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Explaining group membership in the European Parliament: the British Conservatives and the Movement for European Reform

Andreas Maurer, Roderick Parkes and Markus Wagner

ABSTRACT This article examines the decisions behind group membership in the European Parliament (EP) using a rational-choice institutionalist framework. Following the goals ascribed to them by Strøm (1990) in other settings, 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 parliamentarians and existing EP groups. The scope open to these various actors to pursue their interests determines the attractiveness of the various options available to a national party. We illustrate our conceptual framework 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 of an extra-parliamentary federation, the Movement for European Reform.

KEY WORDS Conservative Party; European Parliament; European People's Party; group membership; Movement for European Reform; party groups.

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 characteristics of group behaviour, as well as on the more fundamental question of why groups should have formed in the EP and its predecessor (Raunio 1997; Kreppel 2002; Hix *et al.* 2003, 2007). Here, we set out a conceptual framework to address this lacuna.

(Re-)configuring 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 and the party's own parliamentarians. Drawing on Strøm's (1990) analysis of political actors in other settings, we assume that national parties and European parliamentary groups weighing up membership questions are primarily motivated by that

triad of political goals usually referred to in shorthand as ‘policy’, ‘office’ and ‘votes’. However, we argue that a different set of goals is needed to explain individual parliamentarians’ behaviour, namely ‘policy’, ‘career’ and ‘re-election’ (Mayhew 1974; Hix *et al.* 2007: 28).

Despite this emphasis on actors’ motivations, ours remains a rational-choice *institutionalist* model. Like Strøm (1990: 566) we assume that parties are rational actors but ‘stress the constraints imposed by their organizational and institutional environments’. As regards the institutional setting, we emphasize the role played by the formal rules governing both group formation and the distribution of parliamentary power. As for the organizational dimension, 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, 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 extra-parliamentary party federation founded with the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) that is supposed to form the potential basis for a new group in the next – 2009–14 – Parliament. We thereby analyse an event that has already proved of interest to observers of both British politics (Bale 2006) and the EP (Lightfoot 2006).

These developments are well suited to our aim of illustrating and exploring – as opposed to testing – a conceptual framework that pays particular attention to the sometimes competing interests of different sets of actors. The divergence of opinions among Conservative parliamentarians 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 existing groups in the EP were able to mount a more robust response than during the period at the beginning of Parliament, when they may find themselves in flux.

1. CHOOSING AND FORMING GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The decisions behind group membership in the EP incorporate a hotchpotch of competing interests. Three sets of actors are potentially influential. First, national parties (as unitary actors) dominate these decisions through their leaders, and logically form the focus of our analysis. Second, individual parliamentarians’ priorities in the question of group membership may diverge not only from the party interest but also from one another. Third, existing groups are also active 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 organizational environment, in particular rules internal to the EP and to national parties.

The aims of unitary national parties

Strøm (1990) argues that unitary parties pursue three goals: to exert substantial influence over policy outcomes ('policy'), to occupy as many political posts as possible ('office'), and to maximize the electoral support they win at poll time ('votes'). These goals are not always mutually compatible; it is however possible to generalize about how parties and groups will rank them during processes of group formation in the EP as well as about the ways in which they might best be realized.

To deal first with national parties: within the EP, national parties join a political group primarily when this supports their office goals. This is not only because attaining office in the EP is desirable *per se*: it arguably represents the most important channel for *policy influence* which group membership can offer.¹ Office in the EP refers to the attainment not of a government post but rather to a lead-function within the EP's co-ordinating bodies (e.g. the Bureau or Conference of Committee Chairmen), a committee seat and committee chairs. The EP's internal rules in turn make national parties' group affiliation the defining factor in the distribution of committee seats.

What kind of group should parties join in order to realize their office interests and, in a second step, maximize the policy benefits which these interests offer? The unmoderated pursuit of office goals would in all likelihood lead national parties simply to join the *largest* available group. The institutional rules of the EP mean that these large groups enjoy a greater proportion of the available parliamentary offices to redistribute amongst member parties than their smaller counterparts (Maurer and Wessels 2003: 185–94).² The two largest groups usually provide the chairs for the most important committees. The Conference of Presidents is similarly dominated by the two largest groups.

