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Towards a More Politicised Interparliamentary Cooperation? The European Parliament's Political Groups and the European Parliamentary Week

NATHALIE BRACK AND THIBAUD DERUELLE

I. Introduction	131
II. Development of Interparliamentary Cooperation in the EU and as a Field of Study of European Integration.....	134
III. Interparliamentary Cooperation and the Economic and Budgetary Crisis: Towards Pragmatism, Increased Technicality ... and Politicisation?.....	137
IV. Political Groups' Behaviour Toward the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester: Differentiated Approaches, Constraints and Opportunities	139
V. Conclusion	145

I. INTRODUCTION

THE SEARCH FOR parliamentary legitimacy is an intrinsic tropism of the European integration. Although the 'Monnet Method'¹ was built on a functionalist perspective of the integration process, a common parliamentary assembly was adjoined and national parliaments were the original pool from which the members of the common assembly were selected. In a sense, the very beginning of parliamentary legitimacy in the EU was based on interparliamentary cooperation, with an assembly comparable to the one to be found in the Council of Europe, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), or the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Interparliamentary cooperation became, however, more complex in the EU than in other polities or international organisations. This is mainly due to the role of the European Parliament (EP) in this cooperation. If the setting remains horizontal, with a strong prevalence

¹ Based on the functionalist theory of spillover, the 'Monnet Method' broadly refers to a gradual process of European integration, relying on functional needs and a 'small steps' approach towards communitarisation of policy fields.

of Members of national parliaments, it looks like a classic form of cooperation in an international organisation. But if the EP is introduced into the equation, things become more complicated depending on its role. Indeed, the key question is to know whether the EP is a chamber among others or takes the lead (or patronage), transforming interparliamentary cooperation into a form close to a federal experience.

With the first direct election of the EP, a double trend was triggered: national parliaments became losers of European integration while the EP has been progressively empowered. Indeed, European integration led to a strengthening of the national executives and national parliaments were progressively sidelined in this new 'post sovereign, polycentric and incongruent' political system.² At the same time, the EP has been gradually empowered: with each treaty reform, national governments have granted new legislative or budgetary powers to the EP as a way to compensate for the democratic deficit of the EU.³ While one of the tropes of the European integration process was the parliamentarisation of the decision-making process, this evolution was in favour of the EP rather than national parliaments. Indeed, the EP and national parliaments were competitors for the provisions of democratic legitimacy and rivals for voters' attention.⁴ And for a long time, the different promoters of EU integration were betting on a parliamentary strategy supporting a strong European Parliament rather than an increased involvement of national parliaments.

The situation has evolved recently. The Lisbon treaty ended a long process of constitutionalisation and strengthened the powers of parliaments in the European political system, establishing a multilevel parliamentary field.⁵ The EP has been once again granted new powers but due to a discursive shift, national parliaments are now seen as key players to reduce the EU's democratic deficit. Their direct involvement in EU affairs has therefore been institutionalised.⁶ At the same time, the Eurozone crisis and its management raised new concerns about the parliamentary and democratic legitimacy of the EU.⁷ Indeed, the technocratic and intergovernmental character of the crisis management led to a further empowerment of the executives.⁸ Parliaments have been side-lined whereas the core instruments of the new EU economic governance have major effects on the budgetary powers of national parliaments.⁹ As noted by Berthold Rittberger,

many of the measures to reform the EU's fiscal and economic governance architecture have been criticized for undermining the prerogatives of national parliaments as well as for sidestepping

² P Schmitter, 'Imagining the Future of the Euro-Polity with the Help of New Concepts' in G Marks, F Scharpf, P Schmitter and W Streeck (eds), *Governance in the European Union* (London, Sage, 1996) 136.

³ O Costa and P Magnette, 'Idéologies et changement institutionnel dans l'Union européenne. Pourquoi les gouvernements ont-ils constamment renforcé le Parlement européen?' (2003) 9 *Politique européenne* 49.

⁴ K Auel and T Christiansen, 'After Lisbon: National Parliaments in the European Union' (2015) 38 *West European Politics* 261.

⁵ B Crum and E Fossum, 'The Multilevel Parliamentary Field: a framework for Theorising representative democracy in the EU' (2009) 1 *European Political Science Review* 249.

⁶ Auel and Christiansen, n 3 above.

⁷ R Fox, 'Europe, Democracy and the Economic Crisis: Is it Time to Reconstitute the Assises?' (2012) 65 *Parliamentary Affairs* 463; S Puntischer Rickmann and D Wydra, 'Representation in the European State of Emergency: Parliaments against Governments?' (2013) 35 *Journal of European Integration* 565.

⁸ G Majone, 'From Regulatory State to a Democratic Default' (2014) 52 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 1216.

⁹ K Auel and O Höing, 'National Parliaments and the Eurozone Crisis: Taking ownership in difficult times' (2015) 38 *West European Politics* 375.

the EP. Still the reforms of the EU's economic and fiscal governance architecture do not constitute a parliament-free space.¹⁰

Indeed, the risk of de-parliamentarisation gave incentives to parliaments to use interparliamentary cooperation to counterbalance the dominance of executives, and diverse forums of parliamentary cooperation emerged or were renewed.¹¹ One of these initiatives is the Interparliamentary meeting on the European Semester as part of the European Parliamentary week.¹² Organised on an annual basis, this meeting brings together national parliamentarians from across the EU to discuss first and foremost the annual growth survey and the European Semester. The EP is the leading actor of this process: it organises the meetings in Brussels, which are chaired by the President of the European Parliament (when it meets in its plenary form) or by the Chairpersons of the EP committees. As such, this type of interparliamentary cooperation is not new, but its organisation on a regular basis, and the precision of its goals, compared to other existing settings, made it an institutionalised instrument of interparliamentary cooperation.

