THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL PARTIES AND EUROPEAN PARTY GROUPS ON MEP BEHAVIOR

EVIDENCE FROM A QUASI-EXPERIMENT IN THE EIGHTH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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August 31, 2017

ABSTRACT

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are commonly assumed to be agents of two competing principals: European Party Groups (EPGs) and national parties. It is, however, a frequently debated question which of these two principals is more relevant for MEP behavior. In this paper, we contribute to this debate by analyzing a quasi-experiment observed in the current eighth European Parliament (EP). More specifically, we focus on the case of the German populist radical right party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD), which changed its national position drastically from moderate EU criticism to an outright radical right populist position in mid-2015. This change led to an internal split of the AfD. Despite the large shift in its national position, their MEPs changed the EPG almost one year later in mid-2016. Using a roll-call discontinuity design, we compare the parliamentary behavior of AfD MEPs in different time-periods and find that the EPG change had a much stronger effect on roll-call voting behavior than the national party position shift. We discuss the implications of this finding for the interpretation of legislative behavior in the EP.

Keywords: European Parliament · roll-call voting · quasi-experiments · left-right · populism

* Note: Work in progress, comments on this paper are most welcome. Paper prepared for the panel P139 “Friends with Benefits? Changing Relationships between Radical Right Populist Parties in Europe” at the ECPR General Conference in Oslo, September 6 – September 9, 2017.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, legislators’ behavior in the European Parliament (EP) has been subject to intensive empirical research (for a summary see Hix and Høyland, 2013). Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are commonly assumed to be agents of two different principals (Hix, 2002): their national party and their European Party Group (EPG). On the one hand, national parties decide about the (re-)nomination of MEPs and are thus a necessary condition for securing an MEP’s reelection (vote-seeking dimension). On the other, EPGs have become crucial actors within the European Parliament by, for example, allocating speaking time, deciding on committee composition, and promoting MEPs within the party group (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2005). EPGs thus have the power to decide whether an MEP remains a backbencher or becomes a prominent politician at the European level (office-seeking dimension). Moreover, through an EPG, legislators are more likely to find majorities for their policy goals (policy-seeking dimension).

The question arising from these two principals is how MEPs behave when both principals are in conflict. Is, for example, roll-call voting behavior primarily driven by the preferences of national parties, or are MEPs willing to sacrifice their position and vote in line with the EPG when both positions are not identical? Finding an answer to such questions is challenging as EPGs are built along ideological lines and thus usually consist of ideologically proximate parties. Existing research has found that EPGs became increasingly cohesive over time (e.g., Hix, Noury and Roland 2005, 2007; but see Bowler and McElroy 2015). Moreover, spatial models of parliamentary voting demonstrate that voting in the EP is usually structured along the lines of EPGs (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006; Voeten, 2009; Hix and Noury, 2009). While these results suggest that EPGs might be more relevant for MEP behavior, the findings are also largely consistent with the idea that national parties in an EPG share similar ideological positions. It has been demonstrated, however, that the probability of deviating from the EPG is higher when an MEP comes from a national party which is more distant from the EPG’s average position (Faas, 2003; Hix, 2004). This holds particularly true for votes which are salient for a national party (Klüver and Spoon, 2015). Finally, evidence from surveys among MEPs demonstrates that their individual ideological position is a better predictor for positions on EU policies than EPG membership.
In this paper, we address the issue of contrasting national party and EPG influences on MEPs’ legislative behavior by relying on a quasi-experiment observed in the current eighth European Parliament. More specifically, we focus on the case of the German radical right populist party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD) which drastically changed its national party position since its election to the EP in 2014. Starting off as a moderately Eurosceptical party with little evidence for a fully radical right populist party position in 2014 (e.g. Arzheimer, 2015; Berbuir, Lewandowsky and Siri, 2015; Jankowski, Schneider and Tepe, 2016), the party drastically changed its position after its former leader Bernd Lucke was replaced by Frauke Petry, who was supported by the radical right faction within the AfD. As a response, the more moderate faction from the former party leader Bernd Lucke immediately left the party. The consequence of this change in the leadership was a dramatic overall shift in the position of the AfD from EU skepticism to an outright nationalist radical right position resembling the programmatic of other radical right populist parties in Europe. Despite this radical change at the national level, the radical right AfD MEPs remained in the EU-skeptical European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR). Not until April 2016 did the AfD MEPs changed their EPG affiliation by switching to the clearly radical right EPGs of ENF and EFDD. Therefore, we are confronted with three highly interesting different time periods where we can observe and compare the legislative behavior of radical right MEPs under (1) a moderate EPG and moderate national party leadership (2014 - June 2015), (2) a radical right national position and a moderate EPG position (June 2015 - May 2016), and (3) as members of radical right EPGs.

We exploit this changing membership in EPGs and national party position change to analyze how these factors influence MEPs’ roll-call behavior. We do so by relying on a ‘roll-call discontinuity design’ (Lo, 2013b,2013a) as suggested in Poole (Poole, 2005, Chap. 5) to compare shifts of MEPs on latent policy dimensions which can be extracted from the observed roll-call voting behavior. Legislators not affected by the shift of the AfD constitute a meaningful control group.

