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European Parliament: Is the grand coalition really a thing of the past?

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Abstract

While the European Parliament's two largest political groups, the European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, have been used to sharing its presidency, they decided to fight with each other in January 2017 during the mid-term election. The S&D, indeed, decided to break the coalition agreement they had signed with the EPP after the 2014 European elections. Media and commentators talked about the end of the grand coalition and predicted a new era of decision-making, more political and conflictual. This study aims at analysing the evolution of coalition formation since the end of the 2014 coalition agreement. It uses both quantitative data (roll-call votes in plenary between 2014 and December 2017) and qualitative data (interviews). The grand coalition has remained determining for adopting legislation and non-legislation but has been activated less often when it comes to non-legislative amendments. Moreover, we found that the end of the agreement mostly impacted policy areas that were already conflictual in the past. We assume that coalition formation in the European Parliament is affected by institutional, inter-institutional and conjectural constraints, regardless of the deal signed between the three centrist political groups. In other words, the coalition agreement has only been a reference framework that justified cooperation practises already existing before the 2014.

Introduction

In January 2017, the new President of the European Parliament (EP), Antonio Tajani (European People's Party, EPP), was elected after four rounds of voting, and with the opposition of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). This competition was unusual, since the two largest political groups have been used to sharing the presidency consensually. The reason for this contested election is the decision made by the S&D group to break the 2014 understanding agreement between centrist groups, which stated that both the S&D and the EPP would get one president between 2014 and 2019.

While there have always been agreements for the sharing of the spoils, including the 2014 deal, the latter was more structuring. The content of the agreement was limited, but the political dynamics around it, notably the election of the Juncker Commission, formalised and strengthened the grand coalition narrative. As outlined by the media, Jean-Claude Juncker was elected by the EP after coalition negotiations¹ and “after setting out a ‘grand coalition’ investment programme”.² The need to legitimate the Spitzenkandidaten procedure *vis-à-vis* the Council, as well as the rise of Eurosceptic forces in the hemicycle, pressured the leaders of centrist groups to establish a quasi-formal alliance.³ In this context, the conflict between the two main groups in 2017, and the very contested mid-term election, have led some⁴ to believe that the grand coalition was over, and that “adversarial politics [was] entering Europe”.⁵ The EU political system and the nature of political conflict within institutions have

¹ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *The Making of a European President*, London, Palgrave, 2015, p. 163.

² T. Körkemeier, “EU's Juncker wins approval with 'grand coalition' program”, *Reuters*, 15 July 2014, retrieved 21 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-commission-juncker/eus-juncker-wins-approval-with-grand-coalition-program-idUSKBN0FK0R420140715>.

³ T. Christiansen, “After the Spitzenkandidaten: fundamental change in the EU's political system?”, *West European Politics*, vol. 39, no. 5, 2016, pp. 992-1010.

⁴ C. De Marcilly, “European Parliament: redistribution of political balance”, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2017, retrieved 21 April 2017, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0420-european-parliament-redistribution-of-political-balance>; A. Eriksson, “New EU Parliament coalitions get in shape”, *EU Observer*, 20 January 2017, retrieved 1 May 2018, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/136612>; and S&D MEP Tanja Fajon, quoted in “‘Grand Coalition’ in over – Is that good for Europe?”, *EuranetPlus*, 18 January 2017, retrieved 21 April 2018, <https://euranetplus-inside.eu/grand-coalition-is-over-is-that-good-for-europe/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

been analysed by EU studies. In a system considered as consociational,⁶ the two legislators (European Parliament and Council of the EU) need to pass the law with important majorities, favouring *status quo* outcomes⁷ and encouraging actors to build intra- and inter-institutional alliances. Within the EP, consensus-building processes have become the norm, and MEPs need to endorse a compromise-oriented role if they want to be given important positions.⁸ The consensual nature of decision-making led some to think that the Union is lacking political competition.⁹ Yet, this conclusion derives from studies that focus on final votes and does not consider conflict occurring during other steps of the decision-making process.¹⁰ Although the system can be considered as consensual, there has been a shift toward politicised confrontation: ¹¹ voting behaviour has been increasingly determined by the left-right cleavage,¹² even though recent studies emphasised the relevance of the integration cleavage.¹³

Coalition studies found that there are two main explanations for coalition formation: rational (to secure some benefits) and ideological (to adopt laws).¹⁴ Scholars found that these two explanations apply to coalition formation within the European Parliament.¹⁵ As for the grand coalition, there have been several explanations in the literature.¹⁶ First, the grand

⁶ O. Costa & P. Magnette, "The European Union as consociation? A methodological assessment", *West European Politics*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1-18.

⁷ G. Tsebelis & G. Garrett, "Legislative Politics in the European Union", *European Union Politics*, vol. 1, no.1, 2000, pp. 9-36.

⁸ S. Bendjaballah, *Des illusions perdues ? Du compromis au consensus au Parlement européen et à la chambre des représentants américaine*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2016, p. 18.

⁹ P. Mair, "Political opposition and the European Union", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-17.

¹⁰ L. Roger, S. Otjes & H. van der Veer, "The financial crisis and the European Parliament: An analysis of the Two-Pack legislation", *European Union Politics*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2017, pp. 560-580.

¹¹ A. Kreppel & S. Hix, "From 'grand coalition' to left-right confrontation. Explaining the shifting structure of party competition in the European Parliament", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1/2, 2003, pp. 75-96.

¹² S. Hix, A. Kreppel & A. Noury, "The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2003, pp. 309-331. More recent study: S. Otjes & H. van der Veer, "The Eurozone crisis and the European Parliament's changing lines of conflict", *European Union Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2016, pp. 242-261.

¹³ G. McElroy & K. Benoit, "Policy positioning in the European Parliament", *European Union Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 150-167. More recent study: C. Moury & E. de Giogi, "Conflict and Consensus in Parliament during the Economic Crisis", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-13.

¹⁴ W. Riker, *The theory of political coalitions*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1962.

¹⁵ S. Hix, A. Noury & G. Roland, *Democratic Politics in the European Union*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 149-59.

¹⁶ For a review of these explanations, see S. Hix, A. Kreppel & A. Noury, *op. cit.*

coalition can be explained by ideological similarity between the S&D and the EPP, which are both pro-European parties.¹⁷ Secondly, coalition dynamics can be explained by the constraining procedural rules (absolute majority in second reading).¹⁸ Thirdly, political groups would tend to adopt legislation with a broad majority in order to increase the influence of the EP *vis-à-vis* other institutions, which explains why the grand coalition increased after 1987, when the Parliament was evolving into a legislative chamber.¹⁹ Lastly, the coalition can be explained by the interest the two largest centrist groups have in securing influence in the internal working of the Parliament and in limiting the power of smaller groups.