A burgeoning literature has emerged in the last few years to understand the new provisions of the Lisbon treaty and the new impulse for interparliamentary cooperation, the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs as well as the role of the EP in economic governance and its relations with national parliaments.¹³ But this literature tends to consider parliaments as unitary actors and to focus on inter-institutional relations (among national parliaments and between them and the EP).¹⁴ So far, only limited attention has been paid to the informal aspects of interparliamentary cooperation and more particularly, to the role of political parties and groups, whereas intra-party links seem to be the most frequent contacts between the EP and national parliaments.¹⁵

Building on this research, this chapter aims at exploring the role of EP political groups in fostering interparliamentary cooperation. While their importance is uneven across the political spectrum, large groups can be expected to be involved in an informal but significant coordination between the national and EU levels in order to increase their influence through political parties. Based on interviews with EP civil servants and staff members of several EP groups as well as the observation of the third European Parliamentary Week, the chapter underlines a developing trend: interparliamentary cooperation has evolved towards increased technicality and a politicisation of the issues discussed during meetings.

¹⁰ B Rittberger, 'Integration without Representation? The European Parliament and the Reform of Economic Governance in the EU' (2014) 52 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 1174.

¹¹ D Fromage, 'A mapping of recent trends in interparliamentary cooperation within the EU' in C Fasone, D Fromage and Z Lefkofridi (eds), *Parliaments, Public Opinion, and Parliamentary Elections in Europe* (2015) EUI Max Weber Working Paper 2015/18.

¹² See also the chapter by D Jančić, 'Parliamentary Involvement in the Economic and Monetary Union after the Euro Crisis' Ch 10 in this volume.

¹³ C Fasone, 'European Economic Governance and Parliamentary Representation. What Place for the European Parliament?' (2014) 20 *European Law Journal* 164; C Heffler, C Neuhold, O Rozenberg, J Smith and W Wessels (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments and the European Union* (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014); B Rittberger, n 9 above; See also (2014) 20(1) *Journal of Legislative Studies* Special Issue: 'Connecting with the Electorate? Parliamentary Communication in EU Affairs'.

¹⁴ K Neunreither, 'The European Parliament and National Parliaments: Conflict or Cooperation?' in K Auel and A Benz (eds), *The Europeanization of Parliamentary Democracy* (London, Routledge, 2006).

¹⁵ E Miklin and B Crum, 'Interparliamentary contacts of Members of the European Parliament. Report of a Survey' (2011) 08 Recon Online Working Paper; O Costa and M Latek, 'Paradoxes and limits of interparliamentary cooperation in the European Union' (2001) 23 *Journal of European Integration* 139.

This chapter is structured around three main sections. The first one provides an overview of the literature on interparliamentary cooperation as well as a review of the various forms of interparliamentary cooperation. It shows that the literature has followed the ebbs and flows of interparliamentary cooperation but also that it tends to overlook the role played by EP groups and more generally, political parties. The second part shows a shift in interparliamentary cooperation due to the Eurozone crisis. With the creation of the European Semester and the European Parliamentary Week, interparliamentary cooperation has become more pragmatic, specialised and focused on expertise. The last section examines the diverging involvement of EP groups and the constraints they face. It shows that there are three key elements to understanding their varied engagement in interparliamentary cooperation: their interests, resources and political opportunity.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION IN THE EU AND AS A FIELD OF STUDY OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs has been at the centre of major recent studies,¹⁶ from their lack of involvement in EU affairs to the institutionalisation of their role with the Lisbon treaty. It is interesting to see the development of interparliamentary cooperation as parts of different narratives, or strategies to foster EU integration. The solutions presented have relied almost solely upon interparliamentary cooperation.

In 1989, the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) was created as an initiative of national parliaments: the cooperation was made at parliamentary committee level. The practice of committees on EU affairs was generalised in the EU9, and their representatives would meet during interparliamentary meetings held every six months. For almost 20 years, COSAC would be the alpha and omega of parliamentary cooperation in the EU, establishing in a lasting way the practice of meetings at community level. There is an extensive literature on this issue.¹⁷

However, since the 1990s, the literature has also pointed out the lack of transnational coordination beyond COSAC and the limits of interparliamentary cooperation, mainly due to the absence of interest of national parliamentarians in forging meaningful links with the EP or in associating MEPs to their work.¹⁸ Scholars have been tackling the topic in the light of the Europeanisation of national parliaments, be it in terms of agenda-setting or in terms

¹⁶ Auel and Christiansen, n 3 above; Auel and Höing, n 8 above; J Neyer, 'Justified Multi-level Parliamentarism: Situating national parliaments in the European Polity' (2014) 20 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 125; T Raunio, 'The gatekeepers of European integration? The Functions of National Parliaments in the EU political system' (2011) 33 *Journal of European Integration* 303; I Cooper, 'A Virtual Third Chamber for the European Union? National Parliaments after the Treaty of Lisbon' (2012) 35 *West European Politics* 441.

