

Research Article

Another Side of the Story: A Qualitative Case Study of Voting Behaviour in the European Parliament

Maja Kluger Rasmussen

Danish Institute for International Studies

This study re-examines the conclusions drawn from existing research on legislative behaviour in the European Parliament (EP). Using written questionnaires and qualitative interviews with all 14 current Danish Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and three former MEPs, existing academic findings on voting behaviour in the EP are compared and contrasted with ground-level experience from the MEPs' point of view. This study lends support to many of the conclusions drawn from previous quantitative research. However, it also shows that some of these findings cannot be fully understood without individual-level information.

Introduction

How Members of the European Parliament vote is increasingly important for understanding policy outcomes in the European Union. The European Parliament (EP) is no longer what many people in the past characterised as a 'Mickey Mouse parliament', but rather a parliament playing a very crucial role in taking decisions as well as promoting new EU legislation.

The legislative behaviour of the EP is, potentially, more complex than that of national legislatures for several reasons. Firstly, it is a supranational parliament elected primarily on the basis of national manifestos. All Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are members of national parties and of European party groups (EPGs), which raises the question of whom to vote with if a conflict between the two occurs. Secondly, because national electorates elect MEPs, they are also representatives of their country. Finally, embedded in the separation of powers system and with no real government to hold accountable, the main function of the EP is to maximise its influence *vis-à-vis* the Council of Ministers, representing the governments of the EU's Member States and the European Commission, the EU's executive. Therefore, the MEPs also represent Parliament as an institution.

The list of theoretical and empirical research examining voting behaviour in the EP is a long one. An extensive, though not full, list includes: Attinà (1990), Hix, Noury and Roland (2002 and 2006), Faas (2003), Hix (2001 and 2002), Kreppel and Tsebelis (1999), Noury (2002) and Raunio (2000). Based on quantitative studies of roll call votes, these studies focus on the level of cohesion within the EPGs as well



as the nature of competition between them. However, measuring cohesiveness in the EP by analysing roll call votes is not without its problems. Roll call votes only comprise approximately one-third of all votes in the EP. In addition, various studies show that roll call votes are not requested evenly by EPGs, are not called on a full range of issues and are not called evenly across voting procedures (Carrubba and Matthew, 1999; Thiem, 2006, p. 17).

Moreover, roll call votes do not give an adequate picture of the strength of an individual's opinion. An MEP has four voting options when a roll call vote is requested in the EP: (1) vote in favour of a proposal; (2) vote against a proposal; (3) register an abstention; and (4) not to participate in the vote. It is not possible to know whether a MEP's support of a proposal is to be taken as fervent conviction, modest support or grudging support. For example, this study shows that non-voting (absent or 'present-but-did-not-vote') is often due to disagreement between the national party and the MEP. However, this cannot be seen merely from studying roll call votes as they only tell us 'how' the MEPs have voted, but not 'why' they have voted in a certain way. The latter can only be obtained by interviewing the MEPs about the factors influencing their voting behaviour.

Based on qualitative interviews and written questionnaires with all 14 Danish MEPs,¹ this study compares and contrasts existing academic findings on voting behaviour in the EP with ground-level experience. The aim is to see how well previous academic findings on how MEPs vote in general apply to individuals. Denmark has been chosen because it is a relatively old Member State and, therefore, Danish MEPs may be more familiar with the norms and procedures of the EP than others. Furthermore, the Danish MEPs are represented in seven out of the eight political groups in the EP, which gives an insight into the voting behaviour of MEPs from different groups. Although some of the findings of this study confirm the conclusions of previous research, namely the high level of cohesion within the main EPGs, other findings, such as the role played by national affiliation and the national party in shaping MEPs' voting behaviour, provide additional insight.

The article is organised as follows. First, existing academic findings on voting behaviour in the EP are presented. Thereafter, these findings will be compared with the Danish MEPs' own understanding of legislative behaviour in the EP.

