

# Dealing with fragmentation: The new political equilibrium and coalition dynamics in the European Parliament during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature

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## ABSTRACT

One of the key outcomes of the 2019 elections is the increased fragmentation of the European Parliament (EP). The decline of traditional parties in many member states, the good results of the Greens and the Liberals combined with the success of Eurosceptics have led to a political reconfiguration of the EP. It poses a challenge for its functioning and its place in the EU decision-making system. A higher internal fragmentation may make it more difficult to reach a common position in time to truly have a voice in EU interinstitutional debates. This chapter aims to examine the implications of higher political fragmentation on coalition formation in the EP since 2019. Our central question is: how has the political equilibrium within the EP changed since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term? We expect that the two largest political families will cooperate even more now that they do not hold an absolute majority on their own. We further expect them to include smaller groups in the grand coalition more often in order to continue to adopt reports with large majorities. To examine this question, we rely on an analysis of roll-call votes (RCV) at the plenary level.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the key outcomes of the 2019 elections is the increased fragmentation of the European Parliament (EP). The decline of traditional parties in many member states, the good results of the Greens and the Liberals combined with the success of Eurosceptics have led to a political reconfiguration of the parliament. For the first time since the creation of the EP, the two main political families – Christian-democrats and socialists – do not have a majority. While initially seen as a potential threat for the European Union (EU), recent research has shown that this new situation has so far not created any deadlock and that the EU was still able to manage the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Novak et al., 2020; Truchlewski et al., 2021; Christiansen, 2021). However, the

higher level of fragmentation in the EP poses a challenge for the legislative institution and its place in the EU decision-making system. From the start, the EP has needed to carve out its place and has done so by speaking with one voice. Doubts may however be raised about its true level of influence: the past decade of crises has led to an increased dominance of executives, especially of the European Council (Puetter, 2014), leaving the EP at the margins in key decisions. A higher internal fragmentation may make it even more difficult for the legislative institution to reach a common position in time to truly have a voice in EU interinstitutional debates.

This chapter aims to examine the implications of higher political fragmentation on coalition formation in the EP since 2019. More precisely, it will analyse to what extent this higher fragmentation has impacted the traditional dominance of the grand coalition between the Socialist and Christian Democratic political forces. Put differently, our central question is: how has the political equilibrium within the EP changed since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term? We expect that the two largest political families will cooperate even more now that they do not hold an absolute majority on their own. We further expect the two groups to include smaller groups in the grand coalition more often in order to continue to adopt reports with large majorities. In other words, we expect the higher level of political fragmentation to have led to more consensual and inclusive patterns of coalitions, a trend which is likely to have been reinforced by the COVID-19 crisis. To examine this question, we rely on an analysis of roll-call votes (RCV) at the plenary level.

This chapter will first examine the issue of political fragmentation. The second section will look at the impact of increased fragmentation on coalition building. The third section will analyse the evolution of cooperation between the two traditional political groups within the EP, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), as well as the role played by smaller pro-EU political forces, the Greens and Liberals. A fourth section will investigate the current paradox of Eurosceptics which have gained seats and yet lost influence. Lastly, we will summarize our results and their implications for the EP.

## 1. The increased fragmentation of the European Parliament

Although the number of political families represented in the EP has remained quite stable over time, political fragmentation within the institution has recently increased dramatically. This evolution is the direct result of the decline of traditional mainstream political groups and the rise of smaller groups. Following their lack of success in the 2019 European elections, the two largest party groups within the EP, the EPP and the S&D, no longer hold an absolute majority of seats (see Westlake in this volume). While in the 5<sup>th</sup> legislature (1999-2004) the two groups held 65% of seats, in the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature they only hold 47.5% (Figure 1).

**<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE. Caption:**

**[Share of seats hold by the EPP/S&D groups from 1999 to today]>**

As a result, the share of seats held by smaller parliamentary groups has increased (see Figure 2). The radical right Eurosceptic group has seen its share of seats rise from 2.5% in 1999, when the Europe of Democracies and Diversities (EDD) group comprised only 16 members, to 10% in 2019, with the Identity and Democracy group (71 members). Similarly, the Greens/EFA group has managed to increase its share of seats from 7.5% in 1999 to 9.5% in the 9<sup>th</sup> term. The major boost for the group came in 2019, where green parties across Europe gained from the increase in the salience of environmental issues (Pearson & Rüdig, 2020). The Liberal group also benefited from the good electoral performance of some of its members in 2019 and from the fact that *La République En Marche* decided to join the group in the EP. As a consequence, the proportion of seats held by the Liberals has increased by more than 6 percentage points in 2019 compared to the previous legislature.

**<INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [Share of seats hold by all political families in the EP from 1999 to today]>**

The fragmentation of the party system in the EP can be best visualised by looking at the effective number of political families represented in the European legislature using the indicator developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). This indicator considers the actual numerical weight of the different families. For instance, if a parliament is composed of four families of equal size holding each 25% of the seats, the effective number of families would also equal four. However, if a smaller number of families dominates the legislature at the expense of others, the effective number of families would be lower, indicating a lesser degree of fragmentation. Put differently, the higher the effective number of political families in a legislature, the more fragmented the party system is.

To grasp the evolution of the fragmentation of the EP party system since 1999, we calculated the effective number of party families represented in the EP for each legislative term. The actual (not effective) number of families represented has not changed. For each of the last five legislative terms eight families were represented in the EP (the extreme left, the greens, the socialists, the liberals, the Christian democrats, the conservatives, the Eurosceptic radical right, plus non-attached members). If all these families weighed the same in terms of seats, the effective number of families would be eight. As shown in Figure 3, the effective number has increased since 1999, illustrating the growing party and ideological fragmentation in the EP. This fragmentation in the European chamber is a direct consequence of the decline of traditional groups since the end of the 1990s and the rise of smaller political formations, and should have a direct and important impact on the way coalition are built in the European chamber.

**<INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the effective number of political families in the EP from 1999 to today]>**

## **2. The impact of fragmentation on coalition building in the EP**

The EP's growing party and ideological fragmentation reached an unprecedented level in 2019. This new context is likely to have impacted policy-making, and more precisely the patterns of competition and coalition-building in the EP.

The European Union is often characterised as being a consensual political system (e.g. Costa & Magette, 2003; Elgström & Jönsson, 2000), where many policies are adopted through compromises between different EU institutions. Consensual practices of decision-making are a key element of how these different institutions function, including the European Council and the Council of the EU (Puetter, 2014; Hayes-Renshaw et al., 2006) as well as the European Parliament (Kreppel and Tsebelis, 1999). Regarding the EP, previous research has shown that although deliberation is structured by multiple cleavages, it remains consensual overall at both the plenary and committee level (Novak et al. 2020; Settembri and Neuhold 2009), leading to what scholars have called an 'institutionalized consensus' (Benedetto, 2008). While it is true that there is no stable coalition and that majorities are formed differently depending on the issue at hand, its salience, the procedure as well as the political context (Kreppel 2000), in practice the vast majority of votes, especially those on final legislative reports, are adopted by a grand coalition which comprises at least the two main traditional groups, namely the EPP and the S&D.

The cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists in the EP can be explained by several elements: ideological proximity on fundamental issues (social market economy and further integration); the technical nature of legislative texts, which may reduce political competition; the moderating role of expertise; the pressure to overcome the high majority requirements imposed by the treaties; a common desire to have a unified and strong position vis-à-vis other institutions; and a common interest in controlling the EP (Hix et al., 2007; Costa, 2001; Jacobs and Corbett 2019; Corbett, 1998; Kreppel, 2002; Brack and Costa, 2018). The tendency to build large coalitions is also derived from the internal decision-making process, especially the proportional representation system according to the D'Hondt method (Westlake, 1994), and is a way of simplifying parliamentary work by dividing labour among different groups (Settembri, 2006). Finally, the rise of Eurosceptic political forces in the EP may also have forced pro-European groups to increase cooperation among themselves in order to prevent Eurosceptic MEPs from having any legislative

influence or the ability systematically veto proposals (Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2019; Brack, 2013; Startin, 2010; Treib, 2014).

