

# The Conditional Electoral Connection in the European Parliament<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper introduces a model of the electoral connection in the European Parliament. Emphasizing the problem of common agency – wherein agents are beholden to multiple principals who cannot coordinate – it assumes that national parties, European party groups, and voters are “latent principals” that differentially constrain members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The model proposes that the degree to which each of these principals constrain MEPs depends upon signals that MEPs receive from the national political arena about their electoral vulnerability. Re-election seeking MEPs will in turn cultivate closer connections with the principal whose support is most important for reducing electoral vulnerability. Drawing on the second-order election model, signals about MEP vulnerability are measured as a national party’s success in the most recent national election, given the party’s average size, governing status, and time remaining until the European election. The model predicts three broad outcomes. First, MEPs from large or governing parties will generally be more vulnerable as their party label suffers in European elections. Expecting losses, they should cultivate closer connections to their constituents by emphasizing personal record rather than party affiliation. Second, MEPs from small or opposition parties will generally be less vulnerable as their party label is more successful in European elections. Expecting gains, these MEPs will seek to appeal to their party leaders in order to secure the safest (often only the top) place on the electoral list. Finally, the model predicts that systemic-level attributes such as voters’ right to re-order the ballot should contribute to variation in the first two outcomes. The model’s propositions are tested empirically with qualitative and quantitative evidence from 30 interviews with MEPs in 2008 and an original dataset of MEPs’ non-roll-call position taking in plenary sessions during the 6<sup>th</sup> European Parliament term.

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## **Introduction**

Is there an “electoral connection” to the European Parliament? According to most accounts of EU legislative politics, there is not (e.g., Hix 2002; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007; Farrell and Scully 2007). The central argument is that voters perceive little at stake in European elections and thus cast their ballots in order to make statements about the national political arena rather than their preferences over EU policies (Kuecheler 1991). Parties, in turn, campaign on national issues, rendering incumbents’ EU policy-making records and personal achievements in the European Parliament (EP) irrelevant to the campaign. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) therefore have no real incentive to shape their legislative behaviors to serve citizens’ interests. Instead, MEPs’ political behavior is largely determined by their national parties, which control ballot nominations and electoral list rank, and on whose reputation MEPs rely for re-election.

This perceived failure of European elections to create real accountability in the European Parliament – and the European Union more generally (e.g., Hix 1998; Farrell and Scully 2007) – is central to most work on the European Parliament. For instance, the so-called “standard version” of the democratic deficit (Weiler et al. 1995), which focuses on the role of parliaments and elections to measure the EU against domestic democracy, hinges on the idea that an electoral connection does not exist. Where elections do not work, representative government loses its starting point.

There are, however, at least three criticisms of the standard account of the electoral connection upon which much of the literature rests. First, it is theoretically incomplete. Voter behavior in European elections not only influences how parties and candidates campaign, but it also shapes electoral outcomes in distinctive ways. For instance, relative to their performance in

national elections, large and governing parties invariably fare worse in European elections than small and opposition parties (e.g., Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Kousser 2004; Marsh 2007). Thus it is not intuitive that incumbent MEPs should always tie their fates to party reputation alone.

Second, it is methodologically narrow. Evidence for the view that MEPs are principally constrained by their national parties is based solely on roll-call records in which MEPs more frequently vote according to national party ideal points rather than their own preferences. In order to substantiate this conventional wisdom, however, two procrustean assumptions must hold: loyalty must be conceptualized as a binary phenomenon and voting must be understood as the most meaningful legislative behavior. Neither assumption is testable with roll-call data.

Third, and most importantly, the conventional wisdom is difficult to reconcile with empirical reality. Since 1999, MEPs have collectively passed several reforms to the EP rules of procedure, which enable them to address local constituencies during EP plenary sessions, spend more time in their home countries, and liaise with their national parliaments. And while MEPs tend to be loyal to their national parties on roll-call votes (Hix, Noury and Roland 2007) and to serve their European party groups to obtain positions within the EP (Corbett et al. 2007; Mamadouh and Raunio 2003), evidence from this author's interviews reveals that, much like US Congressmen, MEPs also seek to mobilize and galvanize *constituency* support. MEPs, in short, behave like agents with three principals.

To the extent that there is an electoral connection to the European Parliament, it will depend upon how legislators with limited resources are able to serve multiple principals with potentially distinct demands. Assuming that legislators' first goal is re-election, this paper argues

that MEPs will serve the principal that can most effectively insure their seats in the EP. Emphasizing the problem of “common agency” – wherein agents are beholden to multiple principals who cannot coordinate their demands – the proposed model assumes that national parties, European party groups, and voters are “latent principals” that differentially constrain MEPs’ legislative behavior. The degree to which MEPs are responsive to each of these principals depends upon signals that MEPs receive from the national political arena about their electoral vulnerability. Re-election seeking MEPs will thus cultivate closer connections with the principal whose support is most important for reducing electoral vulnerability.

This proposition is substantiated by evidence from thirty interviews conducted with MEPs during the summer of 2008 and its generality is tested with original data on MEPs’ non-roll-call position taking in MEP speeches during the 6<sup>th</sup> European Parliament term (2004 – 2009). The model is explicated and tested in sections four and five. The following two sections develop the theory of the conditional electoral connection.

### **Second-Order Elections and Principal-Agent Relationships in the European Parliament**

The electoral connection (Mayhew 1974) is, at its core, a principal-agent theory wherein legislators (agents) are beholden to their electorates (principals). It departs from the notion that elected officials’ legislative behavior derives largely from their desire to win re-election. Although legislators may have many goals within an assembly (e.g., pass good legislation, hold leadership positions, develop fruitful careers, etc.), pursuing any of these objectives is contingent upon holding a seat in the legislature. Re-election is therefore legislators’ *proximal* goal, and legislators will presumably shape their political behavior to realize it.

In the archetypical case, for instance, US Congressmen will advertise their skill and expertise to voters; take pleasing positions on, and claim credit for, policies of importance to

their constituents; and provide local casework and spending projects to pivotal electorates (Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1977; Fenno 1978; Johannes 1984; Cain et al. 1984, 1987). Similarly, legislators will pursue influential positions within Congress such as committee seats and chairmanships through which they can create opportunities to cultivate the personal vote – “the portion of a candidate’s electoral support which originates in his or her personal qualities, qualifications, activities, and record” (Cain et al. 2005). The electoral connection thus implies an institutionally induced relationship between *voters* and *legislators*.

