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Bringing salience back in: Explaining voting defection in the European Parliament

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Abstract
What explains when Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) defect from their EP party group? While previous research has focused on the policy distance between an MEP's national party and her party group, it has been overlooked that not all issues are equally important to national parties. As parties prioritize certain issues over others, we argue that it is both the distance and the salience of the issue for the MEP's national party that explains defection. To test our theoretical claim, we explore more than 400,000 vote decisions across 1,948 different roll-call votes in four issue areas – agriculture, environment, social policy and external trade – from 1979 until 1999. To measure policy salience and distance, we combine roll-call analysis with data from the Euromanifestos Project. Our findings have important implications for understanding the dynamics of party competition and the role that national parties play in the European Parliament.

Keywords
Euromanifestos, European parliament, ideological distance, policy salience, roll-call votes, defection

Introduction

The powers of the European Union (EU) have increased extensively over the past decades. Member-state governments have transferred numerous policy-making competences to the European level in a variety of policy areas. As a result, a large share of political decisions are no longer made by national political institutions, but are instead enacted at the European level. While the European Parliament (EP) was initially established as a mere consultative body, it has become a veritable co-legislator through various treaty revisions. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) enact legislation, have to approve the College of Commissioners, and can amend the EU budget and censure the Commission. Given the important role that MEPs play in European politics, it is crucial to understand what drives their decisions.

Hix (2002) argues that MEPs are accountable to two different principals. On the one hand, they belong to political groups which organize legislative activities in the EP. On the other hand, they are members of national parties which control the selection of the candidates. While voting cohesion in the EP has increased over time, there have been numerous instances in which MEPs have voted against the majority of their party group (Attiná, 1990; Bailer et al., 2009; Faas, 2002, 2003; Hix, 2002, 2004; Hix et al., 2005; Linstädt et al., 2012). For example, Faas (2003: 859–860) shows that the British Conservatives voted against their party group in about 25 percent of all roll-call votes cast during the 5th EP. However, the defection rate varies considerably across policy areas as the British Conservatives defected on as much as 50 percent of roll-call votes dealing with questions of employment. How can this be explained? Why do MEPs defect and why do defection rates vary extensively across policy areas?

Several studies have sought to explain the voting defection of MEPs (e.g. Faas, 2002, 2003; Hix, 2002, 2004;

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Lindstädt et al., 2012). In his analysis of defection patterns based on roll-call votes cast in the first year of the fifth EP (1999–2000), Hix (2002), for example, finds that the strongest predictor of MEP defection is the policy distance between national parties and their EP party groups. The larger the distance between national parties and their EP party groups on the left–right and the pro–anti-European integration dimensions, the larger the probability that MEPs defect from their party group. The individual preferences of MEPs, by contrast, do not have a systematic effect on defection rates. Hix (2004) also shows that electoral institutions which strengthen the control a national party can exert over its MEPs – closed-list proportional representation, centralized candidate selection and a small district magnitude – increase MEP defection. Faas (2002, 2003) similarly demonstrates that the character of electoral institutions and the policy differences between national parties and their EP party groups affect defection rates.

While the seminal studies by Hix (2002, 2004) and Faas (2002, 2003) have enhanced our understanding of MEP voting behaviour, they cannot account for the differing voting behaviour of MEPs if electoral institutions and policy distance are held constant. For example, during the first parliamentary period, the ideological distance between the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (CDU) and the European People's Party (EPP) on agricultural issues and the distance between the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) on environmental issues was similar. However, 22 percent of SPD MEPs voted differently from their European party group on these issues compared to only 2.6 percent of CDU MEPs. What explains why so many more SPD MEPs defected from their EP party group given the same degree of policy conflict and similar electoral institutions?

We argue that the salience of policy issues makes a crucial difference. We posit that political parties differentiate between policy issues and consider some issues more important than others. As a result, party behaviour is not only driven by the policy positions parties take on different issues, but also by the importance they attach to these political issues. In the above example, environmental issues were three times more salient to the SPD than agriculture issues were to the CDU. We therefore expect that the more salient an issue is to a national party, the stronger the effect of the ideological distance between that national party and its EP group on the probability of MEP defection. To test this argument, we draw on an empirical analysis of 405,736 vote decisions across 1,948 different roll-call votes cast from 1979 until 1999.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we develop our theory of MEP defection. Next, we discuss our research design and present the results of our data analysis. In the final section, we conclude and discuss the implications of our findings for understanding the dynamics of party competition and the role that national parties play in the EP.

