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The European Parliament in the Enlarged EU Explaining Group Membership in the European Parliament

Abstract:

This paper examines the decisions behind group membership in the European Parliament. Following the goals ascribed to them by Strom in other settings (1990), national parties should join the largest group that matches their socioeconomic preferences. Yet, whilst explanations taking national parties as the basic unit of analysis might sometimes suffice, we argue that it is often necessary to consider the influence of individual party members and existing EP groups. The pursuit of individual and collective interests by all these actors determines the attractiveness of the various options open to a party weighing up its group affiliation in the European Parliament. After developing a conceptual framework to explain the dynamics behind membership decisions, we illustrate it by reference to the attempt by the British Conservative Party to leave the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED) group, an effort ending in the formation with the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) of an extraparliamentary federation, the Movement for European Reform.

1. Introduction

Although our understanding of the European Parliament (EP) has improved significantly in recent years, there has so far been no systematic attempt at explaining national parties' choice of group membership. Analysis has instead focused on the more fundamental question of why groups should have formed in the EP and its predecessor in the first place as well as on the characteristics of group behaviour (Raunio 1997; Kreppel 2003; Hix et al, 2003; Hix et al., forthcoming). Here, we set out a conceptual framework to explain why national parties join, remain in and leave political groups, as well as the conditions under which political groups welcome new members.

Reconfiguring a party's relations in the EP requires the party leader to forge a solution acceptable to a wide range of other actors, in particular, existing party groups, other national party delegations represented in the EP, and the party's own parliamentarians. The latter may be split in ideological terms as well as regarding their views about the utility of group membership. Our framework takes into account not only the actions and interests of these three sets of actors but also the fact that membership of these three categories may overlap. Our assumptions and expectations concerning the aims of national parties and European parliamentary groups are primarily based on the triad of political goals first set out by Strom (1990) and usually referred to in short-hand as 'policy', 'office' and 'votes'. When peering inside parties, though, we argue that a different triad of goals is needed to explain the individual parliamentarians' behaviour. We therefore ascribe to them slightly different interests, namely 'policy', 'career' and 're-election' (Mayhew, 1974; Hix et al., forthcoming: 33).

Despite this emphasis on actors' motivations, ours remains a rational-choice *institutionalist* model. Like Strom (1990: 566), then, we assume that parties are rational actors but 'stress the constraints imposed by their organizational and institutional environments'. As regards the institutional setting in which membership decisions are reached, we emphasize the role played by the formal rules governing both group formation and the distribution of parliamentary power in defining the actions of national parties and EP groups. We also consider the way that these rules and those determining the formal balance of power within national parties spawn differential opportunities for individual parliamentarians to pursue their goals as well as setting the scope for the party leader to reassert the 'party interest'. Organizationally, we stress the multi-level make-up of political parties and the constraints imposed by intra-party conflicts of interest.

We illustrate our framework by reference to the British Conservatives' attempt in the first half of 2006 to leave their group in the EP, the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED). These ructions ended not in the withdrawal of the Conservatives but rather in the establishment in July 2006 of the Movement for European Reform (MER) an extraparliamentary party federation founded with the Czech ODS, which is supposed to form the basis for a new group in the next Parliament.

It should be stressed that these developments have been chosen as a means to illustrate and explore - rather than to test - a conceptual framework that pays particular attention to the sometimes competing interests of different sets of actors. To this end, the Conservatives' case is particularly fruitful: the various options open to the party were a matter of serious and lengthy deliberation throwing open the processes behind the identification of the 'party interest'. The Conservatives also tried to persuade a range of parties to join them in forming a new group, so that this case allows us to examine - albeit cursorily - the group-membership decisions of more than just one party. In addition, the divergence of opinions between Conservative MPs and MEPs, as well as between eurosceptics and those parliamentarians more positively disposed towards European integration, highlights the importance of taking account of the distinct levels of the party and of different ideological factions in group-membership decisions. Meanwhile, the timing of events - mid-parliament - meant that the response of the existing party groups was more robust than during the period at the beginning of parliament when they may find themselves somewhat in flux.

2. Choosing and forming groups in the European Parliament

The decisions behind group membership in the European Parliament incorporate a hotchpotch of competing interests. Three sets of actors are potentially influential. First, national parties (as unitary actors) dominate these decisions, and therefore form the focus of our analysis. Second, it must be recognised that individual parliamentarians' priorities in the question of group membership may diverge not only from the party interest but also from one another. Third, party groups themselves need to be considered as well since, even at the beginning of a new parliament, group formation does not occur in a *tabula rasa* environment. The way that these three sets of actors pursue their interests is defined in large part by the constraints and incentives arising from their institutional and organisational environment. Rules internal to the EP and national parties are stressed here.