In the European Parliament, however, the electoral connection appears to lose its starting point. Strong national political parties control ballot access and rank while European party groups set the political agenda and allocate leadership positions within the EP (Hix, Noury and Roland 2007; Mamadouh and Raunio 2003; Corbett et al. 2007; McElroy 2006). To be sure, the particular institutional environment in which MEPs operate has led scholars to discount the principal-agent relationship between voters and MEPs.<sup>3</sup> As Hix, Raunio and Scully (2003) note, “this area remains largely neglected, perhaps because of widely held assumptions that any electoral connection to the EP is weak because of the way elections (do not) work” (194).

Scholars commonly dismiss the electoral connection on the grounds that voters equate elections to the European Parliament (EP) to “super opinion polls” (Blondel et al. 1988) with little substantive impact. European elections have been characterized as “second-order national contests” fought by national parties on national issues that are irrelevant to the EP or European integration in general (Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). If voters remain largely unaware of the European Parliament and its

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<sup>3</sup> This is not entirely unlike parties’ roles in certain national electoral systems. There is, however, well-evidenced variation in party control over ballot access, list rank, and intraparty competition more generally in parliamentary democracies (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984, 1987; Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 1999; Uslander 1985).

significance, then they are unlikely to punish MEPs for renegeing on electoral promises or for taking policy positions on European issues that are incongruent to their own. MEPs are thus unconstrained by electorates.

Instead, second-order elections (SOE) are believed to strongly tie MEPs to their national parties. Citizens are less participatory because they believe that little is at stake in European elections (Curtice 1989; Niedermayer 1990). To increase turnout, parties place national issues at the center of their campaigns (Blumler and Fox 1982), which reduces incumbent MEPs' opportunities to claim credit for EU-level achievements. Furthermore, the EP's role in policymaking is largely divorced from national and local contexts, which makes it impossible to promise or return particularistic benefits to constituents. And since MEPs' daily work in the EP is practically invisible to national constituencies and does not in itself merit national popularity, there are few possibilities for meaningful position taking. MEPs must therefore rely on the quality of their national party label to win European elections, and this gives national party leaders tremendous control over politics within the European Parliament.

In accordance with this conventional view of SOE effects, much work on legislative behavior in the EP implicitly assumes that national parties act as MEPs' sole principal. To be sure, national parties hold a monopoly over the electoral incentives and sanctions that determine legislators' careers, and MEPs respond with voting discipline and legislative loyalty on the floor (Hix 2002; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007; Farrell and Scully 2007). Indeed, Hix (2001, 2002, 2004, 2009) convincingly demonstrates that MEPs are highly responsive to their national parties during roll call votes. His consistent results show that, despite European party groups' control over leadership positions and political resources in the EP, MEPs will defect from their European groups when national parties' policy locations and European party group ideological positions

are incongruent. The main implication is that national parties alone shape MEPs' electoral incentive, and so MEPs remain uniquely faithful as agents of their national parties on the floor of the EP (Hix 2002).

These arguments, however, are based upon an incomplete reading of the SOE effects. In addition to characterizing the nature of election *campaigns*, SOE in Europe also yield reliable predictions of voter behavior and election *outcomes*. Citizens shrug off strategic voting during European elections and instead tend vote “with their hearts” (Reif 1984; Reif and Schmitt 1980) for parties that approximate their ideology regardless of their apparent governing capability. Citizens also vote “with the boot” (van der Eijk, Franklin and Oppenhuis 1996) to protest and punish national governing party performance (Hix and Marsh 2007).

This voting behavior produces outcomes that differ markedly from those typifying national elections. As the aggregate outcomes in Table 1 show, relative to their performance in national elections, large parties and governing parties have fared *worse* than small parties and opposition parties in every European election since 1979 (van der Eijk, Franklin, and Oppenhuis 1996; Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Kousser 2004; Marsh 1998, 2003, 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007). Thus, contrary to the traditional, “campaign-centric” reading of SOE effects, this “outcome-centric” view suggests that toeing party lines may not always be in MEPs' best electoral interests.

[Table 1 about here]

Taken together, second-order elections' effects on the structure of electoral campaigns and the nature of election outcomes present a puzzle: If MEPs are strongly tied to their national party reputations in European elections, but these reputations vary predictably according to party

size and governing status, how can incumbent MEPs most effectively secure re-election? What shapes the electoral incentive?

### **Common Agency and Electoral Vulnerability: Shaping the Electoral Incentive**

To the extent that national party leaders control ballot access and rank, national party loyalty is necessary to secure a safe place on the ballot. But it is not sufficient. Even closed-list leaders amount to more than party loyalists. List-toppers most often include accomplished incumbents who are both highly familiar with the EU policymaking and highly familiar to broad segments of the electorate. The safest spots on European electoral lists are frequently awarded to incumbents who are known for their roles in European politics (e.g., Members of the EP Bureau), national politics (e.g., former Ministers), cultural venues (e.g., journalists, athletes, and actors), and in local politics (e.g., leaders of trade unions and professional associations).

Securing re-election is presumably more complex than voting with national party preferences on roll-calls. Re-election seeking incumbents must also cultivate a variety of relationships with groups other than their national parties, as well as a strong personal record of local and European service, independent of loyalty to their national party label. As a newly socialized Czech MEP in the transnational European People's Party – European Democrats (EPP-ED) made clear during one interview:

I always try to be in my constituency as often as possible, and this means not just going for election campaigns. If you go just for campaigns you have already lost...I go to organizations, rural youth organizations, women's associations, business sectors. I always try to have more than 50 percent of my contacts and meetings outside of the party.

Most of the MEPs interviewed during the summer of 2008 shared this preoccupation with “constant campaigning.” Twenty-four out of thirty MEPs stated unequivocally that they “think



constantly about re-election.”<sup>4</sup> Though the MEPs offered different accounts of how they pursue re-election. Several interviewees cited media relationships as their central focus. A Danish Liberal for the Alliance of European Democrats (ALDE) noted:

We try to think, ‘what would be the good story in Denmark?’ And sometimes we will make very small stories from down here [Brussels]...seem very important to public interest in Denmark to persuade journalists to write about it. And not always the big things because the big things down here are very technical...