In addition to this analysis, our article provides the first empirical analysis of voting patterns in the eighth European Parliament. We demonstrate that patterns already observed in the 7th European Parliament (Otjes and van der Veer, 2016; Roger, Otjes and van der Veer, 2017) apply also to the 8th EP, meaning that the main line of conflict differentiates EPGs based on their
preferences regarding the EU integration process. The left-right dimension only constitutes a (powerful) second dimension in EP roll-call voting. With regard to the position shifts of AfD legislators, we find that the impact of switching the EPG was much stronger than the shift in the national party position. This finding is interesting, as AfD MEPs had no incentives to follow the line of the EPG after the change of the national party position. We conclude that the influence for EPGs on roll-call voting behavior might not be interpreted as strategic incentives of MEPs to co-operate with the EPG but more as a heuristic which helps MEPs to find a position on less salient votes.

2 MEP’S COMPETING PRINCIPALS AND EP ROLL-CALL VOTING

2.1 The story so far

In almost all legislative assemblies, legislators’ behavior is strongly influenced by factors other than solely their individual policy preferences. For example, many parliaments in Western Europe are characterized by a high level of party discipline, as well as coalition discipline. Parties vote in unity on almost all votes and the main conflict in legislatures is the government-opposition divide (Hix and Noury, 2016). Whether these patterns can be transferred to the European Parliament has been a question for years. Many analyses have displayed that the EP is at least partially different. Roll-call voting is often structured along the left-right dimension, while a second dimension captures differences between parties on the EU Integration dimension (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006, 2007). This pattern can be observed from the first to the 6th EP where the explanatory power of the second dimension constantly decreased. For the 7th EP the picture looks different. As demonstrated by Otjes and van der Veer (2016), roll-call voting patterns have drastically changed due to the Eurozone crises and became more ‘pro vs. anti-European’ compared to previous periods.
These patterns tell us a lot about the structure of the political conflict at the European level. However, it reveals little about the fundamental motivations that underpin an MEP’s legislative behavior. The central question here is which factors influence an MEP’s stance on certain bills. For MEPs, three factors can be identified. First, an MEP’s roll-call voting behavior is influenced by their individual policy preferences. Without any other influences, this position can be referred to as an MEP’s ‘ideal-point’. In the US Congress, for example, roll-call voting is less constrained than in most other parliaments which allows estimates derived from roll-call voting behavior to be interpreted as an estimate of ideology (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). In the EP, however, two additional factors might influence MEP voting in a significant way: the national party and the European Party Group (EPG). These two actors constitute “competing principals” (Hix, 2002) for legislative behavior since MEPs have incentives to follow their national and the EPGs positions. Most importantly, EPGs are assumed to be the most relevant actors within the EP. They decide about the career path of an MEP by providing important resources such as speaking time and committee assignment. In terms of Müller and Strøm (1999) differentiation between policy-, office-, and vote-seeking, EPGs are responsible for the policy- and office-dimension of MEP behavior. National parties, in contrast, are relevant for the vote-earning dimension. That is, national parties decide about an MEP’s re-election probabilities. Without adhering to the national party line, an MEP runs at risk of not being nominated for reelection. Therefore, any career advancement in the EPG might be irrelevant when the national party does not secure reelection (Hix, 2008, 1261).

The puzzling question is which of these two principals is more powerful in influencing an MEP’s legislative behavior. However, contrasting these competing principals is complicated by the fact that EPG membership and national party positions are correlated, meaning that EPGs are formed based on the principle of ideological cohesiveness (McElroy and Benoit, 2007, 2010, 2012). As Hix (2002, 690) puts it: “when an EP party shows a high level of cohesion, we do not know whether this is because the EP party leaders have forced their MEPs to vote together, whether the national member parties in the EP party have policy positions that correlate with those of the EP party (and so have instructed their MEPs to vote with the EP party), or whether the individual MEPs in the EP group share the same policy positions, independently of their national party affiliations.”

1 For simplicity, this includes other factors such as the preferences of the local electorate.
Some authors have suggested that national party positions are more relevant compared to EPG preferences. This is so because vote-seeking is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the other two dimensions (Klüver and Spoon, 2015). Yet it is rather challenging to empirically analyze which principal is more powerful. Many studies rely on the vote defection of MEPs from the EPG position. This research demonstrates that MEPs of parties which are more distant from the average position of the EPG are also more likely to deviate. This is commonly seen as evidence for the influence of national parties. This is correct in so far as it clearly demonstrates that national parties seem to have some influence on MEPs’ roll-call voting behavior (Hix, 2002). Klüver and Spoon (2015) demonstrate that the probability of deviating from the EPG increases when a vote becomes more relevant to the national party.

Others, however, find some evidence that EPGs are influential actors within the EP, and that their relevance has increased over time. Hix, Noury and Roland (2005), for example, argue that EPGs have become more cohesive over time despite the fact that EPGs became more ideologically heterogeneous. The enlargement of the EU also had no effect on the cohesiveness of EPGs (Hix and Noury, 2009). When scaling methods are applied, it becomes obvious that MEPs of the same EPG are usually placed in close proximity to each other, indicating a high level of similarity in their voting patterns. As such, one can also read the existing literature on EP roll-call voting as providing evidence for a strong influence of EPGs on MEPs’ voting behavior.