2.1. Policy, office, votes: parties and party groups as unitary actors

Strom (1990) argues that parties (and groups) will pursue three goals: to exert substantial influence over policy outcomes ('policy'), to occupy as many political posts as possible ('office'), and to maximise the electoral support they win at poll time ('votes'). These goals are not always mutually compatible; it is nevertheless possible to generalise about which of these three goals actors will privilege during processes of group formation and choice in the EP, and about the ways in which they might best be realised.

Within the EP, national parties join a political group primarily when this supports their aim to maximise their office goals. This is not only because attaining office in the EP is desirable *per se*: office in the EP refers to the attainment not of a government post but rather a committee seat. Thanks to the EP's internal rules, group membership is a significant factor in the distribution of committee seats amongst the national delegations. Outside plenary voting sessions, policy influence in the Parliament is best exercised through precisely these committee posts. Meanwhile, because the EP's political system does not punish parties that vote against the group line (Hix and Lord, 1997: 118), group membership is of comparatively little importance for parties seeking to influence policy outcomes during plenary voting sessions. All this, of course, is not to say that parties' office and policy goals are *always* congruent. The EP's Foreign Affairs Committee may offer its members little influence over policy, but is still considered a trump for a party in terms of prestige. Similarly, MEPs, particularly those occupying higher positions, are under pressure to temper their representation of their party's policy preferences in favour of group preferences when exercising their office. This lack of congruence means that parties will tend to seek out a group that shares its policy preferences rather than simply the one that offers the best office prospects.

Both the office and policy goals of parties can be best realised in the EP by membership of a *large* group, even if this group does not perfectly reflect their socioeconomic preferences (in the EP, the largest groups tend to be moderate on socio-economic questions as well as on those pertaining to issues of further European integration). The institutional rules of the EP mean that large groups enjoy a greater proportion of the available parliamentary offices to redistribute amongst member parties than their smaller counterparts (Maurer and Wessels 2003, 185-194): The distribution of posts and responsibilities is largely based on the principle of proportionality: the allocation of seats and posts in committees corresponds to the size of the EP groups.¹ The Conference of Presidents is similarly dominated by the two largest groups. Within the context of these formal advantages, the largest groups wield more power than their smaller counterparts. The two largest groups usually provide the chairs for the most important committees. A group's ability to secure for itself the responsibility for drafting parliamentary reports also increases with its size (Mamadouh and Raunio, 2003).

This boost to their office prospects is, though, not the only reason why membership in a large group can afford parties policy influence: since no government depends upon the support of a majority in the EP, individual parties' defection from a group line is not severely punished in the political system of the EP. Members of a large group can thus seek to persuade a large number of their co-members to take on their preferences in plenary votes, influencing the overall position of the group as insiders, whilst retaining the possibility of going against the group line should they fail to sway their group. It is the two largest

groups, the EPP-ED and the Party of European Socialists (PES), that can together ensure that proposed laws are successful under the voting rules of the EP: in the most important parts of the legislative process, the European Treaties require that a proposal enjoys the support of an absolute majority of MEPs, which means that a parliamentary majority between the groups can, in practical terms, only be usually created if the EPP-ED (35% of seats) and the PES (28%) cooperate (Maurer and Wessels 2003, 192-193). Thus, although group membership is comparatively unimportant in the exercise of influence during plenary sessions, membership of a large group may nevertheless be understood as an 'added bonus'.

Office and policy concerns are privileged by dint of the fact that parties' group affiliation is largely unknown to the electorate, minimising the importance of votes concerns. However, in the unlikely case that the electorate's concerns do have to be taken into account by parties, vote-related goals may take precedence over parties' policy- and office-related interests. Voters may well expect a national party to adhere to a group that demonstrably reflects its socio-economic stance and, in particular, its policy objectives on European integration. Yet, a party obliged to join a group that *symbolically* shares its views on European or socioeconomic issues may actually be unable to sign up to the group that best allows it to assert its preferences in *practical* terms: votes on issues of European integration are rare, meaning that parties will be diverted from the core task of influencing socioeconomic policy if obliged to join a group on symbolic grounds of European policy. Even if the party joins a group which ostentatiously shares its socioeconomic goals, this may preclude its joining one of the larger groups which might entail greater practical influence over socioeconomic policy.

Turning from the national parties to the groups themselves, these may similarly be expected to pursue, above all, office- and policy-related goals. Like national parties, we can expect them to privilege group size over ideological cohesion: increasing their size brings office gains and policy influence. Since groups are not voted for by the electorate, votes-related concerns are of even less importance for them than they are for their constituent national parties.

2.2. Policy, career and re-election: parties as non-unitary actors

Parties cannot always be assumed to behave as unitary actors. As Strom (1990: 569) argues, 'parties are complex organizations that impose various constraints on the behaviour of their leaders'. The level below the party leader key to group-membership decisions is that of individual parliamentarians; they can be ascribed goals that correspond broadly to the policy-, office- and votes-motivations of their parties. The difference is merely that between a collective and an individual interest. The aims attributed to individual politicians are 'policy', 'career' and 're-election' (Mayhew, 1974; Hix et al., forthcoming: 33). Thus representatives seek to realise their preferred policies (policy), achieve a high-ranking position (office) and be returned to parliament (re-election).

