

# *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System*

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A STUDY IN  
INSTITUTIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT

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## *Introduction: The European Parliament and the Institutional Evolution of Legislatures*

When the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Economic Community (EEC) was created in 1957 it was perceived as little more than a multinational chamber of Babel. It consisted of 142 Members appointed by the national legislators of the six Member States. It had no direct popular legitimacy, no control over the fledgling budget of the EEC, and no effective ability to influence legislative outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The Assembly was in all senses a consultative body. But over the course of the last quarter-century the Parliamentary Assembly has evolved into a true European Parliament (EP). Directly elected since 1979 with partial (and increasing) control over the budget since 1975 and the ability to delay, amend, and even veto legislation, the European Parliament of today bears little resemblance to the Parliamentary Assembly of old. Today the EP deserves to be considered a “transformative” legislature capable of significantly impacting the decision-making and policy processes of the European Union (Polsby, 1975: 277–296).

This book examines the remarkable institutional development of the European Parliament since its inception in 1957, and particularly since it began its metamorphosis in earnest in the 1970s. It is not the actual increases to the powers of the EP that interest me, but rather the effect of these increases in terms of the internal institutional evolution of the EP as a legislature. In other words, the main question investigated is, What effect did exogenous increases in the powers and influence of the European Parliament have on its internal development? The theoretical models applied assume rational action on the part of the relevant actors

<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, the Assembly had the right to be “consulted” on some matters, but even then its opinion was most often ignored by the true decision makers in the Council.

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(micro model) when they reform the internal organizational structure of the EP in response to significant environmental (exogenous) changes in EP power and influence (macro model).

A thorough understanding of the internal development of the European Parliament is interesting and important, not only as a case study of institutional development, but also because of the increasingly important role that the EP plays in the creation of legislation and the political life of the European Union (EU). The extent to which the EP is able to exploit its growing powers is largely dependent on its internal development. Without an internal organization capable of efficiently handling the expanding legislative load of the European Union, the EP would have remained a largely inconsequential actor in the policy-making process, despite the significant additions to its official powers that have occurred in recent years. It is important to understand both the extent of the rapid internal evolution of the European Parliament and the impact of increased legislative authority on the direction and character of this development, because these in turn impact the institutional and legislative evolution of the EU as a whole.

The focus of this book is therefore the development of the EP and the supranational party system within it. The primary goal is to trace the internal institutional evolution of the EP and the supranational party groups. Included within this project, however, are two secondary but important goals: The first is to test the applicability and generalizability of models of legislative development rooted in the American congressional context to other national and institutional settings; the second is to suggest some patterns of parliamentary evolution that will be applicable in other new and/or emerging legislative systems. All of these goals are accomplished through an analysis of the impact that external increases to the legislative and political authority of the EP have had on its internal evolution.

A comparison between the internal evolution of the EP and other parliaments would be extremely informative and add to our understanding of the comparability of the "European case." Unfortunately there are not many in-depth analyses of legislative development outside of the American context.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there are no general models of legislative

<sup>2</sup> The best example is by Gary Cox (1987), in which he analyzes the internal evolution of the British House of Commons indirectly through an analysis of the rise of political parties within that body.

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development that can easily be applied to the EP. This is the motivation behind the two secondary goals of this book.

While there are numerous scholarly studies of the development of the U.S. Congress, most of these are, to a certain extent, context driven and difficult to apply directly in other non-American settings. Two models of institutional evolution are generally applied: the environmental or macro model and the rational actor or micro model. The first focuses on large exogenous changes that effect the role of the legislature. These environmental shifts lead to internal changes to adjust to the new situation. The internal adaptations reflect the character of the external changes; that is, they are fundamentally nonstrategic reactions to actual changes in the demands placed on the legislature.

The rational actor or micro model of legislative development focuses specifically on the character of the internal reactions to external change. Essentially, while the macro model predicts that there will be internal change as a reaction to environmental shifts, the micro model tries to predict what those changes will be based on the *strategic* actions of those with the power to affect change (generally “the majority”). The macro and micro models of institutional development, as frequently applied to the congress, implicitly and explicitly incorporate certain elements of the American system that are not present elsewhere (like a two-party system and single-member districts). By generalizing these models beyond the American (and even the legislative) context it is possible to derive some propositions about institutional development as a result of increased political authority that can be applied more broadly, in particular, the internally centralizing and ideologically moderating effects of granting a multiparty legislature nonhegemonic legislative power. In doing so, this book will hopefully serve as a tentative first step on the long road toward a general theory of institutional development.

