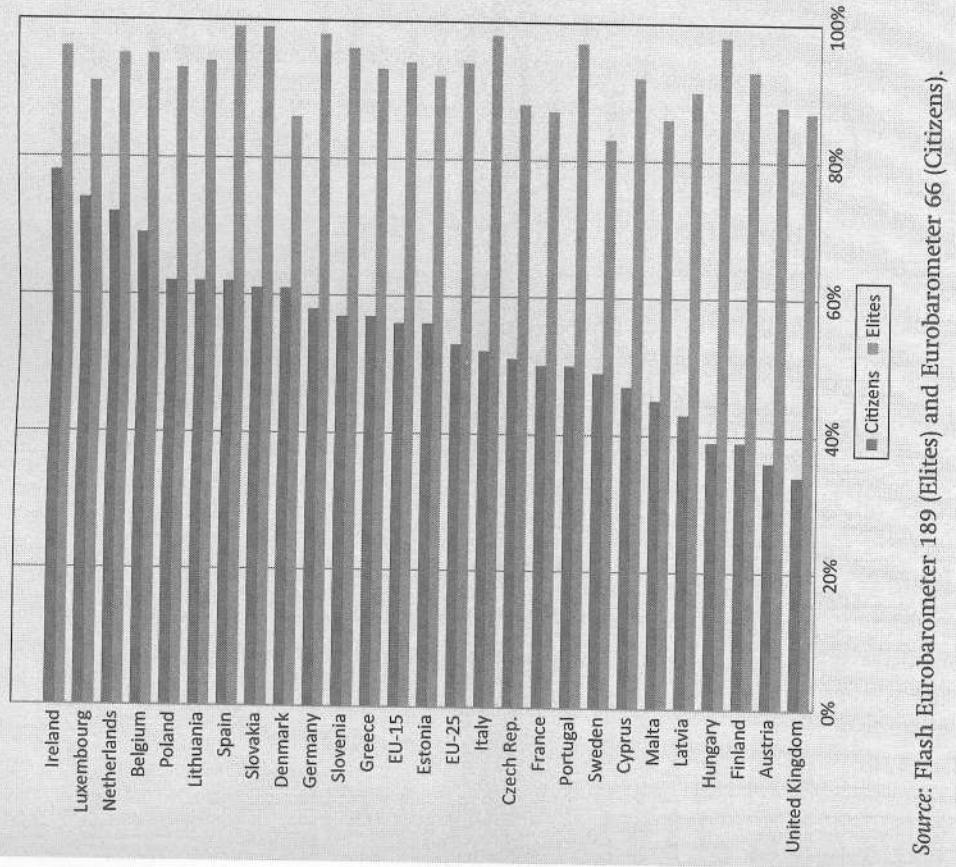
In the introduction we pointed out that democracies should strive to translate the preferences of citizens into policies. In representative democracies citizens do not make policies themselves, however. Most of the decisions are taken by political elites, such as members of parliament, senior civil servants, business and labour leaders and media leaders. By comparing the viewpoints of political elites with those of citizens, it is possible to see to what extent they have a similar evaluation of the EU as a political system.

Figure 5.3 presents data from a study that compares the general public with these elites. While at the level of citizens we witness considerable variation between the member states, we notice a consistently high support at the elite level. More than 80% of the elite respondents – drawn from the groups listed above – think their country's membership of the EU is a 'good thing'. In many countries, then, there is a considerable gap between the elites and the general public.

The differences are also visible in the different types of policies that citizens and elites would like to see taken care of at the European level, although somewhat less pronounced. Neither citizens nor elites like to see a great amount of EU involvement in areas that involve a lot of spending. Elites, however, are to a much greater extent in favour of policies for which there is a clear functionalist logic (currency, immigration), while citizens tend to attach more importance to policies that cushion the effect of the single market: social policies, employment policies and environmental policies.

The gap between citizens and elites is also visible when we compare the positions of citizens with those of political parties. By and large political parties and their candidates are much more pro-integrationist than citizens. In fact in many member states all of the mainstream parties for a very long time have been fully supportive of European integration. However, since the beginning of the 1990s we have witnessed the emergence of Eurosceptic parties: some of these have specifically organized to oppose further European integration, while others are primarily nationalistic in focus and as a result are also critical about

Figure 5.3 Percentage of citizens and elites agreeing with the statement that their country's membership of the EU is a 'good thing' (2006).



Source: Flash Eurobarometer 189 (Elites) and Eurobarometer 66 (Citizens).

■ Elections

Voting in the elections for the European Parliament remains by far the most common form of political participation for ordinary citizens. Every five years citizens in all the member states have the opportunity to elect a member of the European Parliament. As we saw in Chapter 3, parliamentary seats are allocated in elections conducted in all member states, rather than in a Europe-wide election on one and the same day. We therefore first compare turnout for EP elections with that for national elections in each

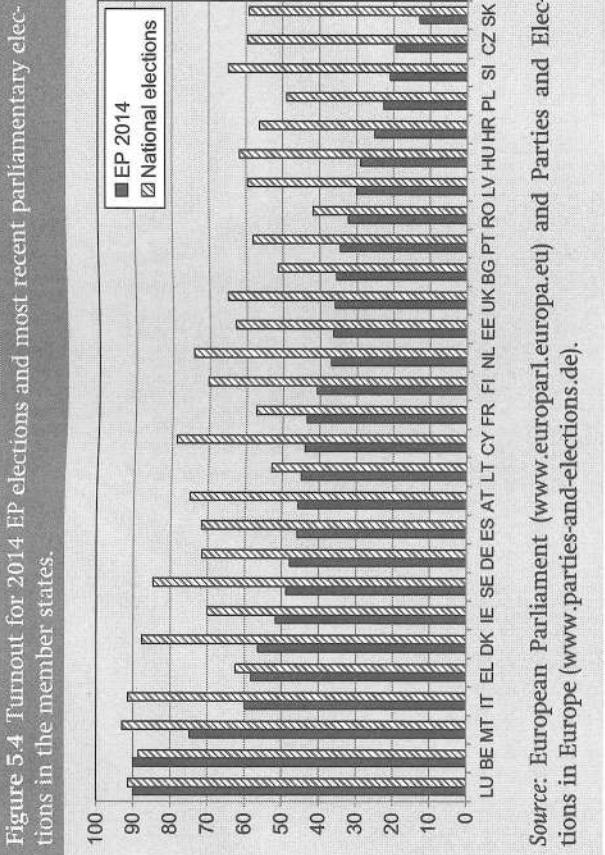
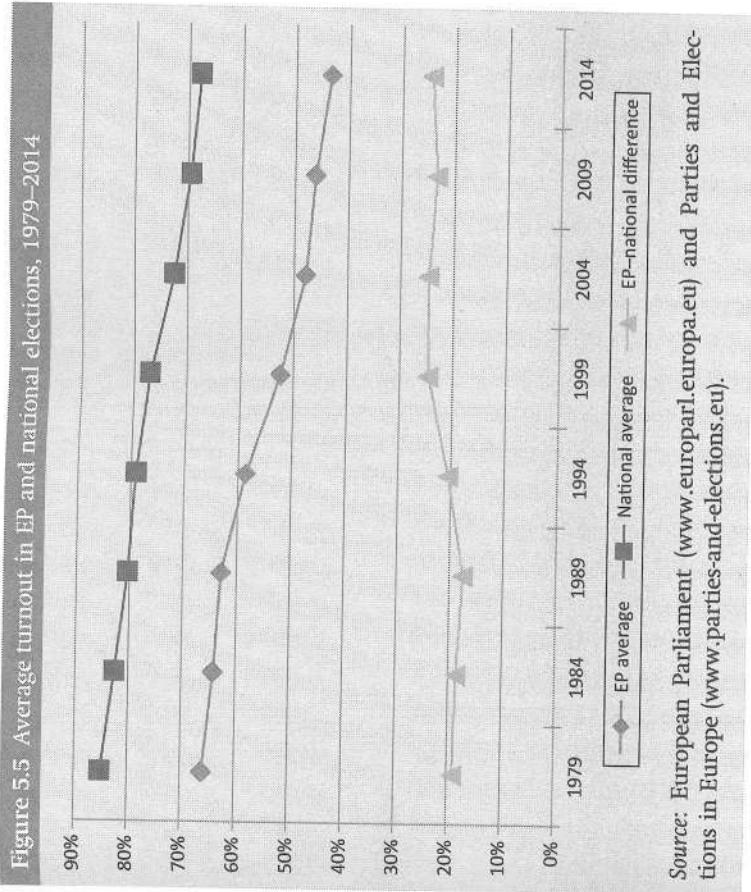


Figure 5.4 shows that EP elections draw substantially smaller numbers of voters to the polls than national elections. Turnout has been especially low in the new member states from Eastern Europe and in the UK. The figure also shows that turnout rates for the two types of elections are related. Lower turnouts in national elections translate into lower turnouts for the EP elections, with rates which are typically 20–30% lower.

So why is turnout for EP elections so much lower than for national elections? A year after the first direct elections for the EP, political scientists Karl-Heinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt classified these as ‘second-order national elections’. For many voters elections for the European Parliament are simply not as important as those that take place at the national level. The secondary importance of EP elections compared to these national ‘first-order elections’ has significant consequences for the behaviour of voters:

- First, because many voters consider EP elections much less important than national elections, turnout is usually lower than for parliamentary or presidential elections at home, as can be seen in Figure 5.4 (the only exceptions to this rule are Belgium and Luxembourg which have compulsory voting).
- Second, many who do vote in EP elections use them to evaluate national politics rather than European affairs. In this sense, voters use European elections to say something about the performance of their national governments. Consequently, governing parties will tend to lose votes in EP elections.
- Third, because voters feel there is not much at stake at EP elections, they are more inclined to ‘vote with their hearts’ instead of ‘their heads’.



EP elections, then, are as much evaluations of national politics as they are of the EU. The fates and fortunes of political parties in EP elections are therefore to a large extent determined by developments ‘back home’. Eurosceptic parties may benefit from this by offering voters a way to signal their discontent. These parties have been aware of the gap between citizens and the traditional elites regarding their attitudes towards the EU. Hence, they have strategically positioned themselves as critical of European integration.

There is, however, a large variety in the types of parties that express a Eurosceptic position: it ranges from extreme right populist parties such as the Hungarian Jobbik party to left-wing parties such as the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left. The extent to which voters are willing to cast a vote for these parties depends thus not only on the availability of Eurosceptic options but also on their political profile.

In some member states Eurosceptic positions are only expressed by a single extremist party, making citizens reluctant to vote for them, even if they agree with their viewpoints on Europe. In countries such as the UK, Sweden, Denmark and Poland there is a greater variety of positions towards the EU, with more mainstream parties also expressing Eurosceptic viewpoints. This offers voters a better choice in finding a political party that matches their political views.

Controversy 5.1

A European public sphere?

An important issue in discussions about the relation between citizens and the EU focuses on the perceived lack of information and debate on the EU in the member states. According to many observers citizens are not interested in the EU because they are not well informed on the major issues that are debated in Brussels. News coverage around EP elections is relatively limited, tends to be focused on national politicians and is generally negative in tone. This results in the second-order effects we outline in this chapter: a low turnout at EP elections and vote choices based on national considerations.

An obvious solution to this problem would be to invest more in reporting news about the EU. In the end this should result in a truly European public sphere: in this ideal constellation there would be EU-wide debates on the EU with citizens reading, thinking and discussing the same themes wherever they live. The EU invests considerable amounts of money in helping to inform citizens. Each of the institutions has its own communications department with fancy websites, glossy magazines and easy-to-use fact files. The Commission even has its own YouTube website. Do you think the lack of a European public sphere is indeed the major cause of the low citizen involvement in the EU? Which measures do you think would be effective to better engage citizens? Is it only a matter of better communication or would it require something else?

are an example of direct democracy and give citizens the opportunity to vote on certain policy decisions. Membership of the EU obviously constitutes such a major decision as it involves the transfer of sovereignty to a new supranational body. Getting the explicit support of a country's citizenry provides a direct and explicit legitimization of such a decision and commits them to the European project. This is exactly what French President Charles de Gaulle had in mind when he dreamed of a pan-European referendum in the 1960s:

Europe will be born on the day on which the different peoples fundamentally decide to join. It will not suffice for members of parliaments to vote for ratification. It will require popular referendums, preferably held on the same day in all the countries concerned.

Quoted in Bruno Kaufman, 'Initiatives and Referendums: Bringing in the People'. In Council of Europe, Reflections on the Future of Democracy in Europe (Council of Europe, 2005: 132).

De Gaulle's dream has not yet materialized. Still, many individual countries have put important decisions on their country's relation with the EU to a popular vote: most of the referendums on European integration have either been about the fundamental decision to join the EU (membership referendums) or the approval of new treaties (treaty referendum) (see Fact file 5.1 for an overview).

The referendum practice was kicked off in 1972 when French President Georges Pompidou used his constitutional powers to let French citizens vote on the accession of Denmark, Norway, Ireland and the UK. After approval by the French voters, Denmark, Ireland and Norway conducted accession referendums in the same year. The UK initially decided to join the EC without conducting a referendum, but it asked its citizens to approve the continuation of EC membership in 1975, which they did.

While most referendums yielded outcomes supportive of integration, several times voters rejected further integrative steps. In 1992 Danish voters rejected the Maastricht Treaty by a very small margin and in 2001 the Treaty of Nice was rejected by Irish voters. In both cases voters eventually approved the treaties after their governments secured modifications or opt-outs. Danish and Swedish voters decided to stay out of the Eurozone in referendums in 2000 and 2003, respectively. As a result, both countries still have their own currency. As we showed in Chapter 1, the negative outcomes of the French, Dutch and Irish referendums forced the member states to make changes to the Constitutional Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. The real effect of these referendums is somewhat unclear, however. While some modifications were made, the Treaty of Lisbon maintained most of the provisions of the Constitutional Treaty.

■ Referendums on European integration

While elections focus on selecting candidates for public office, citizens can

in turnout in some member states, the overall trend is clearly downward: of all the elections held since 1979 in the different member states, two-thirds have witnessed a lower turnout rate compared to the previous election. The decline in turnout for elections is not unique to the EP. In most member states turnout for parliamentary elections has also declined over the past decades, but not to the same extent as for the EP. Apparently EP elections are still not salient enough for most voters: not enough seems to be at stake and in some countries parties are aligned to such an extent that there does not seem to be much to choose between them. One factor that may explain the 'second-order' nature of EP elections, and the fragmentation of public opinion along national lines in general, is the lack of a 'European public sphere'. Rather than an integrated European public sphere, where public debate takes place and public opinion is formed, most of the public debate and public opinion formation takes place in domestic public spheres. Controversy 5.1 takes up this issue and the attempts by the EU institutions to create such a European public sphere.

