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for European Studies

Interparty Relations in the European Parliament 1952–2024:

Between Cooperative and Adversarial Politics

Luciano Bardi and Jacopo Cellini

Credits

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Executive summary

The paper examines trends in relations between party groups in the European Parliament since its inception, with a particular focus on the European People's Party (EPP) and its prospective options for forging coalitions in the coming tenth legislative term. The analysis is embedded in a historical perspective, but makes use of empirical data to assess the likely durability of various intergroup alliances.

First, the paper traces the evolution of the two faces of intra-parliamentary relations that have characterised the European Parliament since its early days: cooperative and adversarial politics. Both practices can be observed over time, but cooperation between party groups—in particular the 'core' groups of the Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats—has been the dominant guiding principle in the Hemicycle. The historical analysis explains why the European Parliament follows a different logic than most national parliaments and illustrates how this cooperation has played out.

Next, the continued existence and relevance of the parliamentary core is examined in light of the declining seat shares of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and EPP groups. In spite of increased fragmentation, the core has persisted and stayed relevant. This analysis is confirmed using two instruments, the institutional relevance index as well as a newly developed political relevance index. Even as the core has shrunk, its three components have maintained their dominant role in the European Parliament.

The prospects for the core groups in the tenth term are then considered. Given its status as the single largest group by far, the EPP would be well-placed to look for new partners and alliances on its own terms. In practice, however, the analysis suggests that embarking on such a course would be fraught with difficulty. Beyond assessing the simple numerical criteria needed to reach an absolute majority, political criteria are introduced that allow an evaluation of the likelihoods of stable and fruitful cooperation with groups outside the historical core. This analysis relies on a measurement of intra-group cohesion as well as intergroup agreement, both compiled by Hix and Noury. It highlights the considerable difficulties that would need to be overcome to reach more than ad hoc cooperation on selected issues with other groups. Even without the S&D group, the continued reliance on Renew and its low levels of agreement with groups to the right of the EPP makes durable coalitions with groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists or Identity and Democracy unlikely.

To conclude, the next term of the European Parliament will likely be marked by the continuity of intergroup relations, and the EPP will find it difficult to pivot away from the core. The pay-offs of more conflictual relations between the core groups are limited, and cooperation can therefore be expected to prevail. This does not exclude the possibility that, on specific issues or in the process of filling institutional positions, alternative alliances could emerge that might become more relevant over time.

Introduction[1]

[1] This paper presents the findings of a study financed by the Martens Centre and carried out by researchers affiliated with the Alcide De Gasperi Research Centre of the European University Institute. The authors would like to thank Christian Kloetzer for his valuable research and editorial assistance, all interviewees for their availability and insights, and the Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence and the Martens Centre in Brussels for providing facilities and support for the research.

This paper aims to trace the evolution and dynamics of party relations in the European Parliament (EP) throughout its history. Overall, EU electoral trends and developments in several member states suggest that the 2024 EP elections could be a crucial turning point, possibly marking a transition from a long period of convergence among the major political groups in the EP to the forming of counter-opposed, ideologically based coalitions. This could signal the beginning of a new phase of adversarial politics in the EU, which may ultimately increase the politicisation of EU government and benefit the development of EU democracy. The predominantly consociational nature of the EP party system is considered a hindrance at the EU level as it contrasts with the government–opposition dynamics typical of Western democracy. In any event, the results of the elections are bound to change interparty relations in the EP, even if in less dramatic ways than anticipated by some commentators.

This potential development will undoubtedly be the focus of the work of practitioners and scholars in the approach to and aftermath of the 2024 EP elections. Our purpose is thus to establish the basic factual knowledge needed for informed pre- and post-election analysis. This is necessary because, while the role of the EP in the EU's overall institutional balance has been extensively studied, there are not yet many studies that focus on the EP's political groups and their relations.

This research combines approaches derived from both history and political science. Drawing on the literature on the concept and phenomenology of the party system core, it first provides a historical overview of the factors that have favoured and hindered cooperation between political groups in the EP, focusing on the European People's Party (EPP) Group, to outline long-term vectors and contextualise current developments. In doing so, it traces the historical origins of the relationships among the EP's political groups in the non-elected Parliament and investigates the strategic, institutional and political reasons for the creation of informal cooperation between the most prominent of these. Subsequently, we assess the historical factors that led to the consolidation and widening of the EP party system's core, and its possible weakening. This analysis is complemented by an empirical assessment of the advantages that being part of the core affords EP groups in securing institutional (such as presidency or committee chairs) and politically relevant (rapporteur) positions.

We then proceed to identify of the policy areas in which a sufficient convergence of positions already exists amongst the potential partners of alternative coalitions in the EP. These convergences may be created by the establishment of an understanding between the EPP and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) or even the Identity and Democracy (ID) political groups, as well as with individual conservative or sovereigntist national parties.

We will rely on various types of sources for the analysis: the archives of the political groups themselves, which are available for consultation at the Historical Archives of the European Union or in Brussels; interviews with former and current Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), as well as officials of both the EP and the political groups; and official EU documentation and data. Cohesion scores,[2] calculated using roll-call data from EP plenary votes, will be used to measure and assess the convergence of the groups and possible divergences, especially in non-institutional policy areas. Finally, our group has developed institutional and political relevance indices whose values will allow us to ascertain the advantages and disadvantages for political groups of the allocation of institutional and politically relevant positions in the EP. These will be very useful for assessing the incentives available to the political groups to maintain or change their current alliance/coalition strategies.

The first two sections employ a historical methodology. For synthesis and analytical clarity, the first section adopts a chronological perspective, explaining how cooperation became the guiding principle in the EP. In contrast, the second section employs a more systematic approach by outlining the elements that fostered the development of adversarial politics. Both sections are grounded in a qualitative analysis of secondary literature, selective reference to archival sources and interviews with key witnesses.

The third section will consist mainly of quantitative, albeit synthetic, assessments of party groups' seat-share trends and institutional and political relevance over time. The fourth will explore the alternative alliance/coalition strategies potentially available to the EPP aside from continued reliance on understandings with the other core groups. This will be achieved by assessing the numerical feasibility of possible coalitions as calculated with the current projections of voting intentions and seat allocations in the next EP, and analysing intergroup proximity as revealed by groups' voting behaviour in the current EP term.

[2] S. Hix, A. G. Noury and G. Roland, *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 87–104.

Cooperation between political groups in the European Parliament 1952–2024: a historical overview

Political groups in the EP's forerunner were set up in 1953, on the initiative of the appointed representatives to the European Coal and Steel Community's (ECSC) Common Assembly at the suggestion of the Committee on Budgets and Administration. As no provision in such regard was included in the ECSC Treaty, members of the Assembly agreed to include an article in the Rules of Procedures (June 1953) which allowed the establishment of groups along political lines rather than nationality—a first in the history of international assemblies. As a result, the Christian Democratic Group, the Socialist Group, and the Group of Liberals and Allies started to operate, thus acquiring legal status and, soon after, financial resources.[3] The reasons behind this decision included the established practice in the national parliaments of organising groups along ideological orientations and the institutional incentive of the significant powers held by the ECSC compared to other international organisations. Such factors supported the creation of strong and effective political organisations to facilitate the Assembly's task of monitoring the Community's executive, albeit in a very limited way at the beginning.[4]

In those early years, the development of political competition along ideological lines was hindered by several factors. First, while the Christian Democratic Group was more consistent in its pro-European

[3] The minimum membership was set at 9 (raised to 17 in 1958), while the fixed contribution for each group amounted to 500,000 Belgian francs, plus a further 10,000 Belgian francs per additional member. On the early history of political groups in the Common Assembly, see S. Guerrieri, 'The Genesis of a Supranational Representation. The Formation of Political Groups at the Common Assembly of the ECSC, 1952–1958', in L. Bonfreschi, G. Orsina and A. Varsori (eds.), *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945–1992* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), 394–410; W. Kaiser, *Seventy Years of Transnational Political Groups in the European Parliament: Origins and Trajectories*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 757.568 (Brussels, 2023).

[4] C. Salm, *Political Groups in the European Parliament Since 1979: Key Facts and Figures*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 637.958 (Brussels, 2019). Initial plans for European integration, based on the gradualist approach of Jean Monnet, did not envisage a parliamentary dimension, which was later included in the ECSC Treaty at the insistence of Christian Democrats. See W. Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

position, rooted in post-war transnational party cooperation, internal divisions in the Socialist Group and the heterogeneity of the Group of Liberals and Allies hampered the elaboration of consistent political platforms concerning European integration.[5] Second, the rather technical work of the Assembly's committees and the limited functions attributed to it did not favour the staging of major political debates. Third, and most importantly from a long-term perspective, political groups developed a common interest in institutionalising their role within the Common Assembly and enhancing its powers vis-à-vis the other European institutions. The differences of opinion on specific issues, which can be seen in the Assembly's records, were offset by the need to find as many compromises as possible to strengthen the Assembly's role in developing the ECSC's institutional balance.[6] Even in the early stages of the life of the European Communities, members of the Common Assembly (renamed the European Parliament in 1962), organised into political groups, were trying to find and negotiate ways to extend the limited powers accorded to it by the founding treaties, thus originating the long-term vectors that would shape the EP's internal practices and political activism in following decades.[7]

As the Communities grew after the signing of the Treaties of Rome in 1957, the widening and broadening of parliamentary activity further intensified the cooperation between political groups to find common ground and a shared position that would enhance the Parliament's limited bargaining powers. This process was also favoured by the groups' self-selection of pro-European representatives, often with federalist preferences, and by the reorientation of the Socialists and the Liberals towards an evident appreciation of European integration from the early 1960s.[8] In 1965 the president of the Christian Democratic Group, Alain Poher, praised the cooperative practice which had been established between the three major groups:

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[5] Kaiser, *Christian Democracy*; K. Featherstone, *Socialist Parties and European Integration. A Comparative History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); G. Thiemeyer, 'Transnational Cooperation of Liberal Parties in Europe, 1945–1976', in L. Bonfreschi, G. Orsina and A. Varsori (eds.), *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945–1992* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), 297–312.

[6] S. Guerrieri, 'The Evolution of the European Parliament's Role Before the Direct Elections (1952–1979)', in D. Preda and D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *The Road Europe Travelled Along: The Evolution of the EEC/EU Institutions and Policies* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), 207.

[7] M. Roos and D. Howarth, 'Pushing the Boundaries: New Research on the Activism of EU Supranational Institutions', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 13 (2017), 1007–24. On the concept of long-term vectors, see W. Kaiser and K. K. Patel, 'Multiple Connections in European Cooperation: International Organizations, Policy Ideas, Practices and Transfers 1967–1992', *European Review of History* 24/3 (2017), 337–57.

[8] Socialist parties expressed their commitment to European integration at the 1962 Congress of the Party of European Socialists, while the traditional pro-European stance of the Liberal Group became more prominent after the split of the French Gaullists, who formed their own group (the European Democratic Union) in 1965. See S. Hix and U. Lesse, *Shaping a Vision: A History of the Party of European Socialists*, *1957–2002* (Brussels: Parti Socialiste Européen, 2002), 4–5; G. Orsina, 'Internationalism and Europeanism in the Ideology of European Liberalism, 1945–1989', in L. Bonfreschi, G. Orsina and A. Varsori (eds.), *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945–1992* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), 286–7.

> The European Parliament has, in my opinion, shown the path forward. You know that it is made up, for the most part, of three political groups: socialists, liberals and Christian Democrats, who have little by little found a line of action in the general confusion. Is it not surprising that, on almost all the major themes of European and world politics, these groups have succeeded in reaching agreement, not only in concrete cases, but on the fundamental bases of the common policies to be put in place. Without forgetting the various ideological tendencies that animated them, these groups, through a pragmatic method, created a true European spirit.[9]

In the subsequent years, the Parliament acquired more substantial budgetary powers via the 1970 Luxembourg and the 1975 Brussels Treaties, while the policy entrepreneurship of individual MEPs and the initiative of political groups contributed to carving out a role for the EP in emerging policy fields such as the environment, social policy and consumer policy.[10] In this context, the 1979 direct elections stand out as an important moment of change for symbolic and organisational reasons. Still, their importance should not be over-emphasised, as they were just one step in a cumulative process, with many twists and turns, towards the expansion of the EP's powers and influence.[11] To this end, cooperation between political groups was one of the continuity factors between the non-elected and the elected Parliament. Following the enlargements of the European Communities and the broadening of the ideological spectrum within the EP (see Section 2), new political groups were formed: the Communists and Allies Group and the European Conservative Group were set up in 1973; however, representatives of the far right did not have their own group until 1984, thus joining the ranks of the non-attached members until then (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). At the same time, the Christian Democrats (renamed the European People's Party Group in 1978), Socialists, Liberals and Conservatives[12] established a sort of 'enhanced cooperation' over legislative and political issues. In

[9] A. Poher, 'La collaboration des démocrates-chrétiens avec les autres forces politiques', speech at the EUCD Congress, 9–12 December 1965, in M. Gehler et al. (eds.), *Transnationale Parteienkooperation der europäischen Christdemokraten und Konservativen. Dokumente 1965–1979* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 117, our translation from French.