Many others, like the Czech MEP cited above, emphasized constituency service during trips home. In fact, two thirds of the MEPs interviewed plainly argued that monthly plenary sessions be moved from Strasbourg to Brussels so they might allocate more time to this type of service.<sup>5</sup> Plenary sessions also figured prominently into the discussions with MEPs for another reason: speaking on the floor affords legislators a key opportunity to clarify their positions on relevant policy issues. Asked to elaborate on a similar point, one MEP responded:

MEP: I speak in plenary when I want to stress that an issue impacts my region.

Author: To whom do you stress it?

MEP: To the constituency, of course. I break down what we are doing here in Europe and what result it has for the constituency. That is very important.

Another MEP revealed his “strategy” for plenary speeches:

...in Plenary you have to be clear, because the journalists are there and it’s the journalists who are supposed to be the medium between you and the larger audience at home. And they have to get it right.

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<sup>4</sup> I conducted semi-scheduled interviews: all lead questions were worded the same but I tailored follow-ups to the specific response. In this case, the exact lead question to which MEPs responded was “Many observers of the US Congress note that Members of Congress constantly think about re-election. Would you say that you constantly think about re-election to the European Parliament?”

<sup>5</sup> Eliminating Strasbourg plenary sessions is a perennial issue “owned” by the conservative EPP-ED, who oppose it on economic grounds. My interviews sampled MEPs from each of the six European party groups and one nonattached member, and vocal opponents of Strasbourg plenary sessions are present in every party.

Loyalty to European party groups and to national party leaders also played into MEPs' concerns, but the latter to a much greater extent. Indeed, three MEPs claimed that service to the European party group was only electorally important when it raised MEPs' visibility in the national parties as European "experts." But the vast majority of the interviewees noted that their national party leaders consider "expertise" secondary in importance to "visibility" at home. Seven interviewed MEPs claimed that committee chairmanships and other leadership positions within the EP serve visibility; however, the vast majority believed that loyalty to the European party group is a procedural norm that is not related to electoral viability.

The MEPs themselves thus lend doubt to the conventional scholarly wisdom that national parties are their sole principal and their sole concern. Moreover, this evidence challenges the more fundamental assumption of a "null" relationship between voters and MEPs. These accounts instead lend credence to a familiar assumption about US Members of Congress, who maintain an electoral connection even though it is well established that most Americans possess too little meaningful political knowledge to truly hold them accountable (e.g., Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Legislators nonetheless serve voters either out of normative obligations (Pitkin 1967) or for fear that, at any moment, voters could acquire the knowledge needed to hold them to account (e.g., Mann 1978; Jacobson 1987, 1989).

Re-election seeking MEPs may thus be conceptualized as agents with three latent principals – national parties, European party groups, and voters. Each offers distinctive rewards to responsive agents, which may be useful to re-election seeking MEPs. National parties control ballot access and rank; European party groups allocate key leadership positions through which MEPs can shape the political agenda; voters cast ballots for party lists or individuals whose

names and reputations they know and trust. MEPs receive these rewards to the extent that they serve their principals' interests. To the extent that MEPs fail to meet their principals' demands, they may be punished. National party leaders can remove incumbents from initial safe positions on the electoral list; European party groups can work to withhold committee chairmanships; some citizens may not turn out to vote, while others who do may vote "with the boot."

On one hand, serving these principals is costly. Local constituencies, European party groups and national parties may have competing demands, and MEPs possess too few resources to permit all to be satisfied equally. On the other hand, these principals face a coordination problem: national parties, European party groups, and voters cannot collectively monitor or constrain MEPs' political behavior because they hold different preferences, pursue different objectives, are not equally attentive to MEPs' work, and possess different formal means of control. This collective action problem of "common agency" means that agents have incentives to shirk their responsibilities to the weakest principals. That is, without coordination, individual principals will offer different payoff structures to agents, who in turn compare the offers and respond only to the principal awarding the highest payoff or threatening the most austere sanctions. In this way, MEPs can maximize their payoffs with minimal costs.

Taking the electoral incentive as an explanatory lever, I assume that incumbent MEPs are "single-minded seekers of re-election" (Mayhew 1974). Although MEPs may certainly wish to pass good policies, obtain leadership positions, and so on, all such objectives require that MEPs first secure re-election. To do so, MEPs must minimize their electoral vulnerability – that is, they must secure the position on their party's electoral list which is most likely to win a seat after votes are tallied.

MEPs face two sorts of electoral vulnerability. First, MEPs are vulnerable to the extent that their personal reputations and records are weak. The balance of positive and negative influences on an incumbent's personal record determines his or her placement on the electoral list and constitutes "*personal vulnerability*." An increase in personal vulnerability may result from lack of name recognition; public scandals; failure to appeal to supportive organized interests; or fallout with party leaders. Second, MEPs are vulnerable to the extent that their national party labels are vulnerable. That is, they are subject to "*party vulnerability*." Given that European electorates disproportionately punish parties according to their size (i.e., vote share in most recent election) and governing status (i.e., at time of EP election), national parties can reasonably estimate their vote shares in European elections. Smaller or opposition parties that are less exposed to protest voting can expect larger overall vote shares than they received in the most recent elections, and are virtually guaranteed a seat in the EP (Hix and Marsh 2007). Larger parties and governing parties expect losses to their vote and seat shares relative to their shares in the most recent election, such that there is less security in higher placement on their electoral lists.

Legislators' and parties' reputations are developed and devastated at home. MEPs therefore draw on signals from the national political arena to estimate their own risk. Personal vulnerability is captured by an MEP's electoral list rank during the previous European election; party vulnerability is reflected in an MEP's national party performance in the most recent national election. Party vulnerability, moreover, has a galvanizing effect on personal vulnerability: higher-ranked incumbents from parties that expect to lose seats in the upcoming European election suffer more personal vulnerability than equivalently-ranked incumbents from safe parties.

