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Measuring group switching in the European Parliament: Methodology, data and trends (1979-2009)

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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Measuring group switching in the European Parliament: Methodology, data and trends (1979-2009). Party group switching in the European Parliament (EP), where parliamentarians individually or collectively switch from one party group to the other, is a well-known contributor to the volatility of the EP party system. We present a new dataset that contains party group information on all MEPs from 1979 to 2009. As a first step to a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of party group switching in the EP we describe characteristics of all switches that have occurred in these six legislatures, with a focus on the trends across time, variety between member states, party groups, and ideological party families.

Keywords: comparative politics; European Parliament; political parties; party switching.

Migração partidária no Parlamento Europeu: metodologia, dados e tendências (1979-2009). A migração partidária no Parlamento Europeu (PE), fenómeno que define a mudança de um deputado ou de um conjunto de deputados para um grupo político diferente daquele em que inicia o mandato, contribui para a volatilidade do sistema partidário da única instituição europeia diretamente eleita pelos cidadãos. Neste estudo apresentamos os resultados de uma base de dados original e exaustiva sobre a evolução da filiação parlamentar de todos os deputados eleitos ao PE desde as primeiras eleições diretas em 1979 até ao final da sexta legislatura, em 2009. O estudo examina as características das migrações que ocorreram neste período, analisando em particular a direção dos fluxos, a sua variação no tempo, por nacionalidade, grupos parlamentares e famílias ideológico-partidárias.

Palavras-chave: política comparada; Parlamento Europeu; partidos políticos; migração partidária.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines party group switching in the European Parliament (EP). A core set of political groups have operated in the EP since the first direct elections in 1979, namely the Christian Democrats, the Socialists, the Liberals, and the Communists. But in the course of EP legislatures, there have been frequent movements of individuals and national party delegations in and out of these groups. Moreover, the composition of these groups has varied significantly between legislative mandates. Furthermore, a significant number of new parliamentary groups have emerged, merged, and disappeared during and between EP legislatures. The fluidity of the EP party system contrasts with the stability of parliamentary parties during the course of legislative mandates in most West European democracies.

The existing literature on party groups and political coalitions in the EP is dominated by analyses on voting cohesion, drawing on roll call votes to examine the compliance of national party delegations with the voting line of

1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the joint meeting of the Maastricht University research group on Politics and Culture of Europe and the ICS-UL research program Citizenship and Democratic Institutions (Lisbon, June 2010), the meeting of the ECPR Standing Group on European Union (Porto, June 2010), and the biennial conference of the European Union Studies Association (Boston, March 2011). We thank Thomas Christiansen, Peter A. Hall, Bjorn Hoyland, and Steven Van Hecke for their comments. We are grateful for research assistance by Vera Henriques and Ana Guardiã. Part of the research has been funded by the FCT project "Switching Behavior in the European Parliament: Voting Power and Ideology", ref. POCTI/CPO/61012/2004.

Political Groups in the EP (see Attina, 1990; Bardi, 1994; Faas, 2002, 2003; Hix, 2002, 2005; Hix, Noury and Roland, 2006, 2007; Kreppel, 2002, 2004; Marsh and Norris, 1997). There have been few analyses of political affiliation in the EP specifically geared toward an understanding of the phenomenon of party group switching (for exceptions, on specific cases and periods, see Verzichelli, 1999; Maurer, Parkes, and Wagner, 2008; Evans, 2009; McElroy, 2008; McElroy and Benoit, 2007, 2009).

This paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. We trace all instances when members of the EP (MEPs) have changed between EP groups (EPGs) in the period between the first directly elected legislature in 1979 and the end of the sixth legislature in 2009. In order to do so, and drawing on earlier databases containing comprehensive information on the parliamentary activities of MEPs (Hix et al., 2006; Hoyland et al., 2009), as well as on data from the EP archives, we have built a new comprehensive dataset with extensive information on the EP curriculum of the 4163 person legislature combinations between 1979 and 2009. The results of a first descriptive analysis of these data highlight the significant extent of group switching in the EP, with on average 9% of all MEPs, and up to 18% of MEPs during the 1989-1994 legislature switching party group, with some of them switching up to four times per legislature. These findings constitute a building block toward a more systematic understanding of party system fluidity in the European Parliament and of the more general phenomenon of legislative switching.

Before proceeding to the presentation of our dataset and core findings, we give a brief account of the role and functions of European Party Groups (EPGs) and their importance in EP parliamentary life. In particular, we address the specificities that characterize these party groups, when compared to the typical parliamentary groups of West European parliamentary settings. The goal is to provide a summarized account of the institutional context in which choices of EP political affiliation are made and how such decisions relate to the primary goals of elected politicians in the EP. We relate this discussion to available literature on the topic of legislative switching. Next we address the methodology adopted for the compilation of the data, in particular coding procedures and the cross-checking techniques we have adopted in order to guarantee the reliability of the information. We also provide an account of the core features of the dataset. In the section on the evolution of switching in the European Parliament between 1979 and 2009 we focus on the variation across legislatures, countries, and political families, the timing of switches, directions of the flows, the percentage of collective vs. individual switching, and the relationship between switching at the national and supranational levels. We conclude with a brief discussion of these findings.

