

# Is there an alternative to consensus? The impact of the 2014 coalition deal on voting behaviour in the eighth European Parliament (2014-2019)

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## **Abstract**

Consensus is a key feature of the European Union. In the European Parliament, most of reports are adopted by a grand coalition between the left and the right. While this trans-partisan cooperation has always been informal, the EPP and S&D groups formed a formal political coalition in 2014. For the first time in the EP's history, this grand coalition was based on a policy programme agreed by the two groups' leadership. Based on roll-call vote data, this paper aims to understand the impact of this agreement on actual coalition-building in the EP plenary. We find that the agreement provided a framework incentivising legislative actors to increase cooperation on issues on which they usually cooperate the least. Against the sociological institutionalist model, which asserts that consensus in the EP has become a norm that constrains actors, our results suggest that interests to cooperate or to increase political conflict do matter.

## **Introduction**

Consensus and compromise-building is a key feature of the European Union (EU) policymaking process (Dehousse, 1995; Costa & Magnette, 2003). Consensual norms of inter-institutional negotiation, the politics of expertise and bargaining, as well as problem-solving approaches, have been gradually institutionalised within the EU machinery (Elgström &

Jönsson, 2000; Radaelli, 1999; Reh et al., 2013) and dominate the decision-making process within and between the EU institutions. The recent crises in the EU since the mid-2000s have further revealed the importance of inter-governmental settings, where national governments bargain with one another and where decisions are taken unanimously (Bickerton et al., 2015; Puetter, 2012), therefore putting aside overt forms of political conflict.

The consensual approach to policymaking at the EU level may conflict with the partisan and political nature of the European Parliament (EP), an electorally connected institution where individual members organise themselves along ideological lines and where party groups have been increasingly powerful over the last few decades (Brack & Costa, 2018). Political conflict in the EP, which is more visible than in other EU institutions (e.g. Novak, 2013; Mattila and Lane, 2001), may be captured by voting dynamics in plenary. The literature finds that voting is determined by ideology and not nationality, and that the major division is between the left and the right (Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). The left-right dimension of competition is more important to explain coalition-building than the anti-/pro-EU dimension (Attinà, 1990; Raunio, 1997; Hix et al., 2007), confirming the fact that political conflict in the EP is structured along the traditional left-right cleavage that structures most of the parliaments in established democracies.

Although the left-right cleavage is a strong determinant of coalition-building in the EP, trans-partisan consensus also plays a crucial role (Settembri & Neuhold, 2009; Burns, 2013; Tsebelis & Garrett, 2000). Norms and practices of consensus in the EP are present at very different levels: in the plenary, but also within committees, national delegations and party groups. Members of the EP (MEPs) have strong incentives to cooperate one with another to find large agreements, especially if they want to see their political career advance in the institution (Bendjaballah, 2016). As a result, most of the legislation is adopted by a coalition between the centre-right (Group of the European People's Party - EPP) and the centre-left (Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament - S&D) groups (Hix et al., 2007, p. 159; Novak et al., 2021). Between 2004 and 2014, around 70% of the plenary votes were adopted by a grand coalition between the EPP, the S&D, and the liberal ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group) groups (Hix & Høyland, 2013).

While coalition-building became more conflictual in the 1990s, leading to the expectation of a growing left-right bipolarisation of the EP political life (e.g. Hix, 2008), the trend reversed in the last legislative terms, with the gradual consolidation of the grand coalition between the left and the right. Indeed, trans-partisan consensus has persisted in the last decade

(Novak et al., 2021), despite the important crises that the EU faces (Brack & Gürkan, 2021; Schimmelfennig, 2018) and the growing politicisation of the EU issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Börzel & Risse, 2018).

Two models explain trans-partisan consensus in the EP plenary. First, the sociological institutionalist model posits the view that consensus is a norm constraining the behaviour of political actors (Novak et al., 2021; Kreppel & Hix, 2003). According to this model, because norms are not easily amended by political actors or by external events, consensus is entrenched in institutions and in social practices and is here to stay. Second, the rational-choice model assumes that political behaviour is shaped by actors' interests. Trans-partisan consensus results from actors' interest in cooperating and is likely to evolve if these interests change. This paper investigates whether coalition-building in the EP plenary is determined by an unchangeable norm of consensus or whether it is affected by external events and by legislative actors' changing interests. Drawing on an original roll-call votes (RCVs) dataset, we study the voting behaviour of EP party groups during the eighth legislative term (2014-2019). This period gives us the unique opportunity to assess the way coalition-building in plenary was affected by actors' changing interests. The first half of the term is characterised by the presence of a political coalition agreement between the EPP and S&D groups, something quite unusual in the EP. We assume this agreement provided a new incentive for the two groups to cooperate when voting in plenary. This coalition agreement ended in January 2017 when the Socialists voted against the EPP candidate for the EP presidency during the mid-term elections.

Analysing whether coalition-building is affected by a coalition agreement or whether it is disconnected from political events bears normative implications. This question taps into the broader issues of political representation and democratic accountability. First, if policy decisions continued to be adopted after the end of the agreement by an oversized majority comprising the former coalition members (EPP and S&D), that would create a gap between the willingness of legislative actors to put an end to a formal coalition configuration and their actual behaviour. This gap between attitudes and behaviour may lower the level of trust citizens have in their elected representatives. Second, the enduring consensus would also limit the politicisation of EU issues, an element which contributes to media coverage and, ultimately, to a better articulation of citizens' demands into policy outcomes (e.g. Morales et al., 2015). Finally, grand coalitions between the right and the left and its subsequent suppression of overt political conflict may reduce the possibility for voters to make their representatives accountable

(Plescia et al., 2021) and may decrease the incentive for political parties to provide a clear and distinct policy platform (Mair, 2007).

In this paper, we consider the EPP-S&D voting cooperation as a proxy for coalition-building in the EP plenary and whether it is ideologically consensual (grand coalition configuration) or conflictual. The EPP and S&D groups have distinct ideological positions on the traditional left-right dimension. Therefore, the structure of competition is consensual and trans-partisan when these two groups vote together and conflictual when they oppose each other in the plenary. We do not include the liberal ALDE group in our analysis, even though it was included – albeit later – in the grand coalition formed in 2014. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, when the EPP and S&D groups vote together, the liberal group is also on board.<sup>1</sup> Also, the ALDE group is a pivotal group and a necessary partner for either the EPP or the S&D when these two groups oppose each other. In short, only the EPP-S&D cooperation is needed for analysing the general structure of competition in plenary (consensual or conflictual), and whether it was affected by the 2014 coalition agreement.

The first section of this paper will discuss the importance of the EPP-S&D cooperation in the EP and will draw hypotheses regarding the way the 2014 coalition agreement has affected actual coalition-building in plenary. The second section will present the data and the third one will proceed with the analysis.