Usually these individual interests are broadly congruent with the equivalent collective party interest. Thus individual politicians' prospects for re-election are, for example, often best served by their efforts to maximise their party's votes. This is particularly true for party-centred legislatures, where parliamentarians have little incentive to cultivate a personal vote (Mitchell, 2000). In candidate-centred systems such as in the US, legislators' behaviour can however easily run counter to the collective party interest as individual members of Congress seeks to maximise their constituency-specific benefits (Cox and McCubbins, 1993).

In the case of the party leader, the congruence between individual and party success is clear: the leader's position is best secured by bringing maximum success to the whole party (Müller and Strom, 1999). The trouble arises when individual parliamentarians' interests run contrary to the collective party interest, or where priorities are unevenly distributed between certain categories of parliamentarian, leading to internal tensions. This can easily come to pass in the process of group formation in the European Parliament. This is because group membership in the EP has different consequences for MEPs in terms of their career, policy influence and re-election prospects than it does for national parliamentarians. For MEPs, group membership is central to their career development and their

influence over policy; for MPs, meanwhile, group membership has most impact on their re-election prospects (as well as their ability to influence policy *indirectly*). It was noted above that privileging electoral concerns in the question of group membership can come at the cost of achieving policy influence and office. Tensions can therefore arise between the two levels of a national party, especially where MPs' prospects of re-election are seriously endangered by a choice of group membership which would bring their MEPs office and policy influence.

These tensions across the two levels of the party become harder to capture conceptually when one acknowledges that group membership is not exclusively considered by politicians or a party's broader membership in terms of a party's office, policy or votes considerations: affiliation with a group in the EP can actually be a constitutive element of a party's European or socio-economic policy goals. Membership of a eurosceptic group, for example, could be considered a eurosceptic policy, rather than a means to influence policy. In this context, the choice of group is not only a means of increasing policy influence, but also a policy outcome. National politicians, whose prospects for career success, re-election and policy influence are seldom directly affected by group membership, are more likely than their European-level colleagues to view membership as a question of European policy – and a rather symbolic one at that.

2.3. Forming, Joining or Leaving a group: the options

Four options are open to an aligned party that is reconsidering its current affiliation in the EP: forming a new group, joining an existing group becoming non-aligned, and maintaining membership of its current group, but under more favourable conditions.

Forming a new group is theoretically – though seldom practically – the most attractive choice since it would allow an alignment of the party's collective interest, with that of its individual parliamentarians and, naturally enough, with that of the group itself: Forming a sizeable group 'in one's own image' could bring office and policy benefits to a party and its MEPs and would ensure a close match on socioeconomic and European policy preferences. However, the EP's internal institutional rules take on real importance here. The requirement that a group consist of a minimum of 20 MEPs from at least one fifth of Member States means that a party will need several partners, each with several parliamentarians, in order to form a new group.ⁱⁱ This option is thus the most difficult to realise.

Meanwhile, joining one of the other groups could also enable a national party to realise office and policy goals. However, in order to bring a similar alignment of interests within the national party, this option depends on the existence of a sizeable group with a suitable policy profile. Usually, the other groups should happily accept a new member due to the office and policy benefits that increased size will bring in the institutional environment of the EP. However, the goodwill of the group cannot be taken for granted. For example, a rival party from the same member state may already be part of that group and block entry. Even if accession to the group is granted, office and policy concessions may have to be granted by the party requesting admission.

Non-alignment is the easiest option to achieve, as it requires no co-ordination with other actors. However, the institutional makeup of the EP means that this option carries with it significant costs for the party in terms of office and policy. Without group membership, MEPs, and the party, have fewer political resources and thus fewer means to influence the work of the EP: for example, non-attached representatives can only very rarely take up important posts within the Parliament and can scarcely hope to gain a pivotal role in votes (Corbett et al., 2003: 59). Non-alignment might also make parties appear isolated in Europe, which can have effects on the electoral reputation of the party, as well as potentially being symbolically out of step with aspects of their substantive European policy.

Should these options fail or be ruled out as impractical, there remains to the party the paltry choice between seeking to alter its current conditions of membership (as William Hague sought to do in 1999) so that it is better able to pursue its votes, policy and/or office interests, or indeed its symbolic concerns, or to face up to the prospect of continued membership under the same conditions.

2.4. Group choice and formation as a result of individual, party- or group-interest?

In short then, since national parties are the main actors in the EP at the time of group formation, we assume that group membership will reflect unitary national parties' pursuit of their interests. Weighing up the handful of options available to them, it is to be expected that parties will choose to join or form a group that broadly shares its socioeconomic policy preferences. This is the principal cleavage in the EP (Hix et al., forthcoming), and belonging to a group with congruent socioeconomic aims will bring a happy marriage between office and policy goals. When, thanks to their similar socioeconomic preferences, more than one group is considered suitable for membership, parties seek out the largest, as this is beneficial to both policy and office goals. Votes-related considerations rarely influence the decision for or against membership of a particular group and are always weighed up against possible gains in office and policy in the EP.

