

Divided government European-style? Electoral and mechanical causes of European Parliament and Council divisions

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**Paper to be presented at the EUSA Tenth Biennial International Conference
Montreal, Canada, 17–19 May 2007**

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A revised version of this paper with the title “Electoral and mechanical causes of divided government in the European Union” is forthcoming in *Comparative Political Studies*.

I. Introduction

There are two channels of democratic legitimacy and accountability in the European Union – a direct and an indirect one. In elections to the European Parliament (EP), EU citizens can decide directly upon the complexion of the EP by sending their delegates ‘to Brussels’ or, for that matter, ‘to Strasbourg’. In national elections, voters in EU member states elect national governments that then represent them in the Council of Ministers and in the European Council (cf. Hix 2005: 5). We know from a rich literature on European elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Eijk and Franklin 1996; Marsh 1998) that the outcomes of European elections differ systematically from those of national elections. Parties in government at the national level tend to systematically lose shares of the vote in the elections to the European Parliament, whereas opposition parties, small parties and ideologically more extreme parties tend to gain greater shares of the vote than in the previous national contest. One prominent explanation for this pattern is that voters perceive this kind of election to be of only secondary importance. For various reasons, voters in these ‘second order elections’ tend to vote more often in favor of opposition or protest parties or abstain from voting altogether, with the effect that parties in government systematically lose vote shares compared to their electoral performance at the last national election.

One important consequence within the European context is that we should expect systematic differences in the political partisan centers of gravity of the Council and the European Parliament, which might be even comparable to the frequent situations of divided government between Congress and President produced by the US mid-term cycle effect or to the diverging majorities between Bundestag and the second chamber, the *Bundesrat*, in Germany. This comparison, at least, has been frequently invoked. Already in 1997 one of the authors of the influential ‘second order election’ thesis pointed to one of its “less often ... discussed” implications:

“Second Order Elections have a practically inevitable structural effect on composite political systems with two different institutions which participate in legislation. The one of the two originating from second order elections (in the EC/EU, the European Parliament)

tends to have a majority that is opposed to the one originating from first order elections (in the EC/EU, the Council). This renders co-legislation more difficult” (Reif 1997: 120).

Similarly, Simon Hix claims that “because EP elections are lost by parties in government and won by parties in opposition, ‘divided government’ is the norm in the EU” (Hix 2005: 206). Note that the second order election thesis would also lead us to expect a higher party-political variance within the Parliament as compared to the Council, since protest or fringe parties are more likely to be represented in the EP than in national governments.

This already suggests that a different party-political complexion of the Council and the European Parliament may have not only electoral but also ‘mechanical’ causes (Colomer 2001: 161). What exactly do we mean by ‘mechanical effects’? In his lucid discussion of divided government Joseph Colomer has pointed out that, in a bicameral system, different majorities in the first and second chamber may come about even if each voter has voted for exactly the same party at first and second chamber elections (and exactly the same voters turned out in both elections). Despite identical votes, first and second chamber may differ in their party-political composition whenever the formulas that translate votes into seats differ for both chambers. In the EU, governments are represented in the Council whereas parties are represented in the European Parliament. In other words, the political composition of the Council incurs one additional step in the translation of votes – national votes are translated into seats in the national parliament, the majority in parliament then determines the national executive (which determines the composition of the Council).

This has an important consequence for our context: more extreme parties will be represented in the EP once they pass national electoral thresholds in European elections. Yet, given that they rarely participate in national governments, they are unlikely to be represented in the Council. In other words, possible distances between the party-political location of the Council and of the European Parliament may be the result of *two* distinct – but possibly related – effects: voters in EP elections are *more likely* to vote for politically extreme parties, while at the same time politically more extreme parties are *less likely* to take part in national government (and we cannot rule out

the possibility that some voters are more likely to vote extreme in EP elections *because* extreme parties are less likely to be represented in the Council; see below).

As we will argue in the following sections, in order to understand the political dynamics of ‘divided government’ in the political system of the EU it is of crucial importance to distinguish between its mechanical and electoral causes and to take into account the two salient dimensions of European politics: the left/right dimension and the European integration versus national sovereignty dimension (Hix 1999; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). As we will show below, the *mechanical cause* of divided government in the EU leads to systematic differences in the pro-/contra-EU dimension between Council and Parliament – due to the lower probability that more extreme, i.e. more EU-skeptic, parties are represented in national governments and therefore in the Council. The consequences of the *electoral cause* of divided government are less clear-cut. First of all, it remains an empirical question whether the second order status of European elections actually does lead to divided government ‘the European way’. Much depends on the composition of EU member state governments. Secondly, without further analysis we cannot say for certain whether voting behavior in EP elections reflects voters’ choices in the traditional left/right or in the pro-/contra-EU dimension.

The paper proceeds in three stages. In the following section (Section 2) we first highlight the importance of diverging majorities for inter-institutional politics and policy-making within the EU. We then subsequently detail (Section 3) how the logic of national government formation translates into a pro-EU bias of the European Council. We also briefly summarize the literature on the second order status of elections to the European Parliament and outline its expected effect on the party-political composition of EP and Council. In Section 4 we empirically compare the spatial location of Council and Parliament in the two salient dimensions of European politics, in the European integration vs. national sovereignty dimension and the traditional left/right dimension. We conclude (Section 5) by emphasizing the implications of our findings for future research on European elections, for the debate on Europe’s democratic deficit and on inter-institutional politics within the EU.

