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The Difference Between Real And Potential Power: Voting Power, Attendance and Cohesion

Discussion Paper

**C130
2004**

ISSN 1435-3288

ISBN 3-936183-30-9

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Thorsten Faas / Tapio Raunio / Matti Wiberg

The Difference Between Real And Potential Power: Voting Power, Attendance and Cohesion

Introduction

Applying power indices to the political process of the European Union has become fashionable. An increasing range of scholars has applied power indices to studying the institutions of the European Union (EU). However, their work has not gone without criticism.¹ Critics argue that the use of power indices is of little value, since they ignore the preferences of the actors, such as party groups, and also the political dynamics of the decision-making processes, such as the EU legislative procedures (see particularly Garrett and Tsebelis 1996, 1999, Tsebelis and Garrett 1996). Advocates of power indices reply by arguing that one cannot know the preferences of the relevant actors in all possible contingencies. We do not always know the preferences of the actors, but we can still say something meaningful about their potential influence (see for example Lane and Berg 1999, Holler and Widgrén 1999).

Initially the power index approach was used in the context of the European Union to study the consequences of alternative voting weights and majority

1 Since the arguments have already been exchanged elsewhere (see particularly the special issue of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, Volume 11 (3), 1999), we can confine ourselves to just briefly presenting the main arguments here.

rules in the Council (e.g. Hosli 1995, 1996, Laruelle and Widgrén 1998), but subsequent applications have incorporated the Parliament and the Commission into their calculations (e.g. Bindseil and Hantke 1997, Colomer and Hosli 2000, Felsenthal and Machover 1997, Hosli 1997, Lane et al. 1995, Moberg 1998, Nurmi 1997, Nurmi and Meskanen 1999).

However, all of these studies are based on two assumptions about legislative politics in the European Parliament (EP) that do not reflect the actual working of the EP accurately. The first assumption is that *all* members of *all* groups (be they national delegations, national parties or party groups) are present in the EP when a vote is taken. The second assumption is that *all* members of *each* group (again, be they national delegations, national parties or party groups) always vote together (i.e. act cohesively).²

Bindseil and Handtke (1997: 174) actually do acknowledge this shortcoming of their analysis, stating that „in the special case of a ‘Thomas-Becket-effect’ being *systematically* more frequent among the representatives of some member states than of others, the distribution of power [...] would shift in favour of those member states with more loyal representatives.” In other words, they accept that differential levels of cohesion (and attendance) can cause shifts in the distribution of power in the EP. Nonetheless, they regard these scenarios as „special” and consequently – just like other scholars – as ignorable. Doing so is questionable, though, since differential levels of cohesion and attendance characterise the proceedings in the EP and, thus, are closer to the „default” than a „special” case. Hence, they should not be ignored in power index analysis.

This article analyses the distribution of voting power in the 1999-2002 EP, taking into account differential levels of attendance and cohesion among party groups.

2 Precisely stated, the assumptions are that there are no differences in the level of attendance and cohesion among the groups.

It does so – using the Shapley-Shubik -index³ (Shapley and Shubik 1954) – for two different kinds of votes: First, votes taken under absolute majority rule (i.e. a majority of *all* MEPs is necessary for a proposal to pass), second – and this is nowadays the empirically more relevant case – votes taken under simple majority rule (i.e. only a majority of the votes *cast* is necessary for a proposal to pass). However, before we start the actual discussion of the distribution of power, a few remarks concerning party groups in the EP – and especially their levels of cohesion and attendance – seem appropriate.

