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Committee voting behaviour in the European Parliament: a microcosm of the plenary or an arena on its own?

A quantitative study into consensual committee voting
behaviour in the European Parliament



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Abstract

The research puzzle of this study concerns to what extent the committees of the European Parliament (EP) are performing their main task of building parliamentary consensus, as expressed in their voting behaviour on legislative issues. As opposed to the amount of literature dedicated to the voting behaviour in the EP plenary, significant gaps in the available data and the scholarly literature have developed with regard to respectively the collecting and analysing of data on committee voting behaviour in the EP. In this study, I collect voting data on 2709 committee votes (N) from the eighth parliamentary term (2014-2019) of the European Parliament. This data concerns aggregated voting results. I test the hypotheses of this study through performing multiple quantitative analyses. The first hypothesis concerns to what extent the parliamentary committees of the EP vote more consensually than the plenary. Are committees significantly more consensual in their voting behaviour than the plenary or does the plenary mostly vote similarly to the committee mandate? Secondly, this study tests whether information-driven committees are better ideological representations than interest-driven committees by comparing the levels of consensus in their voting behaviour vis-à-vis the plenary. Lastly, I test whether the normalization of informal trilogues, as part of the legislative co-decision procedures, leads to a significant difference in consensus levels between committee votes that are related to these procedures and votes that are unrelated. Generally, the results of this study first of all show that the committees vote more consensually than the plenary. Moreover, the results show no significant variations related to the latter two hypotheses.

Introduction

Ever since its founding, the democratic legitimacy of the European Union (EU) has become a major subject of debate, both within and outside of academic circles (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2007). As part of this debate, the functioning of the European Parliament (EP), being one of the core democratic institutions within the EU, has logically become a subject of scholarly scrutiny as well. However, most of the research surrounding the EP has been devoted to voting behaviour within the plenary (for example by Hix et al. (2005; 2008)), while voting behaviour within the parliamentary committees has hardly been a subject matter. This is emphasized by Settembri and Neuhold (2009: 132): “[Voting behaviour] is perhaps the most understudied dimension of EP committees, despite the fact that voting behaviour as such is very common for the study of legislatures and voting behaviour in plenary is one of the most developed fields in the study of the EP.” This fact is rather remarkable, as it is generally within the committees where legislative issues are addressed first and, most importantly, where the bulk of the legislative action takes place. With its strongly committee-focused system, this especially appears to be the case for the EP (Whitaker, 2001: 64). For that reason, I aim to

contribute to filling this literature gap by focusing this study on voting behaviour in the EP committees.

Moreover, Settembri and Neuhold (2009) argue that “*charting voting behaviour in EP committee is not simply an isolated step toward a better understanding of Parliament, but a crucial move forward in theory testing.*” (2009: 131). One theory I test concerns to what extent the voting behaviour of the EP committee system is actually representative of the EP plenary, of which the committees should ideally be (ideological) microcosms.¹ It is within these parliamentary committees where legislative majorities are to be formed and translated into the plenary. This arguably makes the extent to which the committees are representative of the plenary a crucial factor in determining the overall success of the legislative decision-making process. Scholars like Mamadouh and Raunio (2003), Kaeding (2004) and Whitaker (2005) basically argue that there is still a lot of improvement necessary in terms of this representativeness, while McElroy (2006) argues the opposite. A more nuanced argument is provided by Yordanova (2009: 275), who finds that the level of representativeness depends on the type of committees involved. Another theory that I test concerns the informalization of the legislative decision-making process of the EP. This informalization has been developing as so-called trilogues (which are part of the negotiations between the different legislative institutions of the EU) have become normalized. This development has placed more power into the hands of a smaller group of representatives (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). This calls for more research into the functioning of EP committee system and their general representativeness of the parliament as a whole. Furthermore, and besides the scientific relevance, this development places significant practical relevance on this study. In the light of the popular democratic legitimacy debate, how can it be justified that hardly any research has been performed on voting behaviour within one of the core democratic institutions of the EU? With regard to its highly committee-focused nature, adding the EP as a research case may thus be crucial for deepening our understanding of committee voting behaviour.

The main question that guides my research is: *To what extent are there differences between the voting behaviour of the European Parliament plenary and the European Parliament committees and between committees?* In this study, the differences in voting behaviour are expressed as the levels of voting consensus in legislative roll-call votes. In order to answer this research question, I perform a quantitative analysis of aggregated voting data.

¹ European Parliament. The Committees of the European Parliament. Extracted from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/committees>.

This implies that the results are not differentiated for by parliamentarians (MEP), European Party Groups (EPG) or nationalities. The voting data I analyse is composed of voting results on a large number of legislative issues from all 20 permanent EP committees. The time period concerns the eighth parliamentary term of the EP (2014-2019).

This study is structured as follows: first, I provide the theoretical substantiation for the hypotheses of this research. Secondly, I justify my case selection, after which I explain the methodology that guides the testing of the hypotheses. Then, I present the results of the data analysis. Lastly, I discuss the implications and limitations of the results and I provide a concluding answer to the research question, as well as suggestions for future research related to this topic.

Theory

The theoretical substantiation of this research is structured as follows. First of all, I emphasize the indispensability of committees in heterogeneous party systems (like the EP). What is the main function committees (aim to) fulfil and how is their work related to the plenary and, more generally, to the legislative success of the parliament as a whole? Following from this part, I present and substantiate the first hypothesis (H1). H1 addresses the extent to which the levels of voting consensus in the committees are similar to the level of consensus in the plenary. Secondly, what does the theory tell us about the differences between the committees of the EP in terms of their ideological composition and their representativeness of the plenary? The second hypothesis (H2) is aimed at testing whether there are significant differences between two main types of committees (information-driven committees and interest-driven committees) in terms of how similar their levels of voting consensus are compared to the plenary. Furthermore, and more specifically focused on the EP committee system, the normalization of so-called informal trilogues is a crucial development within the legislative decision-making process of the EP. This development may have altered the division of power within the committees, as it could have placed more power into the hands of a smaller group of people (the so-called relais actors). How could this specific development within the EP be interpreted with regard to the general theory about the functioning of committees? The third and last hypothesis (H3) is aimed at testing whether or not voting behaviour on legislation that is part of co-decision procedures is significantly less consensual than votes that are part of other types of legislative procedures.

