# Reassessing the Effectiveness of the European People's Party

Karl Magnus Johansson

Political parties at the European level, referred to as 'Europarties', shape and are reshaped by the ongoing European integration. Having first been constitutionally recognised in the Maastricht Treaty, the Europarties then worked together to write and then rewrite the rules that govern them and to secure their funding. This has helped to strengthen their organisational structures and overall capacity. However, there are marked variations in influence among the Europarties and, in some cases, over time, as the example of the European People's Party (EPP) shows.

The aim of this chapter is to assess the effectiveness of the EPP, taking into account existing research as well as the complex and intertwined relationship between a Europarty and its national member parties. In assessing the role of the EPP, particularly in terms of treaty reform in the EU, which is more conventionally examined through the lens of intergovernmentalism, I also want to say something general about Europarty influence and its limits. Only looking at influence may overstate the Europarties' successes. Taking the limits of this influence into account alludes to the other side of the story—that Europarties are ineffective. Some think they are. Others think they are underappreciated. For me, in any case, they are worthy of serious study.

My study of Europarties has combined primary data from various sources, including archives and interviews but also direct observation, with case-study

K. M. Johansson (✉)
School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden



K. Welle, S. Pini (eds.), *The EPP's Way to Number 1*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-96906-5_22

analysis. I first started to study this topic in 1992, when the EPP finally gave the British and Danish conservatives the green light to join the EPP Group in the European Parliament (EP). This hard-won (and fragile) alliance revealed opportunities, motives and constraints, which were examined in my Ph.D. thesis.[1] What emerged from this analysis was that, in the expansion strategy for the EPP itself and amid the restructuring of the EU, concerns about power trumped those about ideological identity and direction.[2] I then came to approach the Europarties, including the EPP, less as dependent variables and more as independent variables—that is, by studying them as agents of integration and highlighting their attempts to mobilise and influence.[3] All the while, I was closely watching out for the possible impact of the EPP, particularly on treaty reform.

The chapter proceeds in the following way. In the next section I elaborate on the conditions that the Europarties have to fulfil in order to be influential. The subsequent section presents the results of my research into the influence of Europarties/the EPP on treaty negotiation outcomes. I conclude the chapter by sharing some lessons for the future.

## The conditions Europarties need to fulfil to be influential

To a varying extent across time and cases, Europarties have proven to be effective structures for representation and decision-making in the EU—but only under certain conditions. So, what are the conditions under which Europarties can be expected to make a difference? The short answer is that the effectiveness of Europarties, in general terms, largely depends on their European Council presence and relative numerical strength, cohesion, and ability to mobilise their networks of political parties and party/government leaders for

[1] K. M. Johansson, *Transnational Party Alliances: Analysing the Hard-Won Alliance Between Conservatives and Christian Democrats in the European Parliament*, Ph.D. thesis (Lund: Lund University Press, 1997).

[2] See also, K. M. Johansson, 'European People's Party', in K. M. Johansson and P. A. Zervakis (eds.), *European Political Parties Between Cooperation and Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002).

[3] E.g. K. M. Johansson, 'Another Road to Maastricht: The Christian Democrat Coalition and the Quest for European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40/5 (2002); K. M. Johansson, 'Party Elites in Multilevel Europe: The Christian Democrats and the Single European Act', *Party Politics* 8/4 (2002); K. M. Johansson, 'The European People's Party and the Amsterdam Treaty', *Journal of European Integration History* 21/2 (2015); K. M. Johansson, 'Europarty Influence and Its Limits: The Case of the European People's Party and the Amsterdam Treaty', *Journal of European Integration* 38/1 (2016); K. M. Johansson, 'Constitutionalising the Union: The Role of the EPP Group', in L. Bardi et al. (eds.), *The European Ambition: The Group of the European People's Party and European Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).

the party cause.[4] Therefore, they must work within the domestic constraints on national parties and leaders.