To understand how these two types of vulnerability interact, it is useful to conceptualize them in terms of probabilities. For instance, consider a hypothetical electoral list with 4 placements. Given an MEP's previous list rank, the MEP estimates that she has a certain probability of attaining each place on that list. These add to 1.00; formally:  $\text{Pr}(1^{\text{st}}) + \text{Pr}(2^{\text{nd}}) + \text{Pr}(3^{\text{rd}}) + \text{Pr}(4^{\text{th}}) = 1$ . Similarly, the party has a unique probability that it will attain each seat on the list. These also add to one, such that  $\text{Pr}(\text{win } 1^{\text{st}}) + \text{Pr}(\text{win } 2^{\text{nd}}) + \text{Pr}(\text{win } 3^{\text{rd}}) + \text{Pr}(\text{win } 4^{\text{th}}) = 1$ . Taken together, an MEP's electoral vulnerability is the probability that he or she will be placed on the list given the probability that the party will in fact win that seat.<sup>6</sup>

The types of vulnerability that MEPs face in turn shape their strategies regarding how best to reduce their risk of loss. That is, the electoral connection is conditional on electoral vulnerability. The logic is straightforward. Personally vulnerable MEPs are nested within vulnerable parties and institutional contexts that mediate their decisions about which principal to serve. Given both the initial level of personal vulnerability and its contextually "weighted" levels, MEPs will cultivate closer relationships with the principals that can most likely reduce their electoral risk.

### **A Spot Check: Electoral Connections, 2004 – 2008**

The MEPs interviewed for this study generally agreed that among their three latent principals, only two – national parties and voters – are actively relevant to their electoral fortunes. To which principal will MEPs be more responsive?

The second-order elections model yields reliable predictions of parties' expected vote shares in European elections relative to national elections (see Table 1). Governing and large

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<sup>6</sup> That is,  $\text{Pr}(1^{\text{st}}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{win } 1^{\text{st}}) + \text{Pr}(2^{\text{nd}}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{win } 2^{\text{nd}}) + \text{Pr}(3^{\text{rd}}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{win } 3^{\text{rd}}) + \text{Pr}(4^{\text{th}}) \times \text{Pr}(\text{win } 4^{\text{th}}) = 1$

parties are more vulnerable and therefore increase the electoral risk to candidates. The opposite is true of small and opposition parties – they are less vulnerable and seats in the EP are nearly guaranteed (Hix and Marsh 2007).

MEPs from governing or large parties thus face incentives to distinguish themselves from their parties, whose labels will likely suffer in the next European election. The opposite is true of small or opposition parties – they are less vulnerable and a seat in the EP is nearly guaranteed (Hix and Marsh 2007), so these MEPs may rely more on party label. These general relationships, however, necessarily depend upon personal vulnerability (i.e., list rank). Where MEPs from large parties are placed *low* on electoral lists, responsiveness to constituents may shield against partisan swings. Where MEPs from large parties are ranked *high* on electoral lists, they are free from the whims of partisan shifts. Nonetheless, high-ranked MEPs from large or governing parties do risk certain damages to their own reputations. Since these MEPs act as the public “faces” of the party, they incur potential costs to their own records when associated with a suffering party label and when their party list does not perform well under their names. For this reason, high-ranked incumbents from large or governing parties will likely focus on serving the interests of the party leadership to ensure future rewards.

Thus, among large or governing parties (read: where party vulnerability is high):

*H1a: High-ranked (low personal vulnerability) MEPs will forge closer connections with party leaders.*

*H1b: Low-ranked (high personal vulnerability) MEPs will forge closer connections with voters.*

The opposite trend should characterize small and opposition parties. High-ranked MEPs in these parties also do not need to shield themselves against partisan swings. However, since their party label will tend to gain currency in European elections vis-à-vis national elections, high-ranked MEPs face little cost to their own reputations as the public faces of the party. Therefore, we should expect *high* ranking MEPs to spread their party's reputation among voters in order to increase the magnitude of the favorable partisan swing that can bring additional seats to that party. *Low* ranking MEPs from small parties, in turn, can benefit from these partisan swings. These candidates will likely vie for a better list position by appealing to party leaders for higher rankings as a means of capturing these extra seats.

Therefore, among small or opposition parties (read: where party vulnerability is low):

*H2a: High-ranked MEPs will forge closer connections with voters.*

*H2b: Low-ranked MEPs will forge closer connections with party leaders.*

These general relationships are represented in Table 2, below.

[Table 2 about here]

Data collected during 30 semi-scheduled interviews with MEPs in the summer of 2008 permit two preliminary tests that will serve as a spot check on these general hypotheses. The semi-schedule interview technique provides for standardized lead-in questions, asked to all 30 respondents, and improvised follow-up questions. One of the five standardized questions inquired about constituency service. It read, "How often do you meet with constituents to discuss your work and/or their interests in Europe?" 100 percent of MEPs answered this question, and their responses were coded on a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 represents "infrequent contact" and 3

indicates “very frequent contact.”<sup>7</sup> As a first validity check, Table 3 locates each of the 30 respondents, labeled by their rank on the 2004 electoral list, according to their national party size and frequency of constituency service.

[Table 3 about here]

The results generally reflect the hypothesized relationships between vulnerability and constituency connections. In the upper-left quadrant, we expect highly vulnerable MEPs from large or governing parties to be more responsive to their party leaders than to their constituents. Half of the expectation is borne out in Table 3, where these high-ranking MEPs tend to spend less time discussing political matters with their constituents than lower-ranking MEPs from parties of similar size (upper-right quadrant). There are outliers: two “3<sup>rd</sup>” ranked candidates in the upper-right cell boast “frequent” constituency service. Generally, however, the low-ranked MEPs from large or governing parties cluster in this area, where we expect greater connections with constituencies.

We expect similar attentiveness to voters among high-ranked MEPs from small parties. These MEPs are largely found in the lower-right quadrant, which lends supports the notion of constituency service among those MEPs who seek to increase the number of fringe seats resulting from partisan swings. Finally, the lower-left quadrant generally supports the hypothesis that low-ranking MEPs from small parties will not engage in constituency service.