Thus, in short, in the course of this theory section I gradually shift my focus from a broader level to a more narrow level. I start with the level of the committee system (H1), continue with the level of the types of specific committees (H2) and end with the procedural level on which committees operate (H3).

Committees as essential consensus builders

In political systems where parties are of heterogeneous nature and where party discipline is (initially) weak, the legislature is likely to become focused on its committees for building consensus between and within parties and, thereby, securing its legislative success (Mamadouh & Raunio, 2003: 334-335). This theoretical assumption is applicable to the EP, as it is characterized by an extremely heterogeneous party structure and, relatedly, a high significance of its parliamentary committees in executing the bulk of the legislative work and thereby securing its institutional success (Lord, 2018: 42). Individual MEPs sit in so-called EPGs, which are composed of MEPs from a large range of national parties that have their own ideologies. The ideological differences are sometimes pronounced by the fact that a national party's stance on a specific issue differs from the stance of the EPG, which leaves MEPs stranded between these two 'principals'. This primarily poses a threat to the unity of EPGs. Nevertheless, they generally manage to ultimately show high levels of cohesiveness (Hix et al., 2005: 232). The fact that EPGs ultimately vote cohesively conceals the fact that there may have been enormous disagreement in earlier stages of position taking within the EPGs (Costello & Thomson, 2016: 781). This is clearly reflected in the following example: "*The controversial nature of the draft legislative act was reflected by the fact that 1,600 (!) amendments were made in committee. Nevertheless, in its amended version the report was adopted by a large majority in committee.*" (Settembri & Neuhold, 2009: 143).

The main function of parliamentary committees concerns the bridging of ideological differences, as this is necessary for building consensus and reaching legislative majorities. Within the EP, the co-ordinators of the various EPGs are mostly responsible for bridging the ideological divisions and building sufficient consensus within and between the EPGs. The co-ordinators attempt to maximize the influence of their EPGs during votes and minimize the number of MEPs that vote against the rest of their group in the case of conflictual issues (Whitaker, 2005: 9). In this sense, Bowler and Farrell (1995: 220) rightfully argue that "*[l]egislative unity [...] is something that is more likely to have to be manufactured rather than simply relied upon to appear.*" In this sense, consensus refers to legislative acts being adopted by broad voting majorities in the committees and/or the plenary (Novak et al, 2020: 2). Before

the plenary casts its vote on a legislative issue, the responsible committee has to vote and agree on a draft report of the concerning issue. The cruciality of the committee work in building legislative consensus should not be underestimated, as the success of the legislative decision-making process of the EP as a whole highly depends on it, also in sustaining the relative power of the EP vis-à-vis the other EU legislative institutions (Bowler & Farrell, 1995: 221). The indispensability of the EP committees has become even more pronounced over time, as the EU in general has increasingly gained legislative power over a large number of policy areas. This development logically raises the stakes involved and amplifies the risk of conflict within the already ideologically heterogeneous EP (Yordanova, 2009; Settembri & Neuhold, 2009).

Hypothesis I

Settembri and Neuhold (2009: 131-132) raise the importance of clarifying how voting behaviour may generally differ between committees and the plenary. When I take the indispensability of committees in shaping the parliamentary activity and the success of the European Parliament into account, together with the great focus of committees on bridging divisions and building consensus, I argue that committees are in nature more consensus-focused than the plenary. Without the committees, the plenary is ultimately likely to be left with unresolved conflicts. Following this line of arguing, I formulate the following hypothesis (H1): *Voting behaviour in the EP committees is generally more consensual than voting behaviour in the EP plenary.* I now substantiate this expectation.

As I describe above, parliamentary committees are essential for building the necessary consensus in a (highly) heterogeneous party system. By bridging the ideological divisions both within and between EPGs, broad and stable issue-by-issue majorities can be secured. Ideally, the voting lines of the plenary should be similar to the voting behaviour of the committees on the related legislative issues, as the existing ideological divisions have been bridged by the committees. This would contribute to a successful legislative process. However, as building consensus is the main task of committees, committees are likely to be more consensus-focused than the plenary. First of all, the voting records of the plenary may be more scrutinized than those of the committees, increasingly leading MEPs to cast rebellious votes in the plenary (as a signal to their national constituency, for example). Secondly, as committees numerically form only a tiny representation of the plenary, it is also likely that the divisions are more easily bridged in the (smaller) committee compared to a (large) plenary. Moreover, due to the small size of the committee vis-à-vis the plenary, it is also likely that not every ideological position of all separate MEPs is accounted for. This leaves the possibility of a relatively higher

percentage of MEPs not voting in line with the committee. Overall, these aspects may ultimately lead committees to vote more consensually than the plenary.

On the contrary, in a possible alternative situation, plenary MEPs vote along with the voting behaviour of their committee colleagues. In this case, the committees do not vote significantly more consensually than the EP plenary. It is dependent on the quality of the committees in manufacturing this legislative unity whether or not the plenary follows the committee mandate along similar voting lines. Hypothetically, when committees fulfil their consensus-building task perfectly the voting consensus levels of the committees and the plenary should not differ significantly.