Moreover, coalition formation in the EP can also be explained by rational choice institutionalism and constructivism. First, rational choice institutionalism explains that stable majorities can be found for legislation because of the rules that has been adopted for committees or the whole house.²⁰ The developments of these organisational forms is due to the effort to reduce the transaction costs of making deals. Second, constructivism, which is derived from international relations studies, stresses the role of social structures and sociological forces that “bound” actors, who for instance tend to interiorise rules and norms and therefore tends to be sticky.²¹ From a constructivist perspective, social facts are constructed in different ways by actors, and in return affect discourses and relations between groups. We argue that all these approaches are relevant to explain the dynamics around the grand coalition in the European Parliament. When interpreting the results, this paper does not analyse these approaches independently from each other but refer to all of them in order to explain the three constraints on coalition formation: institutional, inter-institutional and

¹⁷ S. Hix, *What's Wrong with the European Union and How to Fix It*, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Article 294 TFEU.

¹⁹ A. Kreppel, “Rules, Ideology and Coalition Formation in the European Parliament”, *European Union Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 340-362.

²⁰ K. Shepsle, “Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 131-147.

²¹ A. Kreppel & S. Hix, “From ‘grand coalition’ to left-right confrontation. Explaining the shifting structure of party competition in the European Parliament”, *op. cit.*

conjunctural. Indeed, within each of these constraints, coalition formation cannot be explained by a single approach: at the inter-institutional level, for instance, ideological similarity (*ideology*) and sociological forces (*constructivism*) between institutions might affect coalition formation, as well as the rules and norms governing the legislative process that has been developed over time to reduce transaction costs (*rational choice institutionalism*).

Discourses about entering a more conflictual area should be taken with caution. Indeed, the cooperation between the main centrist groups had pre-existed the signing of the 2014 agreement, and a cooperative habit has developed over time.²² If cooperation between the political groups has been a constant feature of the EP, has the decision-making process within the EP *really* become more conflictual after the breakdown of the 2014 agreement? Which factors can explain the continuing building of grand coalitions? And what were the reasons for and the meaning of the 2014 coalition agreement? This research focuses on the evolution of coalition-making dynamics and how continuity or discontinuity can be explained. We assume that there have not been major changes since the end of the 2014 agreement when political groups vote on legislative and non-legislative reports. The hypothesis is summarised below:

H: Legislative and non-legislative reports have continued to be adopted by the grand coalition, even after the end of the 2014 agreement.

²² J. Priestley, "Coalitions: Grand or Grubby?", *Julian Priestley*, 8 January 2017, retrieved 21 April 2018, <http://julianpriestley.eu/coalitions-grand-grubby/>

Data and methodology

Quantitative and qualitative data

The quantitative dataset used for this paper is made of roll-call votes²³ (RCVs) from 2014 until December 2017. This paper analyses two types of acts: non-legislative (own initiative reports), and legislative acts (ordinary legislative procedure), leaving aside consultation and budgetary procedures, and resolutions on topical subjects. The total number of analysed votes is 5,078 (79.62% of the number of extracted votes). The disaggregation of data by procedure enabled us to avoid comparing different situations²⁴ and to analyse the independent variables that can impact the outcome of coalition-formation (legislators tend to adopt different positions and strategies depending on the procedure).²⁵ The dataset was also divided according to the parliamentary committee in which the file was discussed. Since the compromise emerging in the plenary is constrained by the nature of negotiations in the committee,²⁶ it is relevant to analyse the impact that coalition-building practices in committees²⁷ may have on coalition formation in plenary.

As for the qualitative dataset, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with ten persons working within the European Parliament (Members of the EP, European political groups' Secretary General, staff working within the Parliamentary Work Unit of political groups, and staff working in parliamentary committees). The diversity of the interviewees can be both an advantage and a disadvantage: it reduced the sample size by category but provided different viewpoints, mirroring the diversity of actors within the EP. Since the focus of this study is the evolution of the grand coalition, interviews have been conducted with

²³ European Parliament Public Register of Documents, retrieved on 2 May 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegistreWeb/search/typedoc.htm?codeTypeDocu=PPVD&leg=8>.

²⁴ C. Carruba et al., "A Second Look at Legislative Behavior in the European Parliament. Roll-Call Votes and the Party System", *Political Science Series*, no. 94, 2004.

²⁵ B. Høyland, "Procedural and party effects in European Parliament roll-call votes", *European Union Politics*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2010, pp. 597-613.

²⁶ N. Yordanova, *Organising the European Parliament: the Role of Committees and their Legislative Influence*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2013.

²⁷ P. Settembri & C. Neuhold, "Achieving consensus through committees. Does the European Parliament manage?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2009, pp. 127-151.

representatives from the three groups member of the coalition, plus a representative from the Greens-EFA. The interviews provided information on both the ground-level experience of actors and the representation and meaning they give to social facts, like the coalition agreement. In this way, the qualitative aspect of the research can help close the gap left by the study of roll-call votes,²⁸ since interviews can enable us to look at the bigger picture and to explain how voting behaviour (macroscopic scale) is shaped by formal and informal rules and practices (microscopic scale) and by the meaning of the coalition agreement (constructivism).

Methodology

Studies using roll-call votes from the EP found that that political groups are more significant than nationality for understanding MEPs' voting behaviour,²⁹ increasing, therefore, group cohesion³⁰ and confirming the policy approach of coalition formation.³¹ To sum up, RCV-based studies have drawn conclusions about the development of a European level-party system and led scholars to consider the EP a "normal parliament".³² Yet, the use of RCVs tend to be biased, since it does not give the opportunity to select votes randomly.³³ Roll-call votes are requested by groups to either discipline their members³⁴ or signal the position of the group (or of another group) to an external audience.³⁵ Conclusions build on these data should therefore be taken with caution. The research method in this paper will be descriptive, comparing the likelihood of each coalition configuration over time. Coalition formation is

²⁸ M. K. Rasmussen, "Another Side of the Story: A Qualitative Case Study of Voting Behaviour in the European Parliament", *Politics*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2008, pp. 11-18.

²⁹ A. Kreppel & G. Tsebelis, "Coalition Formation in the European Parliament", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 32, no. 8, 1999, pp. 933-966; more recently S. Hix, "Parliamentary Behaviour with Two Principals: Legislator Preferences, Parties and Voting in the European Parliament", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2002, pp. 688-698.