The interplay between policy distance and issue salience

In this section, we develop our theoretical argument that it is necessary to take into account the salience of policy issues for national parties to understand why MEPs defect from their party groups.

Parties as policy-seekers

We know that parties have multiple goals – maximizing their vote-share, attaining office and seeking policy (Strøm, 1990). These differing goals subsequently influence party behaviour. Unlike elections to national parliaments, elections to the EP have generally been considered second-order (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Voters often use these elections to signal their dissatisfaction with the governing parties. Thus, smaller parties tend to perform better and parties that are currently in national government are often punished (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

Given this second-order nature of EP elections, we assume that national parties are policy-seeking actors (De Swaan, 1973). We conceptualize national parties as rational, goal-oriented and purposeful collective actors that intrinsically value policy outcomes and sincerely believe in policy goals that they seek to achieve (Strøm, 1990). Political parties therefore strive to maximize their influence on policy-making to bring about a policy outcome that is as close as possible to their own ideal point.

Due to the increasing transfer of competences from the national to the European level over the past decades, the powers of both the EU and the EP have considerably increased over time. Scholars have estimated that in some policy domains such as agriculture, environment and internal market, about 80 percent of existing policies are decided in Brussels (Hix, 2005: 3). Through successive treaty changes, the EP has, at the same time, become more influential among European institutions. It can, for example, veto all legislation under the ordinary decision-making procedure (formerly co-decision), which was extended to nearly all policy areas in the Treaty of Lisbon. Policy-seeking national parties therefore have strong incentives to influence European decision-making through the EP.

We thus assume that national parties actively seek to influence policy-making at the European level and that their behaviour in the EP is motivated by their policy goal to achieve an outcome that is as close as possible to their preferred position.

Policy distances and MEP voting behaviour

Political parties seek to achieve their policy goals through shaping the voting behaviour of their representatives in the legislature. They draw on various stick and carrot instruments to make sure that their representatives follow their voting instructions, including threats of losing parliamentary seats or promises of getting attractive committee positions (Carey, 2007; Sieberer, 2006). While legislators in national parliaments are solely responsible to their national political party, the situation in the EP is more complex: MEPs' voting decisions are based on both national and European considerations. Hix (2002) argues that MEPs are agents with two principals – their national parties and the EP party groups.[1] As EP party groups are characterized by a high degree of internal ideological diversity (McElroy and Benoit, 2007, 2012), the policy positions of national parties can differ considerably from the positions of their party groups (Klüver and Rodon, n.d.).

In situations where the policy preferences of national parties and their EP party groups differ, MEPs may find themselves torn between their two principals. Although each of these principals exercises control over the MEPs, they rely on different instruments (Hix, 2002). EP party groups control the career trajectory of MEPs by allocating leadership positions, committee assignments and speaking time to MEPs. National parties, in contrast, control candidate selection and thus have a crucial impact on the re-election chances of MEPs. As re-election to the EP is a precondition for making a career in the EP, we argue in line with Hix (2002, 2004) and Faas (2002, 2003) that MEPs are first and foremost agents of their national party principals. In situations of conflict between national parties and their EP party groups, MEPs will follow the instructions of their national parties and defect from their EP party group (Hix, 2002, 2004; Faas, 2002, 2003). Our first hypothesis follows from this expectation:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the distance between the policy position of an MEP's national party and that of her EP group, the more likely she is to defect.

Conditioning the effect of distance: Bringing in salience

In his study of the fifth EP, Faas (2003: 856) shows that there is variation in rates of defection across different issue areas for national party delegations. But, what explains this variation? We argue that variation in defection is attributable to the level of salience that parties place on different policy areas. Where salience is higher, the distance in policy preferences between national parties and EP groups will have a larger effect on the probability of an MEP defecting from her EP party group.

Importantly, voting defection from EP party groups has considerable negative consequences for individual MEPs and national parties. As individual MEPs can be sanctioned by their EP party group, voting defection might harm their career prospects within the EP. With regard to national parties, voting defection might result in considerable conflict with the EP party group leadership and other member parties which weakens the position of the national party within its EP party group. We therefore expect that MEPs will only defect if the position of their EP party group differs from the ideal point of their national party *and* if this policy issue is salient to the national party. Where policy issues are not important to national parties, however, they will be more willing to vote with the EP party group in order to avoid negative repercussions.