According to an extensive study of referendums by political scientist Sara Hobolt, three factors play a role in determining people's voting behaviour in

Fact file 5.1**Referendums on the EU**

- Referendums may be either required by law (as is the case in Ireland and sometimes in Denmark) or voluntarily initiated by parliament or government.
- The outcome of a referendum may be binding on the parliament and government (Denmark, Ireland) or only constitute a recommendation, in which case it is called consultative referendum (France, Norway, UK). In practice, governments take the outcomes of consultative referendums as seriously as those of binding referendums.
- Since 1972 more than forty referendums on European integration have taken place.
 - Most of the referendums have asked voters to approve either their country's accession to the EU or a new treaty. All but six of the countries which joined the EU after 1972 have had their membership approved via a referendum, including all countries that were part of the 2004 'big bang' enlargement.
 - Belgium, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria and Romania are the only six member states that have never conducted any referendum on the EU.
 - Norway's citizens are alone in rejecting their country's accession to the EU and did so twice in referendums in 1972 and 1994.
 - While no member state has ever left the EU, the citizens of Greenland opted out after their territory was granted home rule by the Danish government in 1979. In a 1982 consultative referendum 53% voted against the continuation of Greenland's membership. Greenland formally left the EU on 1 January 1985.
 - Ireland and Denmark have held the largest number of referendums because their respective constitutions oblige them to hold binding referendums in all cases where there is a transfer of sovereignty.
 - Although Switzerland is not a member of the EU, its citizens approved tighter economic bonds in several referendums as well as Swiss membership of the Schengen area. Two popular initiatives to start accession talks for formal membership were, however, rejected by large majorities in 1997 and 2001.

Voters in general turn out in larger numbers for referendums than for elections for the European Parliament. There are two good reasons for this. First, most referendums focus on one single issue and give voters a clear choice. Second, the outcomes of referendums are generally respected by their governments. Hence, citizens will generally feel that a vote in a referendum has a greater impact than a vote in EP elections.

Referendums thus seem to do a better job in connecting citizens to EU politics. Still, also in this case it is important to note that debates take place in national contexts and can focus on wholly different topics even when the same decision is at stake.

Take, for example, the French and Dutch no's to the Constitutional Treaty. While in both countries the percentage of no-voters was highest on the extreme right and the extreme left of the political spectrum, the reasons for these votes were different and inspired by different considerations. In France voters on the left were worried about the social dimension of Europe. Their concerns focused on the possible implications of the Services Directives, with fears of Polish plumbers taking over the jobs of French people. Voters on the right in France were mobilized by their parties on the issue of France's declining sovereignty as a result of further integration.

In the Netherlands concerns revolved in the first place around the lack of economic benefits of European integration. The issue gained enormous attention in the campaign after the president of the Dutch central bank conceded that the guilder had been undervalued when it was converted into the Euro. Dutch voters were also worried about the possible threats to Dutch identity as a result of further enlargements, including the possibility of Turkey joining the EU. The issue of Turkey gained prominence when it was successfully mobilized by a Member of Parliament (Geert Wilders) who had just been forced out of the Dutch liberal-conservative party (VVD), because of his stance against Turkey's membership of the EU. He used it successfully to mobilize support for his new party-list and in the course of doing this heavily influenced the campaign debate.

■ The shift from a permissive consensus to a constraining dissensus

The preceding paragraphs have made clear that recent developments indicate cracks in the permissive consensus identified forty years ago. These cracks have most likely been caused by the steady evolution of integration in the direction of the 'ever closer union' which was already dreamed about in the Treaty of Rome. In fact, when writing in the 1970s Scheingold and Lindberg themselves foresaw this: 'Only if the Community were to broaden its scope or increase its institutional capacities markedly would there be reason to suspect

- Attitudes towards European integration are the most important factor in determining a yes or no vote. The stronger voters are in favour of European integration the higher the chance they will say yes to their country's membership or the ratification of a treaty.
- Voters who do not have very strong pro- or anti-European attitudes are more affected by second-order considerations. The chance of those moderate voters voting in favour of integrative steps increases when they are more supportive of the current government in office.
- Voters without strong opinions on the EU are more likely to follow the position of the party they voted for in the last election. Such voters often

This is exactly what has happened. General support for the EU has shown a significant decrease, turnout remains very low and those people that do turn out increasingly vote for Eurosceptic parties.

Recent analyses of the attitudes of citizens show that issues of identity have become more prominent in determining people's stance towards politics, both at the national and at the European level. The more critical stance of EU citizens towards European integration can be seen as one of the expressions of this concern about identity. The Eurosceptical attitude that is witnessed in the behaviour of voters in EP elections and referendums has not emerged in isolation, but can be seen as one of the expressions of a concern to preserve national identities. This then also explains why nationalist parties – which tend to emphasize the importance of preserving national identity and culture – have been so successful both at the national and at the European level.

All in all, the permissive consensus which facilitated integrative steps for so long has by now been replaced by a 'constraining dissensus' – a term coined by political scientists Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks to mark the new constellation in which European integration takes place. While the signals of citizens may at times be erratic, their overall message is clearly in the direction of a more prudent approach to integration in the coming years.

■ Summary

- The EU does not figure prominently in citizens' minds. Most are not opposed to European integration, but their opinion on the topic is not well developed and can be unstable. For a long time a permissive consensus allowed political elites to proceed with integration in a relatively unrestrained manner.
- Over time support for the EU has risen and fallen, with a clear drop in trust in the EU being visible since the onset of the economic crisis. There are large differences in the levels of support between citizens from different member states.
- At the individual level the most important determinants of EU support are education, income, support for one's national government and knowledge of and interest in EU affairs.
- Elections for the European Parliament can be characterized as second-order elections. Voters turn out in smaller numbers than at national elections and use EP elections to evaluate their national governments. Turnout for the EP elections has gone down over the years.
- Citizens turn out in higher rates for referendums than for EP elections.
- While relatively few referendums have resulted in a 'no' to further integration, these no's have generally been taken seriously by the governments affected.

Further reading

The thesis on the 'constraining dissensus' is developed in Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science*, 1, 2009: 1–23, which is followed by a number of insightful comments by other scholars. A comprehensive analysis of the way citizens evaluate the EU can be found in Sarah Hobolt and James Tilley, *Blaming Europe? Responsibility Without Accountability in the European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2015). A diverse set of essays exploring the nature of the European sphere can be found in Thomas Risse (ed.), *European Public Spheres: Politics is Back* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

■ Websites

- The Eurobarometer website contains numerous overviews and analyses on public opinion: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/
- The Eurobarometer data files can be accessed at Gesis–Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences. After free registration it is also possible to carry out some online analyses: www.gesis.org/en/services/data/survey-data/eurobarometer-data-service/
- Specific information on the behaviour of voters in European elections can be found on the website of the European Elections Studies, which contains data sets and an overview of publications using those data: www.ees-homepage.net

■ Navigating the EU

On the website www.navigatingthe.eu you will find online exercises for this chapter.

representatives. In letters to European Trade Commissioner Karel de Gucht, they voiced their concern and called for a public debate.

In their attack on the TTIP, NGOs sought to involve European citizens and mobilize public opinion. They were helped by the fact that, in the course of 2014, draft negotiating texts were leaked to the press. On 11 October 2014, a range of NGOs organized a 'European Day of Action' against the TTIP and two other trade agreements, with different types of protest, such as marches, seminars, flash mobs and concerts, scheduled in twenty-two countries throughout Europe.

In this way, a heated and highly polarized debate between proponents and opponents developed, in which the two sides used different approaches in attempts to influence the negotiating process and the ensuing agreement. This raises a number of important questions about interest group activity in the European Union:

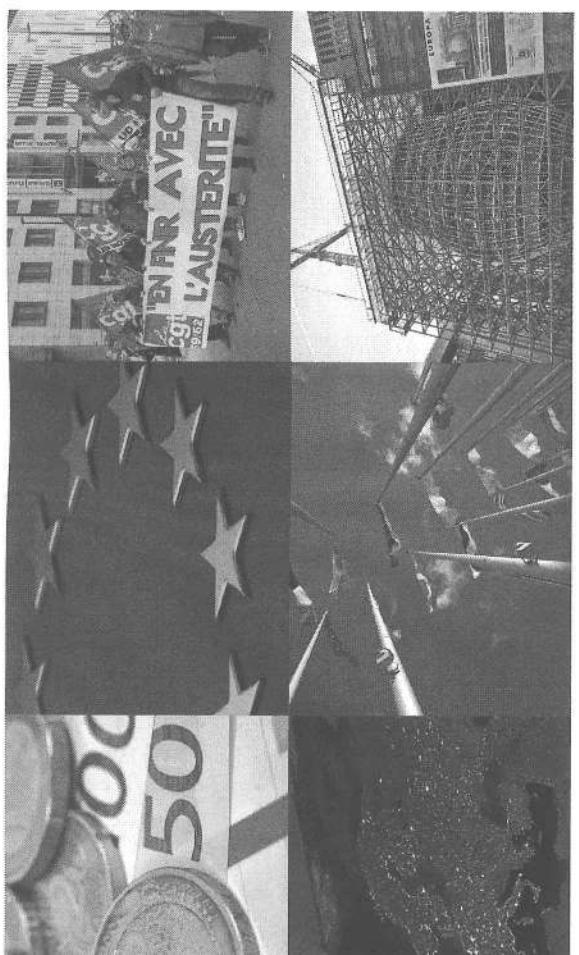
- How many interest groups are there and whom do they represent?
- How is interest representation organized at the EU level?
- What strategies do interest groups use to affect EU policies?
- What impact do interest groups have in the EU?
- How democratic are the role and influence of interest groups?

We will see that a large number and wide variety of interest groups are active at the EU level. Although they cover a broad array of interests, most groups represent business interests. As the example of the TTIP shows, interest groups use different strategies to influence policy-making, from public protests to direct contacts with decision-makers. Because of the limited role of public opinion in EU politics and the difficulties of organizing cross-border protests, seeking direct contacts is a much more common strategy at the EU level than staging protests. Reflecting the EU's multi-level set-up, many interest groups seek these contacts on multiple levels, lobbying not just the EU institutions but also member state authorities. In the end, lobbying is meant to affect policy-making. Although it is difficult to make an overall assessment of interest group influence, the impact specific groups have depends crucially on the resources they command, the way the decision-making process is organized and the type of issue at stake.

■ Interest groups and lobbyists: who are they?

The number of interest groups in the EU

Lobbying has become an important activity in the EU. Estimates of the number of individual **lobbyists** in Brussels range from 10,000 to 30,000, with 15,000 probably the most reasonable figure. The number of **interest groups** lies between 3,500 and 4,000, with some authors quoting figures of up to 5,000 groups. The reason why it is so difficult to



6 Interest groups and interest representation

■ Introduction

On 17 June 2013, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso and US President Barack Obama announced the start of negotiations on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The negotiations were meant to lead to a comprehensive treaty, which would further liberalize trade and investment between the EU and the US and thereby foster economic growth. It covered not just import tariffs and other direct trade barriers, but also targeted domestic regulations that could hinder trade or impair investments.

The conclusion of the TTIP was strongly supported by large firms and business groups on both sides of the Atlantic, which stood to gain from increased trade and investment opportunities. They pushed for an ambitious and quick agreement and made their views known to European and US policy-makers by publishing position papers and organizing meetings and conferences that were attended by business representatives and government officials from the EU and the US.

A wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) opposed the TTIP, arguing that it would undermine health, safety, consumer and environmental standards in the EU. Moreover, they criticized the 'intransparent' and 'undemocratic' character of TTIP negotiations, which they claimed were domi-

A lobbyist is an individual engaged in attempts to influence governmental decision-making on behalf of an interest group.

An **interest group** is a group of people that share certain preferences regarding the outcomes of governmental decision-making.

not clear-cut. Of course, there are many obvious cases of interest groups with established offices in Brussels that make it their daily job to influence EU policy-making. But there are also groups that occasionally engage in lobbying activities, even though their main focus is on other types of activities. Moreover, not all groups that lobby the EU necessarily have an office in Brussels. Some lobbyists fly in and out of Brussels to lobby the EU institutions but operate from another location. All this makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly how many lobbyists and interest groups there are.

Nevertheless, even when we only take into account the clear cases the number of lobbyists and interest groups is impressive and has been rising over the past decades. This goes to show at least two things. First, it shows that the EU has become an important policy-making institution in many areas. Otherwise, interest groups would not bother to spend time and money in attempts to influence EU policy-making. Second, apparently interest groups believe they can in fact make a difference and influence EU policy-making. Later in this chapter, we will look at the ways in which they try to do so and the extent to which they are successful in that regard. Before we do so, however, it is important to take a further look at the types of groups and lobbyists that are active in Brussels.

Types of interest groups in the EU

Table 6.1 gives an overview of the different types of interest groups in Brussels, based on a comprehensive analysis of the interest group population in the EU (see Jan Beyers et al., 'The INTEREURO Project: Logic and Structure', *Interest Groups and Advocacy*, 3, 2, 2014: 126–40).

The largest group in this overview is individual firms. This category includes (large) companies that have an interest in EU regulation or subsidies, such as car manufacturers or banks. It also includes consultancy firms that specialize

in lobbying for others. Known as 'public affairs' consultants, they do not represent one (type of) interest but make it their job to lobby on behalf of their clients. Hiring a commercial consultant is particularly useful if clients do not want to invest in setting up a lobby office and network in Brussels – for instance, because they only need to lobby the EU occasionally. Professional consultants may also have expertise and contacts that clients find valuable in a specific lobbying effort. Together, firms account for some 31% of all EU interest groups.

Business associations are umbrella organizations that represent firms. Some represent a specific type of industry. For instance, the European Chemical Industry Council (CEVIC) represents the European chemical industry. Its members include both national business associations (such as the Hungarian Chemical Industry Association and the French Union des Industries Chimiques) and individual chemical companies (such as AkzoNobel and Procter & Gamble). This category also includes 'peak business associations', which represent firms in all sectors of the economy. The prime example in the EU is BusinessEurope, which has as its members national peak organizations, such as the Italian Confindustria and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. National business associations (either sectoral or peak) are usually also directly represented in Brussels themselves. In all, business associations make up around 25% of all EU interest groups.

Large firms often both lobby directly in Brussels and are members of business associations. This offers them the opportunity to use different channels for different purposes: they can work together with other firms through their business association, but they can also directly contact EU officials if they want to convey a specific message. Likewise, national business associations are usually members of a European association, but also lobby in Brussels themselves. They will do so if a specific national issue is at stake or if they feel that their interests are not sufficiently well represented by the European business association.