However, the behaviour of national parties may not always be unitary. Under certain circumstances the interests of various categories of parliamentarians will diverge significantly from the party interest. These include times when a choice of group membership that would favour MEPs' influence over policy and their career prospects endangers MPs' chances of re-election. They also include situations where a choice of group membership that would favour MEPs' influence over policy, their career and/or re-election prospects clashes significantly with a socioeconomic or European policy preference held by MPs. MPs are, in turn, likely to privilege these concerns when their own policy, office and votes considerations are not much affected by the question of group membership. One particular set of intra-party interests may prevail, especially when the national party leader, who may for analytical purposes be seen as the guardian of the party's collective interest, is unable to use the formal tools at his disposal to reassert the common interest.

Under certain circumstances (pre-)existing groups will also be relatively successful in asserting their interests *vis-à-vis* those of national parties. Many of the groups in the EP have built up considerable administrative machinery over the last decades and belong to a broader, extra-parliamentary European party. This does much to ensure their continued existence across parliaments as well as their capacity to behave as actors in their own right during periods of group formation, independently influencing individual national parties' choice of membership.

Existing groups might have particularly strong influence when:

- the parties in question are closely bound to the administrative structure of the group;
- the parties in question are members of the same extra-parliamentary European party as the group;
- efforts at group formation take place mid-Parliament; the group in question has the means to exert an independent influence upon a party's prospects of achieving votes, policy and influence, for example by threatening political isolation in the EU.

3. A marriage of convenience? The British Conservatives and the EPP-ED

There are currently eight political groups in the Parliament, the largest of which is the EPP-ED (with 277 members from 48 national delegations). After the German CDU/CSU, the 26 British Conservative MEPs that remain in the group form the second largest contingent in the EPP-ED.ⁱⁱⁱ The EPP-ED can trace its heritage back to the Common Assembly (CA) of the European Coal and Steel Community, in which a Christian Democratic party group was first formed (Jansen, 2006: 67-76; Kreppel, 2002: 179ff.).

The first European enlargement in 1973 meant that parties with different political traditions had to be integrated into the Parliament's group system. The British and Danish Conservatives formed their own group, the European Conservatives, as they differed in both European and socioeconomic preferences from the EPP, as it was then named (Hanley, 2002: 454). After the first EP elections, the British and Danish Conservatives, which together made up a sizeable contingent in the Parliament, continued their

cooperation under the name 'European Democrats' (Raunio, 1997: 67). In 1992, the European Democrats fused with the EPP group in the EP. The EPP had been pursuing a conscious strategy of broadening its membership since the 1980s (Jansen, 1998: 115), while the Conservatives at the time wanted to end their party's perceived isolation in Europe. Moreover, after the 1989 elections, the European Democrats were only the fifth- and no longer the third-largest group in the EP (Gagatek, 2004: 4). The benefits of joining a larger group were clear, as this would allow the Conservatives to continue to occupy prominent posts in the EP (office) and influence political decisions as the powers of the EP grew (policy). Nevertheless, the Conservatives never joined the extraparliamentary EPP federation: co-operation has always been limited to the parliamentary group. As a result, the Conservatives have never had to take on or adapt to the political goals of the EPP group, in particular its commitment to federalism (Hanley, 2002: 469).

The relationship between the Conservatives and the EPP was weakened at the outset of the Fifth Parliament (1999-2004). The relatively pro-European John Major had been replaced as leader of the Conservatives by the openly eurosceptic William Hague, and after the EP elections in 1999, the parameters of the party's relationship were officially altered. The Conservatives reconstituted the European Democrats, which together with the EPP now form the EPP-ED. The other members of the ED section of the EPP-ED are the Northern Irish Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Czech ODS, the Portuguese Popular Party (PP) and the Italian Pensioners' Party.

The changed relationship was more advantageous to the Conservatives than to the EPP as a whole. The adjustment was particularly attractive for office and policy reasons. First, the Conservatives were now officially free to decide whether to follow the group line in parliamentary votes. Second, they continued to receive prominent posts as the second-largest member of the largest parliamentary group (Gagatek, 2004: 8). Moreover, the prominent renaming of the group brought the relationship more in line with the eurosceptic bent of Conservative policy on European integration in symbolic terms. All the same, these changes were not enough to placate Hague's successor, Iain Duncan-Smith, who was widely suspected of initiating a withdrawal strategy before his untimely political demise.

