The European Parliament
- European Union (EU) legislature (~ lower house).
- 736 directly elected members (MEPs) sit in transnational party groups.
- Power of amendment and veto in most policy areas.
- More than 80% of EP amendments become law.
  - EP used to be consultative talking shop; now authoritative and assertive political actor.
- Dimensions of conflict: Left-Right and pro- / anti-EU.
- Competitive party system.
  - MEPs overwhelmingly vote based on party affiliations.

What do we know about the EP?
- A lot, compared to 10 years ago; literature has grown tremendously (esp. Kreppel 2001, Rittberger 2007, Hix et al. 2007)
- But: less known about behavioral patterns of individual MEPs.
- Research questions:
  - How do MEPs make decisions on a multitude of diverse policy proposals?
  - How do individual-level choices become aggregated into cohesive parties?

Two mechanisms of policy choice
- Perceived preference coherence (PPC):
  - Non-expert legislators adopt the positions of expert colleagues with whom they perceive to share a common set of preferences over political outcomes.
- Focal points:
  - Indifferent non-experts simply rely on PPC, while policy choices of invested non-experts are based on focal points that relate the policy proposal at hand to their preferences over outcomes.
  - Both PPC and focal points: decision-making shortcuts.

Common explanation
- MEPs are coerced into following the formal “party line” of their EP party groups.
  - “Party control model”
  - Questionable that party discipline = sufficient condition for high levels of party cohesion.
    - Unusually heterogeneous group of legislators.
    - Formally weak party organizations.
  - Questionable in theoretical terms: based on backward reasoning.

Parties vs. preferences
- Counterfactual: would party groups be cohesive in absence of party discipline?
- Yes, according to “shared preferences model”
- Problem: both models assume that legislators know their preferences regarding a great number of policy proposals across numerous issue areas!
Preferences

- Do MEPs have well-defined preferences?
  - They have well-defined outcome preferences...
  - … but not well-defined policy preferences (Krehbiel 1993).
- Uncertain link between outcome preferences and policy preferences.
- How do MEPs make policy choices that approximate their outcome preferences given this uncertainty?

Perceived preference coherence

- MEPs make decisions based on perceived preference coherence (PPC).
- MEPs adopt the position of those policy experts with whom they perceive to share common outcome preferences.
- Policy positions of experts with similar outcome preferences = what non-experts would choose if they had full information.

PPC with whom?

- Who are the experts? Members of EP’s informational committees (Krehbiel 1991; McElroy 2006).
- Shared party affiliation = proxy for shared outcome preferences.
  - Note: decision-making based not on actual preference coherence, but perceived preference coherence.
- MEPs = voters in mass elections: party label serves as decision-making short-cut.
  - MEPs choose among complex alternatives while maximizing probability that preferred outcome is approximated.

Hypotheses

- PPC model:
  - MEPs adopt positions of their party colleagues in responsible committee when voting on the floor.
- Problem: do MEPs follow party experts because:
  - They are coerced into following their positions?
  - They share their colleagues’ preferences?
  - They adopt their positions on the basis of PPC?
- Solution: test hypotheses about political process, not just political outcomes.

Hypotheses (cont.)

- Shared preferences model:
  - Non-expert MEPs have exogenous policy preferences.
- Party control model:
  - Party leaders have exogenous policy preferences.
  - They impose these preferences on their members.
- PPC model:
  - Non-expert MEPs and party leaders do not have exogenous policy preferences.
  - Party positions endogenous to committee deliberation and negotiation process.

Empirics I: quantitative evidence

- Dependent variable: Votes in plenary (yes, no, abstain)
- Independent variables: common positions of
  - EP party group members in committee
  - National group members in committee
  - National party delegation members in committee
Empirics II: qualitative evidence

- 90 in-depth interviews with MEPs and EU officials.
- Key questions:
  - Do non-expert MEPs and/or party leaders have exogenous policy preferences?
  - Where do party positions come from?
    - Especially: do parties discipline their members?

Findings

- Non-expert MEPs do not have exogenous policy preferences:
  - “I really don’t know each time what I vote [on].”
  - “So many things happen, so many different subjects are being debated in different committees, that none of us follow everything in much detail.”
  - “You don’t even read the report … You have some general knowledge … but you just trust your [party] colleagues in committee. You trust that they are the experts [who] have gone through the issue in detail.”

Findings (cont.)

- Party leaderships do not have exogenous policy preferences:
  - [EP parties have] “very broad lines, but there is no particular position on particular issues or particular directives. That is usually built up [in committee].”
  - Leaders incapable of enforcing party discipline through:
    - Sanctions: “We would love to have something to whip people with, but we don’t.”
    - Rewards: [Distribution of posts and positions is not about] “giving bonbons to people.”
  - Plus: parties do not monitor votes of individual MEPs.

Findings (cont.)

- Party positions endogenous to committee deliberation and negotiation process.
  - Party colleagues in committee seek consensus position; successful most of the time; becomes formal “party line”
  - [Most MEPs] “are following what their leaders [in the committee] are telling them.”
  - Even party leaders openly describe this dynamic and willingly discount their own role.
Conclusion and contributions

- EP studies:
  - PPC explains who decides, and how, most of the time; “normal” decision-making.

- Legislative studies:
  - What factors may explain party cohesion?
  - Not parties versus preferences:
    - Outcome preferences and party effect (as proxy for shared outcome preferences) have a mutually contingent effect on party cohesion.