2.The consequences of divided government for inter-institutional politics in the European Union

Systematic differences between the party leanings of Council and Parliament should be of considerable relevance for Europe's inter-institutional politics. A different party-political composition of Council and EP would have considerable consequences for European legislative politics, given that today the co-decision (II) procedure requires the approval of both Council and EP for the vast majority of all legislative initiatives (Shackleton, Richard Corbett, and Shackleton 2003). Marked differences in the party complexion of the Council and the Parliament would possibly lead to government/opposition dynamics between the two major legislative actors and could develop into a source of inter-institutional conflict (Aspinwall 2002; Ringe 2005). Furthermore, larger variation within the EP's party-political complexion may make it more difficult to meet the qualified majority requirements of the co-operation and co-decision procedures.¹

With the significantly increased role of the European Parliament in EU legislation, many see the European Union as having developed into a "classical two-chamber legislature" (Hix 2005: 72) or as having already established a "bicameral legislative authority" (Tsebelis and Garrett 2001: 359; Shackleton, Richard Corbett, and Shackleton 2003: 183). The co-decision procedure was first introduced with the Maastricht Treaty (co-decision I) and then modified and strengthened with the Amsterdam Treaty (co-decision II) and the Draft Constitutional Treaty. With the Constitutional Treaty, the co-decision procedure was supposed to become the "ordinary legislative procedure" (Articles I-33(1) and III-302) and it was planned to extend it to such sensitive issue areas as agriculture and fisheries, asylum and immigration law, as well as structural and cohesion funds (Craig 2004: 3). Already today the procedure applies to more than 50 percent of all EU primary legislation (Shackleton, Richard Corbett, and Shackleton 2003: 187). With co-decision, Parliament and Council have to agree to a given initiative before it can become law. If either of the two fails to give its consent, the conference committee has to find a solution within

¹ See especially the requirement for an absolute majority within the EP under the second reading of the co-operation procedure and the second and third reading of the co-decision procedure as well as for the budgetary procedure (Kreppel and Hix 2003).

eight weeks; otherwise an initiative will not become law. Obviously, under co-decision, conflicts between Parliament and Council become more likely with an increasing distance between their party-political centers of gravity. In all probability, EP amendments to Commission proposals will be proposed more frequently and the conference committee will be invoked more often, the more the political complexion of Parliament and Council diverges.

The spatial location and internal cohesiveness of Council and Parliament has also obvious implications for the degree of autonomy of the Commission, since preference convergence between Council and European Parliament “would reduce” the Commission’s “scope of discretion in implementation and adjudication” of EU legislation (Tsebelis and Garrett 2001: 380). Put another way, the more heterogeneous Parliament and Council are, the stronger the bureaucratic drift of the Commission can be expected to be (Pollack 2003). Obviously, these considerations pertain not only to inter-institutional, especially legislative, politics, but they also affect constitutional conflicts within the European Community (cf. Crombez 1997).

Take for example the EP’s right to approve a new Commission. Due to several treaty provisions, but also due to Parliament’s extensive interpretation of its constitutional role that later became accepted by Council and Commission, the EP today enjoys the right to approve or censure the Commission (Shackleton, Richard Corbett, and Shackleton 2003: 230–33). Moreover, synchronized terms of Parliament and Commission have further strengthened the role of Parliament in the Commission nomination and investiture process. The resignation of the Santer Commission and the nomination of the Barroso Commission provided us with initial evidence of the increasing importance of government/opposition dynamics between Commission and Parliament (cf. Ringe 2005). Conflicts during the Commission nomination procedure may also become more likely because member states increasingly nominate politicians of the nationally governing party (parties) as Commissioners for Brussels (Wonka 2004; Döring 2006) – possibly also because political majorities between the EP and the Council are diverging more and more. However, once installed, the Commission may be more autonomous since it is able to exploit the divergences in the party-political complexion of Council and Parliament – something which would make the conflict between Parliament and Council over the concrete composition of the Commission only more contentious.

Finally, as already briefly mentioned, different party-political centers of gravity between Council and Parliament would also have important implications for our understanding of EP elections. One recurrent feature of European elections has been that voters who participate in them tend to punish their domestic parties of government by voting more often for opposition parties and for ideologically more extreme parties. In the literature on European elections this has been interpreted as proving that European elections are not really about European politics, but first and foremost about domestic politics (cf. Reif and Schmitt 1980). Systematic differences in outcomes between European elections and national general elections are then mainly attributed to the ‘second order’ status of European elections, in which the composition of the national executive is not at stake – which might motivate voters to cast a different vote in EP elections than in ‘first order’ domestic elections.

However, vote loss by governing parties in elections to the European Parliament is “also consistent with the interpretation suggesting that those who are worried by further steps in integration deem the incumbent government responsible for supporting them” (Bartolini 2005: 343). The European voter may be even more worried if (s)he has the – largely correct (see below) – impression that his or her concerns are systematically underrepresented at the European level through the exclusion of more EU-skeptic parties from the Council. In other words, the systematic vote losses of governing parties may have more European causes than as yet suggested by the literature.

But how realistic is the divided government scenario in Europe? Can we actually observe opposed majorities in the Council and the EP? Currently, the literature on EU decision-making provides us with little systematic information on the party positions and majorities in different EU institutions. Yet, recent empirical studies show the relevance of party conflict for decision processes in the Council (Mattila 2004) and the EP (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005). But do we find empirical evidence for situations of divided government in the European Union? Before we answer these questions we will first describe the mechanical and electoral causes of divided government in the EU in more detail.

