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# Party politics in the European Council

Jonas Tallberg and Karl Magnus Johansson

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores the extent to which the growing party politicization of the EU extends to the European Council. We advance the argument that three central factors shape the extent to which party politics influences European Council outcomes: the salience of an issue along the left–right dimension, the partisan composition of the European Council, and the cohesion and mobilization of transnational parties. We explore the influence of these factors empirically through an inventory of elite interview evidence as well as two case studies – the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty and the Lisbon agenda. We conclude that the conditions for party influence in the European Council are demanding, and that the scope for party politicization is less extensive than in the other major EU institutions. The issues on the agenda of the European Council often cut across partisan divides, the heads of government are seldom mobilized along transnational party lines, and decision outcomes instead tend to reflect issue-specific coalition patterns.

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**KEY WORDS** Coalitions; European Council; negotiations; party politics; politicization; transnational parties.

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## INTRODUCTION\*

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One of the most distinct trends in the European Union (EU) over the past two decades is growing party politicization. Constitutional changes since the mid-1980s have strengthened the European Parliament *vis-à-vis* other EU institutions, and encouraged transnational associations of national political parties to transform into proper parties at the European level. European elections nowadays shape politics in the EU by determining the relative strength of competing party groups in the Parliament, and by influencing the partisan composition of the European Commission. In the everyday politics of the European Parliament, the left–right dimension structures political contestation and shapes political outcomes. Yet, to what extent is the growing party politicization of the EU isolated to the composition, internal politics, and external influence of the European Parliament, and to what extent does this trend pertain to other EU institutions as well?

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The purpose in this article is to explore the role of party politics in the European Council. Composed of the heads of government of the member states and the president of the Commission, assisted by the ministers of foreign affairs and an additional member of the Commission, the European Council constitutes the traditional site for fierce bargaining over institutional reform, enlargement,

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long-term budgets, foreign policy, socioeconomic policy, and senior personnel appointments in the EU. As the supreme political body of the EU, the European Council is like no other institution associated with the safeguarding and clashing of national interests. At the same time, the heads of government in the European Council represent national political parties with distinct ideological orientations, memberships in transnational parties, and participation in institutionalized pre-summit meetings, which generate the expectation that party concerns influence the positions they take, the coalitions they form, and the deals they accept.

We address this topic through a focus on *the conditions under which party divides matter in European Council negotiations*. We advance an argument that highlights three central factors shaping the extent to which party politics influences European Council outcomes. First, decision-making in the European Council is more likely to become party politicized, the more salient issues are along the left–right dimension. Second, political outcomes are more likely to reflect distinct partisan preferences, the greater the dominance of one particular transnational party in the European Council. Third, transnational parties are more likely to influence the process and outcome of negotiations, the greater their cohesion and capacity for mobilization.

We explore these hypotheses empirically in two ways. First, we summarize evidence from a unique series of elite interviews with acting or former heads of government, foreign ministers, and top-level civil servants, with extensive experience of European Council negotiations.<sup>1</sup> Second, we offer two illustrative case studies of attempts at party mobilization in socioeconomic issues, salient along the left–right dimension: the negotiations leading to the adoption of the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, and the negotiations preceding the adoption of the Lisbon agenda in 2000. In addition to secondary sources, these case studies draw on interviews as well as direct observation at congresses of the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) over the course of the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

We conclude that the conditions for party influence in the European Council are demanding, and that the scope for party politicization in this body is less extensive than in the other major EU institutions. Most issues on the agenda of the European Council cut across traditional ideological divides, the heads of government are seldom mobilized along transnational party lines, and decision outcomes tend to reflect issue-specific coalition patterns. While prominent in individual cases, party politics generally tends to play a secondary role in the European Council.

This article moves beyond the state of the art in three prominent ways. First, contributions on party politics in the EU primarily address the European Parliament, whereas systematic research on the European Council effectively is non-existent. Second, existing work on transnational parties has mainly analysed their organizational development, paying less attention to the conditions for party influence (Raunio 2006: 252). Third, existing literature on the European Council so far has not addressed the party political dimension of summit

negotiations (cf. Bulmer and Wessels 1987; Westlake and Galloway 2004; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006; Tallberg 2008).

We develop our argument in five substantive sections. The first section presents alternative theories of coalition formation, outlining the partisan hypothesis and its competitors. The second section elaborates on the three factors shaping the influence of party politics in the European Council. The third section presents the results of elite interviews on party politics in the European Council. The fourth and fifth sections present the two illustrative case studies. We conclude by summarizing the argument, discussing the potential impact of the recent enlargement, and outlining the broader implications of this article for existing and future research.

## COALITION FORMATION: ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Coalitions are a central feature of both domestic politics and international negotiations. For individual actors, coalition building serves to pool power and enhance the chances of influence over outcomes. For the collective of actors, coalitions help to simplify the process of bargaining. Yet, given this basic demand for co-operation, why do actors form some coalitions rather than others? What are the motives driving the choice of coalition partners? The partisan hypothesis suggests that actors form coalitions primarily on the basis of ideological affinity, as defined by party affiliation. By contrast, other theories point to power, interest, and culture as driving concerns.