Membership of one of the largest groups can be a boon to policy influence too: given their dominance of the available parliamentary offices, the largest groups wield disproportionately more influence than their smaller counterparts. A group's ability to secure for itself the responsibility for drafting parliamentary reports also increases with its size (Mamadouh and Raunio 2003).

Moreover, individual parties' defection from a group line is not severely punished in the political system of the EP (Hix and Lord 1997: 118). 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.

All the same, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) – particularly those occupying higher committee posts – are under pressure to temper any representation of their own party's policy preferences in favour of group preferences. A party that joins a group purely for reasons of office may therefore find itself unable properly to translate these office benefits into influence over policy. In some cases, then, the pursuit of unmoderated office goals in group membership decisions may prejudice policy goals. This leads us to expect that parties will

rein in the pursuit of their office goals somewhat, seeking out the largest group that shares their policy preferences rather than simply the one that offers the best office prospects thanks to its size.

Office and policy concerns are, meanwhile, privileged over votes-related concerns by dint of the fact that parties' group affiliation is largely unknown to the electorate. Only in the unlikely case that a party's membership is of salience for the electorate may votes-related goals take precedence over parties' policy and office interests. Insofar as they are aware of a party's activities in the EP, voters may well expect a national party to adhere to a group that demonstrably reflects its socioeconomic stance and, in particular, its policy objectives on European integration.

In such cases, difficulties can arise since 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 policy preferences in *real* terms: even if the party joins the group which most obviously shares its socioeconomic goals, this may preclude its joining one of the larger groups which would otherwise offer real influence over socioeconomic policy. By the same token, 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.

Party groups and parliamentarians

Turning now from the national parties as unitary actors to the groups themselves, these may similarly be expected to pursue, above all, office- and policy-related goals. Like national parties, they will be likely 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.

These national parties cannot, meanwhile, always be assumed to behave as unitary actors. As Strøm (1990: 569) argues, 'parties are complex organizations that impose various constraints on the behaviour of their leaders' – behaviour which we here assume to be motivated by the pursuit of the collective party interest. The level below the party leadership 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 significant difference is 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.* 2007: 28): representatives seek to realize 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. Individual politicians' prospects for re-election are, for example, often best served by their efforts to maximize their party's

votes. Indeed, the congruence of personal and party electoral prospects is particularly clear in party-centred legislatures, where parliamentarians have little incentive to cultivate a personal vote (Mitchell 2000). 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 Strøm 1999).

The trouble arises when individual parliamentarians' interests run counter to the collective party interest, or where priorities are unevenly distributed between certain categories of parliamentarian, leading to internal tensions. Group membership in the EP, for example, 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 Members of Parliament (MPs), meanwhile, group membership has most impact on their re-election prospects. 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.

Furthermore, 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 socioeconomic policy goals. Membership of a eurosceptic group, for example, could be primarily considered a eurosceptic policy, rather than a means to exert eurosceptic policy preferences. Group membership thus becomes a part of substantive policy. 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, or indeed the party as a unitary actor, to view membership as a question of European policy – and a rather symbolic one at that.

Forming, joining or leaving a group: the options

The vast majority of national parties represented in the EP are members of a group, and it is they – rather than those MEPs sitting as independents – who form the main focus of our analysis. 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, albeit 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 should 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.³ This option is thus the most difficult to realize.

Meanwhile, joining one of the other groups could also enable a national party to realize 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 owing 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 does not require coordination with other actors. However, the institutional make-up 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 choice between seeking to alter its current conditions of membership (as the then leader of the Conservatives, 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, and facing up to the prospect of continued membership under the same conditions.