3. National government formation and European elections: mechanical and electoral causes of divided government in the EU

Let us start with a brief empirical description of domestic patterns of coalition formation and how they affect the party-political representation in the Council. Martin and Stevenson (2001), in what is as of yet the most extensive empirical analysis of the determinants of government formation in Western democracies, highlight certain regularities with important consequences for our study. Their most relevant finding for our context is that parties in the center of the left/right spectrum participate more often in government than parties with more extreme positions.

This is a natural implication of the median party theorem that predicts that in a one-dimensional policy space the median legislator is part of any majority government coalition (Laver and Shepsle 1996). The extensive literature that discusses different theoretical models of government formation agrees that policy-driven coalitions will always include some moderate party as a pivotal player. Given that parties in a coalition also tend to have associated positions on a left/right scale, we rarely find coalitions that include both left and right extreme parties. Moreover, the largest party in Parliament is most likely to become the *formateur* of the government. Again, large parties tend to be more centrist than small parties; rarely are they to be found on extreme positions of the left/right scale.

Martin and Stevenson (2001) found strong confirmation for all of these expected patterns of government composition when they tested various coalition formation theories on their extensive data set relating to post-war government formation in Western Europe. One of their strongest empirical findings is of particular relevance for our argument: parties located near the extremes of the left/right continuum have a significantly lower probability of being a member of government than parties with a centrist position.

Yet we also know from studies of party positions toward European integration that more extreme political parties tend to be more skeptical toward European integration than more centrist parties (Hix 1999; Aspinwall 2002; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). The party positions in the EU policy space are often described as U- or humped-shaped. Figure 1 presents

this well-known fact but adds information on the parties' government status.² This allows us to combine the findings of Martin and Stevenson (2001) with the findings of the literature on Europe's political space.

Figure 1: Party location in a two-dimensional European issue space: left/right and pro/contra EU

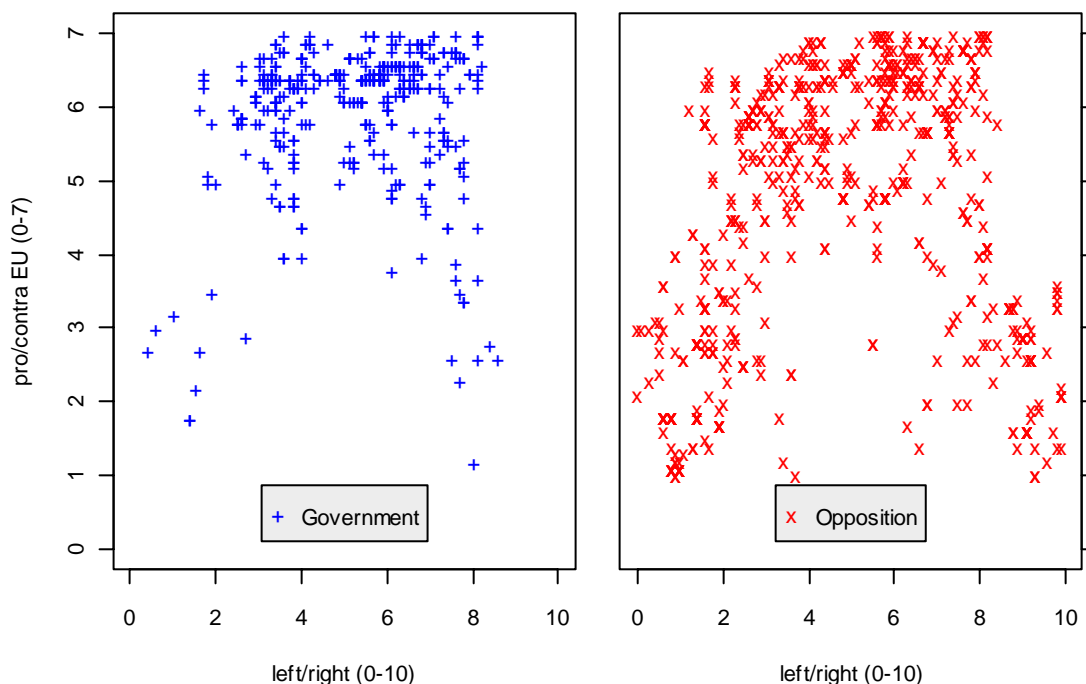
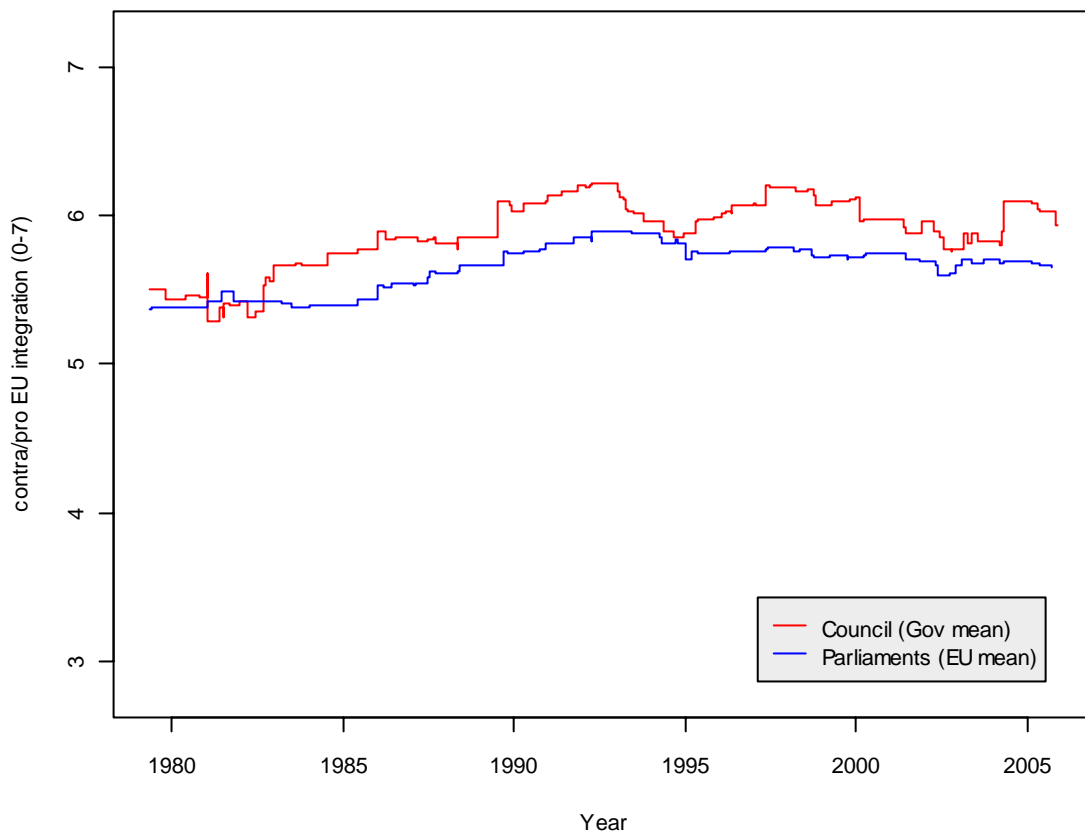