[10] See L. van de Grief and K. van Zon, *The European Parliament and the Origins of Consumer Policy*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 757.647 (Brussels, 2024); J.-H. Meyer, *The European Parliament and the Origins of Environmental Policy*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 757.644 (Brussels, 2024); M. Roos, *The European Parliament and the Origins of Social Policy*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Study PE 757.646 (Brussels, 2024).

[11] K. K. Patel and C. Salm, 'The European Parliament During the 1970s and 1980s: An Institution on the Rise? – Introduction', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021), 5–20.

[12] We use 'generic' names such as Socialists, Liberals, Conservatives, when referring to political relations and political families, as group names have changed frequently over the years.

particular, they agreed on the practical need for compromise-seeking in the EP committees to maximise the Parliament's influence vis-à-vis the other European institutions, and on a general preference for closer and stronger integration (although with more caveats for the Conservatives, as well as for national members of the other groups, such as the UK Labour Party).[13] This did not mean that there was no political competition between the groups (see Section 2), but rather that they were eager to find agreement on issues of common interest, such as the appointment to institutional positions of the EP and the implementation of legislation, or wide-ranging constitutional reforms, to empower the EP to strengthen and democratise the European Communities' institutional architecture.[14]

From a long-term perspective, cooperation between the political groups was a significant asset in the 20-year-long 'season of the treaties', which changed the institutional framework of the European Communities/EU in the period between the signing of the Single European Act (1986) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). This era saw a significant expansion of the EP's powers. Initiatives for constitutional reform originated from the Subcommittee on Institutional Affairs (later the Committee on Institutional Affairs), the Committee on Political Affairs and, crucially, the cross-party 'Crocodile Club'. The latter was founded in 1980 by renowned federalist and former Commissioner Altiero Spinelli, who was elected in 1979 within the ranks of the Italian Communist Party. Despite some reluctance from the EPP motivated by procedural and political issues—it aimed to take the lead in constitutional reform, as it was one of the party's flagship political goals—the Group's support for Spinelli's proposal was the critical factor in the conception and approval of the Draft Treaty on European Union, which testified to the successful efforts of cross-party cooperation in the EP.[15] In this particular case, such cooperation also included members of the Communist group, namely the Italian delegation, who expressed clear pro-European positions.[16]

Although the Draft Treaty on European Union did not come into force, it laid down a repertoire of constitutional ideas that would later be picked up and integrated into European Communities/EU treaty

[13] N. Crowson and J. McKay, 'Britain in Europe? Conservative and Labour Attitudes to European Integration Since the Second World War', in W. Mulligan and B. Simms, *The Primacy of Foreign Policy in British History, 1660–2000* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 305–18.

[14] For an insightful selection of the empowering battles of the EP since the first direct elections, see J. Priestley, *Six Battles That Shaped Europe's Parliament* (London: John Harper Publishing, 2008).

[15] W. Kaiser, 'Shaping Institutions and Policies: The EPP Group in the European Communities', in L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The European People's Party Group and European Integration* (Nomos: Baden Baden, 2020), 67–8.

[16] EPP Group Chair Egon Klepsch had already recognised in 1980 that 'Italian Communists give some indication, in their speeches at least, that they are prepared to recognise the need for European integration and sometimes even to cooperate constructively': EPP Group, *Report on the Activities of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian-Democratic Group) of the European Parliament. July 1979 – July 1980*, Report, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (1980), 7.

reforms, starting with the 1986 Single European Act. The Parliament's legislative influence grew from a right to be consulted, enshrined in the Rome Treaties, to the role of co-legislator, as fully recognised in the Lisbon Treaty. Intermediate steps included the cooperation procedure established by the Single European Act, and the co-decision procedure first provided for in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), and later strengthened by subsequent treaty reforms. In this season of constitutional reform, the EP's cohesion, resulting from the cooperation between political groups and larger party networks, enhanced the Parliament's negotiating power vis-à-vis the other European institutions. It served the overall goals of strengthening the competences and responsibilities of the EU and building a more effective, democratic and transparent institutional architecture, thus empowering the EP, as the only directly elected body of the EU, in the process.[17]

The EPP Group was the political engine in the EP behind this constitutional thrust. Scholarship has demonstrated how the networks activated by the political group, the party at the European level, national parties affiliated to the EPP and EPP representatives in member states' governments were instrumental in shaping the outcome of the intergovernmental conferences where Treaty reforms were discussed.[18] The EPP Group also worked together with other political groups, especially the Socialists, Liberals and Conservatives (which formed a single group with the EPP, the EPP–European Democrats (EPP–ED), between 1999 and 2009), to ensure the coalescing of a broad consensus around the Parliament's main goals. The closely coordinated work of EP representatives Elmar Brok (EPP) and Elisabeth Guigou (Party of European Socialists (PES)) in multiple intergovernmental conferences between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s was critical to presenting a shared EP position.[19]

By the end of the season of the treaties, signalled by the signing of the Lisbon Treaty, the EP's role and functions were very different from the limited powers that had been granted to the ECSC's Common Assembly. The EP, now one of the two chambers of the EU's *sui generis* institutional structure, has a pivotal role in appointing the Commission and its president, as well as an effective right of scrutiny and budgetary authority. Still, long-term vectors in policy formation and organisational practices, stemming from the peculiarities of the EU institutional system, continue to contribute to reinforcing the political groups' propensity to cooperate, contrary to what happens in parliamentary systems based on the alternation of government

[17] R. Corbett, F. Jacobs and M. Shackleton, *The European Parliament*, 8th edn. (London: John Harper Publishing, 2011), 382–97.
[18] K. M. Johansson, 'Constitutionalising the Union: The Role of the EPP Group', in L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The European People's Party Group and European Integration* (Nomos: Baden Baden, 2020), 89–130.
[19] R. Corbett, *The European Parliament's Role in Closer EU Integration* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 374.

and opposition.[20] In the absence of hegemonic control over the legislative process, the EU institutional structure pushes the EP towards unity and compromise-seeking. The high majority requirements imposed by the treaties, including, crucially, the absolute majority for the second reading of the Ordinary Legislative Procedure and other key votes; the technical nature of legislative texts and the moderating role of expertise; the internal decision-making process, primarily based on the proportional representation system according to the d'Hondt method[21] (see Sections 2 and 3); and a common desire to have a unified and strong position vis-à-vis the other institutions, especially the Council, are all factors rooted in European integration history (as shown above) which explain the consociational nature of EP politics.[22] The increasing powers acquired by the EP also positively affected pro-European political groups' remarkable internal cohesiveness, despite their growing internal ideological and national diversity (see Section 2).[23]

In the post-Lisbon era, several informal opportunities for high-level discussion among the political groups were set up to facilitate political negotiations. These included meetings of the group chairs of the EPP, the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the European Democrat and Reform Party/Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ELDR/ALDE, now Renew Europe) ahead of the Conference of Presidents (composed of the EP president and the group chairs), as well as of the EPP and S&D group chairs (sometimes joined by ELDR/ALDE), the EP president and the Commission president, at least during the Juncker Commission.[24] At a recent event hosted by the European Parliamentary Research Service (June 2023), former group chairs Hans-Gert Pöttering (EPP), Hannes Swoboda (S&D) and Gijs de Vries (ELDR) agreed on the pivotal importance of compromise and consensus-building, both within their groups and across the party divide, to enhance the European Parliament's impact on EU politics and policymaking: 'in this Parliament—Swoboda argued—you always have to go for compromise'.[25] Although different majorities

[20] L. Bardi, R. S. Katz and P. Mair, 'Towards a European Politics', in R. Johnston and C. Sharman (eds.), *Parties and Party Systems: Structure and Context* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 127–47.

[21] This method allows for a proportional allocation of seats/positions with a distortion in favour of the largest groups to ensure the system's stability. See S. Kotanidis, *Understanding the d'Hondt Method. Allocation of Parliamentary Seats and Leadership Positions*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 637.966 (Brussels, 2019).

[22] Amie Kreppel argued that cross-party cooperation is primarily a function of the EU institutional design; A. Kreppel, *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System. A Study in Institutional Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[23] Hix, Noury and Roland, *Democratic Politics*, 104.

[24] This was noted in interviews conducted for this project. See also A. De Feo and M. Shackleton (eds.), *Shaping Parliamentary Democracy. Collected Memories From the European Parliament* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 41–2.

[25] Kaiser, *Seventy Years*.

can be constructed on single dossiers on an issue-by-issue basis (see Section 2), the EP's institutional culture leans towards compromise-seeking at the committee stage. To this end, negotiations are regularly conducted in informal private meetings between key groups, while so-called shadow meetings also take place between rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs.[26]

These qualitative references confirm not only the general propensity for cooperation between political groups in the EP but also the existence of a European party system core, which has the shared goal of strengthening the EP within the EU institutional framework and enhancing the supranational dimension of the EU in the process, as political science literature has argued.[27] This core has so far relied upon cooperation between the EPP and the S&D Group (and former denominations thereof), as the two historically largest groups in the EP (see Section 3). The factors leading to EPP and S&D cooperation (labelled the 'grand coalition' in the literature and by the media) have been strengthened by the EP's increased powers as a budgetary authority and co-legislator since the Lisbon Treaty. Their historical origins, though, rooted in the EP's internal practices, can be traced back, to some extent, all the way to the non-elected Parliament, and at least to the season of the treaties. The EPP Group spelled this out in its 1988–9 Activity Report following the 1989 elections, at which the hegemony of the two groups was consolidated:

> The need to create a majority of 260 votes for any effective action by Parliament was the key element in determining the practical framework for consensus. Essentially this meant cooperation with the Socialist Group, since nothing could have been achieved without the two working together. . . . [T]he technical necessity for a compromise between the EPP and the Socialists, which was already beginning to emerge in the old Parliament, will be even greater.[28]

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[26] P. Ahrens, A. Elomäki and J. Kantola, 'Introduction: European Parliament's Political Groups', in P. Ahrens, A. Elomäki and J. Kantola (eds.), *European Parliament Political Groups in Turbulent Times* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 10. Interviews conducted for this project highlighted several factors which can influence the process of compromise-reaching, including the personality of the rapporteurs, the nationality of committee members (representatives from certain countries tend to have a similar institutional culture, irrespective of party affiliation) and the creation of a 'committee culture', which leads to conflict with other committees or EU institutions over competences, rather than internally over ideological cleavages. The latter point was particularly stressed by Alfredo De Feo in an interview conducted for this project; Alfredo De Feo, interview with the authors, online, 21 February 2024.

[27] L. Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core: The EPP Group in the EU Institutional and Political Framework', in L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The European People's Party Group and European Integration* (Nomos: Baden Baden, 2020), 255–334.

[28] EPP Group, *Report on the Activities. July 1988 – June 1989*, Report, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (1989), 7, 18.

The compromise concerns not only legislative cooperation but also the appointments to institutional positions in the EP: since the late 1980s, the president of the Parliament has been chosen based on an agreement between the two major groups, with two exceptions in 2002 and in 2017, when Liberal Pat Cox and the EPP's Antonio Tajani were appointed presidents due to an agreement between the EPP and ALDE (see also Section 2).[29]

The core of the EP party system, however, is currently not limited to the EPP–Socialist coupling, as testified by the formation of a broad 'pro-European' coalition, including Renew Europe and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), in relation to the main political dossiers in the 2019–24 legislature (see the following sections). Renew Europe's inclusion in the core builds on the Liberal Group's historical engagement with European integration, which translated into close cooperation with the two major groups on institutional and constitutional matters in the non-elected Parliament and during the season of the treaties. Between 2004 and 2014 around 70% of the plenary votes were adopted by a coalition of the EPP, the S&D, and the ALDE Groups.[30] In 2014 these groups built a formal coalition supporting Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission president following the outcome of the *Spitzenkandidaten* initiative. The core's enlargement to include the Greens/EFA was less straightforward. In the 1980s and the 1990s, green parties had an 'ambiguous relation to European integration', rooted in the alternative vision of a 'green Europe' based on the concept of a Europe of the Regions, rather than a 'European super-State'.[31] In 1986 the first Green MEPs elected to the EP, who became members of the heterogeneous Rainbow Group, even protested against the EPP Group for broadcasting a video 'where GRAEL [Green Alternative Link] members [were] presented as terrorists'.[32] Their subsequent transition towards a decidedly pro-European stance led the Greens/EFA to be involved in the broad coalition formed by the EP's core groups, with this being clear since the seventh legislature (2009–14) in terms of institutional votes and even more so in the ninth legislature (2019–2024). At the same time, the political behaviour of the Greens/EFA during institutional votes to appoint the Commission president and college has contrasted with its progressive integration into the core, thus showing the persistence of an 'opposition dynamic'. The Greens/EFA have either voted against or split over the nomination of all the Commission presidents since the election of Prodi in 1999 (including the 2019 nomination of the von der

[29] A. De Feo and M. Shackleton (eds.), *Shaping Parliamentary Democracy*, 41.