Approaches to committee-functioning

In order for the plenary to reach voting consensus levels that are similar to the responsible committees, the parliamentary committees should ideally be ideological microcosms of the entire parliament. An ideologically representative committee “[...] allows non-committee members to trust the decisions of party colleagues and helps to ensure consistency in party policy across different issues [...].” (Whitaker, 2005: 7). In the case of ideologically unrepresentative committees, committees may not always reflect the voting intentions of the plenary MEPs and thereby they may not always act in the best interest of the plenary. Unrepresentative committees are composed of MEPs that do not reflect the median voter of the plenary (or of the various EPGs). This is likely to result in different levels of voting consensus between the responsible committee(s) and the plenary. This aspect of committee composition has also been addressed in the literature, which has provided two main approaches: a distributive approach and an informational approach (among others Strøm, 1998; Yordanova, 2009; and Whitaker, 2019).

In the distributive approach, individual MEPs decide which committee(s) they join. MEPs self-select committees in order to gain significant influence over a policy area (McElroy, 2006: 9). Therefore, committees would be dominated by so-called ‘high demanders’ who aim to generate constituency-specific benefits. In this case, the most important constituency for these MEPs are their national parties, on which MEPs are reliant for (re-) selection for elections (Yordanova, 2009: 262). These high demanders are also referred to as policy outliers, as their policy stances do not always reflect the stance of the median voter of their EPGs. Following the logic of this approach, it is likely that parliamentary committees are filled with policy outliers who are less likely to represent the party group median on the legislative issues at stake

(Whitaker, 2019: 164; McElroy, 2006: 10). This is likely to result in (significantly) different voting behaviour between the committees and the plenary.

The informational perspective argues that committees mainly serve the purpose of channelling expertise and thereby reduce the chances of legislators facing unforeseen consequences of certain policy options. From this perspective, and contrary to the distributive approach, committee members are so-called ‘low demanders’. Relatedly, Kaeding (2004: 358) argues that committees are composed of specialists with heterogeneous preferences who are representing both sides of the policy spectrum within their respective EPG, but who are not biased toward either high or low demanders. This results in a balanced composition of the committees in terms of policy stances. In case of this approach, committees are likely to be representative of the preferences of the plenary as a whole. This would ensure the latter to trust the work and advice of the committees to a higher extent (McElroy, 2006: 10). This is likely to result in rather similar voting behaviour between the committees and the plenary.

More specifically focused on this study, to what extent does the composition of the committee system of the EP fit (either of) these approaches? Based on Whitaker (2005) and in line with the committee-functioning approaches, Yordanova (2009: 256) provides a typology of EP committees in which three types of committees in the EP are being distinguished. This implies that neither the distributive approach nor the informational approach are exclusively applicable to the entire EP committee system. First of all, there are information-driven committees that predominantly produce regulatory output and which have mainly uniform externalities. Secondly, there are interest-driven committees that mostly produce distributive output “*affecting specific constituencies or organized homogeneous interest groups*” (2009: 256). Thirdly, Yordanova (2009) identifies mixed committees. Additionally, a distinction has been made that is based on the varying levels of legislative power of the different committees. The relative power of the committees is determined based on the number of co-decision reports committees draft (where a higher number indicates more relative power).

Hypothesis II

For the first hypothesis (H1), I focus on the committee system in general. However, as I describe above, some committees are likely to be better ideological representations (in terms of their voting behaviour) of the plenary than others. Therefore and in order to draw meaningful conclusions about the issue of voting consensus, I state the following hypothesis, in which I focus on this differentiation (H2): *The level of voting consensus in the EP plenary is more*

similar to the level of voting consensus in information-driven committees than in interest-driven committees.

Following the informational approach, the explanatory mechanism that is plausibly underlying this hypothesis is that information-driven committees are more likely to be composed of MEPs that are representative of the (heterogeneous) ideological composition of the plenary. They are composed of policy specialists that do not favour either side of the policy spectrum. Thereby these committees form a balanced representation of the entire plenary, which is likely to result in these committees earning the trust from their EPGs. This implies the plenary MEPs to generally follow their committee representatives in terms of their voting behaviour, resulting in more similar voting consensus levels between this type of committees and the plenary as a whole.

On the other hand, interest-driven committees are more likely to be composed of 'high demanders' that do not represent the ideological composition of the plenary accurately. The interests of the MEPs in this type of committees may be more focused on securing targeted legislative benefits for their constituency, for example their national party or their country in general. When committees are mostly filled with this type of constituency-focused MEPs, the voting intentions of the committees are not likely to be similar to the voting intentions of the plenary; the general interests of the entire plenary do not match the specific interests of the committees. In other words, the overall preference of the median plenary MEP is not well-reflected in the committee votes, which consequently results in different voting consensus levels between these two arenas.

In a possible alternative situation, the voting consensus levels of one type of committees is not any more or less similar to the plenary than the other type of committees. This would imply that there may be other (unknown) factors at work that account for this result.

Informalization of the EP legislative decision-making process

Another important dimension of the legislative decision-making process in the EP that has increasingly come into play is the normalization of so-called 'informal trilogues'. For that reason, it is crucial to take this development into account when explaining the voting behaviour of the EP committees. Trilogues are the informal inter-institutional meetings between representatives of the EP, the Council and the Commission (Delreux and Laloux, 2018: 301). These trilogues have even become the standard operating procedure for inter-institutional legislative decision-making, which has enabled the institutions to agree on issues earlier in the process (Brandsma, 2015: 300; Laloux, 2019: 443).

However, while this development may be positive for the legislative effectiveness of the EU as a whole, there are concerns that it leads to a strong decline in democratic legitimacy and a disproportional increase of power for a small group: the so-called ‘relais actors’. These relais actors are mostly the rapporteurs of the committees. This procedural change namely relocates the decision-making behind closed doors: “*With the shift of political conflict from plenary to committees and now to shadow meetings, the latter have become de facto decision-making bodies.*” (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019: 303). Arguing from the so-called relais actor thesis, the rapporteurs have thereby been granted access to a position in which they have many opportunities for strategic behaviour, including the control over information circulation. Thereby they are able to negatively impact the decision-making (Brandsma, 2015: 304; 2018: 1466; Laloux, 2019: 449). Rapporteurs do not always report back to their committees (adequately) (Brandsma, 2019: 1464), as there is a trade-off between transparency (and legitimacy) and a smooth functioning of the process. This is arguably the reason why the informal trilogues sometimes lead to deals so quickly that the legislative bodies are incapable of checking whether these deals are an accurate representation of their actual (majority) opinion (Brandsma, 2015: 303). In this case, more transparency toward their fellow committee-members could actually lead to more difficulties for the rapporteurs in reaching a compromise with the other institutions.