Figure 1 makes the consequences for the composition of the European Council immediately apparent. Because parties that are more EU-friendly – parties with moderate left/right positions – are more likely to be part of a member state's government, the Council should be on average significantly more integration-friendly than national parliaments, on average, are. As Figure 1 shows, the much lower government participation rate of more extreme and therefore also more EU-skeptical parties should lead to a mechanical effect on the representation of pro-/contra-EU preferences when votes are translated into government positions. That this expectation is indeed borne out by the data can be demonstrated by a simple comparison of two measures: the party-political center of gravity (Gross and Sigelman 1984) in the integration/national sovereignty dimension of the EU member state parliaments compared to the center of gravity in this dimension of the national governments or, for that matter, the Council. As Figure 2 shows, once

² Information about party positions comes from the the UNC data set, government status was assigned using Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2002). See below for a more detailed description of our data sources.

we calculate the seat-weighted positions of those parties that are represented in the national parliaments and compare them to the seat-weighted positions of those parties in government, we see that member state parliaments have been systematically more EU-skeptic than member state governments.³ Translating votes into seats into office (government positions) apparently biases political representation in Europe in favor of EU-friendly parties.

Figure 2 – Center of gravity for parliaments and governments in the EU



³ Our time series starts in 1979, with the first direct election to the European Parliament, since we want to analyze the interplay between mechanical and electoral causes of differences in the party-political complexion of Council and EP. Of course, we could also report centers of gravity for member state parliaments and member state governments in the integration/national sovereignty dimension that date back to 1957. For more on the methods and data used to calculate center of gravity (CoG), see either below or Manow, Schäfer, and Zorn (2004).

The *electoral reasons* for differences in the party-political complexion of Council and European Parliament have been discussed much more extensively and prominently than their potential *mechanical causes*. This electoral effect is widely known in the literature as the so-called second order effect of EP elections. The many election studies about the six direct elections to the European Parliament presently held have provided us with extensive knowledge that outcomes of EP elections deviate systematically from the outcomes of national elections. Ever since the early pioneering articles by Reif and Schmitt (1980) and (Reif 1984), three patterns in EP elections have been highlighted and, by and large, confirmed in subsequent studies. Firstly, government parties tend to lose vote shares in European elections compared to the last national contest. Secondly, both small parties and more extreme parties gain votes compared to their previous domestic electoral performance. Thirdly, these regular vote share shifts seem more pronounced when the European election is held in the middle of the domestic legislative term – whereas EP elections held shortly after or shortly before national elections produce less substantial deviations from the domestic electoral outcomes (Eijk and Franklin 1996).

How is this pattern explained? The answer usually comes in two parts. First, although some voters use European elections to vote on European issues, most seem to want to send an electoral signal to the central political players within their national political arena. Second, since electoral rules, election dates, the set of parties that compete for votes, and – most importantly – what is at stake politically differ between national and European elections, voting behavior differs as well.⁴ In particular, while national general elections establish the national executive (first order elections), in EP elections and other so-called second order elections there seems to be less at stake.⁵ Voters therefore might just care less (lower turnout) or they might vote differently because

⁴ Students of EP-elections have also used the term ‘mechanical effect’ when explaining the consequences of different electoral rules in national and European elections (Farrell and Scully 2005: 979). These mechanical effects either increase or fail to affect the vote shares of small parties in EP elections, as Kousser (2004: 12–13) has shown. In the debate on the ‘second-orderedness’ of EP elections, scholars have put more emphasis on the differences in voting behavior between national and European elections than on the differences in the electoral rules operating between them.