[30] S. Hix, and B. Høyland, 'Empowerment of the European Parliament', *Annual Review of Political Science* 16/1 (2013), 171–89.

[31] N. Brack and C. Kelbel, 'The Greens in the European Parliament. Evolution and Cohesion', in E. van Haute (ed.), *Green Parties in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2016), 217–37.

[32] *Rainbow Group*, 'Compte rendu de la réunion du GRAEL', Meeting Minutes, Historical Archives of the European Union, GRAEL-5 (15 December 1986), our translation from French.

Leyen Commission) and, on a few occasions, have also proactively looked for support to initiate a censure motion.[33] This behaviour from the Greens will be one of the key factors to monitor in the negotiations over and voting on the next European Commission, after the outcome of the 2024 EP elections (see Section 4).

Cooperation within the EP also stemmed from EU-wide electoral and political developments, which impacted the core's structure and the overall European integration process. As the literature has widely addressed, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties since the 2009 European elections has fostered a tendency to cooperate between pro-EU political groups, whose numbers in the EP have conversely declined, as well as introducing increased polarisation and a highly significant cleavage between pro- and anti-integration camps.[34] Although opposition to Europe and the historical development of the European project is not new in the history of post-war European integration, there is no doubt that the increasing salience of the multidimensional phenomenon of Euroscepticism since the late 2000s, following the multiple crises faced by the EU, has changed the landscape of European politics, and with that, of EP politics and coalition-building dynamics.[35] To place this in a proper historical context, we now turn to the factors that did not favour the development of cooperative politics within the EP, but those of adversarial politics instead.

Adversarial politics in the European Parliament, 1952–2024: a historical overview

Consociational tendencies have not ruled out the manifestation of political competition between groups in the EP. Although cooperation has been a guiding principle throughout the EP's history, especially between the core groups, for the reasons explained in the first section, there have been specific instances and general

[33] This behaviour has been underlined by most interviewees contacted for this project.

[34] L. Hooghe and G. Marks, 'Cleavage Theory Meets Europe's Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage', *Journal of European Public Policy* 25/1 (2018), 109–35.

[35] From a historical perspective, see C. Germond, 'Integrating or Breaking up Europe? Euroscepticism and Opposition to Europe', in B. Leucht, K. Seidel and L. Warlouzet, *Reinventing Europe: The History of the European Union, 1945 to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 333–52.

reasons that have favoured the development of adversarial politics and counter-opposed coalitions. As we will see below, these instances of competition arose over political issues and the appointment or election of individuals to institutional positions in the EP/EU.

Once again, the formation of long-term vectors can be traced back to the non-elected Parliament. From the early stages of the Parliament's activity, the system of appointments to institutional positions was governed by the d'Hondt method. During the twentieth century, this method was widely applied in European proportional representation electoral systems, while the EP's political groups used it informally to distribute institutional and political positions (see Section 3). While in general, the system has worked well to minimise political competition between groups—at least those involved in the apportionment system (see below)—some controversies have occurred regarding specific decisions. However, when analysing specific cases, it is worth mentioning that short-term political gains and personal relationships often play a key role in determining unexpected outcomes.

The most resounding examples of political competition over institutional positions ensued from the negotiations over the one job not subject to the d'Hondt system, namely that of EP president. On the very first election of the Common Assembly's president, in September 1952, Belgian Socialist Paul-Henri Spaak beat German Christian Democrat Heinrich von Brentano by attracting votes along ideological affiliation lines as well as those of nationality. According to testimonies, the controversy over Spaak's election accelerated the development of political groups and their subsequent establishment in June 1953.[36] Since then the election of the Parliament's president has become a matter of negotiation among the political groups, especially the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Liberals. On a few occasions, deals struck between the Christian Democrats and the Liberals have built a centre–right majority sufficient to elect the groups' candidates. This was the case in the late 1970s, when the agreement between Christian Democrat Group Chair Egon Klepsch and Liberal Group leading member (and later chair) Martin Bangemann led to the election of Emilio Colombo as the EP president for 1977–9 and of Simone Veil as the first woman and first president of the

[36] Kaiser, *Seventy Years*, 3–4.

directly elected EP in 1979.[37] As already mentioned, agreements between the EPP and ALDE also led to the election of Pat Cox in 2002 and (with an eleventh-hour deal) of Antonio Tajani in 2017, breaking the entente between the EPP and the S&D and leading to a growing distrust between the two largest groups, especially after a Socialist candidate challenged Tajani in 2017.[38] In other cases, the competition played out until the final vote with surprising outcomes, as in 1982 when EPP Chair Egon Klepsch lost the presidency to Socialist Piet Dankert due to internal divisions both among the British Conservatives and within the EPP Group.[39]

Political competition also played a role in the implementation of the growing powers granted to the EP by treaty reforms, especially vis-à-vis the Commission, including the power to grant discharge with respect to the implementation of the EU budget, to vote a motion of censure leading to the resignation of the Commission, to approve the nominee for president of the Commission and to give its approval to the entire college of Commissioners. These powers have been used effectively, especially in 1998–9 and 2004 during, respectively, the crisis which led to the resignation of the Santer Commission and the subsequent election of Prodi as new Commission president, and the appointment of the first Barroso Commission. As well as representing milestones in the strengthening of the EP's standing vis-à-vis the Commission, these episodes fuelled the competition between the EPP and the Socialists over the approval of the Commission's college. This was evident, for instance, in the case of the withdrawal of former EPP MEP Rocco Buttiglione's candidature for a position in the first Barroso Commission.[40] All successive presidents of the Commission have been forced to negotiate with the EP's groups to obtain an absolute majority of approval from the MEPs (since the Treaty of Lisbon came into force). The construction of majorities has so far relied upon negotiations, heated at times, among the EPP, the Socialists and the Liberals, with the occasional support of the Greens, the Conservatives, and other groups or delegations.

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[37] Kaiser, 'Shaping Institutions and Policies', 49–50. Veil's election found cross-party support because of her personal and political history. In the words of Klepsch, a further incentive was that it 'would help commit the European policy of France, a member state of key importance, more firmly to the goal of integration'; EPP Group, *Report on the Activities of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian-Democratic Group) of the European Parliament. July 1979 – July 1980*.

[38] Former EPP and EPP Group Secretary General Klaus Welle underlined how the S&D's behaviour in the last two legislatures has raised serious questions about the future viability of agreements between the two groups; Klaus Welle, interview with the authors, Brussels, 25 March 2024.

[39] N. J. Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration Since 1945. At the Heart of Europe?* (London: Routledge, 2007), 205–6.

[40] Priestley, *Six Battles*, 145–202. The decisive discussion within the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs saw a convergence of some ALDE MEPs with the S&D and other leftist MEPs, which resulted in the EPP's attempt to defend Buttiglione being defeated by a one-vote margin.

From a long-term perspective, the development of adversarial politics in the EP has also benefited from growing ideological polarisation, as witnessed by the establishment of a wide array of new political groups since the 1970s (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). In 1995, on the left of the political spectrum, Communist parties from Southern Europe and green–left parties from Scandinavia formed the Confederal Group of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), the heir to the Communist and Allied Group founded in the 1970s. The Green Group, which was formed in 1989 after the short-lived experience of the Rainbow Group, joined with the various regionalist and radical parties and former groups to create the Greens/EFA Group in 1999. On the right, technical groups and heterogenous short-lived alliances have long dominated the far-right landscape since the creation of the first Technical Group of the European Right in the 1980s. The electoral success of populist, Eurosceptic and far-right parties since the late 2000s has led to the establishment of Eurosceptic groups such as the Europe of Freedom and (Direct) Democracy (EFDD, 2009–19) and ID, created in 2019 as the successor to the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (2015–19), as well as to the radicalisation of the ECR. The latter was created in 2009 through an alliance between former members of the Union for Europe and the Nations Group, active between 1999 and 2009, and the UK Conservatives, which had formed a single group with the EPP between 1999 and 2009.

The increasing ideological polarisation brought to the fore alternative visions and counter-narratives, which contested, to various degrees, the general preference for closer and stronger integration that had strengthened the tendency to cooperate in the EP (see Section 1). Early forms of Euroscepticism had already emerged in the European Communities' formative years, long before the concept took centre stage in the public debate. However, nationalist opposition to the EU has grown more prominent since the 1990s, when the fall of the Soviet Union reduced the far right's functional support for European integration, which was intended as a necessary bulwark in the collective defence against Communism.[41] These critical attitudes towards the EU also reflected a general shift in European public opinion, from the 'permissive consensus' of the first three decades to the 'constraining dissensus' of the post-Maastricht era, when general support for, or at least acceptance of, European integration, could no longer be taken for granted.[42]

[41] W. Kaiser, 'Counter-Narratives in the European Parliament: Far Left and Far Right Groups and European "Union" in the 1980s', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30/1 (2022), 26–38.

[42] L. Hooghe and G. Marks, 'A Post-Functionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science* 39/1 (2009), 1–23.

In response, pro-integration EP groups activated self-defence mechanisms against potential threats to the European project, which came from political forces that did not share the European Communities'/EU's core values or questioned the validity of the integration process. This was first epitomised by the exclusion of representatives of the Group of the European Right from the system of appointments to institutional positions (i.e. chairships and vice-chairships) after the 1984 elections.[43] In more recent legislatures, groups of the core have effectively established a *cordon sanitaire* against Eurosceptic/radical-right groups (such as the EFDD and ID), systematically excluding them from holding offices such as EP vice-presidencies, committee chairships and rapporteurships, as well as from undertaking legislative work. This has de facto limited the eligibility criteria for the application of the d'Hondt system.[44]

While this juxtaposition reinforced the cleavage between the groups within and outside the core, ideological competition in the EP has also played a role in the relations between the oldest and largest political groups. Here we will focus primarily on the EPP Group, as its strategic choices could lead to a potential turning point in coalition dynamics and interparty relations in the EP (see the following sections). Ever since the period of the non-elected Parliament, the dominant tendency towards cooperation that has played out in the Christian Democratic Group has been counteracted by a trend to underline the group's ideological differences from the other political groups. Ahead of the first direct elections, which were supposed to force the constitution of alternative political coalitions in the EP ('The deep meaning of direct elections lies in the creation of political majorities'), the Group claimed that '[e]conomic and social differences are expressed in terms of a divide between socialists and non-socialists'.[45]

The existing literature has argued that the classical socio-economic left–right cleavage may have contributed to explaining the coalition patterns in the EP in all legislatures, but particularly the first one.[46] Due to the factors outlined in Section 1, coalition building along the left–right spectrum was more likely in the early

[43] S. Paoli, 'Euroright. The Extreme Right in the European Integration Process, 1979–1989', in L. Bonfreschi, G. Orsina and A. Varsori (eds.), *European Parties and the European Integration Process, 1945–1992* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015), 329.

[44] A. Ripoll Servent, 'The European Parliament After the 2019 Elections: Testing the Boundaries of the "Cordon Sanitaire"', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 15/4 (2019), 331–42; Michael Shackleton, written communication with the authors, 21 February 2024; Beatrice Scarascia Mugnozza, interview with the authors, Florence, 30 April 2024.

[45] EPP Group, *Rapport sur les activités du Groupe démocrate-chrétien du Parlement européen (Groupe du Parti populaire européen). 15 mai 1977 – 15 mai 1978*, Report, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (1978), 53, 55, our translation from French.