### The partisan hypothesis

Coalitions based on ideological affinity are predicted by comparative politics theories on societal cleavages, party formation and political contestation. According to the classic contribution in the field, critical junctures in European political development generated a set of deep-seated societal cleavages and basic ideological conflicts, pertaining to class, religion, and centre–periphery, that shaped the party systems of the European states (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In Western Europe today, the left–right dimension constitutes the central organizing principle in national politics, and is generally seen as encompassing two sub-dimensions: one intervention-free market dimension, pertaining to economic issues, and one libertarian–authoritarian dimension, pertaining to individual freedoms (Hix 1999; see also Bartolini 2005). When applied to the politics of coalition formation at the international level, this approach suggests that actor alignments will reflect ideological proximities and divides, as defined by party affiliation. Coalition patterns are likely to be stable over time, as long as the same parties remain in office, but change if shifts in government occur. Moreover, coalitions are likely to be the same across issue areas.

In the study of EU politics, the notion of partisan coalitions receives extensive support in the empirical work on the European Parliament. Research on the

European political space strongly suggests that left–right constitutes the central dimension of contestation, supplemented by a second ideological dimension particular to the EU level, independence–integration, capturing attitudes toward European integration (Hix 1999; Marks and Steenbergen 2002; Hix *et al.* 2006; Raunio 2006). The two dimensions are present in the positions that national parties take on European issues, in the election manifestos of the transnational parties, in mass attitudes towards the EU, in the organization of party groups in the European Parliament, and in the voting patterns of Members of the European Parliament. Even some assessments of coalition formation in the Council of Ministers find support for a left–right dimension (albeit weak), expressed, for instance, by shifts in member state positions as a product of changes in government (Mattila 2004; Hagemann, forthcoming). Translated to the context of European Council negotiations, the partisan hypothesis generates the expectation of a party political divide, with heads of government co-ordinating positions within the dominant transnational parties – the PES, the EPP, and the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR).

### 155 **Competing expectations**

Ideological proximity only constitutes one of several potential bases for coalition building. Simplifying slightly, competing hypotheses highlight power, interests, and culture as alternative driving concerns (Laver and Schofield 1998; Elgström *et al.* 2001; Kaeding and Selck 2005). *Power-based coalitions* are predicted by rational choice theories privileging power-seeking behaviour. This approach suggests that actors seek coalition partners based on their capacity to generate winning majorities or blocking minorities (Riker 1962). Coalition building is guided by the philosophy of ‘most important first’, and generates the expectation of coalitions among or with the most powerful actors, stretching across multiple issue areas. In the context of EU negotiations, the Franco-German alliance is frequently considered a power-based coalition, formed for the purpose of producing pre-agreements that set the parameters for the broader negotiations (Pedersen 1998; Cole 2001).

*Interest-based coalitions* are predicted by rational choice theories privileging preference proximity. This approach suggests that actors in their choice of coalition partners first and foremost care about the degree to which they share substantive interests on the issues under negotiation (Axelrod 1970). Coalition building is guided by the philosophy of ‘easiest first’, and this generates the expectation of coalitions among like-minded actors. Furthermore, coalitions would be expected to be issue specific and cross-cutting. In the context of the EU, the notion of interest-based coalitions receives extensive support in both qualitative and quantitative research on negotiations in the Council of Ministers (e.g. *Journal of European Public Policy* 2000; Thomson *et al.* 2004; Zimmer *et al.* 2005; Tallberg 2006).

*Culture-based coalitions* are predicted by theories of negotiation placing particular emphasis on culture and communication. This literature explores how cultural traits related to, for instance, language, history, and ethnicity, affect the central components of negotiations (Faure 2002). This approach generates the expectation of coalitions based on cultural affinity, which are stable and stretch across multiple issue areas. In the EU context, scholars specifically point to cultural affinity as an explanation of geographically defined patterns in the Council of Ministers, notably the existence of a deep-rooted north–south divide (Elgström *et al.* 2001; Kaeding and Selck 2005; Naurin and Lindahl, forthcoming).

## CONDITIONS FOR PARTY INFLUENCE IN THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL

If partisan coalitions constitute one of several alternative forms of alliance in the European Council, under what conditions can we expect this pattern to dominate? In this section, we suggest that three factors shape the scope and influence of party politics in the European Council: the salience of an issue along the left–right dimension, the partisan composition of the European Council, and the cohesion and mobilization of transnational parties.

### Salience of issue on the left–right dimension

The issues on the agenda of the European Council evoke the left–right dimension of politics to varying degrees. We submit that a factor positively influencing the likelihood of heads of government being mobilized along party lines is the salience of an issue in left–right ideological terms. Some issues relate strongly to the intervention-free market and libertarian–authoritarian dimensions summarized in the left–right continuum, whereas other issues only evoke these dimensions to a limited degree, or not at all. The importance of issue salience for the manifestation of the left–right dimension is not unique to the European Council. Rather, it has been observed that the positions adopted by the transnational parties are most clearly defined in those policy areas that strongly conform to traditional left–right conflicts (Lightfoot 2005: 10). Likewise, the positions taken by individual citizens are to varying degrees constrained by the left–right dimension, depending on the nature of the issue (Thomassen and Schmitt 1997: 172).

An emphasis on the nature of the issues yields the expectation that party mobilization would occur less frequently in the European Council than in the Council of Ministers, the Commission and, especially, the European Parliament. The agenda of the European Council is such that only a minority of the issues can be clearly defined in left–right terms. Dominant themes on the agenda – historically and today – are institutional reform, enlargement, foreign policy, and budgetary issues. All of these themes tend to evoke other dimensions of contention than left versus right. Socioeconomic issues feature

on the agenda when referred from the Council of Ministers, either because the ministers have been unable to reach a decision, or because agreements must be politically confirmed at the highest level. More importantly, however, socio-economic issues have entered the agenda of the European Council to a greater extent since the late 1990s, as a product of the open method of co-ordination, which grants the European Council a role in defining goals and reviewing progress on employment, competitiveness, and sustainable development (Borrás and Jacobsson 2004).