The second validity check on the conditional electoral connection theory follows the same logic used for the first. In place of constituency service, however, I employ a measure of responsiveness to national party leaders. The measure is the percentage of roll call votes on

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically, 1 = infrequent contact (“never” to “every few months”); 2 = somewhat frequently (“every month”); 3 = frequently (“every few weeks” to “every week”).



which the MEP voted in accordance with his or her national party's issue position. The latter is assumed to equal the vote (i.e., for or against) cast by the national party delegation leader in the MEP's European party group.<sup>8</sup> The results appear in Table 4, below.

[Table 4 about here]

Table 4 reveals an unsurprising trend – most MEPs are very loyal to their national parties on roll call votes. This claim is well substantiated and lays at the foundation of most recent studies of the EP (e.g., Hix 2001, 2002, 2004, 2009). In light of Table 3, however, it is difficult to claim that MEPs are *not* responsive to their voters – and, more basically, it is wrong to claim that they behave as if they are unconstrained by voters. Together these tables suggest that “loyalty,” is not a binary phenomenon, as most studies employing roll call votes alone require. That is, MEPs are able to serve multiple principles through distinct, mutually nonexclusive means.

Nonetheless, constituency service and party loyalty as measured in Tables 3 and 4 are not comparable along the same metric; it is difficult to make comparative statements regarding the conditions under which MEPs will be more or less responsive to a single principal. The next section expands the conditional electoral connection theory and introduces a statistical model with which to better discern these relationships.

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<sup>8</sup> The original source for this measure is the now defunct oversight site, “How MEPs Work.”

### **The Conditional Electoral Connection**

The evidence presented thus far reveals that MEPs are, in fact, responsive to voters as well as to their national parties. However, these conclusions ought to be deemed tentative until two issues are resolved. First, the indicators of roll-call vote behavior and constituency service – as employed in the two validity checks above – are not comparable measures and therefore do not permit us to conclude that MEPs will be more responsive to one principal or the other under different conditions of vulnerability. Second, the findings ought to be read conservatively since they rely on 30 face-to-face interviews and may not represent MEPs’ general behavioral patterns.

The “condition” of the electoral connection is that MEPs will serve the principal that is most able to reduce their electoral vulnerability. However, MEPs may respond differently to their vulnerability under different circumstances. For instance, electoral systems may strongly influence the relationship between principals, agents, and vulnerability. Candidates for European elections come to be positioned on electoral lists in a similar fashion across national parties. Party leaders – either on their own or while caucusing with party members – determine which candidates will be placed on the ballot and where they will be ranked. The degree to which candidates are bound to those positions, however, depends upon national electoral systems. Table 5 reveals considerable variation in electoral formulas used in European elections. Several countries employ “open” and “ordered-list” systems, in which voters may re-rank candidates and/or weight their votes in favor of candidates according to their preferences. These systems encourage intraparty competition for preference votes, and thereby render low-ranked incumbents less vulnerable than equivalently-ranked incumbents in other systems.

[Table 5 about here]

Additionally, MEPs' sense of vulnerability is largely conditional on their career ambitions (e.g., Scarrow 1997). An MEP who wishes to pursue a ministerial position in national government will likely be less concerned with her rank on the European electoral list than an MEP who wishes to hold the EP Presidency. These additional conditions on the nature of the electoral connection permit richer hypotheses regarding MEPs' legislative behavior and whom it serves. Indeed, the expected patterns of agency proposed in H1a – H2b differ when we take account of these conditions. For instance, legislators elected through electoral systems that foster intra-party competition and personal vote-seeking (Cain et al. 2005) should promote greater responsiveness to constituent interests regardless of vulnerability. Specifically,

*H3: MEPs elected under systems that promote intraparty competition will forge closer connections with their constituents.*

By contrast, MEPs who desire to return to national politics should engage in greater party service than MEPs who wish to flourish in the EP. Individuals with the former interests will be preoccupied with securing a strong “counter-offer” in the national legislature or government, and will likely express far greater loyalty to the national party – which controls career paths – than to constituents. Thus,

*H4: MEPs who seek office in national government will forge closer connections with party leaders.*

One final possibility is that national party loyalty and responsiveness to the constituency are strongly related. Given that “personal vulnerability” is a summary measure of the plausible reasons behind a candidate's position on the electoral list, MEPs may grow more responsive to constituents when they have been *disloyal* to their parties. In this sense, constituency

responsiveness is a safety net directly linked to faltering MEP-national party relations. Specifically,

*H5: As MEPs increasingly defect from their national parties on roll call votes, they will forge stronger connections with voters.*

## **Data and Measurement**

### *The Dependent Variable*

To which principals MEPs are beholden is not fully assessable with roll-call records. Loyalty is not a binary variable. While legislators may only cast one vote, there are numerous ways to qualify, trade, or justify a single vote through other means. Moreover, party and personal reputations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A legislator can easily take up positions that endear her to the constituency while still toeing party lines. But roll call voting records do not permit us to observe the nuances of position-taking in legislative behavior. Furthermore, as Carrubba et al. (2006) argue, selection bias is especially pernicious in EP roll call samples. Roll call votes are more frequently taken on resolutions than legislative proposals and tend to overestimate party cohesion due to high absenteeism.

Moreover, voting in plenary is not the only meaningful legislative behavior. This is particularly true of the European context, where process is as, if not more, important than product. Roll call votes on the floor of Strasbourg plenary sessions are often formal acknowledgements of deals struck in European political group pre-plenary meetings held during the preceding week (Corbett et al. 2007). At these meetings, national party delegations in the EP coordinate with their home offices and clarify their voting intentions to European party group leaders (ibid).

This sort of political maneuvering is often assumed away in roll call analyses because political scientists can't observe what happens behind the scenes. MEPs, however, deliver *public* speeches on a wide variety of topics on an almost daily basis. As a consequence, MEPs may make statements that are either symbolic or strategic. Speeches about European politics contain more detailed information than simple yes or no votes and are likely to reveal preference data on both the political maneuvers invisible to roll call data, and the issues that never make it to roll call in the first place (Proksch and Slapin 2008).