THE CHARACTER AND EVOLUTION OF PARLIAMENTARY GROUPS IN THE EP

European Political Groups (EPGs) differ from national parliamentary parties, and some fluidity of membership should be expected as a result: EPGs are not the “parliamentary arms” of enduring and effectively competing party organizations. Although one can argue that the oldest groups in the EP have built up some organizational strength and mechanisms for continuity through their links with European party federations (see Maurer, Parkes and Wagner, 2008), in general EPGs can be described as post-electoral coalitions between national party delegations and individuals who broadly identify with a set of programmatic principles. Each parliamentary group in the EP is made of a set of party delegations and MEPs who come from different cultural settings, with entrenched national perceptions and specific historical legacies, and which represent more diverse social, economic, and political interests and organizational traditions than any national parliamentary party. EPGs do not perform the typical gate keeping function of national political parties because it is the latter that have a determinant voice in the selection of candidates for the EP elections. Furthermore, there is no direct link between European political groups and voters. Although the largest and oldest EPGs issue policy platforms and election manifestos before EP elections, the campaigns for these elections are run by national parties and often revolve around national issues (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Kreppel, 2002, 2004; McElroy and Benoit, 2009). This leaves a wide scope of choice for EP grouping by elected representatives. National parties that compete for votes at the domestic level may choose to belong to one same parliamentary group in the EP. A case in point are the Portuguese Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party, two parties that contest on the left in Portugal but sit together in the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in the European Parliament.

Nevertheless, the choice of political groups in the EP is critical. EPGs play a key role in important aspects of organizational and political life in the EP. They play a key role in agenda setting and question time (see Rule 115) and in appointing MEPs to leadership positions in the EP and to important functions in committees and delegations (Rules 13, 24 and 186). Each EPG is entitled to a share of the EP budget, which is calculated according to a complex formula that takes into account the number of members and the number of languages represented in the group (Rule 31). The Groups are also entitled to support from the EP in terms of staff, office space, and technical facilities (see Corbett et al., 2005, p. 95 and ff). All these perks are important for national party

delegations, including the financial appropriations from which they share to help finance staff and to conduct “information” activities (ibid, p. 102). Furthermore, group membership is of great significance for the capability to bargain the outcomes of voting in the EP (see Settembri, 2004). This means that, as the EP has acquired more powers through treaty revisions, the role of its political groups in influencing policy has also increased. Hence, the first and most important choice national party leaders and MEPs make when elected to the EP is whether to form a new group, or join an existing group, or to become non-attached, or to maintain membership in their previous group – in the case of those who held seats in the previous EP legislature (see Maurer, Parkes, and Wagner, 2008, p. 250).

The two largest groups – the Socialists and the Christian Democrats – have dominated party politics in the EP, and have held a large percentage of leadership functions in the EP. During the first five EP legislatures, between 1979 and 1999, the weight of these two groups increased steadily, from 53.6% of seats to 66% of seats. The combined weight of the two groups declined somewhat to 62.6% of the seats at the beginning of the sixth legislature, in July 2004. At different stages of the institutional development of the EP, there have been important changes of its party group composition, and a tendency for fragmentation, with the emergence of new political groups on the left and right – but more accentuated on the right – and with the formation of groups voicing regional interests, green movements, and eurosceptic parties as well. Until 1972, only three political families, namely the Socialists, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats, were represented in the EP. With the 1979 direct elections, the ideological spectrum of the EP widened out of the center, toward both left and right, with the Communist and Allies group monopolizing the left and the European Democratic Group and the European Progressive Democrats, splitting the right-hand side of the EP ideological spectrum.

The most significant additions to existing EP groups at the start of the second legislature in 1984 were the formation of the Rainbow group, representing regionalist and green parties, and of the new European Right group. The beginning of the third legislature, in 1989, was marked by further fragmentation, following the split of the Communist Group into the Group for the European United Left and the Left Unity group, and the formation of the Green group, which stole seats from the Rainbow group and eventually led to the demise of the latter after the subsequent EP elections, in 1994. The fourth legislature was marked by further fragmentation as a consequence of the formation of a new regionalist party – the Group of the European Radical Alliance – and of the formation of the Europe of the Nations group, formally representing Eurosceptic/anti-EU parties in the EP, for the first time. Although the Group of the