## **The importance of trans-partisan consensus in the European Parliament**

### ***The long-standing cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists***

Since the 1960s, with the creation of an independent group by the Gaullist MEPs (RDE), the competition in the EP has been structured by the ideological left-right cleavage. Although they are not on the same ideological side, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats have always showed a certain capacity to cooperate, especially when voting in plenary. The literature provides five lines of explanation for this. First, the two groups converge on the main aspects of European integration, such as the scope of the integration project, its necessary institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> In our roll-call votes dataset, when the EPP and S&D voted together in plenary during the eighth term, the liberal ALDE group joined the EPP-S&D coalition in 92.9% of cases.

and some key policies (Hix et al., 2007). Second, they have a common interest in controlling the EP and, therefore, impose to other party groups “pre-cooked” decisions (Westlake, 1994; Brack & Costa, 2018). Third, the EPP-S&D cooperation is explained by institutional constraints and the need for the EP to find large majorities because of treaty requirements (an absolute majority of members is required to adopt amendments to the budget or legislative amendments in second reading or to ‘elect’ the President of the Commission) (Corbett et al., 2007). Four, some consider that parliamentary actors have an interest in finding large majorities to have a stronger stance in interinstitutional negotiations (Corbett, 1998; Hix & Lord, 1997; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). Finally, recent research insists on the impact of the rise of Eurosceptics, which incentivises pro-European groups to cooperate more if they want to limit the legislative influence of anti-EU MEPs (Brack, 2013).

Until 2014, there was no formal political agreement between the Christian democratic and the socialist groups in the EP. The two groups used to informally work together in order to minimise the influence of other party groups on “the internal workings of the Parliament” (Hix et al., 2003, p. 320). More precisely,

representatives of the two Groups meet with each other to strike deals over political or patronage issues without smaller Groups to left or right always being consulted. These latter may then be forced to conform on a take-it or leave-it basis (Corbett et al., 2007, pp. 109-110).

Thus, since the mid-1980s, the two groups have ensured a ‘co-management’ of the EP by coordinating their positions regarding the overall organisation of the assembly (committee structure, agenda, interinstitutional strategy, administrative reform, internal rules...) and imposed their decisions to other groups.

This cooperation has been formalised in a formal technical and non-political agreement at the occasion of the election of the EP President. The first technical agreement was negotiated after the 1989 European elections in order to avoid the situation experienced in 1982 and 1987, where the lack of coordination led to the success of candidates who did not make the best score in the first round. Thus, the Christian democrats and the Socialists decided to share the EP presidency by organising it through time: they agreed to support a single candidate at the beginning of the term and another one at mid-term. This agreement included other arrangements regarding the overall functioning of the EP, and especially the appointment of vice-presidents and committee chairs. However, it only aimed at ensuring a smooth coordination of the EP organisation and activities by the two groups and did not include policy objectives. In that

respect, it differed from the constraining political coalition agreements that are common in many countries (e.g. Moury, 2013).

These technical agreements between the centre-left and the centre-right has always been criticised by smaller groups, but also within the Christian democratic and the socialist groups. Indeed, some MEPs from these two groups were more favourable to a polarised approach of politics, often in line with national habits. Hence, from 1999 to 2004, the deal was not renewed but replaced by a centre-right technical agreement involving only the EPP and the liberal ELDR groups.

### ***The formal political coalition during the eighth legislative term***

In 2014, for the first time in the EP's history, a formal political coalition has emerged between the EPP and S&D groups. Soon after the 2014 European elections, the two leaders of the right and the left, Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) and Martin Schulz (S&D), agreed on a coalition that would back Juncker for the presidency of the European Commission and that would be "based on a programme agreed by both sides" (Penalver Garcia and Priestly, 2015, p. 153). The negotiation between the EPP and S&D groups in 2014 was very political and not only technical. Although the deal did not include a formal written agreement, the two groups discussed and agreed on policy provisions for the Juncker's mandate. Analysing the programme presented in July 2014 by Jean-Claude Juncker, Penalver Garcia and Priestley explains that

the priorities highlighted by Juncker make more than just some passing genuflections towards socialists, liberals and greens in the Parliament. Taken together, they amount to a social democratic tract which could so easily have formed the core of a specific programme for a Schulz presidency (Penalver Garcia & Priestley, 2015, p. 168).

The liberal ALDE group later joined the coalition. This grand coalition agreement may be explained several factors.

The first factor is the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and relates to the defence of the EP's institutional interests. While the five main groups (S&D, EPP, ALDE, GUE and Greens) agreed to organise the European elections around a competition between their respective candidate for the presidency of the European Commission (the *Spitzenkandidaten* process), their initiative received some scepticism in the European Council, as most of the heads of state and government wanted to maintain the right to propose their own candidate (Christiansen, 2016; Penalver

Garcia & Priestly, 2015). Immediately after the election, the EPP, S&D and ALDE groups agreed to claim the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker (candidate of the EPP party) at the presidency of the Commission. This high level of internal cohesion within the parliament allowed the institution to defend its interests and the whole *Spitzenkandidaten* process vis-à-vis the European Council.

The second factor relates to the office and policy objectives of the EPP and S&D groups. First, the policy influence of the two groups has decreased over the past decades with the fall of their numerical weight. Their share of the seats has progressively declined since the 1990s, moving from 66% in 1999 to less than 55% in 2014. For their part, Eurosceptic groups saw their seat share gradually increase, especially after the 2014 elections (Brack & Startin, 2015). The rise in the number of Eurosceptic MEPs, as well as their growing willingness to dedicate more time to legislative activities (Behm & Brack, 2019), may have incentivised pro-EU groups to coalesce more in order to limit the legislative influence of Eurosceptic forces and to secure policy objectives. Second, assuming that parties are office-seekers, the block was also the result of the inter-institutional equilibrium induced by the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. In 2014, European leaders tried to find a balance between the EPP, PES and ALDE political parties regarding the distribution of main EU institutions' top jobs (Commission, European Council, European Central Bank, High Representative, and the EP). Historically, the EP has always refused to take into account external elements for the choice of its own president but, in 2014, the leaders of the three centrist groups agreed that an overall political balance was needed. Hence, with an EPP member as the President of the Commission, the outgoing President of the EP and the *Spitzenkandidat* of the socialist party, Martin Schulz, was re-elected at the presidency of the parliament – the first time in the institution's history.

Third, the grand coalition agreement in 2014 may be explained by the close personal relations between the main party leaders. Indeed, the excellent relationship between Jean-Claude Juncker and Martin Schulz (Penalver Garcia & Priestley, 2015, p. 165), as well as with the liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt, may have helped ease the negotiations in view of the formalisation of the grand coalition. The ideological position of Jean-Claude Juncker (social Christian centrist), who distanced himself from the EPP's manifesto on some economic and migration issues, may have also appealed to the Socialists and contributed to the S&D group accepting to cooperate and to form a grand coalition (Penalver Garcia & Priestley, 2015, p. 169).