The saliency theory of party competition argues that parties prioritize certain issues over others. Instead of directly confronting each other on the same issues, a party strategically emphasizes some issues while downplaying others (Budge and Farlie, 1983: 23–24). The underlying tenant of saliency theory is that parties 'own' issues (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) and pay particular attention to 'their' issues. Although the issue ownership framework focuses on how voters evaluate political parties based on their performance on the issues they own, we focus on how parties are policy-seekers that value issues intrinsically. Thus, rather than emphasizing policy issues for instrumental, electoral reasons, we consider national parties as inherent policy-seekers. The salience of an issue for a party moreover determines its interactions with other parties (Meguid, 2005), affects how its legislators cast roll-call votes in parliament (Jensen and Spoon, 2010), and influences the coalitions it joins (Bäck et al., 2011). Following this line of reasoning, we expect that national parties pay particular attention to legislative votes cast in the EP when they concern their prioritized issues.

We therefore argue that it is not distance alone that influences MEP behaviour. The utility function of national parties is determined by the distance to their EP party groups as well as by the salience of a policy issue and can be formulated as follows:

$$U_j = -\frac{1}{\alpha}(P_{NATjd} - P_{EPGd})^2$$

where U_j is the utility for a national party j. P_{NATjd} is the position of national party j on policy dimension d and P_{EPGd} is the position of its EP party group on that same dimension. Thus, the utility of a national party increases as the policy distance between a national party and its EP party group decreases. However, distance alone is not sufficient to account for the utility of a national party. The parameter α represents the importance a national party attaches to policy dimension d. Thus, the utility of a national party increases as the distance to the EP party group decreases and as salience on the issue increases.

Thus, we posit that issue salience conditions the effect of ideological distance between the MEP's national party and her EP party group on voting behaviour. Given that MEPs are faithful agents of their national parties who diligently follow their voting instructions, we expect an increase in the probability of MEPS' defection as the distance between their national party and their EP party group increases and the national party deems an issue as important. Hence, when an issue is more salient to a national party, the distance between the MEP's national party and her EP party group has a stronger effect on her likelihood to defect from her party group. This leads to our central hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: The more salient an issue is to the national party, the stronger the effect of the distance between the policy position of the national party and the EP group on the probability of MEP defection.

Research design

In this section, we discuss how we constructed our dataset. We first explain how we measure the defection of MEPs and then describe the operationalization of our independent variables.

Measuring defection

There are three types of voting procedures in the EP. First, votes are undertaken by a show of hands. Second, there are electronic votes that record the number of Yes, No and Abstain votes. Third, there are roll-call votes in which the voting decisions of all MEPs (Yes, No and Abstain) are recorded and published in the official minutes. About one-third of all votes in the EP are roll-call votes.[2] Under the EP rules of procedure, only a few votes are required to be cast as roll-call, but roll-call votes can also be requested by a political group or at least 32 MEPs (Hix et al., 2005: 215). Scholars have noted that there may be a selection bias in the issues on which roll-call votes are cast (Carruba et al., 2005; Hug, 2010, 2012). However, roll-call votes still provide important insights into voting patterns in the EP and they have been used by a wide variety of scholars to study legislative behaviour (e.g. Attiná, 1990; Faas, 2003; Hix et al., 2005, 2006).

We measure defection by comparing the votes of individual MEPs with the vote decision of the majority of their EP party group. If an MEP voted differently from the majority of her EP party group, her voting decision is coded as a defection. We only focus on 'Yes' and 'No' votes as abstentions do not indicate a clear defection.[3] In our dataset, 6.2 percent of roll-call votes cast are coded as defections. The percentage of defections varies from 17.7 of votes cast in the first parliamentary period to 4.5 of votes cast in the third parliamentary period.

Explanatory variables and dataset

Following recent work, by Veen (2011) and Lowe et al. (2011), we rely on election manifestos to measure salience and policy positions of political parties. More specifically, we use the Euromanifesto dataset as it simultaneously provides measures for national parties and EP party groups (Braun et al., 2004; Wüst and Volkens, 2003; see also Veen, 2011). European parties as well as most of their national member parties have adopted election manifestos for all EP elections since the first direct election in 1979. Election manifestos are an ideal source of policy position estimates as political parties clearly spell out their ideological stance on a variety of issues. Party manifestos have been used by numerous scholars to measure issue salience and positions of political parties (see, e.g., Budge et al., 2001; Gabel and Hix, 2002; Klingemann et al., 2006; Lowe et al., 2011; Veen, 2011).