The common explanation for these two different conclusions about MEPs’ voting behavior is that forming an EPG (and adhering to it) is rational for national parties (e.g. Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006, 496). In this view, EPGs fulfill the task of structuring the policy space and reducing transaction costs. Most importantly, it is argued that EPGs are a vehicle for national parties to achieve their policy goals. Building coalitions on a vote-by-vote basis is costly. Therefore, organizing in an EPG makes sense. This also implies that national parties and their MEPs take this advantage of EPGs into account when considering whether to deviate from the EPG line. As Hix and Høyland (2013, 181) write: “each MEP carefully calculates whether voting against his group is likely to pay off in the future [...] MEPs are willing to follow voting instructions from the group in the knowledge that collectively each group can be more influential than any single MEP acting alone”. It is important to stress that this line of argument is based on strategic incentives for MEPs to follow the EPG instructions. That is, MEPs follow the line of the EPG as it is assumed that this behavior will pay-off in the future, most importantly, because other MEPs
will do the same when they face a similar conflict. Therefore, vote deviation only occurs when an issue is so controversial or important that a MEP thinks that the costs of breaking the EPG line is less costly than not casting the most preferred vote option.

2.2 An alternative explanation: Heuristic-based roll-call voting

In this article, we suggest another mechanism which can explain high levels of agreement among MEPs of the same EPG. Our argument is also built on the idea that EPGs reduce costs for MEPs, as they provide recommendations on how to vote on certain bills. In this sense, forming an EPG is rational as MEPs do not have to build a position on each and every vote. This is desirable for MEPs as they cannot possess detailed expertise on so many different issues and votes. In the eighth EP, for example, there have been almost 5,000 recorded votes between 2014 and the end of 2016. Possessing detailed knowledge on all of these issues is highly time consuming and probably inefficient. As an alternative, MEPs can just do what all of their fellow MEPs are doing, i.e. MEPs may chose to follow majority position of the EPG. At least on low-salient issues such a behavior is rational as the second-orderness of European politics (Reif and Schmitt 1980) suggests that MEPs are not held responsible for their voting behavior on low-salience issues. In other words, the lack of a clear ‘electoral connection’ in European politics makes it easy for MEPs to remain largely uninformed about the content of a certain vote and just follow the EPG line. As such, our argument exhibits some similarity with the dominant view on EP roll-call voting. It is, however, important to stress that the main underlying assumption of this explanation is fundamentally different. According to our assumption, EPGs remain influential even in the absence of strategic incentives to follow the EPG’s instructions. That is, MEPs do not necessarily expect a pay-off in the future for following the EPG line, such as being promoted within the EPG, being granted more speaking time in debates or expecting that other MEPs are more likely to adhere to the EPG instruction when they consider deviating. Instead, MEPs just lack a better alternative when casting a vote.

What are the implications of this argument for MEP behavior? Our assumption is that roll-call voting behavior of MEPs is driven by the perceived importance of topics, and that the importance of the EPG’s position for the voting of the MEP varies with the extent to which the individual
ranks the bill in question. For instance, an MEP whose policies concentrate on immigration is more likely to follow his national party’s position rather than his EPG’s, but they will join the EPG when it comes to, say, bills on fishery as they are of less importance both for the specific MEP and for their national party. As such, our argument follows the work by Klüver and Spoon (2015) who argue that national party positions dominate in the EP. They find support for this claim by demonstrating that vote defection from the EPG drastically increases the more salient an issue is for a national party. Vote defection remains low, however, when salience is low.

3 THE CASE OF THE GERMAN AFD: A QUASI-EXPERIMENT

In our empirical analysis, we rely on the case of the German radical right populist party ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD). The development of the AfD is highly interesting and, as we argue below, allows for a quasi-experimental test of how national party shifts and EPG membership affect the position taking of MEPs. More specifically, we argue that the AfD constitutes a case in which MEPs had no strategic incentives to follow the instructions of the EPG. Therefore, it allows for a direct test of how MEPs behave when the national party position and EPG membership diverge.

3.1 Development of the AfD and position shifts

The AfD was founded only a few month before the German general election of 2013. The AfD gained no seats in the general election of 2013. In the European Election of 2014, however, the party gained seven seats. At this time, the party was most prominently represented by its founder and chairman Bernd Lucke. Lucke founded the party mainly due to a strong dissatisfaction with the European Union and more specifically due to a critique of the policies during the economic and financial crisis. The party was frequently indicted by political opponents to be Germany’s first successful radical right populist party, but it is important to stress that
many studies have found only very little evidence of a clear radical right populist profile of the party leadership during that time (Arzheimer, 2015; Berbuir, Lewandowsky and Siri, 2015; Jankowski, Schneider and Tepe, 2016). Instead of being comparable to other European radical right parties, Lucke framed the profile of the party as a national-conservative alternative to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Angela Merkel, which shifted towards the center of the political spectrum. However, the AfD also attracted many people who saw in the party a platform for more radical right populist positions. This more radical faction finally gained the majority within the party and replaced Bernd Lucke as the party chairman with Frauke Petry in June 2015. Out of protest, Lucke and his fellows immediately left the party, stressing that the party profile no longer represents what they had in mind when founding the party back in 2013. The new leadership of the AfD – while also being anti-European – actively promoted itself as a clear radical right populist party which actively seeks co-operation with other European populist parties. While the focus of the AfD under Lucke was on an economic and sometimes rather technocratic criticism of the EU, the ‘new’ AfD emphasizes a position which relies much stronger on cultural issues. In terms of the spatial model of politics one can say that the focus of the party shifted drastically from policies which are located on the first dimension of the political space (economic-dimension) to the second dimension (cultural dimension). The new AfD is still anti-European, but it is no longer actively discussing economic questions. Instead, the EU-criticism is rooted in a more general xenophobic attitude. This shift in the position of the AfD might be best explained in comparison to other European parties. While the AfD joined the “European Conservatives and Reformists Group”-EPG (ECR) in the EP because Lucke saw the AfD as an equivalent to the position of the EU skeptic conservatives in the UK. Instead, the new leadership of the AfD started actively co-operating with parties like the Front National, UKIP or the PVV – parties which are organized in the EPGs of the EFDD and ENF. We exploit this shift to analyze how it affected the voting behavior the radical AfD MEPs.