Finally, the 2014 agreement may result from institutional routines. Although the two groups never had a formal political agreement before 2014, the EPP-S&D cooperation is not something new. On a policy level, the two groups have been used to cooperate in adopting legislative reports (Hix et al., 2003). For instance, in our dataset of roll-call votes in the EP plenary, 93% of the legislative reports during the 7<sup>th</sup> term (2009-2014) were adopted by a coalition between the EPP and the S&D. In 2014, the two groups may have preferred a grand coalition arrangement that has already been informally tested rather than to form an alternative coalition which was not present in the near institutional memory (Lees, 2010). Moreover, the long tradition of cooperation between the two groups may explain the absence, in 2014, of a public written agreement listing the different policy promises of the coalition.

The political grand coalition ended during the mid-term shake-up of top jobs, in January 2017. In detail, the breakdown of the deal resulted from the Socialists' decision to present their own candidate for the EP presidency, while it was agreed that the EPP would get it during the second half of the term<sup>2</sup>. The EPP candidate, Antonio Tajani, was elected against the socialist candidate, Gianni Pittella (291 against 199 votes). The end of the block also coincides with the decision of Martin Schulz (S&D), the former EP President, to leave the EP to go back to German politics. With a very contested election (Antonio Tajani was elected after third rounds of voting), media and commentators predicted a new era of decision-making, more political and polarised between the left and the right. Indeed, Tajani was elected thanks to an agreement reached between the EPP and the ALDE groups<sup>3</sup>, a right-wing configuration that already existed between 1999 and 2004. These changes raised concerns about the capacity of the Juncker Commission to build majorities in the EP for adopting its legislative proposals, since they had been previously agreed by the members of the grand coalition and were inserted in the 2014 Work Programme.

### ***The impact of a political agreement on coalition-building in the EP***

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<sup>2</sup> The wording of the written deal, revealed in the press, is the following : "They agree that the S&D Group will appoint the President of the European Parliament in the first half of the legislative period and the EPP Group in the second half".

<sup>3</sup> "Tajani election breaks European Parliament's "grand coalition"", *Financial Times*, 18 January 2017, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/ed2d5750-dd90-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6>.



The eighth legislative term (2014-2019) gives a unique opportunity to assess whether coalition-building in the EP plenary is stable or whether it may be affected by a specific political event, that is the formation of a political coalition agreement.

The impact of the political agreement is nothing but evident. Previous research considered coalition-building in the EP to depend on stable norms and practices of consensus (Novak et al., 2021). Following this literature, one may expect these norms to affect coalition-building in the EP regardless of the presence of a formal agreement. The absence of a relationship between actual coalition-building and the presence of a coalition agreement is supported by a sociological institutionalist approach. It assumes that actors are not independent from their social context (Johnston, 2001) but are constrained by institutional rules and social norms. According to this approach, the norm of consensus in the EP has been interiorised by actors through a mechanism of socialisation. Previous research document this process for MEPs, as well as for officials from the Council of ministers (Bendjaballah, 2016; Reh et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2021; Mühlböck & Rittberger, 2015; Lewis, 2005). This norm of consensus is sticky: it is deeply rooted and cannot be changed easily by political actors themselves (Novak et al., 2021). In sum, the sociological institutionalist approach posits that the actors' behaviour is not likely to be affected by short-term events, like the formation of a coalition agreement, but is bound by exogenous forces that are not easily changed and that are, therefore, stable through time. Thus, we do not expect the 2014 coalition agreement to have affected actual coalition-building in the EP plenary and, more specifically, the voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups.

*Hypothesis 1: The voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups was not affected by the 2014 coalition agreement.*

Besides sociological institutionalism, coalition-building in the EP plenary may be explained by a rational choice perspective. Legislative actors, although socialised into the norm of consensus, are also rational actors that may have an interest in trans-partisan cooperation or in increasing political conflict. According to that approach, coalition-building is not only the result of MEPs' socialisation into specific norms, but is driven by a cost-benefit calculation. In that regard, the 2014 coalition agreement is expected to have provided incentives for the EPP and S&D groups to increase their cooperation in all contexts. The two groups had to provide the new Juncker Commission a stable legislative environment for implementing the policy programme that was agreed in 2014. Moreover, it was in the two groups' interest to make the deal work, as they were likely to be judged by its success and failures and because they shared

responsibility. Even though the situation changed after the deal broke down in 2017, it does not mean that the two groups no longer had an interest in trans-partisan cooperation. The EPP and S&D groups should continue voting together when they have an interest in doing so. On the whole, drawing on rational choice, we expect the coalition agreement to have increased cooperation only on issues where the EPP and S&D groups usually have a low interest in cooperating. For develop several hypotheses for testing this rational choice model.

First, we do not expect the agreement to have affected coalition-building on legislative files. The EPP and S&D groups are policy-seeking actors who “co-manage” the policy-making process: they get most of the rapporteurship on important dossiers, build on policy expertise and spend time and resource to negotiate in informal trilogue meetings with Council’s representatives. They benefit from decision-making efficiency and, therefore, cooperate more often on legislative files (Høyland, 2010; Hix et al., 2003; Kreppel, 2000). Moreover, trans-partisan cooperation is crucial for reaching the absolute majority threshold required to reject or to amend the Council’s position at second reading (Hagemann and Høyland, 2010; Corbett et al., 1995). Finally, the two groups are also likely to have continued cooperating on legislative files in the months that preceded the EU elections, since parliamentarians tend to defect more from the party line in that period (Lindstädt et al., 2011; Koop et al., 2017). Finally, since the EU is a bicameral system (Costello, 2011), trans-partisan cooperation is also a way for the EPP and S&D groups to increase the whole legislative influence of the EP vis-à-vis the Council (Hix et al., 2003; Burns, 2013), something we may refer to as “institutional patriotism” (Novak et al., 2021; Reh et al., 2003). Both groups have an interest in cooperating if they want to show a united front in inter-institutional trilogue meetings (Reh et al., 2013). When reaching early agreements with the Council, MEPs from both groups should back these deals in plenary if they want to signal their credibility and to align with their national parties represented in the Council (Bressanelli et al., 2015). In sum, regardless of whether there is a political agreement, the EPP and S&D groups should cooperate in the EP plenary in order to secure policy gains and to avoid giving Eurosceptic MEPs too much influence (Mühlböck & Rittberger, 2015; Reh et al., 2013).

*Hypothesis 2: The voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups on legislative files was not affected by the 2014 coalition agreement.*

Second, contrary to legislative files, we expect the coalition agreement to have increased consensus on non-legislative files. On these files, MEPs do not need to show a united front in inter-institutional negotiations and are never required to reach an absolute majority threshold. Also, the EPP and S&D groups may have an interest in increasing political conflict on non-

legislative files. Because their credibility is not at risk if one of these files fails to be adopted, they use them to signal their policy preferences to their voters. This is even more likely as the EU elections get closer (Lindstädt et al., 2011; Koop et al., 2017). Therefore, while MEPs and party groups are expected to have been incentivised to increase cooperation on non-legislative files when the coalition agreement was in place, they had no interest in keeping voting together after it fell apart in 2017.