We use election manifestos drafted for EP elections for several reasons. First, as European parties as well as their national member parties simultaneously draft election programmes for EP elections, we can directly compare their policy positions and the salience they attach to different policy areas for the different elections. Second, based on the general policy guidelines set out in the party programmes, MEPs regularly receive voting instructions and can be punished by their party groups for not adhering to them; thus, Euromanifestos are a good predictor of MEP behaviour (McElroy, 2008). Third, Euromanifestos are superior to national manifestos as the nature of party competition and the policy issues addressed at both levels are different. While parties prioritize domestic politics in their national manifestos, they highlight European integration issues and employ a European governmental frame in their manifestos drafted for EP elections (e.g. Wüst, 2009; Wüst and Schmitt, 2007).

The most widely used dataset on policy positions is the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which analyses national party manifestos in a wide variety of countries from 1945 to 2010 through manual coding (Budge et al., 2001, Klingemann et al., 2006). The CMP developed a classification scheme with 56 categories grouped into 7 policy domains. Where possible, directly opposing pro and con categories are specified. The Euromanifesto project (EMP) applies the CMP approach to election manifestos issued by European and national parties for European Parliament elections by manually coding the manifestos according to a coding scheme similar to the one developed by the CMP. Human coders first divided the election programmes into so-called 'quasi sentences' which contain an argument understood as 'the verbal expression of one political idea or issue' (Wüst and Volkens, 2003: 4). In a second step, these quasi sentences were allocated to the appropriate categories specified in the coding scheme developed by the EMP.

To measure a party's policy position, we employ a proportional scaling approach by subtracting the percentage of negative mentions from the percentage of positive mentions of a policy category defined in the coding scheme. Positive scores represent positive positions and negative scores negative positions on policy dimension d. To estimate the *ideological distance* between EP party

Table 1. Matching roll-call and Euromanifesto policy areas.

Roll-call vote policy area	Euromanifesto policy area codes
Agriculture	7031 Agriculture and Farmers (positive)
	7032 Agriculture and Farmers (negative)
Environment*	501 Environmental Protection (positive)
	410 Productivity (negative)
	416 Anti-growth Economy (positive)
Social/ Employment	504 Welfare State expansion (positive)
	701 Labour groups (positive)
	505 Welfare State limitation (negative)
	702 Labour groups (negative)
External Trade/ Aid	107 Internationalism (positive)
	407 Protectionism: Negative (positive)
	109 Internationalism (negative)
	406 Protectionism: Positive (negative)

*Our decision to use Euromanifesto categories 410, 416 and 501 for the environment policy area follows Lowe et al. (2011) and Veen (2011).

groups and their national member parties, we computed the Euclidean distance between these two positions. We calculate *salience* as the percentage of quasi sentences in the manifesto devoted to a policy dimension *d.* We sum the percentage of positive and negative mentions of this policy domain in an election programme.

To empirically examine the effect of salience and policy distance, we focus on four policy areas – agriculture, environment, social policy and external trade. The policy area distribution of our roll-call data is 34.1 percent agriculture, 35.3 percent environment, 12.8 percent external/trade and 17.9 percent social. The selection of policy areas is based on information available in the roll-call dataset constructed by Hix et al. (2006). They gathered data on how each MEP voted on almost all roll-call votes in the first six elected European Parliaments (1979–2009).[4] For the first four parliaments, the dataset allocates roll-call votes to seven different policy areas: agriculture, environment, economics, social, external trade/aid, internal EP and inter-institutional matters. The roll-call votes in the fifth EP are, however, classified into more than 50 different policy domains. Because our goal is to compare policy areas across parliamentary periods, we limit our analysis to the first four European Parliaments from 1979–1999. Our measurement of salience and policy distance is based on the assumption that legislative votes in the EP are unidimensional, which follows much of the extant literature (see, e.g., König, 2007). While this is admittedly a simplifying assumption, it is plausible to argue that the decision-making process concerning a single legislative initiative is characterized by a unidimensional structure of conflict. Once a legislative proposal is on the table, the general outline of the initiative is defined; thus, MEPs are able to operate within a clear framework.