Nevertheless, there is still a clear principal-agent relationship that exists between the rapporteur and the committees. This requires the rapporteur to build enough intra-institutional support in order to start the inter-institutional negotiations in the first place. The success of the inter-institutional decision-making process thereby depends on to what extent the rapporteur has been granted sufficient support from their committee members and the EP plenary (Brandsma, 2015: 301). The rapporteur is responsible for resolving crucial divisions and thereby building enough consensus to secure a favourable outcome. Hereby, the rapporteurs are constrained in their inter-institutional actions by an ex-ante (intra-institutional) mandate (Delreux & Laloux, 2018: 304).

Hypothesis III

I hypothesize the following (and last) hypothesis (H3): *The levels of consensus are significantly lower for votes on co-decision procedures than for other types of votes.* As rapporteurs in informal trilogues are faced with a double constraint (inter-institutionally and intra-institutionally), they aim for a workable (sufficient) level of consensus within their committees, rather than as much consensus as possible. Building as much consensus as possible would make

it harder for the rapporteur to reach an inter-institutional compromise. In short, the consensual function of the committees may have become (partially) undermined by the introduction and normalization of the informal trilogues. This is likely to result in generally lower consensus levels for votes that are part of co-decision procedures (which are led by informal trilogues) than for votes that are part of other types of legislative procedures (that do not take part in informal trilogues). The latter type of votes is not doubly constrained, as the committee rapporteurs do not have to take the position of the Commission into account while working to build consensus. In this case, the rapporteurs are arguably more focused on building committee majorities that are as broad as possible. This should (generally) lead to higher consensus levels on votes that do not concern co-decision procedures.

In the alternative situation, there are no significant differences in terms of voting consensus levels between these procedures. This would imply that the rapporteurs faithfully stick to the core function of their committees of building optimal legislative majorities, irrespective of whether there are any other extra-parliamentary actors involved.

Case selection

This research focuses on examining voting behaviour within the European Parliament, and more specifically, aimed at the voting behaviour of the EP committees. In this study, I express the concept of voting behaviour as voting consensus. As I describe extensively in the theory section, it is within the committees where the crucial task of consensus building between and within the EPGs takes place. This may sometimes be highly complicated due to the different interests, which may create ideological conflicts. Firstly, and related to the first hypothesis (H1), I aim to compare the voting behaviour of the EP committees with the voting behaviour of the EP plenary. By comparing the consensus levels of the committees and the plenary on related votes, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of how these two institutions interact with one another in terms of their voting behaviour, and to what extent they can be compared on this matter. Are EP committees voting more consensually than the EP plenary on related matters? Or do committees perform their task of consensus-building to such an extent that the plenary votes in roughly the same consensual level? And, for example, related to the second hypothesis (H2), is there any variation within this relationship that can be accounted for by differentiating between several types of committees? These are interesting questions also according to several scholars, like Settembri and Neuhold (2009) and Yordanova (2009). As I argue in the introduction of this research, studying the EP as my case of research may be crucial in

significantly moving forward theory testing on and the understanding of the matter of committee voting behaviour. But why is the EP as a research case of such importance?

The EP is arguably one of the most committee-focused parliaments around the globe, as the vast bulk of the work within the EP is executed by its committees (Whitaker, 2001: 64). The fact that the EP is aimed at addressing (sometimes far-reaching) transnational issues accounts for a high level of complexity of the issues that are at stake within the EP. Moreover, despite its young age, the EP has quickly become one of the most powerful institutions within the EU (Hix, 2002: 688). Generally, in order for a parliament to reduce the level of information asymmetry and thereby keep the executive branch in check, the accumulation of information and expertise is highly significant. In this case, this calls for a strong, so-called *working* EP that is essential in controlling the executive successfully (Lord, 2018: 35-36). The EP is argued to be near the very end of the so-called talking – working continuum on which parliaments can be scaled, which accounts for the importance to examine it more extensively as a research case (Lord, 2018: 42). Related to this, and with regard to the external validity of this research, the results of this research for the EP are likely to speak to similar mechanisms for other countries that are on also near the (working) extreme on the spectrum, for example Germany and the Nordic countries.

Methods

Data collection

In order to test my hypotheses and formulate an answer to the research question, I perform a quantitative analysis on voting record data from the parliamentary committees and the plenary of the EP. I focus on the eighth parliamentary term of the EP, which covers legislative voting records from July 2014 until April 2019. I analyse aggregated voting record data on a large number of legislative issues from the 20 permanent committees of the EP. According to information from the EP², a committee consists of between 25 and 81 MEPs and (ideally) reflects the political make-up of the plenary.

However, this specific committee voting record data has not been made available to the scholarly community. A possible explanation for this is the relatively recent procedural rule change in 2014, which required all future final committee votes on resolutions and legislations to be taken by roll-call. A roll-call voting system records the names of the MEPs that voted, to

² European Parliament. The Committees of the European Parliament. Extracted from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/committees>.

which EPGs the MEPs belong, and how they voted.³ This development addresses a concern by Whitaker (2005), as most votes did not concern roll-call votes prior to this change. This implies that conclusions about the voting behaviour of MEPs were subject to non-generalizability before, as these were only based on this type of votes. With this development, the issue of non-generalizability of research on this topic could be tackled. However, ever since the introduction of this system, no serious attempt appears to have been made to systematically collect all of the voting data of the EP committees in one place. The collection of this data is indispensable in order to perform statistical analyses on this topic, and thereby respond to calls made by scholars like Settembri and Neuhold (2009) and Yordanova (2009) to conduct research on this topic. Moreover, the availability of structurally collected voting record data of the EP plenary is rather limited as well. Vote Watch Europe⁴ is one of the prime organizations that collects all types of voting data on the EP plenary, but most of their relevant data has been put behind a paywall.