Dissatisfaction at the Conservative presence in the EPP-ED has not been one-sided. In the last parliament, there were even attempts within the group to exclude the Tories, especially as they voted against the group line one third of the time (Hix et al., forthcoming: 180). However, as the Conservatives were a numerically important contingent of the EPP-ED, there was always a majority of MEPs who opposed their exclusion.

In the Sixth Parliament, the Tories have been no more cooperative than before (Hix and Noury, 2006: 11). Differences with the EPP remain in socio-economic policies and especially on European integration. Among the larger national parties, only the Czech ODS votes similarly to the Conservatives (ibid.).

Against the background of the party- and group-political landscape in the Sixth Parliament, and in particular the dearth of parties and groups that would allow them to form or join a sizeable group 'in their own image' it becomes possible to discern the party interest in group membership: if they were to act as a unitary party according to Strom's schema, the British Conservatives' interests would be best met by remaining in the EPP-ED. The current relationship allows the party to occupy some comparatively high-profile posts in the EP. At the time of Cameron's election to the leadership, the Conservative Party provided one of the Parliament's 14 vice-presidents, a chairman of one of the Parliament's 20 Committees and two Committee vice-chairmen. Four Conservative MEPs were group coordinators for the EPP-ED. The Conservatives as a whole also provided a slightly disproportionate number of Committee members (4.4% of the total although they make up 3.7% of the Parliament (Maurer and Parkes, 2006)). Furthermore, through their EPP-ED membership the Conservatives achieve influence over policy. They do so partly through the possession of relatively key posts but also thanks to the rules that formalise their ability to influence the position of their group as 'full members' and simultaneously vote against the group line. Since there is little to suggest that this realisation of

office and policy interests through cooperation with the EPP-ED has any electoral consequences, the benefits to policy and office seem clearly to outweigh any vote-maximising considerations.

There are, however, serious internal divisions within the Conservative party concerning group membership. Firstly, there is a tension between the party's votes-related interests on the one hand and its policy/office-related interests on the other. As noted above, though, this tension was qualified by the fact that Conservative voters, though predominantly eurosceptic, may be assumed largely to disregard the issue of EP group membership in their voting behaviour. More seriously, a symbolic clash existed between the party's membership of the EPP-ED and the party's policy preferences on European integration: there was a disjuncture between the party's eurosceptic policy preferences and its membership of the pro-European EPP-ED – a membership that brings the party's MEPs career and policy benefits.

4. A Distinctly Non-Unitary Party? The Eurosceptics under Cameron^{iv}

4.1. The formal balance of power under Cameron: the reforms of 1997

The Conservatives' most recent efforts to reconfigure their relations in the EP were characterised by their new leader's struggle to demonstrate his factual authority over the party and to assert the party interest. Although the Conservative party is often thought of as a highly centralised party, with control over the tools of party management heavily weighted towards the leadership, this idea requires qualification. Following its loss of power in 1997, the Conservative Party pursued a policy of internal democratisation, leading in formal terms to a partial decentralisation of control over the party's control of individual parliamentarians' career and re-election prospects and policy influence (Hopkin, 2001; Lees-Marshment and Quayle, 2001). The leader's formal capacity to assert the 'party interest' shrank concomitantly (Maurer et al., 2007). Indeed, through these reforms, grassroots party members' role in electing the leader was also considerably upgraded, although the parliamentary party retains the capacity to exclude the broader membership if it manages to reach internal agreement on a new leader itself. Potential candidates for Parliament too are much more subject to the scrutiny and input of constituency members than before. For MEPs, this decentralisation of candidate selection procedures has been even more marked than for MPs: during the 1999 European elections incumbents were not guaranteed automatic reselection.

4.2. The factual balance of power: group membership in the broader context of policy change

All the same, it is the leader's factual capacity to use these formal powers that counts. For example, in spite – and perhaps even because (see Maurer and Parkes, 2006:Fn.5) – of this *de jure* decentralisation of the formal balance of power in favour of the broader party membership, the leader of the Conservatives retains in real terms a significant capacity to control the political behaviour of the party and assert collective party interests over those of individuals and sub-groups.

Naturally enough, Cameron's 2005 election pledge to remove the Conservatives from the EPP-ED – made not for ideological reasons, but rather to boost his chances of election – had considerably improved the capacity of the eurosceptic parliamentarians to push for a withdrawal from the EPP-ED. Calls for withdrawal were particularly loud at the national level, although a prominent group of eurosceptic MEPs were also vocal. These MEPs were largely part of a cohort of more eurosceptic parliamentarians who had been elected recently, in the Fifth and Sixth Parliaments. Their junior status meant that they were comparatively excluded from the office benefits that membership of the EPP-ED brings to the national delegation as a whole. Withdrawal from the group, sanctioned by the national leadership, potentially promised a short cut to office benefits, bringing their office considerations more in line with their views of substantive European policy. It should also be noted that an overwhelming majority of Conservative MEPs were in favour of staying in the EPP-ED, with only eight delegation members voicing a clear desire to leave their group.^v

Thanks to his professed aim of altering a wide range of the Conservatives' official policy preferences, the party's eurosceptics gained further leverage over their new leader. Following his election, Cameron was primarily engaged in tactical efforts to make the British Conservatives' domestic and foreign policy positions more appealing to voters. In many ways, these attempts ran contrary to his efforts to remove the British Conservatives from the EPP-ED, which has defended a relatively centrist line on socioeconomic and foreign policy issues.