### *Why the European Parliament?*

Although the EP is arguably a unique legislative institution, its evolutionary path and the implications of its development may not be. To understand the fundamental transformation of the EP over the last two decades it is necessary to consider some basic differences between different types of legislatures, in particular, the variation in internal organization and external behavior between legislatures that have significant independent legislative authority and those that do not. One need only compare the

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British House of Commons to the American Congress to understand the potential differences between these two types of legislatures. The role of political parties, ideology, and the internal organization of each institution are unquestionably different, in large part due to the difference in their independent legislative power.

In a sense the House of Commons and the U.S. Congress represent two ideal types: the chamber of debate and the legislative body, respectively. In the former, most legislative decision making effectively takes place elsewhere, generally within the executive. In the latter, the legislature is one, if not the only, focus of legislative activity. The EP is an example of a legislature fundamentally evolving from one type to the other over a very short period of time.

There is little debate over the fact that the legislative powers and influence of the EP have grown dramatically since its inception, and especially over the last twenty years. The introduction of direct elections as well as the significant treaty revisions of the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty, and, most recently, the Amsterdam Treaty have all included provisions to strengthen the legislative role of the EP. The extent to which these reforms have been successful in granting the EP true legislative power remains a topic of much scholarly research and debate (Tsebelis, 1994, 1997; Garrett and Tsebelis, 1996; Moser, 1996; Scully, 1997, Kreppel, 1999b, 2000a) but it is not the central focus of this book. Most observers of the European Union grant that the EP of today bears little resemblance to its predecessors. What have remained largely unacknowledged and unexamined are the internal institutional effects of this transformation.

The history of the EP and its changing legislative role in the larger European Community has been well-documented. There are numerous studies that *describe* the EP, explain how it works, what its actual powers are, and list historical facts and anecdotes (Cocks, 1973; Scalingi, 1980; Bieber, Jacques, and Weiler, 1985; Bieber, Pantalis, and Schoo, 1986; Sbragia, 1992; Nugent, 1994; Westlake, 1994; Corbett and Jacobs et al., 1995). Similar works exist about the party groups, although they are fewer in number (Van Oudenhove, 1965; Pinder and Henig, 1969; Fitzmaurice, 1975; Pridham and Pridham, 1979, 1981; Henig, 1980; Guidi, 1983; Raunio, 1996; Hix and Lord, 1997a). In addition, the history of individual events (such as the introduction of direct elections, the Single European Act (SEA), and the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties) that have increased the powers of the EP have also been extensively analyzed

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both individually and in historical contexts (Bieber, Jacque, and Weiler, 1985; Corbett, 1989; Dinan, 1994; Noel, 1995; Nicoll, 1996; Devuyt, 1999; Moravcsik, 1999).

What we are still missing, however, is an attempt to draw together these diverse aspects to understand the dynamics of the developmental process as a whole. Changes in the focus and nature of the development of the EP's internal organizational structures, as well as the growth of the supranational party group system *as a result* of the increased ability of the EP to impact legislative outcomes in the EU remain largely unexplored. It is this dynamic and interactive aspect of institutional development that this book addresses through a detailed analysis of the internal evolution of the EP and the party groups across time.

### *The Approach*

The theoretical framework used throughout the book is drawn largely from existing American models of congressional development and is in essence a combination of the environmental (macro) and rational actor (micro) models of institutional evolution. When used in conjunction these models predict that institutional changes will occur when external (environmental) changes permit or require them, and that they will reflect the preferences of those (rational actors) able to control the process of reform. Although these models are designed and generally applied specifically within the American legislative context, this research demonstrates the extent to which it is possible to modify and adapt them to other national settings as well as to other institutions.