Nevertheless, as committee voting record data has not been collected in a structured way in one place, this leaves a crucial (data) gap in this field of research. For that exact reason, I aim fill (part of) this gap by manually collecting voting record data from both the committees and the plenary of the EP, which has not been done (publicly) prior to this research. I collect aggregated voting data, based on which I calculate the consensus levels per legislative issue. This implies that I leave individual MEP voting data or specific EPG voting data out of the analysis. Instead, I focus on the numerical distribution of MEPs that voted ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ on a certain legislative issue, and how many MEPs decided to abstain from voting on that issue. According to Willumsen and Öhberg (2013: 11), the main difference between a ‘No’ vote and abstaining from voting is that, while both could be costly to the party and both are active decisions, the cost of the latter is smaller than the former. This arguably makes it more acceptable for MEPs to rebel against their EPG by abstaining from voting than by voting against the party line.

The specific aim of my data collection is to directly compare the varying levels of consensus that exist within the between the different committees and between the committees and the plenary of the EP. Using this data, and in line with the three hypotheses, I aim to generate results that allow me to draw conclusions about voting behaviour on three different levels: inter-institutional level (between the committees and the plenary), intra-institutional

³ European Parliament (2014, February 26). To boost transparency, roll-call votes in committee to show how MEPs vote. Extracted from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20140221IPR36643/to-boost-transparency-roll-call-votes-in-committee-to-show-how-meps-vote>.

⁴ Vote Watch Europe. Extracted from: <https://www.votewatch.eu/>.

level (between different types of committees) and on a procedural level (the type of procedure to which votes are related).

Data operationalization and method

In order to calculate the consensus (or agreement) levels on the legislative votes, I use the group cohesion measure from Hix et al. (2005: 215-216). The level of voting consensus concerns the dependent variable of this study. The Agreement Level (AL) is a number between zero (0) and one (1), where a higher number indicates a higher level of agreement or consensus within the group. A level of zero implies that the number of MEPs are all equally divided between the voting options, which are ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Abstain’ in the case of the European Parliament. An agreement level of one implies that all members of the group concerned vote together. While the measure by Hix et al. (2005) takes the number of abstentions into account, other similar measures do not (like the measure by Brams and O’Leary (1970)). This is the main reason to use the measure by Hix et al. (2005) over other measures. I use the following formula:

$$AL_i = \max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\} - \frac{1}{2}[(Y_i + N_i + A_i) - \max\{Y_i, N_i, A_i\}] / (Y_i + N_i + A_i)$$

Consequently, I perform several t-tests and (for more robustness) various OLS-regression analyses in order to draw conclusions on the possible variations within the data, and specifically to see whether and for what factors the average levels of voting consensus between the various committees and between the plenary and the committees differ. My data collection consists of votes on 2709 legislative issues (N), which have been cast in meetings of the 20 permanent committees of the EP. This comes down to an average of roughly 145 votes per committee. It is important to note that not every legislative issue the committees have voted on has (yet) been voted on by the plenary. However, this is the case for only a small number of issues.

Following from the theory section and related to the hypotheses, I identify the following independent variables, respectively: the type of institution that votes on the issues (the plenary or the committee), the type of committee (interest-driven (1) or information-driven committees (2)) and the type of procedure involved (whether the legislative issue is part of a co-decision procedure (1) or not (2)).

Furthermore, I control for multiple variables. First of all, I control for the votes on these issues by dividing them in two separate categories: so-called ‘opinion votes’ (1) and ‘responsible votes’ (2). A committee may not always be the responsible committee for drafting the report on a legislative issue, but they may still carry out a vote in order to give their opinion

to the responsible committee. Consequently, I link every responsible vote to the vote on that same issue in the plenary. I do not do this for the opinion votes, as I am only interested in to what extent the plenary votes in a similar way to the responsible committee. With regard to the consensus levels in these votes, I expect that committees which are responsible for a report generally aim for higher levels of consensus than the committees which are giving their opinions on a legislative matter. Secondly, the size of the committees is another variable I control for. I expect that smaller committees are better able to bridge the ideological divisions than the larger committees, arguing from the assumption that there are fewer ideological positions to take into account when there are fewer MEPs. I make a distinction between small(er) (1) and large(r) (2) committees, in which committees with more than 53 committee members concern the large(r) committees. Thirdly and lastly, I control for the relative power of the concerning committees: less powerful (1) and more powerful (2). As I state earlier, I hereby follow the typology of Yordanova (2009: 256). In the table below (Table 1), I present a categorization of every permanent committee of the EP, which also includes the type of the committees:

Table 1. Categorization of the 20 permanent committees of the European Parliament