¹⁷ A Cygan, *Accountability, Parliamentarism and Transparency in the EU* (Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2013); M Latek, 'Le poids des traditions parlementaires nationales dans le développement de la coopération interparlementaire. La participation française et britannique à la COSAC' (2003) 9 *Politique européenne* 143; K Neunreither, 'The Democratic Deficit of the European Union: Towards Closer Cooperation between the European Parliament and the National Parliaments' (1994) 29 *Government and Opposition* 299; L Tordoff, 'The conference of European affairs committees: A collective voice for national parliaments in the European Union' (2000) 6 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 1. See also the contributions in the Sixth Part of this volume.

¹⁸ M Larhant, 'La coopération interparlementaire dans l'UE' (2005) 16 *Notre Europe Policy Paper*.

of practices, and have made case studies to assess the involvement of each chamber in EU affairs.¹⁹ De facto this approach underlined the differences among national parliaments but also the competition between the EP and national parliaments. These studies tend to consider national parliaments as one compact unit of analysis rather than tackling the topic of their interactions at the horizontal level.²⁰

The convention for the European Constitution brought new solutions for national parliaments. Some advocated strongly for an EU senate of national parliaments and both advocates of further integration and parts of the Euro-sceptics found common ground on the empowerment of national parliaments in EU affairs, although for different reasons. Indeed, most of the advocates of further EU integration favoured new solutions to alleviate the democratic deficit and legitimise the EU while some Euro-sceptics saw an opportunity to repatriate powers to the national level. National parliaments have been gradually considered as a whole rather than the sum of their different parts.²¹ Their role was thus increasingly studied under the light of comparative politics and their democratic input compared to the EP's one until the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty.²² As outlined earlier, national parliaments have been a tool for conceptualising and assessing the democratic deficit as well as a way for fixing it.

The Lisbon treaty and the creation of the early warning system mechanism on the principle of subsidiarity²³ have provided new opportunities for the national parliaments. According to Andreas Maurer and Wolfgang Wessels, the concept of de-parliamentarisation has called for a phenomenon of 're-parliamentarisation'. Thus, from 'losers' of the integration, national parliaments have become 'latecomers'.²⁴ And the literature has mirrored those changes closely. While interparliamentary cooperation had been criticised for its lack of results, the principle of individual votes for each chamber led researchers to increasingly focus their attention on the way national parliaments deal with their new prerogative and less on their interactions.²⁵

The recent developments related to the Eurozone crisis and the establishment of the European Semester have brought new subjects to study the relations between national

¹⁹ K Auel and A Benz, 'The Politics of Adaptation: The Europeanisation of National Parliamentary Systems' (2005) 11 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 372; O Costa and M Latek, n 14 above; J Karlas, 'National Parliamentary Control of EU Affairs: Institutional Design after Enlargement' (2012) 35 *West European Politics* 1095.

²⁰ P Schmitter, 'Imagining the Future of the Euro-Polity with the Help of New Concepts' in G Marks et al (eds), *Governance in the European Union* (London, Sage, 1996).

²¹ A Fraga, 'After the Convention: The future role of National Parliaments in the European Union (and the day after ... nothing will happen)' (2005) 11 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 490.

²² T Jans and S Piedrafita, 'The Role of National Parliaments in European Decision-Making' (2009) 1 *Eipascopie*; J-V Louis, 'The Lisbon Treaty: The Irish "No". National Parliaments and the Principle of Subsidiarity—Legal Options and Practical Limits' (2008) 4 *European Constitutional Law Review* 429; P Kiiver, 'Legal Accountability to a Political Forum? The European Commission, the Dutch Parliament and the Early Warning System for the Principle of Subsidiarity', *Maastricht Faculty of Law Working Paper* 2009–8.

²³ I Cooper, 'The Watchdogs of Subsidiarity: National Parliaments and the Logic of Arguing in the EU' (2006) 44 *Journal of Common Market Studies* 289.

²⁴ A Maurer and W Wessels (eds), *National Parliaments on their ways to Europe: Losers or latecomers?* (Baden Baden, Nomos, 2001).

²⁵ R Matarazzo and J Leone, 'Sleeping beauty Awakens: The Italian Parliament and the EU after the Lisbon Treaty' (2011) 46 *The International Spectator* 129; C Neuhold, 'Late wake-up call or early warning? Parliamentary participation and cooperation in light of the Lisbon treaty' (2011) UACES Conference, London; T Raunio, 'National Parliaments and European Integration: What we know and Agenda for Future research' (2009) 15 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 317.

parliaments and the EP. Scholars have underlined how interparliamentary cooperation has increased due to the crisis and its management, and has been fostered under the patronage of the EP.²⁶

In a nutshell, the study of interparliamentary cooperation in the EU has long been divided into the two approaches: on the one hand, studies have analysed the horizontal cooperation between national parliaments through studies of the only existing forum: COSAC (and to some extent IPEX (the InterParliamentary EU information eXchange) and network of parliamentary representatives). On the other hand, following the Lisbon Treaty, scholars have focused on the interactions between parliaments and the EU institutions, mainly the EP and the Commission. But as mentioned, the literature tends to consider parliaments as unitary actors. And while EP political groups are key organs for interparliamentary cooperation,²⁷ apart from a few exceptions, there have been very few studies on the partisan variable of interparliamentary cooperation. Focusing on the Joint Parliamentary Meetings (JPMs) between 2005 and 2011, Katjana Gattermann examined the role of the EP in fostering a greater involvement of its political groups in interparliamentary cooperation.²⁸ She shows that political parties have varying interests in maintaining a dialogue with national parliamentarians. Eric Miklin focuses on the Austrian case to show that there is a varying engagement of political parties in transnational cooperation that can be explained by the parliamentary status and ideology of the party.²⁹

Building on this literature, this chapter seeks to unveil the role of political groups in interparliamentary cooperation and identify what explains the differentiated involvement of EP groups and their behaviour in terms of intra-party coordination. To do so, it will focus on a new type of parliamentary cooperation—the Interparliamentary Meetings on the European Semester—which aims not only to foster interparliamentary cooperation but also to present a joint opinion to the Council of the EU. It is assumed that the Interparliamentary Meeting can be considered as a momentum for interparliamentary cooperation and a window of opportunity for political groups to adopt more proactive behaviour. Hence, the main hypothesis is that EP groups' differentiated approach cannot be reduced to a matter of preferences but reflects their different access to resources and how their involvement may be maximised.