Using the combination of these two theoretical approaches is not new (Cooper and Young, 1989; Gamm and Shepsle, 1989; Sinclair, 1989), but it is particularly important for this type of research because it allows the investigation of the *dynamic* process of institutional evolution. The connections between external and internal change are often overlooked in legislative research that is static because it is focused on a specific event or a particular period in time. It is important when looking at the evolutionary process within a legislature to link external changes to internal reforms to understand fully the impact that both have had on the changing character of the institution. In this context it is crucial to examine both the goals of the actors as well as the changing arsenal of tools at their disposal. This can also be understood as changes in the rules of the game.

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Combining the macro and micro models in a longitudinal study makes it possible to study the interaction of strategy and changing opportunity. Even if the goals of the actors (Members and party groups) are consistent across time, the variation in the legislative and political powers of the EP suggests that the strategies pursued will change. In essence, every time the role of the EP is modified the tools at the disposal of the party groups, which allow them to pursue their goals, change. As a result, the best possible strategy to achieve their goals is also likely to change.

Fundamentally, all democratic legislatures exist and develop as a result of the interaction between the role of the legislature in the broader political arena, their internal organizational structures, and the party system. None of these factors exists in a vacuum; each evolves in conjunction with the development and growth of the others. Despite its unusual beginnings and supranational character, the rapid and recent nature of the EP's development offers a unique opportunity to study these dynamic relationships.

### *The Evidence*

The specific focus throughout this book is the impact that increased political authority has had on the evolution of the EP, in particular, the effect of increased legislative power on the character of the legislature as a whole (chamber of debate or legislative body) and the relationships between and within the supranational party groups. To what extent does the internal organization of the EP currently resemble that of a chamber of debate or a legislative body? Has this changed over time? If so, when and how? Have the increases in the legislative authority of the EP affected the roles of the various party groups or significantly changed the party system as a whole? What limits do the institutional character of the EU as a whole place on the internal development of the EP?

All of these questions address the fundamental character of the EP and the party groups as well as the roles that they play within the EU legislative process. They are connected to each other by their interactive nature. Whether the EP is a chamber of debate or a legislative body necessarily affects the role of the party groups and their interactions with each other. Similarly, the interactions between the party groups will influence the internal structure of the EP and therefore how it performs its tasks in the larger EU setting. The general constraints of the institutional structure of the EU as a whole also affect the process of internal EP and party

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group evolution. Each element in the system impacts the others, and a change in one necessarily influences the rest. The questions outlined above are aimed at understanding this influence and the results.

I answer these questions by examining the changing character of the EP's rules of procedure (internal organizational structure), the patterns of coalition formation (party system), the role of ideology in the decision-making process (EU structural influence), and the internal evolution of the supranational party groups themselves all across time. Each of these four topics focuses on a different aspect of the internal structure of the EP. In each case the results of the analysis strongly suggest that the internal evolution of the EP is linked to external increases in its political authority, and that the character of the internal reforms implemented were strategically selected by those within the Parliament capable of controlling the outcomes.

The reason that the acquisition of legislative power has had such a significant impact on the internal evolution of the EP is that it fundamentally altered the ability of both the individual Members and the party groups to achieve their policy goals through direct legislative action. When the EP was created, and indeed for most of its nearly fifty years, its Members had little opportunity to *directly* pursue policy objectives. The EP served as a public, and eventually directly elected, forum of debate. It was an institution that represented "the citizens of Europe" but could do little to directly affect the EU policy process. While the introduction of direct election (1979) was important from a democratic point of view, the real change in the function of the EP did not come until there was significant treaty reform. The Single European Act (SEA) (1987) granted the EP partial decision-making power through the cooperation procedure. The Maastricht (1993) and Amsterdam Treaties (1999) later followed and increased the legislative power of the EP by adding the co-decision (I and II, respectively) procedure.<sup>3</sup>

The opportunity to impact, directly and effectively, policy outcomes had a significant and lasting influence on the internal dynamics between the party groups within the EP. The overall pattern of internal evolution within the EP after the SEA suggests that increasing the decision-making powers of a legislature can lead to the radical transformation of the institution as a whole. In effect the EP has evolved from an ideologically dogmatic, loosely organized chamber of debate to a frequently bipartisan and

<sup>3</sup> Each of these events is discussed and described at length in Chapter 4.



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hierarchically structured legislative body. But this transformation does not come without costs. As a result, it is important to understand who is able to manipulate the transformation process to their benefit and who loses political influence as a result.