How has the coalition-building in the EP evolved since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term? Firstly, let us mention that, despite the EP's higher fragmentation, we do not expect cooperation and consensus to have decreased over time. Consensual decision-making has a long history in the institution, and as such it can be considered as a social norm of behaviour which is deeply rooted in the institutional and social context and constrains actors' behaviour. This norm, and the practice of consensus and compromise, have been assimilated by legislators, as well as by party groups' staff (Bendjaballah 2016). Thus, the search for compromise is an objective for parliamentarians (Ripoll Servent, 2017). Individual legislators have an interest in building coalitions with other legislative actors, since successful MEPs who manage to get a report adopted by a large majority may reap important rewards, such as a better position in their group (coordinator), in their committee, or can be awarded another rapporteurship (Bendjaballah, 2016). Moreover, the key elements that have contributed to the consensual features in the EP (role of expertise, necessity for the parliament to present a unified front in trilogues) continue to constrain the legislative behaviour of party groups and MEPs since 2019. Therefore, because MEPs and the staff of party groups still have incentives to reach large majorities and continue to be constrained by these social norms (Novak et al., 2020), we expect decision-making to be as consensual during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term as during previous ones. We even expect consensus in the EP to have increased during this parliamentary term as a result of higher political fragmentation. Three main reasons may explain this.

Firstly, it is likely to be more complicated to build alliances in a more fragmented parliament. Two main types of voting coalitions are possible in the EP: the grand coalition and an alternative left-wing or right-wing coalition.

- 1) The grand coalition comprises the EPP and S&D groups at least. We expect this configuration to be more unstable as a result of higher political fragmentation and to rely to a larger extent on additional smaller groups. As mentioned previously, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists no longer hold an absolute majority on their own. Even though it is not needed in most cases, MEPs and party groups still try to reach as broad a majority as possible, especially to present a strong EP

position when negotiating with the Council and the Commission in trilogues. Their weaker position in the EP since 2019 means that the EPP and the S&D groups need to include smaller groups, ending the dominance of the “cartel” system of previous terms (Ripoll Servant, 2019). Including more actors in voting coalitions has a policy cost, but the two traditional groups do not have much of a choice, especially if they want to continue to secure policy benefits. The Liberals (Renew) and the Greens-EFA are therefore expected to vote more often with the grand coalition over the 9<sup>th</sup> term than during previous ones.

2) Alternative left-wing or right-wing coalitions include either the EPP or the S&D along with ideologically close allies. One may expect alternative coalitions along the left-right divide to become more common in the EP with the rise of the Greens and Liberals. However, this is not likely to be the case as the voting power of these alternative coalitions has remained quite stable over time. A potential right-wing liberal coalition (EPP, Renew/ALDE, ECR) only represents 49% of seats during the 9<sup>th</sup> term compared to 48% during the 8<sup>th</sup> term. A left-wing liberal coalition (S&D, Renew/ALDE, Greens-EFA) would reach 45% of seats during the 9<sup>th</sup> term, compared to 41% during the previous term. Only a left-wing coalition including the Liberals, the Socialists, the Greens and the GUE-NGL group would exceed the absolute majority threshold of 353 MEPs – and even then, only by two seats. A right-wing coalition including the Eurosceptics (EPP, Renew, ECR, ID) would reach 60%, but is very unlikely because of the *cordon sanitaire* against extreme-right members and the large ideological diversity among these four groups. Therefore, we expect a voting grand coalition to form during the 9<sup>th</sup> term as neither the EPP nor the S&D can easily form alternative coalitions along the left-right divide.

Secondly, the presence of Eurosceptic political forces in the 9<sup>th</sup> EP is likely to increasingly pressure mainstream groups to cooperate and form pro-European voting alliances. As previously noted, mainstream party groups, and especially the EPP and the S&D groups, have incentives to collaborate to keep Eurosceptic forces out of key policy decisions. That was one of the reasons that led the EPP and S&D groups to adopt a formal coalition agreement in 2014 (Marié, 2019). The picture after the 2019 European elections has been even more worrying for mainstream groups. On the one hand, the number of MEPs considered as soft Eurosceptic (ECR and GUE-NGL), who used to be included in coalitions with the EPP and the S&D, has decreased. On the other hand, hard Eurosceptics have become stronger, with the creation of the ID group, the fifth biggest group in

the parliament. Following the *cordon sanitaire* rationale, we expect the EPP and the S&D groups to increase their cooperation during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature as they continue to exclude hard Eurosceptic forces from the policy-making process. Put differently, both the EPP and the S&D continue to have strong incentives to cooperate in order to gain policy benefits and support the EU's action.

Lastly, consensus in the EP may have increased as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which has disrupted the overall organization of the parliament (Ripoll Servent, this book). Pro-European groups have joined forces in order to adopt urgent decisions to fight the pandemic and manage its economic and social consequences. The COVID-19 crisis has also forced the parliament to adapt its modes of operation (working remotely) with an eye to “business continuity”, leaving less opportunities for MEPs to express diverging views and increasing the general level of consensus in plenary votes. A recent study (Braghiroli 2021) on a limited dataset of votes shows that the grand coalition dominated votes on economic issues related to the pandemic. Although the left-right cleavage may have been visible in votes involving non-economic issues, it is clear that on sensitive (economic) matters and on final votes, such as the joint motion for a resolution on a ‘EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences’<sup>1</sup> (17 April 2020), a coalition of the two largest groups as well as the Liberals was formed against the Eurosceptics. When it comes to sensitive issues, even in crisis situations, consensus among pro-EU actors prevails.

In summary, there are good reasons to believe that decision-making in the EP has become increasingly consensual over time. By that we mean, firstly, that cooperation between the EPP and the S&D groups has increased and, secondly, that the coalitions have included smaller pro-EU groups more often (the Liberals and the Greens-EFA).

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<sup>1</sup> EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (2020/2616(RSP), P9\_TA(2020)0054.



### **3. The EP after 2019: A greater cooperation between pro-European forces**

This part will analyse the cooperation between pro-European forces in the European Parliament. In a context of higher party and ideological fragmentation, we expect the EPP and S&D groups to increase their cooperation in order to gain policy benefits and block Eurosceptic forces from key decisions. Because the numerical weight of both the traditional groups has progressively decreased over time, especially after the 2019 European elections, we further expect them to be increasingly reliant on the support of smaller pro-European groups. The first section will investigate the evolution of the EPP-S&D voting cooperation at plenary stage. The second section will get a broader picture by studying the evolution of majority size in the EP. Finally, the last section will focus on the role played by smaller pro-EU groups often considered as pivotal: the Liberals and the Greens-EFA.

#### **A. A closer cooperation between EPP and S&D**

In this first section, we investigate the evolution of the EPP-S&D cooperation. We expected these two groups to have increased their cooperation, especially since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> term. To measure the extent to which the Christian Democrats and Socialists vote together in plenary, we use the RICE index (Hix et al 2003), an indicator that varies between 0 (complete agreement between the two groups) and 1 (complete disagreement).<sup>2</sup>

**<INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the EPP-S&D Rice index from 2004 to today]>**

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<sup>2</sup> The RICE index is calculated as the 'proportion of the group comprising the group majority on a roll-call minus the proportion comprising the group minority'. In other words, it is the absolute distance between the percent of MPs that voted 'yes' and the percent that voted 'no'.