European Right disappeared, a new group formed on the right, with the entry of the *Forza Italia* party delegation, which formed the *Forza Europa* group on its own (in 1995 the party transitioned to the Union for Europe group). In 1999, the number of groups in the EP decreased again, with the merger of the national party delegations representing green and regionalist parties into one group. The opening of the sixth legislature in 2004 saw no significant change to the ideological distribution of EPGs.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF PARTY GROUP SWITCHING IN THE EP

Several features of parliamentary life in the EP make it more complex and more subject to fragmentation than is the case in the standard institutional settings of West European parliaments. The entry in the EP of new national party delegations, bringing in new political views and new national interests when new Member States join the EU, induces political and institutional complexity and even invites unstable political behavior. Changes of procedural rules associated with alterations in the decision-making powers of the EP also contribute to complexity. Moreover, switching is facilitated by the lack of penalties in the Rules of Procedure (see Rule 17 and 186) and by the loose nature of parliamentary groups in this institution. The indifference and low levels of knowledge among European voters with regard to EP activities and surveys on EP elections (see European Election Studies) reflected in the high levels of abstention for these electoral contests, also encourage a flexible approach to membership and open the door to the possibility of national party delegations and MEPs choosing to affiliate with different EPGs. While these political and institutional elements facilitate switching behavior, they are insufficient to explain how this phenomenon is triggered, the evolutionary patterns that characterize it, and how it relates to party system development in the EU.

Research on legislative switching in national settings relates the institutional context in which choices of political affiliation are made with the general assumption established by earlier studies on party politics that political competition is driven by the basic goals of maximizing votes, office, and policy (Strom and Muller, 1999). The basic premise that inspires this approach is that institutions condition the resources and opportunities through which politicians fulfill their ambitions (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Political institutions that grant politicians a great deal of autonomy *vis-à-vis* parties, namely electoral rules that weaken party leadership control over candidate selection, weak party structures, weak ties between electorates, and party labels (i.e. weak party identification), allow politicians to manipulate political ID for short-term

electoral goals and for the distribution of pork-barrel benefits among local clientele (see Mainwaring, 1991 and Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). In these institutional settings, one should expect legislators to calculate their expected eligibility and distributional revenues in any party that may be generally compatible with their policy goals and to decide on switching party ID if the electoral benefits are greater than the transaction cost of moving (see Desposato, 2006). The logical deduction is that one should expect legislators to remain in, or have incentives to move to, governing parties or large parties – because the latter give privileged access to state resources, and thus more pork, than opposition or smaller parties (see Heller and Merzhon2005; 2009). In turn, parties should be willing to accept defectors when their current members reason that the arrival of new members increases their own expected payoff (see Laver and Benoit, 2003).

These studies shed light on the factors one would expect to influence the propensity to change political affiliation in the EP. As we have seen above, EPGs do not control candidate selection, they lack party structures comparable to those of national parties, and voters can hardly identify an EPG label. Electoral rules matter very little in this context. All Member States – except for the UK until 1999– have adopted proportional methods for the EP elections. Although there are differences in proportionality related to the number and size of constituencies and to the thresholds for representation, as well as to the possibility that voters choose and/or rank their favorite candidates, such variation is insufficient to establish direct ties between the legislative behavior in the EP and re-election or re-nomination for party lists (see Corbett et al., 2005, p. 14). In this loose ideological context, Evans (2009) and Maurer et al. (2008) claim that party leaders that do not represent extremist views and/or single issues have strong incentives to opt for one of the largest EPGs. Based on examination of the EP affiliation of Portuguese parties since 1986, Evans argues that parties that rotate in national government tend to prefer (and try to move to) the EPP and the PES, in order to enjoy the inter-institutional policy networks that are sponsored by these groups and that provide bargaining and informational capability that are unmatched by smaller groups, including the Liberals. After long stints in the opposition, party leaders may switch their discourse and EP membership toward Euro-scepticism, with the goal of enhancing their electoral prospects, as the cases of the British Conservatives and the Portuguese Popular Party illustrate. But as soon as these parties are elected back to government they start again to approach the largest EP groups (see Evans, 2009; Maurer et al., 2008).

Research on legislative party switching in national settings provides insights on other factors that have not been explored in the few studies conducted so

far on EP switching. According to Shabad and Slomczynski (2004), one should expect to find a correlation between the direction of flows and the degree of party system development. Accordingly, party mergers and intense movements to older (vs. new) parties are an indicator of party system consolidation. Flows within (rather than across) political families indicate the consolidation of ideological blocs, which is accordingly, a general trait of developed party systems. We thus expect the direction of flows to point toward the largest and oldest groups, namely the EPP and the PES, because these are the EPGs most endowed in terms of office and financial perks, and the more seats these groups obtain, the more resources they are entitled to.

