

15 KEY VOTES IN THE 2009-2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: MAIN INSIGHTS



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On the basis of a common effort undertaken by think-tanks across the EU, this Synthesis highlights the main findings of the research undertaken in 20 countries to analyse 15 key votes in the 2009-2014 European Parliament. National reports are being released in April and May 2014.

Executive Summary

The Synthesis is divided into five chapters:

- The first chapter explains the **purpose of the project** and the different legislative acts and procedures in the European Union.
- The second chapter briefly describes **why the 2014 European Parliament elections matter** and what data and analyses allow showing its activities during the last term.
- After that the third chapter looks which of the **key votes** mattered at the national level and to which extent. Economic governance issues have not been the **most salient issues**. The non-binding resolution on Eurobonds, for instance, was perceived differently in Germany or Finland and in Italy. ACTA and the Multiannual financial framework were the most prominent votes, despite being both (only) under the consent procedure.
- The fourth chapter examines what happens when MEPs are **torn between their European political group and their country**. Here the case of the Financial transactions tax is particularly enlightening. Actually the national parties within the European political groups play the decisive role, because they control the re-election prospects of “their” MEPs. The in-depth analyses for some countries show that there are national parties which have chosen the “wrong” political group in the European Parliament.

- Finally the fifth chapter concludes that there are **co-existing conflict lines in the European Parliament**: left vs. right and pro-EU vs. anti-EU. Sometimes nationality trumps European-ness, sometimes the reasons are also difficult to distinguish. But an analysis of key votes can help to understand how MEPs voted and what they stood and stand for.

1. The project

The 2009-2014 legislative term has been marked by increased strength of the European Parliament (EP) in relation to the Council of ministers and the European Commission. Perhaps the most notorious demonstration of force by the EP was the rejection of the Anti-counterfeiting trade agreement (ACTA) in July 2012. While this may be the most prominent example due to the publicity it received, the number of cases where the Parliament managed to leave its footprint on EU legislation is certainly higher than in the previous term. It is the political and ideological composition of the Parliament that ultimately decides the extent and direction of the Parliament’s footprint.

For this project VoteWatch Europe, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute and national think-tanks have selected 15 votes that emphasize not only some of the big issues the EP has decided, but also how the ideological balance of power in the chamber has influenced the outcome of these decisions. Moreover, these votes show that the national background of the MEPs has influenced some key decisions.

Choosing the “most important” 15 votes out of a pool of over 5,000 so far recorded (roll-call) votes in the seventh term of the European Parliament has not been an easy endeavour. We have inevitably had to make some choices with which some people will disagree. In making this selection we have applied three main criteria:

- That the piece of legislation being voted on has a very high impact;
- That the subject matter is relatively easy to understand for the general public; and
- That the issue generated controversy both in the EP and in the public sphere and that, in consequence, the political groups in the Parliament took different positions on the issue.

The second difficult choice we had to make was to translate the technical language of each legislative proposal or relevant paragraph or amendment into a language that would be easy to understand by a general audience. As a result, the titles of the votes presented in this report are conscious oversimplifications of complex decisions, designed to make it easier to comprehend what the decisions were about.

For a full explanation and understanding of the votes, readers should refer to the votewatch.eu website and to the full text of the proposals that were voted on.

This Synthesis does not discuss all these 15 votes, but highlights the five most important votes.

Box 1. European Union legislative acts

The European institutions may adopt binding or non-legally binding acts.

There are three types of EU **binding acts**, differing on their area of applicability:

- *Regulations* have general application, being immediately and directly applicable in all member states simultaneously, i.e. – they do not require transposition via a national law.
- *Directives* are also applicable in all member states, but unlike regulations they offer flexibility to member states in implementing the law and they require transposition into the national legislation.
- *Decisions* have a more specific application, as they are binding upon those to whom they address only (which can be member states or individual entities).

The EU **non-binding acts** are the recommendations and the opinions:

- *Recommendations* have the same purpose as directives, aiming at national law harmonisation, but without imposing legal obligations.
- *Opinions* allow institutions to make statements, non-binding on the addressees.

Box 2. Legislative procedures

- **Ordinary legislative procedure (formerly-known as co-decision procedure):** The ordinary legislative procedure gives the same weight to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on a wide range of areas (for example, economic governance, immigration, energy, transport, the environment and consumer protection). After the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the vast majority of European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council.
- **Consultation:** special legislative procedure. Parliament is asked for its opinion (may approve or reject a legislative proposal, or propose amendments to it) before the Council adopts it. The Council is not legally obliged to take account of Parliament’s opinion but it must not take a decision without having received it.
- **Consent (formerly-known as the assent procedure):** Special legislative procedure that gives the European Parliament the right to veto legislation. Parliament’s role is to approve or reject the legislative proposal without further amendments. The Council cannot overrule Parliament’s opinion. Consent is also required as a non-legislative procedure when the Council is adopting certain international agreements (e.g. ACTA).

2. Why do the 2014 European Parliament elections matter?

The main issue at stake will be choosing the members of one of the three main EU institutions and determining the new balance of power between the various political forces represented in the European Parliament.¹ It is important to recall that the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are organised along party lines, not national lines, and vote along their party lines in the majority of the cases.

According to the rules of procedure of the European Parliament, a political group must be composed of at least 25 MEPs and at least one-quarter of the member states must be represented within the group. MEPs that do not belong to a political group are “non-attached”.

Box 3. European political groups in the 2009-2014 European Parliament

- European People’s Party (EPP)
- Socialists and Democrats (S&D)
- Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)
- Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)
- European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)
- European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)
- Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)

Political groups were initially created in the European Parliament for four reasons: this follows domestic political practices, it helps overcoming collective action problems, allows a division of labour and competition along party lines – as at the domestic level.² With reduced volatility, higher predictability and more efficiency in policymaking, this system is beneficial to everybody.³

In the European Parliament votes take place by “roll-call” (recording the voting behaviour of each MEP), or in a non-recorded electronic way, or by showing hands. Obviously “roll-call” votes do not tell everything. They cannot explain how a “first reading agreement” in the ordinary legislative procedure (formerly known as “co-decision”) was achieved, but they are a crucial instrument to ensure transparency.⁴ VoteWatch.eu has recorded more than 7.000 “roll-call” votes since July 2009: they show that transnational ideological lines continue to prevail over any other possible dimension, be they national or personal.