At any given time a particular party family may have a strategic advantage through its numerical superiority in the European Council. Whether that advantage can be translated into influence is another matter. Incumbency or numerical strength alone are not sufficient conditions for influencing political outcomes in the European Council along party-political lines, as much depends on the political preferences of the heads of government that belong to the Europarty in question. Participation is not everything, as internal fissures and limits on the ambition and capacity to coordinate positions may reduce Europarty influence. There must be effective mobilisation. In other words, the intrinsic qualities of the individual Europarty can be of great relevance to its potential influence.

Most of the existing research has focused on Europarties in the context of treaty negotiations. Here the evidence is somewhat mixed, but points in the direction of Europarties and their EP groups wielding, in favourable circumstances, even decisive influence in the Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs) and the European Council summits. Research also suggests that the format or institutional framework of the constitutional process matters, with the 'convention' model more likely to facilitate Europarty influence (see below).[5]

Thus, while the right conditions can be created, the core conditions which Europarties need to be present in order to have influence are based on structural factors. In sum, the conditions under which Europarties may wield

[4] For more on this, see Johansson, 'Europarty Influence and Its Limits'; K. M. Johansson, 'The Role of Europarties in EU Treaty Reform: Theory and Practice', *Acta Politica* 52/3 (2017); K. M. Johansson and T. Raunio, 'Political Parties in the European Union', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); K. M. Johansson and T. Raunio, *Transnational Parties and Advocacy in European Integration* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024); J. Tallberg and K. M. Johansson, 'Party Politics in the European Council', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15/8 (2008); S. Van Hecke, 'Christian Democratic Parties and Europeanisation', in S. Van Hecke and E. Gerard (eds.), *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe Since the End of the Cold War* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004); S. Van Hecke, 'Do Transnational Party Federations Matter? (. . . and Why Should We Care?)', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 6/3 (2010); S. Van Hecke et al., *Reconnecting European Political Parties With European Union Citizens* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2018). Tallberg and Johansson suggest a third factor that shapes the influence of party politics in the European Council: the salience of an issue on the left–right dimension. However, this factor, besides its bias generally against issues relating to other ideological dimensions or agenda items, is less relevant in the context of treaty negotiations, where the issues on the agenda of the European Council and decision-making reflect the left–right dimension less than otherwise in EU policymaking. Instead, Johansson and Raunio (2024) add venue choice (format) as a factor specifically hypothesised to shape influence in treaty reform. It is also worth noting that the other two factors, the relative numerical strength of the Europarties and their cohesion and mobilisation, both reflect ideology to a certain extent.

[5] Johansson and Raunio, *Transnational Parties and Advocacy in European Integration*.

influence are demanding. Next, I explore these conditions empirically through illustrative evidence.

## The significance and limitations of the EPP

There is certainly evidence that party-political mobilisation through the Europarties has been decisive for decision-making in the European Council and on EU treaties. In particular, the EPP played a pivotal role in the processes preceding the adoption of the Single European Act[6] and the Treaty on European Union, or Maastricht Treaty.[7] On both occasions, the Christian Democrats shaped the treaty negotiations through collective action. The significance of the EPP pre-summit meetings became apparent during the Maastricht Treaty negotiations.

The EPP profited from its relative majority in the European Council up until the mid-1990s. It mobilised its network and was a cohesive family of mainly Christian Democrats that was able to shape politics and policies. The Christian Democrat heads of government met regularly and agreed on fundamental points. Yet, there is also evidence of the limits to Europarty effectiveness and influence, as shown in the case of the EPP and the Treaty of Amsterdam.[8]

The content of the Single European Act, which was negotiated in 1985 and took effect in 1987, was largely the result of the EPP leaders' leverage, and their determination to push through reforms to shift European integration in a more supranational direction. In 1985, of the original 6 member states, Christian Democrats were still in the leading positions in 5, and out of a total of 10 governments, EPP member parties were represented in 6. The Christian Democrat leaders knew each other well. At the time, the EPP Conference (of party leaders and heads of government) brought together some 30 high-level politicians, including leaders of national governments, political parties and parliamentary groups, as well as the presidencies of the EPP and of the EPP Group, along with commissioners and leading Members of the European Parliament.