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

Against this background, we can make the following claims regarding group choice and formation in the EP. Since national parties are the main actors at the time of group formation, group membership will tend to reflect unitary national parties' pursuit of their interests. In particular, this means that:

- 1 Parties will choose to join the largest group that broadly shares its socio-economic preferences. This brings a happy marriage of office and policy goals.
- 2 Votes-related considerations rarely influence the decision for or against membership of a particular group.

3 In the event that votes-related concerns do gain salience, they may hinder the pursuit of office and policy goals.

However, these three predictions may not always hold as the behaviour of national parties is not solely 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. In such situations, the authority – both formal and informal – of the party leader(ship) over parliamentarians is key to determining the outcome of the process of group choice and formation.

Existing groups can under certain circumstances 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:

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

The recent efforts by the British Conservatives to leave their EP group provide a case study that allows us to apply and illustrate this framework, and it is to this case that we now turn.

2. 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 49-strong German Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) cohort in the EP, the 26 British Conservative MEPs who remain in the group form the largest contingent in the EPP-ED.⁴

The strong representation of the British has by no means always been the case in the history of the EPP-ED, which can trace its heritage back to the 1950s and

the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (Jansen 2006: 67–76; Kreppel 2002: 179ff.) After the 1979 elections to the EP, the British Conservatives formed a separate party group with the Danish Conservatives, the European Democrats (ED), owing to points of difference with the then EPP as regards both European and socioeconomic preferences (Hanley 2002: 454).

Yet, the ED did fuse with the EPP group in 1992. In line with the expectations set out above, the EPP had been pursuing a conscious strategy of broadening its membership since the late 1980s (Jansen 1998: 115). For their part, the Conservatives sought to end their party's perceived isolation in Europe: for them, membership in the still relatively toothless EP was perceived in part as a substantive issue of European policy. Insofar as office and policy interests did play a role, it is worth noting that after the 1989 elections the ED were only the fifth and no longer the third largest group in the EP (Gagatek 2004: 4). The benefits of joining a larger group in terms of office and policy were clear. Moreover, the Conservatives were not obliged to join the extra-parliamentary EPP federation: co-operation has always been limited to the parliamentary group. The Conservatives have never had to take on or adapt to the political goals of the EPP group, in particular its commitment to federalism, thus affording them particular latitude to pursue their policy interests (Hanley 2002: 469).

The parameters of the Conservatives' relationship to the EPP were officially altered after the EP elections in 1999 under the new party leader William Hague. The Conservatives reconstituted the ED within the framework of their existing relationship to the EPP, and the EPP-ED was formed. 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, since the EPP had been prepared to make concessions in order to maintain its size advantage. For the Conservatives, 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 is mutual. 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.* 2007: 135). However, as the Conservatives were a numerically important contingent of the EPP-ED, there was always a majority of MEPs

who opposed their exclusion. Differences with the EPP on socioeconomic policies and especially on European integration remain. Among its larger national member parties, only the Czech ODS votes similarly to the Conservatives (Hix and Noury 2006: 11). In the Sixth Parliament, then, the Tories have been no more co-operative than before.

Weighing up the Conservatives' interests in the Sixth Parliament

It is possible to discern the party interest in group membership: if they were to act as a unitary party according to Strøm's schema, the British Conservatives' interests would be best met by remaining in the EPP-ED. This is not only because of the infertile 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'. The current relationship with the EPP-ED 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 co-ordinators for the EPP-ED. It is not only through the possession of these relatively key posts that the Conservatives achieve influence over policy: the rules concerning relations between the party and the EPP-ED formalize the Conservatives' ability to influence the group position as 'full members' and simultaneously vote against the group line. Since there is little to suggest that this realization of office and policy interests through co-operation with the EPP-ED has any electoral consequences, the benefits to policy and office seem clearly to outweigh any vote-maximizing considerations.

There are, however, serious internal divisions within the Conservative Party concerning group membership, stemming above all from the clash between the party's membership of the relatively pro-European EPP-ED and some MPs' strongly held eurosceptic substantive policy preferences.