However, this general should depend on the inter-institutional implication of the non-legislative report. The EPP and S&D groups have a lower interest in cooperating when this implication is low. On the one hand, motions for resolution (RSP) are non-binding declarations, often on high-profile issues that are beyond the legislative competences of the EU. Because MEPs use them for publicity, especially vis-à-vis their constituents (Brack & Costa, 2018), the interest to cooperate is rather low. On the other hand, own-initiative reports (INI) and legislative initiative reports (INL) are used by the EP to exercise its indirect right to initiate legislation (art. 225 TFUE) (Maurer and Wolf, 2020). Although non-binding, these files formally request the European Commission to respond to the EP and allow parliamentarians to shape the policy agenda (Kreppel & Webb, 2019). The EPP and S&D groups have more interest in cooperating on these files, especially if they want to influence the Commission's legislative agenda. Therefore, while we expect the coalition agreement to have increased trans-partisan cooperation on motions for resolutions (RSP), we do not expect any effect on initiative files (INI and INL).

*Hypothesis 3: The voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups on motions for resolution (RSP) was affected by the 2014 coalition agreement, while their cooperation on initiative reports was not affected by the agreement.*

Third, we do not expect the coalition agreement to have affected coalition-building on votes relating to internal matters. Indeed, the level of EPP-S&D cooperation has usually been very high on issues regarding the management of the internal affairs of the EP (Kreppel & Hix, 2003). This collusion is considered as a way for both groups to prevent the smaller groups from securing influence in the internal workings of the parliament (Corbett et al., 2000; Westlake, 1994). The history of technical agreements in the EP perfectly illustrates this point. Therefore, the EPP and S&D groups should have an interest in managing the parliament regardless of the presence of a political agreement.

*Hypothesis 4: The voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups on internal matters was not affected by the 2014 coalition agreement.*

Finally, we expect the effect of the coalition agreement on coalition-building to vary from one policy issue to another. Specifically, the agreement is expected to have increased consensus only on policy issues on which the EPP and S&D groups usually have diverging views. Previous studies on the cooperation between the two groups have emphasised the role played by ideology (Hix et al., 2006, chapter 8; Guinaudeau & Costa, 2021). Because political actors have policy-oriented objectives, coalitions often form between groups that are ideologically close (De Swan, 1973). For the EPP and the S&D, their policy proximity is greater on issues related to the EU integration and international affairs than on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. Specifically, while the two groups are in favour of European integration and agree on the EU's international role, they hold diverging views regarding the economic, social, and environmental regulation of the single market and, therefore, are more likely to compete in plenary on these issues. For instance, contrary to socio-economic and socio-cultural files, which may include redistributive provisions and produce winners and losers, international affairs' reports (instruments for pre-accession assistance, international trade, development aid) deal with the overall action of the EU vis-à-vis non-EU countries and are more likely to be supported by a large and trans-partisan coalition in the EP. Drawing on this ideology-based account of coalition-building, we expect the agreement to have increased cooperation on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. By contrast, the two groups should cooperate on issues related to the EU integration and to international affairs regardless of the presence of a political agreement.

*Hypothesis 5: The voting cooperation between the EPP and S&D groups on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues was affected by the 2014 coalition agreement. Cooperation on issues related to the EU integration and on international affairs issues was not affected by the agreement.*

## **Data and methods**

This paper investigates whether coalition-building in the EP plenary is stable or whether it has been affected by the formation, in 2014, of a formal political coalition. We test our hypotheses quantitatively on an original dataset containing all the plenary roll-call votes (RCVs) from the eighth legislative term (2014-2019). Our findings will be validated against data from the sixth (2004-2009) and the seventh (2009-2014) terms. The data was extracted

from the EP's Public Register of Documents and additional contextual information (procedure, type of vote, committee) come from the Legislative Observatory website.

The use of RCVs data is very common in legislative studies. It has been used to measure MPs' ideological positions (e.g. MacRae, 1958), the issue congruence between legislators and their districts (e.g. Miller & Stokes, 1963), the internal cohesion of party groups, and inter-group cooperation (e.g. Depauw, 2003). Originally used in US Congress studies, RCVs studies have dominated the literature on the EP since the nineties (e.g. Attinà, 1990; Hix et al., 2005; Høyland, 2010; Raunio, 1997; Otjes & van der Veer, 2016; Bowler & McElroy, 2015) and have produced two main findings: the EP party groups display high levels of internal cohesion in plenary and the main cleavage structuring competition is the left-right dimension (Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999; Hix et al., 2007, p. 94).

Yet the use of RCVs is not without its critiques. One of the main drawbacks is the selection bias (Carruba et al., 2006; Thierse, 2016; Clinton, 2012; Hug, 2009). In most of the legislatures, not all votes are publicly recorded; in the EP, only final votes are systematically recorded – and this has not always been the case. For non-final votes, parliamentary groups often request a roll call in order to either discipline their own members or to make public their own position or the position of another group (Thiem, 2006). RCVs samples are, therefore, not fully representative of the whole population of plenary votes. Although RCVs samples have recently become more representative, because of both changes in the EP's Rules of Procedure and the extension of the EP's legislative powers (Kaniok & Mocek, 2017), the conclusions reached on the basis of RCVs cannot be generalised to the whole population of plenary votes.

Moreover, those conclusions cannot be generalised to other forms of legislative behaviour or interaction between party groups. Although roll call data provides us with an interesting picture of coalition-building in plenary, it says nothing about cooperation occurring during the pre-plenary steps of the policymaking process (co-sponsorship of amendments or resolutions, informal forms of exchange of information, cooperation between the committees' coordinators for the distribution of reports, agreements between group leaders on the EP's agenda and the overall inter-institutional strategy). Also, this voting data does not shed light on voting behaviour in EP committees (Hurka, 2013). One could expect, for instance, that the 2014 agreement did not affect coalition-building in committees since a smooth cooperation between the main groups has been these past years necessary to ensure the efficiency of the efficient legislative work (Neuhold, 2001; Settembri & Neuhold, 2009).

In this paper, we study the EPP-S&D cooperation as a proxy for coalition-building in the EP plenary. We measure this cooperation on each vote. Our dependent variable is the *EPP-S&D AGREEMENT INDEX*, which captures whether the two groups cooperated on a given roll-call vote (Hix et al., 2003). The variable is dichotomous: it takes the value ‘1’ if the plurality (relative majority) of MEPs from the two groups voted in the same way, ‘0’ otherwise. The groups’ majoritarian position can either be ‘in favour’, ‘against’, or ‘abstention’.<sup>4</sup> We decided not to merge ‘abstention’ and ‘against’ since abstention can be considered as a genius choice for MEPs (Mühlböck & Yordanova, 2017; Font, 2018). On average, the EPP and S&D groups voted together in 72.4% of the time during the eighth term, 73.2% during the seventh term, and 69.3% during the sixth term.