Committee	Committee (full name)	Relative power	Relative size	Committee type
AFCO	Constitutional Affairs	Less powerful	Small	Information-driven
AFET	Foreign Affairs	Less powerful	Large	Information-driven
AGRI	Agriculture and Rural Development	Less powerful	Small	Interest-driven
BUDG	Budgets	More powerful	Small	Information-driven
CONT	Budgetary Control	Less powerful	Small	Information-driven
CULT	Culture and Education	More powerful	Small	Mixed
DEVE	Development	Less powerful	Small	Information-driven
ECON	Economic and Monetary Affairs	More powerful	Large	Mixed
EMPL	Employment and Social Affairs	More powerful	Large	Interest-driven
ENVI	Environment, Public Health and Food Safety	More powerful	Large	Mixed
FEMM	Women's Rights and Gender Equality	Less powerful	Small	Mixed
IMCO	Internal Market and Consumer Protection	More powerful	Small	Information-driven
INTA	International Trade	Less powerful	Small	Information-driven
ITRE	Industry, Research and Energy	More powerful	Large	Mixed
JURI	Legal Affairs	More powerful	Small	Information-driven
LIBE	Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs	More powerful	Large	Mixed
PECH	Fisheries	Less powerful	Small	Interest-driven
PETI	Petitions	Less powerful	Small	Information-driven
REGI	Regional Development	Less powerful	Small	Interest-driven
TRAN	Transport and Tourism	More powerful	Small	Information-driven

Results

In this section, I present the results of the statistical analyses. I apply control variables in order to prevent omitted variable bias. First, I provide the descriptive statistical results of the average voting consensus levels per committee, as well as the related plenary voting consensus levels

(in Table 2). Secondly, I provide the results of the t-tests, as related to the hypotheses (Table 3 up to and including Table 9). Lastly, I perform multiple OLS-regression analyses (Table 9).

Table 2. Average voting consensus levels per committee and in relation to the plenary

Committee	Average consensus level per committee – all votes (N)	Average consensus levels per committee – responsible votes (N)	Average consensus levels in plenary votes (N)
AFCO	0.719*** (71)	0.761*** (27)	0.589 (24)
AFET	0.692*** (152)	0.709*** (94)	0.617 (84)
AGRI	0.702 (86)	0.699 (21)	0.646 (19)
BUDG	0.764 (158)	0.798** (107)	0.752 (107)
CONT	0.766*** (175)	0.748 (127)	0.726 (127)
CULT	0.772** (116)	0.815*** (32)	0.718 (31)
DEVE	0.752*** (127)	0.743*** (31)	0.623 (29)
ECON	0.692 (156)	0.698 (113)	0.666 (107)
EMPL	0.727* (219)	0.752** (66)	0.684 (65)
ENVI	0.798 (167)	0.822* (72)	0.768 (67)
FEMM	0.663*** (101)	0.640*** (27)	0.506 (26)
IMCO	0.765 (149)	0.801 (76)	0.779 (70)
INTA	0.769* (154)	0.785** (86)	0.735 (84)
ITRE	0.740 (150)	0.760* (86)	0.716 (81)
JURI	0.836 (160)	0.851** (106)	0.806 (87)
LIBE	0.792*** (154)	0.802*** (87)	0.726 (81)
PECH	0.784 (112)	0.794 (81)	0.792 (78)
PETI	0.722** (34)	0.655 (10)	0.542 (8)
REGI	0.796*** (115)	0.776*** (48)	0.696 (43)
TRAN	0.800* (153)	0.806 (78)	0.758 (73)

Note: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1 – significance of the average consensus levels as related to the average consensus levels of the plenary.

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistical results (Table 2) include an overview of the consensus levels for all votes (both opinion and responsible votes), the consensus levels for the responsible votes only, and the consensus levels on the related plenary votes. The stars indicate whether the voting

consensus levels of the committees differ significantly from the related plenary voting consensus levels.

The results show that almost all committees show higher levels of voting consensus than the plenary, with the exception of the PECH committee and the IMCO committee. However, by controlling for the type of vote (i.e. excluding the opinion votes), these two committees also show higher voting consensus levels than the plenary does on the related votes. Altogether, the results show that the average voting consensus levels for responsible committee votes are all higher than the average plenary consensus level (with thirteen out of 20 being (highly) significant). For some committees the results are stronger than for other committees. For example, the results for the PETI and AGRI committees are not significant, which is most likely due to the low number of (responsible) votes (N).

T-tests: results

Secondly, I present the results of the t-tests that are related to the main hypotheses of this research. The results of the t-test for the variables that are related to the first hypothesis (H1) show the following (Table 3):

Table 3. T-test committee – plenary, all votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 3997
Committee	0.756	0.003	t = 6.744
Plenary	0.712	0.004	p-value < 0.001

The results in Table 3 show a significant difference between the committees (0.756) and the plenary (0.712) in terms of their voting consensus levels. However, this test takes into account all types of votes cast, which means that opinion votes are included as well as responsible votes. By excluding the opinion votes (of the committees), and thereby exclusively focusing on the responsible votes, the results of the committee votes are better comparable to the voting behaviour of the plenary. The results of the t-test show the following (Table 4):

Table 4. T-test committee – plenary, responsible votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 2660
Committee	0.772	0.005	t = 8.566
Plenary	0.718	0.004	p-value < 0.001

After controlling for the type of vote, the results in Table 4 still show a significant difference between the committees (0.772) and the plenary (0.718) in terms of their voting consensus level.

Secondly, I perform t-tests that are related to the variables from the second hypothesis (H2). First of all, I perform a t-test in which I compare the means of the voting consensus levels of the information-driven committees with the interest-driven committees. I control for the type of vote. The results show the following for the voting consensus levels (on responsible votes) between these two types of committees (Table 5):

Table 5. T-test information-driven committees – interest-driven committees, responsible votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 954
Information-driven	0.780	0.006	t = -0.986
Interest-driven	0.768	0.011	p-value = 0.324

The results in Table 5 show that the information-driven committees (0.780) score higher than the interest-driven committees (0.768) in terms of their average voting consensus levels, but that this difference is far from being significant.

Then, I compare the means of the two committee types (separately) with the related plenary voting consensus levels (Table 6). The results for the comparison of the information-driven committees with the plenary show the following results:

Table 6. T-test information-driven committees – plenary, responsible votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 691
Information-driven	0.778	0.006	t = 9.860
Plenary	0.726	0.007	p-value < 0.001

The results in Table 6 show that the information-driven committees (0.778) are significantly more consensual in terms of their voting behaviour than the plenary (0.726). The difference in the mean consensus levels of the information-driven committees between Table 5 (0.780) and 6 (0.778) arises because the former includes votes that the plenary has not (yet) voted on.