⁵ To this class of seemingly less important second order elections belong regional, mid-term or by-elections. It is therefore no surprise that similar regularities can be observed between elections that decide on the composition of the national executive and those elections that do not, e.g. British and Canadian by-elections (Hudson 1985), German regional or *Länder* elections (Lohmann, Brady, and Rivers 1997), or US-American mid-term elections (Jacobson 1990).

they do not need to worry about the consequences of their vote for (domestic) government formation or, indeed, about possibly ‘wasting’ it.

Obviously, if voters cast different votes in national and in European elections, the political composition of those European institutions determined either by the one or by the other can be expected to differ as well. If voters switch votes systematically, these differences in the party-political composition should be systematic as well. This is the background against which ‘divided government as the norm’ expectations have been formulated (see above). But closer inspection shows that the consequences of the second order effect are not as straightforward as often claimed; nor are opposed majorities between Council and EP as “inevitable” (Reif 1997: 120) as often suggested. Even if a substantial proportion of the electorate in the EU member states switches votes between domestic first order and European second order elections, the aggregate effect of vote switching would still depend on the party complexion of all EU member state governments at any given time.

Let us assume – as a thought experiment – that half of all EU member states are led by ‘left’ parties, while ‘right’ parties govern the other half. If voters use European elections to punish their domestic government, the relative vote losses of left and right government parties may roughly cancel each other out.⁶ In other words, whether divided government is the norm in the EU, whether the EP’s political center of gravity has persistently differed from that of the Council, is an empirical question, one that – to the best of our knowledge – has not been systematically addressed so far. It is to this more detailed empirical evidence that we would like to turn now. In the next section we present our center of gravity estimates for the EP and the Council on both the traditional left/right divide and on the pro-/contra-EU dimension since 1979.

⁶ Much depends also on how stable the ‘second order effect’ is over time. Recent studies on a possible Europeanization of European elections have analyzed the extent to which voters in EP elections have come to vote more and more by taking European issues into account (Caramani 2006; Manow 2005). If voters are in fact increasingly casting a truly European ballot in European elections, the differences in the party-political complexion of Council and Parliament may follow a different pattern.

4. Divided government in Europe? The party-political centers of gravity of the Council and the EP, 1979-2004

Do the mechanical and electoral effects that influence the composition of EU institutions lead to ‘opposed majorities’ between Council and Parliament? Does the European Union establish a system of divided government? And if so, ‘opposed’ in which dimension – in the left/right or in the national sovereignty vs. European integration dimension (Hix 1999; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002)? Although data on the party complexion of European governments, and therefore of the Council on the one hand and the EP on the other, are relatively easy to obtain, we still lack a systematic longitudinal comparison of the party complexion of these two central political actors of the EU (but see Manow, Schäfer, and Zorn 2004). In this section we report data on the party-political center of gravity of the Council, the EP and the mean positions of national parliaments from 1979 to 2003. Given that, for EU legislation, the Council’s internal *homogeneity* is often more important than its actual political position (Tsebelis 1994; Kreppel 2002), we also report data on the variation within the Council – again in the two relevant political dimensions of European politics.

To determine the party composition of national parliaments and governments, we have used the data by Mackie and Rose (1991), Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000), the yearly data reports of the EJPR and various Internet sources.⁷ For the European Parliament we have used the election results provided in Shackleton et al. (2003: 308–13). In order to locate parties, and therefore the Council and the EP, in political space we have taken as data sources the “Marks Steenbergen 1999 dataset” and the “2002 Chapel Hill party expert dataset”⁸ on the left/right positions of political parties and their position on European integration.

We will not engage here in an extended methodological debate about the pros and cons of expert surveys versus content analysis data like that generated by the Comparative Manifesto Project (see the forthcoming special issue of *Electoral Studies* (2006) edited by Gary Marks). The basic

⁷ Especially helpful, valuable and reliable in this respect is the webpage at www.kolumbus.fi/taglarsson.

⁸ Available at www.unc.edu/~gwmarks/data.htm.

trade-off between these two data sources seems to be one between coverage (in time and thus also with respect to the parties covered) and reliability. Given that our period of investigation starts relatively late with the first direct election to the EP in 1979, coverage is less of a problem in our context, which strongly speaks in favor of using the more reliable expert-survey data. Moreover, the left/right dimension has been validated for the manifesto data and expert surveys, whereas the integration/independence dimension has been much better validated for the expert surveys. Latest evidence suggests that expert surveys provide us with considerably better estimates of parties' positions on European integration (Marks, Hooghe, Steenbergen et al. 2006).