In the European Parliament, the AfD was originally represented by seven MEPs. Five of these MEPs belonged to the Lucke faction (including Lucke himself) and left the AfD after the internal split. The two remaining MEPs of the AfD, Beatrix von Storch and Marcus Pretzell, became prominent members of the new party leadership of the now radical right AfD. It is a surprising and crucial factor for our analysis, however, that both of them remained members of the moderate ECR-EPG until mid-2016, i.e. until one year after the internal split of the AfD. This
means that despite the more radical position of the national party, they remained in a rather moderate EPG compared to the positions of the EFDD- and ENF-EPGs. In April and May 2016, both AfD MEPs had to leave the ECR and became member of the EFDD (Beatrix von Storch) and ENF (Marcus Pretzell) EPGs.

3.2 Why the case of the AfD is particularly interesting

The case of the AfD is of particular interest for the analysis of MEP voting behavior because of two aspects. First, during the 8th term of the European Parliament, the AfD MEPs were associated with two different EPGs. Second, due to the split of the party in summer 2015, they were either members of two national parties (from AfD to ALFA/LKR) or of one national party (AfD) which has changed its ideology to a significant extent, at least in terms of issue salience (Decker, 2015, 81). Thus, we are able to observe legislative behavior during three different time periods.

1. From the beginning of the 8th EP in 2014 until the internal break-up of the AfD in June 2015. During this period, all AfD MEPs were members of a moderate EPG and a Euroskep-tical but moderate national party (Jankowski, Schneider and Tepe, 2016). Although the party included members and representatives who displayed a clear populist right-wing profile, its manifesto lacked equivalent positions (Arzheimer, 2015).

2. After the split of the AfD, the radical right MEPs remained members of the moderate EPG to begin with, but at the same time, their national party embraced more radical positions. While the more radical MEPs had been ‘enclosed’ by their relatively moderate national party between May 2014 and June 2015, their positions were now in line with their party’s.

3. Finally, after May 2016, the two remaining AfD MEPs changed their EPG membership (EFDD and ENF). We can observe parliamentary behavior under a radical national party position and a radical EPG. This development is displayed in Figure 1.

Particularly interesting for our analysis is the second time period in which the AfD changed its issue emphasis and national party position drastically but remained a member of the rather moderate ECR-EPG. This time period is not only crucial due to this position shift, but also
because we can safely assume that the ECR leadership had only very little means to influence the behavior of the two radical AfD MEPs. For example, both radical AfD MEPs are strongly focused on national politics. They never pursued a career at the European level. The fact that both MEPs are actively seeking office at the national level provides evidence for this claim. Marcus Pretzell was elected to the parliament of North-Rhine Westphalia in 2017 and Beatrix von Storch is running for parliament in Germany’s general election of 2017, with good prospects of being eventually elected. This strong focus on national politics makes it much more challenging for the ECR leadership to influence legislative activity of AfD MEPs as they are not really interested in a career within the EP or the EPG. Bluntly put, incentives related to office-seeking are probably ineffective with respect to the AfD MEPs. Moreover, it is also rather challenging for the ECR to influence AfD MEPs with regard to policy seeking. Due to the ‘grand coalition’ in the EP, it is almost impossible for smaller EPGs to find majorities in certain votes. This holds even more true for the case of the AfD as the position of the AfD is more radical and thus less likely to find a majority in the EP. Put differently and from the perspective of the AfD MEPs, there is little incentive to co-operate with the ECR to find a majority on certain votes if it is almost always clear that even with the support of the ECR, the chances of finding a majority are rather low.

Based on these arguments, the AfD constitutes a least likely case for EPG influence since there are no strategic incentives for AfD MEPs to co-operate with the ECR. This implies that, if EP roll call voting is subject to strategic considerations, we should observe a strong change in the position of AfD MEPs after the internal split of the AfD. Most importantly the radical AfD MEPs should change their position drastically and more towards the EPGs of which they later became members, namely the EFDD and ENF. Moreover, one might also argue that the former AfD MEPs, who left the AfD after the internal split, shifted their position towards a more liberal position. This argument is based on the idea that before the internal split, both factions had some incentives to act in unity. This would suggest that the moderate (back then) AfD MEPs sometimes took a more right-wing position, while the radical right AfD MEPs sometimes behaved more moderately due to the dominance of the moderate party leadership.