³⁰ S. Hix, A. Noury & G. Roland, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³¹ T. Raunio, *The European Perspective: The Transnational Party Groups in the 1989-1994 European Parliament*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997.

³² S. Hix, A. Noury & G. Roland, "A 'Normal' Parliament? Party Cohesion and Competition in the European Parliament, 1979-2001", *European Parliament Research Group*, Working Paper, no. 9.

³³ C. Carruba et al., *op. cit.*

³⁴ C. Carruba, M. Gabel & S. Hug, "Legislative Voting Behavior, Seen and Unseen: A Theory of Roll-Call Vote Selection", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2008, pp. 543-572.

³⁵ J. Thiem, "Explaining Roll Call Vote Request in the European Parliament", *Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung*, Working Paper, no. 90, 2006.

calculated on the basis of voting similarity, which is defined as follows: two groups vote in the same way when the majority of members from group 1 casting a vote has the same position (yes, no, abstention) as the majority of members from group 2 casting a vote. The likelihood of a coalition configuration is the share of a given coalition that has been activated over a given period, with respect to the total number of votes over the same period. Four different coalitions have been studied:

1. EPP/S&D/ALDE, where $EPP = S\&D = ALDE$;
2. EPP/S&D, where $EPP = S\&D \neq ALDE$;
3. EPP/ALDE, where $EPP = ALDE \neq S\&D$;
4. S&D/ALDE, where $S\&D = ALDE \neq S\&D$.

This categorisation enables us to exclude some groups (we can study the likelihood of the EPP/S&D coalition when ALDE members oppose it) and, unlike cooperation rates,³⁶ provides us with information concerning the different coalition configurations used by political groups.

The impact of the deal: limited changes in decision-making since January 2017

Coalition formation: stability of the grand coalition

Coalitions are crucial in the European Parliament: since the first elected Parliament, no group has been able to secure a majority of seats by its own. In order to test our first hypothesis that reports have continued to be adopted by the grand coalition even after the end of the 2014 deal, we make three sub-hypotheses. Firstly, we assume that the proportion of final texts adopted by the grand coalition has remained rather stable. Secondly, since there has always been more conflict on amendments, we hypothesis that the proportion of amendments adopted by the grand coalition has decreased. Lastly, we assume that the breakdown of the coalition has not affected coalition-building for texts drafted in committees used to

³⁶ D. Cherepnalkoski et al., *op. cit.*

compromise-making. If this last hypothesis is true, it would confirm the fact that coalition formation very much depends on the informal rules (practices, socialisation, and interpersonal relations) of committees.

		EPP/S&D/ALDE	EPP/S&D	EPP/ALDE	S&D/ALDE
Sections	Pre-2017	62.08%	3.35%	22.68%	11.90%
	Post-2017	62.69%	2.59%	18.65%	16.06
	Evolution	+1% (0.94)	-22.7% (1)	-17.8% (0.48)	+35% (0.34)
Final text	Pre-2017	96.33%	0.92%	1.83%	0.92%
	Post-2017	86.21%	0%	0%	10.34%
	Evolution	-10.5% (0.08)	- (1)	- (1)	+1,028% (0.06)

Table 1: Evolution of coalition formation for **legislation**.

The data show that the impact of the breakdown of the coalition agreement has been quite limited on **legislation** (Table 1). The statistical significance of the difference between the two periods is very low, meaning that one cannot know whether the evolution between two periods is caused by chance or not. This supports our hypothesis that there has not been change in coalition formation (on legislation) after January 2017. Still, some downwards trends would need further research: the three centrist groups cooperated in 96.33% of the cases before January 2017, against 86.21% after 2017, and the two alternative coalitions have been more volatile than the grand coalition. Three legislative files³⁷ were won by a left-wing coalition after the mid-term election. These texts were mandates given by the plenary to the responsible committee to open inter-institutional negotiations. We assume that it might be easier for a group to oppose a negotiating mandate in plenary, rather than the final first-reading report. The argument that the Parliament would try to get the broadest majority possible in order to increase its power *vis-à-vis* the Council of the EU should therefore be reconsidered. Even

³⁷ European Parliament, “Multi-annual plan for demersal stocks in the North Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks”, P8_TA(2017)0357, 2017; European Parliament, “Report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the respect for private life and the protection of personal data in electronic communications and repealing Directive 2002/58/EC”, A8-0324/2017, 2017; European Parliament, “Amendments adopted by the European Parliament on 24 October 2017 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules on the making available on the market of CE marked fertilising products and amending Regulations (EC) No 1069/2009 and (EC) No 1107/2009”, A8-0270/2017.

though there has not been major change for legislation, decision-making is not always consensual. One legislative file³⁸ adopted during in 2017 was supported by none of the coalitions studied in this paper (neither S&D or ALDE explicitly supported the EPP, which adopted the text with the support of ECR, ENF and non-attached MEPs). The vote was about giving a mandate to the responsible committee for negotiations, and we can doubt that a final first-reading text would have had been approved by such a narrow majority (53.3% of the votes in favour).

We can assume that this coalition was possible for two reasons. Firstly, since it is not likely that the legislation would go to second reading (in our dataset, only 10% of legislation), groups are not pressured to reach from the beginning a supermajority. Secondly, the strategy of the EPP can count on the division within other groups (S&D and ALDE cohesion rates were significantly low). It is important to distinguish between legislative and **non-legislative reports**, since MEPs tend to vote differently. This paper only studies initiative reports and not resolutions, since the two are not drafted in the same way.³⁹ Like for legislation, there have not been major changes after the end of the agreement for adopting final non-legislative files (Table 2), even though the three centrist groups did not need large majorities in order to negotiate with the Council. These findings confirms the hypothesis that legislative and non-legislative texts have continued to be adopted by the grand coalition after the breakdown of the deal.

³⁸ European Parliament, “Report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules on the exercise of copyright and related rights applicable to certain online transmissions of broadcasting organisations and retransmissions of television and radio programmes”, A8-0378/2017, 2017.

³⁹ O. Costa, *Le Parlement européen, assemblée délibérante*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2001, p. 441.