The third-largest group is *governmental organizations* from the member states. These include local and regional governments, such as the German Länder, Spanish autonomous regions and large cities, but also national regulatory agencies. These governmental actors often have a lot to gain (or lose) from EU policies. For instance, local and regional governments are the main beneficiaries of the EU's structural funds, which are meant to support poorer regions in Europe (see Chapter 8). Also, governmental organizations in the member states often have to implement or are affected by EU legislation. In order to make sure their voice is heard in EU decision-making, many governmental organizations from the member states are therefore actively lobbying the EU or have even opened their own office in Brussels. They form some 11% of all EU interest groups.

Source: Joost Berkhout, Jan Beyers, Caelesta Braun, Marcel Hanegraaff and David Lowery, *Making Influence across MobiLize! Making Influence across MobiLize!* Research Group, University of Amsterdam, 2014.

Type of interest group	Share of total (%)
Firms	31
Business associations	25
Governmental organizations	11
Citizen groups	11
Non-profit organizations	10
Professional associations	4
Research institutes	3
Trade unions	1
Unknown/other	3

Table 6.1 Types of interest groups in Brussels

Citizen groups are also called NGOs ('non-governmental organizations') or interest groups.

Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

examples are Amnesty International (for human rights) and Greenpeace (for the environment). European NGOs come in different forms. Some are single organizations that operate at the EU level (such as Greenpeace). Others resemble the structure of European business associations, bringing together national umbrella organizations and NGOs. For instance, the Association of European Cancer Leagues represents national organizations in the field of the fight against cancer, such as the Irish Cancer Society and the League against Cancer in Slovakia. Citizen groups form around 11% of all interest groups in the EU.

Non-profit organizations include, for instance, churches, hospitals, foundations and charities. They, too, may be affected by EU legislation or benefit from EU subsidies. For those reasons, they actively lobby in Brussels and make up around 10% of all interest groups.

Finally, three smaller categories, in terms of numbers of interest groups, complete Table 6.1. Professional associations represent a specific profession. An example is the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME), which represents medical doctors. Research institutes receive considerable funding from the EU. This category also includes think tanks, which try to initiate debates on issues they find important. Finally, trade unions are organizations of employees. Several trade unions from member states are active in Brussels. In addition, there are umbrella associations of trade unions at EU level. The most important of these is the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which has as its members eighty-eight national trade unions.

All in all, a wide range of interests are active at the EU level: from private to public and from businesses to NGOs. Still, business interests account for the vast majority of interest groups in Brussels. In comparison, citizen groups are a much smaller group. This is a pattern that is also found in domestic political systems. One reason for this may be that it is more difficult for citizen groups to organize and find financing. After all, business groups represent relatively limited numbers of firms that all have a distinct (financial) stake in lobbying the EU. Thus, they will find it easy to come together and fund EU lobbyists. Citizen groups, by contrast, represent some diffuse interest that does not yield concrete benefits to specific organizations or individuals. Briefing 6.1 takes a closer look at this issue.

Lobbying through different channels

The discussion above shows that one and the same organization can be represented at the EU level in different ways. The organization can lobby in Brussels itself, it can hire a commercial consultant, and it can work through a national or a European association. Moreover, one and the same organization can be a member of more than one European association, depending on the issues it finds important. Finally, lobbying efforts can be aimed directly at the EU institutions or they can target national governments which then take the

Briefing 6.1

Interest groups and the logic of collective action

It is a general tendency in political systems that concentrated interests organize more easily than diffuse interests. The mechanism behind this has been clarified by Mancur Olson in his classic book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, which appeared in 1965. According to Olson, interest groups provide collective goods for their members. If, for instance, a consumer group succeeds in improving consumer protection, all consumers profit from that effort, whether they are members of that consumer group or not. Moreover, there are so many consumers that the contribution of one additional member makes no discernible difference to the effectiveness of the group.

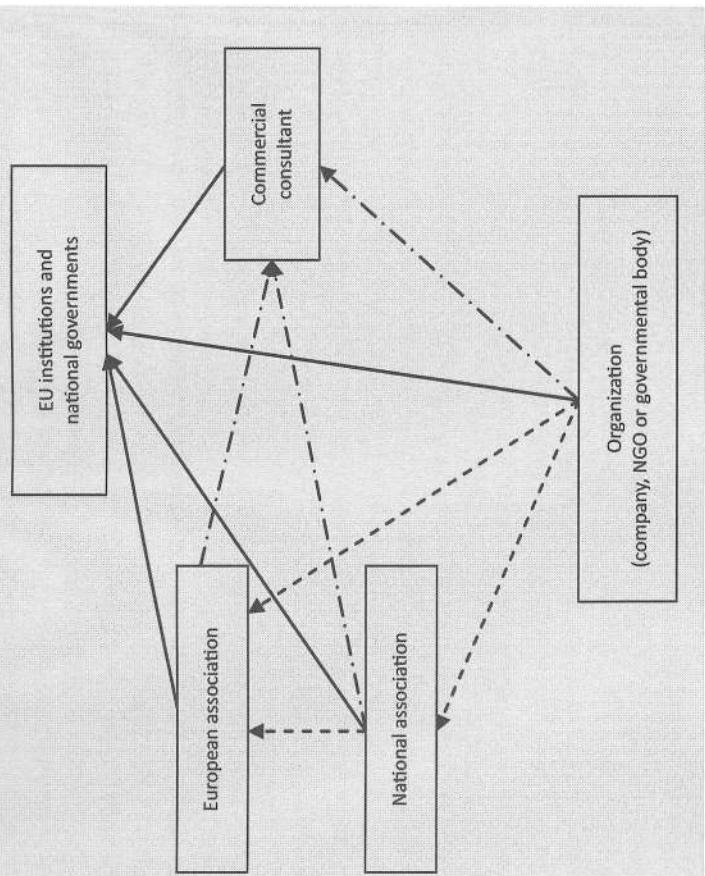
As a consequence, it is always more profitable for a consumer not to become a member of the consumer group. After all, if the group has a sufficient number of members, the consumer will benefit from the group's successes anyway and may as well avoid the membership fee. If, on the contrary, the group is not large enough to have an impact, one additional member is not going to make any difference, so the consumer would also do well not to pay the membership fee. This basic dilemma applies to all interest groups. However, it is stronger for groups representing diffuse interests than for groups representing concentrated interests. To begin with, the number of potential members is much smaller when concentrated interests are at stake. Hence, these potential members are easier to reach and organize. Second, when concentrated interests are at stake, the potential gains of collective action are much larger than when the interests are diffuse. This leads to a stronger incentive for potential members to organize.

Take the example of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Under this policy, farmers are financially supported by the EU. This support is paid for out of tax contributions by citizens. Even though the overall benefits for farmers are equal to the overall costs for citizens, the benefits per farmer are much higher than the costs per citizen, since the number of farmers is much smaller than the number of taxpayers. Hence, the benefits of the CAP are concentrated, whereas the costs are diffuse. As a result, farmers have a much greater incentive to organize in support of the CAP than taxpayers have to organize against it. This may explain why farmers are among the best-organized interests in the EU while organized opposition against the CAP has remained weak.

organizations to make their message heard in various ways and to choose different channels for different issues. This is illustrated in Figure 6.1.

For instance, when a company does not agree with the position taken by its European business association, it can choose to lobby the Commission itself. The same is true when the issue at stake is of specific concern to one company

Figure 6.1 Channels for lobbying in Brussels (uninterrupted lines indicate 'lobbying'; dotted lines indicate membership; lines with dots and strokes indicate 'hiring')



between channels of interest representation is only a realistic option for larger companies and NGOs. The vast majority of firms and other organizations in Europe have neither the resources nor the incentive actively to work through several channels of interest representation at the same time.

■ Organizing interest representation: between pluralism and corporatism

Systems of interest representation

Interest groups exist in all political systems. Whenever there are groups of people that try to influence government policy, there are interest groups. In Western democracies, in particular, interest groups have always played an important role in politics. However, the way in which the relationships between interest groups and government are structured differs greatly between political systems. In some countries, certain interest groups have a formal position in the policy-making process whereas in others they do not. In

with a wide range of issues, while in others there are many smaller and more specialized groups. These differences can be described in terms of different systems of interest representation. The two most important systems are 'corporatism' and 'pluralism'.

A **corporatist** system is characterized by the fact that a limited number of interest groups have a privileged position in policy-making. This means that some groups have special rights, for instance, to be consulted by government before a policy is adopted or, in an even more extreme form, to approve certain policies. In such a system, there are regular and formalized discussions between government and interest groups. Interest groups have become, as it were, part of government. Interest groups and government do not operate in opposition to each other (even though they may disagree on important issues) but they seek to cooperate in order to find consensus. The quintessential example of a corporatist system is Austria, but corporatist arrangements are also common in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. In these countries, the major labour unions and employers' organizations have an important role to play in formulating and approving social and economic policies. To this end, government consults with them on a regular basis. The position of these groups is privileged, and the number of groups involved is limited, because this role is only played by groups that are officially recognized as representative of broad constituencies.

A **pluralist** system is quite the opposite. In a pluralist system there are many interest groups, none of which has a privileged position in policy-making. As a result, groups are engaged in a continuous struggle to gain access to decision-makers. They cannot rely on any formalized discussions but have to vie for attention with competing interest groups. As a result, relations among interest groups and between interest groups and government tend to be more antagonistic than they are in a corporatist system. Whereas corporatism is typified by consensus-seeking among elites, pluralism is characterized by a constant struggle between groups for government attention and influence. The best examples of pluralist systems of interest representation are the United States and the United Kingdom.

The two systems have very different consequences for the way interest groups operate. In a corporatist system, access to government is limited but once a group has gained access it can have a lot of influence. After all, it only has to deal with a limited number of other interest groups and its privileged position in policy-making ensures that it will be listened to. In a pluralist system, by contrast, any group can in principle gain access to government. However, even if access is obtained there is no guarantee of success because many other groups have access as well. In a corporatist system there are a few

Pluralism and corporatism in the EU

Given the existence of these two systems, scholars of EU interest representation have tried also to characterize the EU in these terms. In doing so, they have tended to conclude that the EU is predominantly pluralist. That is, there are many interest groups, and it is easy for them to gain access to EU policy-making but they have to share this access with a range of other groups. In short, the EU is a relatively open system of interest representation, which is typical of pluralism.

At the same time, elements of corporatism can be found in various parts of the EU. With the creation of the EEC in 1957, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was established as a way to involve social and economic interest groups in policy-making. The EESC currently consists of representatives of employers' organizations and labour unions (the two traditional strongholds of corporatist systems) together with representatives from other interest groups, such as environmental groups and consumer groups. In a range of policy areas, the European Commission is obliged to ask the EESC for an opinion when it presents a proposal. In addition, the EP can ask the EESC for an opinion and the EESC can issue opinions on its own initiative on issues it deems important.

In 1994, a similar body was established to create a platform for regional and local governments: the Committee of the Regions (CoR). The members of the CoR are elected politicians in local or regional governments in the EU member states. Like the EESC, the CoR needs to be consulted on proposals that potentially affect its members and it can issue own-initiative opinions.

During the 1980s, an attempt was made to introduce a more far-reaching type of corporatism in the form of the Social Dialogue. The Social Dialogue includes a total of six organizations: three employers' organizations, led by BusinessEurope, the overarching EU business group, and three organizations of employees, the most important one being the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the federation of European labour unions. The Social Dialogue is a platform for discussing social and economic issues among the main 'social partners'. This may lead to joint opinions as well as agreements between them. If the social partners wish so, these agreements are subsequently formalized into EU legislation by the Council. An example of where that happened was the agreement on parental leave, which was reached within the Social Dialogue in 1995 and adopted as a Council Directive in 1996.

The EESC, the CoR and the Social Dialogue are examples of corporatist forms of interest representation because they grant certain rights to a limited number of groups that are deemed to be representative of broad interests in Europe. At the same time, their practical meaning has remained limited. The EESC and the CoR are large bodies that need quite some time to reach compromises among their members. This dilutes the impact of their opinions on decision-making. Moreover, they are usually consulted only after a Commission proposal has been published, while most influence for interest groups is to

much smaller platform, which, through the conclusion of agreements among the social partners, can also take more far-reaching initiatives than the EESC and the CoR. In practice, however, the number of agreements reached has remained limited, mainly because employers' organizations have been reluctant to bind themselves to European-level agreements. As a result, these bodies have not achieved the level of corporatism that can be found in some EU member states.

Another policy area that shows elements of corporatism is agriculture. From the early 1960s onwards, the EU has had an extensive Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with heavy subsidies for farmers. Policy-making on agricultural matters always included representatives of farmers' groups, joined at the EU level in COPA/COGECA. COPA/COGECA would be routinely involved in policy debates with the European Commission's DG Agriculture and the Council of Agricultural Ministers. Since the early 1990s, however, the stronghold of farmers has diminished, as new interests have become active in this area, including environmental groups and consumer groups. Although COPA/COGECA is still a powerful interest group in Brussels, it now has to compete with other groups, leading to a more pluralist constellation than used to be the case.

Designed pluralism in the EU

All in all, interest representation in the EU is more pluralist than corporatist in nature. It is very open to interest groups and groups tend to focus on one specific issue (area) or sector of industry. This is one of the reasons why, as we saw above, so many interest groups are active at the EU level. At the same time, the variety of interest groups in the EU is also a result of attempts by the European Commission actively to stimulate the creation and activities of certain groups. On an annual basis, the Commission spends some €1 billion on supporting EU-level interest groups. This money goes primarily to NGOs, which, as we saw above in Briefing 6.1, suffer most from the 'logic of collective action'. Controversy 6.1 invites you to think further about the pros and cons of Commission support for EU interest groups.

For the European Commission, supporting EU-level interest groups has been a way to increase the legitimacy of EU initiatives. This perspective was voiced in the *White Paper on Governance*, a Commission document published in 2001. According to the White Paper, interest groups form a European 'civil society', which 'plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and delivering services that meet people's needs'. As a result, so the Commission argues, civil society offers 'a chance to get citizens more actively involved in achieving the Union's objectives and to offer them a structured channel for feedback, criticism and protest' (European Commission, *White Paper on Governance*, COM (2001) 428, 25 July 2001, p. 14 and p. 15, respectively).

Controversy 6.1

Financial support for NGOs

In order to redress the imbalance between business interests and NGOs, many NGOs are subsidized by the European Commission. In some cases, the European Commission has even actively sought to create a European NGO in an area it deemed important. All in all, the Commission is estimated to spend around €1 billion in subsidies for NGOs per year.