Party Groups in the EP

Party groups are the backbone of the EP's internal organization. The larger groups like the PES and the EPP accommodate national parties from all member states, while one or two national parties often dominate smaller groups. Table 1 provides some basic information about party groups in the first half of the fifth European Parliament (1999-2002). (See Table 1 in the Annex)

Despite accommodating large numbers of national parties and despite often being little more than loose coalitions of national parties, not to mention the lack of any EU-level government to support or challenge, previous studies about group cohesion in the EP have shown rather high levels of cohesion.⁴ Nonetheless, group cohesion is subject to constant pressure from individual MEPs and national parties. Party groups have to accept defections, espe-

- 3 The index is computed by listing all permutations of voters and the relative frequency with which a particular voter is in a pivotal position. When using the Shapley-Shubik -index it is assumed that all orders of forming coalitions (permutations) are equally probable. The Shapley-Shubik -index for a party group is the weighted average of the value this group adds to all possible coalitions. The weights are the a priori probabilities of the corresponding coalitions. The Shapley-Shubik -index draws our attention to the notion of players who pivot (those who can convert losing coalitions into winning coalitions). The Shapley-Shubik -index of a voter i in voting body v (also called a weighted voting game) is equal to the number of permutations of N voters in v in which i is pivotal divided by $n!$ which is the total number of possible permutations for the game v . Player i is pivotal only if her membership turns the losing coalition into a winning coalition. All permutations are taken equally likely. Since neither the issues nor the preferences of the actors are specified, we can ascribe by the principle of insufficient reason equal probability to any issue and corresponding preference ordering, i.e. the permutation of voters.
- 4 See Raunio (2002: 266) for a summary of group cohesion in the directly elected Parliament. Hix and Lord (1997) and Kreppel (2002) provide excellent accounts of the development and operation of the party groups.

cially of entire national party delegations. There are several reasons why MEPs vote against a party group line – the most prominent being that national parties expect their MEPs to vote in a certain way, even if that means voting against the party group. Such voting instructions are quite effective, since the re-selection (and consequently also the re-election) of MEPs depends on the support of a national party. Faas (2002) provides indirect evidence that strongly supports this view. He finds that MEPs from those national parties that are rather Euro-sceptic, that have a centralised method of candidate selection, that invest more resources in the monitoring of their MEPs and/or that are part of the national government are more likely to defect from party group lines. Obviously, these parties have a higher interest in as well as a more effective tool box for influencing their MEPs' behaviour. This is also reflected in a survey of MEPs conducted in 1996: When MEPs were asked, on which source they would be most inclined to base their decisions on in controversial matters, national parties ended up in second place (on average), while EP party groups ended up only third.⁵ So, defections do occur, as one senior member of the EPP group also acknowledges: „This happens. This is possible; they can do it. But normally we always prefer that they do not do it” (quoted in Brzinski 1995: 149).

The empirical consequences⁶ in terms of party group cohesion can be seen from Figure 1. Obviously, party groups are characterised by rather high, but also by very different levels of cohesion. In line with the results of previous studies, group cohesion for the four largest party groups in the 1999-2002 EP is highest, with index scores exceeding 80. The UEN and the GUE/NGL groups take middle positions. The anti-integrationist EDD group, the non-attached members and the TGI display the lowest level of

5 The first choice of MEPs is their own judgement. The MEP study 1996 was part of the project "Political representation in Europe" and can be obtained from the Central Archive in Cologne (study number ZA3078).

6 The data base of the study consists of roll call votes taken in the European Parliament from July 1999 to February 2002. The details for each roll call (i.e. the voting behavior of individual MEPs) were obtained from the minutes of the EP (accessible at <http://www3.europarl.eu.int/omk/omnsapir.so/calendar?APP=PV1&LANGUE=EN>). A total of 3050 roll call votes was taken during this period. They are used as the data base for this analysis. Based on these roll call votes, group cohesion was calculated for each roll call and each party group using Atinà's (1990) index of agreement. Attendance was also calculated based on whether MEPs cast their vote in a roll call vote or not.

cohesion. With that in mind, it seems very questionable to regard cases of differential cohesion among party groups as „special”. (See Figures 1 and 2 in the Annex)

Concerning attendance, we can observe similar tendencies, although to a lesser extent. Apparently (and with the EDD being a major exception), members of less cohesive party groups are also less present in the chamber. In addition, one can see that *all* party groups have to cope with about 25 per cent of their MEPs *not* being present, posing serious problems for matters decided under absolute majority rule, when 314 MEPs have to vote in favour of a proposal regardless of the number of representatives actually present.