Earlier studies have also found that different stages of the electoral cycle provide different kinds of incentives for switching, including the expectation to obtain parliamentary offices and privileges in the early period of legislatures, the goal to improve electoral positioning in the late stages of a legislative mandate, and the aim to achieve policy goals at the time of major policy decisions (see Mershon and Shvetsova, 2005). Drawing on these findings, we expect switching in the EP to be concentrated in three periods of the legislative cycle: at the very beginning of each legislature, when national party delegations negotiate the prerogatives of parliamentary group membership; before the legislative mid-term, when important leadership positions in the EP rotate (see Rule 17); and toward the end of the mandate, when MEPs position themselves for re-nomination to national party lists.

EP GROUP SWITCHING DATASET

Although much information is available on parliamentary affiliation and parliamentary behavior of MEPs (see in particular Hix et al., 2006 and Hoyland et al., 2009), none of the existing databases is specifically geared toward the analysis of group switching in the EP. As a result, and somewhat surprisingly, considering that the phenomenon of group switching in the EP is well-known (see e.g., Brzinski, 1995 for an early discussion; and Corbett et al., 2005), little comprehensive and systematic analysis of this phenomenon is currently available. In this section we discuss the methodology we have followed for the construction of our new, comprehensive dataset on group switching in the European Parliament, and present an account of its core features. In the next section we draw on the information provided by this new dataset to provide an account of the character and trends of group switching in the EP.

The dataset contains data on all 4163 individuals who have held a seat in the EP since the first direct EP elections in 1979 and until the end of the sixth legislature in June 2009. As a starting point, we have drawn information from

the Hix et al. dataset for the first five legislatures (Hix et al., 2006)² and from Hoyland et al. (2009) for the sixth legislature.³ Although the Hoyland et al. database encompasses all MEPs since 1979, we started from the Hix et al. dataset because it includes more accurate (though not fully updated) data on national party affiliation.⁴ The reason for this is that the online EP archive, from which the Hoyland et al. database derives its information, for a long while included only information on the latest available national party position. The EP archive was updated in early 2010 and now includes information on the party platform on the basis of which an MEP was elected into the EP at the start of each legislature. However, it does not mention changes of national party affiliation during legislatures.⁵ With the goal of enhancing the reliability of the dataset, we have cross-checked the data from both sources with information on the parliamentary curriculum of each MEP in the updated EP archive, as well as with EP publications on the composition of political groups at the beginning and conclusion of each legislature. In case of doubt we consulted additional sources to verify, in particular, information on national party affiliation.

After compiling all the relevant information, the next step was to merge the data into a single data row for each MEP per legislature. For example, if an MEP switches between party groups within one legislature, this would lead to multiple entries in an output file from the Hoyland et al. database, in line with the way in which this is noted at the EP archive. The Hix et al. dataset contains only one EP party group affiliation (per MEP per legislature) and we used the EP archive and the Hoyland et al. database as sources for information on group switching during the first five legislatures. Our dataset is structured in such a way that all relevant information on a single MEP per legislature is contained in one data row. The whole dataset thus has 4163 data rows, for all MEPs per legislature. Note that the total number of MEPs is significantly higher than the total seats in this period (3507) due to replacement of MEPs in the course of legislative mandates. The EP Group Switching Dataset includes a complete overview

2 The dataset is available at <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/hix/HixNouryRolandEPdata.htm>.

3 The automated database is available at <http://folk.uio.no/bjornkho/MEP/default.htm>.

4 For example, Enrico Ferri, an Italian MEP, was elected into the EP in 1989 and 1994 on the list of the Partito Socialista Democratico Italiano, and – after a period in the Centro Cristiano Democratico between 1996 and 1999 – was elected in 1999 on the list of Forza Italia. In the Hoyland et al. database, Ferri is described as affiliated to Forza Italia in 1989 and in 1994 as well. In the Hix et al. dataset, Ferri is described as affiliated to the CCD in the fourth legislature (1994–1999), which is also partly incorrect if one takes into consideration this was not the national party that got him elected into the EP. In our dataset and in the analysis developed here, we consider only the national party platform on which each MEP was elected to each given EP legislature.

5 The archive is available online at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/archive/>.

of all national parties and EP party groups, including a coding scheme.⁶ In the remainder of this section we discuss the coding of the different variables.

With regard to *party group switching*, we consider as a switch any change in EP party group affiliation that is not merely the consequence of a change in the name of a party group. As long as one group can be seen as the ‘natural successor’ of another, for example, when the Progressive Democrats were renamed as Group of the European Democratic Alliance, in 1988, we code both groups equally and do not consider a move from one group to the other a party group switch.⁷