This paper studies the impact of the 2014 political agreement on coalition-building in plenary. Our main independent variable is the presence or absence of the *Coalition deal* during the eighth legislative term. The deal was in place from the beginning of the term (July 2014) until the month before the mid-term elections (January 2017). It was not in place during the remaining period. With this variable, we can compare the frequency of the EPP-S&D cooperation during two distinct periods, an approach similar to the one used by Kreppel and Hix (2003). We expect the effect of the coalition agreement to be conditional on contextual variables. Specifically, the 2014 agreement is expected to have increased the EPP-S&D cooperation on votes where the two groups usually have a lower interest in voting together. We use different independent variables for testing our hypotheses. First, a vote is *Legislative* if the report is a binding report adopted through the following procedures: the ordinary legislative procedure, the budgetary and discharge procedures, the delegated and implementing acts procedures, and the consultation and consent procedures. Second, *Non-legislative* votes are the ones on motions for resolution and own-initiative reports. Votes on *Internal matters* concern orders of business adopted in plenary, the amendments to the EP’s Rules of Procedure, as well as the internal organisation decisions. Finally, the *Policy issue* of a vote is determined by the committee responsible for drafting the report. This operationalisation is like the one adopted by Hix (2009) and Kreppel and Tsebelis (1999, p. 958). Reports can either be on ‘EU-integration issues’, on ‘International affairs issues’, on ‘Socio-economic issues’, and on ‘Socio-cultural issues’ (see Appendix I).

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<sup>4</sup> The value is “in favour” if the number of MEPs from group X voting in favour is higher than the number of MEPs from group X abstaining and voting against. The same logic applies to the values “against” and “abstention”.

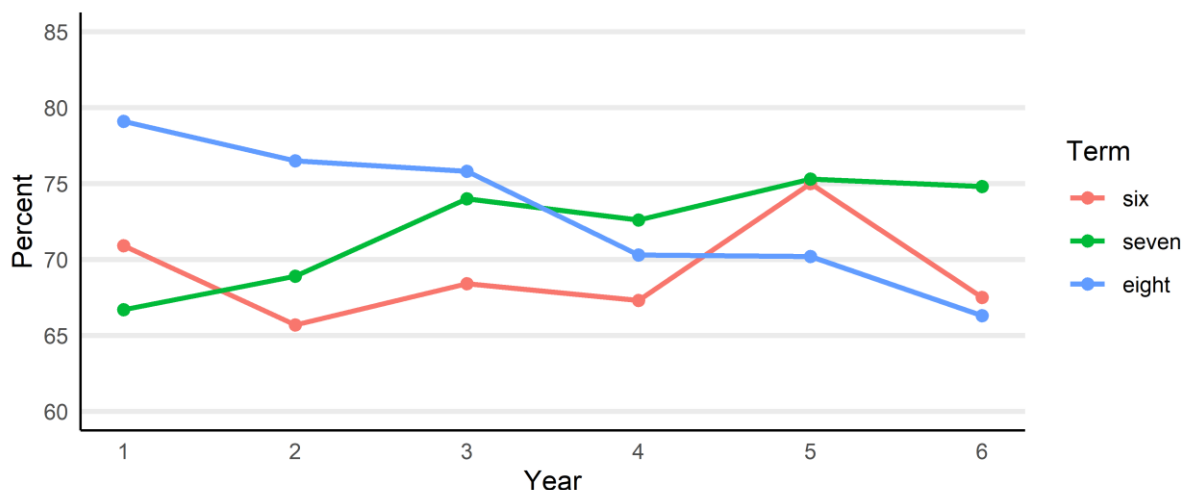
The analysis in this paper is descriptive: we analyse whether coalition-building is different when the 2014 agreement was in place compared to when it was not. For these analyses, we separately study final and non-final votes. Previous research found that coalition patterns on final votes differ from those on non-final votes (Hix et al., 2003; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). The EPP and S&D groups are more likely to cooperate on final votes because of their inter-institutional implications. Final votes are those on the whole report, while non-final votes concern amendments, recitals, and paragraphs.

The results for the first hypothesis will be confirmed by regression analyses. These logistic models take the dummy *EPP-S&D AGREEMENT INDEX* as its outcome variable and the *Coalition deal* as its explanatory variable. Control variables include the procedure (*Legislative*), the type of the vote (*Final*), as well as the *Policy issue*.

## Results

Our paper studies how coalition-building in the EP plenary was affected by a formal political coalition agreement. Drawing on sociological institutionalism, we first expect that the political agreement between the left and the right did not affect the overall level of trans-partisan consensus in the EP plenary (H1). Specifically, the EPP and S&D groups should vote together in plenary regardless of the presence of a political agreement. This hypothesis is rejected by the data. Overall, the two groups cooperated on 76.5% of the roll-call votes before January 2017 against 70.3% after. This result is confirmed by the yearly evolution of the level of EPP-S&D cooperation. Figure 1 shows the cooperation rate between both groups for each year of the eighth term (blue line), as well as for each year of the sixth and seventh terms. The trend depicted in the graph confirms that the 2014 coalition agreement had an impact on actual coalition-building in plenary. The EPP-S&D cooperation gradually fell throughout the eighth term – from 79.1% in 2014 to 66.6% in 2019 – and, more specifically, after the fourth year, which marked the end of the agreement. To validate this finding, we compare this trend with those from the sixth and the seventh terms. We find that the decline in the level of EPP-S&D cooperation throughout the eighth term is not a systematic trend present in all legislatures.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]



Sources: Authors' data

To corroborate these findings, we run two logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of the EPP and S&D groups voting the same way on a specific vote. These models test for the direct effect of the presence of the agreement on the cooperation between both groups. They control for the procedure (legislative file or not) and for the type of the vote (final vote or not), two variables that are expected to affect the cooperation between the two groups (Kreppel & Hix, 2003; Hix et al., 2003; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999). One of these models also controls for the policy issue. The results are presented in Appendix 2. Our first hypothesis is further rejected: after controlling for the procedure, for the type of the vote and for the policy issue, we find that the EPP and S&D groups cooperated significantly more when the coalition agreement was in place. All these findings tend to reject the sociological institutionalism model: although political actors might be constrained by the norm of consensus, we find that they are free to change their behaviour depending on specific external events, such as the formation and the end of the formal political coalition agreement in 2014.