### Partisan composition of the European Council

The heads of government in the European Council represent national parties in office. Depending on the pattern of electoral success in the member states, the European Council will be dominated by, or divided between, socialists, liberals, and conservatives.<sup>3</sup> We hypothesize that the relative number of heads of government that each respective transnational party can gather will affect outcomes on issues politicized along the left–right dimension. Figure 1 provides an overview of the relative numerical strength of the socialist (PES), liberal (ELDR), and

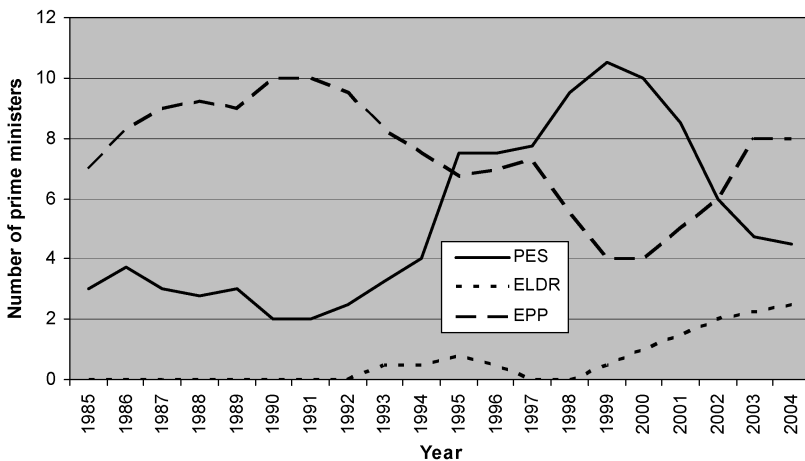


Figure 1 Relative numerical strength of transnational parties in the European Council, 1985–2004

*Note:* The scores for France and Finland are based on the party affiliation of both prime minister and president. Yearly scores are split in half when shifts in government occur. When prime ministers or presidents are not part of any transnational party, their ideological profiles have been approximated. Hence, Jacques Chirac (Rally for the Republic, RPR), Charles Haughey (Fianna Fáil), and Albert Reynolds (Fianna Fáil) are classified as conservative (EPP), and Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (non-political) and Lamberto Dini (non-political) are classified as liberal (ELDR).

conservative (EPP) parties in the European Council over the past two decades. It points to three distinct periods: conservative predominance in the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, socialist predominance in the second half of the 1990s, and conservative and liberal predominance in the first half of the 2000s.

These swings in the partisan composition of the European Council were an effect of general ideological shifts in national electorates, which translated into the empowerment of socialists or conservatives/liberals in several member states within a limited time period. At most, in the late 1990s, socialists formed all or part of 13 out of 15 governments. It was during this period that the European Council concluded the negotiations on the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty, which we explore in our first case study. This period of socialist supremacy gradually gave way to centre-right dominance in the early 2000s, with the elections of, for instance, José Maria Aznar in Spain, José Manuel Barroso in Portugal, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Jan Peter Balkenende in the Netherlands, and Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Denmark. This partisan swing in the composition of the European Council is often posited as an explanation for the political reorientation toward competitiveness and liberalization, manifested in the ‘Lisbon process’, which is the topic of our second case study.

However, heads of government do not necessarily adopt the same ideological position, just because they belong to the same transnational party. The ideological profiles of national parties of the same political colour vary, and the transnational parties, as a consequence, exhibit a level of heterogeneity. For instance, there is notable variation among both the conservative and Christian democratic parties of the EPP, and the socialist and social democratic parties of the PES, on issues of liberalization and social regulation. Hence, we identify the degree of ideological cohesiveness among the heads of government of a particular party as a factor that shapes the capacity to translate numerical advantage into party political influence.

### **Cohesion and mobilization of transnational parties**

Numerical superiority alone is not sufficient for influencing political outcomes in the European Council along party political lines. In addition, the heads of government of a particular transnational party must be mobilized for the joint cause. Hence, we hypothesize that transnational parties are more likely to influence the process and outcome of negotiations, the greater their cohesion and capacity for mobilization. As Simon Hix (2005: 187) notes with regard to party influence generally in the EU, ‘translation from party strengths to policy outputs requires party actors in the same party family to cooperate.’ To this end, the transnational parties organize meetings of party and government leaders just before the opening of European Council summits, but also hold party summits and conclaves independent of the European Council. The purpose of such institutionalized networking is to discuss items on the agenda, develop strategies, and – whenever possible – hammer out a common line.

For the heads of government, the transnational parties offer a layer of coalition building in the European Council, through which they may seek to improve the bargaining position of the state they represent. However, the effectiveness of the parties as vehicles for coalition building in the European Council depends on their relative cohesion and capacity to mobilize ‘their’ heads of government for the party cause. The pre-summit meetings among party leaders are a central aspect of this mobilization process, and their significance appears to vary over time and across party families. There are instances when party political mobilization through pre-meetings has been decisive for decision-making in the European Council (Hix and Lord 1997; Johansson 1999, 2002a, 2002b). Yet, there is also evidence that a lack of commitment to these meetings among the heads of government has reduced their significance.