We count as switch any move between party groups with different party group codes both *in between legislatures* (switches taking place at the start of a new legislature) *and during a legislature*. Including switches at the start of a legislature may be less intuitive, for those who are familiar with the international literature on party switching, which normally focuses only on switches that occur during legislative terms. However, whereas in national legislatures the electoral platform and the parliamentary organization normally come together in the organization of a political party, in the EP these two dimensions of political competition unfold separately, as we have seen above. MEPs are elected on the basis of a national party platform, and not on a European party group platform, but once they enter the EP, the strategic and ideological choice that has to be made with regard to the organization of their legislative activity relates primarily to the (European) party group, and not to the (national) party. Hence, national party delegations and MEPs confront the choice of party group affiliation at the start of each new legislature and strategic group switches often occur here (see next section). In a significant number of cases MEPs switch both at the start of a term and also once, twice, or even three times during a term. We code all these switches separately including the timing of each switch (measured by week into the legislature, thus ranging from 0 to 60). We also code the group of departure and the new group for each switching occurrence. Furthermore, we code not only the EP party groups involved, but also the broader ideological party family to which each

6 The dataset can be obtained on request. Please contact Ana Evans (ana.maria.evans@ics.ul.pt).

7 Even when a name remains the same, this does not mean that there is no ideological re-direction of a group. The Rainbow Group in 1989 retained its original name despite a fundamental ideological redirection due to the exit of the Greens. The regionalists and radicals who were left behind would join the new Green/European Free Alliance group in 1999. In the latter case our coding captures both the strategic choice of the Greens to exit the Rainbow Group and to start an independent Green party group in 1989 as well as the regionalists and radicals to join in 1999.

group belongs, in order to capture if and how specific trends are associated with specific ideological groups.

For each switch we also code whether it involves an *individual* or a *collective switch*. We code switches as collective where at least two persons switch at the same time (in the same week) from one same party group to another same party group. Frequently, this means whole national party delegations switching from one EP group to another (as the Conservatives did in 1992 when they joined the European People's Party). Sometimes collective switches involve a faction of a national party delegation. When two or three people make a move together from one same group and into another same group, we also code this as a collective switch. All other switches are coded as individual switches.

With regard to *national party affiliation*, and as mentioned above, we include information on the party platform on which a given MEP has been elected for each given legislature where s/he holds a seat. We code national party switches that occur in-between legislatures by comparing national party affiliation at the re-election time. In other words, if an MEP is elected to the EP for a second or subsequent time, but on the basis of a different national platform, we code this as a 'national party switch'. We do not code national party switches during an EP legislative term due to lack of systematically available data.

As for EP leadership, we include information on what kind of positions were held by MEPs during a legislative term, including EP (vice-) President, Quaestor, Committee Chair, Delegation Chair, and President of a party group (=member of the Conference of Presidents). This information is available on the website of the EP, via the Archive. We have used the variable "Leadership" from the Hoyland et al. database to read this information from the website and have subsequently added this to our dataset. At this stage we have not yet included information on the allocation of *rapporteurships*, crucial positions within the political system of the EP (see e. g., Kaeding, 2004).

TRENDS

When we look at the data on the evolution of group switching in the European Parliament between 1979 and 2009, at least two things are immediately striking. First, whereas group switching is largely acknowledged as a significant phenomenon, and has been estimated by some to range between 2% and 11% of members changing party group affiliation (Hoyland et al., 2009, p. 147), our data suggest that these estimates are conservative. Table 1 shows that a total of 377 out of all 4163 MEPs switched affiliation between 1979 and 2009, amounting to an average "switch rate" of around 9%. Nearly a third of those MEPs switched more than once, leading to a total of 519 switches (12.5% of

TABLE 1
Number of group switches per legislature (1979-2009)

Legislature	Number of switches per MEP per legislature					Total MEPs switching	Total n. ^o of switches	Switchers as % of MEPS	Switches as % of MEPS	Total MEPs	Total Seats
	0x	1x	2x	3x	4x						
I 1979-1984	542	8	1	0	0	9	10	1.63	1.81	551	434
II 1984-1989	614	10	11	3	0	24	41	3.76	6.43	638	518
III 1989-1994	498	104	4	0	0	108	112	17.82	18.48	606	518
IV 1994-1999	636	49	39	6	1	95	149	13.00	20.38	731	626
V 1999-2004	633	36	22	5	1	64	99	9.18	14.20	697	626
VI 2004-2009	863	49	25	3	0	77	108	8.19	11.49	940	785
Total	3785	256	102	17	2	377	519	9.06	12.47	4163	3507

total MEPs). We see a clear peak of switch behavior in the 1989-1994 and 1994-1999 legislatures. In the third legislature 108 MEPs, or nearly 18% of all MEPs, switched group affiliation at least once. Important episodes were the Greens splitting off from the regionalists and radicals and forming their own group, as well as the Conservatives joining the EPP. In the fourth legislature, however, due to the fact that a large number of MEPs (46) switched two or more times, the total number of switches peaks at 149 (20.4% of total MEPs in that period). Whereas the number of MEPs switching (64) and the number of switches (99) decreased substantially in the fifth legislature, these numbers increased slightly in the sixth term (77 and 108, respectively).