Moreover, unlike roll call voting loyalty – which may derive equivalently from cohesion or coercion – the expression of loyalty in legislative speeches may be located in the speeches' target audiences. Indeed, MEPs tend to view speeches as important position-taking mechanisms. When asked whether he uses floor time to express loyalty to his political party, one MEP plainly responded:

No, no. I am loyal to them when I vote and that is enough. On the floor I must explain my votes to the constituents, and how voting in favor or against makes me loyal to them too. Sometimes I must explain why I could not be loyal to them.<sup>9</sup>

Identifying the target audiences in legislative speeches permits a better comparison of MEP responsiveness to their constituents and to their national party leaders. MEPs have a reasonable expectation that they are monitored by their national parties, and media coverage of Strasbourg plenary sessions may enhance MEPs' belief that constituents pay attention. Given condensed speaking time, MEPs may not be able to rhetorically satisfy both constituent and party interests in a single speech. Deciding how to speak – and for whom to speak – is thus a costly choice.

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<sup>9</sup> Author interview with Spanish MEP, 14 June 2008.

The latent construct underlying my dependent variable is the tradeoff an MEP makes between expressing loyalty to her national party and expressing loyalty to her constituents in legislative speeches. This tradeoff reflects how MEPs “calculate” loyalties and can indicate when, and under what circumstances MEPs tend to respond more to one principal than another.

To capture this tradeoff, I employ as my primary dependent variable the ratio of references that an MEP makes to his/her voters/constituency and references an MEP makes to his/her national party during legislative speeches. This “ratio of references” (ROR) measure is derived from the content analysis of all MEP speeches during the 6<sup>th</sup> EP term (up to January 2009).<sup>10</sup> Specifically, I constructed a word count dataset with key words and phrases as rows and MEPs as columns. To tap national party references, the content analysis program counted mentions of 1) the MEP’s national party name and 2) the phrase “my party” in each speech. To tap constituency references, the program counted references to 1) “voters,” 2) variations on “my constituency” (e.g., “my constituents”), and 3) references to intermediary associations such as “trade unions.” For each MEP, the number of “constituency references” was compared to the number of “party references,” yielding a ratio that indicates MEPs’ average “target of representation”:

$$\text{Representation Target} = \frac{(\text{Constituency References} - \text{Party References})}{\text{Total References}}$$

The dependent variable is bounded between -1 and 1, where -1 indicates exclusive representation of national party in speeches and 1 indicates exclusive representation of

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<sup>10</sup> Following Proksch and Slapin (2008), I employ Will Lowe’s *jjfreq* program to search and collect keywords and phrases. The program is available from <http://people.iq.harvard.edu/~wlowe/Software.html>. I was able to compile a comparable dataset using the “Python” program: <http://people.iq.harvard.edu/~wlowe/PyContent.html>.

constituents in legislative speeches. Finally, where the dependent variable equals 0, MEPs referred as many times to their party as they did to their constituents.

### *Individual-Level Variables*

Data with which to measure individual-level variables was drawn from two sources. The majority of my measures derive from my original dataset of MEP careers, which includes information ranging from patterns of voting loyalty and cohesion, to committee positions and transfers to seniority and MEP electoral list rank in previous European elections (i.e., 1999 and 2004). The main individual level variable included here is “RANK2004” which lists the electoral list position of candidates for EP elections in 2004 and is intended to proxy for “personal vulnerability. Since rules differ across parties and across countries regarding how many names may be included on an electoral list, my measure of list rank is weighted by the total number of names included on each national party’s electoral list. A candidate ranking 3<sup>rd</sup> on a list of 6 is presumably less safe than a candidate ranking 3<sup>rd</sup> on a list of 12.<sup>11</sup>

I also included several individual-level controls which could impact speech counts. First, I controlled for MEPs’ loyalty to their national parties (“PARTY LOYALTY”) in roll call votes by calculating the percent of roll call votes on which MEPs voted with their national party. For this measure, as well as my second control variable, progressive ambition (“AMBITION”), I employ the Farrell et al. (2006) Survey of MEPs. The survey contains data on 255 MEPs in the 6<sup>th</sup> European Parliament (2004 – 2009). “Ambition” is a dummy variable that captures MEP responses to a question regarding where they would like to work “next.” MEPs were coded “1” when they indicated a preference for national government and received a code of 0 otherwise. Finally, I control for “turnover” rate among MEPs in each party. I assume that where turnover is

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<sup>11</sup> I subtracted the weighted measure from 1 such that larger values represent higher ranks. For instance, in the example given,  $[1 - (3/6) = .5] < [1 - (3/12) = .75]$ .

high, constituency and party loyalty are less electorally relevant since parties lose some control because of their need to fill as many seats as possible.

### *Contextual Variables*

At the systemic-level, party vulnerability is captured by two variables. First, following convention (Ringe and Koepke 2005; Marsh 2003, 2007; Hix and Marsh 2007), “PARTY SIZE” is measured as an MEP’s national party’s vote share in the most recent national election. Second, “OPPOSITION” is coded 1 where the party is in opposition, and 0 where in government. In this sense, party vulnerability captures the potential gains or losses a large or governing national party can expect in European elections relative to national elections, as predicted by the second-order elections model.

Second, the extent to which an electoral system encourages personal vote-seeking incentives (“PERSONAL VOTE”) is measured with the Shugart and Carey (1995) index. This three-item index measures party leaders control over access to the ballot, whether votes are pooled across the party or across some sub-unit of the party (e.g., electoral list or candidates), and whether citizens are able to cast more than a single vote. Where party leaders have full control over nominations, where votes are pooled across the party, and where citizens have only one vote, the index takes a value of 3 – the *least* amount of personal vote-seeking incentives. Alternatively, where party leaders have virtually no control over nominations (e.g., primaries in the US), votes can be transferred from one candidate to another, and citizens have more than one vote to cast (e.g., for a party and for a candidate, or for two candidates, etc.), the index takes a value of 9 – the *greatest* amount of personal vote-seeking incentives. Different combinations yield intermediate values, but they are coded such that higher values reflect greater incentives to cultivate the personal vote.



## Statistical Methodology

Because the thing that I wish to measure is at the individual-level measure – MEPs' responsiveness to different principals – and the things hypothesized to affect it are at both the individual and systemic-level, I prefer a multilevel modeling technique, which allows me to explore causal heterogeneity while also limiting error.