The third time period, when the AfD MEPs changed their EPG membership, should not have an that drastic effect on MEPs position if it is solely the national party which dominates. However, if EPGs structure voting behavior on most votes and national parties are only relevant on certain votes, then this period should yield significantly stronger shifts in the position of MEP
members. The shifts in the position of the AfD members are also depicted in Figure 1. It should be noted, however, that the strength of the shifts is an empirical question. Therefore, the shifts in Figure 1 only highlight where we would expect changes in the position of AfD and former AfD MEPs.

![Figure 1: The Case of the AfD](image)

Note: The y-axis displays the ideological position of the MEPs with larger values indicating a more radical position.

4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In our analysis of the AfD in the 8th EP, we rely on what Lo (Lo, 2013b,a) describes as “roll-call discontinuity approach”. This approach is explained in more detail in Poole (2005), and represents a standard strategy for analyzing quasi-experiments based on roll-call data. The approach exploits that a certain treatment during a legislative period has only been assigned to some legislators. In such cases, the untreated legislators can serve as a control group. More specifically, we can employ spatial models of parliamentary voting (Poole, 2005) which estimate a legislator’s position based on their voting record. A position is estimated for legislators subject to the treatment for each treatment period. Since our treatments are first, the internal split of
the AfD and secondly, the change of the EPG, each member of the AfD is thus included three times in the data. These position estimates are comparable as we can use all the other untreated legislators as ‘bridging’ observations. Without such bridging observations, the estimates from two spatial models would not be comparable (Shor, Berry and McCarty, 2010).

A pitfall of this identification strategy is that position shifts of the multiple included MEPs might be due to shifts in the agenda and structure of the policy space which are unrelated to the treatment of the specific MEPs. If, for example, the whole EP became more conservative in June 2015, then any MEP included twice – for example, before and after June 2015 – would appear to be more conservative in the second time period. We control for this factor by running placebo analyses in which each MEP is assigned to the two treatment conditions, and all other MEPs serve as bridging observations. We then compare the observed shifts in the policy space for the treated (AfD) MEPs and the non-treated MEPs. Since estimating several spatial models requires some time, we restrict this placebo analysis to all MEPs of the ECR as they constitute a good control group. We also only focus on MEPs who have been members of the ECR for the whole time period under study since other MEPs who might have also switched their EPG have also received a treatment.

To estimate a legislator’s position, we use the Optimal Classification (OC) technique developed by (Poole, 2000). OC is less frequently employed in roll-call analyses in the EP compared to W-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997). However, we agree with the advice of (Voeten, 2009) stating that OC is the more suitable method for analyzing EP roll-call data due to the relatively high levels of party discipline. W-NOMINATE is based on several assumptions which are unlikely to hold in the case of EP roll-call voting. In contrast, OC is a non-parametric technique which requires no such strong assumptions.

Our analysis is based on 4,692 roll-call votes held between the beginning of the EP in 2014 and the end of 2016. All data has been collected from votewatch.eu.
5 DIMENSIONALITY OF THE EIGHTH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

We begin our empirical analysis with presenting some more general results regarding the dimensionality of the eighth European Parliament. This is relevant for two reasons. First, this paper is – to our knowledge – the first article which analyzes the roll-call data from the eighth European Parliament, and therefore an update on the dimensionality of the EP policy space seems desirable. Secondly, in order to understand positions shifts of AfD’s MEPs, it is relevant to know what the dimensions include as regards to content.

As explained above, we estimate OC models based on all roll-call votes held between 2014 and the end of 2016. Of the 4,962 roll-call votes, 162 were excluded by the scaling algorithm due to lopsidedness. Legislators who switched their EPG are included as new observations in the data. The results of this analysis are displayed in Figure 2 with MEPs colored according to their EPG membership.

As with any scaling model, the interpretation of the dimensions has to be provided by the researcher. Based solely on the position of the EPGs, we can clearly reject the idea that the first dimension identifies the left-right conflict. Social Democrats (S&D), Liberals (ALDE) and Christian Democrats (EPP) are placed on a similar position on the first dimension, followed by leftist parties and the ECR. Finally, the right end of the dimension is occupied by the two radical right populist EPGs of EFDD and ENF. As such, it is more reasonable to interpret this dimension as the conflict over the European Integration process which has been located on the second dimension for earlier periods of the EP (Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006, 2007). It should be noted, however, that this is just one possible interpretation of the first dimension and that other interpretations are also possible. For example, the three parties on the left constitute the ‘grand coalition’ in the EP. Therefore, the first dimension might also capture the ‘government-opposition’-conflict in the EP (Hix and Noury, 2016). Since support for the EU and government-opposition patterns are correlated, it is hard to disentangle both interpretations from another.

Turning to the second dimension, it becomes obvious that this dimension is more likely to identify the left-right conflict. On the bottom, we find radical left EPGs like the GUE-NGL and Greens followed by the socialdemocrats, liberals and finally conservatives. Also the placement of the radical right populist parties fits into this interpretation. The ENF consists of parties with
a strong right-wing position on cultural issues but a more left-wing position in questions of redistribution, as for example the Front National. In contrast, the EFDD is dominated by UKIP, a party which has a more neo-liberal economic position. Therefore, it makes sense that the ENF is placed more towards the bottom of the second dimension while the EFDD is placed more towards the top of the second dimension.