Figure 4 shows the mean RICE index for the past four legislative terms. The smaller the RICE index, the higher the cooperation between the Christian Democratic and Socialist groups. The data clearly supports the expected increase in EPP-S&D cooperation. More specifically, this confirms our expectation: the two groups have increased their cooperation since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term. To substantiate our findings, we further examine the data for the different types of procedures, as coalition-building is expected to be higher on legislative reports (Hoyland, 2010; Carruba et al., 2006). Therefore, we distinguish legislative reports (files under the ordinary legislative procedure) and non-legislative reports (comprising initiative reports and EP resolutions). We also distinguish between final votes, which groups consider to be more important and thus lead to more whipping, and non-final votes, which are votes on parts of a text (a recital, an article, or an amendment). Figure 5 shows the evolution of the EPP-S&D agreement index for different procedures and different types of votes.

**<INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the EPP-S&D Rice index from 2004 to today, by type of procedure and type of vote]>**

The evolution is quite consistent: the EPP-S&D cooperation has been higher (lower RICE index) during the 9th legislature than during previous legislative terms. This means that, overall, the EPP and S&D have been voting together more often since 2019 than previously. The only exception is for non-legislative final votes, where the RICE index has constantly increased, meaning that the two groups tend to cooperate less often in these cases – even if the baseline is still quite high.

Although these results seem robust, we also ran linear regression models with the EPP-S&D agreement RICE index as the dependent variable. The different models predict the agreement index, controlling for the procedure and the type of vote. Table 1 presents these results.

**<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [Result of the regression models predicting the EPP/S&D Rice index]>**

The first model pools all RCVs from the sixth to the ninth legislatures, the second one adds control variables, and the third one removes all legislative dossiers linked to the COVID-19 crisis<sup>3</sup> - since the general consensus within the EP was very high when adopting texts related to the crisis, this could skew EPP-S&D cooperation measures upwards. For an easier interpretation of these results, the 9th EP is the reference category for the *term* variable. Positive coefficients for the other terms mean that the RICE index is estimated to be higher (more disagreement) for these terms compared to the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term. For instance, a positive coefficient for the 8th term means that the EPP and S&D, all things being equal, cooperated less frequently during the 2014-2019 period than they have been doing so during the 2019-present period.

This regression analysis further confirms our expectation: the RICE agreement index was significantly higher during the previous terms after controlling for the procedure and the type of vote. Moreover, this decrease in the RICE index, and therefore the increased EPP-S&D cooperation since 2019, is still significant even after removing votes related to the COVID-19 crisis from the analysis (third model).

## **B. The stability of majority size in the EP**

In the previous section we found that the EPP and the S&D groups have been voting together more often in the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term than in previous terms. To better understand the political dynamics

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<sup>3</sup> Those listed on this webpage:  
<https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/thematicnote.do?id=2065000&l=en>

at play since 2019, we need to get a broader picture by studying the overall coalition-building dynamics in the EP. Have the EPP-S&D cooperation continued to cooperate, but on their own, or have they increasingly included in winning majorities smaller groups? Our overall expectation is that, because of the decline of the Christian Democrats and the Socialists after the 2019 European elections, pro-EU smaller party groups, especially the Renew and Greens-EFA groups, will regularly serve as necessary partners in winning coalitions.

In order to test this hypothesis, this section analyses the evolution of the size of voting majorities. With the numerical decline of the EPP and S&D groups in mind, a smaller average majority size would mean that the Christian Democrats and the Socialists have continued to rely, for each vote, on the same number of party groups or MEPs beyond their own ranks. In that sense, the type of coalition built by the two traditional groups would not have changed with the new context of fragmentation in the EP. However, if the average majority size increases or remains stable, it would mean that the EPP and S&D groups rely on a higher number of other parliamentarians to build winning coalitions and, in that sense, have changed their coalition-building strategies.

**<INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [Average majority size by type procedure and type of vote]>**

Table 2 displays the average size of winning majorities by procedure and type of vote. Two conclusions can be drawn from it. Firstly, the average size of winning majorities has remained relatively constant over time. For instance, the majority size on final legislative votes (row 4) was on average 89% during EP6, against 85% during EP9, although the EPP and S&D have gradually increased their cooperation over the past ten years. Secondly, it appears that the 8<sup>th</sup> term (2014-2019) stands out: in all cases, the sizes of majorities were smaller during that legislature than during the two prior terms as well during the current one. This might be related to the variability that occurred during that period: the EPP-S&D groups cooperated very closely during the first half of

the legislative term (July 2014-December 2016) when they had a formal coalition agreement, but their cooperation rate fell after its breakdown in January 2017, driving the figures downwards for that legislature (Marié, 2019).

The stability of the size of winning majorities illustrates the long-term evolution of political conflict within the EP. Although the numerical weight of the EPP and S&D groups has gradually decreased, the size of voting majorities has not shrunk, indicating that the two traditional groups have progressively been obliged to rely to a larger extent on other and smaller party groups. This confirms our expectation that, as a result of higher fragmentation and a weaker position for both the EPP and the S&D groups, coalition-formation in the EP has been increasingly consensual over the legislative terms.

### **A greater role for the Liberals and the Greens**

In the two previous sections we found that the EPP and the S&D groups have increased their cooperation and that the size of winning majorities has not decreased over time. We therefore expect the Liberals and the Greens-EFA groups to be included more often in winning coalitions during the 9<sup>th</sup> term than during previous ones. Figure 6 shows the average winning rates for these two political groups, by procedure and type of vote. We excluded from the analysis all the votes related to the EP's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

**<INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the winning rates of the Liberals (ALDE and Renew) and the Greens-EFA groups from 2004 to today, by type of procedure and type of vote]>**

We found a clear increase in the winning rate of the Liberals, regardless of the procedure (legislative or not) and the type of vote (final or not). For instance, for final legislative votes, the

Liberals have been included in winning coalitions in 100% of cases during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term, compared to 96.4% during the 8<sup>th</sup> legislature. One could think that this trend is a direct result of the Liberals' electoral success in 2019. However, the Liberals had the same share of seats during the 6<sup>th</sup> legislature (2004-2009) than during the 9<sup>th</sup> term but were less often part of winning coalitions. This suggests that the group's influence is not directly a function of its voting power (share of seats) but is related to other factors. In fact, it is obviously linked to the higher fragmented partisan configuration, the rise of Eurosceptic forces and the numerical decline of the EPP and the S&D groups. As a result, the cleavage between pro-European and anti-European forces has deepened, at least when it comes to voting behaviour at plenary stage. This confirms the findings of recent research showing that the last decade of crises has left its mark on the lines of conflict within the EP and that the pro-/anti-EU cleavage has become very salient in plenary votes (Roger et al. 2017; Otjes and Katsanidou 2017; Otjes and van der Veer 2016; Treib, 2021).

As for the Greens, as expected, Figure 6 shows that the group has won more votes during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term than during previous terms. This confirms that the Greens-EFA group has been increasingly integrated in coalition building processes with the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. The only exception is for legislative final votes, where the average winning rate of the Greens-EFA has been stable over the different legislative terms. This is probably due to the fact that, for these visible votes which are likely to attract the attention of the media, the Greens-EFA party group continues to have an issue-by-issue strategy and is more willing to oppose the EPP/S&D/Renew coalition.

A more precise way to analyse the voting behaviour of both the Liberals and the Greens is to investigate the frequency of the different coalition options the groups have during a plenary vote. For our analysis, we limit the range of these possible coalition outcomes to the six most frequent ones, sorted into two broad categories. More specifically, the Liberals and the Greens can either win or lose a vote. On the one hand, if they are on the winning side, they can win a vote either with the grand coalition (EPP and S&D), with only the EPP, or with only the S&D. On the other hand, when losing a vote, they can lose either with the EPP, with the S&D, or alone (meaning that the winning coalition is comprised of both the EPP and the S&D but neither the Liberals or the Greens).

Table 3 summarises these six configurations. Roll call votes related to the EP's response to the COVID-19 have been removed from the analysis.