By comparing the voting consensus levels of the interest-driven committees with the voting consensus levels of the plenary, the results show the following (Table 7):

Table 7. T-test interest-driven committees – plenary, responsible votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 204
Interest-driven	0.772	0.006	t = 5.694
Plenary	0.725	0.007	p-value < 0.001

The results in Table 7 show that the interest-driven committees (0.772) also show a significantly higher consensus level than the plenary (0.725) on related legislative votes.

Thirdly, the results of the t-test for that are related to the variables from the third hypothesis (H3) show the following (Table 8):

Table 8. T-test co-decision procedural votes – other votes, all votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 2707
Co-decision procedure	0.740	0.007	t = 3.306
Other procedures	0.764	0.004	p-value < 0.001

The results in Table 8 show that, when looking at all votes (both opinion and responsible votes), the voting results on issues that are part of co-decision procedures (0.740) are significantly more consensual than votes that are not part of these procedures (0.764).

However, when controlling for the type of vote, and thereby solely focusing on the responsible votes, the results of the t-test show the following (Table 9):

Table 9. T-test co-decision procedural votes – other votes, responsible votes

Voting consensus level	Mean	Standard Error	df = 1370
Co-decision procedure	0.773	0.176	t = -0.152
Other procedures	0.771	0.162	p-value = 0.879

The results in Table 9 show a different result than the results in Table 8. In terms of voting consensus levels, the difference between votes that are part of a co-decision procedure (0.773) and votes that are not (0.771) is not significant.

OLS-regression analyses: results

I now present the results of the OLS-regression analyses, in which I apply all important factors that I lay out in previous sections. Before proceeding to the results, I first introduce the various

models that constitute Table 10. Model 1 is constituted of all variables except the size of the committees, as the dependent variable consists of votes that are from both the plenary and the committees. The size of the committees only concerns the votes of the latter, which is why I excluded this factor from Model 1. The second model (Model 2) solely concerns the extent to which the variation within the consensus levels of all votes can be explained by the type of institution, respectively the parliamentary committees (1) and the plenary (2). In Model 3, the dependent variable is the average consensus level of (solely) the committee votes, as all of the factors (with the exception of ‘Institution’) mainly concern the committee system and not the plenary. The dependent variable of Model 4, as opposed to Model 3, concerns solely the responsible committee votes (and thereby excludes the opinion votes). Models 1 and 2 concern H1, while Models 3 and 4 concern H2 and H3. The results of the different models are shown in the table below (Table 10):

Table 10. OLS-regression models, including all variables

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Constant)	0.752*** (.016)	0.795*** (.008)	0.730*** (.006)	0.759*** (.020)
Institution: plenary or committee	-0.054*** (.006)	-0.038*** (.006)		
Committee type: interest or information	0.005 (.004)		0.003 (.005)	0.003 (.006)
Procedure type: co-decision or other	-0.008 (.006)		-0.031*** (.007)	-0.011 (.010)
Power: less or more powerful	0.056*** (.006)		0.048*** (.005)	0.062*** (.010)
Vote type: opinion or responsible	0.032*** (.006)		0.033*** (.007)	
Committee size: small(er) or large(r)			-0.047*** (.008)	-0.055*** (.010)
N	3999	3999	2709	1372
R-squared	0.046	0.012	0.033	0.036
Adj. R-squared	0.045	0.012	0.032	0.033

Note: OLS linear regression coefficients (SPSS output) with standard errors in between brackets.

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

The regression analyses indicate the following. The results of Model 1 indicate that the type of institution, the relative power of the committee and the type of vote influence the dependent variable significantly; the level of consensus is significantly higher for committee votes, votes that concern issues from more powerful committees, and responsible votes. The results for the second model (Model 2) show that the independent variable (for the type of institution) significantly influences the level of consensus (the dependent variable) that is reached during the votes level, as the plenary generally shows a lower average consensus level than the committees. For Model 3, the results show that all of the included factors, with the exception of the type of committee, are significant explanatory factors for the levels of consensus committees reach during votes. The level of committee voting consensus is higher for votes that concern co-decision procedures, for more powerful committees, responsible votes, and in smaller committees. In Model 4, of all factors included, only the size of the committee and their relative power are found to be significant explanatory factors for the consensus levels. More powerful and smaller committees generally show higher voting consensus levels. Altogether, looking at the R-squared values, all four models very minimally explain the variation within the dependent variables. Respectively, the models account for 4.5%, 1.2%, 3.2% and 3.3% of the variation within the dependent variables concerned.

Hypotheses testing

Based on the results of the statistical analyses, I now draw my conclusions about the various hypotheses.

The first hypothesis (H1) is related to whether committees may indeed, as the literature leads me to suggest, be more focused on building broad legislative majorities that lead to higher average levels of voting consensus than the plenary. The first hypothesis is the following: *Voting behaviour in the EP committees is generally more consensual than voting behaviour in the EP plenary.* In line with my expectations, the results show that the committees indeed appear to aim for more voting consensus as they do so successfully. This especially appears to be the case for votes in which committees are responsible for the drafting of the legislative report. Furthermore, every committee appears to be more consensual than the plenary on related legislative issues (as Table 2 shows), although the results for some committees are significantly weaker than for other committees. Altogether, I confirm the first hypothesis (H1).

The second hypothesis (H2) concerns the following one: *The level of consensus in the EP plenary is more similar to the level of consensus in information-driven committees than in interest-driven committees.* First of all, the results of the t-tests and the OLS-regressions show

that the levels of voting consensus between the interest-driven committees and the information-driven committees do not differ significantly. Moreover, both committees appear to be significantly more consensual in terms of their voting behaviour than the plenary on related issues. Based on these results, the second hypothesis (H2) should be rejected, as the information-driven committees do not appear to be more similar to the plenary in terms of consensus than the interest-driven committees.