In the making of the Maastricht Treaty or the Treaty on European Union, the meetings of Christian Democrat leaders shaped both the agenda and the

[6] Johansson, 'Party Elites in Multilevel Europe'.

[7] Johansson, 'Another Road to Maastricht'.

[8] Johansson, 'The European People's Party and the Amsterdam Treaty'; Johansson, 'Europarty Influence and Its Limits'.

outcome of the negotiations. Previous studies display a clear link between the Maastricht Treaty outcome and the demands and positions of the EPP.[9] Many of the EPP's requirements made their way into the new treaty. A comparative analysis shows that most of the EPP's demands were satisfactorily met and that there was no progress at all on only one point, namely on the *avis conforme*—the need for the assent of the EP for new actions (Article 235) and revisions of the treaties (Article 236). Wilfried Martens, EPP president and prime minister of Belgium, had drawn up most of the important demands in agreement with Ruud Lubbers, the Dutch prime minister, who would chair the Maastricht European Council. In an interview, Lubbers said that at that time the EPP 'did a lot as Christian Democrats together', were 'a strong family' and were 'still a team'.[10] Also in an interview, Martens noted that positions were 'strongly inspired by the EPP programme', even though some of the EPP prime ministers were in coalition governments and therefore there were no 'purely EPP attitudes'.[11] In 1991, 6 out of 12 prime ministers in the European Council belonged to the EPP family.

At the time of the 1996–7 IGC, the EPP was operating in more constrained circumstances. The party was no longer in the ascendancy in the European Council, it was suffering from internal divisions (not least over employment policy) and, most importantly, there was a less favourable domestic political context in Germany. For a long time, the numbers had been in the EPP's favour. During the second half of the 1990s, however, they were against the party. At the Amsterdam European Council in June 1997, out of 15 heads of government only 6 were from the EPP and of these only 3 were traditional Christian Democrats. A new balance of power had emerged in the European Council. EPP government leaders were still an important part of it, but they were numerically weakened. The small number of Christian Democrats made it even more important to coordinate the policies of the EPP and the positions taken by 'its' heads of governments in the IGC. To that end, there was a series of meetings at the highest level, the EPP Summit, but despite finding consensus on several of the demands within the EPP, those present failed to agree on a more substantial institutional reform. To Wilfried Martens, the

[9] D. Hanley, 'At the Heart of the Decision-Making Process? The European People's Party in the European Union', in P. Delwit, E. Külahci and C. Van de Walle (eds.), *The Europarties: Organisation and Influence* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2004), 250; S. Hix and C. Lord, *Political Parties in the European Union* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 189; T. Jansen and S. Van Hecke, *At Europe's Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011), 157–9; Johansson, 'Another Road to Maastricht', 887.

[10] Interview conducted by the author, Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, 15 June 2000.

[11] Interview conducted by the author, Brussels, 30 March 2000. See also W. Martens, *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 104–8.

EPP president, the Amsterdam outcome was a disappointment, especially as key demands in the institutional fields were abandoned, although there was some 'degree of success', such as the expansion of co-decision and the strengthening of the EP's control over the Commission.[12] In my interview with Martens, he said it was not a big result on institutional reform because Kohl 'was not willing' to agree to a 'decision' or 'solution' in this field due to problems in Germany.[13] This was 'very different' from the 1980s and from Maastricht, when the six EPP heads of government had been 'very closely' coordinated. Maastricht had reflected the strong 'political will' to reform the Union; that will 'no longer existed' due to the focus and efforts of governments having shifted to the single currency and the Stability (and Growth) Pact, which was Kohl's main priority.

In summary, the situation at the 1996–7 IGC exposed the limitations of the EPP's influence. It was clear that the party had failed to influence the outcome more significantly, and this was because, first, it lacked the relative majority from which it had profited before and, second, there were internal divisions in the party. By comparison, the EPP's influence had been much in evidence in the two earlier treaty reforms. Taken together, these instances illustrate how the extent to which Europarties can 'make a difference' depends not only on the capacity for mobilisation and on incumbency, but also on cohesion.