It is precisely because of these incongruities that Cameron's efforts to withdraw British Conservative MEPs from the EPP-ED attained a broader significance at the national level: analysis from previous parliaments suggests that MPs supporting a eurosceptic policy – of which EPP-ED withdrawal is a key substantive aspect – tend to favour the kind of economically non-interventionist and socially conservative positions (Heppell, 2002) that Cameron was seeking to leave behind. There was therefore speculation that Cameron would pursue withdrawal from the EPP-ED as a key eurosceptic policy outcome in order to ensure the progress of broader policy change: since European issues are of disproportionately more salience to Conservative MPs than they are to the electorate (Norris and Lovenduski, 2001, 2004, Usherwood, 2002), Cameron would be able to effect a wide-ranging change in social and economic policy having bought the goodwill of recalcitrant MPs by concessions in a policy area of secondary electoral importance. This tactic of 'buying off' reluctant MPs would come despite considerable 'costs' to most MEPs and the collective party interests.

Instead, Cameron adopted a more subtle tactic: rather than formulating a hard-line eurosceptic policy before social and economic policy change had been accomplished, he preferred to depoliticise European policy so that it did not interfere with his broader efforts, and seemed likely to adopt a eurosceptic position only in response to MPs' resistance to his broader policy agenda (Maurer and Parkes, 2006). Although his hard-line position on the specific issue of the party's relationship with the EPP-ED was largely defined prior to his leadership, he sought to pursue a similar approach towards this question too.

Yet, Cameron did not have time on his side in his efforts to assert his control over the party. He was under pressure from unsettled Conservative MEPs, eurosceptic MPs and even opportunist opposition politicians not afraid to raise questions of European policy that may have proved divisive for their own party (on this last issue see Hillebrand, 2006). The threat made by some Eurosceptic MEPs that they would unilaterally adopt non-aligned status if no new arrangement was realised raised the spectre of open intra-party divisions. Additional time pressure arose from the fact that, out of government, the removal of his party from the EPP-ED was one aspect of substantive policy that could be realised. Against a background of general suspicion that Cameron was merely formulating a policy programme that would appeal to the electorate, but which he had no intention of actually realising, the withdrawal received considerable attention.

5. Five options for the Sixth Parliament

5.1. Ruling out non-alignment, group accession and group formation

Including the choice of staying in the EPP-ED under the same conditions as before, Cameron faced five options to deal with the fallout from his election pledge. Two of these were quickly ruled out, despite the considerable pressure from eurosceptic MPs for withdrawal: non-aligned status and accession to another group. It soon became clear that neither alternative would have advantageous consequences for MEPs or the Conservative party as a whole.

Non-aligned status had the benefit for the Conservatives that it could have been realised with minimal interaction with other actors in the EP. However, it offered few other advantages. Apparent political isolation in the EP might most appeal to those within the Conservative party who view Britain as detached from the EU and seek to withdraw from the EU altogether; for most Conservative parliamentarians it would however smack of an unfortunate radicalism. Non-aligned status would bring little either for the party (in terms of policy, votes or office) or for individual parliamentarians (in terms

of policy, re-election or career). For this reason, the threats of a few MEPs to withdraw unilaterally from the EPP-ED and adopt non-aligned status held little weight.

Joining another group was unattractive, even for eurosceptic MPs: the only groups that might offer themselves for accession were the UEN and I/D. Given their current, amenable arrangements with the large EPP-ED, neither option would have boosted the Conservative party's policy or office-related interests. Furthermore, the presence of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Alleanza Nazionale (with its perceived fascist heritage) in the I/D group and the UEN, respectively, might well have damaged the Conservatives' vote-maximising ambitions and perhaps even individual MPs' re-election (Wagner, 2006a). For their part, some national parties in the two party groups might also have suffered in electoral terms thanks to a Conservative accession (for example UKIP in I/D and the Irish party Fianna Fail in the UEN). Thus, although the two groups would have gained as a whole given the considerable increase in size that a Conservative accession would bring, some member parties would have resisted, perhaps demanding concessions from the Conservatives in terms of parliamentary posts or formal influence over group positions.