		EPP/S&D/ALDE	EPP/S&D	EPP/ALDE	S&D/ALDE
Sections	Pre-2017	63.92%	7.95%	13.02	14.43
	Post-2017	53.62	2.77%	20.85%	22.13%
	Evolution	-16.1% <i>(<0.001***)</i>	-65.2% <i>(<0.001***)</i>	+60.1% <i>(<0.001***)</i>	+53.4% <i>(<0.001***)</i>
Final text	Pre-2017	86.85%	3.76%	1.88%	7.04%
	Post-2017	85.83%	3.94%	0.79%	8.66%
	Evolution	-1.2% <i>(0.89)</i>	+4.8% <i>(1)</i>	-58% <i>(1)</i>	+23% <i>(0.74)</i>

Table 2: Evolution of coalition formation for initiative reports.

Although the grand coalition has remained decisive for adopting final texts, we assume that there have been changes regarding **sections** (amendments, paragraphs, recitals). As for **legislation**, Table 1 (p. 8) shows that coalition formation has not changed when MEPs vote sections of a text, rejecting our hypothesis that the grand coalition has decreased on amendments and paragraphs. Still, the aggregation by year (Figure 1, p. 11) shows that the share of amendments adopted by the S&D and EPP (without ALDE) has dropped in 2017, while the proportion of centre-right amendments has increased (even if this is not statistically significant). This might be due to the fact that groups have changed their working habits: “At a working level, all advisors and staff had established good relations with the Socialists. Suddenly we had to change the way of doing.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Interview with staff (1) working in the Parliamentary Work Service, European People's Party group, European Parliament, Brussels, 13 April 2018.

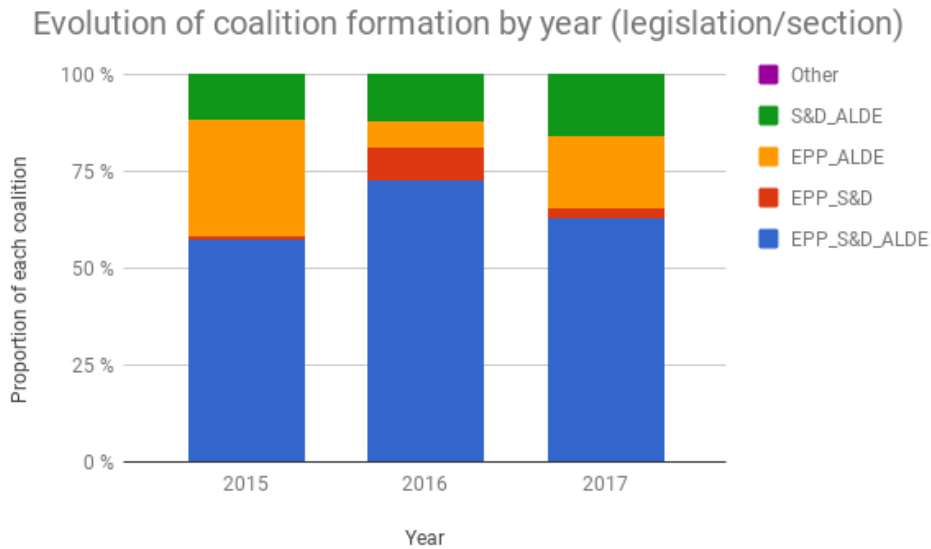


Figure 1: Evolution of coalition formation by year (legislation/section)

The story is different for **non-legislative reports**, where the evolution regarding sections is statistically relevant for every coalition (Table 2). After the breakdown of the agreement, amendments have been less likely to be adopted by a grand coalition. The trend is similar (even more radical) for the grand coalition without the ALDE group. Simultaneously, the two alternatives coalitions have dramatically increased. In sum, for non-legislative files there is a clear distinction between votes on the whole text and votes on parts of the text, with the latter becoming more conflictual. While studies showed that political groups tend to cooperate more on final texts than on amendments,⁴¹ our findings show that the variable “end of the grand coalition agreement” only affected non-legislative reports. Finally, there can be important differences from one **committee** to another in terms of rationale and organisation,⁴² leading to different consensual and conflictual dynamics once the report comes to plenary. To assess the effect of the committee variable, we will focus on amendments to non-legislative files (Table 3), due to sample size requirement. Only committees with more than 30 votes in plenary in the two periods have been added to the analysis.

⁴¹ A. Kreppel & S. Hix, *op. cit.*

⁴² P. Settembri & C. Neuhold, *op. cit.*

	EPP/S&D/ALDE	EPP/S&D	EPP/ALDE	S&D/ALDE
AFET	-5.5% (0.40)	-73.9% (<0.05*)	+371% (<0.01**)	+5.9% (0.84)
ECON	+20% (0.24)	-74.5% (0.26)	-40.8% (0.42)	+42.0% (0.73)
EMPL	-38.2% (<0.05*)	-73.0% (<0.05*)	+139.5% (<0.001***)	+31.5% (0.38)
INTA	+11.7% (0.43)	+575.0% (0.17)	-50.2% (0.29)	-100% (1)
FEMM	-45.8% (<0.05*)	-50% (1)	+831.6% (<0.001***)	+18.1% (0.37)

Table 3: Evolution of coalition formation by committee for initiative reports.

Table 3 shows that the evolution of coalition formation is not evenly distributed across committees. Indeed, coalition-making on reports drafted in EMPL, FEMM and AFET dramatically evolved after 2017, while there have not been major changes in ECON and INTA. We assume that this is due to the nature of committees themselves. Indeed, a consensus-driven committee would tend to send to plenary initiative reports supported by a broad majority, while other committees might rely on smaller majorities. The ECON committee, which is influential within the decision-making process and drafts many legislative reports, would tend to rely on consensus-building dynamics:

Compared to other committees, ECON is more pragmatic and less ideological. When there is problem, a solution, and thus a directive, it should be adopted very quickly.⁴³

Consequently, norms, processes and habits of negotiation, and interpersonal relations that have been developed within the context of legislative files might also impact the drafting of non-legislative reports.

⁴³ Interview with staff from the Secretariat of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON), Brussels, 20 April 2018.

On the contrary, in committees that rarely drafts legislative reports (like FEMM), MEPs are never constrained by institutional or inter-institutional rules. We assume that for these committees, the end of the coalition agreement had a huge impact (the likelihood of the grand coalition being activated has significantly dropped after 2017 for AFET and FEMM). While the coalition agreement gave incentives to MEPs to work together before 2017, they were no longer constrained after the breakdown of the coalition, whether by the agreement or by institutional and inter-institutional norms and rules. Finally, the dynamic in EMPL might be different: the end of the agreement has reinforced a left-right cleavage that was already determining before January 2017. These findings confirm our hypothesis that the end of the grand coalition disproportionately affected parliamentary committees, reinforcing conflictual dynamics only for texts drafted by committees that are not consensus-oriented.