### **PARTY POLITICS IN THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL: EVIDENCE FROM ÉLITE INTERVIEWS**

In the previous section, we introduced three factors hypothesized to condition party politics in the European Council. In this section, we present interview evidence on the influence of these factors. The evidence is drawn from a unique series of elite interviews conducted in 2004–06 with acting or former heads of state and government, foreign ministers, and top-level officials of the member states and EU institutions. This methodological strategy was explicitly chosen for purposes of overcoming the data problems that have so far hampered the development of research on the European Council. The list of interviewees includes, among others, nine heads of state or government, four foreign ministers, one president of the Commission, and one secretary general of the Council. The interviewees were selected to control for known divides in European politics, notably left–right and north–south. Below, we centre on general tendencies in the interview material, based on multiple interviews, and only draw on individual interviews to exemplify common opinions among the interviewees.

The central message from this series of elite interviews is one of scepticism toward the notion of party politics in the European Council. The dominating perception is that most issues are not easily placed on the left–right dimension, pre-summit co-ordination in the transnational parties tends to be ineffective, and ideological differences within these parties undercut their political potential. This general message is explicitly advanced by politicians of left and right, as well as senior civil servants. Erkki Tuomioja, former social democratic minister for foreign affairs in Finland, testifies: ‘Although the European Union, and in particular the European Parliament, is fully [party] politicized, you do not see this at the European Council. There are no ideological or clear political lines.’ Similarly, a prominent conservative head of government remarks: ‘It never occurred to me, sitting around the table, that there was a particular right–left split. Not at the heads of government level, when it came to decision-making. National interests are and always have been much stronger.’

In the same vein, John Kerr, with experience of participation in about 50 European Council meetings as UK senior official, testifies: 'I cannot really see growing politicization in terms of left and right in the European Council.'

365 According to the interviewees, the agenda of the European Council is such that only a few issues are *salient in left-right terms*, with the potential to generate processes of party politicization. The issues that become politicized in left-right terms pertain either to socioeconomic matters, or to institutional appointments, where the transnational parties have distinct stakes. As testified by one foreign minister: 'Party affiliation matters very little in the European Council. 370 Overall, the heads of state and government in the European Council do not want to co-ordinate party-wise, even if it may happen in economic and social issues where the ideological affinity is more pronounced.' Another interviewee makes the same point through a comparison with the Council of Ministers: 'Coalitions in the European Council are best described as fluid. That even 375 goes in comparison to the specialized councils, where the issues to a greater extent bring affinity in party colour and ideology to the fore.'

It is a very common observation that most coalitions are issue specific and involve a low degree of institutionalization. Coalitions tend to form and operate on a flexible basis, with loyalties playing a minor role. There is rarely a sense of 'us and them' and you are not regarded as unfaithful when shifting to new partners on the next issue on the agenda. Rather, as Göran Persson, former social democratic prime minister of Sweden, emphasizes: 'It is important to go by your interests, and not to get stuck in fixed groupings.' The result is a pattern of cross-cutting coalitions, with different alignments across the central 380 categories of issues on the agenda – institutional reform, enlargement, budget politics, socioeconomic issues, and foreign policy. 385

When issues become subject to party mobilization, the *partisan composition of the European Council* tends to affect negotiated outcomes, according to the interviewees. It is a common observation that the predominance of the socialist party family during the second half of the 1990s, as well as the liberal-conservative predominance during the first half of the 2000s, left partisan imprints on the outcomes of summit negotiations on socio-political issues. When there is a significant majority in the European Council of a particular party political colour, even heads of government from large member states will be marginalized, testifies Tarja Halonen, president of Finland: 'It does not help if you come from the country alone, if you have the wrong political 390 background.' 395

That said, European Council participants frequently point to ideological heterogeneity among heads of government with the same party affiliation as a significant constraint on the capacity of the transnational parties to transform numerical superiority into desired political outcomes. As one head of government explains: 'Sometimes, there is a greater difference between a Nordic social democrat and a social democrat from southern Europe, than there is between a Nordic social democrat and a German Christian democrat.' 400 Underscoring this point, a northern social democratic participant of the 405

European Council acknowledges: 'I find that I myself am mostly in agreement with Jacques Chirac and in disagreement with Tony Blair!'

European Council participants further testify that limits in the *mobilization capacity of the transnational parties* negatively affect their ability to shape outcomes, even when enjoying numerical superiority. Particularly common is the observation that the limited interest of influential heads of government, like Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, to attend the preparatory meetings of the PES reduced the political potential of the socialist party during the early 2000s. In this vein, one European Council participant notes: 'I started at a time when social democrats were in 11 or 12 of the 15 governments, with 13 at most, but there was no socialist co-ordination to speak of at all. The attempts to have these pre-Council meetings were rather ineffective. The big boys did not attend and it was quite irrelevant.' Stephen Wall, former EU affairs adviser at Downing Street, explains the absence of the UK prime minister: 'Blair sees the party pre-meetings as a complete waste of time. Instead, he talks to those he needs to talk to.'