Taken together, we clearly see differential levels of cohesion and attendance in the EP. Moreover, both effects interact, which should considerably lower the voting power of affected groups. Finally, these differential levels among party groups are quite stable, e.g. they hardly change regardless of whether the roll call at stake is on an amendment or a final resolution. Hence, it is justified to assume that the observed levels of cohesion and attendance can be treated – at least to a large extent – as exogenous factors that influence the legislative process and not vice versa.

We can assume that each party group has a specific „default” level of attendance and cohesion that is mostly independent from the proceedings inside the Parliament. These levels can be included into the a priori considerations of power index analysis, which is the next part of our analysis.

Voting Power in the EP assuming perfect cohesion and attendance

When analyzing voting power in the fifth European Parliament (1999-2002), one has to take into account that the TGI group was one of the players in the EP from June 1999 to September 2001, but was disbanded in October 2001. Since a change in the configuration of players can have considerable consequences for the distribution of power in a game, we will analyze both periods separately. The first step in our analysis is the calcula-

tion of power indices for the Parliament assuming perfect attendance and cohesion, as previous power index analysis of the EP have done (Table 2). This will yield a point of reference for our further analysis.⁷

The most remarkable feature of the 1999-2002 EP in terms of the distribution of voting power is the weakness of the PES: While holding about 29 per cent of the seats in the EP, its share of voting power is just 19 per cent. In other words: the PES loses about 10 percentage points in terms of voting power, which is by far the biggest loss of voting power that a party group suffers. The picture for the EPP looks quite different: While holding about 37 per cent of seats in the EP, its share of voting power (slightly) exceeds that, being close to 40 per cent for both periods. Concerning the medium-sized groups (ELDR, GUE/NGL, Greens), we can observe similar tendencies: All of them profit in terms of voting power relative to their share of seats. When looking at the UEN group, one can see that changes in the configuration of players can induce considerable changes in the distribution of voting power. The UEN comprised about 28 MEPs on average in the first period (with the TGI still being a player), and it also had more voting power than one would expect based on its number of seats. However, after the disappearance of the TGI (and a drop in size to 22 MEPs), the group's voting power went down to 3.57 per cent, almost matching its share of seats. (See Table 2 in the Annex)

Hence, in a nutshell, we see that in a Parliament based on perfect attendance and cohesion, the distribution of voting power does not follow the distribution of seats. Instead, some party groups (especially PES) suffer losses in terms of voting power, while others gain. However, as we have argued above, this picture is not very realistic, since it is based on the assumption of perfect cohesion and attendance. Therefore, the next step of our analysis will include the differential levels of cohesion and attendance that characterize the party groups, thus yielding a more realistic picture of power in the EP.

7 Since we assume perfect cohesion and attendance, there is no difference between votes taken under absolute majority rule and simple majority rule.

Power in the EP given the differential levels of cohesion and attendance

Taking differential levels of cohesion and attendance into account is equivalent to reducing the number of seats for each party group with the extent of reduction depending on the level of cohesion and attendance. To include the effect of differential levels of cohesion, we have computed for each party group and each vote taken how the members of a party group were split between „Yea”, „Nay” and abstentions. We have then checked for each vote which one of the three sub-groups (Yea, Nay, abstentions) was the largest one and how many MEPs this largest sub-group comprised. Finally, we have calculated the mean of the size of the largest sub-group over all the votes we analyse, thus yielding the average size of the largest sub-group within each party group.⁸

We use this mean value as the size of the party group controlled for its level of cohesion.⁹ Finally, taking into account the differential levels of attendance is straightforward and easy: if only 50 per cent of a party group’s MEPs are present when a vote is taken, the size of this party group is reduced by half. But what are the consequences of the inclusion of differential levels of cohesion and attendance? We will first look at the situation under absolute majority rule. (See Tables 3 and 4 in the Annex)