**Figure 2:** Optimal Classification Estimates of MEPs in the Eighth European Parliament 2014 - 2016

Note: Figure displays the positions of MEPs in a two-dimensional policy space as estimated by optimal classification (Poole 2000).

Following Hix, Noury and Roland (2006), we can further corroborate this interpretation of the dimensions by making use of the national party positions as predictors for their placement on the dimensions in the EP. Using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, we have precise information about the position of national parties on the left-right scale but also on their attitudes towards the EU. We use this information to explain the average position of each national party
for which a position exists in the CHES data. In Table 1, we report the results of this analysis for both dimensions. We estimate three models for each dimension. The first uses only the expert positions as predictors. The second model controls for EPG membership, and the third model additionally includes fixed-effects for countries. The findings strongly support our interpretation. For the first dimension, the attitudes towards the EU are dominating and in the third model the economic left-right position is only significant at \( p < .1 \), while EU attitudes remain a powerful predictor even after accounting for EPG membership and country. The picture is reversed for the second dimension. Here, the economic position of party is a powerful predictor for the OC position while the EU attitudes have no explanatory power after accounting for EPG membership.

Table 1: OLS Regression: Explaining OC Positions of National Parties in the Eighth European Parliament

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>First Dimension</th>
<th>Second Dimension</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro EU-Integration</td>
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<td>-0.036***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
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<td>Economic Left-Right</td>
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<td>0.032**</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.014)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>0.307***</td>
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<td>(0.051)</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>0.908</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * = \( p < .1 \), ** = \( p < .05 \), *** = \( p < .01 \). Robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: Position of national parties on OC dimensions.
6 COMPARING NATIONAL PARTY AND EPG INFLUENCE: POSITION SHIFTS OF AFD MEPS

6.1 Position shifts of AfD MEPs

Having discussed the dimensionality of the current eighth European Parliament, we now turn to the analysis of the position shifts of AfD MEPs. As explained in the methodological section, we estimate three positions for each of the MEPs, with each position reflecting a different time period. We display the position shifts in Figure 3. The two more radical AfD MEPs are highlighted by blue points, while the moderate AfD MEPs, who left the party after the internal split, are colored in red. The y-axis displays the three different time periods from the beginning of the EP to the end of 2016.

The results are striking with regard to the radical AfD members. We can see clear position shifts after both time periods, but the substantive shift in the positions is particularly strong after the change of the EP in May 2016. This finding holds true for both dimensions. Therefore, the results indicate that the positions of the radical AfD MEPs are strongly influenced by their EPG membership.

Turning to the analysis of the moderate AfD MEPs who left the party after the internal split in June 2015, we find a consistent pattern of shifts towards a more pro European position. The shifts are much smaller in magnitude compared to the shifts observed for the radical right AfD MEPs. However, it is noteworthy that such a consistent shift in the same direction is extremely unlikely. Under the null hypothesis of no systematic effect shifts to a certain direction are equally likely. Therefore, the probability of finding consistent shifts in one direction for five MEPs is $p = 0.5^5 = 0.03125$. On the left-right dimension, no systematic effects can be witnessed, with some of the moderate MEPs shifting to the left and some shifting to the right.
Figure 3: Positions of the AfD Legislators During Three Time Periods

Note: Figure displays the positions of MEPs in a two-dimensional policy space as estimated by optimal classification (Poole 2000).

Our results therefore indicate that the shifts in the position of the radical AfD MEPs was much stronger after changing their EPG compared to the internal split of the national party. Since all positions are scaled in the same space, they are directly comparable. On the Pro-Anti-EU Dimension, the shift was twice as strong as after the internal split of the AfD. The same holds true for the position shift of Marcus Pretzell on the left-right dimension. The shift of von Storch on the left-right dimension was equally strong in both time periods, which can be explained by the fact that the EFDD takes a position in the EP which is much closer to the ECR compared to the ENF, while ENF and EFDD take almost identical positions on the anti-pro-EU dimension.

As explained in the theoretical section, we interpret this finding as evidence for a strong influence of EPG membership on the revealed positions of MEPs. However, as we have also argued above, this result might be surprising for the case of the AfD since the ECR had very few options to strategically influence the behavior of the radical AfD MEPs. Therefore, the
question remains unanswered why the radical AfD MEPs followed the position of the ECR so frequently despite their diverging underlying ideological positions? Two answers can be given to this question. The first answer might be that our methodological approach is unreliable as the position shifts might not be related to the changing EPG membership. To test this aspect, the next section provides a placebo analysis which controls for shifts of untreated legislators. The other, more theoretically driven answer to the question is that following the position of the ECR came at low costs for the radical AfD members. The last section of this article controls for this aspect.

6.2 Comparing the shifts to untreated MEPs

The shifts presented in the previous section might be biased as it is possible that they are caused by a common shock which affects all MEPs. But since we only included some MEPs twice in the data, we might observe only the shifts for these MEPs. Therefore, we ran several OC models in which each MEP of the ECR is included three times while we fix the position of all other MEPs. If there was a common trend towards more radical positions, we should observe shifts for all legislators in the respective time periods. In contrast, if our identification assumption is correct, we can expect that the shifts of untreated MEPs will be close to zero since there is no reason for them to change their position.