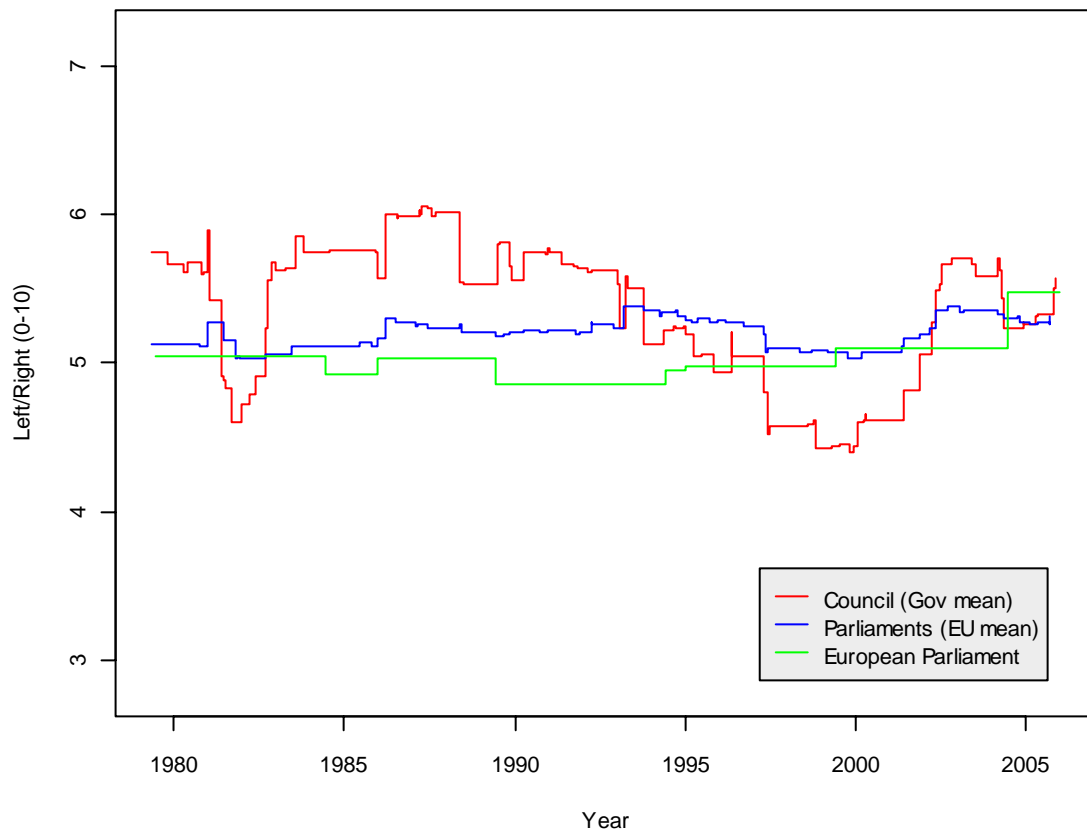
We measure the ideological position of political institutions using the center of gravity (CoG) concept (Gross and Sigelman 1984). The center of gravity is the weighted mean of the positions of all parties in the institution being studied. An alternative, and a possibly more appealing indicator theoretically, would be the position of the median party. However, this would have implied to make additional, sometimes problematic, assumptions – for instance, that parties are unitary actors and that coalitions prove stable without there being any political compromise between the coalition parties. In the case of the Council, we also would have needed to decide whether to take the median of all the parties represented in the Council or to take the country with the median position as our reference point. For the national parliaments and the EP the choice would have been one between the position of the median party or the median legislator. Powell (2006: 303) discusses in much more detail the pros and cons of different indicators – median, majority party, veto player and weighted mean – as estimators for the position of multiparty governments. We follow his choice of the weighted mean, i.e. center of gravity, but also apply this concept when calculating the political position of national parliaments and the EP. We weight with the number of seats in the national parliament and the EP, respectively.⁹

⁹ When comparing the Center of Gravity of all national parliaments with that of the European parliament, the second number already accounts for the different number of MEPs that each country sends to Brussels, whereas the first number weights each national parliament equally. To control for the effects of these different aggregation procedures, we also compared an EP-mean with constant country weights and the CoG of all member state parliaments and obtained almost identical results.

We first would like to compare the positions of national parliaments, national governments (i.e. the Council) and the European Parliament in the left/right dimension. In parliamentary democracies the government is usually located either to the left or to the right of the parliament's mean. This is due to the simple fact that a government coalition constitutes a subset of the parties in parliament that is likely to deviate from the mean parliamentary position. While being to the left or right of the parliament's mean, a governing coalition is also ideologically more homogeneous than the parliament as a whole. If political competition is not distorted, the centers of gravity of subsequent governments should fluctuate around the parliamentary mean. In other words, we would not expect a *systematic and persistent* difference between the left/right position of governments and parliaments – translating parliamentary seats into government positions should produce no systematic bias in the left/right dimension.

Moreover, for the EU as a whole, deviations of national governments from the national parliamentary mean may cancel each other out. If left and right governments are balanced in the Council, we would not be able to observe any aggregate electoral effect in the party complexion of the EP (assuming voters predominantly cast national protest votes): left governments would be punished by vote gains for right parties in EP elections and vice versa. However, even in the case of close left/right centers of gravity, the Council should be ideologically more coherent than the parties in all national parliaments, given that national governments represent ideologically more coherent subsets of the number of parties in parliament. For the same reason, it should also be more coherent than the European Parliament.

Figure 3 – The left/right center of gravity of the EP and the Council



Are these expectations borne out by the data? Figure 3 reports CoG estimates for Council, national Parliaments and EP in the left/right dimension since 1979. Our first finding is that the party-political center of the Council has not actually fluctuated randomly in relation to the position of the national parliaments, but has deviated in a systematic, almost cyclical way. The data confirm what we already know from anecdotal evidence: a dominance of conservative governments in the 1980s and the return to power of Social Democratic parties in the second half of the 1990s (cf. Manow, Schäfer, and Zorn 2004). The center of gravity of national governments (i.e. of the Council) has differed quite substantially from the CoG of national parliaments. The political location of the European Parliament by and large lends support to the second order election thesis: the 1980s with rather conservative member state governments saw a relatively left Parliament, in the 1990s Council and Parliament changed: now a relatively left

Council is confronted by a Parliament positioned more moderately. Also the systematic deviation of the EP center of gravity from member state parliaments' CoGs provides support for the thesis that voters in European elections obviously cast protest votes against their national governments.