**<INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [Summary of the different possible vote outcomes for a political group]>**

Figure 7 shows the evolution of these different configurations over time, for both the Liberals and the Greens. The two top panels display frequencies for the Liberals and the bottom panels for the Greens. The right panels show the frequencies when a group wins a vote and the left panels when a group loses a vote for ease of reading. The results confirm our previous findings for the Liberals: the Renew group has been more involved in winning coalitions with both the EPP and the S&D groups during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term than its predecessor (ALDE) was during previous ones. Specifically, the Liberals were on the winning side with the grand coalition in 73% of all votes during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature, compared to 68% during the 8<sup>th</sup> term and 66% during the 7<sup>th</sup> term. Moreover, the Liberals have very rarely lost votes during the 9<sup>th</sup> term, and the proportion of votes the Liberals have lost has progressively declined since 1999. More specifically, the ALDE party group lost 8% of the votes against the grand coalition (EPP and S&D) during the 6<sup>th</sup> legislative term, compared to 2% during the 9<sup>th</sup> term. This clearly confirms the higher degree of consensus in the EP, especially at the centre (Liberals, EPP, and S&D) of the political landscape, as the great majority of the roll-call votes in plenary are adopted by a very large majority comprising all centrist and pro-European forces.

**<INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the frequency of the different vote options for the Liberals (ALDE and Renew) and the Greens-EFA groups from 2004 to today]>**

As for the Greens, the two bottom panels of Figure 7 show that the group has also been included more often in winning majorities with the EPP and the S&D during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature than previously. More specifically, out of all roll call votes, the Greens-EFA party group has been on the winning side with the grand coalition in 60% of cases during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature, compared to 51% during the previous one. As a direct consequence of this, the percentage of votes for which the Greens-EFA group was outvoted by the grand coalition has dropped to 15% during the 9<sup>th</sup> term, compared to 22% during the 8<sup>th</sup> legislature. Although not to the same extent as the Liberals, the Greens-EFA group has been, therefore, an important coalition partner for the EPP and the S&D.

Thus, as we expected, it appears that both the Liberals and the Greens have been increasingly integrated in coalition-building with the EPP and the S&D, especially since 2019 and the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term, therefore reducing voting opposition between pro-European forces and deepening the cleavage between pro- and anti-EU political groups.

#### **4. Eurosceptics in the European Parliament: more seats but less influence?**

Eurosceptic and populist fringe parties have progressively gained seats in the EP over the past few legislatures. Including the non-attached members, around one third of parliamentarians can be considered to be Eurosceptics in 2019 (Ripoll Servent, 2019), although the level and nature of their opposition to the EU is very different from one group to another. In this section we will distinguish between hard and soft Eurosceptics, as they tend to have different attitudes and behaviours in the EP (Brack, 2018). Firstly, we will focus on the voting behaviour of the Conservative party group (ECR), which can be considered to be soft Eurosceptic (Whitaker and Lynch, 2004). The conservative group, which counts among its members governing national parties, is more often included in coalition-building processes and can be considered to have an influence over the policy-making process, in trilogues for instance (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). Secondly, we will turn our attention to the voting behaviour of hard Eurosceptics (the ENF group during the 8<sup>th</sup> term, and



the ID group during the 9<sup>th</sup> term). These groups tend to have a harder and more critical stance on European integration (Kaniok & Komínková, 2020), are often excluded from legislative activities (Brack 2015) and are therefore considered to be less influential in the policy-making process (Almeida, 2010).

How has the voting behaviour of soft and hard Eurosceptic groups evolved? While the legislative behaviour of soft and hard Eurosceptic MEPs has diverged in the past, with soft Eurosceptics more often included in coalition-building processes with pro-European groups, we expect their behaviour to be more aligned in the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature. As demonstrated in previous sections, coalition-building during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term is characterised by an increased prevalence of the grand coalition, EPP-S&D cooperation, and the participation of pro-European smaller groups in winning coalitions (Liberals and Greens). As a consequence, the size of voting majorities has not decreased over time as a function of party fragmentation but has remained rather stable. Because of that, one can expect the two Eurosceptic families to be left out of coalition-building processes as they are not needed by the winning side. Most of the votes are adopted by a pro-European oversized majority, comprising the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, the Liberals, and more occasionally the Greens and, therefore, do not require additional support from the Eurosceptic fringes. Consequently, we do not expect the participation of Eurosceptic groups in winning coalitions to have increased over time. In a first section, we will study the voting behaviour of the Conservatives in the EP. The second section will focus its attention on three Eurosceptic groups: the ENF groups in the 8<sup>th</sup> term and the ID group in the 9<sup>th</sup> term.

### **A. The marginalisation of the ECR group**

In this section we analyse the role played by the ECR group in voting coalitions. Figure 8 shows the evolution of the winning rate of the ECR group in the EP, by procedure and type of vote. Roll-call votes related to the COVID-19 crisis have been removed from the analysis.

**<INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The evolution of the winning rate of the ECR group from 2009 to today, by type of procedure and type of vote]>**

The trends are not as clear as the ones for the Liberals and for the Greens. We observe two different patterns for the evolution of the Conservatives' voting behaviour. Firstly, the participation of the ECR group in winning coalitions has remained quite constant or has decreased for non-legislative files and for non-final legislative votes. For these votes, which are less constrained than final legislative votes and where groups tend to be more flexible regarding whether they join a voting alliance, the Conservatives have been excluded more often from coalition-building during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term compared to previous legislatures. This might be a direct consequence of the new balance of power in the EP, where a great deal of votes are adopted by a centrist and pro-EU alliance. In that context, the ECR group is less likely to be an important (and necessary) actor to build a successful coalition. This is even more so the case since the departure of the British Conservatives from the EP (31 January 2020) and the increased influence of the Polish *PiS* party. These changes may have shifted the average ideological position of the ECR group away from the EPP and closer to the EP's Eurosceptic pole. Moreover, the success of the Liberals during the 2019 elections and the electoral loss of the Conservatives gave the Renew group more leverage to build alliances with the EPP rather than with the ECR.

Secondly, contrary to what we observe for non-legislative votes and for non-final legislative votes, the ECR group's winning rate has increased for final legislative reports. Indeed, it has been on the winning side in 85% of cases during the 9<sup>th</sup> term, compared to 80% during the 8<sup>th</sup> legislature and 77% during the 7<sup>th</sup> legislature. Put differently, although the Conservatives have been more often side-lined during the 9<sup>th</sup> term than previously when it comes to less salient and important votes, the contrary is true for final legislative votes. This upward trend in the case of final legislative votes can be explained by interinstitutional constraints. Indeed, the inclusion of the ECR party group in voting coalitions on legislative reports may be seen as important for the rapporteur in order to present a united front to the Council. Thus, the main centrist pro-EU groups (EPP, S&D and

Renew) are keener to negotiate with the Conservatives to adopt final legislative reports than they are for legislative amendments or for non-legislative dossiers.

## **B. A normalisation of radical Eurosceptics?**

Previous studies analysing coalition-building in the EP emphasise the impact of the rise of populist and radical right Eurosceptic political forces. This is one of the reasons – mentioned by legislators themselves (Marié, 2019) – for the increase in inter-group cooperation. The pro-European centrist groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE/Renew and, to some extent, the Greens-EFA) have systematized their collaboration in order to reduce the legislative influence of Eurosceptic groups and to avoid any deadlock of the institution. The increase in EPP/S&D cooperation described in the above sections as well as the growing inclusion of smaller pro-EU groups in winning coalitions support this point.

Following this argument, we do not expect the winning rate of the radical right Eurosceptic forces to have increased over time. To analyse the evolution of the voting behaviour of right-wing Eurosceptic groups, and the nature of their parliamentary opposition, we compare the winning rate in plenary of the ENF group during the 8<sup>th</sup> legislative term with that of the ID group during the 9<sup>th</sup> term. Figure 9 displays these results. Roll-call votes related to the EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis have been excluded from the analysis.

Contrary to our expectation, the ID group has won more votes during the 9<sup>th</sup> legislative term than the ENF group did during the previous legislature. Out of all roll-call votes, the ID group was on the winning side in 40% of cases during the 9<sup>th</sup> term, against 34% for the ENF group.