The overall cohesion rate of political groups in the EP (meaning that x% of the members of the political group vote the same way) stands at a remarkable 90%: the groups are not subject to the kind of majority discipline that a government would demand, thus it relies only on genuine ideological convergence. Publicly available data from VoteWatch Europe allow showing that some political groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE and Greens/EFA) are more cohesive than others and that their internal cohesion varies by policy area.⁵ It is possible to view the results from a European angle (with the positions taken by European political groups as a whole), but it is also possible to look at the results from a national angle, focussing on how national party delegations within one European political group voted and whether they followed the line of their European political group or not.⁶

The real challenge in the European Parliament, as the assembly of a separated powers system, lies in forming a majority. The requirement of an absolute majority of members at the second reading of the Ordinary Legislative Procedure favours an

agreement between the two largest political groups in the European Parliament, because with an attendance of about 65% the absolute majority requirement imposes de facto a three-quarters majority. But they can fail to reach a consensus: “for some issues ideological differences are difficult to overcome.”⁷

The analysis of roll-call votes between 2009 and 2013 reveals three different co-existing winning coalitions in the EP that vary by policy area, but are relatively stable over time⁸:

- first, a “grand coalition” between EPP and S&D, often together with ALDE (in total in about 70% of the cases⁹);
- second, a “center right” coalition led by the EPP, ALDE and ECR, the main group to the right of the EPP (also in 15% of the cases);
- third, a “center left” coalition led by S&D, ALDE and the two groups to the left of S&D, Greens/ALE and GUE-NGL (in 15% of the cases).

The left/right dimension plays an important role in shaping legislative politics and affects about one third of all votes. But the pro-/anti-European dimension (whether more Europe or less Europe is seen as “better”) also shapes legislative politics in the European Parliament, including within the European political groups: If an MEP faces a choice between his/her two principals, the national party and the European political group (the national parties are able to control the re-election or re-selection of the MEPs while the European political group controls the career prospects within the European Parliament), it is interesting to see that “the greater the distance between an MEP and his or her national party on the EU integration dimension, the less likely the MEP will defect from his or her European political group. This suggests that the more pro-European MEPs in a national party delegation are more likely to support the policies of their European political group.”¹⁰

The following sections draw on the analyses and forthcoming publications of the think-tanks involved into the project and will highlight and provide examples for the questions raised in this section.

3. Which of the key votes in the 2009-2014 European Parliament mattered the most in individual member states?

Each of the key votes has had a different impact in each member state. One could say that this variation shows “Europe united in diversity”. The following sections single out a few votes from the 15 votes and summarise their particular characteristics.

3.1. Economic governance issues during the euro crisis

The legislative term was dominated by the economic crisis. On some dossiers the European Parliament played a crucial role which is described in the report by the *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*: If one considers the domestic salience of questions related to the management of the euro crisis in **Finland**, the votes on budget supervision, Eurobonds and the Single supervisory mechanism were of importance, “although they were hardly present in the Finnish media.”¹¹ The same applies to the vote on the Financial transaction tax.

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik analyses that the Eurobonds case was extremely politicised in the debate in **Germany**, but the vote in the European Parliament did not play any role as the European Parliament was no decisive player in the game. “Such votes can, of course, nevertheless have an (long term) influence on the political process, e.g. by supporting the Commission’s position vis-à-vis member states in the Council or infusing new ideas into political debates etc. as was the case with the EP’s vote on Eurobonds vote.” The report continues: “The German government parties of the time (CDU/CSU/FDP) as well as the German public at large are extremely critical. In consequence, both CSU within the EPP and the FDP within ALDE voted against party lines while the CDU was split. Interestingly, the MEPs of the SPD very outspokenly supported the EP resolution, while the SPD at home followed a somewhat more cautious approach in face of the critical German public.”¹²

It is interesting to see that with respect to the possible introduction of Eurobonds, which is regarded negatively in the **Netherlands**, the *Clingendael* report notes that “Labour, the Christendemocrats, the Democrats 66 and the Greens did not rule out

the introduction in the long term, despite strong reservations.”¹³

In **Italy** the supportive resolution on Eurobonds also gained almost unanimous backing by the national parliament, given the huge economic difficulties faced by the country and the need to boost growth.¹⁴

Interestingly, despite having an opt-out from the Euro, the votes concerning economic and financial measures, including the proposal on Eurobonds, the proposal on a financial transactions tax (FTT) and the proposal on banking union, were widely debated issues in the **Danish** media.¹⁸

In **Sweden**, not inside the Eurozone either, an interesting aspect is that the Moderate party (which belongs to the EPP and is also the party of the Prime minister) tends to be critical on issues concerning Eurobonds, FTT and own resources. According to the *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies* this would point to a hesitant view on the EU’s role in economic governance.¹⁹

In the case of the vote on the Two-pack ideology won over nationality in **Spain**: “Although substantial majority of the Spanish parties (seven out of ten) voted in favour of the enhanced budget surveillance at the EU level – the disagreement ran across the right-left fault line on this issue. The bone of discontentment was the issue of austerity, as the left of the left [...] raised the flag against such measures, extremely controversial in the national context.”²⁰

The report on **France** shows that a grand coalition of French MEPs has emerged to support the Two-pack, while the French were more openly opposed against the first reform of the Stability and growth pact in 2011 (Six-pack).²¹