Our data also confirm that the Council is indeed ideologically more homogenous than the EP. We have calculated the standard deviation for each observation as a measurement of the cohesiveness of Council and EP. Obviously, national governments are less internally divided (mean value of the standard deviations for the center of gravities of all governments; 0.69) than their national parliaments (1.89). Above we also discussed how the dominance of center parties in the process of domestic government formation creates a more homogeneous Council compared to all national parliaments and the EP. The calculated standard deviations for all the parties in the Council (1.68), for all parties in all EU member state parliaments (2.15) and for all the parties in the EP (2.19) bear out our expectations.

Consider now the pro-/contra-integration dimension. We have argued that the mechanical effects that accompany the translation of domestic votes into Council seats are likely to make the Council more integration-friendly than national parliaments – at least this is what the theoretical and empirical work on coalition formation in Western Europe would suggest. We know that parties in the center of the left/right spectrum are more likely to be represented in government coalitions. Therefore, fewer extreme parties are to be found in West European governments than are represented in EU member state parliaments. Given that we also know that more extreme parties tend to be more EU-skeptic, the representation of 'national governments' in the EU is very likely to have a pro-European bias to it. A comparison between the CoGs of national parliaments, the European Parliament and the Council in the sovereignty/integration dimension indeed strongly confirms our hypothesis (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Positions on European integration

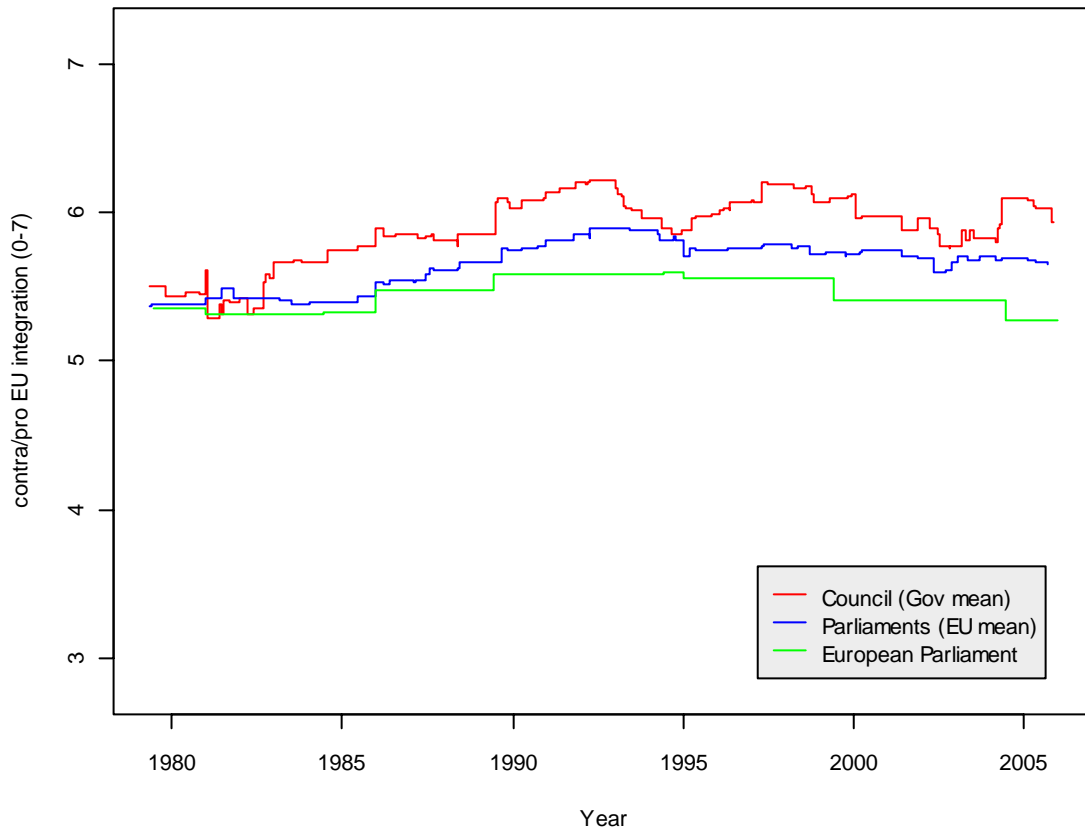


Figure 4 shows that – as expected – the Council has been on average systematically more EU-friendly than the national parliaments. But Figure 4 displays an additional important finding: EP elections produce a European Parliament that is even considerably more EU-skeptic than the national parliaments are. Whether the more integration-skeptic position of the European parliament is only a by-product of European elections, in which voting decisions are largely driven by domestic political concerns, or whether it reflects vote choices which themselves take the pro-EU bias of the Council already into account is an interesting question, which we cannot, however, answer here.

Once we focus on the internal cohesiveness or homogeneity of the EU institutions in the integration/independence dimension we again find our expectations confirmed. The Council (1.05) is more coherent than all parties in national parliaments (1.37), and the European

Parliament is even more divergent (1.53) on the integration/independence dimension than all parties in all member state parliaments taken together.