To match the policy area specified in the roll-call dataset with the policy domains coded in the Euromanifesto dataset, we used the matching scheme illustrated in Table 1. We limit ourselves to these four policy areas as they have clear matching categories in the EMP dataset. The 'positive' and 'negative' indications in brackets denote whether these categories are coded as positive or negative mentions of the respective policy area, which is important for the computation of policy position estimates, as discussed above.

In order to study defection of MEPs, we concentrate on the four major political groups – European Peoples' Party (EPP), S&D (Socialists and Democrats, formerly the Party of European Socialists), the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) as they have dominated politics in the EP and have had greater stability in their composition than other EP party groups. This approach enables us to study defection of national parties over time and across party groups. The MEPs in our dataset are members of 49 national parties and from these four EP party groups. The final dataset includes 405,736 voting decisions of 741 MEPs across 1,948 roll-call votes.

Control variables

We also include several control variables in our analysis. Following Lindstädt et al. (2012), we control for potential learning effects due to prior experience in the EP by including the *duration of EU membership* of a national party's home country measured by the number of days between its accession and the date of the roll-call vote in the analysis. In order to take into account the possibility that defection might vary with the stage of the domestic electoral cycle, we control for the *number of days until the next national election*. We use the logged number of days as it is plausible to assume that the size of the learning effect decreases with an increase in number of days of EU membership. In addition, we control for the legislative term of the *European Parliament*, as the composition of the individual parliament, the political environment or the institutional competences might have an effect on defection of MEPs. Given that EP party groups can request roll-call votes to discipline their deputies, we include a dummy variable indicating *whether an MEP's party group asked for the roll-call*. Moreover, defection might vary with the structure of conflict and we therefore control for the *closeness of the vote* by taking the ratio of the Yes and No votes ranging from 0 to 1, whereby 1 indicates equal strength of supporters and opponents. The data for these two variables come from Hix et al. (2006).

Next, we include four control variables that measure individual party characteristics. First, we have a measure for *party size*, which is operationalized as the share of seats that the national parties control in their EP party group (see, e.g., Klüver and Rodon, n.d.).[5] We expect that the probability of MEP defection decreases as the size of the national

Table 2. Multi-level logistic regression explaining MEP defection.

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Fixed effects						
Distance	0.972***	0.996	0.973***	0.954***	0.976***	0.971***
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Salience		0.955***	0.942***	0.948***	0.942***	0.941***
		(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Salience * Distance			1.003***	1.004***	1.003***	1.003***
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Membership duration	0.631***	0.628***	0.619***	2.003***	0.584***	0.627***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.106)	(0.017)	(0.018)
Days until next national election	0.999***	0.999***	0.999***	0.999**	0.999***	0.999***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Roll-call vote requested by EPG	0.696***	0.695***	0.689***	0.709***	0.683***	0.689***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Closeness of the vote	3.622*	3.653***	3.685***	3.482***	3.675***	3.679***
	(0.075)	(0.076)	(0.077)	(0.074)	(0.077)	(0.077)
Seat-share	0.190***	0.157***	0.167***	0.008***	0.333***	0.131***
	(0.044)	(0.036)	(0.038)	(0.002)	(0.079)	(0.031)
Government participation	0.829***	0.825***	0.826***	0.952***	0.835***	0.837***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Centralized candidate selection	1.049	1.011	1.017	1.331	1.090	0.992
	(0.136)	(0.126)	(0.129)	(0.233)	(0.137)	(0.097)
District magnitude	1.007***	1.005***	1.005***	1.021***	1.007***	1.002*
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Co-decision	1.481***	1.532***	1.586***	2.182***	1.635***	1.600***
	(0.102)	(0.106)	(0.110)	(0.153)	(0.113)	(0.111)
Absolute majority	1.669***	1.671***	1.683***	1.400***	1.679***	1.683***
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.038)	(0.044)	(0.044)
EP 2				0.394***		
				(0.015)		
EP 3				0.133***		
				(0.006)		
EP 4				0.119***		
				(0.007)		
EPP					9.921***	
					(4.501)	
S&D					7.996***	
					(3.771)	
ELDR					4.182***	
					(1.902)	
Communists						10.815***
						(7.162)
Liberals						6.848***
						(2.699)
Conservatives						3.716***
						(1.366)
Nationalists						31.068***
						(20.504)
Regionalists						9.043***
						(4.351)
Social democrats						6.720***
						(2.406)
Christian democrats						5.712***
						(2.074)