A distinctly non-unitary party? The eurosceptics under Cameron⁵

According to our conceptual framework, the capacity of individual parliamentarians to pursue their goals at the expense of the party interest depends in large part upon the leader's authority to assert the collective interest. The Conservatives' most recent efforts to reconfigure their relations in the EP were indeed characterized by their new leader's struggle to demonstrate his authority over the party and to assert the party interest. Cameron's 2005 election pledge to remove the Conservatives from the EPP-ED was made as a means of boosting his leadership prospects. It considerably increased the levers available to eurosceptic parliamentarians to push for a withdrawal from the EPP-ED at the expense of the party interest which Cameron was subsequently charged with promoting.

As we would expect, calls for withdrawal were particularly loud at the national level where policy, office and votes considerations were diffuse and the membership question was treated as an issue of substantive policy. However, a prominent group of eurosceptic MEPs was 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. For some, 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. Forming a new or joining another existing group potentially promised a short cut to office benefits for these MEPs. These MEPs now felt able to privilege their substantive European policy preferences in the membership question, since these had apparently aligned with their career considerations. All the same, it is worth reiterating 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.⁶

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. 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: Cameron would be able to effect a wide-ranging change in social and economic policy having bought the goodwill of recalcitrant eurosceptic MPs by concessions in a policy area of secondary electoral importance (on the electoral salience of European issues, see Norris and Lovenduski 2004; Usherwood 2002). This tactic of 'buying off' reluctant MPs would come about 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 depoliticize 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 had already been set out prior to his leadership, he also sought to depoliticize this question as far as possible.

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 materialized raised the spectre of open intra-party divisions. Additional time pressure arose from the fact that the removal of his party

from the EPP-ED was one of the few aspects of his leadership election promises that could be realized out of government.

3. FIVE OPTIONS FOR THE SIXTH PARLIAMENT

Cameron faced five options to deal with the fall-out from his election pledge: non-alignment; group accession; group formation; continued membership of the EPP-ED, but under more favourable conditions; and continued membership of the EPP-ED under the same conditions as before. The first two were unattractive to both the party's interests as a whole and those of individual parliamentarians. Group formation was a suitable strategic choice but, as we will see, Cameron finally plumped for continued membership of the EPP-ED as the best means of pursuing the party interest – with success.

Ruling out non-alignment, group accession and group formation

Non-aligned status and accession to another group were quickly ruled out as viable options, despite the considerable pressure from eurosceptic MPs for withdrawal. It soon became clear that the costs for the party (in terms of policy, votes or office) and for individual parliamentarians (in terms of policy, re-election or career) were simply too high (Maurer *et al.* 2007).

Non-aligned status had the benefit for the Conservatives that it could have been realized with minimal interaction with other actors in the EP. However, it offered few other advantages. Apparent political isolation in the EP might appeal most 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. Overall, the disadvantages of non-aligned status for the office-, policy- and votes-related goals of the party were matched by negative consequences for the policy, career and re-election goals of parliamentarians. For this reason, the threats of a few MEPs to withdraw unilaterally from the EPP-ED and adopt non-aligned status held little weight.

Nor would joining another group have boosted the Conservative Party's policy- or office-related interests, especially given the party's current, amenable arrangements with the large EPP-ED. The only groups who might have offered themselves for accession were the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) and the Independence/Democracy (I/D). 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 have damaged the Conservatives' vote-maximizing ambitions and even individual MPs' re-election (Wagner 2006a). Some national parties in the two party groups might also have suffered in electoral terms thanks to a Conservative accession (for example, the UKIP in the I/D and the Irish party Fianna Fáil in the UEN). 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: this 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 allay MPs' concerns about how membership of the EPP-ED might affect their election prospects, in a way that accession to the UEN or the I/D or indeed non-aligned status could not. For MEPs, forming a sizeable group with similar socioeconomic preferences would somewhat offset the damage to their career prospects and their policy influence which withdrawal from the EPP-ED would elicit.