Only controlling for cohesion already yields some changes in the expected direction: The four party groups that act most cohesively gain in terms of voting power at the expense of the other party groups. The EPP’s share of power rises to 41.83 per cent (42.74 per cent) for the period including (excluding) the TGI compared to the situation analysed before. The PES also gains about two percentage points of power, but still has far less power

- 8 This does not imply that these sub-groups and their composition within each party group are constant. The composition can change on every single vote. What we calculate is an aggregate measure for the cohesion of party groups. We do not say anything about the lines along which a party group is split.
- 9 To give an example: let us say a party group comprises 100 MEPs. On a certain vote, 80 of its MEPs vote „Yea”, 15 „Nay” and 5 abstain. Obviously, the largest sub-group votes „Yea” and comprises 80 MEPs. On another vote, 30 MEPs vote „Yea”, 60 vote „Nay” and 10 abstain. In this case, the largest sub-group votes „Nay” and comprises 60 MEPs. In these two cases, we would take the mean of 80 and 60 (i.e. 70) and treat the party group, which originally and actually comprises 100 MEPs as a party group that only comprises 70 MEPs.

than one would expect based on its share of seats. The liberals and the greens also obtain small gains of power, while the EDD – the party group with the lowest cohesion – suffers the biggest loss of power: its share of power is almost cut by half for the period including the TGI and even by more than two thirds for the period excluding the TGI, leaving the party group as hardly more than a dummy player. Other significant losses can be seen for GUE/NGL, TGI and UEN for the period including TGI as well as the Non-Attached and the UEN for the period excluding the TGI.

However, all of these changes in the distribution of power are minor compared to those that we observe when levels of attendance are controlled for. Of course, this does not come as a surprise, since we are dealing with votes taken under absolute majority rule (i.e. a threshold of 314 MEPs) and with a parliament, for which about 25 per cent of MEPs are not present on average. The consequence of these two factors combined is an almost exclusive concentration of power in the hands of the two largest party groups – EPP and PES – with hardly any power and differences remaining among all other party groups, their power is negligible. This is true for both periods analysed here. The EPP is still more powerful than the PES, it holds more than half of the power!

This changes when we look at the last scenario: the distribution of power in the EP simultaneously controlled for cohesion and attendance. The two largest groups now possess the same share of power – both hold about 45 per cent. Again there are hardly any differences among the other party groups, their share of power does not exceed three per cent. The only remarkable feature is that the liberals and the greens – both very cohesive groups – manage to (re-)gain some power for the period including the TGI compared to the scenario when we only controlled for attendance.

Taken together, we see that the distribution of power *does* change when one controls for cohesion and attendance. However, while we have seen the impact of differential levels of cohesion, we have not so much seen an effect of *differential* levels of attendance, but rather a general effect of low levels of attendance. Since we have only looked at votes taken under absolute majority rule so far, the concentration of power in the hands of the two

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largest groups was primarily the result of the high threshold combined with the generally low presence. This will no longer be the case, when we look at votes taken under simple majority rule, where the *level* of attendance per se does not matter.¹⁰ (See Tables 5 and 6 in the Annex)

The general expectations (albeit with a few exceptions) are again met. Party groups with low levels of attendance – especially TGI and UEN (in the second period) – suffer losses of power. However, it is more interesting to finally look at the interactive effect of cohesion and attendance, where the results are more straightforward and also more relevant in magnitude. Party groups with disciplined and present MEPs gain (considerable) amounts of power at the expense of party groups with less disciplined and less present MEPs. UEN and TGI lose most in the first period: While starting with a share of power of 5.40 and 3.25 per cent respectively, they end up with a share of only 2.90 and 1.47 per cent. Just about half of their power is left. The same applies to the non-attached members in the second period. On the other hand, EPP and PES gain about three percentage points of power in the first period, liberals and Greens about 1.5 percentage points (which is equivalent to a gain of about 10 per cent in relative terms!). Cohesion and attendance do matter – the more disciplined and cohesive MEPs act, the more powerful their party groups become.