The EPP has confronted fewer problems in securing the participation of its heads of government at pre-summit meetings. But testimonies suggest that participation is not all, as limits in the ambition and capacity to co-ordinate positions may reduce the influence of the transnational parties as well. As John Bruton, former prime minister of Ireland, testifies: 'These discussions [at EPP summits] were useful in preparing for the subsequent heads of government meetings between all of the members. The meetings gave a particularly good insight into the thinking of Chancellor Kohl, who tended to lead the discussions within the EPP. The EPP meetings did not, however, take any decisions or give any directions as to "EPP policy" at the subsequent formal heads of government meeting. The only occasion that I recollect anything remotely of that character happening was when we discussed a particular appointment to a job.'<sup>4</sup>

Below, we explore how the partisan composition of the European Council and the mobilization of transnational parties shaped the scope for party influence on two central issues during the past decade: the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty and the Lisbon agenda. Both negotiations concerned issues that were highly salient along the left–right dimension and where attempts at party politicization could be expected. Given the character of the European Council as a relatively inhospitable environment for party politics, these negotiations may be described as most likely cases within a least-likely setting. Since the case studies serve to provide a preliminary assessment of novel hypotheses, they have the status of plausibility probes (George and Bennett 2005: 75).

## CASE STUDY: THE EMPLOYMENT CHAPTER

Employment was a policy domain that originally should not have been part of the agenda of the intergovernmental conference (IGC) in 1996–97. Yet, following intensive preparatory work in the PES from 1993 onwards, employment was

transformed into one of the priorities of the IGC. The issue was highly salient along the left–right dimension and generated attempts to form party coalitions in the European Council. Numerically dominating the European Council in the second part of the 1990s (see Figure 1), the socialists championed the establishment of an employment chapter in the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty. This is generally considered an example of successful transnational party politics (Johansson 1999; Ladrech 2000; Külahci 2001, 2002; Lightfoot 2005). While remaining a national competence, employment policy was henceforth to be co-ordinated at the European level through a specific institutional procedure and strategy.

The origins of the employment chapter can be traced back to the Nordic labour movement, and specifically to a PES working group on employment set up in September 1993 by the PES leaders – the European employment initiative (Johansson 1999). The working group consisting of personal representatives of national party leaders was chaired by Allan Larsson, a former Swedish finance minister, and assisted by the PES secretariat (interviews Larsson and Tuytens). The result was the report ‘Put Europe to Work’, which was the product of intensive consultation at the highest levels of party and government and constituted ‘a truly transnational policy contribution by the Socialists’ (Ladrech 1997a: 180). The PES leaders adopted the report at their pre-summit meeting in December 1993.

The December 1994 Essen European Council was another stepping stone on the road to Amsterdam. The Essen summit agenda included, among other things, the implementation of the employment initiative and the agenda of the IGC due to start in 1996. In their pre-summit meeting, the PES leaders underlined the fact that Europe lacked an effective employment policy and that PES member parties were prepared to take leadership in the formulation of the new employment strategy, based on the Larsson report. The Essen summit was held a few weeks before Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the EU as full member states. However, the heads of government of these new members were invited to the summit as observers and contributed to pushing employment as an item for the upcoming IGC (interview Carlsson).

Sweden was the first member state formally to suggest the introduction of an employment chapter in the Treaty, in a proposal that drew heavily on work conducted within the PES. The proposal was tabled in September 1995 in the Reflection Group preparing the IGC agenda (interview Lund). The proposal subsequently became ‘a fixed item in the negotiations’ (Ladrech 1997b: 110). From then onwards, there was a clear party-political pattern in the positions taken by governments on this issue. Whereas the IGC by definition was conducted through intergovernmental negotiations, the parties continued to mobilize over the issue of employment policy.

Both the PES and the EPP organized working groups devoted to the IGC, and parties set up meetings between the personal advisers of the heads of government. The main purpose was to strengthen co-ordination and sound out common ground between the governments. The forceful mobilization of the PES leaders in favour of an employment chapter, and the dominance

of the PES in the European Council, effectively put the EPP leaders in a position where they would have to accept that employment would become part of the Treaty. Internal differences in ideological emphasis became apparent in this process in both the PES and the EPP, but did not translate into cross-cutting coalitions that undermined the influence of the transnational party co-ordination.

The Swedish social democratic government found allies especially in the governments of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland and Spain, all of which included PES member parties. The PES leaders in general shared a sense of responsibility for the employment issue, and it constituted the key issue in the run-up to and throughout the IGC. The primary responsibilities should lie with the member states, but national employment policies could be made more effective through co-ordination at the European level. The employment chapter, as pioneered by the PES, was effectively adopted at the Dublin European Council in December 1996, when six months of negotiations still remained.

In May and June 1997, the PES grouping in the European Council was further reinforced through the election of Tony Blair as prime minister in the UK, and Lionel Jospin as prime minister of France. Yet, while increasing the dominance of the PES in the European Council, the elections of Blair and Jospin also added elements of ideological heterogeneity to, and tension among, the group of PES leaders. The traditional socialist agenda for an interventionist, regulatory Europe championed by Jospin collided with the new centre-left project promoted by Blair (Devuyst 1998: 624; Pollack 2000: 269). Though unable to bridge such internal divisions, the socialists were nevertheless able to steer the employment chapter towards adoption during the last month preceding the Amsterdam summit. The socialist dominance in European politics was epitomized by the strategic PES congress in Malmö, Sweden, just one week before the Amsterdam summit in June 1997, where the PES could boast nine socialist prime ministers and socialist presence in another four governments.