Continuity of coalition dynamics: institutional, inter-institutional and conjectural constraints

Empirical data showed that the end of the 2014 coalition agreement had no significant impact when it comes to adopt final texts, while it did increase conflict on sections (amendments and paragraphs). Our findings highlight that, despite the end of the coalition agreement, the EP has not evolved towards a majoritarian system. We agree with Dehousse, Novak and Bendjaballah⁴⁴ that institutional settings and rules play an important role, although one should remind that rules have themselves been developed and shaped by actors.⁴⁵ This section will analyse how both institutional and inter-institutional settings have shaped coalition formation in the EP and continue to affect coalition dynamics, despite the signing (and the breakdown) of coalition deals. It will also study how the 2014 deal constituted the

⁴⁴ R. Dehousse, S. Novak & S. Bendjaballah, "Consensus under pressure. The evolution of conflict in the EU legislative process", *Politique européenne*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2017, pp. 44-70.

⁴⁵ N. Brack & O. Costa, "Democracy in parliament vs. Democracy through parliament? Defining the rules of the game in the European Parliament", *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 51-71.

continuity of already existing cooperation practices and can be understood as a framework of reference that legitimised cooperation practices.

Institutional constraints: how the EP has formalised and established consensus-building mechanisms

The data analysis highlighted that the grand coalition has remained determining when it comes to adopt final reports (legislation or non-legislation). We assume that this might be due to the fact that consensus-building mechanisms have been embodied within the EP formal and informal rules for a long time. From a rational choice institutionalism perspective, political groups have developed consensus-building rules and habits, and therefore continue to decide consensually, since they are arithmetically constrained. One of the main reasons is the electoral system (proportional), and the fact that groups can hardly secure a majority of seats: “There is no majority-opposition dynamic within the Parliament but one of constructive compromise”.⁴⁶ In a Parliament without a clear and stable majority, decision-making has often been made on a case-by-case basis. For each vote, the rapporteur needs to build a majority,⁴⁷ obliging him or her to cooperate with members from other groups: “A rapporteur wants his or report to pass. He or she needs to negotiate with the most important group”.⁴⁸ The need to make compromises has been institutionalised within EP bodies, such as committees. As outlined by the quantitative analysis, coalition formation has not changed for reports drafted in committees used to consensus building. As stated by the EPP group, “In committees where MEPs were already cooperating with each other before 2014, like ENVI, TRAN or ITRE, the agreement deal in 2014 had no impact”.⁴⁹ Moreover, because of the use of expertise, which is important

⁴⁶ Interview with an official from the European Commission, Secretariat General, Directorate F (Relations with other institutions), 27 March 2018, Brussels.

⁴⁷ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, 20 April 2018; Brussels.

⁴⁸ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, 22 March 2018, Brussels.

⁴⁹ Interview with an official (1) from the EPP political group, Parliamentary Work Unit, 21 March 2018, Brussels.

for compromise-building,⁵⁰ Members tends to be socialised at the committee level,⁵¹ triggering committee-based loyalty. This socialisation tends to produce long-lasting effects, reducing the impact of the breakdown of the deal. The representation of the MEP as an expert, which has been socially constructed,⁵² can explain why committees work consensually “regardless of the procedure applied”.⁵³ Moreover, from a rational point of view, parliamentarians have an interest in making compromises with other groups, if they want to get rewards.⁵⁴ The whole organisation of committee work is based on consensus: the coordinator's role is to flag up conflictual issues and the shadow rapporteur's aim is to find an agreement with the rapporteur.⁵⁵ Moreover, socialisation to the EP's norms and habits can take time, and newcomers may find difficult to enter into EU negotiations, as opposed to MEPs with established patterns of social interaction.⁵⁶ Talking about a file that failed to pass in committee, an official working in ECON explain some of the reasons:

The shadow rapporteur (from S&D) did not understand that compromises were crucial for a legislation to pass. He was a new MEP who had worked in academia, and therefore was not used to compromise-making.⁵⁷

A parliamentary committee is managed by a secretariat, which can play a role in reaching agreements.⁵⁸ The officials working in the secretariat have contacts with officials from the European Commission and have developed an extensive expertise of a field.⁵⁹ Therefore, despite coalition agreements, the secretariat brings continuity,⁶⁰ especially given

⁵⁰ S. Synnøve & L. Hermansen, “(Self-)selection and expertise among decision-makers in the European Parliament”, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 148-172. See also O. Costa, *op. cit.*, pp. 460-466.

⁵¹ S. Bendjaballah, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁵² W. Beauvallet & S. Michon, “Des eurodéputés ‘experts’ ? Sociologie d’une illusion bien fondée”, *Cultures & Conflicts*, vol. 85-86, 2012.

⁵³ P. Settembri & C. Neuhold, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ S. Bendjaballah, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁵⁵ P. Settembri & C. Neuhold, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ A. Kreppel & S. Hix, “From ‘grand coalition’ to left-right confrontation. Explaining the shifting structure of party competition in the European Parliament”, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ O. Costa, *Le Parlement européen, assemblée délibérante*, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁶⁰ F. Desage, “Un régime de grande coalition permanente? Eléments lillois pour une sociologie des ‘consensus’ intercommunaux”, *Politix*, vol. 4, no. 88, 2009, pp. 133-161.

that the MEPs' turnover remains markedly high. In addition to committees, the European Parliament has developed informal consensus-oriented bodies where a limited number of actors can have a seat. These informal settings, which could have been used to overcome deadlock on some files,⁶¹ can bypass parliamentary committees. In 2008, some parts of the negotiation on the EU climate and energy package took place in *ad hoc* committees.⁶² These forums can also be a way of reinforcing cooperation between the two largest groups, especially on sensitive issues, while excluding other groups (as they are not mentioned in the rules of procedure, there is no rule as to their composition). The recently created Brexit Steering Group is for instance only composed of members from non-Eurosceptic political groups⁶³: “It was a way of deliberately exclude some groups”.⁶⁴

The two largest groups have also formalised their cooperation through co-rapporteurship, especially on important issues. In these cases, cooperation is accepted from the very beginning. There rapporteurs are in the great majority of cases from the EPP and the S&D,⁶⁵ therefore “forcing [MEPs] to cooperate and agree with the other group”.⁶⁶ High-level forums have also been used to overcome divisions in the Parliament. For example, the Conference of Presidents (CoP) has played an important role in the adoption of the Joint Declaration.⁶⁷ The Declaration has been a very political document – and not technical – and the negotiations have been conducted between high-level counterparts. This does not mean that debates in the Conference of Presidents are always consensual (the outcome was forced by the CoP, leaving the S&D in an uncomfortable situation).⁶⁸ If compared to the impossibility

⁶¹ P. Settembri & C. Neuhold, *op. cit.*

⁶² S. Bendjaballah, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁶³ European Parliament, “Brexit Steering Group”, retrieved 2 May 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/brexit-steering-group/en/home.html>.