In addition to that, the chapter will test several additional expectations. First, we expect that the third European Parliamentary Week underlines a developing trend towards an increase in technicality and a politicisation of the debate. This trend results in a shift of the EP's groups' political priorities in terms of interparliamentary cooperation. Secondly, we assume that political groups represent an alternative model to the engine of interparliamentary cooperation. Therefore, we expect groups' behaviour to be influenced by their size.

²⁶ Auel and Christiansen, n 3 above; K Auel and T Raunio, 'Introduction: Connecting with the Electorate? Parliamentary Communication in EU affairs' (2014) 20 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 1; I Cooper, 'Parliamentary oversight of the EU after the Crisis: On the Creation of the "Article13" Interparliamentary Conference', *LUISS Working Paper Series SOG-WP21*; C Sprungk, 'A New type of Representative Democracy? Reconsidering the role of national parliaments in the EU' (2013) 35 *Journal of European Integration* 547.

²⁷ Costa and Latek, n 14 above.

²⁸ K Gattermann, 'Opportunities, Strategies and Ideologies: The Incentives of European Parliament Political Groups for Inter-parliamentary cooperation' (2014) 16 *OPAL Online Paper Series*.

²⁹ E Miklin, 'Interparliamentary Cooperation in EU affairs and the Austrian Parliament: Empowering the Opposition?' (2013) 19 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 22.

In other words, we anticipate that large groups will be more involved in interparliamentary cooperation. Lastly, without bypassing the institutional aspect of the EP patronage, political groups pursue a strategy of maximisation: they seek to increase their influence on national parties as well as in the EP.

III. INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION AND THE ECONOMIC AND BUDGETARY CRISIS: TOWARDS PRAGMATISM, INCREASED TECHNICALITY ... AND POLITICISATION?

In his interim report 'Towards a genuine Economic and Monetary Union',³⁰ the then-President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy outlined that the democratic oversight of the Eurozone governance, in its core aspects, lies within the responsibility of national legislatures. In doing so, he was referring to the European Semester and most particularly the Commission's Annual Growth Survey, which identifies objectives to fulfil the priorities for the EU as set by the Commission. The Annual Growth Survey is always discussed in the Council and the European Parliament before being endorsed by the Spring European Council, giving strategic guidance on the priorities to be pursued. The focus here lies on another step: the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester, which prepares recommendations for the European Council.

The Interparliamentary Meeting was created as a democratic oversight of the budgetary surveillance as crafted in the so-called 'Six-pack'.³¹ The technical aspect of the cooperation became salient before the EP focused its effort on indicating clearly the issues that should be on the agenda of the future interparliamentary meetings, underlining a growing trend of pragmatism in interparliamentary cooperation.³² The texts provide the following design:³³

in line with the legal and political arrangements of each Member State, national parliaments should be duly involved in the European Semester and in the preparation of stability programmes, convergence programmes and national reform programmes in order to increase the transparency and ownership of, and accountability for the decisions taken.³⁴

³⁰ H Van Rompuy, 'Towards a genuine Economic and Monetary Union', 5 December 2012.

³¹ The 'six-pack' refers to a set of six EU laws (listed below), the first four on fiscal policy and the last two on macroeconomic imbalances:

Regulation (EU) No 1175/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 amending Council Regulation (EC) No 1466/97 on the strengthening of the surveillance of budgetary positions and the surveillance and coordination of economic policies. [2011] OJ L306/12.

Council Regulation (EU) No 1177/2011 of 8 November 2011 amending Regulation (EC) No 1467/97 on speeding up and clarifying the implementation of the excessive deficit procedure. [2011] OJ L306/33.

Regulation (EU) No 1173/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the effective enforcement of budgetary surveillance in the euro area. [2011] OJ L306/1.

Council Directive 2011/85/EU of 8 November 2011 on requirements for budgetary frameworks of the Member States. [2011] OJ L306/41.

Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances. [2011] OJ L306/25.

Regulation (EU) No 1174/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on enforcement measures to correct excessive macroeconomic imbalances in the euro area. [2011] OJ L306/8.

³² S&D group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 19 February 2015.

³³ Regulation (EU) No 1173/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the effective enforcement of budgetary surveillance in the euro area. [2011] OJ L306/1.

³⁴ Council Regulation (EU) No 1177/2011 of 8 November 2011 amending Regulation (EC) No 1467/97 on speeding up and clarifying the implementation of the excessive deficit procedure. [2011] L306/33.

The Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester may be seen as a series of Interparliamentary Committee Meetings (ICMs) held at the same time, and packed with ‘plenaries’ organised as introduction and conclusion sessions. It is thus the sophistication of existing practices, ie the organisation of JPMs and ICMs.³⁵ The main difference between those two settings is the chair; while JPMs are co-chaired by corresponding chairpersons from the EP and the chamber(s) of the country exercising the rotating presidency of the Council, ICMs are organised only on the initiative of the parliamentary committees of the EP.

The Meeting is actually a concomitant ICM for the EP’s Economic and Financial Committee (BUDG), Economic Policy Committee (ECON) and Employment Committee & the Social Protection Committee (EMPL). Moreover, the President of the EP, the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council participate in the event. The choice of this model, which gives the upper hand to the EP in the organisation of these meetings, should be seen not only as a sign of its empowerment but also as an insurance for the ECON committee that the interparliamentary cooperation will provide an input on the national budgets’ oversight that will go beyond a symbolic democratic input.

This search for increased technicality and political input may also be underlined in the difference between the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester and the ‘Article 13 Conference’. It is important to briefly explain the negotiations that led to article 13 of the TSCG. This article refers to Title II of Protocol no 1 of the Lisbon Treaty. But the title is composed of two different articles, each of them calling for a different design of interparliamentary cooperation. The first one (article 9) model refers to an ‘ICM-type’ meeting (with a clear patronage of the EP) while the second model (article 10) refers to the COSAC-type meeting. No choice was made between those two articles in article 13 of the TSCG—which was negotiated in the same period when the ‘Six-pack’ was adopted. This shows that during the negotiation of the TSCG, the concerns of democratic accountability were addressed, but the issue of increasing technicality was not decisive in drafting article 13. The difference also lays in the scope³⁶ and output of these meetings:³⁷ while the Article 13 Conference discusses budgetary policies and other issues covered by the TSCG,³⁸ the role of the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester is to provide an input to the Council of the EU following the annual growth survey.³⁹

The EP has thus been an important actor in crafting the Meeting, pushing for an increased technicality and assuming the patronage of interparliamentary cooperation. But the ECON,⁴⁰ EMPL⁴¹ and BUDG⁴² committees also played a role in shaping the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester or in its organisation. These committees (and the EP as a whole) could benefit from the technical input of this joint ICM. However the political aspect of the questions dealt with by the Interparliamentary Meeting

³⁵ EP civil servant, DG for Presidency, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

³⁶ EP civil servant, DG for Presidency, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

³⁷ Article 13 Treaty on Stability Convergence and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union.

³⁸ Although in the light of the current practice, this still remains not entirely clear: see I Cooper, ‘The Interparliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union (“The Article 13 Conference”); Ch 13 in this volume.

³⁹ EP civil servant, DG for Presidency, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

⁴⁰ Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee of the European Parliament.

⁴¹ Committee on Employment and Social Affairs of the European Parliament.

⁴² Budgets’ Committee of the European Parliament.

on the European Semester should not be underestimated. National budgets' oversight is an increasingly salient issue in Europe and which is very delicate in some Member States where public opinion is very sensitive about the consequences of the European Semester. Beyond the empowerment of the EP and the struggle for increased technicality, politicisation is an important element to understand the European Parliament's political groups in the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester.

IV. POLITICAL GROUPS' BEHAVIOUR TOWARD THE INTERPARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER: DIFFERENTIATED APPROACHES, CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

So far, research has tended to concentrate on interparliamentary cooperation by focusing on the formal and institutional relations. But parties are important actors within parliaments and intra-party links are the main channel for the contacts between national parliaments and the EP.⁴³ In principle, political groups do not have a specific mandate to become patrons or federate national parliamentarians invited to the meeting. In practice, interparliamentary meetings such as COSAC, JPMs or the Interparliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy show that divisions among parliamentarians are most likely to occur along national than political lines. This section will therefore concentrate on the differentiated involvement of EP groups in interparliamentary cooperation and the constraints they face.

A. Intra-Party Cooperation. Differentiated Approaches and Their Success

The literature on political parties shows that the linkage between national parties and MEPs has gradually become stronger and that national parties now pay more attention to their MEPs.⁴⁴ Interparliamentary contacts can be seen as a resource for MEPs, their national party and their political group in order to increase their influence on the decision-making process. And as most national delegations are too small to have an impact on the EP's deliberation, parties rely on the cooperation and resources of EP groups to maximise their impact.⁴⁵ We can thus expect that EP political groups are engaged in cooperation with national members of parliaments, especially from their political family but also that there will be considerable variation between party families.

The survey by Eric Miklin and Ben Crum confirms that indeed most interparliamentary engagement proceeds through political parties on the initiative of MEPs (rather than MPs) and that there is a significant difference between the two main EP groups. They found

⁴³ E Miklin and B Crum, 'Interparliamentary contacts of Members of the European Parliament. Report of a Survey' (2011) 8 *RECON Online Working Paper*.

⁴⁴ T Raunio, 'Losing Independence of Finally Gaining Recognition? Contacts between MEPs and National Parties' (2000) 6 *Party Politics* 211; T Raunio, 'National Parliaments and European Integration: What we know and Agenda for future research' (2009) 15 *Journal of Legislative Studies* 317; T Raunio, 'Open List, Open Mandate? Links between MEPs and Parties in Finland' (2007) 8 *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 131.