Employment policy did not constitute the top priority of the EPP at the IGC. Rather, the EPP focused on institutional reforms to prepare the EU for enlargement, as well as issues pertaining to EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs policy. In the end, the EPP failed to influence the outcome on employment significantly, first and most important, because they lacked the relative majority from which they had profited before and, second, because the EPP suffered from internal ideological divisions among its leaders (Van Hecke 2004: 50). The employment chapter was one of the most difficult issues for the EPP in the IGC (interview Welle). Chancellor Kohl argued that employment is 'a matter of the member states and of the *Länder*' (interview Martens). Yet, during the course of the IGC, principled support developed for a chapter on employment in the Treaty. The consensus of EPP leaders is reflected in a speech by EPP president Martens, who said, with reference to the European Council conclusions of Essen (1994), Florence (1996) and Dublin (1996),

that a better strategy of co-ordination of national employment policies is necessary and that there should be a chapter on employment in the Treaty (Martens 1997). Positions outlined in this speech had been cleared with Bonn. Elmar Brok, a German Christian democrat member of the European Parliament and close to Kohl, had accepted the proposal for a chapter on employment already tabled in September 1995 to the Reflection Group in which he represented the European Parliament (interview Brok).

The emerging consensus in the EPP was the product of a compromise between the competing standpoints as well as of the realization that opposition would be difficult politically, given the EPP's numerical weakness in the European Council. While declaring its support for an employment chapter, the EPP simultaneously emphasized the application of the principle of subsidiarity, thus underlining that employment policy should remain a national responsibility.

In sum, there was a clear party-political pattern in the support of EU governments for the employment chapter of the Amsterdam Treaty. Whereas socialist and social democratic governments pushed the issue, the conservative or Christian democratic governments of Britain, France, Germany, and Spain were reluctant or opposed. Even if it is questionable whether any of these governments would have been ready to block an employment chapter, the swing from the right to the left in the British and French parliamentary elections in May and June 1997 was significant in that it further shifted the balance in favour of the PES. During this period of socialist numerical supremacy in the European Council, the PES effectively mobilized 'its' heads of government, and eventually succeeded in shaping the outcome along partisan preferences. The case of the employment chapter thus offers support for the partisan hypothesis.

## CASE STUDY: THE LISBON AGENDA

After it had concluded the negotiations on the employment chapter, which states that employment is a 'matter of common concern', the European Council subsequently worked to put these ambitions into effect. During the period between the Amsterdam European Council in June 1997 and the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, which adopted the Lisbon agenda, there were several instances of party mobilization of the heads of government. A key event in the post-Amsterdam developments was the special jobs summit held in Luxembourg in November 1997, which launched the European employment strategy, also referred to as the 'Luxembourg process'. This was followed by the 'Cardiff process' on structural reform of the markets for goods, services and finances, agreed by the European Council in June 1998. Another key event was the European Council meeting in Cologne in June 1999, which adopted the European employment pact and launched the 'Cologne process' on a macroeconomic dialogue. Throughout this period, there was significant activity in both the PES and the EPP. However, in both cases, it became evident that, while sharing a commitment to addressing unemployment in

Europe, the strategies advocated by the leaders within each party varied in emphasis.

The divisions within the PES and the EPP became particularly notable in the preparatory work before the Luxembourg and Cologne summits. In mid-1997, the PES established a working group on employment, whose primary task was to prepare objectives for the Luxembourg summit. Yet, because of ideological divisions between Blair and Jospin, it was decided that the PES should focus on a limited number of issues, on which the PES heads of government could present a united front (interview Tuytens). The divisions came to the fore again in mid-1998, when the PES held a party leader meeting prior to the European Council summit in Cardiff. While Blair championed structural reform of the European economy as a central priority for the UK presidency, Jospin presented plans for EU-wide expansionist Keynesian policies (Lightfoot 2005: 129–30). While the PES is judged to have influenced the agenda of the Cologne European Council in 1999 by promoting the employment pact (Ladrech 2000: 125), internal ideological divisions simultaneously weakened the capacity to play a true policy-seeking role (Lightfoot 2005: 31).

The EPP, for its part, had to come to terms with the fact that a central force behind the new employment strategy was Luxembourg's Christian democrat prime minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, whose ideological profile did not square well with the positions of more right-wing political leaders. Juncker was in favour of establishing concrete and binding guidelines or directives on employment. However, other parties, notably the ruling Spanish Partido Popular under the leadership of José Maria Aznar, objected to such strict provisions, and emphasized the national responsibility for employment policy. At a closed meeting in the context of the EPP congress held prior to the Luxembourg jobs summit, Juncker called for all member states to unite behind one single employment policy and singled out the Spanish government for objecting to harmonization of taxes and closer macroeconomic co-ordination (direct observation). The congress demonstrated the clear division in the EPP, not least between Benelux Christian democratic principles and liberal-conservative solutions (Martens 2006: 311). At the same time, Juncker convinced Kohl of the employment strategy including 'European guidelines' (interview Martens).

It was in this context of great attention to the issue of employment, but ideological tension within the party families, that the Portuguese socialist government under António Guterres put employment on the agenda of its EU presidency during the first half of 2000 (Edwards and Wiessala 2001: 44). In early 1999, Guterres led a PES working group on employment, which developed ideas for a European employment pact. These ambitions informed the European Council in Cologne in June 1999, as well as the special European Council in Lisbon in March 2000, dedicated to employment, economic reform and social cohesion. This constituted a broadening of the agenda, compared to the Luxembourg and Cologne summits, through the inclusion of issues pertaining to new technologies, innovation, the knowledge economy, and the information society.