Summary

We have shown that power index analyses that do not take into account differential levels of attendance and cohesion yield results that are not necessarily realistic. Most significantly, we see a shift of power towards the two large party groups, EPP and PES under absolute majority rule. We have shown that almost the entire amount of voting power is split between these groups. The other party groups are limited to being hardly more than dummies. However, that was only partially an effect of differential levels of

¹⁰ To do so, we have multiplied the average presence for each party group with its number of seats. Next, we have added up these "present seats". Doing so yields an EP with 457 (479) seats for period including (excluding) TGI. This is the average number of present MEPs. In order to obtain a threshold for simple majority voting, this number is divided by two.

cohesion and attendance, and primarily an effect of the generally low level of attendance. Still it proves the point that power index analysis should take into account questions of cohesion and attendance. In the second step of our analysis, we have also shown that differential levels do matter – with cohesion being more consequential.

What are the possible consequences of our findings? The concentration of power in the hands of the two larger party groups may well induce further centripetal moves in the Parliament, with MEPs motivated by legislative goals having strong incentives to switch to EPP or PES. At the same time, this means that the medium-sized and smaller groups are caught in a difficult situation. Possessing only marginal policy influence in comparison with the two largest groups probably contributes to lower attendance rates and cohesion levels, which in turn further marginalizes these groups in the chamber. Our results also indicate that *all* party groups, including PES and EPP, have an interest in ensuring that both their MEPs are present in the chamber when votes are taken and that they vote according to group lines, with particularly the low attendance levels reducing the ability of the groups to influence EU legislation, at least under absolute majority rule. Whether that is actually possible unilaterally or whether the other party groups would follow a move by one party group to increase cohesion and/or attendance, is another question for future analysis.

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Annex

Table 1: The party groups in the present European Parliament (as of 1 July 2002)

Abbrevia- tion	Name	MEPs	Coun- tries
EPP	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats	234	15
PES	Group of the Party of European Socialists	175	15
ELDR	Group of the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party	52	10
GUE/NGL	Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left	46	10
Greens	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	45	12
UEN	Union for Europe of the Nations Group	22	5
EDD	Group for a Europe of Democracies and Diversities	16	4
TGI	Technical Group of Independent Members – mixed group	0	0*
NA	Non-Attached Members	36	6

* After a ruling of the European Court of Justice, the TGI no longer exists.

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Figure 1: Cohesion in the EP by Party Group