When we look at the variation across member states, we first see significant differences between countries and, second, two countries that stand out: France and Italy. These two countries account for more than half of all switches (283 out of 520). This should be related to the fragmentation of the French and Italian party systems, for example, when compared to the German party system. Between those two, the Italian case stands out with the 592 Italian MEPs in the whole twenty-year period, switching party group affiliation 181 times (30.7%). We come back to this when discussing party switching at the national level (Table 6, below). For some of the new member states, especially Poland and Romania, party group switching is also very significant, while in other new member states such as Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia no MEPs had switched party group in the first legislature after accession.

TABLE 2
Number of group switches per member state (1979-2009)

Member state	Number of MEPs per legislature who switch x times					Total MEPs switching	Total n.° of switches	Switchers as % of MEPs	Switches as % of MEPs	Total MEPs	Seats
	0x	1x	2x	3x	4x						
AT	76	2	1	0	0	3	4	3.80	5.06	79	60
BE	164	8	6	0	0	14	20	7.87	11.24	178	146
BU	26	2	1	0	0	3	4	10.34	13.79	29	18
CY	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	6	6
CZ	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	24	24
DK	95	9	4	1	0	14	20	12.84	18.35	109	94
ET	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	7	6
FI	64	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	64	46
FR	574	42	27	2	0	71	102	11.01	15.81	645	495
DE	571	12	0	0	0	12	12	2.06	2.06	583	540
GR	187	6	1	0	0	7	8	3.61	4.12	194	146
HU	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	26	24
IT	479	61	38	12	2	113	181	19.09	30.74	592	495
IE	100	1	0	0	0	1	1	0.99	0.99	101	88
LA	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	10	9
LI	12	2	0	0	0	2	2	14.29	14.29	14	13
LU	49	1	0	0	0	1	1	2.00	2.00	50	36
MA	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	6	5
NL	176	4	2	1	0	7	11	3.83	6.01	183	164
PL	43	13	5	0	0	18	23	29.51	37.70	61	54
PT	141	13	1	0	0	14	15	9.03	9.68	155	122
RO	59	4	5	0	0	9	14	13.24	20.59	68	35
SK	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	14	14
SN	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	8	7
ES	329	28	8	1	0	37	47	10.11	12.84	366	302
SW	81	1	0	0	0	1	1	1.22	1.22	82	63
UK	459	47	3	0	0	50	53	9.82	10.41	509	495
Total	3786	260	98	16	3	377	519	9.06	12.49	4163	3507

Table 3 presents the information on collective versus individual switches, by party group. In line with the available literature, we find that in general collective switches clearly outweigh individual switches. However, our data also demonstrate that this partly depends on the party group context. For the party groups on the fringes of the ideological landscape the collective switches significantly outweigh the individual switches. For the party groups in the center this is much less the case, or even the opposite (as within the PES and EPP).

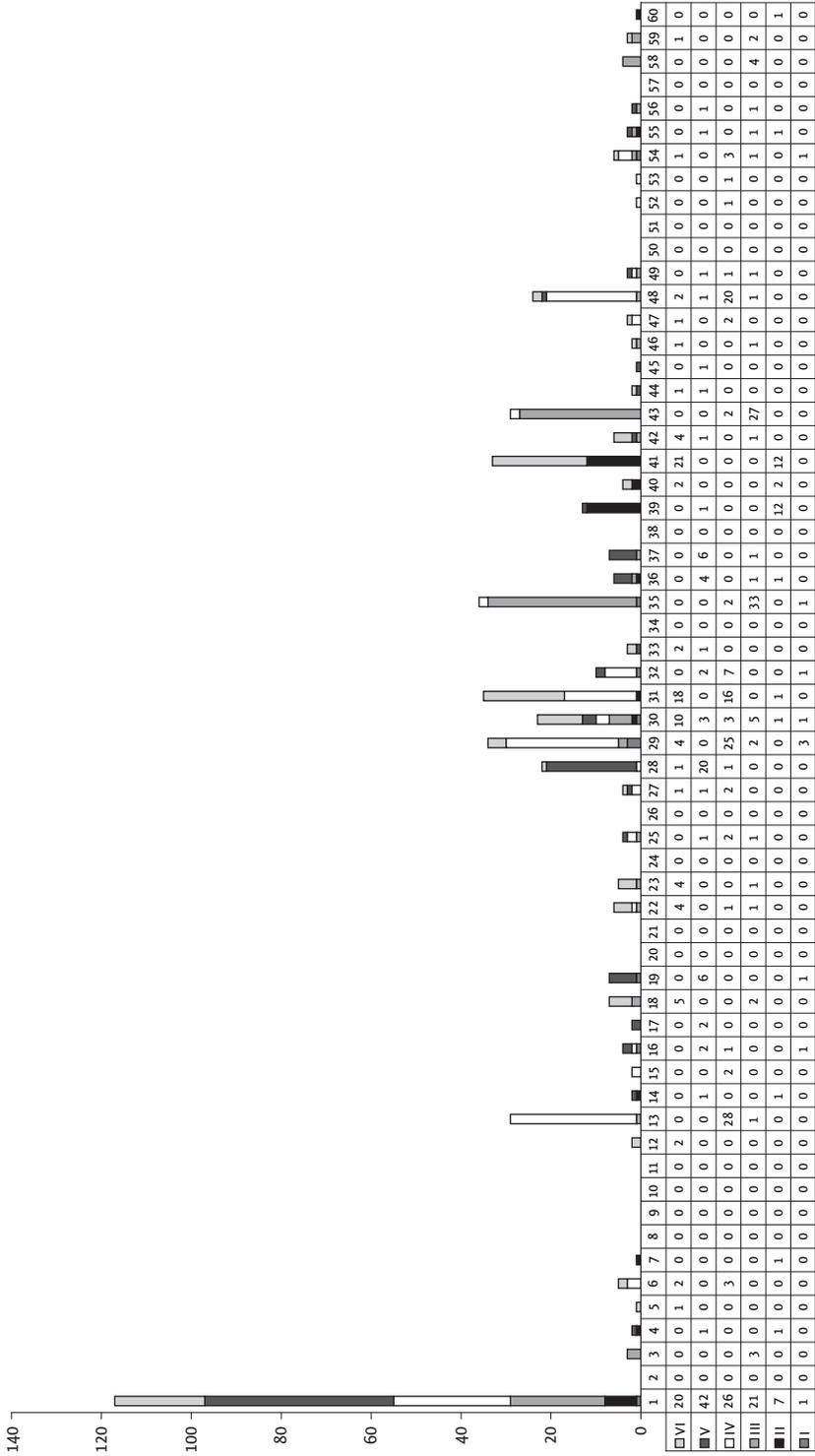
Figure 1 shows the distribution of switching over the legislative term. What we see here is that around a quarter of all switches take place at the start of the legislature. These are generally MEPs who have been re-elected into the EP and switch party right at the start of the legislature. We also find some MEPs who switch twice or even three times within the first month (15 in the period under examination). Furthermore, we observe high switch activities in the third year