The third hypothesis (H3) I pose relates to the type of procedure or, more specifically, whether the (supposed) involvement of early agreements in the co-decision procedure leads to lower levels of consensus: *The levels of consensus are significantly lower for votes on co-decision procedures than for other types of votes.* Although the results indicate that committee voting behaviour (including both opinion and responsible votes) as part of co-decision procedures is significantly less consensual than votes which are part of other legislative procedures, the results of the t-tests and the OLS-regressions nevertheless show that the difference between the types of procedure do not unanimously lead to lower levels of consensus in the responsible committee votes. Based on these results, I should reject the third hypothesis (H3).

Discussion and conclusion

Summarily, the results of the quantitative analyses show important insights with regard to the hypotheses and the research question of this study (*To what extent are there differences between the voting behaviour of the European Parliament plenary and the European Parliament committees and between committees?*). In line with my expectations, the results almost unanimously show that the levels of voting consensus in the committees of the European Parliament are higher than in the plenary. Moreover, as shown in Table 10, committee voting consensus levels are significantly higher on votes for which committees are responsible for drafting the legislative report, in committees that are relatively small(er) and in committees that have jurisdiction over ‘powerful’ policy areas. Furthermore, and opposed to what the literature led me to expect, whether the legislative issue is part of a co-decision procedure or not and whether the responsible committee is more information-driven or interest-driven appear to be rather negligible factors in this research. Altogether, the results lead me to accept the first hypothesis (H1) and to reject the latter two (H2 and H3). These findings are important additions to the literature.

With regard to the first hypothesis (H1), the theory about parliamentary committees yet implies that the main function of committees is to reach consensus, by bridging ideological divisions and thereby reaching broad and stable majorities (and ideally also within the plenary). The results reflect that, in nature, the committees indeed appear to be more consensus-focused than the plenary. Moreover, as I state in the theory section, the numerical size of committees may generally reinforce the success of committees in reaching consensus as well, as there are literally fewer ideological positions to be bridged in the committees than in the plenary. Furthermore, the more public visibility of the plenary may hinder the consensus-building, as opposed to the committees. These are important factors to account for in future research.

For the second hypothesis (H2), and contrary to what the theory led me to expect, the information-driven committees do not appear to be distinctly more similar of the plenary in terms of voting behaviour than the interest-driven committees. Moreover, by directly comparing the voting consensus levels of these two types of committees, the results show that even these do not differ significantly. This appears to be the same when controlling for the relative power of the committees. This result is contrary to my expectations, as I expected the more ‘policy-outlying’ interest-driven committees to be less similar/representative of the plenary than the ‘ideologically balanced’ information-driven committees.

For the third hypothesis (H3), the results show that the involvement of opinion votes in the analyses leads committee voting on co-decision procedural issues to be significantly more consensual than committee voting as part of other legislative procedures. However, when solely involving responsible committee votes, the results of the t-tests and the OLS-regressions show that there is basically no difference in terms of consensus. In this study and in contrast to the theory, I am not able to show that committee voting that (supposedly) involves early agreements are significantly less consensual. Nevertheless, the involvement of this factor in this study provides another important step towards uncovering the exact influence of the informal trilogues on the legislative process in the EP.

This study is limited by factors like time and lack of other resources. The fact that the voting data had to be collected manually has (for now) restricted me in collecting additional specific data, like EPG or MEP voting data. Another example is that the judging of the results with regard to H3 rests on the assumption that the co-decision procedures generally all involve early agreements. I have not been able to control for this, as the structured available data to do so is not accessible, which could account for possible small inaccuracies in the results. For this reason, further in-depth research on this particular aspect would provide a clearer picture, for example by excluding the co-decision procedures that do not involve early agreements.

This study contributes significantly to filling existing data and literature gaps on the topic of committee voting behaviour in the European Parliament. Moreover, this study lays a significant part of the foundation on which political science scholars can further build on in future research. Besides the scientific relevance of this study, research into the topic of committee voting behaviour provides information on how our elected officials act on legislative issues which are enacted in the European Parliament and which influence our daily lives. This importance is reinforced by the fact that it is the committee system where the key legislative work is being executed, part of this being the bridging of ideological divisions and thereby reaching necessary legislative majorities.

That brings me to suggesting options for future research that foresee in this demand. First of all, in the light of the results surrounding H1, I would recommend scholars to focus more specifically on committee voting behaviour on the level of EPGs. Doing this would provide a more complete picture of the functioning of committees and the relationship of the committee system vis-à-vis the plenary of the European Parliament. One could differentiate between different EPGs and different policy areas, leading to providing answers to questions like: which EPGs are generally more consensual in the committees than in the plenary? Related to the theoretical concept of issue saliency, does this differ significantly for EPGs between policy areas? What other factors account for this possible variation? Secondly, with regard to (the rejection of) the second hypothesis (H2), it would be scientifically valuable to conduct a qualitative research that focuses on the ideological composition of both the information-driven and interest-driven EP committees. One could do this by looking at the (professional) backgrounds and the ideological stances of the MEPs of which the committees are composed. How great are the differences in terms of the composition of these two types of committees? And if there are significant differences between these committees, how can the rejection of the second hypothesis (H2) of this research be explained? This would be a reassessment of the current literature surrounding the composition of the EP committees. Furthermore, this research should not merely be used as reference for further research on the EP, but also as input for other (national) working parliaments, like in the Nordic countries or Germany. It would be fruitful to test the generalizability of the results, to see if the results of this study generally hold within those committee systems.

Altogether, the first bricks of an important research avenue have been laid and, luckily for ambitious scholars in this field of research, many interesting and significant questions remain.

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