What (we think) we know about legislative politics in the EP

Empirical research on MEPs' voting behaviour in the EP generally supports three main conclusions regarding EPG cohesion:

1. EPGs display very high levels of party cohesion (although not as high as that of parties in domestic parliaments in EU Member States). The EPGs that are transnational party federations (the European Peoples party, the party of European Socialists, the Greens and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) are more cohesive than the groups that do not possess these external party organisations (European United Left and Nordic Green Left, the Independence and Democracy Group, Union for a Europe of Nations and the Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty). However, issues involving substantial cross-country

redistribution (i.e. the Common Agriculture Policy and Structural Funds) create cleavages within EPGs (see, for example, Faas, 2003; Hix, Noury and Roland, 2002 and 2006; Kreppel, 2000; Noury, 2002).

2. Legislative behaviour in the EP is structured more by EPG affiliation than national affiliation. National affiliation, independent of national party positions, has very little bearing on the voting behaviour in the EP. MEPs are more likely to vote with their EPG than with other MEPs from their Member State represented in other EPGs (Hix, 2001; Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999; Noury, 2002).
3. However, MEPs are more likely to toe the policy line of their national party when a policy conflict occurs between the national party and the EPGs. Despite the fact that EPGs control the allocation of committee assignment, rapporteurships and speaking time, etc., the national party controls the selection of candidates to the EU elections and, ultimately, determines how the MEP votes. Consequently, EPG cohesion breaks down when its policy position conflicts with those of national parties (Hix, 2001; Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999; Noury, 2002).

The story told by the MEPs

Interviews with the MEPs confirm that the main EPGs tend to act cohesively, while the smaller groups are more fragmented. However, the Danish MEPs contend that national affiliation plays a more significant role than previously assumed by existing research. Furthermore, the Danish MEPs do not necessarily vote with their national party when a policy conflict occurs between the national party and the EPG. The rest of the article will focus on the insights that a focus on individuals brings to the quantitative analysis of MEP behaviour, particularly the impact of nationality and the position of the national party on legislative behaviour.

Nationality and MEP voting behaviour

According to my interviewees, national affiliation plays a more significant role than is assumed by previous research. This is especially so with regard to employment, environment (including food safety and animal rights) and agricultural policies (the impact of national affiliation upon agricultural policies has been confirmed by previous research). On these issues, Danish MEPs are more likely to vote in a 'Danish way' than a 'European way', which means that the majority of Danish MEPs vote the same, regardless of voting option (roll call votes, show of hands and electronic vote). When talking about policy areas in which MEPs find it difficult to follow their EPG, one MEP says:

'We [Danish liberal delegation] sometimes divert from our group [ALDE] when voting on issues such as food safety, environment and agriculture. For example, we are strongly in favour of introducing more free market measures into the Common Agricultural Policy by reducing the EU farm subsidies. However, the French delegation could never dream of changing the current structure of the farm subsidies. This creates situations where we vote in a national way rather than voting with the other members of our group' (Interview 10).

When it comes to voting on environmental issues, Danish MEPs are in support of higher and stricter environmental EU standards than most of their fellow MEPs. On these issues, the EP is often characterised by a North/South division between EU Member States.

‘When national divisions occur in Parliament, it is often the case that Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom vote in one way and the southern European states vote in another way. The new member states have not yet found a solid policy stand and, as a consequence, the European Parliament is often characterised by national divisions between “south” and “north” ’ (Interview 7).

These national divisions have to be seen in relation to the historical origins of national parties in the different Member States. As one MEP describes it:

‘One might wonder why votes on agricultural and employment issues are coloured more by national divisions than by a left–right division. The answer is to be found in the different historical and cultural origins of national parties. Whereas, for example, the left-wing parties in Portugal traditionally have been strongly affiliated with the farm workers and the fishermen the left-wing parties in Denmark grew out of the workers movement’ (Interview 16).