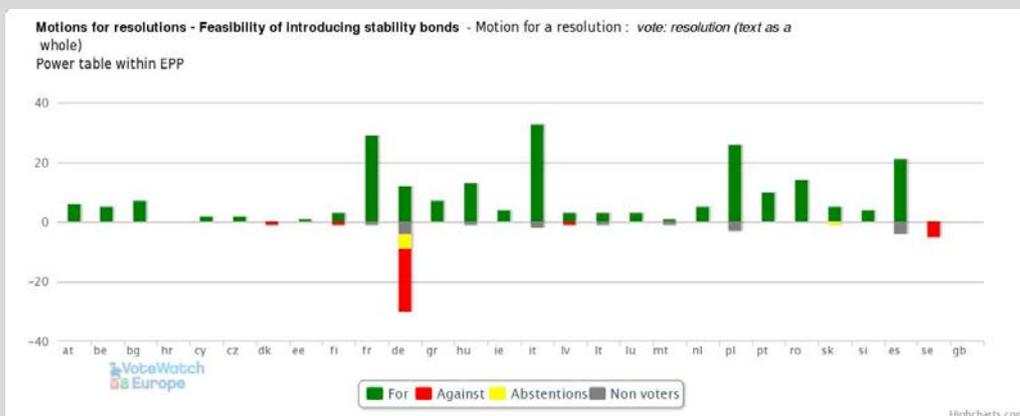
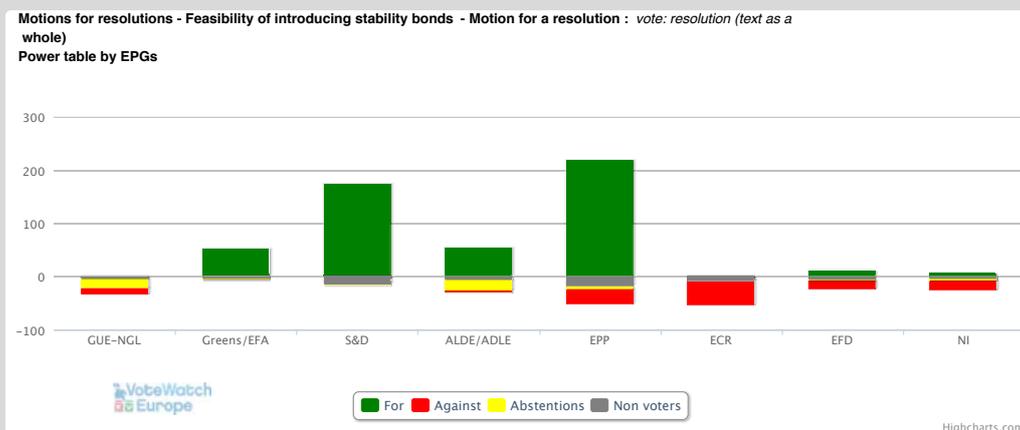
According to the *Royal Institute for International Relations EGMONT*, the situation is different in **Belgium**: “Belgian socialist MEPs from both the French- and Dutch-speaking Communities (PS and sp.a) coordinated their position and decided to vote against the two regulations. By doing so, they were the only socialist MEPs not to back the deal. This negative vote was in tune with their earlier rejection of the Six-pack.”²²

Box 4. Should the Eurozone member states pool their public debts by creating Eurobonds?

Feasibility of introducing stability bonds, final vote, February 2012 EP plenary session.¹⁵

In February 2012 the EP gave its first reaction to the European Commission’s Green Paper proposing Eurobonds. The Eurobonds (or Stability Bonds as they are referred to in the European Commission’s Green Paper) are collective bonds for pooling “of sovereign debt issuance among EU member states and the sharing of associated revenue flows and debt-servicing costs”.¹⁶

The non-binding resolution was largely supportive of the initiative, arguing that Eurobonds are needed as part of the solution to the Eurozone’s current financial problems. The S&D and Greens/EFA groups, as well as the majority of MEPs from the EPP and ALDE groups, voted in favour of the resolution. However, 29 EPP members from Germany and Sweden voted against, while 19 ALDE MEPs, also mainly from Germany, abstained. There was also opposition from the ECR group and most MEPs from the GUE-NGL and EFD groups.¹⁷



3.2. ACTA, the Multiannual financial framework, and other issues

Despite the economic and financial crisis which led to many votes related to economic governance issues, these votes did not become the most salient issues in national politics. This is largely because the crisis-related emergency decisions were taken by the member state governments themselves, in the Eurogroup and in the European Council.

The vote on ACTA and the issue of the Multiannual financial framework can be seen as the two most salient issues. It is interesting that these two issues

fall under the consent procedure where the European Parliament actually only has a “take it or leave it” decision: it can either approve or reject the text. But the case of the Multiannual financial framework shows that even under this condition the European Parliament is able to get concessions from member states.

3.2.1. ACTA

In **Austria**, according to the report by the *Institute for Advanced Studies*, newspapers reported extensively on the ACTA vote: “The focus was less on how the Austrian delegation voted and more on the fact

that the EP as a whole rejected the particular proposal. The ACTA debate was one of the relatively few issues that acquired some prominence in Austria, although there were no specifically Austrian interests involved. This confirms that some topics can cut across borders and they can trigger transnational debate, but they are infrequent.”²³

In **Romania**, “in a move resembling those in other countries, like France, Germany and the UK, hundreds of protestors took to the streets demanding that ACTA should not be implemented.”²⁴

The controversy surrounding ACTA did not go unnoticed in **Finland** either, but the *Finnish Institute of International Affairs* notes that the issue caused less stir in the country than in other member states.