Attention thus turned to the option of group formation: it was the only possible path providing a satisfactory strategic outcome. This option was still not as favourable to the party's collective interests as continued membership of the EPP-ED; nevertheless, in theoretical terms, it offered an opportunity to meet the concerns of Conservative MPs without overly compromising those of the party's MEPs. Forging a new group with a strong eurosceptic profile at the European level would symbolically concur with MPs' substantive European policy preferences. It would also meet MPs' concerns about how membership of the EPP-ED might affect their election prospects, in a way that accession to the UEN or I/D or indeed non-aligned status could not. Forming a sizable group broadly sharing Conservative MEPs' socioeconomic preferences would somewhat offset the damage to their career prospects and their policy influence which withdrawal from the EPP-ED would elicit. Given the EP's institutional rules, the barriers to realising this option were of course high.

Given the makeup of the Sixth Parliament, it quickly became apparent that group formation within the EP would scarcely reconcile the interests of (eurosceptic) MPs with those of most MEPs and the party as a whole. The difficulties of enticing parties away from their group mid-Parliament meant that the Conservatives' choice of partners was extremely narrow (Maurer and Parkes, 2006). The EPP-ED's strategy of privileging group size over ideological cohesion meant that many of the ideologically close prospective partners for the Conservatives were already members of the Parliament's largest group. Ironically, it is partly due to the British Conservatives' earlier efforts to assert themselves in the group that other Conservative parties enjoy a somewhat privileged position in the EPP-ED, and few of these (apart perhaps from the Czech ODS) appeared ready to give this up. Enticing parties away from their current groups would in all probability have required the Conservatives to make concessions in terms of the parliamentary posts offered to partners as well as their formal influence over the group line.

Beyond these formal 'goods', the Conservatives had two other, less tangible, goods which might be strategically deployed to attract prospective partners: their 'respectability' as a former party of government in an established democracy and their size. Yet, their respectability was primarily attractive to those parties widely deemed to lack this quality, and which thus might have damaged the Conservatives' own electoral prospects. Meanwhile, their size would have been most attractive to smaller parties, who might thereby gain office and policy influence in the EP; however, members of the EPP-ED already enjoyed such advantages, whilst more radical parties in the EP would have demanded some kind of safeguard that they would not be dwarfed by the Tories in any new group.

As it happened, the Conservatives implicitly acknowledged the lack of ideological overlap with their prospective partners as regards the two principal cleavages in the EP (socioeconomic issues and European integration): they stated the aim of forging a group united by its common commitment to atlanticism, decentralism (an oblique reference to euroscepticism) and the free market. Yet even this proved an unsuitable basis for group formation: some of the parties that it approached (notably the Mouvement pour la France) reject atlanticism; others (the Dutch Christian Union, the Polish Law and

Justice Party (PiS), the Latvian for Fatherland and Freedom Party) are sceptical of free-market policies (Maurer and Parkes, 2006: 15). Moreover, even the Czech ODS, which shares many of the Conservatives' socioeconomic preferences as well as their concerns about the future of European integration, proved reluctant to commit itself. This reluctance was perhaps even more surprising given that, in order to attract the ODS, the Conservatives had offered concessions in terms of office (apparently offering the chair of the new group to the Czechs). Yet the ODS, like other members of the EPP-ED, was under pressure from its partners within that group as well as its extra-parliamentary party to retain its membership. Moreover, it was facing a general election at the national level; controversy about their positioning in the EP might have compromised its electoral prospects as well as its capacity to build a governing coalition.

5.2. Steps towards the retention of the EPP-ED membership

Cameron's capacity to assert the party's collective interest *vis-à-vis* those of individual parliamentarians grew in the first half of 2006. His broad personal support amongst the electorate, as reflected in favourable opinion-poll results, increased his *de facto* control over MPs' electoral and career prospects. Increasingly, it appeared that Cameron would be well-placed to maintain the party's relations with the EPP-ED if he decided, in contrast to his campaign promise, that this was the most advantageous course of action.

Moreover, the party's partners in the EPP-ED and its mother party, the EPP, functioned – perhaps unknowingly – as allies to the Conservative leader, putting pressure not only on the Conservatives' prospective partner parties, but also on the Conservatives themselves, to remain in the group. It is certainly the case that the EPP-ED's capacity to steer the outcome of the Conservatives' efforts was both formally and factually extremely limited.^{vi} It was nevertheless useful for Cameron and the shadow Foreign Minister, William Hague, to point to the obstacles to group formation arising from other actors in the EP, and thereby to disguise their own interest in retaining the relationship with the EPP-ED.

These obstacles were increased when the ODS failed to win a clear victory in the Czech domestic elections and was thrown headlong into a difficult period of coalition-building with the pro-European Christian Democrat party. Again, the ODS' overall party interest would not, at that stage, have been furthered by breaking with the EPP-ED. A high-profile altercation between the ODS and the PiS appeared to put the nail in the coffin for the Conservatives' efforts at group formation (Wagner, 2006b). Yet, eurosceptics at the national level became increasingly aware that Cameron was aiming to maintain relations with the EPP-ED. Their robust counter-reaction apparently took Cameron by surprise, and the Conservative leadership cast about for a new option that would alleviate the need to withdraw from the EPP-ED but nevertheless alter relations with the group in the Conservatives' favour.