**<INSERT FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The winning rate of the ENF group (8<sup>th</sup> term) and the ID group (9<sup>th</sup> term), by type of procedure and type of vote]>**

As shown in Figure 9, this result holds after controlling for the type of procedure and vote. Indeed, the ID group (since 2019) has been more often on the winning side than the ENF group (2014-2019) for all types of procedures and votes. The most significant difference between the two groups is for final legislative votes. When it comes to adopting legislative reports, the ID group participated in winning coalitions in 73.9% of cases, against only 39% for the ENF group during the 8<sup>th</sup> legislature. Put differently, contrary to what one may expect, the ID Eurosceptic group cooperated – or at least voted – with the EPP and S&D in three-quarters of final legislative votes. This does not mean that they have become more influential, that they were part of the actual negotiations with the other party groups or that their support was required to reach voting majorities. This increased participation in winning coalitions may be the result of a strategy of “normalisation” of radical right members, especially since most of them have renounced advocating for their country to leave the EU (Brack 2020). They may no longer necessarily describe the EU as a fundamentally illegitimate system that needs to be dismantled but may consider it as a potential tool to reach specific political goals. For instance, during the 2019 campaign for the European elections, radical right parties called on the EU to do more to fight illegal migration or to improve security.

More participation in winning coalitions does not mean that Eurosceptics are more influential. One way to operationalise influence is to look at the percentage of times a given party group could have shifted the EP’s voting majority. To operationalise influence in this way, we selected the votes on which the ENF and ID groups were very cohesive<sup>4</sup> and then simulated a change in the group’s majority position to determine if it could have challenged the majority. The results are displayed in Figure 10.

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<sup>4</sup> Hix’s agreement rate more than .75

**<INSERT FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE. Caption: [The frequency of votes where the ENF group (8<sup>th</sup> term) and the ID group (9<sup>th</sup> term) were influential, by type of procedure and type of vote]>**

It appears that the ID group is now less determinant to reach voting majorities than the ENF group was during the previous term. Specifically, since July 2019, the ID group has never had the possibility of shifting a voting majority on a final legislative vote, while during the previous term the ENF could have done so in 2.6% of cases. This situation is a direct consequence of the strength of the pro-European legislative block: as the EPP and the S&D groups have increased their cooperation, and because they have more often integrated other pro-EU groups (the Liberals and the Greens), the potential influence of Eurosceptic forces has been reduced, even though they vote more often along with pro-EU political forces.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, the EP has been uninterruptedly dominated by a coalition between the two largest groups, namely the EPP and the S&D. Since July 2019, these two groups have lost their majority. This new political configuration has led specialists to fear that an increasingly fragmented parliament would hinder the EU decision-making process. This chapter has examined the consequences of this fragmentation on coalition-building.

Our analysis has shown that coalitions are now more consensual and inclusive than before, therefore confirming previous studies investigating the capacity of a polarised EP to legislate in specific policy fields (Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021; Buzogány & Četković, 2021). The two traditional groups, the EPP and S&D, have increased their cooperation since 2019. They have also been forced to turn to the Liberals much more often, and to the Greens to a lesser extent, in order to build sufficiently broad and stable majorities. Despite the higher fragmentation in the EP, most of the votes during the 9<sup>th</sup> term have been adopted by oversized majorities comprising all centrist pro-EU party groups. As a consequence, this chapter has also highlighted that the pro-/ anti-EU divide has

become more salient in plenary: pro-European groups have continued to stick together to avoid including Eurosceptic actors.

On the other hand, our analysis has found that the Eurosceptics fringes in the EP are not as excluded from the legislative process as before. Since the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> term, the ID group, the fifth biggest group in the parliament, voted with pro-EU party groups in favour of final legislative files in more than 70% of cases. This result raises questions regarding the role of Eurosceptics in the policymaking process, and the existence of a “cordon sanitaire”. Further research is needed to determine whether the increased participation of Eurosceptics in winning majorities is related to the weakening of the “cordon sanitaire” among pro-European legislative actors or to independent changes in the behaviour of Eurosceptic MEP. While the weakening of the “cordon sanitaire” would mean that pro-European actors more often cooperate with Eurosceptic actors prior to the voting stage, increasing the influence of the latter, the “independent changes” hypothesis implies that Eurosceptic MEPs, regardless of their actual working relations with pro-EU MEPs, now decide to be part of large majorities in support of EU policy action.

It should be noted that coalition building at the plenary stage is only the tip of the iceberg, as it focuses on the very final stage of the decision-making process and, therefore, overlooks prior negotiating dynamics between groups. In this regard, the patterns of competition which are outlined in this chapter may be quite different from those at other stages of the legislative process, especially at the committee level (Bendjaballah 2016). Therefore, conclusions on the basis of voting records cannot be easily inferred to other aspects of EP activities, yet they remain comparable over time and are a good indicator of the political dynamics at play.

Overall, our results point to a certain resilience of the EP as an institution: parliamentarians and party groups seem to have been able to cope with the new challenges resulting from increased political fragmentation. However, our analysis is based on plenary votes, and on the first 2 years of the 9<sup>th</sup> legislature. Further research is necessary over a longer timeframe to examine whether the same trends are confirmed throughout the entire legislative term. Furthermore, a more in-depth study at the committee level would present a more nuanced analysis of coalition building in an increasingly fragmented EP. Finally, an analysis by issues would also provide us with a more fine-grained picture of the role of smaller groups in this new configuration. Indeed, it would be

especially interesting to examine to what extent they can leave their mark on key pieces of legislation as new crucial elements of coalition building.

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FIGURES:

FIGURE 1:

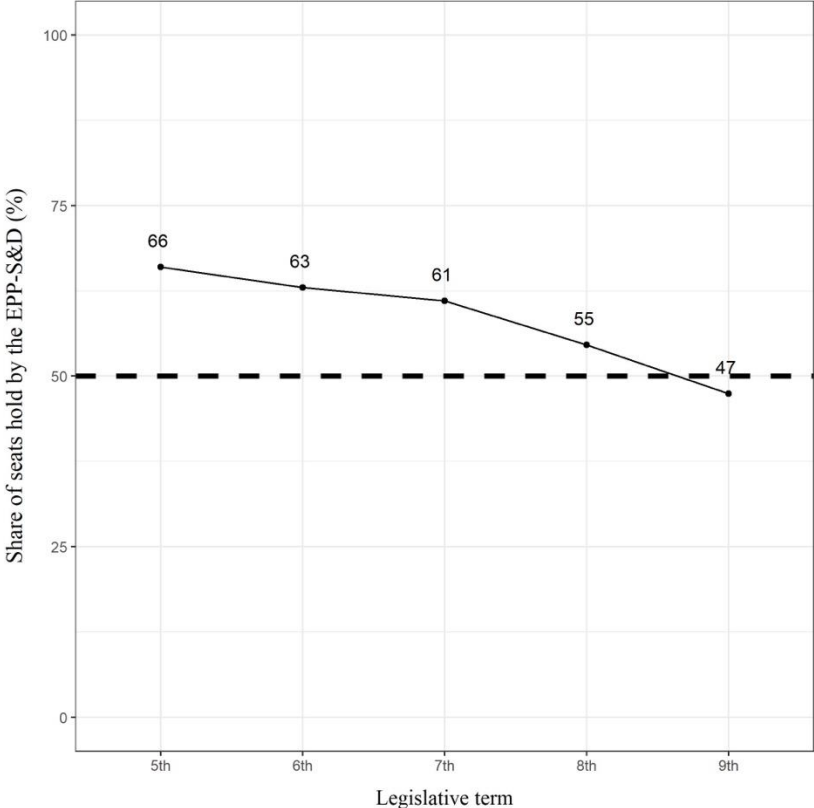


FIGURE 2

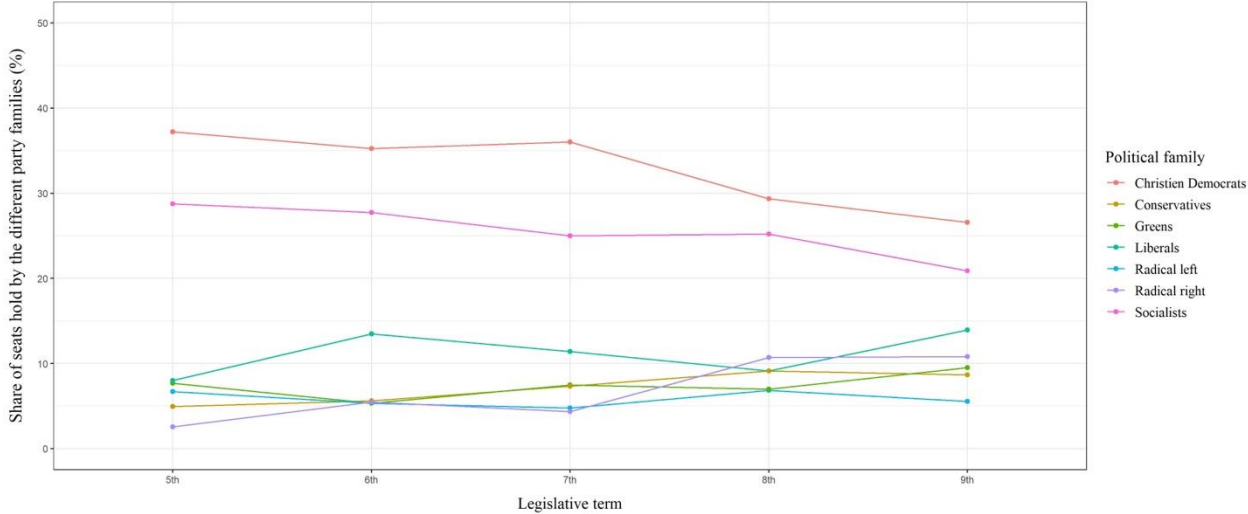


FIGURE 3:

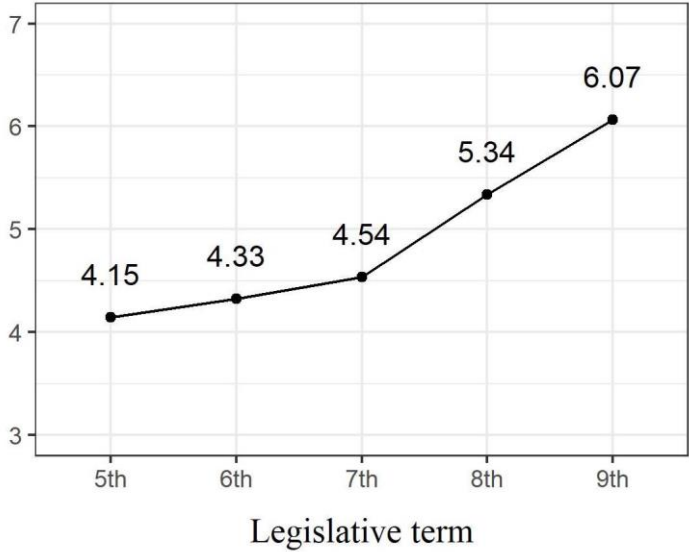


FIGURE 4:

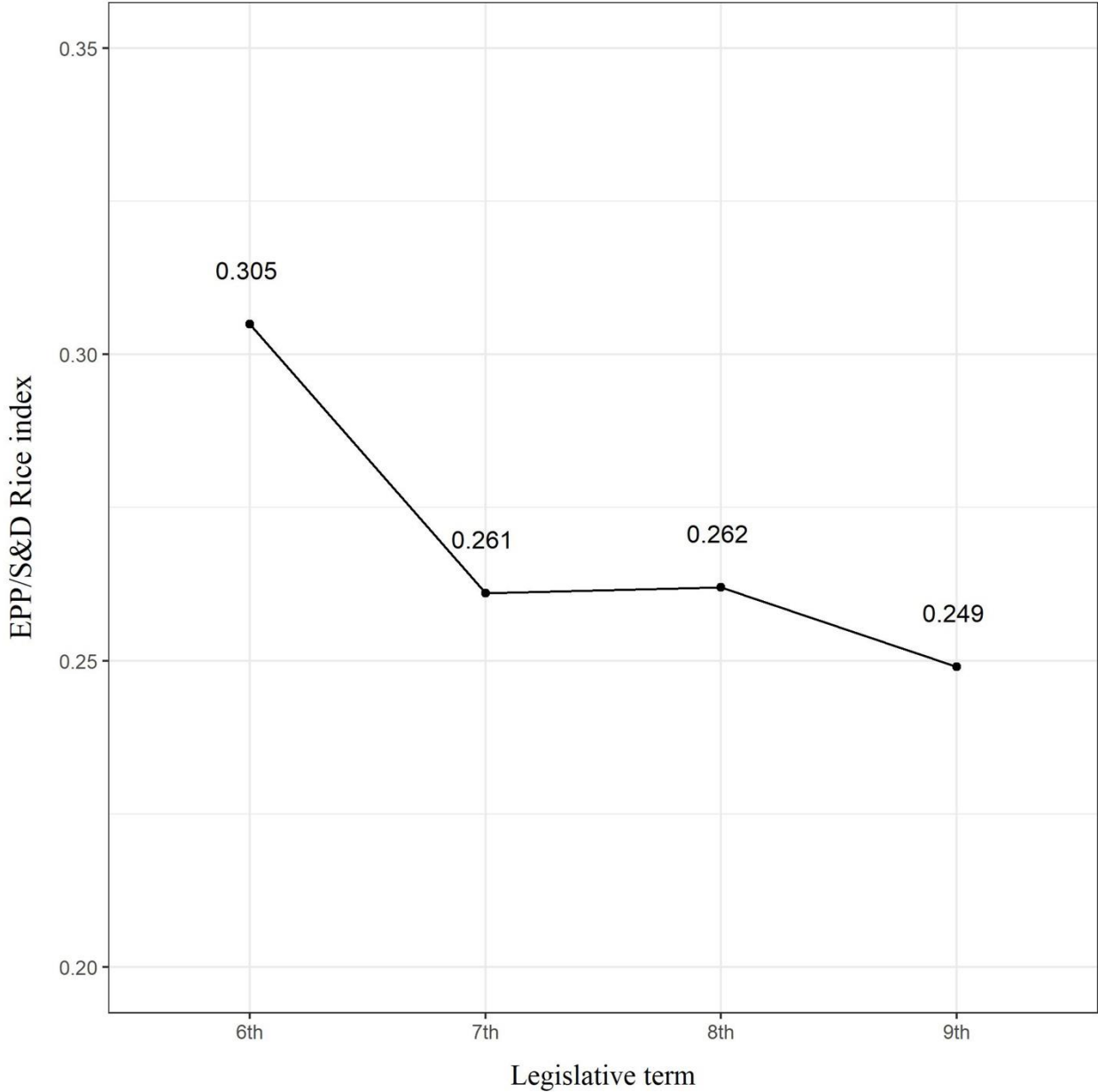


FIGURE 5

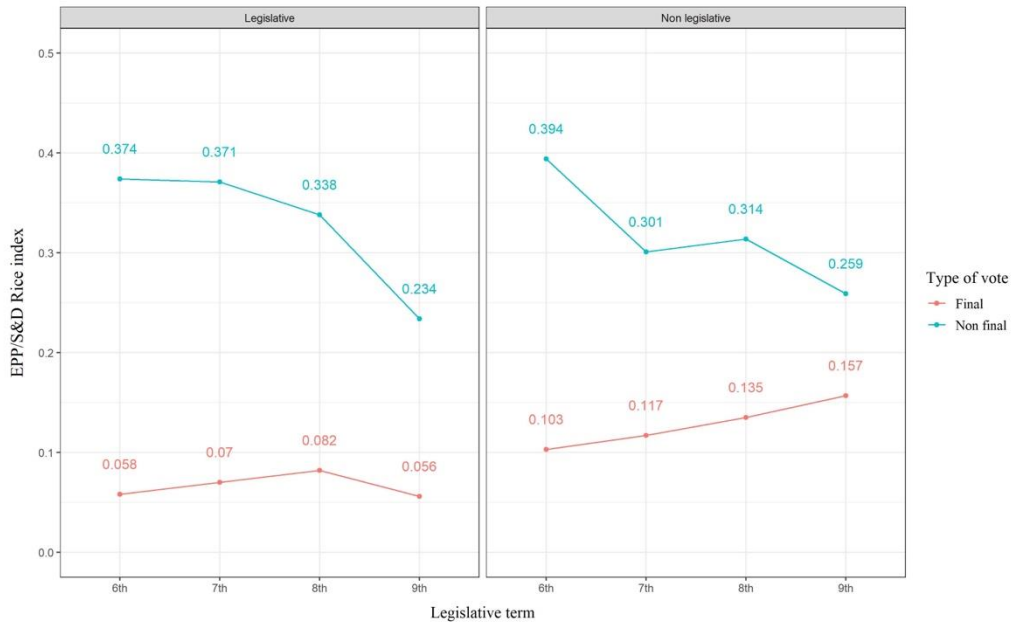


FIGURE 6

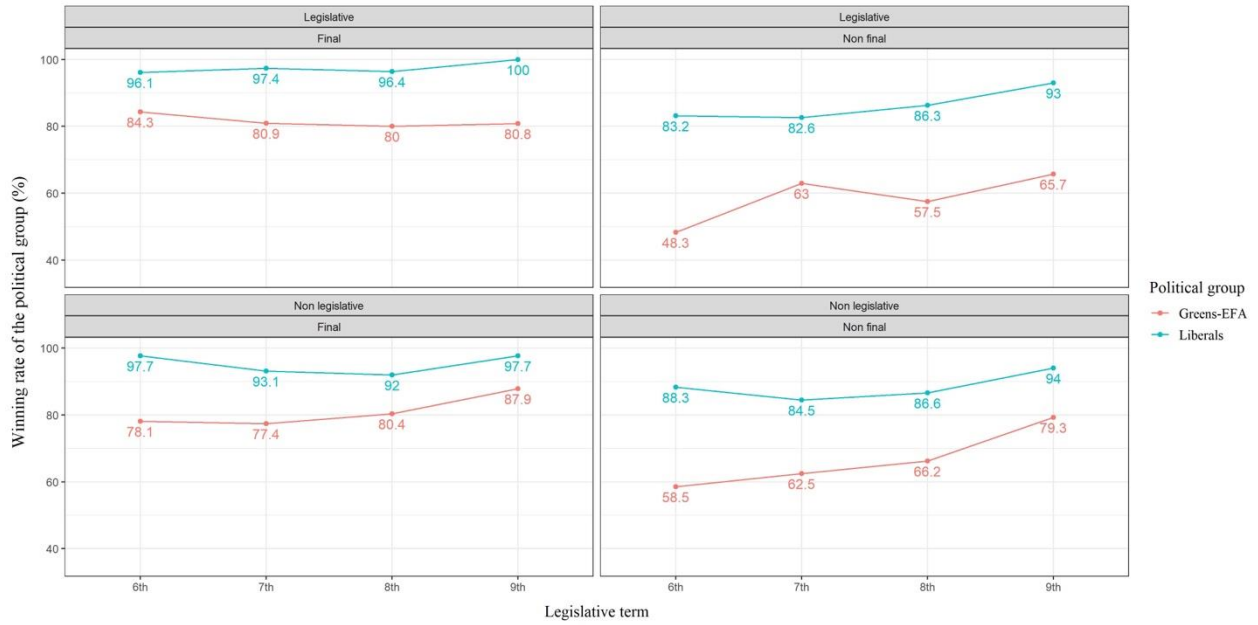


FIGURE 6

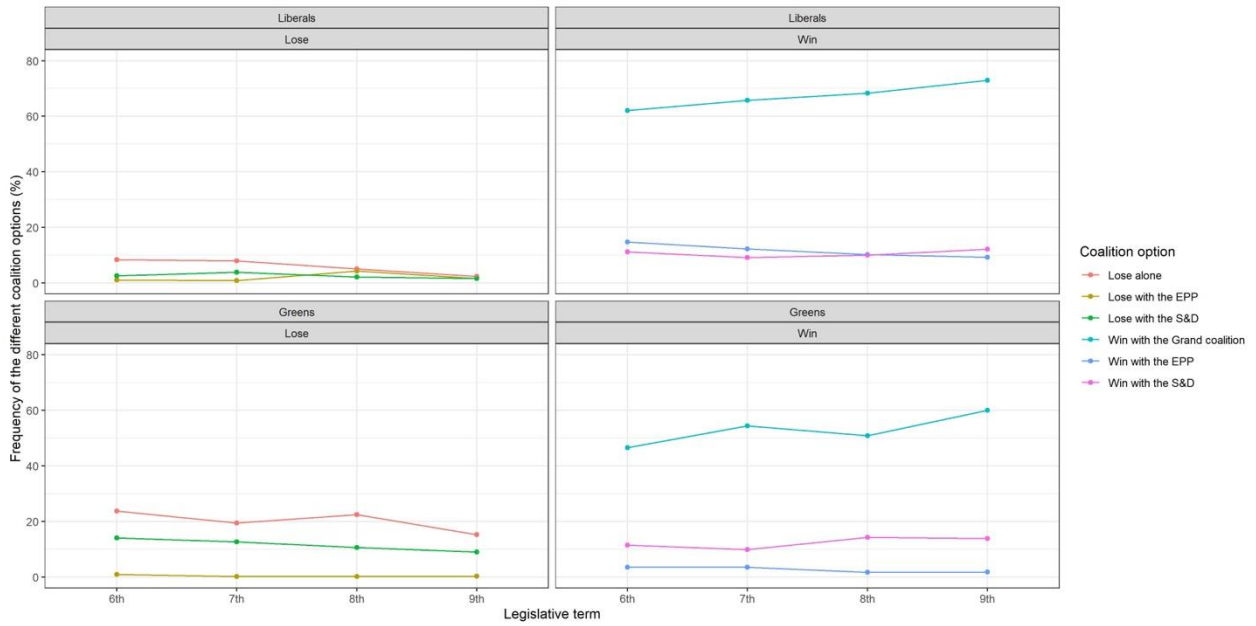


FIGURE 7

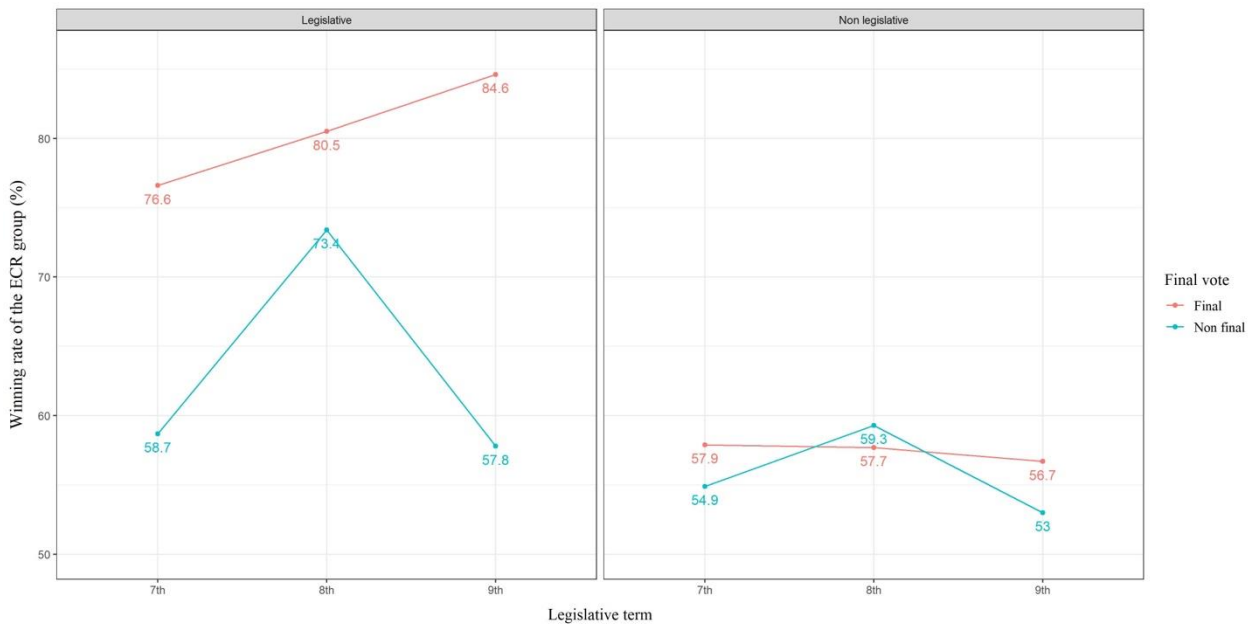




FIGURE 7

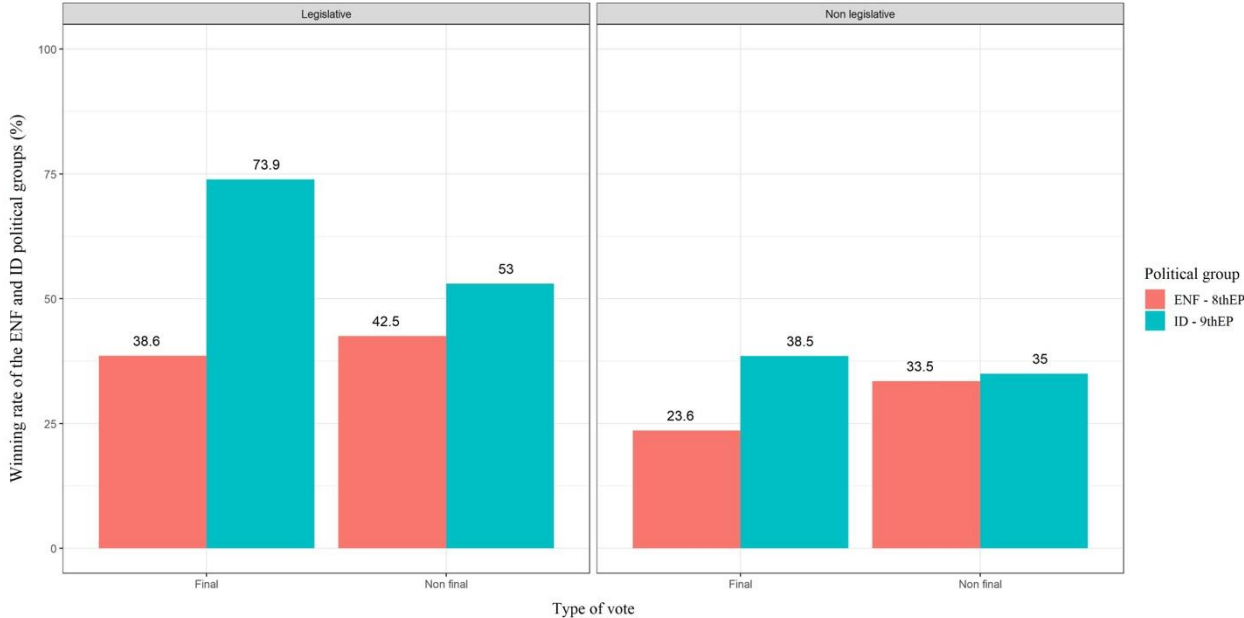
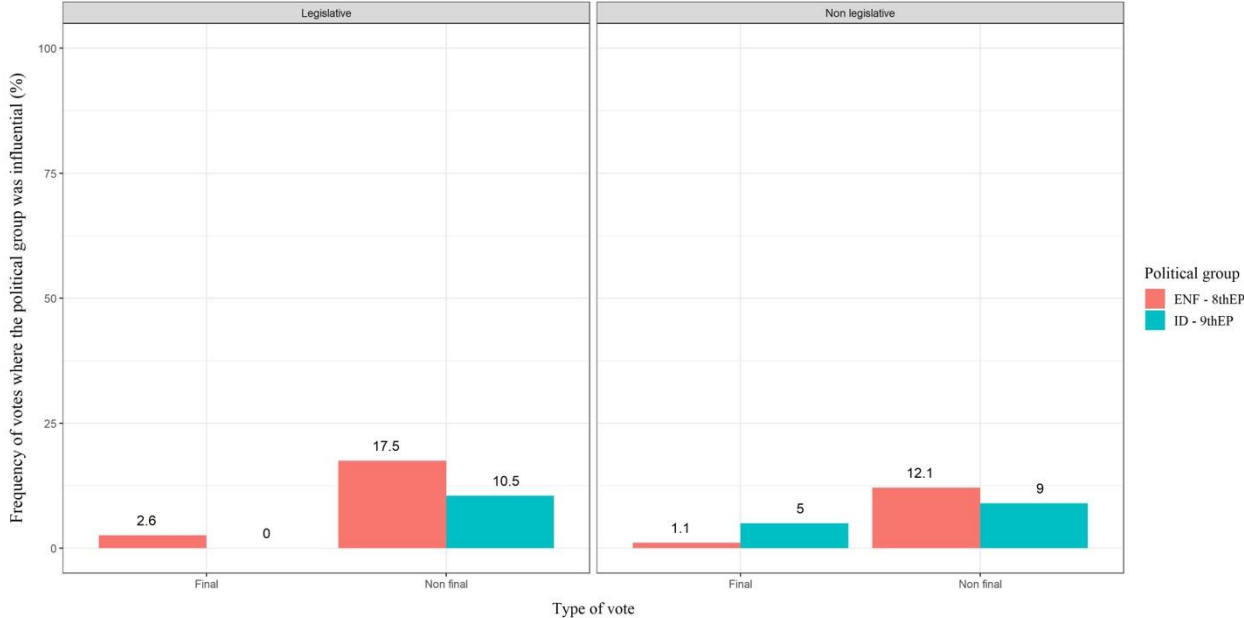


FIGURE 8



TABLES

TABLE 1:

<b>EPP-S&amp;D Rice index</b>			
	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
Term 6	0.057*** (0.007)	0.115*** (0.008)	0.110*** (0.008)
Term 7	0.013* (0.007)	0.059*** (0.008)	0.053*** (0.008)
Term 8	0.013** (0.006)	0.064*** (0.007)	0.059*** (0.007)
Legislative vote		0.003 (0.006)	0.003 (0.006)
Final vote		-0.227*** (0.007)	-0.228*** (0.007)
Constant	0.249*** (0.005)	0.258*** (0.006)	0.264*** (0.006)
N	29500	22287	21813
R-squared	0.003	0.047	0.047

\*\*\* p < .01; \*\* p < .05; \* p < .1

TABLE 2:

Type of procedure	Type of vote	6th term	7th term	8th term	9th term
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1	Non-legislative	Non-final	72.3	74.4	70.5	73.5
2	Non-legislative	Final	85.6	82.2	75.2	75.9
3	Legislative	Non-final	71.7	71.9	70.3	74.6
4	Legislative	Final	89.1	87	80.5	85.3

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TABLE 3:

The political group <b>wins with</b>	The political group <b>loses with</b>
The Grand coalition (EPP and S&D)	Alone (voting against both the EPP and the S&D)
Only with the EPP	Only with the EPP
Only with the S&D	Only with the S&D