[46] See, in particular, Hix, Noury and Roland, *Democratic Politics*.

stages of the legislative procedure—especially in the first reading of co-decision when it was introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht—than in individual amendments, and in policy areas where the EP's powers were limited or merely consultative.[47] One case in point is the area of external relations, such as foreign policy and trade policy, where the position of the EPP Group was clearly identifiable and often opposed to that of the Socialists.[48] Political divergences between the EPP and the S&D, stemming from their different ideological platforms, have resulted in the creation of centre–left or centre–right majorities at various times, particularly in policy areas which do not involve constitutional or institutional issues. Over the course of the EP's history, this has put the Liberal group in a pivotal position to create majorities, notwithstanding its smaller size, due to the historical coexistence, in European Liberalism, of left-wing and conservative tendencies. The Liberals often vote with the Socialists on civil liberty issues and the environment, and with the EPP on economy and defence matters. Moreover, these political differences between the EPP and the S&D have opened up political space for other groups, such as the Greens and the Conservatives, to enhance their role in EP politics.[49]

Although various coalitions have been formed for individual dossiers, not necessarily along the left–right cleavage, the EPP and the Socialists have historically been at the centre of possible alternative coalition strategies. The Socialists' efforts to unite progressive forces were visible, for instance, in the fourth legislature (1994–9)—the last time they enjoyed the number one spot in the EP—when the Socialist Group's Chair Pauline Green tried to meet every month with the leaders of left-oriented groups (the GUE, the Greens and the Radicals) to reach common positions on key issues.[50] More recently, particularly in the ninth legislature, a centre–left coalition of the S&D, Renew Europe, the Greens/EFA and The Left[51] has formed in relation to political dossiers concerning the environment, civil liberties, employment and social affairs, and women's rights and gender

[47] Under co-decision (now the Ordinary Legislative Procedure), the Parliament and the Council jointly adopt legislation. After the European Commission submits a proposal, the EP and the Council can approve or amend it. If the institutions do not agree on the proposed amendments at either the first or the second reading, they enter negotiations, which are concluded by a final decision in favour or against. The need to reach an absolute majority of EP members in the second reading of the co-decision procedure, as well as in budgetary matters and the assent procedure, is one of the factors that leads to compromises between political groups. Ripoll Servent, 'The European Parliament', 201.

[48] W. Gagatek, 'Values, Strategies, Actions: The EPP Group and EU External Relations', in L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The European People's Party Group and European Integration* (Nomos: Baden Baden, 2020), 201–53.

[49] Corbett, Jacobs and Shackleton, *The European Parliament*, 124; De Feo and Shackleton (eds.), *Shaping Parliamentary Democracy*, 40; Panos Konstatopoulos, interview with the authors, Brussels, 25 March 2024.

[50] Priestley, *Six Battles*, 158.

[51] Since January 2021 the GUE/NGL group has been known as The Left in the EP.

equality, among other policy areas.[52] On the other side, the EPP's attempts to bring together the conservative camp must be understood in the context of the Group's political trajectory and evolving identity, which brings us back to its origins.[53]

At the time of the EPP's foundation in 1976, two political lines of thought confronted each other, each of which held different conceptions of its programmatic profile and membership strategies. One, represented by parties from Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, advocated the creation of a European party with a strong Christian Democratic identity. The other, embodied by the German Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, was more open to integrating centre–right and conservative traditions, in line with the German conception of Christian Democracy as a *Volkspartei*.[54] A compromise was found over the initial exclusion of conservative parties, such as those from Denmark and Britain, from EPP membership. At the same time, other transnational networks, such as the European Democratic Union, were created to foster dialogue between Christian Democratic and conservative parties from both European Economic Community and non–European Economic Community countries. After the 1980s, the EPP Group's strategy favoured the opening of a dialogue with the Conservatives (renamed the Group of European Democrats, ED Group, after the 1979 elections), which was considered 'a reliable ally especially in European foreign and defence policy', in order to form a 'centrist coalition' (together with the Liberals) to counterbalance the Socialists' hegemony in the EP.[55] The loss of Klepsch to Dankert in the 1982 EP presidential election, which strained the relationship between the EPP and the ED Group, at least served to teach the EPP Group the valuable lesson that 'the European Center must grow more closely together in order to defeat the Left'.[56]

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[52] S. Hix and A. G. Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections: Potential Outcome and Consequences*, SIEPS Report no. 10 (Stockholm, April 2024), 7. See also the following sections of this paper.

[53] For a focus on the current challenges, see the forthcoming proceedings of the conference organised by the Martens Centre, 'Beyond Centre–Right—Christian Democracy and Conservatism for the XXI Century', Brussels, 18 March 2024.

[54] B. Tensen et al., *The Christian Democratic Origins of the European People's Party: Values and Relevance for Policies*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2014).

[55] EPP Group, *Report on the Activities of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian-Democratic Group) of the European Parliament. July 1979 – July 1980, 8.*

[56] EPP Group, *Report on the Activities of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian-Democratic Group) of the European Parliament. July 1981 – July 1982,* Report, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (1982), 15. One reason for the painful electoral defeat was that 'possibly there was too much personal ambition at stake in the Centre camp' (Ibid.).

The rapprochement between the two groups was negotiated between the EPP leadership and the British Conservatives (especially after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's resignation in 1990), in the context of a strong political initiative of the EPP (see below). These negotiations eventually resulted in the formation of a single group after the 1999 elections, the EPP–ED, which became the largest group in the EP, overwhelming the Socialists.[57] Differing views on the long-term goal of European integration, which distanced the British Conservatives from the federalist preferences of the EPP, led to an amendment to the Group's rules of procedures ahead of the 2004 elections to allow the ED part of the group 'to develop and promote independent views on constitutional and institutional matters', and ultimately contributed to the split of the group after two terms.[58] The subsequent creation of the ECR Group, under the leadership of the British, Polish and Czech delegations, established a challenger to the right of the EPP. The ECR's relations with the EPP were hampered by its anti-integrationist platform and its subsequent nationalist and ultra-conservative shift, which was particularly clear after the eighth legislature and especially after the UK Conservatives left due to Brexit.[59] Cooperation between the EPP and the ECR to build a centre–right majority, with the inclusion of the Liberals and, in a few cases, ID, has so far been established on an issue-by-issue basis (see Section 4). The possibility of implementing a flexible strategy, implying the enactment of various coalition strategies, had already been outlined in an internal document of the EPP Group presidency in March 2005. The suggestion made was to 'pursue an active strategy of building alliances on a case-by-case basis', with the overall objective of 'strengthen[ing] the EPP–ED Group as a driving force of the European Parliament'.[60]

The EPP's coalition-building strategies were also influenced by the evolution of the group's composition following systemic changes to member states' political party systems and European Communities/EU enlargements. The first enlargements of the European Communities in the 1970s and the 1980s posed complex challenges for the EPP family in terms of identifying suitable prospective members, as 'Christian Democracy as a postwar intellectual and political party phenomenon was largely confined to the [European Communities] founding member states'.[61] The subsequent admission of parties from the UK, Greece,

[57] Kaiser, 'Shaping Institutions and Policies', 53; Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core', 266.

[58] EPP–ED Group, *2006 Yearbook of the EPP–ED Group (Including January 2007)*, Report, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (2007), 10.

[59] M. Siddi and C. Miller, 'What's in a Name? Gender Equality and the European Conservatives and Reformists' Group in the European Parliament', *Party Politics* 29/5 (2023), 829–39.

[60] EPP–ED Group, *Relations entre le Groupe PPE-DE et les autres groupes politique du Parlement européen*, Briefing, EPP Group Archives, European Parliament, Brussels (3 March 2005), our translation from French.

[61] Kaiser, 'Shaping Institutions and Policies', 53.

Spain and Portugal between 1981 and 1996 oriented its ideological profile towards the right of the political spectrum, most significantly with the integration of the Spanish People's Party (Partido Popular), born out of the post-Francoist party People's Alliance (Alianza Popular). The inclusion in the late 1990s of the French Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la République) and Italian Forward Italy (Forza Italia) after the dissolution of Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana) reinforced the group's conservative/moderate component.[62] This was part of a strategy formally outlined at the 1992 EPP Congress under the leadership of Wilfried Martens, which built on the party's opening up to centre–right non–Christian Democratic parties and consolidated the political profile of the EPP as a people's party, as first advocated by the German delegation in the 1970s.[63]

This strategy effectively led the EPP Group to obtain and maintain numerical prevalence in the EP after 1999 and to attract member parties from new EU countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe that joined the Union during the Eastern enlargements of the 2000s.[64] The inclusion of parties from a variety of historical contexts and diverse political and cultural traditions, marked by their opposition to Communist regimes, contributed to changing the organisational features of the groups at the core of the EP. However, these changes did not significantly affect their voting cohesion.[65] Notably, however, such changes did impact the groups' core identities and programmatic profiles. Focusing on the EPP Group, this calls into question the enduring relevance of its founding Christian Democratic identity. While in the past, a distinctive Christian Democratic idea of Europe underpinned the cooperation with other universalist political cultures, such as the socialist and liberal ones,[66] a shift towards a more heterogenous ideological platform, attractive to diverse actors from right-wing non–Christian Democratic backgrounds, might support an increase in adversarial politics in the EP.[67] Recent developments in the Group's coalition strategies, which will be analysed in the subsequent sections of this paper, should also be considered against this backdrop.

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[62] Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core', 268.

[63] Candidate parties were integrated and socialised in the EPP network through various channels, including through the political group, the European Union of Christian Democrats and the EPP political foundations; Tensen et al., *The Christian Democratic Origins*, 7. Former EPP Secretary General Klaus Welle recalled how the design and implementation of 'the enlargement of the EPP to become the strongest group in the EP' was a key feature of his tenure: Klaus Welle, interview with the authors, Brussels, 25 March 2024.

[64] Bardi et al., *The European Ambition*, 16.

[65] E. Bressanelli, *Europarties After Enlargement. Organization, Ideology and Competition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[66] J. Cellini, 'The Idea of Europe at the Origins of the European People's Party. The Making of the European Manifesto and of the EPP's Political Programme', *Journal of European Integration History* 24/1 (2018), 79–95.

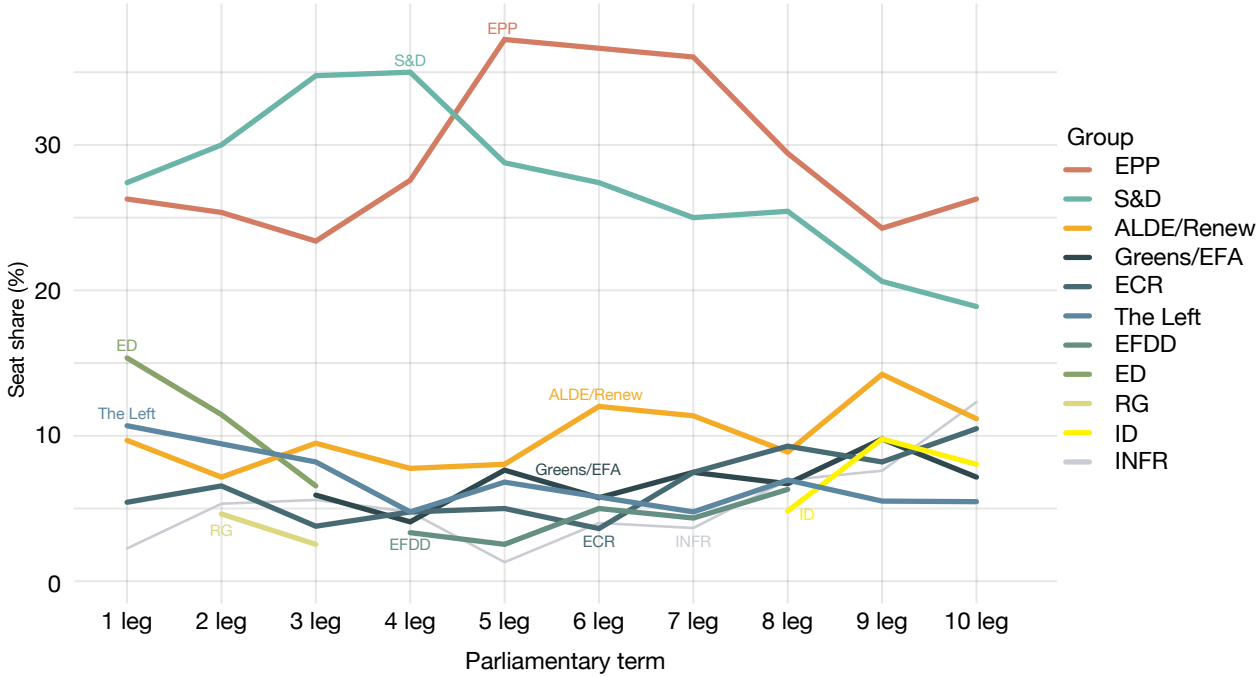
[67] For a view that insists on the enduring relevance of Christian Democratic values, see Tensen et al., *The Christian Democratic Origins*.

Is there still a core? The EPP Group and intergroup relations in the European Parliament: institutional and political relevance

As we have seen, throughout the EP's elected history, interparty relations have been heavily influenced by the dominance of the EPP and the S&D in their various denominations.[68] Figure 1 gives a dramatic visual representation of this. Although declining, the seat shares of the two major parties remained above the 20% line throughout the EP's ninth term; with the lone exception of the Gaullist-dominated ED in the first EP term, all the other groups have shares of under 15%.[69] The 2024 elections have brought a widening of the gap between the EPP and the S&D, due to a slight rebound of the former and the continuing decline of the latter to below the 20% line (18.89% to be precise) for the first time in the elected EP's history. All the other groups, however, still remain several points behind.

[68] For a graphical illustration of the evolution of the EP party groups, see Table A1 in the Appendix.
[69] For a detailed account of electoral trends and seat distribution in the EP, see Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core'.