Multilevel models permit the incorporation of contextual variables into the individual-level equation without assuming a deterministic relationship between them. That is, multilevel models permit first an assessment of what systemic-factors explain average propensity to respond to a given principal, and second what systemic-factors can explain the relative weights or slopes of the individual-level independent variables. In this sense, the model intuitively and appropriately (from a statistical point of view) integrates party and personal vulnerability as antecedents of responsiveness.

$$Target_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}Rank2004_{ij} + \beta_{2j}PartyLoyalty_{ij} + \beta_{3j}Ambition_{ij} + \beta_{4j}Turnover_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

And at the contextual-level, the equation for the individual-level intercept:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}PartySize_j + \gamma_{02}Opposition_j + \gamma_{03}PersonalVote_j + \delta_{0j}$$

And the contextual-level equations for the individual-level regression weights :

$$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}PartyVulnerability + \gamma_{12}Opposition + \gamma_{13}PersonalVote + \delta_{1j}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}PartyVulnerability + \gamma_{22}Opposition + \gamma_{23}PersonalVote + \delta_{2j}$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31}PartyVulnerability + \gamma_{32}Opposition + \gamma_{33}PersonalVote + \delta_{3j}$$

The model is specified so that the individual-level slope and individual-level intercept are modeled identically at the contextual-level. This is because the contextual factors may not only influence the differential role that personal vulnerability (i.e., Rank), party loyalty and ambition

play in determining inter-MEP differences in incidence rates of plenary speeches, but also the *average* outputs in terms of speech and responsiveness across national parties as well.

## **Results**

[Table 6 about here]

Table 6 presents both the individual-level “Model 1” and the fully specified “Model 2.” All level-1 predictors achieve significance at conventional levels. The intercept value of  $-.219$  indicates that MEPs’ loyalties generally favor the national party over the constituency when all other values are held to zero.<sup>12</sup> However, more vulnerable MEPs will tend to target the party less – in favor of ordinary voters – by  $.072$  for every increase in list rank. The same is true for roll-call loyalists. Indeed, contrary to Hypothesis 5, MEPs who are loyal to their parties on roll call votes tend to *increase* their emphasis on voters in legislative speeches. This is not the case for MEPs who wish to hold office in national government – in accordance with Hypothesis 4, these incumbents tend to favor their national parties 13.1% more than EP careerists during legislative speeches.

However, Model 1 is incomplete. The variance components (the estimated covariance of the randomly varying individual-level intercept,  $\beta_{0j}$ , across contextual units) for this model are statistically significant, indicating that there is a significant amount of variation in the dependent variable across contextual units when controlling only for the individual-level attributes of the MEPs. Put simply, the model is not correctly specified until contextual-factors are included. The

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<sup>12</sup> The level-1 predictors have been centered to provide intuitive meanings behind the ceteris paribus condition. List rank is centered on its median (i.e., the middle of the list); Ambition’s zero-value indicates an EP careerist; and roll call loyalty is centered on its mean.

fact that contextual variation is present when fitting a model with only individual-level predictors is a strong confirmation of the multilevel model approach.

In Model 2, with the contextual components included, the variance components are smaller. This means that the contextual-level variables in this model have accounted for some of the cross-system variation in the dependent variable that Model 1 did not. It should be noted that Model 2 is a significantly better fit than Model 1. Subtracting the deviances and dividing by the differences in the degrees of freedom is equivalent to a chi-squared test insofar as Model 1 is nested within Model 2, wherein the latter's contextual effects are 'constrained' to zero. Model 2 thus provides a significantly better fit to the data than Model 1.

In Model 2, the cross-level interaction terms largely achieve statistical significance at conventional levels. The level-1 predictors remain highly significant, though there are considerable differences. The measures of party vulnerability – party size and opposition – reveal interesting influences on the intercept. For every percentage increase in an MEP's party's vote share in the last national election, we see a 1.9% increase in the dependent variable. This indicates that, *ceteris paribus*, MEPs from larger parties tend to speak to *constituents* rather than party leaders in legislative speeches. The effect is even larger among national opposition party MEPs, who take positions on behalf of voters 2.1% more than MEPs from governing parties. Finally, and unsurprisingly, the effects of intraparty competition on speech behavior comports with predictions. For every unit increase in personal vote-seeking incentives, there is a 15.1 percent increase in the ratio of references favoring constituents over parties.

These contextual features also impact individual-level slopes. Examining the effects on "List rank" (i.e., personal vulnerability) clarify the influence. Party size and opposition status

have *opposite* effects. Thus, for every one percentage gain in an MEP's party vote share in the last national election (party size), the ratio *decreases* by 4.5 percent. This indicates that high-ranked MEPs from vulnerable parties tend to favor parties over constituents. Contrariwise, MEPs from opposition parties who are highly ranked tend to speak to constituents 10.7 percent *less* than vulnerable MEPs from governing parties. This in turn suggests that safe MEPs from safe parties tend to serve voters more than party leaders. Together, these effects lend supportive evidence to Hypotheses 1 and 2. Finally, Hypothesis 3 is strongly supported: in all instances increasing personal-vote seeking incentives dampens negative slopes and serves to enhance position taking in favor of constituents.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Is there an electoral connection to the European Parliament? This paper challenges the conventional scholarly wisdom that there is not. The mixed methods approach has substantiated at least three criticisms of the traditional view of the principal-agent relationship between voters and legislators in the European Parliament. First, reading the second-order elections model for its outcomes rather than its effects on campaigns yields important revisions to the claim that MEPs tie themselves most strongly to their national parties' reputations in European elections. To the contrary, MEPs tie their fates to the principal that can most effectively reduce their electoral vulnerability given MEPs' expectations about list rank and aggregate party losses in vote share.

Second, the statistical findings expose an alternative measure of party-loyal behavior that is more comparable to constituent responsiveness. The constituency – party mentions ratio makes clear that MEPs must at times trade off service to the party for service to the constituency in floor behavior, and vice versa. Moreover, the qualitative evidence showing that constituency

service and roll call voting behavior varies with personal vulnerability clearly demonstrates that loyalty need not be a binary phenomenon.