⁴⁵ C Lord, 'The aggregating function of political parties in EU decision-making' (2010) 5/3 *Living Reviews in European Governance* 5.

that MEPs from the Socialist and Democrat Group (S&D) are more regularly involved in coordination with their national parties as well as with EP parties from their party family. In comparison to the European People's Party group (EPP), they are more interested in developing a common position on EU issues but are also more prone to criticise the lack of attention paid by the national party to EU affairs.⁴⁶

The data from the EPRG Survey of 2010 confirms that there is indeed considerable variation among the different EP groups in terms of contact with the national parties and parliaments. Table 1 displays several elements. First, there are frequent intra-party contacts in the 'multilevel parliamentary field': 51 per cent of the MEPs have weekly contact with their national party, almost 30 per cent with national parliamentarians as well as with their national party leadership. 40 per cent have monthly contact with MPs and almost 50 per cent have monthly contact with the national party executive. Secondly, there is considerable variation across the different groups. It is not surprising that small and marginal groups (such as the Europe and Freedom and Democracy (EFD) and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL)) as well as non-attached members have the most frequent contact with their national parties due to their attitudes towards European cooperation and the fact that it is usually party leaders and key figures who take the seats in the EP. Thirdly, if we focus on the two main groups, these data contradict the findings of Miklin and Crum: the EPP seems more involved in interparliamentary coordination than the S&D. EPP members have more frequent contact with national parliamentarians, national party executives and member of their national party than S&D members. This finding is corroborated by interviews with representatives from the two largest groups: the EPP tends to prioritise interparliamentary cooperation and can rely on its past experiences in intra-party coordination while S&D involvement is in its infancy. Finally, the data displayed in table 1 confirm that intraparty coordination is by far the most frequent link between national and the European parliaments.

The EPRG survey data show a strong linkage between national parties and MEPs. More importantly, they show that intra-party cooperation is a phenomenon that is spread across all groups. The fact that small and marginal groups seem to be most frequently in touch with national parliamentarians and party representatives confirms—so far—part of the hypothesis. However, intra-party linkage is only one of the different facets of interparliamentary cooperation: the data presented above focus on personal and individual linkage rather than on groups' organisation. They give a general picture of the 'day-to-day' linkage and indicate that these links are first and foremost about national parties' affiliations. However, taking the lead and assuming a 'patronage' of interparliamentary cooperation require more than a strong linkage with national parties. The following part of this chapter will investigate how the Interparliamentary Meeting, as a *momentum*, creates opportunities and constraints for political groups.

⁴⁶ Miklin and Crum, n 42 above.

Table 1: Intraparty coordination and relations to national parliaments

Contacts frequency with MPs from my national parliament						
	At least once a week (%)	At least once a month (%)	At least every 3 months (%)	At least once a year (%)	Less often (%)	No contact (%)
EPP	28.6	41.3	19	3.2	4.8	3.2
S&D	20	41.8	32.7	5.5	0	0
ALDE	30	43.3	16.7	0	10	0
Greens/EFA	40	26.7	26.7	6.7	0	0
ECR	12.5	62.5	25	0	0	0
EUL/NGL	16.7	66.7	16.7	0	0	0
EFD	60	20	10	0	10	0
NA	60	0	0	20	0	20
Total (N = 192)	28.6	40.1	22.4	3.6	3.6	1.6
Contact frequency with national party executives						
EPP	25	51.6	15.6	1.6	3.1	3.1
S&D	23.6	52.7	14.5	5.5	1.8	1.8
ALDE	30	53.3	6.7	6.7	3.3	0
Greens/EFA	26.7	26.7	40	6.7	0	0
ECR	0	50	25	25	0	0
EUL/NGL	50	33.3	0	0	0	0
EFD	50	50	0	0	0	0
NA	80	20	0	0	0	0
Total (N = 193)	28	48.7	15	4.7	2.1	1.6
Contact frequency with members of the national party						
EPP	54.7	35.9	3.1	1.6	3.1	1.6
S&D	44.4	50	5.6	0	0	0
ALDE	51.7	37.9	10.3	0	0	0
Greens/EFA	46.7	33.3	6.7	6.7	6.7	0
ECR	25	62.5	12.5	0	0	0
EUL/NGL	60	20	20	0	0	0
EFD	70	30	0	0	0	0
NA	80	20	0	0	0	0
Total (N = 190)	51.1	40	5.8	1.1	1.6	0.5

Source: David Farrell, Simon Hix and Roger Scully (2011) 'EPRG MEP Survey Dataset: 2011 Release'

B. Constraints and Opportunities: Ideological Approach, Political Strategy, Administrative Resources

The political salience of the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester is nevertheless an opportunity for political groups to seize. Partisan division among national parliamentarians, especially along the majority/opposition axis, are more easily drawn, which offers a window of opportunity for political groups to assume a role of patron.

However, this window of opportunity may vary from one group to another. Three variables are relevant in this respect:

1. The size of the group in the EP as well in the national parliament: the larger the group, the more administrative resources it can claim and the larger the pool of national parliamentarians it could cooperate with.⁴⁷
2. The political group's interest in interparliamentary cooperation and its path dependency: the longer is the practice, the more developed it should be.
3. The political opportunity to adopt a proactive strategy towards interparliamentary cooperation.

Building on these variables, the most proactive group in interparliamentary cooperation would be a group which tackles this issue with an approach close to that of a club⁴⁸ with a strong record of inclusivity and which behaviour is motivated by both ideological and political incentives.