## Lessons learned

This chapter began with the observation that Europarties shape and are reshaped by European integration. The existing studies of Europarties, and this chapter too, have shown both their significance and limitations. The EPP demonstrated its effectiveness in the treaty reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s, while the reform that occurred in the second half of the 1990s is a powerful reminder of the constraints on Europarties to deliver on their ambitions. I conclude this chapter by sharing two overlapping lessons or takeaways from this analysis.

First, one clear lesson is that numerical strength is certainly important, but what really matters is the ability to translate ambitions into joint action. This requires a shared commitment through institutional presence and peer pressure. It also points to the need for organisational capacity.

[12] Ibid., 137–8.

[13] Interview conducted by the author, Brussels, 30 March 2000.

Second, cohesion is essential to enable Europarties to exercise their agency effectively. The expansion of the EPP to parties from origins other than Christian Democracy has increased the party's ideological divisions, adding dissenting voices within. This development is hampering the party's ability to find a coherent voice, not least over the future of the EU itself. (So far, the EPP has said relatively little about treaty reform.) Somehow, and without undermining trust, deeper schisms must be confronted to be able to continue to shape agendas and decisions.

All of this highlights not only the EPP's influence, but also its internal divisions. In crucial ways, through collective action the EPP has been able to alter the EU's constitutional and institutional foundations forever. Put another way: despite having to meet demanding conditions, the influence of the Europarties can be profound.

## Bibliography

Hanley, D., 'At the Heart of the Decision-Making Process? The European People's Party in the European Union', in P. Delwit, E. Külahci and C. Van de Walle (eds.), *The Europarties: Organisation and Influence* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2004), 243–61.

Hix, S. and Lord, C., *Political Parties in the European Union* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

Jansen, T. and Van Hecke, S., *At Europe's Service: The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2011).

Johansson, K. M., 'Another Road to Maastricht: The Christian Democrat Coalition and the Quest for European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40/5 (2002), 871–93.

Johansson, K. M., 'Constitutionalising the Union: The Role of the EPP Group', in L. Bardi et al. (eds.), *The European Ambition: The Group of the European People's Party and European Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), 89–130.

Johansson, K. M., 'Europarty Influence and Its Limits: The Case of the European People's Party and the Amsterdam Treaty', *Journal of European Integration* 38/1 (2016), 79–94.

Johansson, K. M., 'European People's Party', in K. M. Johansson and P. A. Zervakis (eds.), *European Political Parties Between Cooperation and Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002), 51–80.

Johansson, K. M., 'Party Elites in Multilevel Europe: The Christian Democrats and the Single European Act', *Party Politics* 8/4 (2002), 423–39.

Johansson, K. M., 'The European People's Party and the Amsterdam Treaty', *Journal of European Integration History* 21/2 (2015), 269–86.

Johansson, K. M., 'The Role of Europarties in EU Treaty Reform: Theory and Practice', *Acta Politica* 52/3 (2017), 286–305.

Johansson, K. M., *Transnational Party Alliances: Analysing the Hard-Won Alliance Between Conservatives and Christian Democrats in the European Parliament*, Ph.D. thesis (Lund: Lund University Press, 1997).

Johansson, K. M. and Raunio, T., 'Political Parties in the European Union', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1153.

Johansson, K. M. and Raunio, T., *Transnational Parties and Advocacy in European Integration* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), accessed at https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-62285-4.

Martens, W., *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008).

Tallberg, J. and Johansson, K. M., 'Party Politics in the European Council', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15/8 (2008), 1222–42.

Van Hecke, S., 'Christian Democratic Parties and Europeanisation', in S. Van Hecke and E. Gerard (eds.), *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe Since the End of the Cold War* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 43–54.

Van Hecke, S., 'Do Transnational Party Federations Matter? ( . . . and Why Should We Care?)', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 6/3 (2010), 395–411.

Van Hecke, S. et al., *Reconnecting European Political Parties With European Union Citizens* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2018), accessed at https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/reconnecting-european-political-parties-european-union-citizens.

**Karl Magnus Johansson** is an Affiliate Professor of Political Science at Södertörn University, Stockholm. His primary research interests are European integration and politics, political parties and transnationalism, and political communication and executive institutions.