Figure 1 Seat percentages for EP political groups, 1979–2024



Sources: For the first to ninth legislatures, data from L. Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core: The EPP Group in the EU Institutional and Political Framework', in L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The European People's Party Group and European Integration* (Nomos: Baden Baden, 2020), 264. For the tenth legislature, data from *European Parliament*, '2024 European Election Results', provisional results as of 14 June 2024.

Note: INFR = Independents and far right; RG = Rainbow Group.

In numerical terms (see Table 1), the combined mean for the 2 parties for the first 10 terms was 56.5%, with a peak of nearly 66% in the fifth term. As we know, this situation permitted the creation of the core of the European party system. The core consisted mainly of the EPP and the S&D, which committed themselves to seeking and finding mutually satisfactory solutions, especially on institutional matters. The best-known of the ensuing decisions was the generally respected rotation of the EP presidency between the two groups. The core has often been extended to include the ALDE/Renew group. This has almost become a necessity since the beginning of the ninth EP term, when the combined strength of the EPP and the S&D fell to less than 45% of the seats. But there have been exceptions to this consociational practice, as has been seen in previous sections. However, the advantages afforded to the component parties of the core by their lasting entente have greatly outweighed any occasional setbacks.

Table 1 EP political groups' seats, %, 1979–2024

	EPP	S&D	ALDE/ Renew	GUE/ NGL	G/EFA	RG	ED	ECR	EFDD	ID	Ind & far right
1 leg.	26.34	27.32	9.76	10.73			15.37	5.37			2.19
2 leg.	25.35	29.95	7.14	9.45		4.61	11.52	6.68			5.30
3 leg.	23.36	34.75	9.46	8.11	5.79	2.51	6.56	3.86			5.60
4 leg.	27.51	34.92	7.76	4.94	4.06			4.58	3.35		4.76
5 leg.	37.22	28.75	7.99	6.71	7.67			4.95	2.55		1.28
6 leg.	36.61	27.32	12.02	5.60	5.74			3.69	5.05		3.96
7 leg.	36.01	25.00	11.41	4.76	7.47			7.34	4.35		3.67
8 leg.	29.43	25.43	8.92	6.92	6.66			9.32	6.39	4.81	6.92
9 leg.	24.23	20.51	14.38	5.46	9.85			8.26		9.72	7.59
10 leg.	26.39	18.89	11.11	5.42	7.22			10.56		8.06	12.36
Mean	*29.25*	*27.28*	*9.99*	*6.81*	*6.81*	*3.56*	*11.15*	*6.46*	*4.34*	*7.53*	*5.36*

Source: For the first to ninth legislatures, data from Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core', 264. For the tenth legislature, data from *European Parliament*, '2024 European Election Results'.

Note: RG = Rainbow Group.

Indeed, being part of the core has proved highly advantageous for the political groups involved. We analysed this empirically by developing an *institutional relevance* (IR) index.[70] The purpose of the index is to provide a synthetic measure, comparable across political groups and over time, of the groups' ability to secure institutional positions for themselves. We have calculated IR scores for the first nine terms of the elected EP.

In theory, there should be very little difference between seat percentages and IR scores, in that 'the largest groups should have the highest IR values, whereas the smaller groups should have the lowest ones'.[71] This is undoubtedly facilitated by the informal understanding amongst the groups that institutional positions are allocated according to an adapted form of the d'Hondt-based seat apportionment method widely used in proportional electoral systems, as seen earlier in this paper. As noted by Poptcheva:[72]

> The d'Hondt method . . . not only allows the quantitative distribution of seats, but also their distribution according to an order of precedence, which is of particular importance where, for instance, parliamentary committee chairs and other leadership positions are distributed, enabling political groups to choose the posts of most interest to them according to the order resulting from the d'Hondt calculation.[73]

The d'Hondt method is also used to distribute the more important positions proportionally, albeit giving precedence to the larger groups. The decisive qualitative difference in assessing a group's IR is thus the attribution of the EP presidency. Given the importance of this position, it was decided that the presidential term would last for only half a legislature. This means that there have been 18 presidencies so far in the history of the elected Parliament.[74] The presidency is a monocratic position; as such, it is the only one not subject to the d'Hondt allocation method. The president's election requires an absolute majority of the votes cast in the EP plenary; a threshold no single group can reach. The 'fairness' of the rotation of the groups in this fundamental office is thus ensured only through understandings and compromises amongst those groups we

[70] The index is calculated by attributing different weights to different institutional positions in the EP. These weights are then treated as points to be added together to determine the total score for each group. The index is then obtained by dividing any given group's score by the total of all the scores calculated for all political groups. Each group's score is thus a percentage of the total of all the EP political groups' scores. For the weighting of institutional positions in the EP, see Table A1 in Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core', 327.

[71] Ibid.

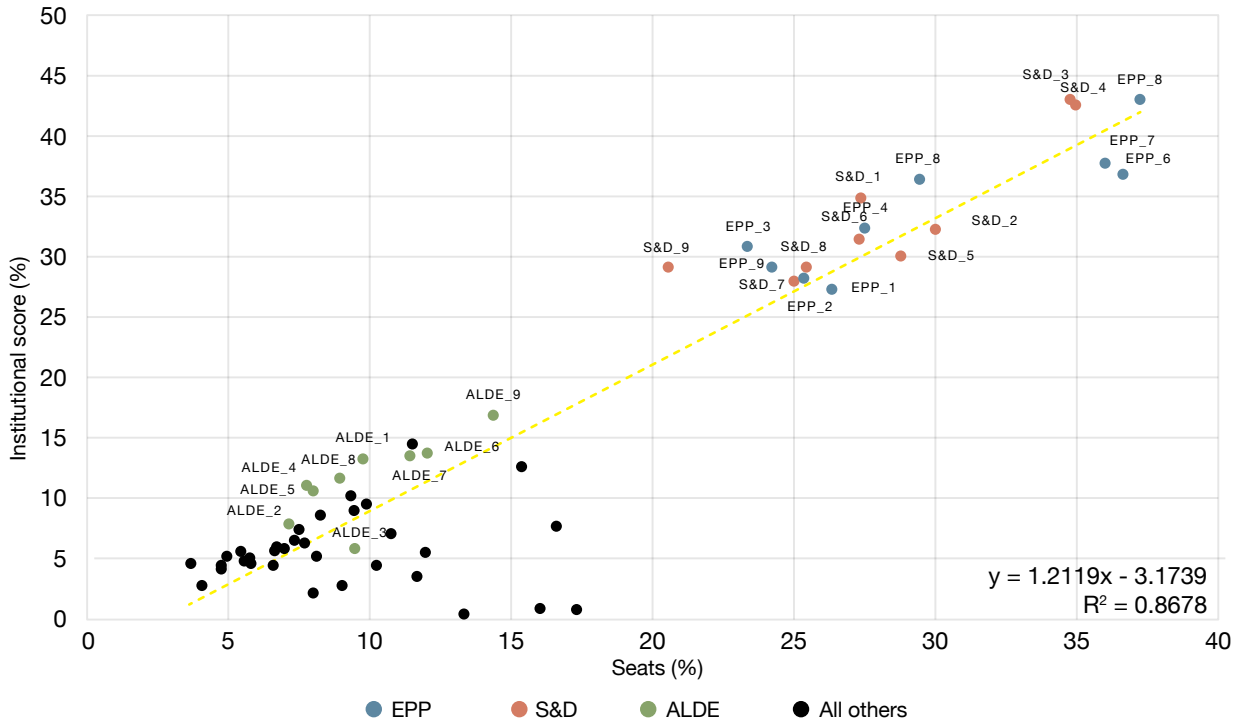
[72] E.-M. A. Poptcheva, *Understanding the d'Hondt Method. Allocation of Parliamentary Seats and Leadership Positions*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 580.901 (Brussels, 2016).

[73] Ibid., 3.

[74] There have been only 16 EP presidents as Martin Schulz (S&D) served twice in the seventh (second half) and eighth (first half) legislatures.

have identified as part of the core. It is not surprising that 17 presidencies out of 18 have gone to the EPP (8), the S&D (6), and ALDE (2). The only non-core EP president, Henry Plumb (ED), was elected in the latter half of the second term of the legislature due to criteria that considered member state as well as political group affiliation to be relevant for the rotation. The decisive factor in his election, however, was a desire on the part of both the EPP and the ED to restore mutual trust after the misunderstandings that had led to the election of PES candidate Piet Dankert in 1982 at the expense of Egon Klepsch.[75] Be that as it may, the election of a non-EP-core-party candidate was an exception, never to be repeated in the subsequent seven EP terms.

Figure 2 Correlation between the EP political groups' seat percentages and IR values

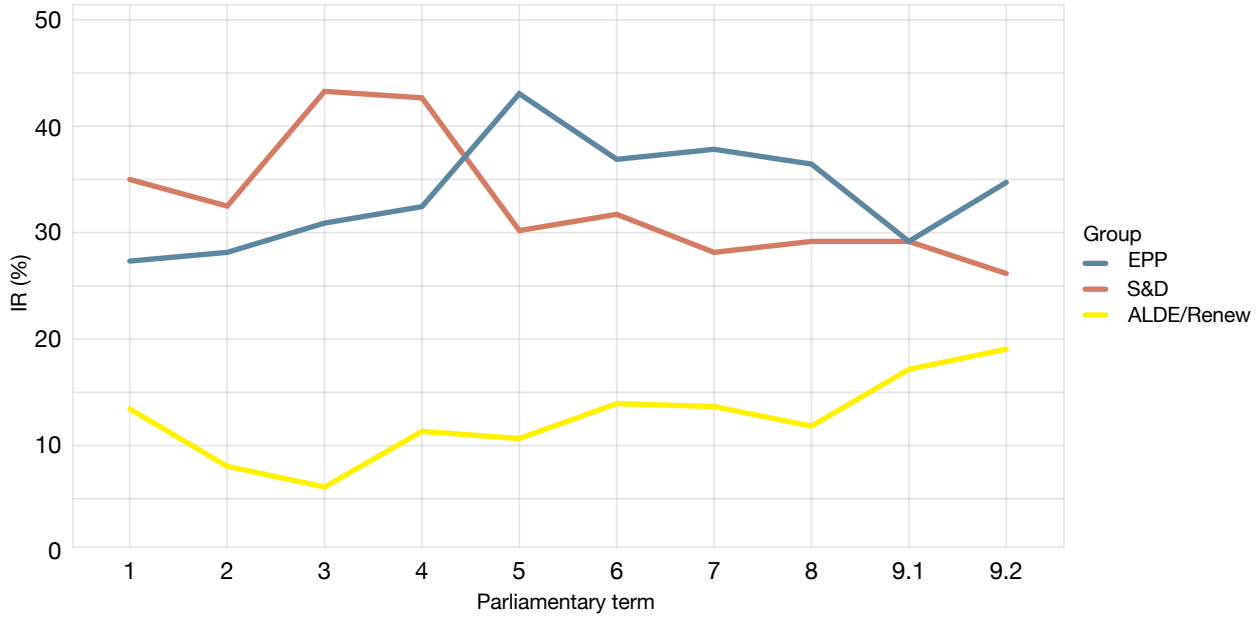


Source: Adapted from Bardi, 'The Heart of the Core'.

[75] P. Fontaine, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe 1953–2009. A History of the Christian-Democratic Group and the Group of the European People's Party in the European Parliament* (Brussels: Racine, 2009), 181; see also Kaiser, 'Shaping Institutions and Policies'.

Figure 2 gives us a very good first empirical impression of the relationship between EP group size and IR. Group positioning over time is reflected in two clusters at the two ends of the regression line, with the EPP and the S&D entries near the top-right corner and all the other groups, including ALDE/Renew, near the bottom-left one. More importantly, all core groups' scores above the trend line indicate proportionally higher IR values than seat percentages. Thus, the graph confirms the advantage the three core groups have in terms of the institutional rewards they receive, partly indeed due to the sheer effects of the d'Hondt method, but even more significantly, due to the political weight that they individually and collectively bring to bear on the allocation of institutional positions.