⁶⁴ Interview with Richard Corbett, Member of the European Parliament (S&D, United Kingdom), 22 March 2018, Brussels.

⁶⁵ Interview with Alexander Beels, Secretary General of the ALDE political group, 20 March 2018, Brussels.

⁶⁶ Interview with Pervenche Bères, Member of the European Parliament (S&D, France), 22 March 2018, Brussels.

⁶⁷ Interview with an official from the ENVI committee, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Informal talk with an official from the European Parliament.

to adopt a resolution on the Commission's Work Programme, one understands the role played by the setting: while the resolution on the Work Programme is dealt with by political groups and needs to be adopted by the plenary,⁶⁹ the Joint Declaration is adopted by single Members, behind closed doors. The small size of this setting, where information is concentrated in the hands of a few parliamentarians and where interpersonal relations have a role, is expected to help compromise-making. To sum up, we argue that consensus-building processes were developed before the signature of the 2014 coalition deal, and these processes have continued to impact decision-making after the breakdown of the agreement. Consensus-oriented rules, discourses and norms have been developed in the EP, justified by the specific nature of the EU (diversity, need to increase legitimacy, technicity). These arguments are similar to those used in some French intercommunalities.⁷⁰ These practices and norms have been translated into an "esprit européen du consensus", similar to the "esprit communautaire" in France, and have been internalised by MEPs, especially if they want to influence policy outcomes. The cooperation between political groups is even more possible when the EP political sphere remains disconnected and autonomous from national and established public spheres.

Inter-institutional constraints: how the grand coalition depends on other EU institutions

The EP is not autonomous: it needs to co-legislate with the Council and cannot really oppose Ministers without the support of the European Commission. Analyses need therefore to take into account how the EP is inserted into the EU political system.⁷¹ In the legislative context, the high qualified majority voting threshold in the Council obliges the EP to adopt a position close to the Council (broad) majority. As stated by an MEP, because of this high threshold in the Council, "the style of the Union as a whole is consensual rather than

⁶⁹ Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament, "Pittella & Rodrigues: Right-wing block crumbles. For the S&Ds, citizens come before big business – our programme for a pro-European, progressive future", retrieved 2 may 2018, <http://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/pittella-rodrigues-right-wing-block-crumbles-sds-citizens-come-big-business-our-programme>.

⁷⁰ F. Desage, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ N. Yordanova, "The European Parliament: In need of a theory", *European Union Politics*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2011, pp. 597-617.

adversarial”.⁷² This constraint has shaped the way the EP adopts positions: the EP has “less room for radicalism and ended up with more centripetal outcomes”.⁷³

The rationalisation of legislative work is a direct consequence of the need to cooperate for adopting legislation. With the bulk of texts being adopted in first reading, the legislative process has sped up, meaning that consensual dynamics need to occur during the first reading stage.⁷⁴ Consequently, a narrative about efficiency (output and throughput legitimacy⁷⁵) has been reinforced over the past few years, increasing the number of early agreements.⁷⁶ All these practices have been internalised by actors and are independent from the 2014 coalition agreement. As an example, the internal organisations of some committees have been adapted to, and are justified by, efficiency:

The five stages in a committee are: exchange of views, draft report presentation, amendments tabling, discussion, and vote. In ECON, we decided to skip exchange of views. We do not have enough time, and there is little point for this.⁷⁷

Political groups also cooperate for pragmatic reasons, which are, for instance, to have a broad majority in order to oppose the Council – or at least to be more powerful.⁷⁸ The end of the 2014 agreement can be considered as artificial, since all the above-mentioned elements have not fully disappeared after January 2017: “We still need great majorities in order to prepare negotiations with the Council”.⁷⁹ Moreover, the EP is related to other institutions through political parties. Indeed, the Council, where the left-right cleavage is rarely activated⁸⁰, adopts positions with a supermajority of Member States governed by parties

⁷² Interview with Richard Corbett, Member of the European Parliament (S&D, United Kingdom), *op. cit*

⁷³ A. Ripoll Servent, “Playing the co-decision game? Rules' change and institutional adaptation in the LIBE committee”, *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2012, pp. 55-73.

⁷⁴ L. Roger, S. Otjes & H. van der Veer, *op. cit*.

⁷⁵ V. A. Schmidt, “Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, Output and ‘Throughput’”, *Political Studies*, vol. 61, 2013, pp. 2-22.

⁷⁶ E. Bressanelli, C. Koop & C. Reh, “The impact of informalisation. Early agreements and voting cohesion in the European Parliament”, *European Union Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2016, pp. 91-113.

⁷⁷ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit*.

⁷⁸ A. Kreppel, “Rules, Ideology and Coalition Formation in the European Parliament”, *op. cit*.

⁷⁹ Interview with an official from the European Commission, *op. cit*.

⁸⁰ F. Hayes-Renshaw, W. Van Aken & H. Wallace, “When and Why the EU Council of Ministers Vote Explicitly”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2006, pp. 161-194.

mostly affiliated with the EPP, the S&D and the ALDE families. We assume that it is complicated for groups in the EP, or national delegations, to adopt a position different from the position of ministers from their political party. The situation is similar with the Commission, where Commissioners come from the same governing political families, therefore increasing the loyalty from the EP towards the Commission: “When [socialist commissioners] propose a text, we have to support them”.⁸¹ In this context, the majority of proposals from the Commission is drafted to please a broad majority in the two institutions.

Furthermore, the EU balance of power obliges the EP to cooperate with other institutions: the Parliament's success remains highly dependent on preference congruence with the Council or with the Commission.⁸² For instance, the Council has agenda-setting power between the first and the second reading. Even though only a few texts go to second reading, “it can cast a shadow. If you don't reach agreement at first reading, the Council can go to second reading”.⁸³ Therefore, from a rational perspective,⁸⁴ the best option for the Parliament is to make a proposal that would be accepted at the Council's first reading.⁸⁵ Inter-institutional dynamics can also explain the position of some parliamentary groups and the continuity over time of the grand coalition. Some groups might vote for reports not in their ideological interest because they know the report is likely to change with inter-institutional negotiations. This is the case for the EPP, which tends to be located at the centre of the Council-Parliament political spectrum: “In the negotiation process, a lot of EPP positions are taken in the compromise report of the Council”.⁸⁶ The EPP tends to adopt a negotiation mandate even though it has been outvoted on specific amendments, increasing the likelihood of the grand coalition on

⁸¹ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, *op. cit.*

⁸² A. Kreppel, “Bicameralism and the balance of power in EU legislative politics”, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2018, pp. 11-33.