Figure 4 presents evidence in favor of our identification strategy. The shifts of all ECR members are displayed in the four plots. The left column displays shifts on the pro-anti-EU dimension and the second column displays the shifts on the left-right dimension. The upper row displays the shifts after the national party shift and the lower row displays the shifts after the EPG shift.

In all cases, the position of the untreated MEPs is stable between the periods and thus the majority of the shifts is close to zero. The only case in which the assumption of a stable position seems to be slightly violated is the left-right dimension after the internal split of the AfD. Also, when comparing the position of the radical AfD MEPs, the analysis suggests that the observed shifts are quite unusual. Even in the period where we observed rather small shift, after the

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2 We included only legislators who were part of the ECR for the complete time period.
internal split of the AfD, the observed shifts are among the strongest among all analyzed MEPs. This pattern holds even more true for the time after the EPG switch in May 2016. Some outliers can be found among the other untreated ECR members, particularly the MEPs Notis Maria and Rikke Karlsson. Both of these MEPs were also ‘treated’ during the period under investigation. Rikke Karlsson, for example, left her national party in October 2015 and is thus also affected by a certain treatment (although she remained in the ECR). Quite similarly, Notis Martis left his national party in January 2015. Therefore, these two MEPs are not necessarily suitable as a control group.
**Figure 4:** Placebo Analysis: Shifts of Treated and Untreated MEPs in the two time periods
6.3 The role of issue salience

So far, we have presented evidence that position taking in the EP seems to be primarily influenced by the EPG. On the one hand, this finding is consistent with existing research pointing out the high levels of cohesion among EPG MEPs. On the other hand, as argued above, this finding is rather surprising with regard to the AfD particularly due to analyses which point to the relevance of national parties in the EP. However, it is not plausible to assume that the influence of the EPG on the voting behavior of MEPs is equally high on every vote. In this regard, for example, Klüver and Spoon (2015) highlight that national parties are more relevant when push comes to shove in the EP. In this section, we test this proposition and argue that issue salience can explain the rather surprising patterns of a strong EPG influence even in a case where the national party had a very diverging position compared to the EPG – as is the case for the AfD.

For this purpose, we chose a slightly different approach than above and turn to a Differences-in-Differences (DiD) identification strategy. Our dependent variable measures the percentage of votes for each ECR-MEP which were cast in line with the radical right populist EFDD-EPG. It is important to highlight that we only focus on cases in which the ECR and the EFDD took different positions as measured by their majority position. Therefore, our dependent variable measures the percentage of vote deviations to the EFDD from ECR members. We compute this quantity for three different issue areas. The first issue category reflects – from the perspective of the AfD – low-salience votes on agriculture and fishery policies. The second and third issue category embraces “civil liberties and justice” and “foreign policy and security”, which we consider issues of high salience for right-wing populist parties like the AfD. The deviations to the EFDD are estimated separately for each of the three time periods of the AfD. We then use the following Differences-in-Differences estimation strategy:
Deviations_{i,j,t} = \eta_i + \\
\beta \times Time_t + \\
\psi \times D_{i,t} + \\
\gamma \times Topic_j + \\
\zeta \times D_{i,t} \times Topic_j + \\
\epsilon_{i,j,t}

where \eta_i is a candidate’s fixed effects. Time_t controls for the three time periods (i.e., pre-AfD-split, post-AfD-split, and post-EPG-change). D_{i,t} is the treatment indicator for the two radical right AfD members. Since we are interested in the impact of issue salience, we interact the treatment variable with the Topic_j variable which controls for the low- and high-salience vote categories. Put bluntly, we estimate six different treatment effects, since we estimate two DiD-effects for three different issue categories.

The results from this model are descriptively displayed in Figure 5. Blue lines indicate the two radical right AfD MEPs and the grey lines identify all untreated MEPs. The left panel shows the change in the deviation to the EFDD for low-salience votes on agriculture and fishery issues. Obviously the large increase in deviations only took place after the change of the EPG. There is almost no increase after the internal split of the AfD – a finding largely consistent with our spatial analysis from above. The picture looks different for more salient votes on civil liberties. Here, the rise seems to be stronger after the internal split of the AfD while it is smaller after the EPG change. Finally, for the high-salience issues of Foreign- and Security Policies, we find that there was a high level of deviation to the EFDD from the beginning and only a small increase after the change of the EPG. As such, the descriptive look at the voting patterns indicate, that voting deviations are indeed driven by issue salience.
In Figure 6, we present the results from the DiD estimation. The y-axis displays the DiD-effect at two different points in time compared to the respective previous period. The different colors of the estimate indicate the different topics. Again, our assumptions are largely corroborated. For fishery and agriculture issues, there is no effect after the AfD split for the two radical right AfD MEPs, meaning that the radical AfD members were not more likely to deviate into the direction of the EFDD after the internal split of the AfD compared to other members of the ECR. After the EPG change of the two radical right MEPs, however, there is a remarkably strong change in the proportion of votes cast with the EFDD. This supports our argument that the EPG offers 'low-cost advice' on issues where MEPs have no opinion.