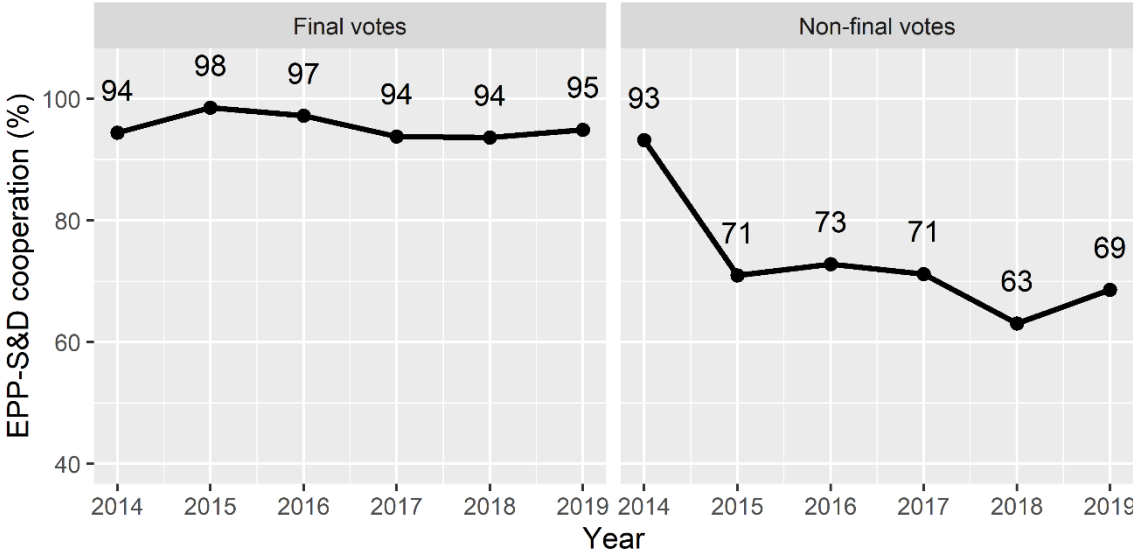
In what follows, we test the rational-choice framework. Overall, we expect the coalition agreement to increase cooperation on issues where the EPP and S&D groups usually have a low interest in voting together (on non-legislative files and when they have diverging issues). On the contrary, the EPP-S&D cooperation should remain stable no matter what when both groups have a strong interest in voting together (on legislative files, internal matters, and when they are ideologically close).

First, we expect the EPP-S&D cooperation on legislative files to be unaffected by the political agreement (H2). However, contrary to our expectation, some evidence suggests that



the coalition agreement slightly increased cooperation between the two groups on legislative files. Overall, the EPP and the S&D voted together on 83.4% of the legislative files when the deal was in place against 72.5% after it broke down in 2017. We further disaggregate the data by year and by type of vote (final or not). The left-hand panel of Figure 2 shows the yearly average cooperation rate on final votes during the eighth term, and the right-hand panel shows the average cooperation rate on non-final votes. The data presented in Figure 2 shows that the EPP-S&D cooperation in plenary was slightly higher when the coalition deal was in place. Although the two groups always have a strong interest in cooperating on final legislative reports regardless of a coalition agreement, we find that the agreement affected coalition-building. It may have represented an extra incentive for party groups to vote together in plenary. These results are mixed. Although the EPP-S&D cooperation fell after the agreement broke down, they continued to have a close cooperation on legislative reports. From 2017 to 2019, around 95% of final legislative reports were still adopted by a grand coalition between the left and the right.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

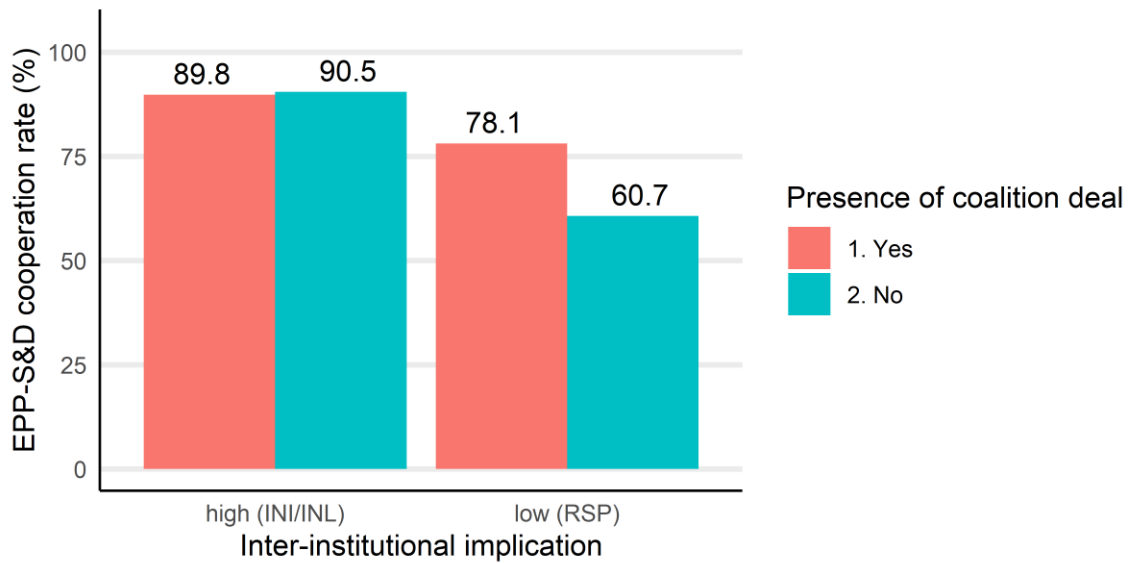


Sources: Authors' data

Second, we expect the effect of the 2014 agreement on non-legislative files to depend on the report's inter-institutional implications. On the one hand, the EPP and S&D groups should cooperate no matter what on non-legislative files with high inter-institutional implications because they have an interest in showing a united front vis-à-vis the other EU institutions. On the other, because the stakes are lower for non-legislative files without inter-institutional implications, the coalition agreement is expected to have increased cooperation on these files. Figure 3 shows the average cooperation rate for votes on final non-legislative reports with higher inter-institutional implications and for votes with lower inter-institutional implications.