Figure 3 IR per legislature: trends for the EPP, the S&D, and ALDE

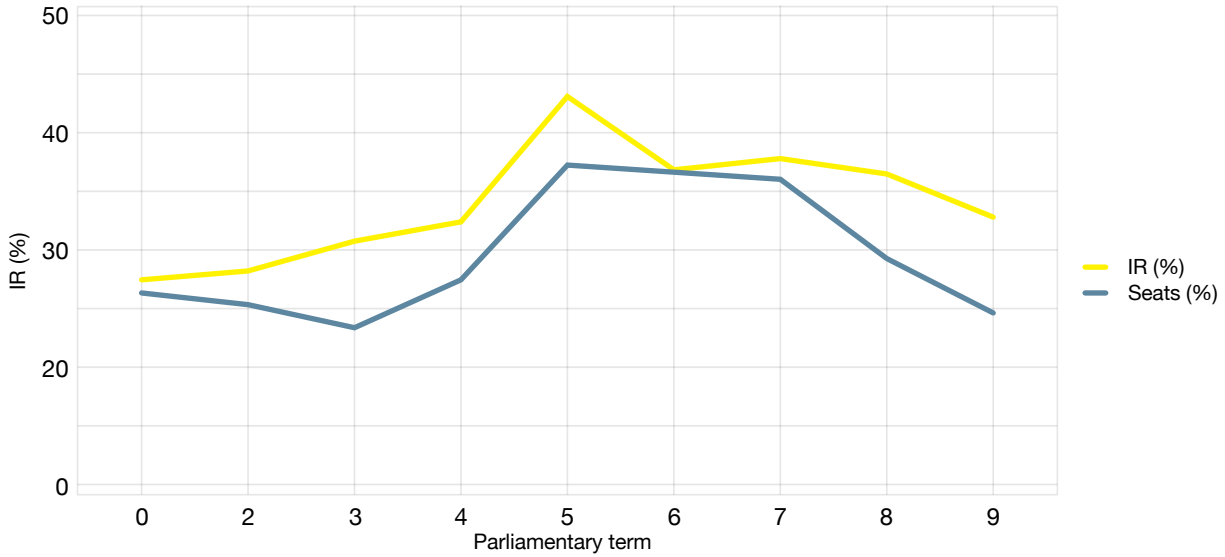


Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: For the ninth legislature, index scores refer to Renew not ALDE.

Figure 3 displays IR values over time for the three groups at the core of the European party system. As expected, the three lines follow patterns very similar to the trends in the three groups' seat shares (see Figure 1). In particular, it can be seen that the EPP Group's IR values are highest for the last five EP terms and are lower than those of the S&D for the first four;[76] this is a very similar pattern to the one we observed in the distribution of seats over the same period. The main difference concerns the absolute level of the IR values, which peak at above 40% for the S&D and the EPP, as opposed to about 35% (S&D) or slightly above (EPP) for the seat percentages (see Figure 1). After the 2019 elections, IR values for both groups dropped to under 30%, consistent with the trends but still significantly above the levels of their respective seat percentages. The near-equivalence of the post-2019 elections' IR values for the two major EP groups was essentially due to the election of David Sassoli (S&D) to the EP presidency. The fork between the two trend lines widened again in January 2022, when EP exponent Roberta Metsola was elected president for the remainder of the term.

Figure 4 EPP: comparison of IR scores and seat percentages



Source: Authors' calculations.

[76] The EPP Group's value for the ninth EP term is very marginal and the difference is not visible in the graph (29.21 vs 29.12 for the S&D).

Figure 4 gives a graphic impression of the EPP's IR advantage over the EP's first nine terms. Being part of the core can also be a considerable asset for a party group when securing positions that have both institutional and *political* relevance.[77] We have calculated a *political relevance* (PR) index to assess this ability. Its purpose is to determine the extent to which the actual appointments reflect the simple proportionality criteria afforded by the d'Hondt method, which is also used to distribute rapporteur positions or can be attributed to groups' political influence.[78] Like the IR index, the PR values are calculated by identifying the group affiliation of rapporteurs and giving them a score based on the weight we have attributed to the committees based on their importance. The total of the scores for all rapporteurs of a given group yields, as a percentage of the total for all rapporteurs, each group's PR score. The results of this exercise for the ninth EP term are shown below.

Table 2 PR index for the ninth EP (2019–24)

Political group	Seats (%)	PR (%)	PR–seats differential
EPP	24.7	33.72	9.02
S&D	20.1	20.65	0.55
Renew	14.4	18.62	4.22
Greens/EFA	10.0	8.45	-1.55
ECR	9.0	14.73	5.73
ID	9.0	1.69	-7.31
The Left	5.4	1.81	-3.59
Non-attached	7.4	0.34	-7.06

Source: Authors' own calculations using data from *European Parliament*, 'Legislative Observatory', as of May 2024.

[77] Here, we refer to the positions of rapporteurs involved with dossiers being discussed in EP committees. Although such positions do have an institutional relevance, in that they are officially designated to perform specific functions that are necessary for EP operations, they are not permanently outlined in the EP's organigram but discreetly appointed as individual dossiers are initiated. Consequently, they are not strictly 'institutional' in the same sense as the other positions we have considered for the calculation of the IR index. However, they cannot be excluded from analysis, not only because they have an institutional role but, even more importantly, because they have undoubted political relevance. Hence, we have decided to create a specifically dedicated index.

[78] 'The allocation of reports among political groups roughly follows the lines of the d'Hondt system, combined with an auction system reflecting the different values of reports. In the European Parliament, the auction system typically assigns several points (usually one or two) for each member a political group has on a committee. The group coordinators then decide how much a report is worth, depending on the political weight assigned to it. As such, reports cost more than opinions, and some highly expected reports cost more than others . . . A Group willing to spend more points on a report can thus get it more easily but will compromise its ability to get future reports by having spent a large number of points already.' Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union, *Rapporteurs in the European Parliament* (September 2006).

As Table 2 indicates, the three largest groups have, as expected, the three highest scores. All three also exhibit positive PR–seat differentials. This is also consistent with our expectations, just as the fact that the two extreme groups, GUE/NGL on the left and ID on the right, as well as the non-attached representatives, which in a domestic context could be considered anti-system parties, all exhibit extremely negative PR–seat differentials. These data confirm our hypothesis that being part of the core is very advantageous. However, as is often the case with calculations of this kind, there are some puzzling results. For one, the S&D's PR–seat differential is relatively small, albeit positive. It would have been expected to fall between the EPP's and Renew's scores and above that of the ECR. However, it is lower than the differentials of all three of these groups. The other unexpected finding concerns the Greens' negative PR–seat differential. Having been the group closest to the core since the inception of the ninth legislature, it might have been expected that it would be more likely to have a positive score, even if small. The most astounding result is the ECR's PR–seat differential. At 5.73, it exceeds the group's seat share by almost 64%, dramatically outdoing the differentials of 36.5% for the EPP and 29.3% for Renew. To provide a more informed explanation of these apparent anomalies requires the diachronic plotting of the PR scores. Whilst this is something that we hope to do in a follow-up to this report, here we will only surmise that the astonishing ECR result may reflect the changed attitude of the ECR in its bid to take on a new, more government-oriented strategy.

The weakening of the core: the EPP Group and the quest for a new strategy

The analysis so far has shown the importance and persistence of the EP party system core and the institutional and political advantages it affords to the political groups which it comprises, particularly the EPP. However, electoral trends in the last decade or so have revealed the overall decline of the core's political groups. These are undoubtedly reflective of trends in electors' political orientations in the member states.[79]

[79] C. Rovira Kaltwasser et al., *The Transformation of the Mainstream Right and its Impact on (Social) Democracy*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (Brussels, April 2024).

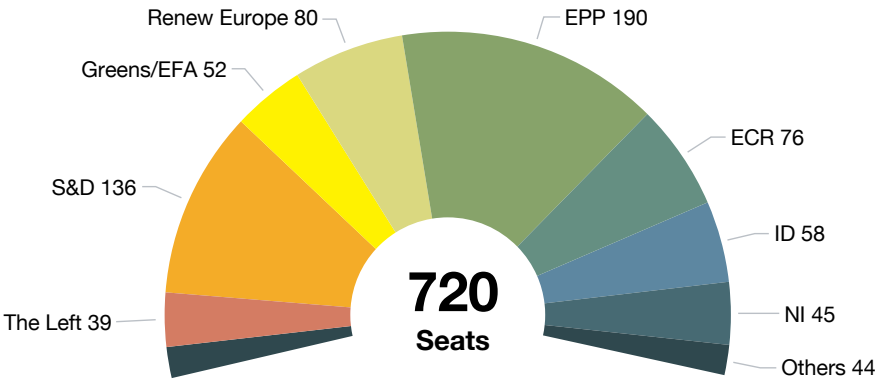
Political parties at the European level can only adapt to changes in their composition/strength that result from the outcomes of the European elections. Notably, the so-called 'populist surge' that has occurred in many party systems at the national level has also highlighted the conflict between Europeanist and sovereigntist groups at the European level.

Be that as it may, as early as the eve of the 2019 elections, speculation was occurring about the potential need for a change in the composition of the core. Due to the risk that the Eurosceptic challenge might shrink the alliance in the Europeanist core, the fear of a numerical decline made the core's component parties more open to alternative alliance strategies. This was particularly true for the EPP, whose position in the party system made it objectively better placed for approaching potential new allies.

In actuality, the results were less dramatic than was feared by the supporters of the status quo, as the substantial losses among the EPP and the S&D, which deprived them of a combined majority, were partially compensated for by the rise of the ALDE/Renew group and its stable inclusion in the core (see Table 1). The provisional results of the 2024 EP elections indicate substantial stability in the tenth term for the combined strength of the two major groups (up .54% compared to the ninth term). This is, however, the result of an increase for the EPP (up 2.16%) and a decline (down 1.62%) for the S&D, with a consequent widening of the gap between the two groups, which is also reflected in Figure 1.

It was this possibility, with an even more pronounced decline expected for Renew (3.27% was the actual loss in the election), that stimulated speculation about the EPP considering a significant change in its strategy within the EP party system. As is demonstrated in Figure 5, after the 2024 elections the EPP's positioning in the EP is much more central than in the past, even if its overall strength has remained almost unchanged. This, the argument goes, might be enough to make it possible for the EPP to abandon its long-established entente with the Socialists and Liberals and consider new alliance strategies with political groups situated to its right.

Figure 5 Seat distribution in the EP 2024–9: provisional results for the tenth term



Source: Authors' calculations.

Note: NI = non-attached representatives.

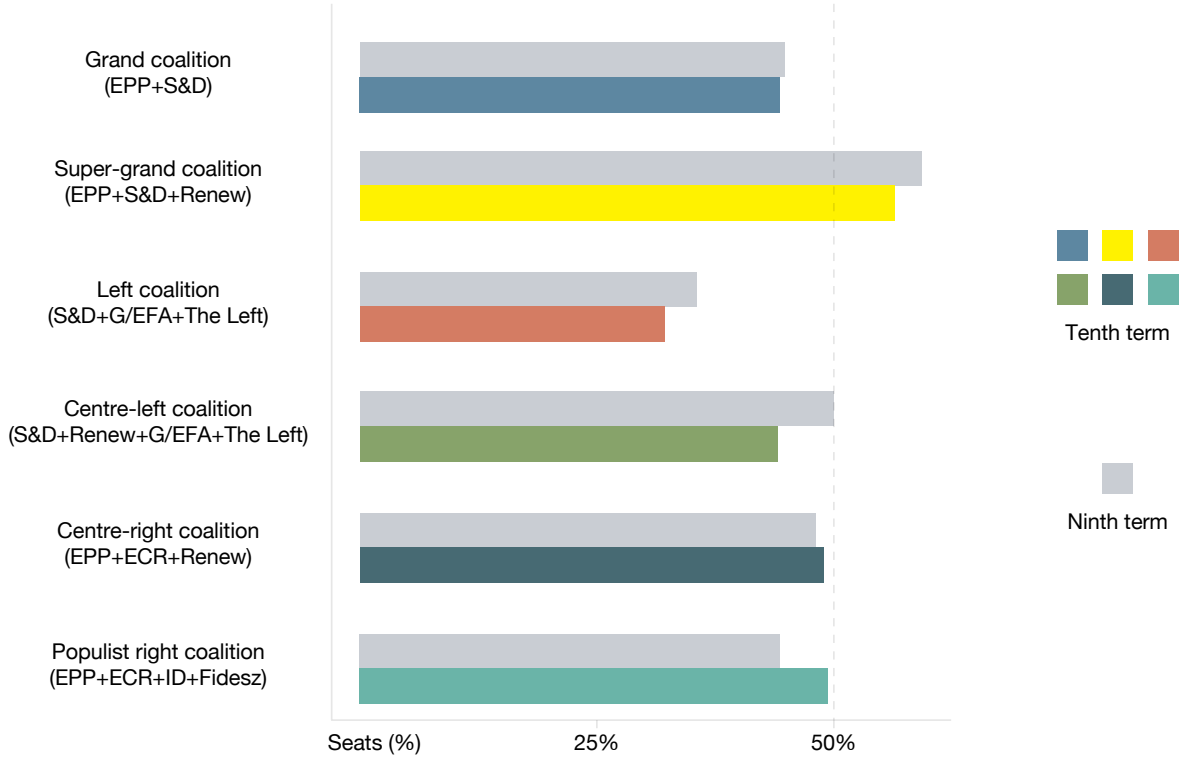
However, a closer look at the provisional results of the EP elections suggests that such an alternative might be pursuable in only very select ways.[80] A permanent coalition that excludes all parties to the left of the EPP would be theoretically possible but would only have a majority if it included the ECR, ID, and all those who come under the banners of Non-attached and Others, as some party delegations whose affiliation is yet to be determined are labelled on the Parliament's results webpage. Even so, such a coalition would consist of only about 400 MEPs, once those MEPs in the last two categories that are left of the EPP are excluded. This is not a high enough number to make such a coalition reliable and lasting, particularly in view of its heterogeneity. Moreover, the ECR and ID groups are the least cohesive in the EP, and it could be challenging for their leaderships to enforce party discipline.[81]

[80] The likelihood of this outcome was confirmed in our interviews with Klaus Welle, Pier Virgilio Dastoli and Riccardo Ribera d'Alcalà. Klaus Welle, interview with the authors, Brussels, 25 March 2024; Pier Virgilio Dastoli, interview with the authors, online, 3 April 2024; Riccardo Ribera d'Alcalá, interview with the authors, Brussels, 27 March 2024.