Owing to the EP's institutional rules, the barriers to realizing this option were high. Moreover, given the make-up 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 prospective partners who broadly shared the Conservatives' preferences were already members of the Parliament's largest group. Ironically, it is partly because of 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 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 the group thus formed 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, the mainly moderate 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 overlap in policy preferences with their prospective partners as regards the two principal cleavages in the EP (socioeconomic issues and European integration), indicating that they were at one stage prepared to compromise the party's and MEPs' policy interests: 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) proved sceptical of free-market policies (Maurer and Parkes 2006: 15). Moreover, even the Czech ODS, which shares many of the Conservatives' socio-economic preferences as well as their concerns about the future of European integration, proved reluctant to commit itself. This reticence was perhaps 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 the extra-parliamentary EPP to retain its membership. Furthermore, 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.

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 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 so decided.

In addition, the party's partners in the EPP-ED and its mother party, the EPP, functioned – perhaps unknowingly – as allies of 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 extremely limited.⁷¹ 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, had anyway 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. It was useful for Cameron and the shadow foreign secretary, William Hague, to point to the obstacles to group formation arising from other actors in the EP as an added reason for retaining the relationship with the EPP-ED.

These obstacles were increased when the ODS failed to win a clear victory in the Czech parliamentary elections and was thrown headlong into a difficult period of coalition-building with the pro-European Christian Democrat

party. Again, the ODS 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 EP. 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 careers 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.

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 tend to belong to the party group that maximizes their opportunity to realize office and policy goals in the Parliament. We argue that in most cases this is best achieved by joining the largest possible group which shares the delegation's socioeconomic (and, to a far lesser degree, EU integration-related) policy preferences. These considerations were indeed central to the course followed by the leader of the Conservative Party, first in his efforts to form a new group (instead of, say, accepting non-aligned status) and then in the retention of EPP-ED membership. Moreover, the priority of office and policy goals explains well the reluctance of other parties to join the new group proposed by the Conservatives.

Overall, our argument that parties tend to behave as unitary actors is given strength by the fact that few internal divisions were found among the parties approached by the Conservatives. Nevertheless, we found a considerable

divide in the Conservative Party between (eurosceptic) MPs and MEPs (more positively disposed towards European integration). In this case, it was MPs' preferences over European policy that provided the main cause for internal party conflict. These divisions are key to our understanding of Conservatives' efforts to leave the EPP-ED, underlining the necessity of considering the internal politics of group choice. However, we should be careful in assuming that parliamentarians' interests are homogeneous within each level of the polity, as we have seen that the Conservative MEPs were themselves internally split on the issue of group membership. Finally, the EPP-ED's capacity to steer the outcome of the Conservatives' efforts was limited given that the Conservatives have a relatively loose relationship with the group's mother party, but it was nevertheless able to exert some influence on the process.

Although the Sixth Parliament did not witness the establishment of a new party group by the Conservatives, in 2007 there was a new albeit short-lived addition to the family of EP groups: 20 MEPs representing far-right parties from seven 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 to overcome the institutional hurdle that prevented the formation of a group by the Conservatives. After having been without an own group since 1994, Europe's extreme right could once again realize the office and policy opportunities that party groups provide. That this new group did not even see out the year illustrates the difficulties associated with establishing a stable group in the European Parliament as well as the magnitude of the task facing the Conservatives should they pursue this option.

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NOTES

- 1 Of course, group membership also allows national parties to affect policy outcomes in plenaries irrespective of the parliamentary offices they hold: parties can influence the group line and thereby extend their clout. Yet this influence is comparatively limited as the EP's political system does not punish parties that vote against the group line. Policy influence exercised via group rather than committee channels is thus relatively limited and, whilst it is suggested in this paper that pure policy concerns like this can play a supplementary role in decisions of group membership, they remain secondary to office interests since these will almost always bring policy influence of some kind.
- 2 Rule 177.1 of the EP's Rules of Procedure.
- 3 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.
- 4 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.
- 5 The information for this section and section 3 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 those directly involved in proceedings as well as with well-placed observers.
- 6 See <http://www.adieu-ep.com>
- 7 '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>.

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