⁸³ Interview with Richard Corbett, Member of the European Parliament (S&D, United Kingdom), *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ A. Kreppel, *The European Parliament and the supranational party system: A study of institutional development*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁸⁵ A. Hagemann & B. Høyland, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Interview with an official (2) from the EPP political group, Parliamentary Work, 13 April 2018, Brussels.

final votes. In this context, the continuity of the grand coalition for final reports may hide conflict activated during the inter-institutional negotiation phase. In sum, all the inter-institutional constraints that came with the empowerment of the European Parliament in the EU political system forced the institution to adapt, especially with the rationalisation of legislative work.⁸⁷ Even though the agreement deal ceased to exist after January 2017, all the inter-institutional constraints have continued to shape coalition formation in the EP.

Conjectural factors: how the 2014 deal has been shaped by political situation and already existing cooperation

If the grand coalition is independent of the 2014 agreement, why did the groups decide to sign it? The EP political balance has radically changed in 2014. Unlike in the 2009-2014 Parliament, the centre-right groups (EPP, ALDE and ECR) could not secure a majority. In 2014, the share of seats of centrist groups has decreased, while the share of Eurosceptic groups dramatically increased. The 2014 agreement has therefore been considered as setting up a “*democratic*” coalition against Eurosceptic political forces.⁸⁸

The rise of Eurosceptic forces in 2014 obliged centrist groups to formalise cooperation in a stable agreement, in order “to have a stable majority for legislation”.⁸⁹ Moreover, it was important to avoid giving too much voice and power to Eurosceptic groups, especially in high-level meetings (the EFDD, for instance, did not get a committee chair or a vice-presidency). The creation of a “pro-European bloc” (“there is a pro-European bloc that opposes the wrecking bloc”)⁹⁰ is likely to have strengthened the rhetoric “democratic” versus “undemocratic”, reinforcing moralistic position of centrist groups against Eurosceptic forces.⁹¹ For the grand coalition, it was important to cooperate in order to avoid letting

⁸⁷ N. Brack & O. Costa, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ Interview with an official (1) from the EPP political group, Parliamentary Work Unit, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ Interview with Alexander Beels, Secretary General of the ALDE political group, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ C. Mouffe, “La 'fin du politique' et le défi du populisme de droite”, *Revue du MAUSS*, vol. 2, no. 20, 2002, pp. 178-194.

Eurosceptic forces become pivotal players. It was not conceivable for centrist groups to rely on Eurosceptic groups: “We do not work with ENF, neither with EFDD”.⁹² Moreover, because Eurosceptic parliamentarians have the tendency to boycott legislative work⁹³ and to oppose every text,⁹⁴ the centrist groups has been increasingly obliged to cooperate and vote together in committee and plenary if they want to adopt legislation.

The rise of Eurosceptic forces is not the only factor explaining the signature of the 2014 agreement. The Spitzenkandidaten process, establishing a direct link between candidates and the Commission president, was also a determining factor. Since the Parliament had been a strong supporter of the Spitzenkandidaten process, it needed to present a united front and to speak with one voice to the European Council, where some of the Member States tried to oppose. As stated by Peñalver García and Priestley, voting for the Juncker Commission in the EP was crucial to “establish the Spitzenkandidaten system as the norm”.⁹⁵ The election of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the Commission has been made on the ground of institutional patriotism, explaining why some of the Greens voted in favour.⁹⁶ In this way, while the Spitzenkandidaten system could have replaced the “slow governance style” by a more majoritarian and competitive bargaining style,⁹⁷ it seems that the opposite has come about. There is thus a mismatch between the political competition from the Spitzenkandidaten, and the consensual institutional design of the whole EU.⁹⁸ Both the 2014 coalition deal and the Spitzenkandidaten process have created a new direct link between the Commission and the Parliament, since both the EPP and S&D could not really oppose the European Commission after the signature of the deal:

⁹² Interview with an official (1) from the EPP political group, Parliamentary Work Unit, *op. cit.*

⁹³ N. Brack, “The roles of Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament and their implications for the EU”, *International Political Science Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2015, pp. 337-350.

⁹⁴ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *op. cit.* p. 169.

⁹⁶ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *op. cit.*, p. 169-170.

⁹⁷ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁹⁸ A. Körfer, “Politicising the Union? The Influence of ‘Leading Candidates’ for the Commission Presidency”, *Bruges Political Research Papers*, vol. 36, 2014.

During the first months of the Juncker Commission, there were discussions over the LuxLeaks, especially that the S&D campaigned for tax justice. But the Socialists also voted in favour of the Commission. The S&D therefore requested a special committee and not an inquiry committee.⁹⁹

The 2014 agreement had some impact on decision-making. One important objective of the deal was to avoid unpredictability.¹⁰⁰ Political groups established contacts at different levels (Presidents, MEPs, staff) about upcoming issues. The aim of these contacts was to exchange information and not to make a deal: “It was more predictability than deal-making”.¹⁰¹ In other words, “at the operational level, there was not any attempt to necessarily coordinate”.¹⁰² The coalition focused more on political discussions and exchange of information than on day-to-day policy management.