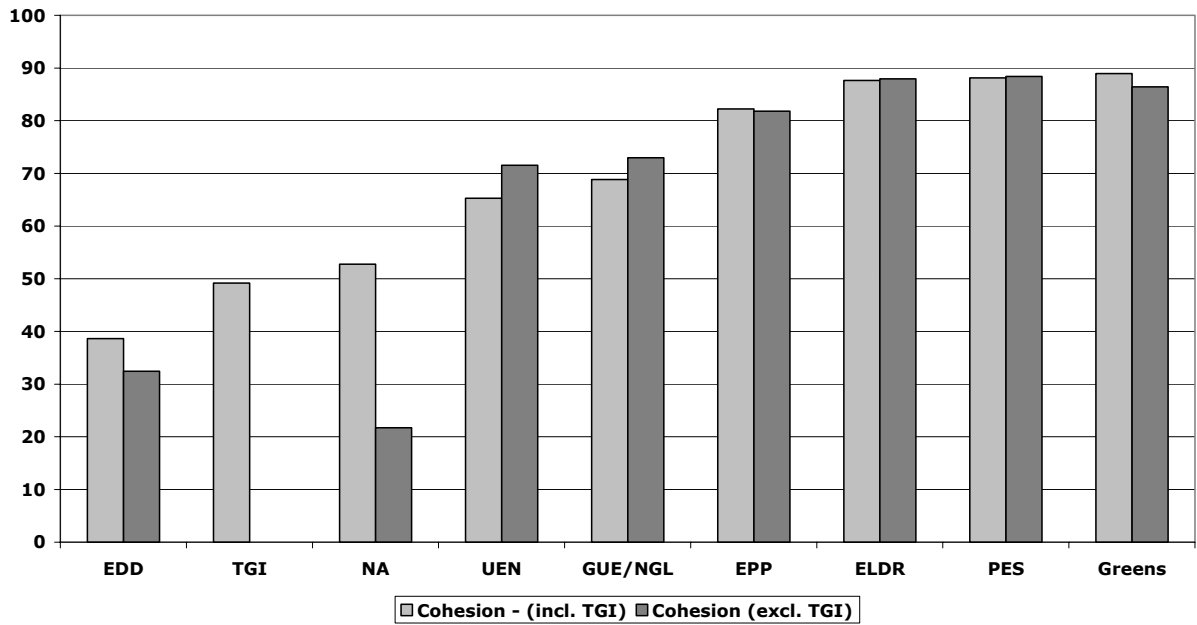


Figure 2: Attendance in the EP by Party Group

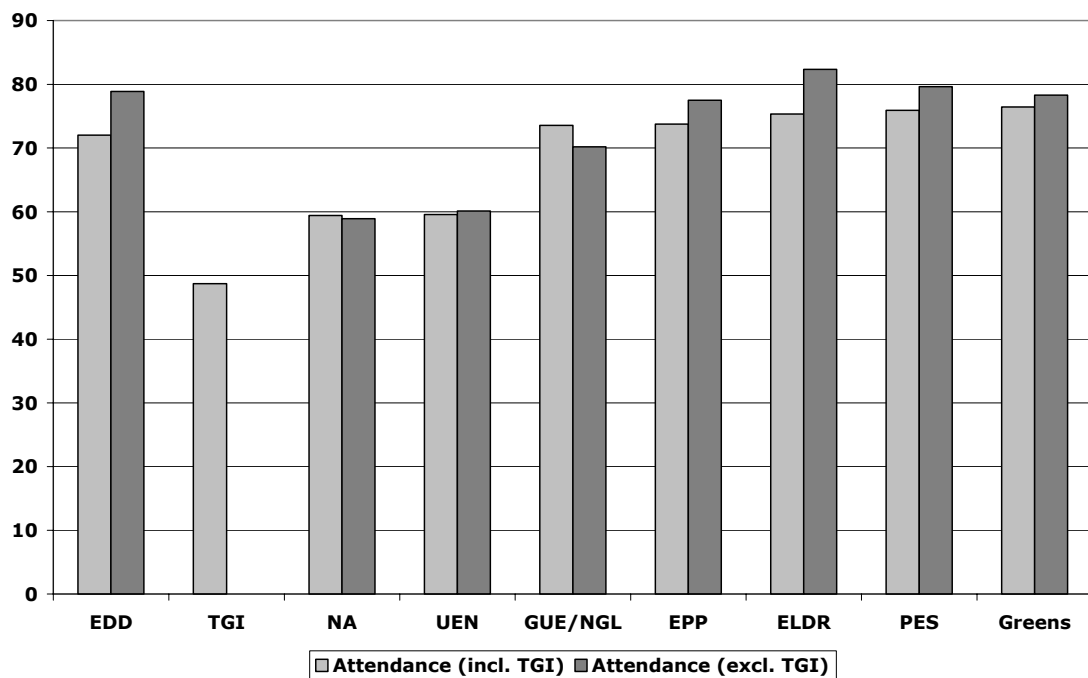


Table 2: Voting Power under absolute majority rule in present EP assuming perfect cohesion and attendance, based on (average) number of seats