The Commission's argument for this type of support is that it achieves a more balanced representation of interests at the EU level. Critics point out, however, that these subsidies bias interest representation by artificially strengthening certain (types of) interest groups. What do you think of these arguments? Do you think the Commission should continue supporting NGOs (or perhaps even step up its effort) or would you argue for a reduction or even the full abolition of financial support?

way to develop a European 'constituency' that the Commission can mobilize in support of its initiatives. For the Commission, it is a great benefit if it can tell member state governments and the European Parliament that its proposal is supported by a wide range of European interest groups. As a result, the Commission has shown a clear preference for interest groups that are willing to support its causes and take a constructive (as opposed to confrontational) stance in influencing EU policy-making. Interest groups that fit into these categories have often enjoyed easier and more extensive access to the Commission than other groups. In that sense, although the EU represents a pluralist system of interest representation, it is a form of designed pluralism, shaped by the preferences and financial incentives of the European Commission.

■ Interest group strategies

As we saw above, the EU has attracted a wide variety of interest groups. The purpose of these groups is to influence policies. But what do they actually do to achieve this? In this section, we will discuss a number of strategies that interest groups can pursue. As we will see, the variety of interests is matched by the variety of strategies that groups employ. This variety poses a number of strategic choices (sometimes even dilemmas) for groups. Below, we will survey the menu of options available to groups and indicate what reasons groups have to choose one strategy rather than another.

Inside lobbying and outside lobbying

If an interest group seeks to influence policy-making, what it wants to

different logics of political influence. These strategies are called 'inside lobbying' and 'outside lobbying'.

To begin with, interest groups can try to talk directly with decision-makers. They can phone them, arrange meetings to discuss policies, respond to consultations from the Commission or the Parliament, or become part of a committee or forum that advises EU institutions on a given issue (see Chapter 9 for a closer look at how EU proposals are developed). This was the strategy used by firms and business associations in their lobby over the TTIP, the example with which we started this chapter. What they tried was to become part of the debates among policy-makers and influence policy-making from within. Put simply, they want to sit at the same table as the decision-makers in order to affect their decisions. That is why this strategy is called **inside lobbying** – after all, lobbying takes place *inside* policy-making institutions.

Alternatively, or in addition, an interest group can try to mobilize public opinion by organizing strikes and demonstrations, or attracting media attention to its cause. Think, for instance, of the 'European Day of Action' against the TTIP that was organized by NGOs. Other examples are the confrontations between activists and whaling vessels that Greenpeace uses to draw attention to the whale hunt, and the general strikes organized in recent years by labour unions in countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal in opposition to austerity measures and economic reforms by their governments. When they use this strategy, interest groups hope to affect decision-makers by showing how much public support they have. Rather than influencing policy-making from within, they seek to put pressure on decision-makers by mobilizing groups and citizens *outside* the decision-making institutions. That is why this strategy is called **outside lobbying**. In the literature on interest representation, inside lobbying and outside lobbying have often been linked to specific types of groups. Briefing 6.2 discusses the definitions put forward in this literature.

The choice of strategy by interest groups

When choosing between these two strategies, interest groups can rely on one strategy or on a combination of the two. However, some groups typically rely more on inside lobbying while other groups make greater use of outside lobbying. This depends on a number of factors:

- **The target of the lobby.** Outside lobbying works best when the decision-maker that is targeted is sensitive to public opinion. For instance, elected politicians depend more on public opinion than civil servants, because they rely on public opinion for their reelection. Therefore, if an interest group

Briefing 6.2

Interest groups and social movements

The political science literature often makes a distinction between interest groups and social movements. *Interest groups* are formally structured organizations that seek to influence government policies through inside lobbying. *Social movements* are more or less unstructured groups that engage in political protest, such as strikes, demonstrations and blockades (what we here call outside lobbying). These definitions identify certain types of political activity with certain types of groups.

In reality, however, the two forms often overlap. Some formal, well-structured groups (such as trade unions) engage in both inside and outside lobbying. Likewise, social movements are often structured around a (formal) social movement organization that is central to organizing political protest and seeks to establish 'inside lobbying' contacts with policy-makers. These overlaps make it increasingly difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between types of groups. An alternative approach is therefore to see inside lobbying and outside lobbying as two potential strategies for all groups that try to influence EU policy-making – even if some groups tend to rely more on one type of strategy and other groups rely on the other.

- **The organization and identity of the interest group.** Inside lobbying and outside lobbying require very different skills. For inside lobbying, a group needs to establish and maintain contacts with policy-makers, and be able to gather and present information in a way that ties in with the policy debates in a given field. For outside lobbying, a group needs to have a sufficiently large network of members and volunteers to organize large-scale events and relay those events to the media. These capabilities cannot be built up overnight. They are often the result of long experience and carefully developed networks. As a result, interest groups tend to rely on the time-tested strategies that they are familiar with.

- **The issue at stake.** Some issues appeal to public sentiments more easily than others. Thus, it is difficult to conceive of a large-scale demonstration being organized against a proposal on accounting standards. However, people can more easily be mobilized for things that they feel are close to their interests (such as the protection of their jobs and wages or environmental pollution in their neighbourhood) or that have great symbolic value (like the protection of whales). As a result, outside lobbying will typically be used only for the latter types of issues.

As a result of these factors, some groups specialize in a certain strategy. Interest groups that represent firms and industries or local governments rely almost completely on inside lobbying. By contrast, other groups, such as NGOs, are receptive to certain claims and strategies. As

engage in inside lobbying with decision-makers in the EU institutions. Likewise, farmers' groups are part of consultations on agricultural policy and often meet with Commission officials (inside lobbying), but once in a while they also organize large-scale demonstrations and blockades in Brussels to show the determination of their members (outside lobbying). Groups that rely (almost) completely on outside lobbying are scarce at the EU level.

Inside lobbying and outside lobbying in the EU

The fact that few EU interest groups only rely on outside lobbying reflects a more general pattern in EU interest representation. Compared to outside lobbying, inside lobbying is much more prevalent at the EU level. Outside lobbying is also remarkably less common at the EU level than within its member states. This has been studied systematically by Doug Imig and Sydney Tarrow, two scholars of social movements and political protest (Doug Imig and Sydney Tarrow, 'Political Contention in a Europeanising Polity', *West European Politics*, 23, 4, 2000: 73–93). They counted the number and types of political protest within the EU (including its member states) in order to find out how often EU-related protests take place and what form they take. For the period 1984–97, they found that EU-related political protest only formed about 5% of all protests staged within the EU member states. The remaining 95% were related to domestic issues. This figure of 5% is lower than what one would expect on the basis of the scope and impact of the EU's policies. Moreover, of these 5%, only some 20% (hence, 1% of all political protest taking place) were genuine 'collective European protests' – that is, cross-border protests organized at the EU level and aimed at the EU institutions. The European Day of Action against the TTIP falls into this category but was in fact exceptional.

The remaining 80% of EU-related protests were aimed at member state governments. Examples include French farmers protesting to the French government against reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, and Spanish fishermen urging the Spanish government to defend their interests against French fishermen in the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. This is what Imig and Tarrow call 'domesticated political protest': related to EU policies, but aimed at domestic decision-makers. A more recent study found a similar pattern for the period 1997–2007 (Katrín Uba and Fredrik Uggla, 'Protest Actions against the European Union, 1992–2007', *West European Politics*, 34, 2, 2011: 384–93).

Why do we find so little EU-related political protest and why is it so often aimed at domestic governments? Imig and Tarrow explain this by pointing at the unfavourable **political opportunity structure** for political protests at the EU level and the organizational constraints that many groups face. The political opportunity structure determines whether decision-makers are receptive to certain claims and strategies. As

The **political opportunity structure** is the institutional and political context within which an interest group operates and that determines the

put pressure on decision-makers from the outside by mobilizing public opinion. This strategy will only work if decision-makers are sensitive to public opinion. At the EU level, however, this is much less the case than in most of its member states (see Chapter 5 for a more extensive discussion). The European Commission is not directly elected. Unlike governments in parliamentary systems, it also does not rely on a governing coalition in the European Parliament. The EP itself is elected, but as we saw in Chapter 5 EP elections are normally decided on domestic not European issues. Finally, the Council of Ministers as a whole is not dependent on public opinion, and much of its deliberation is confidential. Domestic politicians, by contrast, rely heavily on public opinion for re-election. As a result, they will take care not to provoke massive public protests against them. This is one reason why interest groups at the EU level tend to focus more on inside lobbying and why, if they do use outside lobbying, they target member state governments, which are more likely to listen.

In addition to the political opportunity structure, many groups find it difficult to organize political protests at a European scale. These protests involve coordinating the activities of large numbers of citizens in different countries, with different languages and each with their own newspapers and broadcasting systems. It is difficult to reach that many people and to mobilize them to fight for the same cause. This, too, is a reason why pan-European protest is scarce.

Finally, the issues at stake are partly different at the EU level than within the member states. Many of the issues that are closest to people's daily lives (such as economic policies, social benefits and moral issues) are still primarily dealt with by member state governments (see Chapter 8). Most of the issues dealt with by the EU are more remote from most citizens' daily lives and therefore less likely to arouse equally strong sentiments.

Having said this, the EU is not static and neither are the interest groups active in it. Over the decades, the EP has obtained a much stronger role in EU decision-making and the EU deals with a much wider array of policies and issues. As a result, EU-related political protest has been on the rise since the early and mid-1990s and so have truly collective European protests. As the EU's political opportunity structure has evolved and groups have learnt how to organize themselves at the European level, outside lobbying has become more important in EU politics. Nevertheless, inside lobbying remains the rule and outside lobbying the exception. This is why we will now take a closer look at inside lobbying.

Lobby routes and coalition formation

When interest groups use inside lobbying strategies, they face a number of important choices. One choice is whether to lobby at the EU level or at the member state level or both. This reflects the multi-level nature of EU decision-

Do interest groups matter?

the governments of the EU member states (through the Council of Ministers). An interest group is therefore confronted with a range of potential targets: the Commission, the EP and each of the EU's member state governments. Here, too, interest groups will make the decision based on which target they think will be most receptive to their cause, what influence that actor wields in the decision-making process and the organizational capabilities of the interest group itself.

Ideally, groups are active at several levels at the same time, talking to the Commission and MEPs in Brussels, and approaching politicians and government officials in member state capitals. Such a multi-level strategy corresponds well with the way many EU interest groups are organized. As we saw above, most groups take the form of a European federation, with an office in Brussels and members in the various member states. This leads to a natural division of tasks, whereby the Brussels office tries to influence the EU institutions and the group's members target their own national government.

Besides the choice between national and European routes, interest groups also have to decide whether to work alone or to join forces with other groups. The advantage of 'going alone' is that the demands and message of the group are not diluted by compromises with partner groups. The disadvantage, however, is that no group is capable of single-handedly influencing EU decision-making. Just remember the enormous number of interest groups and lobbyists active in Brussels today, each trying to get attention for their claims and arguments. The voice of one single group will not easily be heard in this cacophony. Moreover, decision-makers are much more likely to listen to a lobbyist if he or she can claim to speak for a wide range of groups than just for one group. Forging coalitions is therefore essential if an interest group wants to have any impact. Finding the right partners and coming up with joint positions is one of the crucial jobs of lobbyists in Brussels.

■ Do interest groups matter?

Above, we have seen that many interest groups and lobbyists try to influence EU policy-making. They would not take all this trouble if they did not believe their activities affected policies. However, this still leaves the question of exactly what influence they have. Does 'big business' rule Brussels? Or are interest groups a peripheral force next to member state governments?

The influence of interest groups in the EU

Determining the influence of interest groups is a notoriously difficult issue in political science. Ideally, what we want to know is whether a decision would have been different in the absence of interest groups or a specific interest group. If so, the difference between the decision that was taken and the

straightforward way to determine interest group influence, in practice it is almost impossible to assess.

For instance, one way of assessing interest group influence is to take a policy proposal, see what the response of an interest group was, and then determine whether the policy proposal changed as a result of that response. Simple as it may seem, this approach is fraught with caveats. First, if we observe that a policy proposal has changed, how can we be sure that it was changed *because of* the response by the interest group? Maybe policy-makers disagreed among themselves and changed the proposal for that reason. One reason why it is difficult to determine whether interest group activity caused a change is that policy-makers often have a strategic interest in downplaying or emphasizing the role of interest groups. In most cases, policy-makers do not want to be seen as lackeys of interest groups, so they will claim they changed their position for reasons other than interest group pressure. In other cases, they want to pacify (the members of) some interest group by stating they responded to that group's demands, even if they had different reasons for changing their position.

Second, any policy proposal is subject to numerous pressures, from interest groups, member state governments, MEPs and governments from states outside of the EU. It is nearly impossible to isolate the effect of interest group activity (let alone of one interest group) in this plethora of activities.

Third, and most fundamentally, interest groups need not always do something in order to have an impact on policy-makers. If policy-makers know that a powerful interest group is likely to oppose some idea, they will think twice before they propose it. Influence can therefore also be exerted without doing anything. These *anticipation effects* are extremely difficult to uncover because we cannot link the position of policy-makers to observable interest group behaviour.

The most we can do, therefore, is to carefully analyse the various possible routes of influence that interest groups have in order to arrive at a reasonable estimate of their impact on policy-making. Even then, it is very difficult to determine the *overall influence* of interest groups. Yet, studies of interest group influence do tell us more about differences *between* interest groups, answering the question of which groups are more powerful than others (and why).

In general, the impact of interest groups in policy-making depends on three sets of factors:

- characteristics of the interest groups;
- characteristics of the political system;
- characteristics of the issue that is at stake.

We will discuss each in turn.

do not. It makes sense to assume that these differences affect the ability of interest groups to influence policy-making. For instance, if a group is rich, it can hire more (and presumably better) staff and it can spend more money in order to set up a campaign.

In a more general sense, lobbying can be seen as an example of a 'resource exchange': interest groups are able to influence policy-makers because they have something to offer that those policy-makers value. For instance, interest groups have a lot of information about the issues they deal with. Because the European Commission needs information in order to make policies, it is very interested in obtaining that information. This offers opportunities for interest groups to influence policy-making. Likewise, for the European Commission it is very helpful to be able to point at the support of certain interest groups. If the Commission can claim that its proposal is supported by the affected industry, or by most NGOs dealing with the issue, it can considerably strengthen its position vis-à-vis the EU member states and the European Parliament. As a result, the Commission will often make modifications to its proposals in order to obtain the support of important interest groups.

The two examples point at two important sources of interest group influence in the EU: expertise and political support. The more knowledgeable an interest group is, the more impact it will have on policy-making. As we saw above, the EU is characterized more by inside lobbying than by outside lobbying. In inside lobbying processes, expertise is crucial because interest groups need to engage directly with policy-makers and other experts in discussions on the content of policies. In addition, the wider the constituency of an interest group, the stronger its voice will be. It makes quite a difference whether an interest group represents a few firms in one member state or it can claim to represent the entire European industry in a given field. This is the reason why, at the EU level, interest groups normally strive to form broad coalitions – both geographically (including as many member states as possible) and functionally (including as many different types of groups and sectors as possible). This is the only way to stand out from the crowd of EU interest groups.