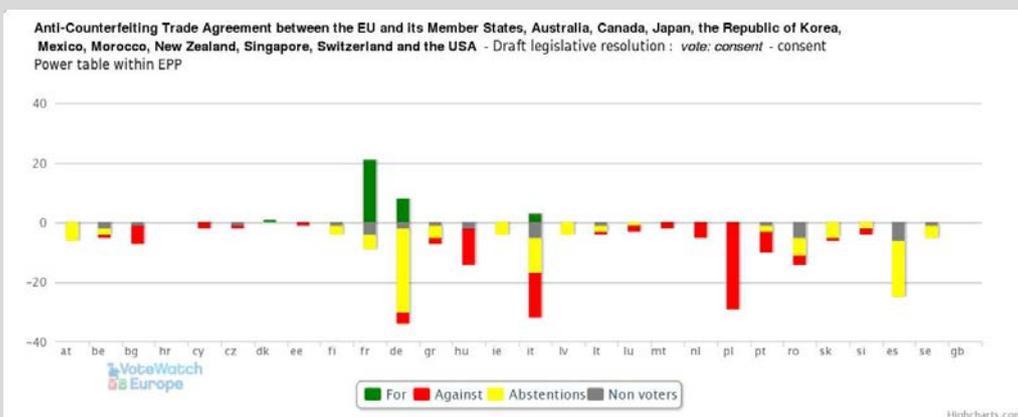
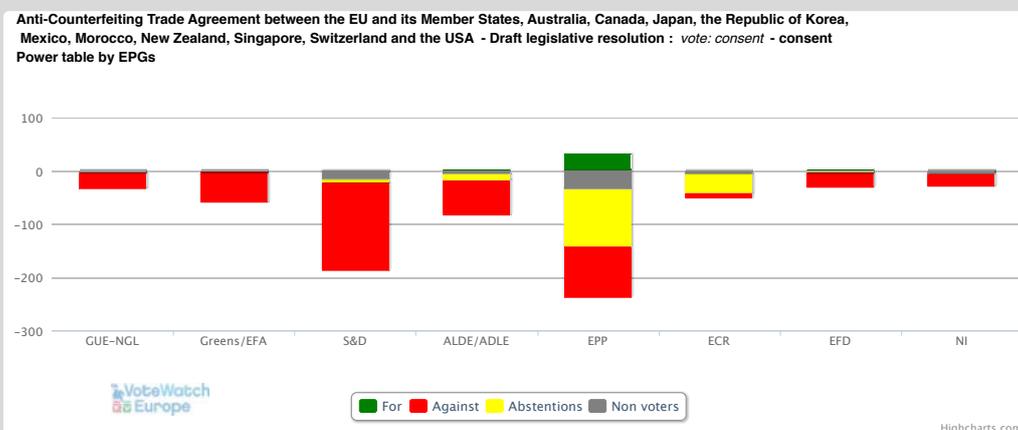
In **France** the ACTA vote “reflects a relatively consensual position of French politicians, since it rallied elected from all political groups and non-aligned. It should however emphasized that this majority consensus is incomplete since it can see the expression of dissimilar votes among French MEPs who belong to the EPP group.”²⁵

Box 5. Should the Anti-counterfeiting trade agreement (ACTA) be adopted?

Anti-counterfeiting trade agreement between the EU and its member states, Australia, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland and the United States of America, Final vote, July 2012 EP plenary session.²⁶

In July 2012, the EP voted not to give its consent to the Anti-counterfeiting trade agreement (ACTA) between the EU and its member states and Australia, Canada, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland and the USA. MEPs rejected ACTA by 39 votes in favour, 478 against and 165 abstentions.²⁷

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EP is required to approve or reject trade agreements, but it cannot amend them. The consent procedure gives Parliament the right to veto a proposal. Parliament’s role is thus to approve or reject the legislative proposal without further amendments and the Council cannot overrule Parliament’s opinion. As a result of this vote, neither the EU nor any individual EU member state can join ACTA. MEPs raised concerns related to data protection, fundamental freedoms, openness and transparency of ACTA negotiations. Most EP groups voted against ACTA, while a majority of EPP and ECR members abstained. This vote represents an important achievement of the European Parliament, which successfully imposed its will on the EU national governments.



The graph above shows that the EPP group faced a three-way split between MEPs voting in favour of the agreement, against it, and abstentions.

Politicisation occurred when national party polarisation was high as in the case of ACTA, which was contentious both within the government coalition and between government and opposition parties in **Germany**. In that case the public debate was fueled and driven by an intense participation of civil society actors, according to *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*.

3.2.2. Multiannual financial framework and Common agricultural policy

In net-recipient countries, like **Romania**, some MEPs argued with respect to the Multiannual financial framework that “if the budget had remained at the same level as during the last programming, economic depression would have been prevented, allowing for a proper economic revival”, but Common Agricultural Policy reform was for example considered “good news for Romanian farmers, through the allocated subsidies.”²⁸

Polish MEPs “want the EU to remain focused on bridging the gap between its richer and poorer members, and therefore are vocal advocates of maintaining a generous cohesion policy and CAP.”²⁹

Among the votes of national importance there are those where **Spanish** MEPs have traditionally

positioned themselves according to national interest, due to the strategic importance of those policies, argues the *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)*: “The reform of the CAP is such an example, since Spain is one of the main recipients of EU’s agricultural subsidies.”³⁰

In the context of the Multiannual Financial Framework, the best example of an issue where **Swedish** MEPs “have something of a national position relates to the own resources of the EU. While all MEPs were encouraged by their party groups to support the initiative, only three Swedish MEPs did so.”³³

The report on **Italy** by *Istituto Affari Internazionali* and *Centro Studi sul Federalismo* shows that “recent Italian debates did not focus much on the introduction of new resources for the EU but rather on the measures directed towards employment and research of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020.”³⁴