It is in this light that the foundation of the MER should be seen. This extra-parliamentary party federation founded with the ODS is supposed to form the basis for a new parliamentary group in the Seventh European Parliament. The federation remains in its infancy, and it is unclear whether it is being actively pursued as part of a long-term project to form a group 'in the image of the Conservatives' or whether it was merely a stopgap solution to pacify eurosceptic MPs. Whatever the case, the federation allows the Conservatives to remain in the EPP-ED until the end of the Sixth Parliament, thus meeting the party's collective – and MEPs' individual – interests at least in the short term. That the small band of disgruntled MEPs did not carry through with their promise unilaterally to quit the EPP-ED indicates that they were not prepared to place their career on the line in order to pursue group membership as a manifestation of their views on European integration. Cameron reinforced this disinclination by threatening MEPs with deselection should they do so, thereby increasing the costs to them of withdrawal whilst offering them an excuse to back down without losing face.

6. Conclusion

The Conservatives' recent manoeuvring has provided a good opportunity to illustrate a framework capturing the principal dynamics underpinning parties' choice of group membership in the EP. Given the EP's institutional rules, we suggest that national parties acting in unitary fashion should belong to

the party group that maximises their opportunity to realise office and policy goals. We argue that this is usually best achieved by joining the largest possible group that shares the delegation's socioeconomic (and, to a far lesser degree, EU integration-related) policy preferences. This was indeed the course followed by the leader of the Conservative party, firstly in his forlorn efforts to form a new group and then in the retention of the EPP-ED membership. The pursuit of these interests was largely conditioned by the internal rules of the EP, which factually precluded the establishment of a new group, whilst pushing the Conservatives into the arms of the largest group that shares their socioeconomic preferences.

If group membership does take on electoral implications or is perceived as a substantive aspect of European or socioeconomic policy, these considerations should rival office and policy priorities. Given that individual parliamentarians across the two levels of the national party, and different ideological factions at both levels, weight the office- votes-, policy- and symbolic aspects of group membership in different ways, tensions over these goals are likely to be played out within national parties. It was thus no surprise to find considerable divergence between (eurosceptic) MPs and MEPs (more positively disposed towards European integration) about the course to be taken. The course of action finally taken depended in large part upon Cameron's capacity to use his formal powers to create party unity. The MER can thus be understood as a last sop to eurosceptic parliamentarians, boosting his factual authority within the party.

Cameron also received – perhaps unwitting – support from the EPP-ED in his efforts to assert the party interest. Despite internal tensions, the group maintained its policy of pursuing size over ideological cohesion, even though this would have provided a suitable occasion to loosen or break ties with the Conservatives. It is certainly the case that the EPP-ED's capacity to steer the outcome of the Conservatives' efforts was extremely limited. The EPP-ED would, for example, have struggled to offer the Conservatives further concessions to remain in the group, running the risk of upsetting other member parties at a time when group cohesion was paramount. The fact that the Conservatives under Hague and Duncan-Smith had already made noises about leaving the group, but had failed to follow through, gave the EPP-ED leadership a clearer picture of the intra-party constraints faced by the Conservative leadership in going through with its promise, and increased the EPP-ED's readiness to refuse the party concessions. The leadership of the EPP-ED was, however, able to threaten the Conservatives and others leaving the group with sanctions, indicating that they would receive the cold shoulder from the remaining group members.

Although the Sixth Parliament did not witness the establishment of a new party group by the Conservatives, in 2007 there was a new addition to the family of EP groups: 20 MEPs representing far-right parties from 7 member states founded the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty Group. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania meant that there were 20 MEPs from at least five member states willing to form a new group, thus helping far-right parties overcome the institutional hurdle that prevented the formation of a group by the Conservatives. After having been without their own group since 1994, Europe's extreme right could once again realise the office and policy opportunities that party groups provide. How this will affect the Conservatives' efforts to establish a group in the next Parliament remains to be seen.

Notes

ⁱ Rule 177.1 of the EP's Rules of Procedure.

ⁱⁱ Rule 29.2 of the EP's Rules of Procedure. Prior to the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, only 19 MEPs were needed to form a group.

ⁱⁱⁱ A twenty-seventh Conservative MEP, Roger Helmer, was ejected from the EPP-ED and is non-aligned but still a member of the Conservative delegation.

^{iv} The information for this and the following section is based primarily on reports in the British press and MEPs' websites. For background information and in order to corroborate these reports, we also conducted several informal, off-the-record interviews with MEPs, MPs, their assistants, Conservative Central Office and well-placed observers.

^v See <http://www.adieu-epp.com>.

^{vi} "Merkel tells British Conservative leader to stick with EPP partners," *The Times*, 16 December 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,13509-1934239,00.html>; "Merkel Warns Cameron over MEP Plans," *The Guardian*, 5 December 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/eu/story/0,,1668250,00.html>.

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