Characteristics of the political system

Even though resources are important for an interest group, they do not fully determine its success. Whether or not an interest group is able to influence policies also depends on the way the political system operates. For instance, it makes quite a difference whether the system is pluralist or corporatist in nature. Likewise, money is more important as a resource for US than for EU interest groups because of differences in the political systems. Because election campaigns are more important in US politics than at the EU level, and because candidates need to spend a lot of money to win an election, financial resources are crucial for US politicians. Hence, campaign contributions to politicians are

other resources become important. As a result, interest groups that represent firms (and which, as a result, tend to have more financial resources) are relatively more successful in US politics than in EU politics, as Christine Mahoney showed in a comparison between lobbying in the EU and the USA (Christine Mahoney, 'Lobbying Success in the United States and the European Union', *Journal of Public Policy*, 27, 1, 2007: 35–56). These are circumstances that interest groups can hardly change, but that do affect their chances of making a difference in the policy-making process.

In addition, the 'multi-level' nature of the EU may affect the influence of interest groups. Exactly how it affects interest groups is subject to debate among political scientists. On the one hand, it can be argued that the EU strengthens interest groups by offering them various different access points. A group can choose whether to go to the EU level or to lobby a national government. As a result, the EU's multi-level nature multiplies the options interest groups have, which decreases their dependence on any one level of government. If a group is not successful 'back home', it can always try again in Brussels. And if it is set to lose at the EU level, it can always try to reverse its odds by targeting member state governments. In this way, its position vis-à-vis each level is strengthened. On the other hand, the EU has also increased the options for member state governments. When dealing with interest groups, they can now point at agreements made at the EU level or obligations flowing from EU law. This offers them new opportunities to resist demands from interest groups. In reality, both things may take place at the same time: interest groups can exploit new opportunities at different levels of government, while governments can use the EU to circumvent domestic interest groups. Which of the two is stronger will vary between countries and between interest groups. The EU's multi-level character strengthens groups that are in a relatively weak position domestically but face better chances in Brussels, while it weakens groups that are strong domestically but find it more difficult to operate at the EU level.

The importance of issues

Finally, the impact of interest groups depends crucially on characteristics of the issue at hand. Interest groups are most effective if they face little competition from other interests. This means, first of all, that a particular interest group is more effective when few or no other interest groups are involved in the policy-making process. In addition, the impact of interest groups as a whole depends on the scope or salience of an issue. Interest groups can exert the greatest influence when an issue is confined to a small circle of policy-makers. This is often the case when the issue is seen as relatively 'technical' and with limited impact beyond the immediate area it deals with. This is favourable for interest groups because it means that they can target their efforts on a limited number of policy-makers. Moreover, the policy-makers themselves are more likely to provide interest groups with a platform when they do not have to compete with other groups.

All of this changes when an issue becomes subject to broader debates, involving a wider range of stakeholders and political actors at higher levels. In those situations, interest group demands have to compete with a host of other considerations. This is clearest for issues that are considered to be 'high politics'. High politics issues are dealt with at the highest level of government (in the EU: the European Council). Here, interest group demands are easily swamped by geopolitical or electoral considerations. These considerations may work to the advantage of some groups, but no group will be able to exert the kind of direct influence that can be had with more limited issues.

■ Lobbying and democracy

We have seen that interest groups play important roles in EU policy-making. Even if they are not always successful in reaching their objectives, there are many situations in which they do affect the policies adopted. This raises obvious issues of democracy. After all, in a democratic political system, decisions should ideally reflect the preferences of the full citizenry, not of specific interests. Moreover, decision-making should be more or less transparent, so that citizens are able to know how and why a decision was taken and can hold their elected representatives to account if they do not agree. Lobbying may undermine both qualities. By lobbying for specific interests, decisions may move away from what most citizens would prefer. In addition, lobbying (particularly inside lobbying) is almost by nature an informal activity that takes place outside of the public view. As a result, it detracts from the transparency of the policy-making process and makes it more difficult to assess why and how a decision was taken.

This, however, does not automatically make lobbying an undemocratic or even anti-democratic activity. In fact, an argument can also be made in favour of lobbying. To start with, lobbying can improve the quality of decision-making by giving new information and additional viewpoints to policy-makers. Often, interest groups are knowledgeable about the issue they are engaged in. That knowledge can add to the quality of deliberations in the policy-making process. In addition, lobbying can bring viewpoints to the attention of policy-makers that would otherwise be ignored. There is no reason to assume that, in the absence of interest groups and lobbying, policy-makers would automatically do what is 'in the best interest' of citizens or what is supported by the majority of them. By promoting alternative viewpoints, interest groups may represent points of view that are shared by many citizens but are not (yet) heard in the policy-making process.

However, all this relies crucially on two conditions. First, whether or not lobbying helps the representativeness of policy-making depends on the balance between interest groups. If only one interest group is represented in the policy-making process, the outcome is likely to be severely biased towards that group.

groups). In terms of numbers of groups, this claim certainly seems to have merit. As we saw above, the vast majority of EU interest groups represent business interests, which may lead to a bias in favour of business-oriented policies. At the same time, research into the impact of interest groups suggests that business interests have a greater impact in US politics than in the EU because business interests have greater financial leverage than NGOs and money plays a greater role in US than in EU politics. Moreover, the European Commission actively tries to support European NGOs in order to stimulate a more 'level playing field' among interests.

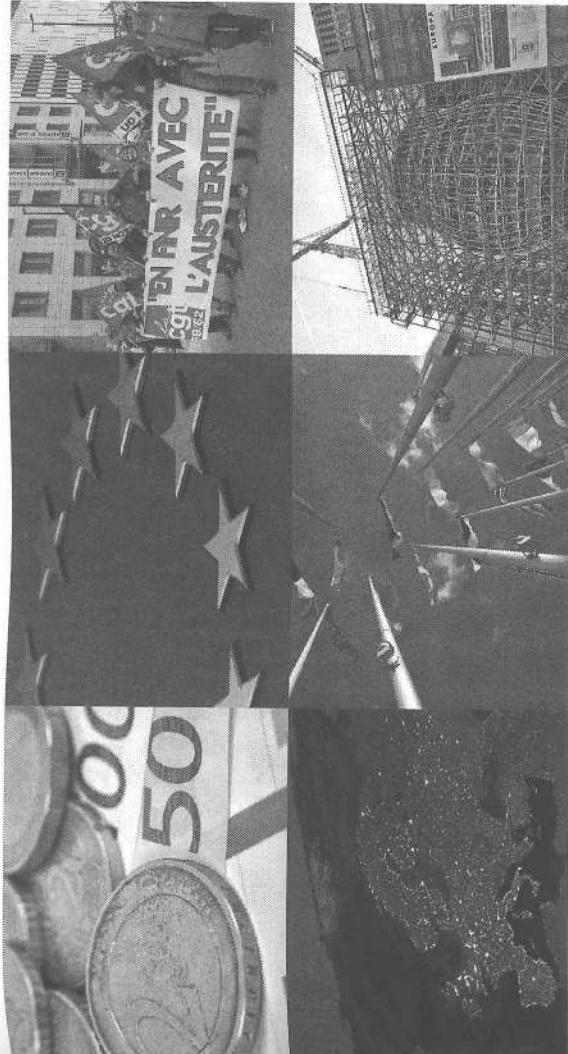
The second condition that determines whether lobbying helps or threatens democracy has to do with the way in which lobbying takes place. Some forms of lobbying, such as giving objective information in order to highlight certain consequences of proposed policies, can hardly be objected to. This becomes different when lobbyists deliberately distort information or studies in order to mislead decision-makers. In the extreme, bribing decision-makers is even a criminal activity. In terms of transparency, as well, there is a continuum from more or less open contacts between interest groups and policy-makers to secretive meetings that are deliberately hidden from the public eye. Thus, there is a continuum of lobbying activities, from those activities that do not harm and may actually help democratic policy-making to activities that undermine it. Therefore, it is impossible to pass judgement on lobbying and interest groups per se: much depends on how the lobbying is done. This is the reason why there has been much debate about rules and codes of conduct for lobbyists. The European Commission and the European Parliament operate a joint register for interest groups and individual lobbyists (the so-called Transparency Register). Once they have registered, they are supposed to comply with a Code of Conduct. Yet, the register does not show what types of contacts actually take place between lobbyists and policy-makers. Moreover, although interest groups and lobbyists are 'expected' to register, there are few sanctions for those who do not. Most concretely, registration is required if a lobbyist wants to obtain access to the Parliament buildings.

Whatever one's normative judgement on lobbying, it is also a fact of political life. As long as (groups of) people are affected by government decisions or passionate about their ideas, they will try to convince policy-makers of their point of view. In the EU, as well, lobbying is set to remain an important feature of its political process. Hence, understanding which groups are involved and how lobbying works is an important precondition for understanding EU politics in general.

■ Summary

This chapter has discussed interest groups and lobbying in the EU. It argues that:

- The vast majority of these groups represent business interests. This can be explained by the fact that business groups typically represent specific interests while NGOs represent diffuse interests.
- Interest groups can use different channels to lobby the EU: they can lobby themselves, hire a consultant, or lobby through national or European associations. In addition, groups can lobby the EU institutions or target national governments.
- Interest representation in the EU is more pluralist than corporatist in nature, although pockets of corporatism can be found in social policy and the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.
- The European Commission has actively sought to support the creation and activities of EU interest groups, in an attempt to integrate them into the EU policy-making process. For the Commission, this has been a way to achieve a more balanced representation of interests but also to create an EU-level constituency that it can engage in its initiatives.
- Interest groups can use two types of strategies: inside lobbying and outside lobbying. When groups rely on inside lobbying, they try to influence policy-making from within, by becoming part of deliberations on policies. When groups use outside lobbying, they try to put pressure on policy-makers from the outside, by staging public protests and involving the media.
- Interest groups may use combinations of these two strategies, but often they rely more on one or the other.
- In the EU, inside lobbying is much more prevalent than outside lobbying, because EU policy-makers are less vulnerable to public opinion, protests at a European scale are difficult to organize, and the types of issues the EU deals with are more remote from citizens' daily lives.
- The impact of interest groups depends on three things: characteristics of the interest groups themselves, characteristics of the political system they operate in, and characteristics of the issue they are active on.
- The most important interest group characteristics that affect their impact in the EU are expertise and political support.
- Because campaign financing is less important in the EU than in the USA, money plays a smaller role for interest groups in the EU than in the latter.
- The EU's multi-level character offers opportunities for interest groups to circumvent governments but also for governments to withstand interest group demands.
- Interest groups are most effective when an issue is confined to a limited set of participants and stakeholders.
- Whether or not lobbying helps or is a threat to democracy depends on the balance between interest groups and the way in which lobbying takes place.



edn, 2011) and Rimus van Schendelen, *The Art of Lobbying the EU: More Machiavelli in Brussels* (Amsterdam University Press, revised edn, 2013). Christine Mahoney, *Brussels versus the Beltway: Advocacy in the United States and the European Union* (Georgetown University Press, 2008) presents one of the few systematic empirical comparisons between lobbying in the EU and the USA. A somewhat older but still outstanding analysis of political protest in the EU is presented in Doug Imig and Sydney Tarrow (eds), *Contentious Europeans: Protest and Politics in an Emerging Polity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

■ Websites

- European Commission and European Parliament's Transparency Register: <http://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister>
- European Economic and Social Committee: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu>
- Committee of the Regions: www.cor.europa.eu
- European Public Affairs Consultancies' Association (EPACA): www.epaca.org
- Society of European Affairs Professionals (SEAP): www.seap.be

7 Political parties and the European Parliament

■ Introduction

In March 2009 David Cameron, the leader of the British Conservative Party, announced that the Conservatives would form a new political group in the European Parliament after the EP elections of June that year. In doing so, the Conservatives would break away from the Christian Democrat European People's Party (EPP), with which it had been allied in the EP for almost two decades.

The relationship between the Conservatives and the EPP had always been strained, as the Conservatives were much more Eurosceptical than the (traditionally strongly pro-EU) 'continental' conservative and Christian democratic parties assembled in the EPP. Before joining the EPP group, the Conservatives had cooperated with like-minded parties in the 'European Democrats' (ED) group. When the British Conservatives decided to join the EPP political group in 1992, they only did so as an 'associated party'. In 1999, this associated status was made more visible by adding 'ED' to the name of the EPP group in Parliament. Still, the British Conservatives continued to disagree with the EPP 'party line' on many important issues and frequently threatened to withdraw from the EPP-ED group altogether to form their own political group. Cameron's decision to set up a new political group attracted a lot of criti-

Navigating the EU
On the website www.navigatingthe.eu you will find online exercises for this chapter.

Parliament (MEPs) voiced their discontent with the move, fearing that the Conservatives would lose influence in the EP. They were joined by former Conservative commissioners Leon Brittan and Chris Patten, as well as the (Christian Democratic) President of the European Commission, José Barroso. Nevertheless, on 22 June 2009, eight parties, including the Conservatives, presented their new political group under the name European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). A few months later, they also created the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR), a political party at the European level.

The story of the Conservatives and the EPP raises a number of questions about the role of political parties in the EP and EU politics in general. Why did the Conservatives stay in the EPP political group for almost twenty years when there were so many differences of opinion? When Cameron did create a new group, why did a number of prominent party members voice their opposition? And what is the relationship between political groups in the EP and European political parties, such as the AECR?

In order to answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at what political parties do in the EU, both inside and outside of the EP. In this chapter, we will do so by looking at the following questions:

- What do we mean by the term 'political party' in the EU?
- Which political groups are active in the European Parliament?
- What are the benefits of forming a political group?
- What role do political groups play outside of the EP?
- What role do European political parties play outside of the EP?

We will see that political parties play an important role in the European Parliament. The EP's 'political groups' are instrumental in structuring the Parliament's work, and they tend to vote as cohesive blocks. In that sense, the EP is increasingly operating like domestic parliaments. Outside of the EP, by contrast, European political parties have been slow to develop and have only assumed a limited number of tasks. They remain confederations of domestic parties and lack the key tasks of recruiting candidates for political office and organizing the electorate. As a result, European political parties do not play the central and independent role in EU politics that domestic political parties play in domestic politics.