(i) Size and Logistics

As underlined by the interviewee from the EPP, size matters.⁴⁹ The most important challenge of interparliamentary cooperation is to maintain a stable network. There is a constant turnover of national parliamentarians in Europe and this perpetual movement requires strong logistical efforts. Moreover, the number of national parliamentarians they are able to access varies a lot from one group to another. In this respect, the EPP is the group with the strongest potential to assume a proactive role in interparliamentary cooperation. It is the largest group in the EP and is able to reach out to the most important pool of national parliamentarians in the Union because of the current political majorities in the Member States. The S&D comes right behind it, being the second largest group in the European Parliament, but also the second group in terms of possible parliamentarians to reach out to. Both groups have a structured administration dedicated to relations with national parliaments. While the S&D has a Special Adviser for Relations with National Parliaments, the EPP has a more political approach, with a vice-Chair for Relations with National Parliaments in the EPP Bureau (currently Esther de Lange (NL)) as well as members of the staff entirely dedicated to this task.

However, smaller groups may encounter difficulties. A staff member of the EFDD⁵⁰ group explains the lack of means at their disposal, but also the narrow number of parliamentarians

⁴⁷ EP civil servant, DG for Presidency, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ EPP group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 26 February 2015.

⁵⁰ Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy.

they are able to establish a contact with. This finding is true for other smaller groups such as EUL/NGL, the Greens and ECR.⁵¹ In all those cases, national parliamentarians are unevenly represented in Member States and the cost of their efforts represents a bad pay-off in terms of benefits. Small and marginal groups, despite a strong intra-party linkage, cannot cope with the advantages that larger groups have access to, due to their size and resources. During the interviews conducted in the EP, it was made clear that marginal groups see a genuine interest in fostering interparliamentary cooperation; however their lack of administrative means leads them to focus on intra-party linkage rather than attempting to assume a patronage.⁵² The case of ALDE⁵³ is interesting as it has long been the third largest group in the European Parliament, with a relatively significant staff. However, even with this staff resource, the scope of their opportunity for interparliamentary cooperation remains narrow, as the pool of national parliamentarians at their disposal remains small.

The first variable shows that the opportunity is only significant enough for the two biggest political groups: the EPP and the S&D. By their size and the opportunities they can reach out to national parliamentarians and they are more likely to be involved in interparliamentary cooperation and eventually take initiatives. The interviews and the observation data of the third European Parliamentary Week confirm this finding. If all groups are officially involved by the EP's Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments in the preparation of the parliamentary week, only the two largest ones have the resources to have permanent staff following and preparing interparliamentary meetings. Hence, the next two subsections will focus only on these two groups.

(ii) Interest in Interparliamentary Cooperation and Path Dependency

The EPP has a strong record in terms of efforts to promote interparliamentary cooperation, with the organisation of the meetings of group coordinators. The EPP secretariat has been investing time and resources in promoting and preparing for interparliamentary cooperation for quite some time. Considering interparliamentary cooperation as a political priority, in 2007 the group created an organ to deal with the issue, and since 2009 one of the vice-presidents of the EPP has been in charge of relations with the national parliaments and travels often to meet national parliamentarians. Before each official interparliamentary meeting, the EPP seeks to determine a common line among its members from national and the European parliaments. And the group also organises various events such as the summits of the presidents of the parliamentary groups belonging to the EPP, twice a year, or that of the EPP's network on EU affairs.

The same involvement can be noticed in the European Parliamentary Week. There were preparatory meetings among parties from the EPP to decide on a common position and to maximise the EPP's input during the parliamentary week. And during the event as such, there were informal gatherings such as lunch, organised by the group to foster intra-party coordination. There is thus a strong path dependency in the EPP group and a structured network.

⁵¹ European Conservatives and Reformists.

⁵² EFDD group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

⁵³ Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

The PSE has a less strong record, and parliamentary cooperation is a more recent priority in the group. For a long time, interparliamentary cooperation has not been a priority for the S&D group; this was attributed to a lack of political tradition by our interviewees.⁵⁴ While the EPP was developing a strategy to bring together its political family and to structure its network of MPs, the S&D group was focusing its efforts on gaining influence within the EP rather than extending its influence outside the institution. Whilst the interviewees attest to a shift in the groups' preferences, the interest for interparliamentary cooperation has still room to develop. For instance S&D did not invest in upstream preparations of the parliamentary week and there did not seem to be any special event or meetings organised by the group for the occasion.

While the two groups have different approaches, especially during the last mandate, they share a similar proactive attitude towards interparliamentary cooperation. This may find an explanation in the fact that both groups are in the coalition supporting the Juncker Commission.⁵⁵ As such, they are both concerned with assuming a leading and proactive role in the functioning of the institution—in this respect, the S&D group has been through a rapid evolution. There are also exchanges of good practices between the two groups,⁵⁶ in terms of structure and logistics.

(iii) Political Opportunity

The evolution of interparliamentary cooperation towards more pragmatism and increased technicality had a decisive importance in encouraging the S&D group to focus more on interparliamentary cooperation⁵⁷ and in maintaining their efforts in the case of the EPP. Both groups welcome the evolution of the cooperation on more technical and precise issues, citing the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester as an example. The COSAC model is seen as too general and unfruitful when it comes to putting forward measures and the subsidiarity check is seen as unpractical and limited in motivating national parliaments' input.

Assuming the 'patronage' of interparliamentary cooperation is a strategic tool, with more precise topics debated with national parliaments and recommendations passed on to the European Council, national parliamentarians can be used as a relay and/or a support to the group's position. The EPP has the most sophisticated approach with preliminary meetings to establish a common political line with national parliamentarians. Interparliamentary cooperation can be thus seen as a means of empowerment. It was underlined by a member of the administrative staff of the EP⁵⁸ and corroborated by a staff member of the S&D⁵⁹ group that there is a current rise of the political groups in the institution: they dominate the agenda and MEPs hire more and more specialised people, while the secretariat has seen its influence decrease.⁶⁰ The proactive behaviour of political groups is thus a process of

⁵⁴ S&D group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 19 February 2015.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ EPP group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 26 February 2015.