The importance of national affiliation on environment, food safety, animal rights and agricultural issues is confirmed when talking to the MEPs about their contact with the Danish government. When asked whether they have been contacted in the past by any of the Danish ministers, most MEPs mention that they are in frequent contact with the Minister for the Environment (Connie Hedegaard) and the Minister for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries (Hans Chr. Schmidt). However, frequent contact with these ministers is not a guarantee of identical views, but it does show that these areas are of special importance for Denmark.

From this, can we conclude that legislative behaviour in the EP is structured more by national affiliation than EPG affiliation? The answer is ambiguous as it is highly dependent on the policy issue in question. When employment, environment, food safety, animal rights and agricultural issues are on the agenda, Danish MEPs are more inclined to vote in accordance with national affiliation rather than with their EPG. However, the desire of EPGs to present a united front, so as to carry weight in negotiations with other EPGs and thus to influence legislation, serves as a strong incentive for MEPs to adhere to the EPG position.

‘We have to be aware that whenever we [the Danish delegation] choose to divert from our group’s position, we contribute to weakening the group in relation to other groups. Politics is about “taking action” and if the members of a group cannot come to agreement, we become paralysed’ (Interview 9).

Strikingly, national differences are most prevalent at the beginning of a parliamentary term, when there are a number of new MEPs. After an election, all EPGs need some time to integrate the new members and to find common policy stances acceptable to the newcomers and the old members. This is especially the case if a group consists of many first-time MEPs who are unfamiliar with the norms and ‘rules’ of the EP and are influenced by past careers in national politics. One might

say that new Members need to be 'socialised' into their group and the EP before the group can present a united front. The main EPGs need to re-mobilise themselves after each EP election and build policy consensus between new and old MEPs.

The national party and MEP voting behaviour

Most of the Danish MEPs have participated in a vote where their national party and their EPG wanted different outcomes. Conflicts between MEPs' national parties and EPGs happen on a wide range of issues, especially concerning the environment, agriculture and EU integration. Some MEPs find themselves more in favour of 'tighter' EU co-operation than their national party. As one MEP says:

'We [the Danish national delegation] are in favour of the abolition of the Danish exemptions;² however, the party at home would like to preserve them. It is natural that you as an MEP develop your own opinions when you are represented in the EP and, thus, see things in another light' (Interview 1).

The important issue here is that the MEP feels that he or she is able to judge things differently than the national party and, perhaps, see things from a broader European perspective. Danish MEPs do not necessarily vote the way the national party would want when a policy conflict emerges. The decision with which side to align is made by weighing up the importance of the issue for the national party as against the EPG.

'It is important for us [the Danish delegation] to vote in accordance with our party programme in Denmark, but it is not an obligation. The GMO [genetically modified organism] area is a good example of a policy area where we did not vote in accordance with our national party' (Interview 15).

If an issue is highly salient at the national level and of special importance for the national party, MEPs often find it more important to vote in accordance with the national party. However, almost one-third of the Danish MEPs said that they often abstain from voting in the EP if a policy conflict emerges between the national party and the EPG, or if they disagree with the national party.

'When voting on issues regarding the Danish exemptions, I most often abstain from voting, as I know that my opinion will not be well received by my national party' (Interview 15).

This quotation suggests that non-voting during roll call votes expresses an exit behaviour rather than being coincidental. It also implies that the balance of power between the national level and the EU is an important area of conflict between MEPs and their national party.

The interviewees frequently noted that rather than receiving too much direction from their national parties, their national parties are quite uninterested in what is happening in the EU. This situation is compounded by different legislative focuses, with the European Parliament much more heavily engaged in regulation and the national parliament more heavily engaged in redistributive policies. Moreover, European legislation goes before the EP long before it reaches the Danish parlia-

ment. Even controversial issues can take some time to travel from the EP to the national agenda. A former MEP describes her national party's interest in her work in the EP as follows:

'A characteristic feature of working down here [the EP] is that you are very much on your own. The party back home knows very little about what you are doing and are not very engaged in your work. They helped me in making my party program for the European Parliament election, but that is about the only time that they have really showed any interest in my work' (Interview 16).