TABLE 3
Collective versus individual switches per party group (total 1979-2009)

Party Group*	Collective	Individual	Total
COM/EUL/NGL	30	4	34
LU	0	1	1
RBW/ERA	8	3	11
G/Greens/EFA	18	12	30
S/PES	4	17	21
L/LDR/ELDR/ALDE	21	13	34
EPP/EPP-ED	12	20	32
ED	43	2	45
FE	27	0	27
EPD/EDA/UFE/UEN	27	8	35
ER/DR	7	6	13
ITS	21	0	21
EN/I-EN/EDD/IND/DEM	34	11	45
TDI/CTDI	30	1	31
NA	110	29	139
	392	127	519

* Reference point is the party group *from which* an MEP switches.

FIGURE 1
Number of group switches per month of legislature (total 1979-2009)



of each legislature, before but also after the important mid-term moment when leadership positions are re-allocated.

Looking closer into the direction of party group switching in the EP, Table 4 shows the overall movement between ideological groups between the start and the end of each legislature. The cells on the diagonal, highlighted in bold, represent those MEPs who stay within their ideological group or “party family” (we refer here to party families in order to highlight the broader strategic movement between ideological groups). First, when comparing row totals (start) and column totals (end) we see that in general there is a movement toward the two largest ideological groups, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats. Second, we see that while the Socialists mainly profit from competition with the orthodox Left, the Christian Democrats receive mostly from the Conservatives and the populist Right. Third, it should be noted that the movement is not unidirectional, and we also see (smaller) groups of people moving away from the ideological center.

In Table 5 we look at office incentives and focus on the leadership functions that MEPs may hold in the EP, such as President or Vice-President of the EP, Quaestor, Committee Chair, or Delegation Chair. The results presented

TABLE 4
EP Group Switches by Party Family (total 1979-2009)

Start legislature*	End legislature									
	Left	Green/ Regionalist	Socialist	Liberal	Christian- Democrat	Conservative	Right	Anti-EU	Other	Total
Left	254	1	25	1	0	0	0	0	8	289
Green/Regionalist	4	230	7	3	0	0	0	2	5	251
Socialist	5	6	1241	1	2	0	1	0	5	1261
Liberal	1	0	3	380	18	0	2	1	6	411
Christian-Democrat	0	0	0	14	1177	0	6	1	5	1203
Conservative	0	0	0	0	44	137	1	0	0	182
Right	0	0	1	3	27	0	227	1	15	274
Anti-EU	2	0	0	0	6	0	8	58	9	83
Other	5	8	6	9	7	0	16	10	148	209
<i>Total</i>	271	245	1283	411	1281	137	261	73	201	4163

* For MEPs who are re-elected the reference point is the last party group of the previous legislature.