Our findings seem to contradict the received wisdom of the literature, in which the Council is pictured as a bulwark of national interest whereas both Parliament and Commission are seen as very much integration-oriented, often forming pro-European coalitions against the reluctant member states. Of course it seems reasonable to assume that on the sovereignty/integration dimension MEPs tend to be preference outliers within their respective parties, i.e. they are likely to be more EU-friendly than the median MP or average member of their own party. Therefore it might be misleading to derive the EP's center of gravity using indicators that measure the location of parties in domestic politics. Yet, there are limits for outliers. Serious party-internal divisions over the course of European integration endanger party credibility and party identity, and a party risks sending ambiguous signals to voters when its European Members of Parliament deviate systematically from the party's domestic line. It also risks losing votes in EP elections (cf. Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004). There exist clear domestic constraints on party positions on Europe: in general, parties "seek EU policies that are in line with their electoral commitments, accord with domestic public opinion, or directly benefit their voters and supporting interest groups" (Hix 2005: 409).¹⁰

Moreover, the common perceptions of the EP's integration-friendly position may be distorted because we often tend to regard the joint position of the two dominating party groups within the European Parliament, the PPE and PES, as the position of the Parliament as a whole. In this respect our study's findings are also relevant to the understanding of coalition politics in the European Parliament. Students of coalition behavior in the European Parliament emphasize the need to form grand coalitions given the supermajorities required in the legislative decision processes. Our findings suggest that not only formal majority requirements but also actual majorities may have been important. Given that the Council is composed mostly of parties that are closer to the mean left/right position and thereby more integration-friendly than the Parliament, a two-dimensional perspective on likely coalitions in the EP will predict that

¹⁰ This points to a desideratum in the EU literature: to the best of our knowledge, we lack good studies of how national parties nominate and possibly recall their MEPs.

coalitions in the EP will be closer to the mean as well. In contrast to national political systems, where majority coalitions significantly left or right of the parliament's position can be formed, we expect a bias toward parties close to the mean. Speaking in the terms of formal models, the median legislator is more likely to select other legislators to the left and right of his position than to use all the legislators either left or right to his position to form a majority.

4. Conclusions

Is divided government the norm in the EU? As we have shown, the question can only be answered by distinguishing between mechanical effects of vote aggregation on the one hand and the effects of electoral behavior in European elections on the other. We have found evidence for the claim of electoral effects when looking at the positions of Council and European Parliament in the left/right dimension since 1979. The EP during the 1980s is seen to be, on average, more left than the Council, where conservative governments dominate. Since the mid-1990s, the EP has become more conservative whereas the Council first comprised a majority of left member state governments and has lately shifted back to the conservative side. Differences in the left/right dimension, however, seem not as marked as justifying to speak of 'opposed majorities' between Council and European Parliament. However, we have found more important, more persistent and more marked differences between Council and EP in the second salient dimension of European politics: the pro-/contra-EU or integration/sovereignty dimension. Here, we seem to be confronted with a composite effect of the mechanics of vote aggregation on the one hand and vote choices in European elections on the other. More extreme parties are *less likely* to be represented in national governments, due to the centrist logic of national government formation, and *more likely* to be represented in the EP, due to the more extreme vote choices of voters who take part in EP elections.

Our study speaks to three different literatures: to the literature on EP elections (1), to the debate on Europe's democratic deficit (2) and to studies on legislative politics within the EU and on coalition formation within the EP (3).

(1) Our empirical evidence questions previous interpretations of EP elections which see European elections as being no more than national elections in disguise. As has been noted above, the relatively poor performance of government parties in EP elections does not necessarily point to the ‘second order’ status of European elections since there is a straightforward European interpretation to this (Bartolini 2005: 343). With respect to the second order thesis, our study suggests an alternative interpretation. The strong empirical evidence for the success of small parties in EP elections (Kousser 2004) may be better explained if we take the policy positions of parties into account. Small parties may be more successful in these elections not because of their size, but because of their more skeptical attitude toward European integration. This implies that in the pro-/contra-EU dimension the electoral causes of divided government may not be fully independent of the mechanical causes. There is an obvious analogy to Duverger’s law here: we might observe ‘psychological’ effects in European voting behavior that react to the mechanical effects in the preference aggregation from national parliaments to national governments to the European Council. EP election outcomes would then have to be explained – at least in part – as the manifestation of ‘electoral overshooting’ (Kedar 2005). This suggests that re-assessing EP election outcomes in the light of the overshooting thesis might be a worthwhile enterprise.

(2) The empirical evidence presented here is also relevant to the debate on Europe’s democratic deficit.¹¹ One argument often made in this debate, which even strong critics of an integration process dominated by national executives seem to have accepted, is that the EU integration process is – if only indirectly – democratically legitimized, since all member states in the EU are, of course, democratically elected (Moravcsik 2002). However, as we have shown in the preceding paragraphs, national governments represent only imperfectly and in a systematically biased way citizens’ preferences as to the course of European integration. This puts sanguine perspectives of Europe’s democratic deficit into doubt. If we expect political institutions to create congruence between citizens and representatives (McDonald and Budge 2005; Powell 2006), then European political institutions seem to fail to accomplish this congruence in one important dimension.

¹¹ We are grateful to Armin Schäfer for having pointed this out to us.

(3) Finally, the literature on legislative politics within the EU and on coalition formation within the EP may benefit from systematically taking the relative policy distances between the major political actors into account. While previous contributions to the literature have devoted quite some effort to locating political actors in an issue-specific space, more systematic and possibly more reliable information about policy distances might be derived from the center of gravity approach pursued here.

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