Despite examining four very different areas of internal reform and evolution (the rules, coalitions, ideology, and the party groups) there is a consistent trend of power and influence flowing toward the centralized control of the two largest party groups and away from the smaller groups across the ideological spectrum. Not surprisingly, as suggested by the macro model, internal reforms have been inspired by external changes, and as the micro model would suggest it is precisely these two large groups that have consistently had the power to control the outcomes of reform.

Within the EP no party group has ever held an absolute majority of the seats. There have always been two large party groups, the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Christian Democratic European Peoples' Party (EPP).<sup>4</sup> Between them they have continuously controlled between 50 and 70% of the seats in the EP. If they work together, the two groups have the potential to be hegemonic. In circumstances that require an absolute majority little can be accomplished without the explicit assent of both.<sup>5</sup> Both internal reforms of the rules of procedure and legislative decision making in the latter stages of the process require the assent of an absolute majority.<sup>6</sup> This means that if the EPP and PES are strategic *and* can find areas of agreement, they can work to manipulate both internal reform and policy outcomes to their benefit. More importantly, it suggests that the other numerous political groups within the EP risk marginalization at a structural as well as an ideological level.<sup>7</sup>

The internal hierarchical organization of a legislature is extremely important and reflects the nature of the institution as a whole. The rules

<sup>4</sup> The names of the groups have varied across time. I use the current names throughout to avoid confusion, with the exception of the European People's Party group (EPP). In July 1999, the EPP renamed itself the European Peoples' Party and European Democrats Group (EPP-ED) to incorporate the existence of a broader membership into its name. Because this occurred after the period discussed here, I use the EPP throughout.

<sup>5</sup> This is due not only to their size, but also to the extremely high level of absenteeism in the EP. This is discussed further in Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>6</sup> This applies to the second reading of the cooperation and co-decision procedures as well as the assent procedure.

<sup>7</sup> Historically there have been between three and twelve party groups in the EP. Since direct elections were introduced in 1979, the number has varied between seven and twelve, with an average of eight or nine party groups.

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that determine who can do what when are a crucial aspect of the decision-making process. The character and efficiency of the Parliament are strongly influenced by the rules that structure the day-to-day activities within it. The role of individual Members of the Parliament as well as the relationships between the political parties are defined by the distribution of rights and powers that are established, at least in part, by the internal rules of the legislature.

These internal rules are not static, however. They evolve and change as the role of the institution changes over time. Examinations of the American Congress have demonstrated the extent to which the majority parties within both the House and Senate have used the opportunities presented by external environmental changes to strategically modify the internal organizational structure of the institutions to benefit themselves (Cooper and Young, 1989; Gamm and Shepsle, 1989; Binder, 1996). The Members of the European Parliament have been offered a number of similar opportunities since its inception, including enlargement, direct elections, and the new legislative procedures introduced by the Single European Act and the Maastricht/Amsterdam Treaties. With each external reform the EP was granted increased control and influence over the EU legislative process. And with each external increase in its powers the EP has reformed its rules of procedure to adapt to the new situation. Not surprisingly, given the American experience, these reforms have been increasingly less egalitarian, shifting power toward the two largest groups and away from both individual Members and the smaller groups.

At the same time, patterns of coalition formation between party groups have reflected a similar willingness of the two largest groups to work together despite apparent ideological differences. The level of EPP–PES coalition activity far exceeds anything required by the rules regulating majority requirements and instead reflects the changing character of the EP as an institution (Chapter 7 and Kreppel, 2000b). Just as the two largest groups found it beneficial to work together in restructuring the internal rules of the EP, they have also realized the need for pragmatic coalitions in the legislative arena. Because of the tricephalous nature of the EU legislative process, no ideologically extreme proposal can be adopted.<sup>8</sup> Thus, regardless of the majority requirements of any specific procedure

<sup>8</sup> In no case does the EP have hegemonic control over legislative outcomes. Although there are significant variations by legislative procedure, the EP must always work to some extent with both the Commission and the Council to achieve its legislative goals.

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or legislative stage, the two groups need to work together to create ideologically moderate, and thus, broadly acceptable proposals. The result is once again the marginalization of the smaller party groups, which are numerically largely unnecessary in the coalition formation process.