Third, the evidence presented on MEP legislative behavior serves to align theoretical expectations with empirical reality. The theory of common agency posits that MEPs will make rational choices regarding whom to serve as agents. It evidences this theory with MEPs' own words and individual-level behavioral data to reveal that, while MEPs intend to serve three different principals, when they are forced to choose, they respond most to the principals responsible for their career's longevity. This is the hallmark of the electoral connection.

The study is certainly not without flaws. The measure of loyalty as speech-target is admittedly crude and it is not necessarily clear that speaking on behalf of one principal or another on the floor constitutes "service" to that principal. However, it is a first attempt at testing for whether MEPs calculate their loyalties. In that regard, what is more problematic is that this design cannot resolve the possibility that serving the national party and serving the constituency may be, in MEPs' minds, identical tasks. Given that voters do cast ballots for national parties, MEPs' explanations of votes in plenary may just as likely serve to bolster the party's image as the MEPs' own. To resolve these questions, perhaps measures of "district" or "national" ideology should be developed as baselines against which to compare MEP nominate scores.

Finally, even if this paper has succeeded in establishing an electoral connection between voters and their MEPs, this should not be misconstrued as having established that the EU democratic deficit is no longer a concern. The electoral connection is an instrumental, principal-agent relationship that shapes legislative behavior and organization. The electoral connection creates incentives for legislators to *make apparent* their service to constituents; it does not

guarantee that this service will be anything more than a façade, or a pseudo-representation. Further work is most certainly necessary to disentangle the organizational and normative developments in the European Parliament.

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**Table 1: Aggregate Second-Order Election Outcomes (1979 – 2004)**

	EU-15			2004 Accession States		
	Average Gain†	Standard Error	N	Average Gain†	Standard Error	N
<i>Governing Parties</i>	-3.05	0.67	97	-1.23	5.29	12
<i>Large Parties</i>	-3.00	0.49	162	-5.20	2.25	24
<i>Opposition Parties</i>	9.50	1.39	22	3.30	2.45	3
<i>Small Parties</i>	1.20	0.21	420	2.50	0.97	58

Notes:

Party size is measured as the percent of votes received in most recent national election

†average gain in percent of votes relative to most recent national election

Source: Hix and Marsh (2007)

**Table 2: Electoral Vulnerability and Electoral Connections**

		Personal Vulnerability	
		Low (safe rank)	High (unsafe rank)
Party Vulnerability	High (large party)	<i>Connection to Party Leaders</i>	<i>Connection to Voters</i>
	Low (small party)	<i>Connection to Voters</i>	<i>Connection to Party Leaders</i>

**Table 3: Electoral Vulnerability and Constituency Service**

		Constituency Service										
		Low				High						
Party Vulnerability	High	1			2			3	7	8	4	5
		1	2			3			9		5	5
		3	2			3						6
	Low											3
		1				4		2				6
		7	4								2	3
	2		5	6							1	

**Table 4: Electoral Vulnerability and National Party Loyalty**

		Party Loyalty								
		Low				High				
Party Vulnerability	High		3	2	3	7	8		1	1
	Low	4	6	1	2		2		3	6

**Table 5: European Electoral Systems (2004)**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Ballot Structure</b>	<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Districts</b>
<i>Austria</i>	Ordered; single vote	National	1
<i>Belgium</i>	Ordered; multi-vote	Regional	3
<i>Cyprus</i>	Ordered; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Czechia</i>	Ordered; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Denmark</i>	Open; single vote	National	1
<i>Estonia</i>	Open; single vote	National	1
<i>Finland</i>	Open; single vote	National	1
<i>France</i>	Closed; single vote	Regional	8
<i>Germany</i>	Closed; single vote	National	1
<i>Greece</i>	Closed; single vote	National	1
<i>Hungary</i>	Closed; single vote	National	1
<i>Ireland</i>	Open; multi-vote	Regional	4
<i>Italy</i>	Open; multi-vote	Regional	1
<i>Latvia</i>	Ordered; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Lithuania</i>	Open; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Luxembourg</i>	Open; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Malta</i>	Open; multi-vote	National	1
<i>Netherlands</i>	Ordered; single vote	National	1
<i>Poland</i>	Closed; single vote	Regional	1
<i>Portugal</i>	Closed; single vote	National	1
<i>Slovakia</i>	Ordered; single vote	National	1
<i>Slovenia</i>	Ordered; single vote	National	1
<i>Spain</i>	Closed; single vote	National	1
<i>Sweden</i>	Ordered; single vote	National	1
<i>UK - GB</i>	Closed; single vote	Regional	11

## Notes:

Closed lists tend to reduce intraparty electoral competition. Rankings are fixed; voters may not re-order rankings. Open lists encourage intraparty competition. Voters may re-order lists. Ordered Lists encourage more intraparty competition than closed lists, but less than open lists. Voters may not re-order lists, but often may “cumulate” votes to a single candidate as an indicator of preference

Source: Farrell and Scully (2007).

**Table 6: Determinants of MEP's Responsiveness to Constituents and National Parties**

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>
<b><i>Fixed-Effects</i></b>				
Intercept				
Constant	- 0.219	0.025*	- 0.099	0.015*
Party Size			0.019	0.001*
Opposition Party			0.021	0.005*
Personal Vote			0.151	0.011*
List Rank Slope	- 0.072	0.003*	- 0.081	0.004*
Party Size			- 0.045	0.001*
Opposition Party			0.107	0.049*
Personal Vote			0.073	0.050*
Ambition Slope	- 0.131	0.033*	- 0.110	0.050*
Party Size			0.002	0.001
Opposition Party			- 0.241	0.119*
Personal Vote			- 0.010	0.003*
Roll Call Loyalty	0.067	0.022*	0.078	0.031*
Party Size			0.051	0.042
Opposition Party			- 0.092	0.013*
Personal Vote			0.102	0.020*
<b><i>Random Effects</i></b>				
	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Variance Component</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Variance Component</i>
Intercept	0.137	0.019**	0.0978	0.009*
List Rank slope	0.089	0.008**	0.071	0.005*
Ambition slope	0.001	0.000**	0.009	0.000*
level-1	0.164	0.027**	0.1628	0.027*
<b><i>Model Fit</i></b>				
	<i>Deviance</i>	<i>AIC</i>	<i>Deviance</i>	<i>AIC</i>
N = 255	-332.0	-312	-353.8	-327.8