3.2.3. Not issue-based, but depending on the timing: If a country holds the Council Presidency...

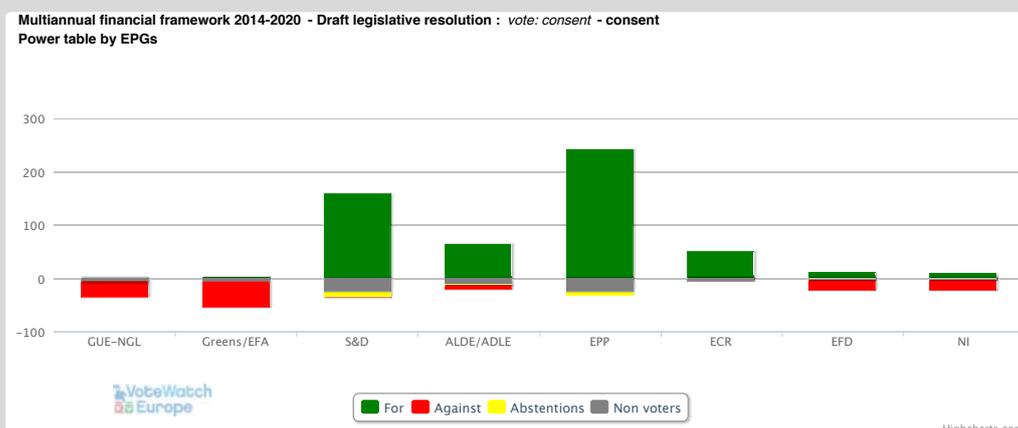
Being a Council presidency affected the voting pattern of the **Spanish** parties in the European Parliament: “This was for example evident in the case of the final vote on the European External Action Service (EEAS), where such important issues

Box 6. Should the EU budget be increased and be made more flexible?

Multiannual financial framework 2014-2020, final vote, November 2013 EP plenary session³¹

In November 2013, the European Parliament demanded concessions from the member states with respect to the Multiannual financial framework (MFF): flexibility between budget years and budget lines, the promise of the creation of a high-level group on own resources of the EU and a revision clause that states that the Commission will have to bring forward a review of the MFF in 2016. The latter provision is also aimed at aligning the future duration of the MFF with the 5-year political cycles of the EU institutions.

The text as a whole was supported by a comfortable majority (EPP, S&D, ALDE, ECR), passing with 537 votes in favour to 126 against, and 19 abstentions. The opposition came mainly from the Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL and EFD groups³².



as the organisation, budget and accountability of the service were at stake. The support of the majority of Spanish parties was motivated by the drive for European integration, but another important factor was that Spain was the incumbent Council President at the time and as such felt responsible for the success of the launch of the service.”³⁵

As **Lithuania** held the Council Presidency in the second half of 2013 all the votes taking place during or around that time (Multiannual financial framework for 2014-2020, budget of 2014 and Common Agricultural Policy) were considered as particularly salient by the Lithuanian MEPs.³⁶

3.2.4. Apart from the 15 votes, outside the European mainstream

The most prominent vote in **Finland** during the 2009-2014 legislative term did not deal with the Eurozone crisis or another matter that gathered attention across Europe, but with a directive imposing a strict limit on the sulphur content of marine fuels: “While the directive was passed in the EP by an overwhelming majority of 606 votes to 55, altogether eight Finnish MEPs from across the political spectrum voted against it. Notably, seven of the eight MEPs defected from their European political groups to do so. The vote thus united Finnish MEPs across party limits. Only four Finnish MEPs voted in favour.”³⁷

4. European political groups and national parties: Along what lines did MEPs vote?

If the principal-agent theory is applied to MEPs, they are usually agents who have two principals: their European political group and their national party. The first controls their career prospects within the European Parliament, the second controls their re-election prospects via the selection of the candidates at the national level. As long as these two agents do not have contradicting views on how their MEP(s) should vote, MEPs do not face a conflict of interest. If they do and if they follow the position of their national party (or that of their national party delegation within their European political group), they defect from their European political group. The Financial transactions tax was the most interesting issues, but the phenomenon of defection can also arise from the fact that individual national parties (and MEPs) chose the “wrong” political group, notice

that they are ideologically too distant and thus (have to) defect regularly.

4.1. Financial transactions tax

For **Latvia** the analyses by *PROVIDUS – Centre for Public Policy* show that MEPs’ voting behaviour “closely paralleled those of their European political groups except the vote on the financial transactions tax.”³⁸

In **Luxembourg** MEPs also defected on the matter of taxation on financial transactions, according to the analysis of the *Centre d’études et de recherches européennes Robert Schuman*.³⁹

The financial transactions tax was rejected by a majority of social democratic MEPs from **Romania**, too, “which marked a break-away from the dominant line of the S&D group.”⁴⁰

According to the *Danish Institute of International Studies*, many MEPs from **Denmark** defected as well: “Although a large majority of GUE-NGL, Greens/EFA, S&D and EPP, adopted the vote on the FTT, the Danish MEPs in the Green group were the only ones voting in favour. The MEPs from the S&D abstained from voting because their national party (a government party since 2011) was strongly against the FTT. This was despite the fact that the Danish S&D delegation had previously been very keen on getting the FTT adopted. Also the Danish member of the EPP voted no, and thus went against his European colleagues, who generally voted in favour of the bill.”⁴¹

MEPs from the **United Kingdom** find themselves on the losing side “on issues of high symbolic content and perceived as sensitive for the British public [...], such as the enhanced cooperation for a Financial transaction tax.”⁴²

However, the report on **France** emphasises that “all French MEPs chose to approve this project, with the exception one MEP who voted against, and the three extreme right National Front MEPs, who abstained. The French’s almost unanimous voting behaviour contrasts with the divided character of other national delegations.”⁴³

In Belgium the MEPs reflected “the positions of their respective parliamentary groups, at the exception of the Belgian liberals in the ALDE group and the

N-VA, which was the only abstention vote among the Greens/EFA members.”⁴⁴

4.2. The relationship between national parties and “their” European political groups

The *Policy Network* report on the **United Kingdom** writes that “the Conservatives’ decision to depart from the EPP in 2009 appears as particularly misguided move and Labour’s overly cautious relation to their fellow Socialists and Democrats is a missed opportunity to exert leadership. By focusing on building a positive agenda and engaging with natural