At the Lisbon summit, the EU set itself a new strategic goal for the next decade – ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council 2000: 2).  
 635 This goal would be achieved through three main means: a transition to a knowledge-based economy and society, a modernization of the European social model, and an appropriate macroeconomic policy mix. Institutionally, this would take place through an introduction of the open method of co-ordination at all levels. The method of the European employment strategy was thus  
 640 extended to a range of other policy fields (Goetschy 1999; Borrás and Jacobsson 2004). The co-ordinator of the Lisbon summit and the personal representative of Guterres, Maria João Rodrigues, worked through the PES, as well as bilaterally with national governments, not least the Blair administration in London.

According to Robin Cook, who at the time of the Lisbon European Council was UK foreign secretary, and a vice-president of the PES, the ‘Lisbon Process of economic reform was a product of Tony Blair’s advocacy of knowledge-based economy’ (Cook 2003: 131). Blair hailed the agenda of the summit as marking ‘a sea change in EU economic thinking’, moving the EU’s agenda  
 645 away from the social regulation agenda of the 1980s in ‘a direction of enterprise, innovation, competition and employment’ (quoted in Lightfoot 2005: 130). A close ally in the work to reorient the EU agenda was the Spanish conservative prime minister, Aznar. At the Lisbon European Council, Aznar insisted on structural reform and liberalization in language similar to Blair’s. The two of them were close politically, wrote international articles together, and led the  
 650 crusade for a modernization of the European social model, most notably by emphasizing the need for flexible labour markets. Their agenda and alliance had a negative impact on the level of cohesion of both the PES and the EPP.

The internal cohesion of the EPP was further challenged by the decision of the heads of government to ostracize Austria for the establishment of a governing coalition including Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party, and this ‘crisis hit the EPP especially hard and caused severe turbulence and tensions between its member parties’ (Jansen 2006: 162). Notably, the EPP cancelled the pre-summit  
 660 scheduled to take place in Lisbon.

The PES, for its part, suffered from the ideological differences between the member parties in government in Britain, France and Germany. With Blair forming a strategic alliance with Aznar, and Jospin and Schröder opposing far-reaching structural reforms, the PES leaders had great difficulties in finding common ground on socioeconomic issues. Figure 1 shows that the PES still dominated numerically at the time of the Lisbon summit. Yet, while  
 670 the PES welcomed the Lisbon European Council, with its focus on employment issues, the summit arguably demonstrated the ‘domination of the PES and the EU by the social liberal agenda’ (Lightfoot 2005: 130). The width of the goals adopted by the Lisbon summit reflected a political compromise between the governments on the centre-right plus the British Labour government, which  
 675 wanted to concentrate on structural labour market and welfare state reforms,

and the governments on the left led by the French and German administrations (Hix 2005: 246–7).

In sum, despite several attempts to mobilize ‘their’ heads of government for the joint cause, the two main transnational parties were unsuccessful in forming strong party coalitions in the European Council. The case of the Lisbon agenda demonstrates how limits in the ideological affinities of heads of government belonging to the same party family can translate into coalitions that cut across partisan divides, even in socioeconomic issues. The cross-party coalition pushing for the Lisbon agenda thus points to the limits of the partisan hypothesis.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored the extent to which the party politicization of the EU extends to the traditional stronghold of inter-state negotiation – the European Council. We proceeded in four steps, outlining the partisan hypothesis and its competitors, identifying three factors hypothesized to influence the scope for party politics in the European Council, summarizing unique interview evidence, and tracing party mobilization in two cases of socioeconomic reform. Our conclusion is guardedly negative. Negotiations along party divides are relatively rare in the European Council, where issue-specific, interest-based coalitions instead constitute the most prevalent form of actor alignment. The conditions for party-political mobilization and impact that we identify in this article help to explain this pattern. Only a minority of the issues on the agenda of the European Council are salient along the traditional left–right dimension. Only rarely are the heads of government from a particular party family sufficiently dominant in numerical terms and ideologically coherent. Only seldom are the transnational parties capable of effectively mobilizing and disciplining ‘their’ heads of government. These results do not imply that the European Council is alien to party politicization – only that this is likely to happen less frequently than in the Council, the Commission, and especially the Parliament.

What is the likelihood that these conclusions, based on evidence from the EU 15, will have to be revised in the new context of 27 member states? While it is still too early to draw decisive conclusions about the impact of the recent enlargement, the preliminary evidence offers little support for the notion that party politics will come to play a more prominent role in the European Council in the near future. Recent empirical analyses of coalition formation in the Council of Ministers after 2004 suggest that party politics has become even less prominent (Hagemann, forthcoming; Mattila, forthcoming). Interview evidence from the European Council supports this picture, pointing instead to interest-based and cross-cutting coalitions among old and new member states. By contrast, mobilization within the transnational parties after enlargement is frequently regarded as more cumbersome, mainly because of the growing size and increasing ideological heterogeneity of these parties.