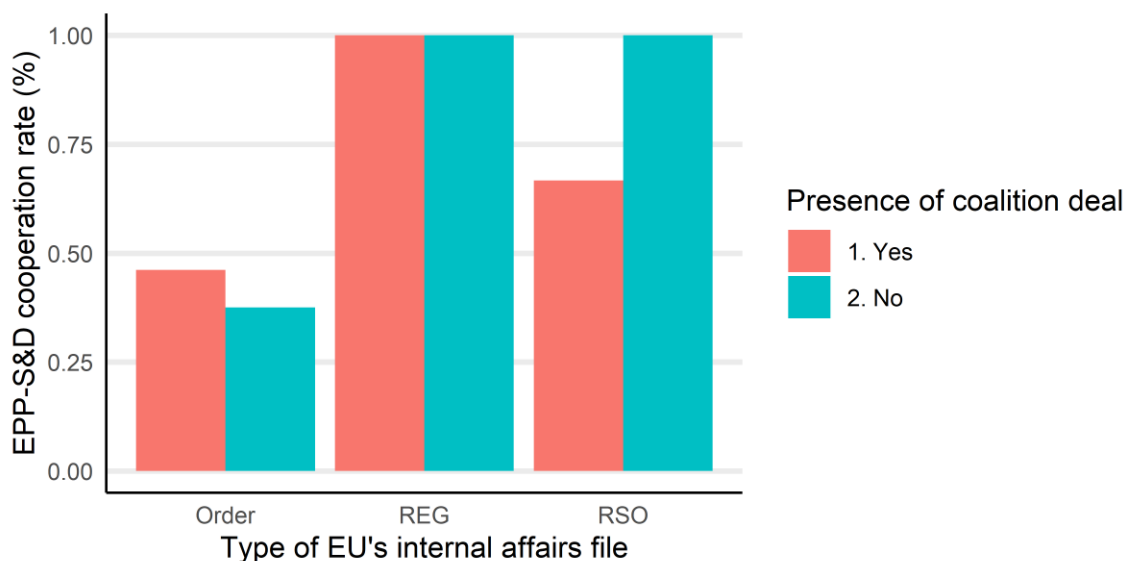
Our hypothesis is supported by the data. On the one hand, the coalition agreement did not affect the EPP-S&D cooperation on non-legislative reports with higher inter-institutional implications. The proportion of these reports adopted by the grand coalition stayed identical after the end of the agreement. This illustrates the importance for the two groups to reach broad majorities to increase the EP's initiative power independently of the political agreement signed in 2014. On the other, the end of the agreement had a sizeable effect on the adoption of non-legislative reports with low inter-institutional implications. The EPP-S&D cooperation on these files decreased from 78% to 61%. Because motions for resolution are used by groups to communicate to their voters a specific position, both groups have an interest in increasing political conflict, especially when there is not a political agreement. Therefore, our data suggests that the agreement provided incentives for the two groups to cooperate more on non-legislative reports with lower inter-institutional implications.

[INSERT FIGURE 3].



Third, we do not expect the coalition agreement to influence coalition-building on votes regarding the EP’s internal affairs (H5). The EPP and S&D groups have always co-managed the EP’s internal business. Because they have a strong interest in voting together on reports dealing with the EP’s internal organisation regardless of the presence of a coalition deal, they should not have stopped cooperating on these votes after the end of the coalition agreement in 2017. Figure 4 shows the average EPP-S&D cooperation rate on different types of votes dealing with the EP’s internal affairs: orders of business, amendments to the EP’s Rules of Procedure (REG), and internal organisation decisions (RSO).

[INSERT FIGURE 4]



We do not find a general pattern for internal matters votes. First, the 2014 agreement increased cooperation on ‘order of business’ items. These items are put forward at the beginning of each session by legislative actors to add to the agenda points of debate regarding non-legislative dossiers, for instance cases of breaches of human rights or rule of law issues. The interest for the two groups to cooperate is low: these topics are beyond the competences of the EU and are, therefore, used to signal a position to voters. In line with the rational choice model, we find that the political coalition agreement increased the EPP-S&D cooperation on these votes. Specifically, while the EPP and S&D groups were bound by the agreement between 2014 and 2017, they no longer had an interest in voting together on these files after the agreement fell apart.

Second, as expected, votes on amendments to the rules of procedure (REG) were not affected by the coalition agreement. In all cases, they were all adopted by a grand coalition between the left and the right. These files are examined by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) and are adopted in the EP plenary with an absolute majority (art. 232 TFEU). The EP’s Rules of Procedure structure the actual organisation of the parliament and define the rules of the game for the different legislative actors. The many reforms of the EP’s rules have been used to rationalise the deliberation of the assembly to increase its overall influence in the EU’s political system (Brack & Costa, 2018). The EPP and S&D groups have a strong interest in co-managing the internal organisation of the institution and, therefore, cooperate when it comes to amending the institution’s rules. This was already the case in the 1980s, thanks to the

“technical agreement” and, as showed by our data, does not depend on a formal political agreement between the left and the right.

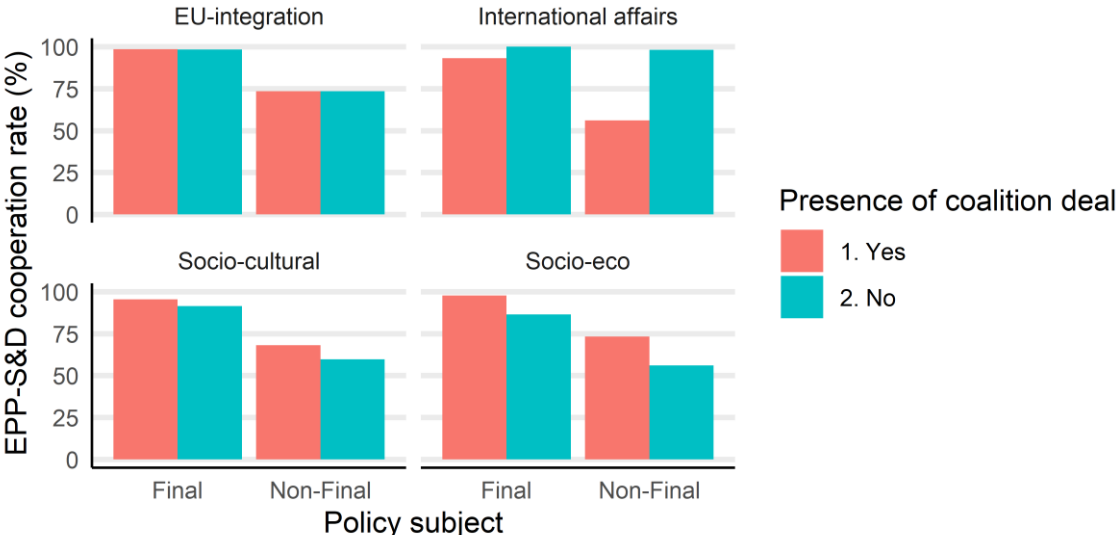
Third, regarding internal organisation decisions (RSO), we cannot reach conclusions about the trend depicted in Figure 4 as our dataset only contains four votes. International organisations decisions are about setting up special committees and agreeing on their power, numerical strength and term of office. The special committees created when the political agreement was in place deal with tax rulings (TAXE committee) and emission measurements in the automotive sector (EMIS committee). While the EPP and S&D groups were both in favour of creating the TAXE committee, they had diverging views on the EMIS committee (the EPP was against). After the end of the agreement in 2017, both groups voted for the creation of the special committee on terrorism (TERR). In sum, it does not seem that the coalition agreement impacted the behaviour of legislative actors for creating *ad hoc* institutional settings. Except for the EMIS committee, which clashes with the pro-business line of the Christian Democrats, both groups agreed that the EU should give priority to tackling the issues of tax rulings and terrorism.