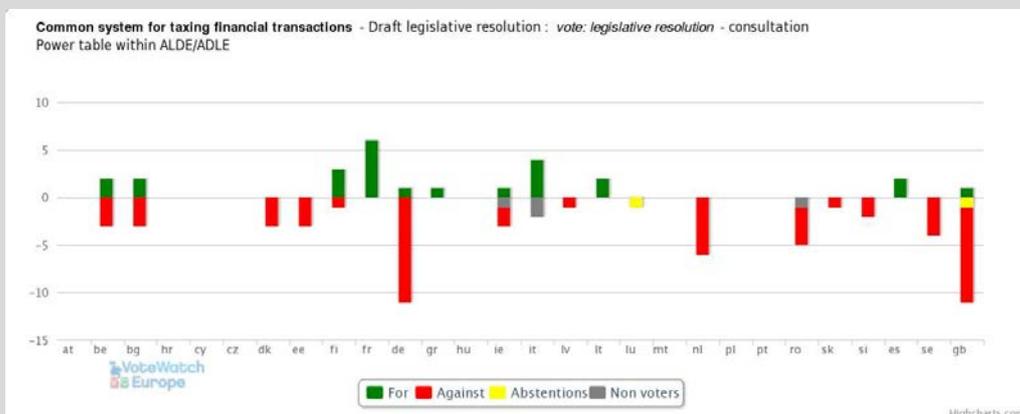
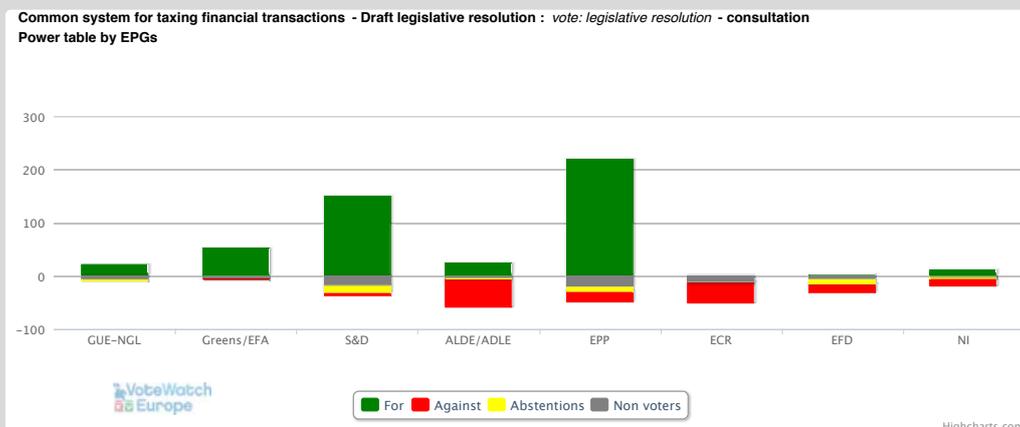
partners on strategic issues such as trade and market regulation, they would gain substantial influence in Brussels and help advance British interests.”⁴⁷

The report on **Belgium** by the *Royal Institute for International Relations EGMONT* shows that in more than half of the votes, the Flemish regionalist party N-VA did not vote in line with the majority of its European political group, the Greens/EFA. It is more aligned to the European conservative group than to the Greens/Regionalists. “The fact that the N-VA can be considered as a right-leaning party while their European political group is mostly at the left of the

Box 7. Should there be a new tax on all financial transactions in the EU?

Common system for taxing financial transactions, final vote, May 2012 EP plenary session⁴⁵

In May 2012, a large majority of MEPs supported a tax on financial transactions (FTT), to be levied by EU member states, in the framework of a special legislative procedure (consultation of Parliament). MEPs backed the tax by 487 votes.⁴⁶ A significant minority of 152 MEPs, from ECR, EFD, and ALDE (with the exception of the French, Italian and Finnish members), voted against the proposal. 20 EPP members, from Malta, Cyprus, Sweden and Latvia, and 6 S&D members, from Malta and Cyprus, also voted against.



Following this vote, member states failed to reach an agreement on the FTT, which, as a tax-related issue, requires unanimity in the Council. As a result, the Council authorised in January 2013 the initiation of an enhanced cooperation procedure among eleven member states (Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia and Slovakia) that wanted to go ahead with the FTT. Consequently, the European Commission tabled a proposal for a Council Directive implementing enhanced cooperation, which is still under discussion and currently being challenged before the Court of Justice of the EU.

political spectrum provides a major part of the explanation. [...] This leads to wonder whether the N-VA should consider joining the European conservative group instead of the Greens/Regionalist.”⁴⁸

In **Denmark** sometimes their European political group “is simply too ‘far away’ from the Danish MEPs’ viewpoint on a particular political course. One example is the Danish delegation in the ALDE group, who are from the Danish right-wing liberal party, which is arguably more right-wing than the majority of their European colleagues’ sister-parties.”⁴⁹

A similar case exists in **Lithuania** where the research undertaken by the *Institute of International Relations and Political Science* shows that MEPs of Tvarka ir teisingumas (Order and Justice) “rebelled for 77,78% of all votes and only on 4 votes [...] were loyal to their European political group”⁵⁰. The party is left-wing, but belongs to the EFD group on the right of the political spectrum.

An issue that might merit further research is a conclusion for MEPs from **Latvia** which suggests that MEPs identify themselves more with their European political group when this group is small.⁵¹

5. The main conflict lines in the European Parliament

5.1. When does nationality prevail?

According to *Diktio Network for Reform in Greece and Europe*, MEPs from **Greece** often felt that “they were part of a particular tug of war where on one side was the European dimension, obligations and responsibilities, and on the other the realities experienced by Greeks citizens back home.”⁵²

The *Institute for Public Affairs* in **Poland** evaluates that on backloading the Polish delegation in the S&D group rebelled and did so despite the fact that they had virtually the whole group against them. This issue was highly important: the Polish MEPs were hoping to tip the balance and change the outcome of the vote. In “all but one of the votes Polish MEPs were part of the winning majority. Backloading was the only vote in which Poles found themselves in the minority.”⁵³

The report for **Spain** examines which were the votes where Spanish MEPs “rallied around national

interest rather than ideology, i.e. their vote could be better understood taking into account the national situation rather than ideological constraints in terms of party or group membership.”⁵⁴ According to the report many of these votes were directly related to the Spanish economy and financial situation and/or regulatory context (CAP reform, own resources, Eurobonds, banking union, tax on financial transactions, maternity leave).