	Period including TGI			Period excluding TGI		
	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power
EDD	16,52	2,64	3,25	18,00	2,88	3,57
ELDR	51,58	8,24	9,92	50,98	8,14	10,71
EPP	232,23	37,10	38,97	232,92	37,21	39,76
Greens	47,12	7,53	9,92	45,00	7,19	8,81
GUE/NGL	42,00	6,71	8,49	43,00	6,87	8,81
Non-Attached	9,85	1,57	1,11	33,00	5,27	5,48
PES	180,18	28,78	19,68	181,00	28,91	19,29
TGI	18,37	2,93	3,25			
UEN	27,74	4,43	5,40	22,00	3,51	3,57

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Table 3: Voting Power under absolute majority rule in present EP, based on (average) number of seats, controlling for differential levels of cohesion and attendance (period including TGI)

	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power in perfect EP	Voting Power controlling for...		
				Cohesion	Attendance	Cohesion and Attendance
EDD	16,52	2,64	3,25	1,83	2,18	0,56
ELDR	51,58	8,24	9,92	10,87	2,18	2,94
EPP	232,23	37,10	38,97	41,83	50,40	44,96
Greens	47,12	7,53	9,92	9,92	2,18	2,94
GUE/NGL	42,00	6,71	8,49	7,42	2,18	2,34
Non-Attached	9,85	1,57	1,11	1,47	0,40	0,20
PES	180,18	28,78	19,68	21,23	36,11	44,96
TGI	18,37	2,93	3,25	2,18	2,18	0,56
UEN	27,74	4,43	5,40	3,25	2,18	0,56

Table 4: Voting Power under absolute majority rule in present EP, based on (average) number of seats, controlling for differential levels of cohesion and attendance (period excluding TGI)

	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power in perfect EP	Voting Power controlling for...		
				Cohesion	Attendance	Cohesion and Attendance
EDD	18,00	2,88	3,57	1,07	1,19	0,71
ELDR	50,98	8,14	10,71	10,83	3,57	1,67
EPP	232,92	37,21	39,76	42,74	53,57	46,43
Greens	45,00	7,19	8,81	9,40	3,57	1,67
GUE/NGL	43,00	6,87	8,81	8,69	3,57	1,67
Non-Attached	33,00	5,27	5,48	2,74	1,19	0,71
PES	181,00	28,91	19,29	21,79	32,14	46,43
TGI						
UEN	22,00	3,51	3,57	2,74	1,19	0,71

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Table 5: Voting Power under simple majority rule in present EP, based on (average) number of seats, controlling for differential levels of cohesion and attendance (period including TGI)

	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power in perfect EP	Voting Power controlling for... Attendance	Cohesion and Attendance
EDD	16,52	2,64	3,25	3,02	1,85
ELDR	51,58	8,24	9,92	10,75	11,23
EPP	232,23	37,10	38,97	38,02	41,11
Greens	47,12	7,53	9,92	10,04	10,87
GUE/NGL	42,00	6,71	8,49	8,25	7,66
Non-Attached	9,85	1,57	1,11	1,59	0,75
PES	180,18	28,78	19,68	20,52	22,18
TGI	18,37	2,93	3,25	2,30	1,47
UEN	27,74	4,43	5,40	5,52	2,90

Table 6: Voting Power under simple majority rule in present EP, based on (average) number of seats, controlling for differential levels of cohesion and attendance (period excluding TGI)

	Number of Seats	Percentage of Seats	Voting Power in perfect EP	Voting Power controlling for...	
				Attendance	Cohesion and Attendance
EDD	18,00	2,88	3,57	2,86	2,02
ELDR	50,98	8,14	10,71	11,43	11,79
EPP	232,92	37,21	39,76	39,05	40,36
Greens	45,00	7,19	8,81	9,52	10,36
GUE/NGL	43,00	6,87	8,81	8,10	7,26
Non-Attached	33,00	5,27	5,48	6,19	2,74
PES	181,00	28,91	19,29	20,00	22,74
TGI					
UEN	22,00	3,51	3,57	2,86	2,74

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