[81] Hix and Noury report cohesion scores of 50 and 60 for ID and the ECR, respectively. The scores for the EPP, GUE/NGL and Renew all exceed 70. The S&D score is above 80 and the Greens/EFA is above 90. However, they surmise that in the tenth EP, 'the increased size and power of ECR and ID may lead to higher voting cohesion of these groups'. Should limited party discipline persist, however, scenarios could develop in which selected national parties from the two groups could be attracted into occasional or one-off majorities. Hix and Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections*, 6–7.

A centre–right coalition, including Renew and the ECR, alongside the EPP and excluding the S&D, would, on paper, look more feasible but, with less than 350 seats, would fall short of the necessary majority (see Figure 6). This is without considering the significant differences in many policy fields between Renew and the ECR (see below), as well as between Renew and the EPP at times, which would enormously reduce the occasions of unanimous convergence across the three groups. Figure 6 provides a graphic impression of the potential composition of several possible coalitions. Despite its losses, the core or 'super-grand' coalition is still the only one that could hold an absolute majority of the seats (406). The centre–right and populist coalitions would be roughly the same size, falling short of an absolute majority. All other possible coalitions would be too minoritarian to even be considered.

Figure 6 Party group coalitions in the EP: ninth and tenth terms

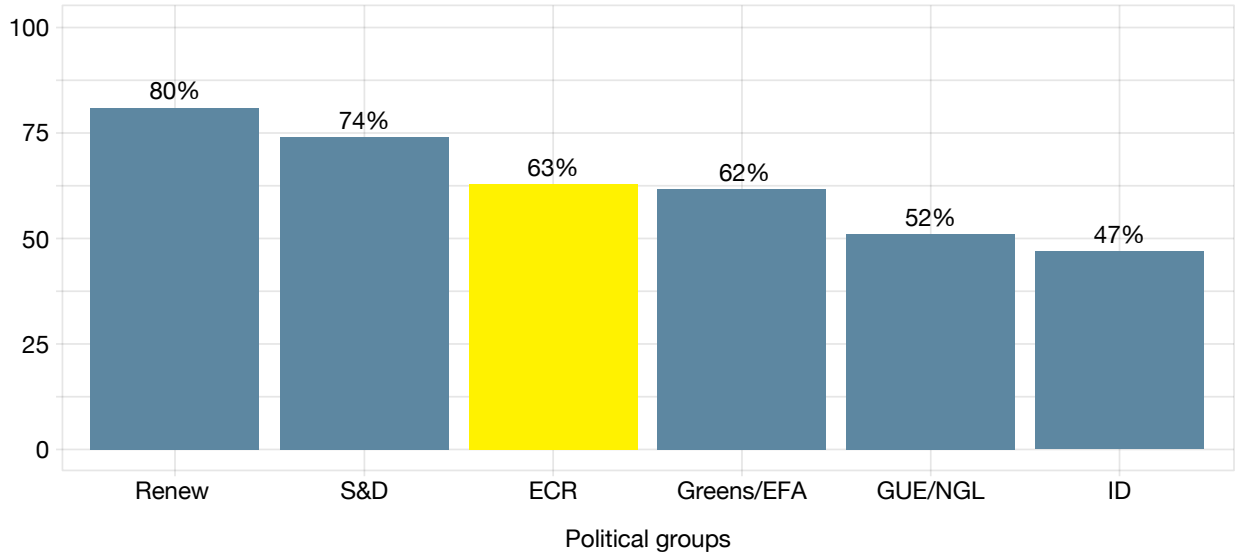


Source: Data adapted from Hix and Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections*, 4. Reproduced with permission.

Note: Fidesz is a Hungarian party which was at the time of writing non-attached.

Beyond the sheer numerical feasibility of coalitions, political considerations necessarily come into play when exploring possible alternatives to the entente of the core EP groups. In particular, it is necessary to assess the options available to the EPP, which, as we have seen, is still the most pivotal group in the new EP's balance of power. Figure 7 graphically illustrates the EPP's proximity to the other EP groups, as measured by the percentage of votes on which the groups have converged in plenary sessions. If established voting practices are any indication of the overall political proximity of groups, the EPP is closest to Renew. But perhaps even more importantly, it is also closer to the S&D Group than it is to the ECR—the group considered the most likely new ally should the EPP decide to build an alternative to the core. Finally, the other group necessary to construct a centre–populist-right coalition, ID, converges with the EPP less than 50% of the time, an even worse score than that of the extreme left.

Figure 7 The EPP's voting agreement with other EP political groups (ninth term)



Source: Adapted from N. Brack and A. Marié, *Une poussée à droite aux élections conduirait-elle à un changement de la coalition centrale au Parlement européen?*, Institut Jacques Delors, Policy Paper no. 300 (Paris, 2024), 6. Reproduced with permission.

Aside from the importance of convergences with other groups, much has also been said about the proximity of EP political parties to their individual national parties/components. Should it be difficult to establish an understanding with the ECR as a whole, it might be easier to do so with some of its components, which might become part of an EPP-led majority on selected votes. This might be a desirable alternative, especially if the national party in question is of sufficient size. It is no secret that for some time a potential candidate for this role has been Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FDI). The FDI's 24 seats make it the third-largest single national party in the new Parliament. Moreover, its leader, Georgia Meloni, as the current prime minister of Italy, has taken a more moderate line than the party has in the past. This has made her a potentially attractive ally to Ursula von der Leyen and sections of the EPP.

An assessment of the feasibility of the EPP's approach to the ECR or parts thereof can be therefore based on two sets of considerations: an analysis of data apt to demonstrate the proximity to the EPP of the ECR's national components on policies, and an assessment of ongoing political developments that might favour or hinder such an approach.

Table 3 reports data on the proximity between the ECR's national party components and the EPP. As expected, there is significant variation across individual party scores. However, the data show that there is agreement less than two-thirds of the time for all parties. In one case, that of the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna), it is less than 50% of the time. As for the FDI, its agreement rate with the EPP is an unsatisfactory 60%. This means that even at the national party level, the potential for a lasting alliance with the ECR or portions thereof is not very promising. However, the ECR, or at least some of its components, may converge significantly with the EPP on votes with an overarching political importance. This could be the case for the election of the next European Commission. A precedent was set with the 2019 election of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission, which relied on convergence of the vote of the ECR's Polish component with that of the core parties, albeit this party now exhibits a rather unimpressive proximity score of 61.

Table 3 Proximity between the EPP and the ECR's national parties

ECR parties	
Political parties	**Proximity to EPP group (%)**
Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, Czechia)	65
New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, Belgium)	64
Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Poland)	61
FDI (Italy)	60
Vox (Spain)	57
Sweden Democrats (Sweden)	48

Source: Adapted, with permission, from Brack and Marié, *Une poussée à droite aux élections conduirait-elle à un changement de la coalition centrale au Parlement européen?*, 13.

The 2024 elections' results seem insufficient to mark a substantial shift from the past. However, the hostility that the member parties of the EPP and the PES generally have for each other at the member state level could be a decisive factor in accelerating conflictual dynamics between the two party families at the EU level.[82] For now, all other factors, especially the sheer seat distribution in the new EP, make the demise of their entente very unlikely. This does not mean, however, that alternative majorities will not selectively materialise. The less-than-perfect agreement indices shown in Figure 7 imply that this is already happening somewhat frequently.

The historical assessment of interparty relations in this paper's first two sections has shown that the EU government is not supported by an organic and stable coalition of parties (in the Parliament) or member states (in the Council). In most cases, unanimity is pursued in the latter. It is well known that with each new

[82] According to at least two of our interviewees, Klaus Welle and Johan Ryngaert, there has recently been an increase in conflicts between the EPP and the PES at the EU level as well. Klaus Welle, interview by the authors, Brussels, 25 March 2024; Johan Ryngaert, interview by the authors, Florence, 30 April 2024.

EP term, the legislative or other decisions that must be taken after the nomination/election of the various institutional presidencies (of the Commission, the EP and the European Council) are approved by ad hoc majorities formed for each decision. These majorities are not necessarily replicated in subsequent votes throughout the parliamentary term. Although patterns and regularities can be observed, especially within single policy areas, the actual majorities that emerge include all groups and MEPs at different times. As Klaus Welle pointed out when interviewed, 'Sometimes you get support from corners where you would never expect [it].'[83] The question of whether a permanent majority can exist in the EP, then, needs to be reformulated to assess which policy areas are likely to produce majorities that differ from those that have prevailed in the EP's history.

The number of possible majorities is incommensurably higher than indicated in Figure 6 as it can include not only all possible permutations of the 7 EP political groups and the over 20 parties (plus a few independents) among the non-attached members, but also other combinations of national delegations/parties and even single MEPs dissenting from the official position of their established groups. However, for these majorities to materialise, attracting three or four of the EP's largest groups is crucial.

Since the implicit working hypothesis here is that in the new term, the EPP will try to reach more decisions than in the past without the S&D, it becomes necessary to identify the policy areas in which the EPP generally converges with both the ECR and ID. We stipulate that convergence exists when the groups vote together at least 70% of the time. Hix and Noury calculated cohesion scores based on over 17,000 votes in the EP's ninth term.[84] Their data (see Table 4), consistent with what is displayed in Figure 7, show that the EPP's and the ECR's views converge just over 60% of the time, whereas the EPP's and ID's views only converge on less than 50% of votes. Moreover, Renew, the other essential component in a coalition excluding the S&D, has an agreement score of 50% with the ECR and just 37% with ID, making it an unlikely partner for the two right-wing groups. The overall impression thus remains that the permanent substitution of the S&D with the ECR as the privileged ally of the EPP in this EP is very unlikely.

However, we know from the history of EP voting that the formation of majorities other than those centred on the core parties occurs frequently. The S&D, the EPP and ALDE/Renew consistently agree on institu-

[83] Klaus Welle, interview by the authors, Belgium, 25 March 2024.
[84] Hix and Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections.*

tional matters, but they differ on policy decisions. Hix and Noury also calculated cohesion values for the current EP term for pairs of all EP party groups on votes in different policy areas. Using their data, we have constructed a table (Table 4) showing the agreement scores between pairs of EP groups in 21 policy areas. The most relevant pairings are those between the EPP, the ECR and ID. We have also included EPP and S&D pairings for comparison. We have included pairings with the same three groups for Renew as well. Although we are mainly interested in assessing the EPP's proximity to the ECR and ID, it is also true that for any coalition excluding the S&D to materialise, it would need to include Renew. Thus, it becomes crucial to know its scores too. To facilitate our analysis, we have colour-coded all entries in the table. All scores of 0.70 and above are coloured green to indicate more than satisfactory convergence. All entries of 0.50 and below are coloured red to indicate unsatisfactory convergence.[85]

Table 4 Agreement between pairs of EP groups (ninth EP term)

	EPP			Renew		
	S&D	ECR	ID	S&D	ECR	ID
All issues	0.73	0.62	0.46	0.87	0.50	0.37
Agriculture and rural development	0.73	0.74	0.64	0.73	0.67	0.59
Budgets	0.76	0.64	0.38	0.87	0.58	0.35
Civil liberties, justice and home affairs	0.78	0.45	0.37	0.95	0.32	0.25
Constitutional affairs	0.62	0.54	0.55	0.93	0.25	0.26
Culture and education	0.99	0.46	0.34	0.96	0.46	0.31
Development	0.68	0.33	0.34	0.90	0.22	0.29
Economic and monetary affairs	0.72	0.65	0.37	0.81	0.56	0.34
Employment and social affairs	0.63	0.58	0.48	0.82	0.44	0.36
Environment, public health and food safety	0.59	0.31	0.25	0.90	0.36	0.29
Fisheries	0.76	0.84	0.63	0.85	0.72	0.54
Foreign affairs	0.81	0.69	0.38	0.89	0.63	0.32
Industry, research and energy	0.72	0.72	0.59	0.89	0.56	0.47

[85] The criteria we have chosen to determine the colour codes are admittedly arbitrary. The purpose of colour-coding, however, is only to serve as an analytical aid, not to act as an objective measurement.