We assume that these cooperation mechanisms, which already existed before 2014, have continued after 2017. The S&D and the EPP have continued to cooperate on a high-level basis after the mid-term election, as highlighted by the creation of the G6 meeting, which is a “so-called meeting of democratic groups, without EFDD and ENF [...]”,¹⁰³ where groups flag up what their positions are (information exchange). While during the first part of the parliamentary term, the S&D and EPP leaders met bilaterally, during the second part, they decided to include other political groups with the G6 meeting, creating new opportunities for small groups.¹⁰⁴ Although the two main groups have continued to exchange information, it seems that it has been more complicated since 2017 to be seen publicly as working together if other “democratic” political groups are not on board: “After 2017, we refused to have contacts only with the EPP and ALDE. The EPP therefore proposed a meeting of pro-European forces, the G6”.¹⁰⁵ The nature of the deal was twofold: technical (seat allocation)¹⁰⁶ and programmatic

⁹⁹ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ Interview with an official from the ALDE political group, Parliamentary Work Unit, *op. cit.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with Alexander Beels, Secretary General of the ALDE political group, *op. cit.*

¹⁰² Interview with an official from the ALDE political group, Parliamentary Work Unit, *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ Interview with Alexander Beels, Secretary General of the ALDE political group, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ Interview with an official from the Greens-EFA political group, 28 February 2018, phone interview.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

(the programme presented by Jean-Claude Juncker was centrist¹⁰⁷ and included policies proposed by the S&D group, like the investment plan).¹⁰⁸ These two elements were central in 2017 when the S&D decided to breakdown the agreement:

The EPP announced that it will present a candidate for the EP presidency. So we decided to stop the cooperation, especially that the Juncker Commission was not making sufficient progress on social issues.¹⁰⁹

Looking at these two elements, one could say that there has been no radical change since the breakdown of the deal. On the one hand, the seat allocation has remained similar (the distribution within the EP in January 2017 was part of an agreement).¹¹⁰ As for ideology, the data analysis underlined that the three groups have continued to adopt consensually legislative and non-legislative files.

Finally, while coalition agreements generally include provisions related to formal and/or informal rules, commitments for decision-making, or sanction mechanisms,¹¹¹ this was not the case for the 2014 coalition deal. We assume that political groups did not see the need to create new mechanisms for the daily management of the coalition because parliamentarians had already integrated the consensus norm, and compromise-making bodies were already in place in the EP. The 2014 agreement only symbolically formalised consensual practices that already existed before 2014.

From a constructivist perspective, one can say that the 2014 agreement has created an interpretative framework for inter-group relations, in other words an element build by actors and to which actors can refer when producing discourses and cooperating with each other. The agreement constituted a framework for interaction and cooperation, thus facilitating working relations between MEPs. This interpretative framework became the framework of reference

¹⁰⁷ N. Peñalver García & J. Priestley, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Interview with Javier Moreno Sancher, Secretary General of the S&D political group, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ N. Bué, "Les accords de coalition dans une municipalité d'union de la gauche. Contribution à l'étude de la régulation des rapports coalitionnels", *Politix*, vol. 4, no. 88, 2009, pp. 105-131.

for centrist political groups, and parliamentarians and political groups' staff could refer to the coalition when working together.¹¹² In this context, alternative coalitions were rarely mentioned. This slightly changed after the end of the agreement. Some national delegations officially asked for adopting a new strategy, such as the French Socialist delegation that was in favour of a cooperation first with the Greens-EFA and the GUE/NGL. An analysis of inter-group cohesion when the grand coalition is activated would, in this regard, be much appreciated. Publicly, the two largest groups describe a post-2017 situation where contacts have not been made firstly with the EPP or the S&D, but with ALDE, the Greens or the GUE, in order to create alternative coalitions: "It is not the S&D first any longer. We are looking at ALDE and ECR".¹¹³ Both the EPP and the S&D seem to have refocused on other political groups. However, because of the constraints above-mentioned (institutional, inter-institutional, socialisation, and arithmetic), the formation of an alternative coalition continues to be very complicated, explaining why the grand coalition has remained determining when it comes to voting: "The only stable majority is the grand coalition. Alternative coalitions are still very complicated to use".¹¹⁴

Conclusion

As expected, legislative and non-legislative reports have continued to be adopted by the grand coalition after the breakdown of the coalition deal. In this regard, the decision of the S&D group to put an end to the deal had no impact on day-to-day decision-making in the European Parliament, which has remained very consensual, following the findings of Bendjaballah,

¹¹² E. Burgos, O. Mazzoleni & H. Rayner, "Le gouvernement de tous faute de mieux. Institutionnalisation et transformation de la 'formule magique' en Suisse (1959-2003)", *Politix*, vol. 4, no. 88, 2009, pp. 39-61.

¹¹³ Interview with an official (2) from the EPP political group, Parliamentary Work, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ Interview with an official from the ECON committee, *op. cit.*

Novak and Rozenberg.¹¹⁵ The major evolution concerns votes on non-legislative amendments, where groups have fought with again each other more frequently after 2017 than before.

This research shows that coalition formation is very much linked to institutional and inter-institutional constraints. The grand coalition has continued to be determining for adopting reports due to the “minority” nature of the European Parliament. In addition, the EP has always tried to adopt legislation, or negotiation mandate, with a broad majority in order to present a united front in defending its arguments before the Council.

This research also underlines the sociological aspect of these constraints. Institutional and inter-institutional constrains have indeed been interiorised over time. The relationships between MEPs from different groups, as well as the committee-based loyalty, can explain why groups have continued to cooperate when adopting non-legislation. If not “factice”, the 2014 deal has mainly been a reference framework, whose aim was to justify and legitimise practices that already existed before 2014. Without this framework, we assume that MEPs that expressed unease with the deal in 2014 could after 2017 defect more easily.

All these conclusions need to be taken with caution. Firstly, the quantitative data is very limited, since it does not include the whole parliamentary term. Secondly, the main dataset used in this study can be biased, even though we tried to avoid this by disaggregating data (because RCVs on amendments can still be strategically requested by groups, conclusions about final texts are more reliable than on amendments). Finally, the methods used in this research are limited. Relying too much on quantitative data without observation can lead to misinterpretation. Indeed, the RCV analysis hide preliminary phases of coalition formation, where conflict might have increased since the end of the agreement. Yet, this analysis sheds light on very recent developments in the EP. While one of the main objectives of the S&D in

¹¹⁵ S. Bendjaballah, S. Novak & O. Rozenberg, “L'évolution du processus législatif de l'Union européenne. Conflit, consensus et tendances sectorielles”, *Politique européenne*, vol. 4, no. 58, 2017, pp. 8-13.

breaking the 2014 deal was to send signals to its electorate, policy-making has remained very consensual. This raises questions as to the democratic accountability of the EP, since the electorate does not really know how policies are made and which group is responsible. Some authors encourage political contestation in the EP in order to fill the EU democratic deficit.¹¹⁶ It would be wrong to say that there is not contestation: the EP has become more and more politicised over time. Still, the final text communicated to the media and the public continues to be adopted by the grand coalition. There has always been a complicated balance between conflictual and politicised dynamics on the one hand and consensual and depoliticised dynamics on the other, and the story around the coalition agreement during the 2014-2019 term is part of these two opposing dynamics.

¹¹⁶ A. Follesdal & S. Hix, “Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: a response to Majone and Moravcsik”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2006, pp. 533-62.

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