Of the four aspects of EP development studied here, only the internal evolution of the party groups themselves has not directly led to a reduction in the role of the smaller party groups in the political life of the EP. On the whole, the party groups have been largely unable to move significantly beyond the developmental stage of loose confederations of like-minded individuals. While it is true that the party groups have a very high level of voting cohesion, it is wrong to assume that this is due primarily to high levels of internal party discipline (see Chapter 8). In fact, the internal decision-making process, and particularly the allocation of benefits within the two largest party groups, is controlled fundamentally by the national delegation leaders. It is possible that this has actually placed more pressure on party group leaders to push for still greater centralization within the structures of the EP to control their members indirectly,<sup>9</sup> with the result once again being the marginalization of the smaller groups.

The overall pattern of internal EP development has been movement away from egalitarian internal structures and strongly ideological coalitions toward increased internal centralization of power and ideological moderation. This has occurred gradually across time as external increases in the legislative and political authority of the EP have given the leaders of the EPP and PES opportunities to strategically reform the internal organizational structures of the EP. Increased legislative powers also gave these two groups an incentive to avoid ideological dogmatism and work together to achieve moderate, broadly acceptable proposals. Together these two trends have led to a highly centralized and largely bipartisan European Parliament that much more closely resembles the U.S. Congress than it does the House of Commons. This transformation suggests that the accumulation of legislative authority by a legislature within a political system that requires moderation may help improve the internal efficiency of the institution and mitigate ideological extremism, but at the cost of marginalizing smaller party groups.

<sup>9</sup> I examine the internal evolution of only the two largest groups since these have been present throughout the EP's history and have actively tried to control their members' behavior to one extent or another; see Chapter 8.

## Introduction

This book is divided into three sections. The first section is an introduction to the macro and micro models of legislative development, in which I review their use in the American context and discuss how they can be adapted to non-American and even nonlegislative arenas. More specifically, Chapter 2 is a review of the application of these models to the American Congress and a discussion of the adaptations necessary to apply them to the EP. These adaptations lead to a set of testable hypotheses about the character of internal rules reforms across time. In Chapter 3, I follow a similar process to adapt and apply the macro and micro models of development beyond the legislative context to the parties and the party system as a whole.

In the second section I trace the history of the EP, highlighting those external changes that have led directly to significant internal reforms. The history of the EP is divided into four distinct periods, which roughly reflect the various stages of its development. The early years (1958–1969) include the initial creation and internal organization of the EP and a discussion of the formal role of the EP as established by the Treaties of Rome. The second period (1970–1978) covers the early period of EP development when it was granted partial budgetary control, adapted to the first enlargement, and prepared for direct elections. During the third period (1979–1986) the EP changed yet again, as its membership was doubled by the first direct elections and then later increased still further by the second round of enlargement.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, it was during this period that the Single European Act was passed, first granting the EP the opportunity to directly participate in the legislative process via the cooperation procedure. Finally, the fourth period of EP evolution (1987–1999) encompasses the expansion of the EP's power through the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, including the addition and subsequent modification of the co-decision procedure as well as the third major enlargement.

The final section presents the empirical evidence and tests the hypotheses developed in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 5 examines all proposed reforms to the internal rules of procedure both qualitatively and quantitatively since 1970. I qualitatively assess the character of reforms in the three historical periods covered and categorize amendments based on their intent and result for the quantitative section. Chapter 6 traces the patterns of coalition formation in the EP through a statistical analysis of roll-call

<sup>10</sup> Grouping the accession of Greece in 1981 and Portugal and Spain in 1986 as a single enlargement process.

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votes on resolutions between 1980 and 1996, focusing, in particular, on the dramatic changes that occurred in the general character of coalitions before and after the Single European Act. In Chapter 7, I continue the analysis of coalition behavior, focusing instead on the role of ideology in the coalition formation process and in particular on patterns of cooperation and opposition between the EPP and PES. Finally, Chapter 8 examines the internal evolution of the EPP and PES following the model developed in Chapter 5 for the EP as a whole. This includes tracing the evolution of their internal party group rules to determine the extent to which similar patterns of centralization exist. I conclude in Chapter 9 with a discussion of the overall findings and some possible other applications of the model.