Internal market and consumer protection	0.80	0.78	0.51	0.85	0.79	0.50
International trade	0.92	0.91	0.56	0.92	0.90	0.58
Legal affairs	0.87	0.46	0.37	0.95	0.39	0.39
Petitions	0.56	0.52	0.53	0.92	0.42	0.51
Regional development	0.89	0.75	0.48	0.98	0.68	0.42
Artificial intelligence in a digital age	0.94	0.83	0.80	0.94	0.83	0.80
Transport and tourism	0.87	0.62	0.77	0.90	0.61	0.77
Women's rights and gender equality	0.73	0.40	0.46	0.94	0.23	0.32

Source: Adapted from Hix and Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections*, 13–14.

Note: 'Entries indicate the proportion of times the majority of MEPs in each pair of political groups voted the same way in a set of votes. Highlighted entries indicate higher EPP/ECR than EPP/S&D convergence. Compiled by Hix and Noury from "voting data available on the European Parliament website".'[86]

There appears to be a large distance between the EPP and ID. In 12 policy areas out of 21, their proximity is below 0.50, and in only 2, less than 10% of the total, does it rise above 0.70. Therefore, even if in one area, transport and tourism, the EPP/ID score is higher than that for the EPP/ECR, the prospects of enhanced cooperation between the two groups after the 2024 elections are rather limited.

The picture portrayed by the EPP/ECR pairings is more mixed. There is satisfactory convergence between the two groups in seven policy areas, most notably in fisheries, international trade and artificial intelligence. In six other areas, convergence is unsatisfactory, particularly in development, the environment and, most importantly given the current salience of this issue, women's rights and gender equality. The remaining six areas are neutral. By contrast, convergence between the EPP and the S&D is satisfactory in 14 policy areas, whereas no areas register unsatisfactory scores. In only two cases, fisheries and agriculture and rural development, are convergence scores with the ECR better than with the S&D. This does not mean that cooperation between the EPP and the ECR cannot increase. Indeed, it very well may if the two groups' general orientations should change in light of the election results. EPP/ECR cooperation will most likely increase in those 'neutral' areas, such as employment and petitions, where the distance between the ECR/EPP and the S&D/EPP pairings is relatively small.

[86] S. Hix and A. G. Noury, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections*, 5.

The same, however, cannot be said about Renew's pairings with the ECR and ID, among which convergence is unsatisfactory in, respectively, 10 and 14 areas. By contrast, only four Renew/ECR and no Renew/ID scores are satisfactory. Given that *all* Renew/S&D values are satisfactory, it is doubtful that Renew will be attracted, even selectively, into a populist—centre–right coalition to the detriment of their alliance with the S&D.

In light of the new Parliament's seat distribution and the observed voting patterns of the EP party groups, we can expect more variation than in the past in the formation and composition of majorities in EP votes. However, the departure from past practices will likely be somewhat limited. This does not mean that there will not be dramatic consequences, especially if such departures concern crucial votes, such as those on monocratic EU and EP positions. To be sure, should the next Commission president be supported in the EP's approval vote by a centre–right coalition and not by the S&D, it may foster the forming of further similar alliances in EP voting. The question would then become whether the compromises the EPP would necessarily have to reach with its right-wing would-be partners would be considered an acceptable price to pay for such a victory.

Conclusion

Reaching 'conclusions' on something still in the making is no simple task, especially when the process that is being observed concerns a complex institutional and political entity such as the EU's multilevel governance system. However, speculations about possible changes, or lack thereof, that might occur in interparty relations in the EP as part of the post-election process that will structure the EU's institutional and political system for the next five years are possible. It could even be that such speculations are legitimate, as we hope is the case, when they are based on a historical and empirical assessment of past and current interparty arrangements.

The most likely scenario to emerge from our analysis is one of more continuity with the past than change. Our historical assessment of the creation and growth of the 'core' based on the understanding between the EPP and the S&D also demonstrates its resilience, as shown by its extension to ALDE/Renew and, albeit

more selectively, to the Greens. As we have seen in the first section of this paper, for the Greens to become more stable partners in the core they will have to side with the other three groups on crucial votes, such as the approval of the next European Commission.

For all practical purposes, the history of interparty cooperation in the EP is as old as the Parliament itself. Procedural and institutional imperatives were the initial stimuli for interparty cooperation. Very soon, however, the core parties' need and desire to strengthen the EP and the EU level of government became their dominant concern. The success of their strategy, which materialised in the 'season of the treaties',[87] eventually enhanced the EP's powers and the EU's policy domains. It soon followed that interparty cooperation concerned an ever-growing set of policy areas.

It would be mistaken, however, to expect, on this basis alone, interparty cooperation to continue unchanged after a weakening of the combined parliamentary strength of the core. At the same time, it would also be wrong to expect the sudden replacement of cooperation with an 'adversarial politics' dynamic for two reasons. First, we have shown that political competition has also characterised the history of EP interparty relations. Second, such a replacement would be made impossible not only by the numerical limits of counter-opposed party coalitions in the EP, but even more so by the EU's institutional architecture and balance.

Adversarial politics finds expression in the alternation of coalitions in the government and opposition. However, these concepts have a very different meaning in the EU than in the member states. In particular, 'opposition' is not a concept applicable to the European political system. The European executive consists of two bodies belonging to institutional circuits with separate sources of legitimacy. In the intergovernmental circuit, the Council is a confederal body through which most decisions are formally and unanimously made by the governments of the 27 member states. Such governments are endowed with national legitimacy. As such, the Council faces no opposition at the European level.

In the supranational circuit, the Commission's legitimacy, once provided exclusively by the treaties, is now strengthened by Parliament's approval. But this is a vote that has a unique value and that does not

[87] Naturally, the treaties, from the Single European Act onwards, were signed owing to the initiative and will of a multitude of actors, of which the EP groups formed only a minor part. It was through the signing of the treaties, however, that many of the objectives pursued by the EP party groups were obtained.

provide continuity to the majority that expresses it. In the remainder of the legislature, ad hoc majorities are formed for individual decisions. As a result, there is no real opposition either, not least because the plural nature of European society requires broad consociational convergences.

Even if a non-core majority should emerge to elect the next Commission president, for all subsequent decisions different majorities will likely be formed, albeit ones that are sometimes similar to each other. Often, such majorities will stem from the contributions of EP groups or national parties that were not part of the majority that supported the new Commission. Therefore, it can be surmised that no one will be permanently in opposition, and everyone will contribute, with varying frequency, to government. Core cooperation may become a less dominant mode of decision-making in the EP. Still, it is doubtful that it will be replaced by adversarial politics, as foretold or desired by some, such as the critics of the EU's democratic deficit.

From the point of view of democratic theory, the absence of government–opposition dynamics is precisely one of the reasons for the democratic deficit in the European political system. The creation of mechanisms for the permanent conferral of legitimacy to government by alternating party coalitions would be a way to eliminate this anomaly. But this would require a new treaty, which would need to be unanimously approved by the member states. Until then, the consociational pressures from European society's plural structure will prevail, as will cooperative rather than adversarial politics.

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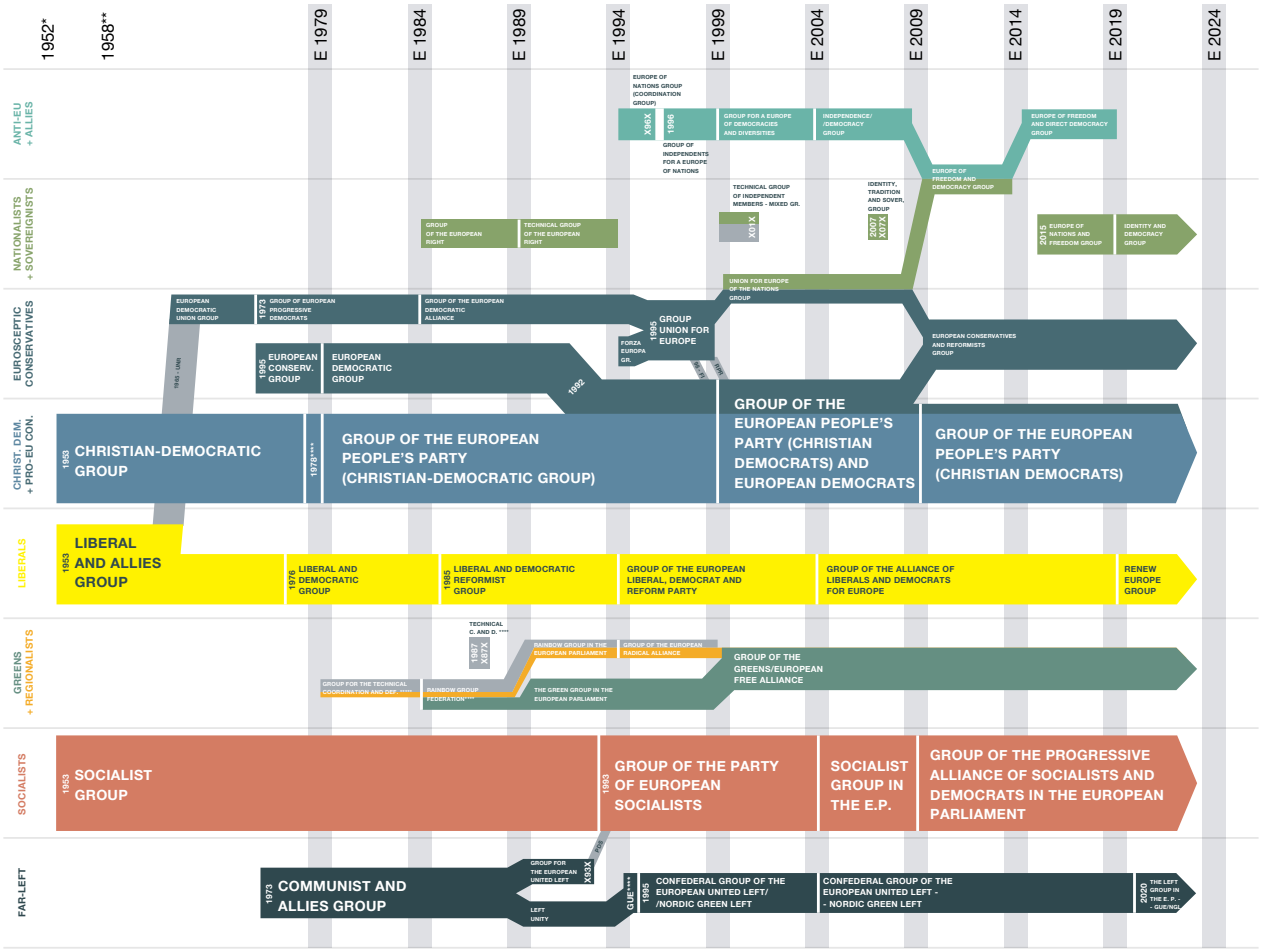
Appendix

Table A1 The evolution of political groups in the EP, 1979–2024



Source: A. Trunečka, 'Development of Political Groups in the European Parliament', reproduced under Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0.

This paper examines trends in relations between party groups in the European Parliament since its inception, with a particular focus on the European People's Party (EPP) and its prospective options for forging coalitions in the coming tenth legislative term. First, it traces the evolution of the two faces of intra-parliamentary relations in the European Parliament since its early days: cooperative and adversarial politics. Cooperation between the 'core' groups of the Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats has been the dominant guiding principle. The historical analysis explains why the European Parliament follows a different logic than most national parliaments and illustrates how this cooperation has played out.

The continued existence and relevance of the parliamentary core is demonstrated next. Despite a decline in the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and EPP groups' seat shares. the core has persisted and remained relevant. The analysis of data obtained by calculating two indices, the institutional relevance index and a newly developed political relevance index, demonstrates that, even if the core has shrunk, it has maintained a dominant role in the European Parliament.

The prospects for the core groups in the tenth term are then considered. Although the EPP would be well-placed to look for new partners and alliances on its own terms, the analysis suggests that embarking on such a course would be fraught with difficulty. The analysis of intra-group cohesion and intergroup agreement data found in the literature highlights the considerable difficulties that The EPP would encounter in pursuing anything more than sporadic cooperation on selected issues with other groups. Even without the S&D group, the EPP's need to rely on Renew makes durable coalitions with groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists or Identity and Democracy unlikely because of Renew's low levels of agreement with these groups.

It is likely that the European Parliament's incoming term will witness a continuity in intergroup relations. Therefore, the advantages of more conflictual relations between the core groups are limited, and cooperation can be expected to prevail.

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