Considering the two other issues, which we consider to be more salient for the radical right AfD MEPs, we find a deviation from the ECR towards the EFDD at the time of the national split. The effect at the time of the EPG change is also significant but it is either slightly lower (for civil liberties votes) or equally high (for foreign and security votes). Note that the displayed effect measure the difference compared to the previous time period, so that the overall change in the proportion of votes cast with the EFDD is the sum of both estimates. We can therefore conclude that we find strong variation in the proportion of votes cast with the EFDD for different issue areas. The patterns strongly suggest that the national party shift of the AfD was not irrelevant.
for their MEPs voting behavior. It only mattered more for some issue areas than others. It should also be noted that the observed patterns might become even clearer after a more fine-grained salience coding of each vote. Currently, all votes within these issue areas (which we adopted from the categorization of votewatch.eu) are considered to be of either low- or high-salience. While it is reasonable to assume that all votes on fishery and agriculture are of low salience for AfD MEPs, it is more problematic to assume that all votes regarding civil liberties or foreign and security policy are highly salient for the AfD. Therefore, providing a more detailed coding of individual votes with regard to salience for AfD’s MEPs might support our findings even more.

**Figure 6: Differences-in-Differences Effects**

![Figure 6: Differences-in-Differences Effects](image)

What can we conclude from these findings? We see that in the case of less salient issues, the more radical MEPs vote largely in line with their EPG after the split of their national party. As expected, the change within the national party has no significant effect on the voting behavior in less important issues. In contrast, in case of core issues of their national party, the two remaining AfD MEPs deviate significantly from their EPG after the split at the national level and, to a lesser extent, after the EPG change. The significant effect of EPG change is straightforward since deviation from the original EPG’s position should appear when MEPs change their parliamentary group.
Overall, this shows that the role of the EPG is overestimated if voting behavior – or, more precisely, deviation from the position of the EPG – is not controlled for salience. This result has strong implications for our considerations on the role of EPGs. We conclude that MEPs use the position of their EPGs as an orientation or heuristic, but only when topics are of lower importance. When the EP votes on salient issues in terms of the ideology of their national party, MEPs obviously do not hesitate to deviate from the position of their EPG (Klüver and Spoon, 2015).

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have assessed the extent to which the voting behavior of MEPs is influenced by the position of their EPG or their national party. To answer this question, we have, first, described the two most important dimensions which define the policy space in the Eighth European Parliament. Our analysis demonstrates that European integration policies specify the first and the left-right conflict represents the second dimension. In the second step, we have analyzed the positions of MEPs based on their distribution in this two-dimensional space. In the subsequent sections of our paper, we have analyzed the positional shifts of AfD representatives in the EP at two points in time: the split of the AfD in June 2015 and the change of the EPG of the remaining AfD members in May 2016. Overall, we have found positional shifts for the more radical MEPs after the party’s split and, even more drastically, after their EPG change. While these results have indicated an important role of the EPG for the individual voting of MEPs, we have supposed that their voting behavior varies with the salience of the topics. By using a Differences-in-Differences approach, we have proven this assumption. The two MEPs in question follow their EPG even after the split of the AfD in less important issues. When issue salience is high, the extent to which the AfD MEPs tend to deviate from the position of the ECR is significant.

Our findings do not only illuminate the specific case of the AfD. More importantly, they contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of EPGs in the voting behavior of individual MEPs. Considering the low influence of EPGs on MEPs compared to their national parties, we have offered a more fine-grained assessment of the role of EPGs. Under specific circumstances, it is
definitely rational for MEPs to vote in line with their EPG, and these circumstances appear to be widely defined by issue salience. In order to reduce costs – namely the necessary efforts to permeate the complex issues of European politics – MEPs use the position of their EPG as a heuristic for their own vote, as long as the current topic is of low importance compared to the position of their national party. In ballots on topics which represent core issues of their national parties, they do not hesitate to deviate from their EPG’s position. However, it should also be highlighted that our findings might cannot be generalized to all other national parties in the EPG. While we focused specifically on the AfD as this party had no incentives to co-operate with their former EPG, it might be the case that other national parties are more relevant for certain EPGs. Most importantly, large national parties – as for example the German CDU/CSU within the EPP-EPG – can be so decisive for the functioning of an EPG that they influence the position of the other national parties within the EPG. This implies that the proportion of identical votes between the national party and the majority EPG position might be larger for more powerful national parties.

Our results might be summed up as follows: as measured by issue salience, EPGs do matter when issues are less important, but when it comes to core issues, national parties still matter more. These results are also relevant with regard to the interpretation of positions extracted from roll-call data in the EP. When MEPs are primarily agents of their national party and only follow the EPG in irrelevant votes, how can we then interpret the positions of MEPs extracted from scaling methods? It is still reasonable to assume that these positions have some meaning when the purpose is solely to describe the structure of the EP in general. Only a minority of votes in the EP are probably relevant for a national party and different votes are important to different national parties. Therefore EPGs still have the power to define a majority position on most roll-call votes since probably only few MEPs are going to deviate from the EPG. Our findings are more problematic when scaling methods are used to interpret the individual position of national parties in the EP. These estimates reflect at best the relative position of national parties compared to the other national parties from the same EPG. Their positions are, however, still dominated by the influence of EPG membership. Put differently, the position of national parties might be radically different when only votes are considered which are of relevance for a national party. Analyzing this relationship between issue salience and the position of national parties in more detail is an important topic for future research.
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