A current MEP noted:

'It is all about where the national party is in the policy process. The Danish Parliament first started discussing the Services Directive one and half years later than the EP. They discussed the initial proposal from the EU Commission, but the EP was much further ahead in the process than they were' (Interview 10).

The lag in national attention can put MEPs in an awkward position. On the one hand, they are decision-makers who need to seek compromises in the EP and, on the other hand, they might be criticised afterwards for not voting in accordance with the national party.

However, some of the Danish MEPs³ reported that the Danish ministers and national parties are now more active in contacting the Danish MEPs than they were in the past. This reflects the increased power of the EP and its ability to fill the political vacuum that occurred in the wake of the failure of the Constitutional Treaty by initiating more legislation:

'The increased interest in the European Parliament from the national level is, partly, a result of the new role played by the European Parliament in the wake of the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty. While the Council and the Commission have stuttered and stumbled regarding the future of EU integration, the European Parliament has picked up the baton and begun to run with its own policy initiatives' (Interview 3).

Conclusion

While this study replicates some of the findings of previous research, it also sheds light on new areas of importance. Two features of legislative politics came to the fore when interviewing the Danish MEPs:

1. National affiliations, independent of national party position, do significantly influence voting behaviour in the EP when voting on issues regarding the environment, employment, animal rights, food safety and agriculture. On these issues, Danish MEPs are more likely to vote with each other rather than toe the line of their EPGs.
2. MEPs do not necessarily vote with their national party when a policy conflict emerges between the national party and the EPG, not least because national parties are often seen as ill informed and/or slow on the uptake. The MEPs often divert from their national party when voting on issues regarding the speed and nature of EU integration (e.g. EU Constitution, treaties and the Danish exemp-

tions). When conflicts occur between the EPG and the national party, and if the issue is of importance for the national party, MEPs sometimes choose to abstain from voting, indicating that non-voting is used as an exit behaviour.

It is doubtful whether these findings would have become apparent without the use of qualitative interviews. However, the focus on only Danish MEPs means that it is problematic to assume generalisations about how all MEPs vote in Parliament. At the same time, the purpose of this study is to examine the applicability of general conclusions regarding the legislative behaviour of MEPs to individuals. Moreover, these findings – notably the use of abstention as a means of dealing with conflicts between the national party and the EPG and the lack of national attention to European issues creating leeway and problems for MEPs – are consistent with the conclusion Magnus Blomgren (2003) reached in his qualitative study of how MEPs from Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Ireland understand their roles and how they organise their work. This suggests that these findings may apply to MEPs other than those from Denmark.

Notes

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- 1 The interviews were conducted over a two-month period (16 June–11 July 2006). In that period, 13 interviews were carried out with 10 of the 14 current Danish MEPs and 3 of the 16 former Danish MEPs. The other 4 current MEPs answered questions by e-mail as they either did not have time or did not want to participate in an interview. Thus, all of the current Danish MEPs are represented in this study. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and had a mean duration of 45 minutes depending on the amount of time the MEP had available. Some interviews lasted 2 hours, while others only 20 minutes. They were carried out in a semi-structured way so that the same questions were posed to every single MEP and followed a common order. The interview guide contains two types of questions. The first type deals with the respondent's external reality, such as information on how the MEP's political group in the EP comes to agreement and what role the national delegations play in the EP. The second type of question is aimed at when the MEP's own view is in focus: for example, how the MEPs experience conflict or describe their contact with the national party. Both types of questions are important as they reveal differences in opinion and procedure between and within the different political groups.
- 2 Denmark has four exemptions of its membership of the EU: common defence, common currency, EU citizenship and certain aspects of legal co-operation including law enforcement.
- 3 These are either MEPs who have been represented in the EP in more than one parliamentary period or who have possessed government positions in the past, and have thus experienced contact with the EP from a government's point of view.

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