⁵⁷ S&D group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 19 February 2015.

⁵⁸ EP civil servant, DG for Presidency, interviewed in Brussels on 17 February 2015.

⁵⁹ S&D group staff member, interviewed in Brussels on 19 February 2015.

⁶⁰ A Pegan, *An Analysis of Legislative Assistance in the European Parliament*, PhD Thesis, University of Luxembourg, March 2015.

appropriation of a part of the inter-institutional relations of the institution. Moreover it corroborates the idea of path dependency for the S&D: the definitive goal of the group is still to gain in importance within the EP, however the patronage of interparliamentary cooperation is seen as an appropriate means by which to reach this goal. Political opportunity and groups' traditional strategy are easily wed in the framework of the Interparliamentary Meeting.

To sum up, groups are subject to constraints vis-à-vis interparliamentary cooperation, especially in terms of logistics, means and number of MEPs and MPs. The evolution of the S&D group also underlines an important point: being part of the coalition may be seen as an incentive to assume a form of patronage in interparliamentary cooperation. Eventually, the increased technicality of meetings such as the Interparliamentary Meeting on the European Semester is a political opportunity that groups are interested in seizing.

Table 2: Constraints and behaviour explanation for political groups

<i>Variables</i>	Groups	
	EPP	S&D
<i>Administrative resources</i>	Very strong	In development
<i>Interest and path dependency</i>	Welcoming and proactive— Constant since the Lisbon Treaty	More welcoming since the Juncker Commission
<i>Political opportunity</i>	The increased technicality and pragmatism is seen as a strong opportunity to use interparliamentary cooperation in order to gain/maintain influence within the EP.	

V. CONCLUSION

Interparliamentary cooperation has attracted much attention lately. The Lisbon treaty, also known as the 'treaty of parliaments',⁶¹ evidenced a shift in the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs. The status of national parliaments changed, from losers to latecomers, as they started to be seen as a potential tool to remedy the EU's democratic deficit. In addition to that, the EP has started to use interparliamentary cooperation to strengthen its position and its legitimacy, especially since the start of the Eurozone crisis. The risk of a de-parliamentarisation due to the side-lining of parliaments in the management of the crisis has triggered a new appetite for interparliamentary cooperation and new forums emerged.

It remains to be seen how this shift is interpreted by the EP. With the Lisbon treaty, it seems that there are competing approaches within the EP as to the best strategy to include national parliaments in the EU's decision-making, and as a result, the patronage of the EP has become more complex. While the COSAC setting is increasingly challenged, the new forms of interparliamentary cooperation focus on more technical but also more political

⁶¹ See for instance: European Parliament, 'Report on Interparliamentary Relations between the European Parliament and national parliaments under the Treaty of Lisbon, 2009–2014', Annual Report 2013–14; A Herranz-Surrallés, 'The EU's Multilevel Parliamentary (Battle)Field: Inter-parliamentary Cooperation and Conflict in Foreign and Security Policy' (2014) 37 *West European Politics* 957.

issues, be it cooperation in foreign and security policy or in budgetary and economic issues. This increased technicality and politicisation of the interparliamentary meetings have opened a window of opportunity for an enhanced involvement of EP political groups. Although often neglected by the literature, intra-party links are one of the most frequent forms of interparliamentary cooperation. As we have shown in this chapter, MEPs are regularly in contact with members of national parliaments as well as members of their national political parties. And the main EP groups seek to enhance their influence by promoting multilevel cooperation within their respective political families. As such, group politics has developed as an informal means of interparliamentary cooperation without bypassing the institutional aspects of the EP's patronage, and represents an alternative model to the engine of interparliamentary cooperation.

The main hypothesis is confirmed, what can be considered as momentum in interparliamentary cooperation is an opportunity for political groups to adopt more proactive behaviour. Their differentiated approach may not be summed-up as a matter of mere preferences but lays in their different access to resources and how their involvement may be maximised. However, EP political groups have differentiated approaches and strategies towards interparliamentary cooperation. As it has been shown here, three main variables help in explaining this difference. First, EP groups face constraints in terms of size and resources. Larger groups have more resources to engage in interparliamentary cooperation and are therefore more involved. Secondly, the interest and experience of an EP group in such cooperation is crucial: involvement in interparliamentary cooperation requires the political will to do so, which explains the diverging strategy of the S&D in comparison to the EPP. Finally, the context also plays a role. As mentioned, the evolution of interparliamentary cooperation towards more pragmatism and increased technicality was decisive in encouraging the S&D to increase intra-party links.

One last aspect can be underlined with the S&D case: interparliamentary cooperation is more and more attractive for the EP's political groups because the practice is much more important in the EP itself. The importance of political groups in this type of cooperation depends on their ability to tag onto the general functioning of the institution. Despite the fact that interparliamentary cooperation is still considered to be a matter of interinstitutional relations, this chapter has shown that large groups increasingly claim ownership of this process. In doing so, it suggests that studies should continue opening the Pandora's box that is the European Parliament and its relations with national parliaments. And a promising avenue for future research is to adopt a partisan approach to investigating interparliamentary cooperation.