■ Political parties in the EU: three levels

When we talk about **political parties** in the EU, it is important to note that the term can be used for three different types of entities, which need to be clearly distinguished:

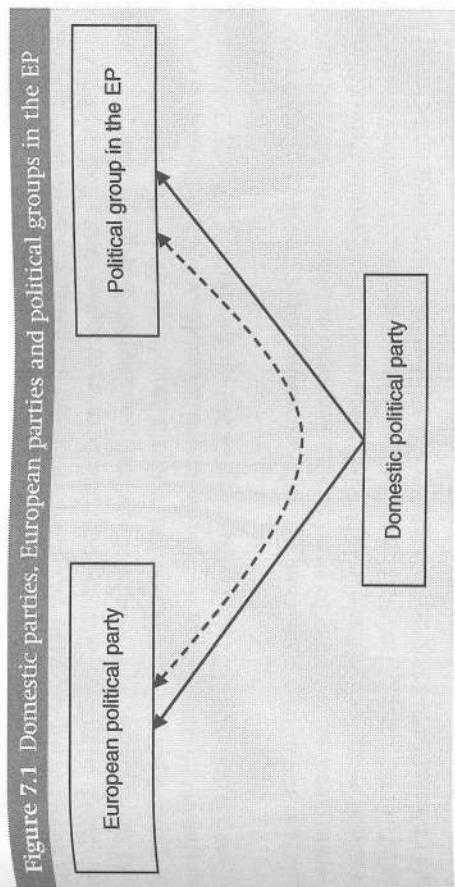


Figure 7.1 Domestic parties, European parties and political groups in the EP

- Political groups are coalitions between elected MEPs from different member states in the EP. They play important roles in the daily operation of the EP and structure the voting behaviour of MEPs.
- European political parties are associations between domestic political parties and operate outside of the EP.

The relationship between these three forms of 'political party' is shown in Figure 7.1.

Within the 'triangle' in Figure 7.1, domestic political parties play a central role. They are the ones that send MEPs to the European Parliament. Hence, they also decide which political groups to form or join. David Cameron's decision about the affiliation of the Conservative MEPs in the EP is a good illustration of this process. In addition, domestic political parties are the founders and members of European political parties, and are firmly in the driving seat when it comes to deciding about the activities of those European parties. As a result, there is no close, direct link between European political parties and the political groups in the EP. Any link that exists between European political parties and political groups runs via domestic parties. This is indicated by the curved, dashed line between them, as opposed to the straight full lines between domestic parties, on the one hand, and European political parties and political groups in the EP, on the other. Hence, domestic political parties play a pivotal role, organizing and controlling both political groups and European political parties.

■ Political groups in the European Parliament

The development of political groups in the EP

When the European Coal and Steel Community (ECS) was the predecessor

precursor of the European Commission) and the Council of Ministers. The Common Assembly consisted of members from the national parliaments of the six member states who met to discuss issues related to the ECSC. In contrast to the European Parliament that we have now, the members of the Common Assembly were not elected directly, but combined the membership of the Assembly with their work as national members of parliament. As we saw in Chapter 5, this only changed in 1979, when direct elections to the EP were introduced.

Nevertheless, from 1953 onwards, the national representatives in the Common Assembly chose to organize on the basis of political ideology rather than country of origin. In these early days, the Assembly had three political groups: Socialists, Christian Democrats and Liberals. By organizing on the basis of political groups, the members of the Common Assembly emphasized that they primarily represented ideological cleavages in Europe and not different member states.

With the creation of the European Economic Community and Euratom in 1958, the tasks of the Common Assembly were extended to these communities, too, and it was officially renamed 'European Parliamentary Assembly'. In 1962, the Parliamentary Assembly decided to call itself the 'European Parliament'. This emphasized the role the Assembly saw for itself – not as a mere collection of national members of parliaments but as a European parliament in its own right, even if this name was only formalized in the 1986 Single European Act. From the 78 members of the ECSC's Common Assembly, the European Parliament has grown to 751 MEPs. Most of these MEPs belong to one of the EP's seven political groups. Table 7.1 gives an overview of these groups. The seven groups vary widely in terms of their ideological underpinnings, level of ideological cohesiveness and level of organization. In the following sections, we will discuss these three elements in turn.

The ideological underpinning of the EP's political groups

In terms of **ideological** underpinning, most of the political groups are defined in classic left/right terms, ranging from the (post-) Communists, the Greens and the Socialists on the left to the Christian Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives on the right. All in all, therefore, the political groups in the EP tend to reflect the political distinctions that also exist within the member states.

The main exception to this left/right scheme is the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFD), which is based on a Eurosceptic platform. Its uniting ideology consists of opposition to the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and identity. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, the

Political group	Created in	Ideological orientation	Website
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	1953 (as 'Group of the European People's Party' (EPP))	Christian Democratic Group	www.eppgroup.eu
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	1953 (as 'Liberal Group')	Liberal	www.alde.eu
Group of the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	2009	Conservative/Eurosceptic	www.ecrgroup.eu
Group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	1953 (as 'Social Democratic Group')	Social Democratic	www.socialistanddemocrats.eu
Group of the Progressives Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	1953 (as 'Group of the Socialists')	Socialists	www.socdemgroup.eu
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	1953 (as 'Liberal Group')	Liberal	www.alde.eu
Group of the Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	1973 (as 'Communist and Allies Group')	(Post-) Communist	www.guengel.eu
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA)	1984 (as 'Rainbow Group')	Cooperation of Greens and Regionals	www.greens-efa.eu
Group of Freedoms and Direct Democracy (EFD)	1994 (as 'Europe of Nations')	Eurosceptic	www.efdgroup.eu

7.1 Political groups in the European Parliament (as of 1 July 2014)

the EFDD, it does not oppose the existence of the EU as such but focuses on reform of the EU and is reluctant to concede new powers.

Ideological cohesiveness in the EP's political groups

The shared ideological underpinnings of the EP's political groups obscure important distinctions within each of these groups, which are reflected in their level of ideological cohesiveness. In the end, the political groups in the EP are collections of (elected representatives from) domestic parties. These domestic parties have all evolved within specific national contexts and political traditions. As a result, the British Labour Party has partly different positions and priorities than, say, the French Parti Socialiste (PS) or the Austrian Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ).

Still, some political groups include wider national differences than others. The three oldest political groups are those of the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals. These three political groups were the first to be established when the ECSC's Common Assembly decided to organize along party lines. Currently, they are the only groups that have members from (almost) all EU member states. This is not surprising, as Christian democracy, social democracy and liberalism have been the three defining political ideologies in Western Europe during the twentieth century. International cooperation among domestic parties from these ideologies often predates the creation of the ECSC. For instance, the first Congress of Christian People's Parties was held in 1925, while cooperation between socialist parties extends back as far as 1864, when the First International was established.

Nevertheless, there are also differences in cohesiveness between these three 'classic' political groups. Despite the differences between social democratic parties in the EU member states, each of these parties is based on a largely similar political ideology. This is helped by the fact that socialism and social democracy had from the outset an explicitly international outlook. The idea of international solidarity has always been important in socialist thinking; it is no accident that the First International was founded already in 1864. Since the 2009 EP elections, Social Democrats have formed the major part of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats Group (S&D).

The group of the European People's Party (EPP) is a somewhat more mixed bag and is a good example of the difficulties of forming cohesive political groups on the basis of domestic political parties. Christian democracy shares a number of ideas in different countries, but these ideas were often developed in specific national contexts and not as part of an international political programme as with the Socialists. In fact, as conservatives, Christian Democrats put a high value on local and national traditions, which has led to quite distinct political profiles for each of the Christian democratic parties in Europe.

explicitly Christian in character, such as the Spanish Partido Popular (PP) or the French Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP). These parties have developed from specific national concerns. The UMP, for instance, builds on the French political tradition of 'Gaulism', a peculiarly French brand of political ideas that cannot be found in any other EU member state.

The Liberal group in the EP, nowadays named the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), also hosts a diverse set of political parties. Broadly speaking, two strands can be discerned in European liberalism. One strand, which is on the right of the political spectrum, stands for market liberalism and a minimal state. The other strand, which is more centrist or left-leaning, emphasizes equality of rights and social justice. As a result, Liberal parties in different member states take quite different positions in their political system. For example, the German Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) has traditionally placed itself in between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, participating in alternating coalitions with these two powerhouses of German politics. The British Liberal Democrats are seen as left-leaning in ideological terms. The Belgian Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Open VLD), by contrast, is firmly on the right of the political spectrum and has placed greater emphasis on market liberalization and financial austerity. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, liberalism is represented by two parties: one of the market liberalism and one of the social liberalism variety. Although competitors on the domestic level, these parties work together in the ALDE group.

In the introduction we already saw the background to the creation of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). The parties in this group are all 'conservative' and are united by a considerable degree of Euroscepticism, expressed in their opposition to 'Euro-federalism'. Under this broad umbrella, the ECR brings together twenty-two parties from fifteen member states, dominated by the British Conservatives, the Polish Law and Justice Party, and the Eurosceptic German party Alternative für Deutschland.

The Confederal Group of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL) is a group consisting of far left parties, most of them of a communist or post-communist persuasion. Although communist representation in the European Parliament as a political group dates back to 1973, the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe has led to significant changes within this political group. It now also includes communist parties from the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The rise of the Greens began in the 1980s, when Green parties, devoted to environmental protection and progressive social policies, sprang up in several European countries. The Greens started their life in the EP under the aegis of the Rainbow Group, a coalition with so-called 'stateless nations' or 'regionalists'. The latter include parties that represent minorities within certain EU member states, such as the Scottish National Party and the Republican Left of

form their own political group, the two groups were reunited in 1999 as the Greens–European Free Alliance.

The Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD) is not so easy to characterize in left/right terms. Its uniting ideology consists of opposition to European integration and an emphasis on the sovereignty of the member states vis-à-vis the EU. The British UK Independence Party (UKIP), the largest member of the group, even advocates the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. The second-largest member besides UKIP is Italy's Five Star Movement, a protest party founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo. In addition, the group includes members from a number of smaller right-wing parties.

Level of organization

Political groups differ not only in terms of ideology, but also in terms of the level of organization. Some political groups are ad hoc coalitions between like-minded MEPs that form after an EP election, while others are based on more enduring forms of cooperation. Examples of the former include the EFDD and EUL/NGL political groups. The members of these groups cooperate within the EP, but they do not have a common organization outside of the EP. Other groups are affiliated to a European political party, which provides a platform for cooperation apart from the political groups in the EP. Most European parties publish a party manifesto preceding the elections for the EP, which includes common positions on a range of issues related to the EU. The organization and role of European parties will be discussed more extensively below.

The benefits of forming a political group

Above, we surveyed the field of political groups in the EP. It turned out that there is a fair amount of variation among domestic parties, which makes it difficult to form one single group in the EP. Still, MEPs and parties that are represented in the EP find it very important to be part of a political group. This is why the British Conservatives only left the EPP political group when they had found enough partners to form a new political group. It also explains why the Conservatives remained part of the EPP-ED political group between 1992 and 2009, despite considerable differences in opinion on European integration. In turn, the other parties in the EPP-ED political group made great efforts to keep the Conservatives on board during this period. Why, then, is it so important to political parties to cooperate in political groups?

The answer to this question is twofold. Part has to do with the internal rules and procedures of the European Parliament. The other aspect has to do with the political advantages of being part of a (large) political group. The Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament greatly encourage the formation of political groups by granting them a range of specific powers and privileges.

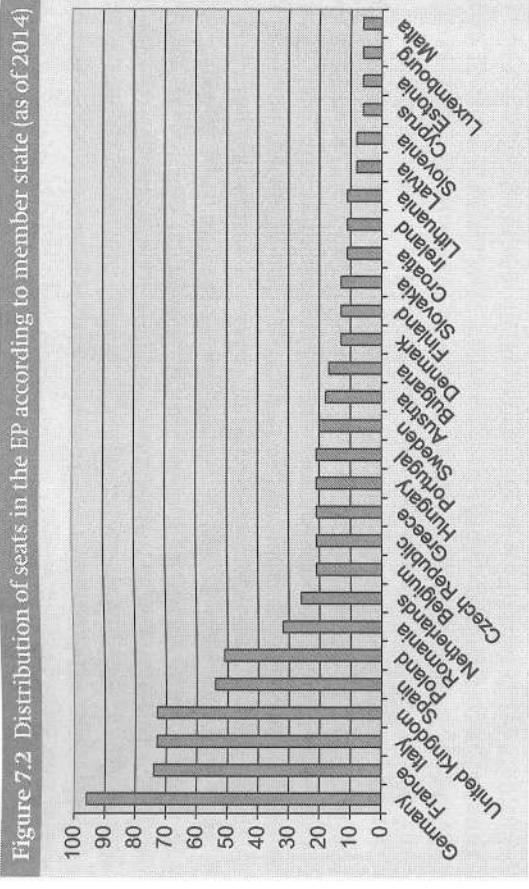
work of the EP, consists of the President of the EP plus the presidents of all political groups. Being on the Conference of Presidents is important because it decides on such things as the agenda for EP meetings and the composition of parliamentary committees. Also, political groups can table amendments to proposals that are being discussed in the EP or propose to reject a proposal altogether. Outside of political groups, only parliamentary committees and groups of at least forty MEPs can do so. To give a final example, when a conciliation committee is formed to discuss a compromise with the Council of Ministers under the ordinary legislative procedure (see Chapter 4), seats on the EP delegation to the committee are allocated according to the composition of the EP by political group. Hence, it is very unattractive for an individual MEP or domestic political party not to be a member of a political group.

In order to form a political group, three conditions have to be met. First, the group needs to consist of at least twenty-five MEPs. Second, these MEPs need to come from at least one-quarter of all EU member states. Currently, this implies the members should come from at least seven different member states. Third, the group should be formed 'according to political affinities', as the EP's Rules of Procedure state it. The latter condition is meant to prevent the creation of purely 'technical groups' of MEPs who work together to obtain the benefits of a political group without actually sharing a common political programme.

All in all, the EP's rules on political groups encourage organization along ideological lines. They almost force MEPs to form political groups across EU member states on the basis of a shared political programme. This, in turn, conditions many of the activities that take place within the Parliament.

In addition to these procedural incentives, there are also important political benefits in forming a political group. Figure 7.2 shows the distribution of seats in the EP between the twenty-eight member states. The EU's largest member state, Germany, occupies 96 seats out of a total of 751, or 12.8% of the total. All other member states have smaller numbers of seats. The largest single domestic party in the EP, Germany's Christian Democratic CDU/CSU, currently occupies thirty-four seats, or 4.5% of the total. Hence, in order to get things done in the EP, it is necessary to work together with MEPs from other member states. By forming a political group, MEPs can present a unified front that controls a substantial number of votes, which increases the chances of obtaining decisions that are favourable to that group.

Of course, working together in a political group also means that MEPs and domestic political parties represented in the EP need to compromise with their colleagues from other countries. This is made easier by the fact that the political groups are based on common ideological backgrounds, but as we saw above there can be substantial differences within a political group. MEPs and domestic political parties therefore face an important trade-off. On the one hand, by joining a political group they may have to compromise on some of



This trade-off also characterized the relationship between the British Conservatives and the EPP political group that we discussed in the introduction. To illustrate this further, take a look at Figure 7.3, which shows the size of the political groups in the EP.