TABLE 5
EP party group switch by EP leadership

		EP party group switch		<i>Total</i>
		No	Yes	No
EP Leadership	No	3476	351	3827
		90.8%	9.2%	100.0%
	Yes	310	26	336
		92.3%	7.7%	100.0%
Total		3786	377	4163
		90.9%	9.1%	100.0%

Pearson Chi-Square: .771; Sig (2-sided): .380.

in Table 5 are ambiguous. The expected direction of the relationship between the two variables EP Leadership and Party Switch holds only to the extent that the percentage of group switching is lower for people with a leadership position in one of the six legislatures (7.7%) than for those who have not held such a position (9.2%). However, the relationship between the two variables displayed in the crosstab is not statistically significant. Since there are relatively few leadership positions available within the EP, the effects of leadership may be expected to work more at a group level than at the individual level.

TABLE 6
EP Party Group switch and national party switch

		EP party group switch		<i>Total</i>
		No	Yes	No
National party switch	No	3734	352	4095
		91.4%	8.6%	100.0%
	Yes	43	25	68
		63.2%	36.8%	100.0%
Total		3786	377	4163
		90.9%	9.1%	100.0%

Pearson Chi-Square: 64.444, Sig (2-sided): .000

A factor with more intuitive explanatory force is party switching at the national level. If MEPs have switched party affiliation at the national level there are good reasons to expect that this may have consequences for their party group affiliation at the EP level. Table 6 shows that, indeed, MEPs who have switched party at the national level, and are re-elected in the European Parliament, are more prone to switching than MEPs who have not switched at the national level. National party switching is an important phenomenon in countries with volatile party systems, such as France and Italy, and we see that 40 out of the 69 MEPs who are re-elected into the EP on the basis of a new party list are from either France or Italy.

DISCUSSION

It is a well-known fact among observers of party politics in the EP that electoral losses at the time of European elections contribute to the disappearance of parliamentary groups at the start of a new legislative mandate in the EP. This occurs when such electoral losses mean that the parties that held together in an EP parliamentary group fail to assemble sufficient seats to form an EP group at the start of a new EP legislature. On the other hand, the election of members from national parties previously not represented in the EP contributes to the formation of new coalitions – and therefore to the emergence of new EP parliamentary groups, often representing new sets of political interests. National party realignments during the campaigns for EP elections are also well-known factors for altering the choices for coalescing in the EP – hence, changing the composition of EP parliamentary groups at the start of a new legislature (see Corbett et al. 2005). Yet the literatures on legislative switching and on EP party politics offer little analysis of the phenomenon of group switching in the EP. Our research seeks to fill this gap.

The phenomenon of EP party group switching discussed in this paper highlights, to a greater extent than has been observed before, the fluidity that characterizes the composition of European parliamentary groups. On average 9% of all MEPs switch during legislative terms. Party group switching is a phenomenon that gained force especially in the legislatures during the 1990s, up to a maximum of 18% for the 1989-1994 term, with strong prevalence among representatives from France and Italy, though by no means limited to those two countries. With regard to our expectations derived from the literature, we indeed see a clear tendency of party group switches from the ideological extremes, both left and right, toward the center. We also observe that most switching takes place at the outset of legislative terms, with another peak around the half-term moment, when responsibilities rotate within the EP hierarchy.

Second, when discussed in relation to the degree of consolidation of the European party system, this phenomenon also raises questions with regard to the quality of democratic representation in the EU. At a normative level, legislative switching is regarded as a reflection of instable party identity, which raises questions on all the essential dimensions of an operating democratic system, namely on the accountability of elected representatives, on the strength and performance of party representation, on the meaning of party labels to voters, on the reliability of policy-making coalitions – meaning stable government-opposition alignments that allow politicians to make reasonable calculations when negotiating legislative reform. The EP is hardly a nascent democratic institution: it has been operating for over 50 years, and its members have been directly elected by the citizens of Member States for the past three decades. Yet its unique mix of electoral contests based on national party list, internal legislative organization, and political dynamics dominated by international party groups provides an institutional context that is not conducive to party system stability. From that perspective, party group switching may be seen more as a natural element, than as an aberration of the political system of the EP.

In this paper we have provided a first comprehensive descriptive account of the phenomenon of party group switching in the EP. Explanatory work starts with a solid understanding of the nature of the phenomenon that needs to be explained and the extent to which it occurs. In that sense the evidence presented here complements existing studies that have focused more on ideological coherence of groups. These studies, albeit within limited time periods, emphasize the importance of ideological congruence between national party platforms and the policy positions of European parties (McElroy and Benoit 2007, 2009). Our dataset is geared toward explaining group switching and can be expanded with additional information, for example on seniority of MEPs, voting behavior on roll call votes, or *rapporteurships*. Now that comprehensive data about elected representatives in the EP become increasingly accessible, the way is open to a better and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of party group switching. This paper takes a step in that direction.

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