In sum, the coalition deal did not increase coalition-building on votes on internal matters dealing with the internal organisation of the assembly. Regardless of the agreement, the two groups were constant in cooperating for amending the EP’s Rules of Procedures. However, on ‘order of business’ items, which deal with reports and questions with low inter-institutional implications, the 2014 agreement incentivised both groups to increase cooperation. Our data confirms that the trans-partisan cooperation on these files was less frequent after the agreement fell apart in 2017.

Finally, we expect the 2014 agreement to increase the EPP-S&D cooperation on policy issues on which they have distinct ideological positions: on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues (H6). By contrast, the agreement should not have affected coalition-building on votes regarding the EU integration and the international affairs. In these two domains, the EPP and the S&D usually have similar positions and a show strong interest in cooperating. This analysis focuses on reports adopted through the ordinary legislative procedure. The data presented in Figure 5 supports this expectation. The EPP and S&D groups adopted together 98% of legislative socio-economic reports when the deal was in place, against 86% after the agreement fell apart. We observe the same trend for votes on socio-cultural issues. On the contrary, the agreement did not affect coalition-building on votes related to the EU integration and cooperation on internal affairs did not increase with the presence of the agreement. On

international matters, cooperation was even higher during the period not covered by the agreement, from 2017 to 2019. This might be related to the content of specific files, but also to the pressure for actors to adopt international agreements towards the end of the legislative term. To sum up, as expected, the agreement reduced political conflict between the left and the right on policy issues on which the two groups usually have diverging views. However, when they have closer positions, the EPP and S&D groups keep cooperating regardless of the presence of the formal political agreement.

[INSERT FIGURE 5]



### Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to study the impact of a formal political coalition agreement on actual coalition-building in the EP plenary. In 2014, for the first time in the EP’s history, a political agreement was signed between the EPP and the S&D – along with the ALDE – because of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and as a strategy of pro-European forces to limit the legislative influence of Eurosceptic MEPs. The agreement fell apart in January 2017 in the context of the EP’s mid-term internal elections. These two events (the formation of the coalition and its end) provide us with the unique opportunity to better understand actual coalition-building in the EP.

More precisely, does a formal agreement affect the actual level of trans-partisan cooperation in the EP plenary? Or is coalition-building only determined by a long-standing norm of consensus, as the sociological institutionalist model puts it. We use a roll-call vote dataset to study coalition-building in plenary during the eighth legislative term (2014-2019).

Against the sociological institutionalist model, we find that consensus in the EP has evolved throughout the eighth legislative term. Social behaviour is not only determined by constraining norms and practices: political actors cooperate when there is an interest in doing so. While the two groups had an interest in cooperating when the agreement was in place, in order to adopt the proposals that were agreed by coalition members in 2014, this interest was lower after the end of the agreement. This explains the drop in cooperation during the second half of the term. We further argue that the political agreement constituted a framework that eased the day-to-day cooperation on issues where the EPP and S&D groups usually cooperate the least. Indeed, when the two groups are used to cooperate, because of shared interests or policy proximity (internal matters, EU-integration and international affairs issues), the agreement did not affect much cooperation. By contrast, it significantly increased it on files where the two groups usually compete the most (motions for resolution). The only exception is for legislative files. Contrary to the sociological institutionalist and to the rational-choice models, the EPP and S&D groups cooperated less often after the agreement broke down, although they had a strong interest in adopting together legislative amendments and reports.

Our results question the neo-institutionalist literature, which puts the emphasises on social norms and institutional rules. In this paper, we find that legislative behaviour in the EP can depend on individuals' strategies. Although the structure of competition in plenary is overly consensual, it can also be politicised if legislative actors want to do so. This process of politicisation may be contrary to actors' policy interests, as underlined by the example of legislative files. However, legislative actors pursue other objectives, for instance electoral, that may confront with the necessity to build broad trans-partisan majorities for the adoption of legislative reports. From a political representation perspective, this process of politicisation may be beneficial: political conflict increases media coverage, fuels citizens' political interest, and better links electoral politics to policy outcomes.

The results presented in this paper need to be supplemented by other studies. First, a qualitative analysis is needed to better understand the way legislative actors considered the 2014 agreement and how it changed their day-to-day behaviour. Second, beyond plenary, we need to

know more about the way the EPP-S&D cooperation was organised within committees and informal meetings, and how the end of the agreement affected negotiation routines. Finally, further empirical research is needed to better understand coalition-building in the new legislative term. After the 2019 elections, the EPP and S&D groups did not negotiate a political agreement like in 2014, mainly because the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was not fully implemented. However, they have renewed the old “technical agreement”, especially to share the Presidency of the assembly throughout the legislative term. Qualitative research would help understand how the experience of the political deal between 2014 and 2017 affected the coalition strategies of the EPP and S&D groups’ leaders in 2019.



## ANNEXES

Annexe I. Policy issues of reports determined by the responsible committee

<b>Policy issue</b>	<b>Committee responsible for drafting the report</b>
EU-integration issues	Agriculture and Rural Development (AFCO)
	Budgetary Control (CONT)
	Legal Affairs (JURI)
International affairs issues	Foreign Affairs (AFET)
	International Trade (INTA)
Socio-economic issues	Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON)
	Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE)
	Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO)
	Transport and Tourism (TRAN)
	Regional Development (REGI)
	Fisheries (PECH)
	Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI)
	Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL)
	Tax Rulings and Other Measures Similar in Nature or Effect (TAXE)
	Tax Rulings and Other Measures Similar in Nature or Effect (TAXE 2)
	Financial crimes, tax evasion and tax avoidance (TAXE 3)
Socio-cultural issues	Culture and Education (CULT)
	Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)
	Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM)
	Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)
	EU authorisation procedure for pesticides (PEST)
	Terrorism (TERR)

Annexes II: Results of logistic regressions on EPP-S&D cooperation (8<sup>th</sup> legislative term)

	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>
Coalition deal	-0.41 *** (0.05)	-0.47 *** (0.06)
Legislative file	0.19 *** (0.05)	0.00 (0.06)
Final vote	1.39 *** (0.09)	1.39 *** (0.10)
Policy issue: EU-integration		ref
Policy issue: international affairs		0.20 (0.11)
Policy issue: socio-cultural		-0.91 *** (0.09)
Policy issue: socio-economic		-0.53 *** (0.09)
Constant	0.90 ***	1.39 ***
Observations	9,436	6,987

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses. By controlling for the policy issue, operationalised by the committee responsible for drafting the report, the number of observations drops. Indeed, it removes from the analysis all motions for resolution which are not drafted within a committee. We provide two models: the first one does not control for the *Policy issue* of the vote and the second one includes this variable.

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