In the 2014–19 European Parliament, the EPP political group is the largest, holding 221 of the EP's 751 seats. The S&D group is second, with 191 seats. For the British Conservatives, being a member of the EPP-ED political group was attractive because it made them part of the EP's largest political group. In comparison, the ECR group is much smaller with only 70 seats. The logic also worked for the other parties in the EPP. For them, having the Conservatives on board was an important asset, because the seats of the Conservatives, and those of some of the other parties that later joined the ECR, solidified the position of the Christian Democrats as the largest group in the EP. This calculus explains why both the Conservatives and the rest of the EPP political group for a long time went to great lengths to maintain their coalition, despite clear differences of opinion. This is also why some Conservative MEPs and former commissioners opposed David Cameron's decision to start his own group, because it would diminish the influence of the Conservatives in the EP. Briefing 7.1 looks at this trade-off in greater depth, on the basis of insights from political science theories of coalition formation.

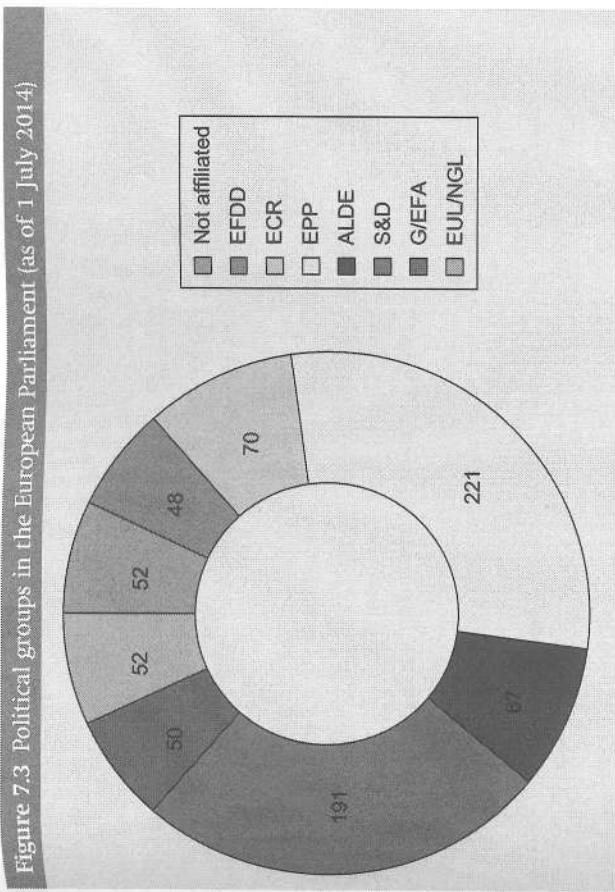


Figure 7.2 Distribution of seats in the EP according to member state (as of 2014)

Figure 7.3 Political groups in the European Parliament (as of 1 July 2014)

matter? First, we discuss how often MEPs vote with or against their own political group. Only if political groups are able to 'bring out the vote' do they have any real political significance. Second, we ask to what extent political groups structure political conflict in the EP. In national politics, we are used to thinking of political parties as voting along certain lines, the 'left-right' dimension being the most relevant in most countries. Do similar conflict dimensions also exist within the EP and, if so, what do they look like? Finally, we look at coalitions between political groups in the EP. Since no political group has an absolute majority, they have to cooperate to achieve something. Does this lead to stable coalitions between political groups in the EP, similar to the coalitions that we find in national politics? And, if so, which groups tend to form coalitions?

Do political groups vote as blocks?

Political groups bring benefits to their members, both in terms of formal 'perks' and in terms of political power. However, for this political power to be actualized, political groups need to vote as a block. If individual MEPs or domestic parties within a political group do not vote with the overall party line, the potential for forming one block in the EP is severely diminished. This is not just a theoretical possibility. In fact, on the face of it, there are few reasons why MEPs would vote with their political group if conflicts with domestic imper-

■ MEPs: between political group and member state

Above, we discussed the various political groups in the EP and the benefits of

Briefing 7.1

Coalition formation in the European Parliament

Political groups in the European Parliament are in essence coalitions between (MEPs from) domestic political parties. In order to understand why certain political groups form, we can therefore make use of existing theories in political science on coalition formation in domestic politics. The key question in these theories is why certain parties elect to work together. Two main approaches to this question have been formulated:

- One approach assumes that politicians are mainly interested in maximizing power for its own sake. Power gives important benefits to those holding it, including status and the perks of office. Politicians are then said to be 'office-seeking'. Applied to the EP, this approach predicts that national political parties will strive for political groups that command as many seats as possible, regardless of the ideological background of their partners.
- The other approach starts from the idea that politicians want to have certain policies adopted. In other words, they want to make a difference through their policies. These politicians are 'policy-oriented'. As a result, coalitions will be formed among parties that take similar policy positions, even when this means losing some power.

In the EP, the same two considerations play a role in the formation of political groups. A group that wants to increase its power will opt for the inclusion of as many members as necessary without being too strict about the ideological background of those members. A group that cares mainly about ideology will only accept members that fit its profile, even if this implies a smaller group.

In reality, all political groups in the EP balance these two objectives; they are both 'office-seeking' and 'policy-oriented'. Still, some groups have learned more towards increasing their membership while other groups have adhered more closely to a shared ideological background. For instance, in the early 1990s, the EPP decided to expand its membership in order to become the largest political group in the EP, even if this meant the inclusion of parties that did not have a Christian democratic background. As a result, after the 1999 elections the (then) EPP-ED group became the largest single political group for the first time since 1975, but with much greater internal diversity than before.

candidates by their domestic parties. Moreover, if MEPs have political ambitions beyond the EP (such as becoming a cabinet minister) they also rely on their domestic party. In comparison, the political leadership of the political group in the EP has little to offer, although it can determine which MEPs obtain rapporteurships for legislative proposals or chairmanships of parliamentary committees. As a result, in case of conflict between the two it is not at all obvious that the official position of the political group will prevail over domestic imperatives.

Nevertheless, political groups in the EP tend to vote relatively cohesively. Political scientists Simon Hix, Abdel Noury and Gérard Roland have studied the **cohesion** of political groups in the EP between 1979 and 2004 by analysing the extent to which MEPs vote with or against their political group in the EP (Simon Hix, Abdel Noury and Gérard Roland, *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge University Press, 2007). They found that in the vast majority of cases, MEPs vote with their political group and not with their compatriots in other political groups. Moreover, political groups have become more cohesive over time, voting together more often. By contrast, the cohesion among MEPs from the same member state has decreased over time. More recent analyses have shown that this trend has continued since 2004 (www.yotewatch.eu). Cohesion is generally strongest among the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Greens/EFA groups. Overall, the cohesion of these groups is still weaker than that of parties in national European parliaments but stronger than that of the two parties in the US Congress.

Political groups have therefore become stronger as the EP has become more powerful. According to Hix, Noury and Roland, political groups have become stronger because domestic parties have realized that in order to operate effectively in the EP, they need to vote together, even if the position of the political group does not always conform with their own ideal position. This shows that political groups are important factors in the EP. If we want to understand how MEPs vote, we need to look first at the positions taken by their political groups.

Conflict dimensions in the EP

In the previous sections, we saw that the EP's political groups, with the exception of the EFDD group, can be ordered along the familiar left/right divide. The cleavage in the domestic politics of most EU member states. Cleavages are based on social differences between groups of citizens that lead to different perspectives on the kind of policies that share certain basic ideas about the way the EU should be run. Still, as we saw above, there is quite a lot of variety within political groups. Moreover, on some issues of EU politics, political parties from the left and the right within a certain country tend to agree, regardless of ideological background. If this occurs, MEPs can hardly abandon the position of their constituency

Cohesion is the extent to which MEPs of the same political group vote together. If all MEPs from a political group vote exactly the same, cohesion is high. If some MEPs in a political group vote for a proposal or amendment while other MEPs from that same group vote against, cohesion is low.

A **political cleavage** is a stable conflict dimension between political groups that is rooted in social differences between groups in society.

'rightists' believe that the economy works best if the government does not interfere with it too much. In addition to the left/right cleavage, there may also be other cleavages in a country – for instance, between different regions in a country or between cities and the countryside.

Cleavages structure politics because issues tend to be absorbed into existing cleavages. So, if the left/right cleavage is the only important cleavage in a country, all issues will typically be interpreted in left/right terms. In this way, cleavages lead to 'packages' of political positions that go together, so that a leftist position on unemployment benefits goes together with a leftist position on immigration policies and a leftist position on environmental protection. If an issue cannot be defined in such terms, the chances are that it will largely be ignored by existing political parties. By structuring politics, cleavages also lend a degree of predictability and stability to political systems. If cleavages are strong, you can easily predict the position of a political party on one issue from its position on another issue. After all, since cleavages lead to the 'packages' of political positions described above, if politicians support one part of the package they are forced also to adhere to the other parts.

Cleavages are important for understanding domestic politics, but are they also relevant in the European Parliament? Studies of voting behaviour in the European Parliament show that they are. As in most European states, the left/right cleavage is the most important conflict dimension in the European Parliament. This means that in most of the cases support for and opposition to proposals depends on where a political group stands in terms of left and right. It also means that politics in the EP is remarkably like domestic politics and you can understand quite a lot about the voting behaviour of political groups in the EP by looking at them in left/right terms.

In addition, voting patterns in the EP reveal a second, though less important, conflict dimension between groups that support further European integration and groups that are more reluctant to let the EU play a greater role vis-à-vis its member states. Above, where we reviewed the seven political groups in the EP, we already saw that opposition to the EU is a particularly important part of the platforms of the ECR and the EFDD. To some extent it also characterizes the positions taken by the EUL/NGL. The three large centrist groups (EPP, S&D and ALDE) as well as the Greens have generally been supportive of further integration. This conflict dimension is peculiar to the EU, although it is similar to the opposition to central governments by regional political parties in some EU member states, such as Italy, Spain and the UK.

Coalitions between political groups in the EP

Above, we saw that political groups are **coalitions** of domestic parties that work together in a common political objective – for instance, to coordinate voting behaviour for a common policy in the EP. However, since no political

achieve something. In principle, this could take two forms. On the one hand, coalitions between political groups could form on each individual issue separately. Then, we would find different coalitions on different issues. On the other hand, political groups could agree to support each other on a range of issues. Then, they would form stable coalitions. The latter pattern is what we typically find in the domestic politics of EU member states, where parties in parliament form stable coalitions for certain periods of time.

Coalition formation in domestic politics is the result of the parliamentary system that exists in most EU member states. In a parliamentary system, the government can only operate if it is supported by a majority in parliament. Hence, parties form coalitions in order to form such a majority. In the EP, this type of coalition formation is not relevant. After all, the EU does not operate under a parliamentary system. Its 'government' (that is, the Commission) is not formed on the basis of the prevailing majority in the EP, so there is no need (or use) to create a governing coalition. Nevertheless, there can be benefits for political groups in agreeing to work together and hence win a greater proportion of votes.

Up until the mid-1990s, such coalitions indeed formed between the three largest political groups: the EPP, the Socialists and ALDE. These three groups often formed a triangle that voted together on major issues. For political parties outside this triangle, it was almost impossible to get anything done (unless they happened to agree with what the 'big three' wanted). This has led to the image of the EP as largely ruled by a grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Socialists, aided by Liberals.

This grand coalition still plays an important role in the EP. Since the mid-1990s, however, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists have voted against each other more often, leaving more scope for alternative coalitions (e.g. between left-wing or right-wing groups) or ad hoc coalitions around specific issues. These coalitions are primarily based on the congruence of the policy positions taken by political groups on a given issue. As a result, political groups tend to vote most often with the groups that are closest to them on a left/right scale. Yet, in contrast to the way parliaments work in most EU member states, political groups in the EP do not form longer-term coalitions in which they agree to support each other between two elections.

■ Political parties outside the European Parliament

The previous sections reviewed the role of political groups in the European Parliament. These political groups are the result of cooperation between (groups of) MEPs from different EU member states. In addition, domestic political parties from various EU member states may also cooperate outside the EP. Then they form European parties in order to coordinate their activities. Although European parties and political groups in the European Parliament

which is directly linked to the European People's Party. Likewise, the vast majority of parties in the S&D group are members of the Party of European Socialists (PES). Other party groups are affiliated with two different parties. For instance, the Greens/European Free Alliance group has ties with both the European Green Party and the European Free Alliance. Still other political groups include members from domestic parties that belong to a European party alongside members from domestic parties that do not. Thus, the EUL/NGL group includes parties that are members of the European Left Party and members that are not affiliated to a European party.

In each of the EU member states, political parties are important players in politics. Their importance stems not only from the fact that they are represented in parliaments but also from their activities outside parliament. They have members who vote on candidates for elected office and party platforms, they actively recruit people to represent the party, and may organize debates and publish discussion papers in order to have an input into the political debate. In short, political parties are organized and have a role in politics independent from the elected representatives for those parties. An important question is whether European parties perform the same roles that parties within the member states do. To what extent are they a political force of their own in EU politics? That is the question this section will address.

The development of European political parties

Initially, the development of European political parties was closely linked to developments in the European Parliament. As we saw above, cooperation between Christian Democratic and Socialist parties in Europe was initiated well before the Second World War. These forms of cooperation remained rather loose. They presented opportunities for domestic political parties to meet and discuss informally, but did not go beyond that. The development of more strongly institutionalized European party federations started after the creation of the ECSC in 1951. It proceeded in four stages.

The early years

The first stage runs from the creation of the ECSC to the 1970s. After political groups had formed in the ECSC Common Assembly (and later the EEC's European Parliamentary Assembly), Christian Democratic, Socialist and Liberal parties started to cooperate at the European level. Socialist parties from the six EEC member states formed a 'liaison bureau' within the Socialist International in 1957. In 1965, the European Union of Christian Democrats was established. Liberal parties worked together in the Liberal International, which had been founded in 1947.

informal. These were not European parties, neither in practice nor even in name. Rather, they were platforms where representatives from various domestic parties could meet to discuss issues relating to the European Communities. There was little use for more intensive forms of cooperation, anyway, because the Common/Parliamentary Assembly consisted of representatives from national parliaments.

Direct elections to the EP

The formation of European party federations entered the second stage when it was decided that the EP would be elected directly by citizens in the member states. Election campaigns called for closer coordination – for instance, in the formulation of a common party manifesto. In the mid-1970s, the main political groups therefore created European party federations to replace the weak platforms existing until then. In 1974, Socialist parties formed the Union (also: Confederation) of Socialist Parties of the European Community. Christian Democratic parties followed in 1976 with the European People's Party. That same year, Liberal parties established the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community. Each of these party federations drafted a party manifesto for the first direct elections to the EP, in 1979, but in the end election campaigns remained a matter for each of the domestic parties that were members of the federation.