725 This article and its results carry two broader implications. First, it suggests  
that there are important limits to the trend of party politicization in the EU.  
In this half-way house between an international organization and a federal  
730 polity, the European Council constitutes the institution probably most resistant  
to party politicization. While the status of heads of government as representa-  
tives also of national political parties generates expectations of partisan align-  
ments in the European Council, other factors reduce or even offset the  
importance of party affiliation as a source of coalition patterns. Second, this  
735 article opens up a new agenda of research. As the first theoretical and empirical  
exploration of party politics in the European Council, it offers an initial rather  
than a final analysis. The theoretical hypotheses which we have advanced may be  
tested through a wider repertoire of methods, including large-N studies.  
Moreover, they may be refined to incorporate other factors, such as the domestic  
political context of heads of government (majority/minority government,  
coalition/one party government). Finally, these hypotheses may form the  
basis for inquiries into variation in party-political influence across time, issue  
areas, and transnational parties.

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## APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

750 The title or function of the interviewee is given as held at the time of the inter-  
view, and in the capacity relevant to the article.

### 755 **Interviews conducted within the project 'Power and Negotiation in the European Council' (Tallberg and Strömvik), summarized in the fourth section of the article**

Frank Belfrage, former Permanent Representative to the EU, Sweden. 17  
November 2005.

Bernard Bot, Minister for Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands. 15 May 2005.

760 Ingvar Carlsson, former Prime Minister, Sweden. 8 September 2004.

Robert Cooper, Director General of Directorate General E, General Secretariat  
of the Council. 3 February 2005.

Lars Danielsson, State Secretary, Sweden. 8 September 2004.

765 Kim Darroch, Head of the European Secretariat, Cabinet Office, United  
Kingdom. 29 November 2006.

- Jacques Delors, former President of the European Commission. 21 December 2006.
- David Galloway, Head of the Private Office of the Assistant Secretary General, General Secretariat of the Council. 3 November 2004.
- 770 Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, former President, France. 7 December 2005.
- Felipe Gonzáles, former Prime Minister, Spain. 17 May 2005.
- Tarja Halonen, President, Finland. 27 May 2005.
- Lena Hjelm-Wallén, former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sweden, and former Vice-President of the Party of European Socialists. 28 October 2004.
- 775 Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister, Luxembourg. 8 December 2005.
- John Kerr, former Permanent Representative to the EU, United Kingdom. 28 November 2006.
- Neil Kinnock, former European Commissioner and former leader of the UK Labour Party, United Kingdom 29 November 2006.
- 780 Claas D. Knoop, Minister at the Permanent Representation, Germany. 5 November 2004.
- Wim Kok, former Prime Minister, The Netherlands. 15 May 2005.
- Erkki Liikanen, former European Commissioner, Finland. 27 May 2005.
- Gunnar Lund, former Permanent Representative to the EU, Sweden.
- 785 7 September 2004.
- John Major, former Prime Minister, United Kingdom. 1 December 2006.
- Guy Milton, Adviser, General Secretariat of the Council. 3 February 2005.
- Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, President of the Party of European Socialists and former Prime Minister, Denmark. 11 November 2005.
- 790 David O'Sullivan, Secretary General, European Commission. 2 February 2005.
- Göran Persson, Prime Minister, Sweden. 25 January 2005.
- Sven-Olof Petersson, Permanent Representative to the EU, Sweden. 24 September 2004.
- Michel Petite, Director General of the Legal Service, European Commission. 3
- 795 November 2004.
- Jean-Claude Piris, Director General of the Legal Service, General Secretariat of the Council. 3 February 2005.
- Paolo Ponzano, Director of the Task Force on the Future of the EU and Institutional Questions, European Commission. 5 November 2004.
- 800 Javier Solana, Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Council. 12 December 2006.
- Erkki Tuomioja, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Finland. 27 May 2005.
- Hubert Védrine, former Minister for Foreign Affairs, France. 17 November 2005.
- 805 Jérôme Vignon, former Director of the Forward Studies Unit, European Commission. 3 February 2005.
- Stephen Wall, former Permanent Representative to the EU, United Kingdom. 30 November 2006.

**Selected interviews conducted within the project 'Transnational Party Networks and the Agenda of the European Union' (Johansson), referred to in the case studies**

- 815 Elmar Brok, Member of the European Parliament, CDU, Representative of the European Parliament in the 1995 Reflection Group and the 1996/97 Intergovernmental Conference. 25 February 1998.
- Ingvar Carlsson, former Prime Minister and Chairman of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. 22 October 1997.
- 820 Allan Larsson, Director General of Directorate General V, European Commission, Chairman European Employment Initiative 1993. 20 August 1997.
- Gunnar Lund, State Secretary, Personal Representative of the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs in the 1995 Reflection Group and the 1996/97 Intergovernmental Conference. 11 September 1997.
- 825 Wilfried Martens, former Prime Minister, Belgium, President of the European People's Party since 1990. 30 March 2000.
- Bernard Tuyttens, Adviser and Liaison Officer, Party of European Socialists. 23 September 1997.
- 830 Klaus Welle, Secretary General of the European People's Party 1994–99. 24 February 1998.

**NOTES**

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- 840 1 The interviews were conducted by Jonas Tallberg and Maria Strömviik within the research project 'Power and Negotiation in the European Council', funded by the Swedish Research Council. A complete list of the interviews appears in the Appendix.
- 2 The interviews were conducted by Karl Magnus Johansson within the research project 'Transnational Party Networks and the Agenda of the European Union' at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. Select interviews are listed in the Appendix.
- 845 3 For linguistic reasons, we use the term socialist to denote socialists and social democrats in the PES, and the term conservative to denote conservatives and Christian democrats in the EPP.
- 4 Personal letter to Karl Magnus Johansson, dated 14 August 1997.

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