5.2. The particular case of a vote on extending maternity leave

The report for **Austria** by the *Institute for Advanced Studies* emphasises that “MEPs of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) voted in all cases in favour of the proposals put forward in the European Parliament, with a single exception: the extension of the maternity leave.” But even then they followed the line of their political group, the EPP. “This ‘constructive’ and ‘conformist’ approach largely characterises the voting behaviour of also the other two mainstream party delegations, namely, of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and of the Greens.”⁵⁵

The *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)* concludes on **Spain** that “[s]pill-over effects of the economic crisis were not always evident in the cases, where one would have expected them.” On the extension of the maternity leave “the battles in the European Parliament were fought across the left-right cleavage on the issue of conciliation of work and family and additional economic burdens at the time of crisis among MEPs from other countries, [but] there was an overall consensus on this issue among the Spanish MEPs. A large majority of the Spanish parties (7 out of 10) voted for extending the maternity leave on full pay from 14 to 20 weeks and the majority of the PP MEPs didn’t follow the EPP group line (which was contrary to the Commission proposal). The reason for this was that the Spanish baseline situation was already similar to the proposal of the Commission, i.e. the current maternity leave is already 16 weeks plus 2 weeks of not transferable paternity leave.”⁵⁸

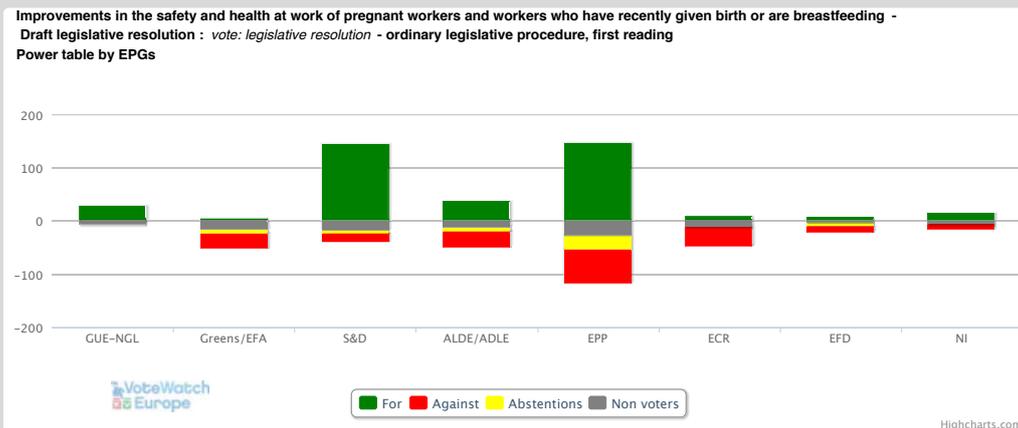
The report for **Italy** agrees: “on the extension of maternity leave [...] the Italian legislative framework already provided many of the reforms proposed at EU level.”⁵⁹

Box 8. Should the minimum length of the maternity leave on full pay be extended from 14 to 20 weeks throughout the EU?

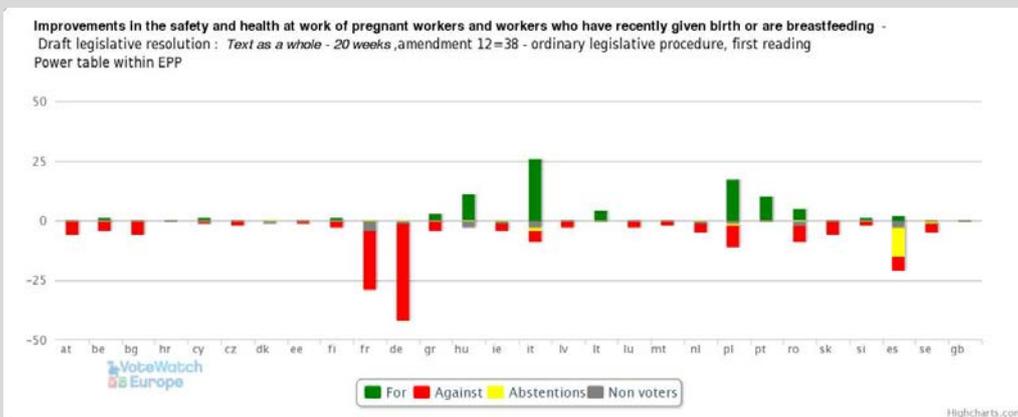
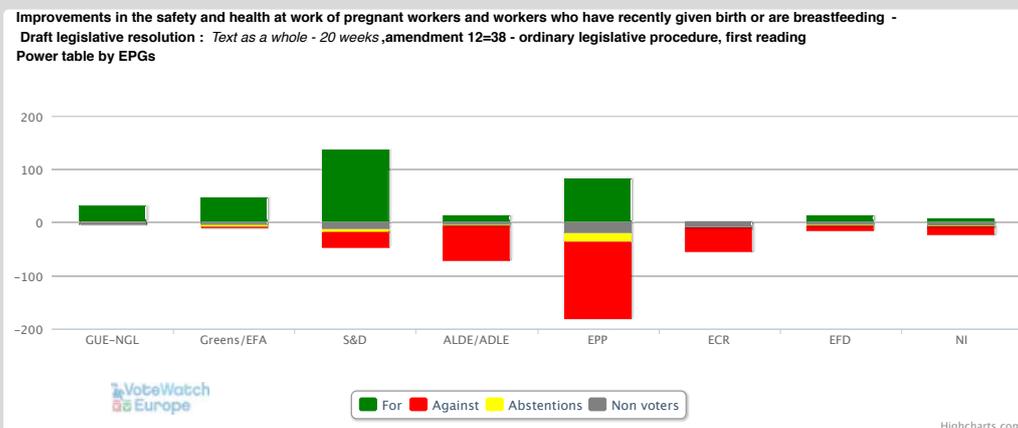
Improvement in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding

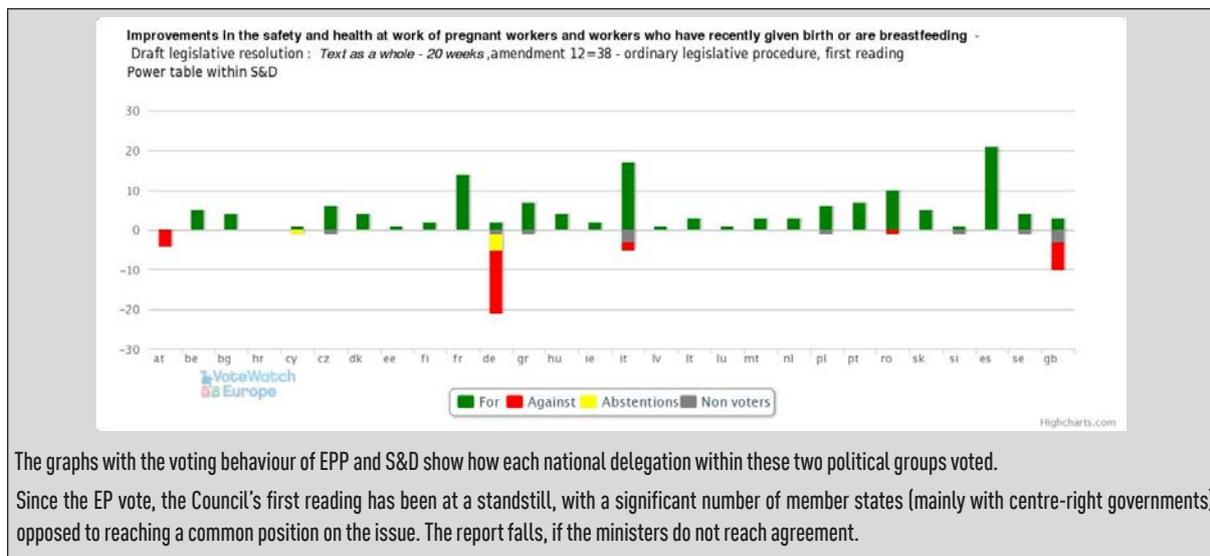
In October 2010, the European Parliament adopted its position in first reading on the Directive on maternity leave. The text provided for the extension of maternity leave from 14 to 20 weeks on full pay, and included a number of other measures favourable to mothers and pregnant women, as well as more generous paternity leave. The proposal (text as a whole) was passed by a relatively narrow majority (390 votes for to 192 votes against), formed by EPP, S&D, ALDE and GUE-NGL.

The centre-left supported the amended proposal, arguing that its provisions would ensure greater protection of women and encourage demographic growth. The centre-right groups, on the other hand, generally opposed it, arguing that such provisions would lead to significant extra costs, particularly for small businesses, and would cause indirect discrimination of women in the labour market, as employers would avoid hiring young women with a right to extended paid maternity leave.



The key vote we selected for this report was on amendment 12=38⁵⁶, regarding the extension of maternity leave on full pay from 14 to 20 weeks. The vote passed with 327 MEPs in favour to 320 against. The centre-left groups – Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Greens/EFA and the radical left (GUE-NGL) – succeeded in gathering a majority with the help of 82 MEPs from the EPP, primarily from Poland, Italy, Hungary and Lithuania⁵⁷.





The graphs with the voting behaviour of EPP and S&D show how each national delegation within these two political groups voted. Since the EP vote, the Council’s first reading has been at a standstill, with a significant number of member states (mainly with centre-right governments) opposed to reaching a common position on the issue. The report falls, if the ministers do not reach agreement.

Conclusion

Five years ago “[t]he paradox of an increasingly powerful European Parliament mobilising decreasing public support was cruelly but clearly demonstrated”.⁶⁰ The role of the European Parliament in the political system of the European Union has indeed become increasingly important: “[t]he European Parliament has evolved from the toothless Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community to an equal partner with the [...] Council in almost all policy areas.”⁶¹

The 2014 elections provide a “chance to inject some democratic vitality into the somewhat wan structure of the European Union.”⁶² They might bring “less abstention [and] more populism”⁶³ – a development

that (depending on the extent of the rise of populist forces) will, however, probably not change the functioning of the European Parliament or block decision-making.

At the elections in May 2014 voters face different policy options for the future direction of the EU that are presented by the European political parties and their national member parties. At this stage, the political game still seems to be very open and this should prompt all the players concerned, whether political or otherwise, to engage in a vigorous defence and promotion of their alternative vision and proposals for the EU. For the first time, these elections are genuine “European” elections and will shape European politics for the next five years.

Partners of the project

Austria	Institute of Advanced Studies, Department of Political Science	Italy	Istituto Affari Internazionali & Centro Studi sul Federalismo
Belgium	Egmont - Royal Institute for International Relations	Latvia	Centre for Public Policy (PROVIDUS)
Bulgaria ⁶⁴	Centre for Liberal Strategies	Lithuania	Institute of International Relations and Political Sciences
Cyprus ⁶⁵	Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs	Luxembourg	Centre d’études et de recherches européennes Robert Schuman
Denmark	Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)	The Netherlands	Institute of International Relations Clingendael
Finland	Finnish Institute of International Affairs	Poland	Institute of Public Affairs
France	Fondation Robert Schuman & Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute	Romania	European Institute of Romania
Germany	Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik	Spain	Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)
Greece	Diktio Network for Reform in Greece and Europe	Sweden	Swedish Institute of European Policy Studies (SIEPS)
Ireland	European Movement Ireland	United Kingdom	Policy Network

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