Recognition of European political parties

Party formation at the EU level entered the third stage in 1992, when European political parties were mentioned for the first time in an official EU treaty. The Treaty of Maastricht included a provision which stated that '[p]olitical 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.' Although they had little practical effect, these words at least recognized the potential role to be played by political parties in the EU. Furthermore, the Treaty of Maastricht, and the earlier Single European Act of 1986, expanded the role of the European Parliament, which also implied a greater relevance for political parties. In response to these developments, several European party federations were strengthened or reincorporated. In 1993, the Confederation of Socialist Parties was renamed the Party of European Socialists (PES), while the Liberals continued under the name of European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR). Moreover, the three traditional party federations were joined in 1993 by the European Federation of Green Parties, a party federation that succeeded the previously much looser cooperation between Green parties from several European countries. In 1994, the European Free Alliance was established as a European party feder-

The Party Regulation

The fourth stage was set in motion by the 2000 Treaty of Nice, which amended the provision on political parties included in the Treaty of Maastricht. Whereas the provision in the Treaty of Maastricht only expressed the sentiment that political parties had an important role to play without specifying any concrete rights or obligations, the amendment in the Treaty of Nice provided for the adoption of 'regulations governing political parties at European level and in particular the rules regarding their financing'. On the basis of this provision, a Regulation on the financing of European political parties was adopted in 2003. In 2014, a new Regulation was adopted, which will apply from 2017. Controversy 7.1 highlights the debate on the definition of a 'European political party' that surrounded both Regulations.

The 'Party Regulation' has had important practical implications. Until the adoption of the Regulation, European party federations had been closely tied to their political groups in the European Parliament. They received most of their funding from the budgets of the political groups, and it was common for the staff of European party federations to be seconded from the EP secretariat. The Party Regulation provides for a clear separation between political groups in the EP and European political parties. Political parties now receive their funding directly from the EU, while they are required to hire their own staff. In response to the Party Regulation, and in particular the funding opportunities attached to it, the Greens and the EFA further formalized their party structures. In addition, several new European political parties were recognized in the years following the adoption of the Regulation. The Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists, which we met in the introduction to this chapter, was one of them.

The thirteen European political parties

As of 2014, there are thirteen official European political parties. These parties are listed in Table 7.2. These thirteen European political parties represent most of the major political families that have traditionally been present in the EU member states. This is further highlighted in Fact file 7.1. Exceptions are the agrarian parties, which are represented in a number of member states but are not organized in a separate EU-level political party.

Six out of the seven political groups in the European Parliament now have a counterpart European political party (or, in the case of ALDE and the Greens/EFA group, two counterpart parties). Only the EFDD group has no link to a European political party, even though many of its views coincide with those of the European Union Democrats. The European Alliance for Freedom brings together representatives from several radical right-wing Eurosceptic parties, such as France's Front National, the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and the Dutch Party for Freedom. These parties are represented in the EP and tried to form a political alliance in 2014 but failed.

Controversy 7.1

What is a European political party?

The Party Regulation stipulates five criteria for an organization to be recognized as a 'European political party'. This recognition is required to receive financial support from the EU:

- It must have its seat in an EU member state.
- It must, either:
 - be represented, in at least one quarter of member states, by members of the European Parliament or in the national parliaments or regional parliaments or in the regional assemblies;
 - have received, in at least one quarter of the member states, at least 3% of the votes cast in each of those member states at the most recent European Parliament elections.
- It must observe the principles on which the European Union is founded. In the 2003 Regulation, these were specified as the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. The 2014 Regulation includes the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These are identical to the values that, according to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the EU as a whole is founded on.
- It must have participated in elections to the European Parliament, or have expressed the intention to do so.
- It may not pursue profit goals.

This definition was the outcome of prolonged debate. Several issues were at stake in that debate. First, how 'transnational' should a European political party be? The Party Regulation sets the threshold at one-quarter of the member states, but earlier proposals referred to one-third of all member states. Apart from specific thresholds, more principled questions can be asked. Why should a party that focuses on the EU be excluded if it is active in only one member state? Or, by contrast, shouldn't we expect a European political party to aspire to be active in (almost) all member states rather than just one-quarter or one-third?

Second, should a party be required to subscribe to certain fundamental values? Some Eurosceptic political parties were afraid that the reference to 'the principles/values on which the European Union is founded' would exclude them. Similarly, extreme rightist groups could be denied funding on the basis of the principles included in the Regulation. Should EU democracy be protected against such parties or, rather, is it undemocratic to deny them funding on the basis of their beliefs? Do you think the new wording in the 2014 Regulation makes a difference compared to the terms used in the 2003 Regulation?

Fact file 7.1

Party families

Although political parties were created within individual countries, specific parties from different countries often show close ideological affinities. Therefore, parties from different countries can be grouped in 'party families', which share a common ideological background. In *Foundations of Comparative Politics* (2nd edn, Cambridge University Press, 2009), Kenneth Newton and Jan van Deth discern seven main party families:

- Socialist parties, including ex-communist, left-socialist and social democratic parties;
- Christian Democratic parties;
- Agrarian parties;
- Liberal parties;
- Conservative parties;
- Nationalist, regional and minority ethnic parties, including radical right-wing parties and (either right- or left-wing) regionalist parties;
- Green parties.

The roles and functions of European political parties

European political parties and the EP elections

Although European political parties are now more clearly separated from political groups in the European Parliament, their main activities remain linked to the EP. In fact, as we saw in Controversy 7.1, to be recognized a European political party should be active in EP elections or declare that it aspires to be. Historically, as well, the creation of European party federations was closely linked to the development of the European Parliament. In practice, however, the role of European political parties in relation to the EP and EP elections remains limited. After all, elections to the EP are contested by domestic parties in *national* elections for *national* shares of seats in the EP. This means that the selection of candidates is done by domestic parties, not by the European political party. Also, the election campaigns are organized and conducted by domestic parties, not the European political party. Most domestic political parties have been reluctant to cede a greater role to European political parties in these areas. In that regard, they guard their party's 'sovereignty' as jealously as many member state governments guard their state's sovereignty.

The most important role for European political parties with regard to EP elections is to coordinate the party positions of their members. Starting with the first direct elections to the EP in 1979, all major European political parties have presented party manifestos before each EP election. These party mani-

Party family	Affiliation with	EP website	EP political group	Party name
Christian Democratic	EPP	www.epp.eu	S&D	European Socialists (PES)
Socialist (Social-democratic)	ALDE	www.pes.eu	ALDE	Liberal Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE)
Conservative	EDF	www.aldeparty.eu	Centrist (pro-EU)	Democractic Party (EDP)
Regionalist	Greens/EFA	www.europeangreens.eu	Greens/EFA	Green Alliance (ECP)
Radical right-wing	Greens/EFA	www.eurofreedom.org	Regionalist	Aliiance for Freedom (EAF)
None	None	www.euroaffree.org	Radical right-wing	United for Europe of Liberatees and Democracy (MELD)
Radical right-wing	None	www.meldeuropea.com	Radical right-wing	of European National Movements (EMN)
None	None	www.aemn.info	Radical right-wing	European Movement (EM)
None	None	www.europeansunitedfordemocracy.org	Orthodox Christian Democratic	Christian Political Movement (ECM)
None	None	www.ecpm.info	Eurosceptic	United for Democracy (EUD)
None	None	www.europeweb.org	Eurosceptic	European People's Party (EPP)

European political parties and the other EU institutions

Outside of EP elections, some European political parties have sought to become active in the other EU institutions. This makes sense if parties want to exert influence over EU policies. After all, in the EU's fragmented decision-making system, being active in the EP only brings one so far. It would vastly increase the power of a political party if it could also coordinate participants in the European Council, the Council of Ministers or even the European Commission. In each of these institutions, participants have a party-political background and their parties are usually members of one of the European political parties. This is also true of the Committee of the Regions, whose members are organized in political groups.

These opportunities for political coordination outside the EP are mainly relevant for the three largest party families in the EU (the Christian Democrats, the Socialists and the Liberals) because they tend to supply most ministers, heads of government and commissioners. The EPP, the PES and the ALDE organize meetings between the leaders of their member parties (whether or not they are currently in government in their country) on the eve of European Council meetings in order to discuss the issues on the agenda. In this way, they try to come to a joint 'Christian Democratic', 'Socialist' or 'Liberal' voice in the European Council. Officially, the European Commission does not operate on a party-political basis. However, most commissioners are former national politicians with close links to a political party. Each of the larger European political parties now identifies its' commissioners on its website. These commissioners may even join the party leaders' meeting before a European Council meeting.

In the run-up to the 2014 EP elections, the largest European political parties designated their own candidates for Commission president. These candidates became known as the 'Spitzenkandidaten', after the German word for 'top candidate'. After the elections, when the EPP turned out to have won most seats, a majority in the EP was able to force member state governments to accept the EPP candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker, despite initial opposition from some heads of government. This was not only a new step in the relationship between the EP and the member states and the stakes involved in EP elections, but also marked a stronger role for European political parties.

Comparing European and domestic political parties

When we compare the roles and activities of European political parties with their counterparts in the EU member states, several important differences can be observed. One way of looking at these differences in a systematic way is to compare the functions that political parties perform at the domestic and European levels. Table 7.3 lists the five main functions of domestic political parties, and the extent to which European political parties perform them.

Domestic political parties perform each of the five functions listed in Table 7.3, although there may be differences in the extent to which they do so. The

Table 7.3 The functions of domestic and European political parties

Domestic political parties ...	European political parties ...
1. Structure the choice offered to voters by presenting a limited number of clear alternatives in elections and by organizing elected representatives in parliament.	Structure the choice offered to voters by organizing a wide range of domestic parties into a more limited set of European parties that will form political groups in the EP after the elections.
2. Aggregate interests by putting together more or less coherent packages of positions on a wide range of issues.	Aggregate interests by formulating joint party manifestos and by facilitating debate and exchange between domestic parties.
3. Recruit candidates for political office and socialize them into existing political routines.	<i>Do not recruit or socialize candidates for political office.</i>
4. Form governments.	<i>Do not form the EU government.</i>
5. Form a liaison between the state, on the one hand, and voters and civil society, on the other.	<i>Hardly form direct liaisons between the EU institutions and citizens or civil society.</i>

by both, domestic and European political parties structure the choice offered to voters. Without political parties, voters would face a potentially limitless array of possible vote options, each representing a different combination of policy positions. Like domestic political parties, European political parties offer a much more limited number of options by organizing domestic parties into broader European platforms.

Second, both domestic and European political parties aggregate interests by formulating more or less coherent 'packages' of policy positions, often based on a shared ideology. In the absence of parties, politics would revolve around a struggle between special-interest groups that are active on only one or a few related issues. Both domestic and European political parties bring together these separate interests by formulating overarching party programmes.

Yet, European political parties are much less active on the other three functions that domestic political parties usually perform. To begin with, with the notable exception of the 'Spitzenkandidaten', European political parties do not recruit or socialize candidates for political office. This is a key function of domestic political parties, and one that accounts for much of their importance in domestic politics. When it comes to the European level, however, most of the recruitment and socialization of candidates remains the exclusive responsibility of the domestic parties that are members of the European party. Neither do European political parties form the EU government. Although the political profile of European Commissioners has become more pronounced

Finally, because European political parties are confederations of domestic parties, they hardly form direct liaisons between the EU institutions and citizens or civil society. The core members of European political parties are domestic political parties. A number of European political parties also admit individual citizens as members alongside domestic parties. In order to establish links with citizens and civil society, some European parties have created organizations for specific groups of citizens, such as a youth association or a women's association. Moreover, several European political parties have created separate 'European political foundations', which act as a think tank for the party and a platform for debate with civil society. These initiatives notwithstanding, the role played by citizens in European parties is limited, and domestic parties remain firmly in the driving seat when it comes to determining the course and activities of European political parties.

All in all, then, European political parties are best seen as cooperation frameworks between domestic parties. They focus on bringing together, facilitating and coordinating member state political elites rather than organizing voters and citizens. Even at the elite level, some of the key functions of political parties (recruiting candidates for political office and forming governments) are carried out by domestic parties. As a result, European political parties are not (yet) fully fledged political parties but they have succeeded in establishing themselves as mediators between the various domestic parties at the EU level.

■ Summary

This chapter has dealt with the role of political parties in EU politics. It argues that:

- Three types of 'political party' play a role in EU politics: domestic political parties, political groups in the EP and European political parties. Among these three types, domestic political parties play the central role because they create and manage the other two.
- Since the early days of the ECSC, political groups in the European Parliament have formed around shared ideologies rather than nationality.
- The EP's rules of procedure stimulate the formation of transnational political groups by granting them specific rights and benefits.
- In addition, MEPs from different domestic parties have an incentive to work together in order to have more influence on EP decision-making.
- Nevertheless, tensions remain between the benefits of working together in transnational political groups and the need for domestic parties to give up some of their policy positions.
- Despite the tensions inherent in their formation, political groups in the EP tend to vote together in the vast majority of cases. As a result, they are remarkably cohesive.
- Politics in the EP is structured predominantly along a right/left dimension.

- Coalitions between political groups in the EP are not fixed but are formed on the basis of shared policy positions on certain issues.
- European political parties originated in response to developments in the European Parliament. However, they have become increasingly independent from the political groups in the EP.
- The existing European political parties reflect most of the main party families to be found in the EU member states.
- The largest European political parties now also try to organize their party members in the Council and the College of Commissioners.
- The functions performed by European political parties are more limited than those performed by domestic political parties. In particular, European political parties structure politics by limiting the number of choices and aggregate interests in more or less consistent policy programmes. At the same time, they do not recruit candidates for political office, do not form governments, and hardly form a link between rulers and ruled in the EU.

Further reading

A good collection of essays on the development of European parties, with contributions on each of the major parties, is Pascal Delwit, Erol Külahçi and Cédric van de Walle (eds), *The Europarties: Organisation and Influence* (CEVIPOL, 2004). The most extensive study of party politics in the European Parliament is Simon Hix, Abdul Noury and Gérard Roland, *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Amie Kreppel, *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) traces the development of political groups in the EP and the evolution of the EP as a legislature since 1957. A collection of studies on the role of political parties in the various EU institutions can be found in Björn Lindberg, Anne Rasmussen and Andreas Warntjen (eds), *The Role of Political Parties in the European Union* (Routledge, 2010). These contributions were also published as a special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15, 8, 2008.

Websites

- European Parliament: www.europarl.europa.eu
- The site www.yotewatch.eu contains the voting records of MEPs and political groups, as well as analysis and background information.
- For the websites of the political groups in the EP, see Table 7.1 above.
- For the websites of the thirteen European political parties, see Table 7.2 above.

Navigating the EU

On the website www.navigatingthe.eu you will find online exercises for this chapter.

PART III

EU policies: agenda-setting, decision-making and implementation