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Random effects						
Variance on party level	0.624	0.580	0.600	1.145	0.584	0.304
Model fit						
N / Parties	405,736/499	405,736/49	405,736/499 49	405,736/49	405,736/49	405,736/49
Log likelihood	–88792	–88507	–88461	–87188	–88403	–88427
AIC	177609	177043	176953	174412	176842	176897
BIC	177751	177196	177116	174609	177038	177137

****p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10*. The coefficients are odds ratios. Standard errors are in parentheses. The reference category for EP fixed effects in M4 is EP1, the reference category for the EP party groups in M5 is G/EFA and the reference category for party families in M6 is the green parties.

party increases (see, e.g., Faas, 2003). Second, we include a dummy variable which indicates whether a national party is *in government* at the domestic level. We expect defection rates to be lower if an MEP's party is in the national government. Third, in order to capture differences between different party types, we also control for *party family* (see, e.g., Adams et al. (2006) for a discussion of how niche parties behave differently in electoral politics). Finally, we also control for the *EP party groups* with which the MEPs are affiliated, as the internal decision-making structures and the composition of the EP party groups might have an important effect on MEP votes. We extracted the information on party size, party family and EP party groups from the Euromanifesto dataset and collected government participation data from the ParlGov dataset (Döring and Manow, 2012).

Finally, we also incorporate controls for electoral institutions and legislative rules. First, we include variables that measure whether the *candidate selection* process is decentralized or centralized and the average *district magnitude.* These data come from Hix (2004: 202). Following from Hix, we expect defection rates to be higher when the national parties have more control over their MEPs, in other words, when the selection process is centralized and when districts are smaller. Second, we also control for the *legislative procedure* (dichotomous variable for co-decision) and the *voting rule* (dichotomous variable for absolute majority) (e.g. Thomson et al., 2006). We expect an MEP to be more likely to defect under co-decision and when there is an absolute majority rule. See the Appendix for the descriptive statistics for all of the variables included in our models.

Data analysis

We now turn to the empirical test of our theoretical claim that the more salient an issue is to the MEP's national party, the stronger the effect of the ideological distance between the national party and the EP group on the probability of her defection.

As discussed above, the 741 MEPs in the dataset are members of 49 national parties which are in turn members of the four major European party groups. The dataset is thus hierarchically structured as MEPs which belong to the same national parties and EP party groups are subject to the same contextual characteristics and thus are not completely independent. Ideally, we would set up a three-level model with MEPs at the first, national parties at the second, and EP party groups at the third level. However, there are only four EP party groups, which is not a sufficient number of clusters for a multi-level analysis. We therefore distinguish between the MEP (first) level and the national party (second) level and include EP party groups as fixed effects (see M5 in Table 2).[6] As the dependent variable is measured dichotomously, we estimate a multi-level logistic regression model.

Table 2 presents the results of the multi-level logistic regression analysis. M1 is the default model derived from previous literature, which suggests that the policy distance between national parties and their EP party group has an impact on defection rates. M2 is an extended model which also includes the salience of the policy issue to national parties. With regard to policy distance, the multi-level regression analysis provides mixed evidence, which is contradictory to previous research. While the effect of policy distance is statistically significant and negative in the first model, suggesting that larger policy differences lead to lower defection rates, the effect of policy distance is not statistically significant in M2. Hence, the findings by Hix (2002, 2004) and Faas (2002, 2003) are not confirmed.[7] With regard to salience, the second model surprisingly suggests that defection rates decrease with the importance that national parties attach to the policy issue at stake.[8]

These first two models do not, however, tell the whole story. Since we hypothesized that the positive effect of policy distance between national parties and EP party groups should increase with the salience of issues to national parties, an interaction effect between the two variables has to be included in the regression analysis. Models M3–M6 therefore incorporate an interaction term between distance and salience in addition to their main terms. Model M3 constitutes the baseline model that includes the explanatory variables distance, salience and the interaction between the two variables, as well as the control variables.

Column 4 contains the results of an extended model (M4) that additionally incorporates fixed effects for the different legislative terms of the EP taking the first parliamentary period as the reference category. To take into account the clustering into EP party groups, model 5 comprises fixed effects for the different EP party groups with the G/EFA as the reference category. Finally, column six shows the results of a multi-level model (M6) that incorporates fixed effects for party families to capture the differences between different party types with green parties as the reference category.[9]

Across all four model specifications (M3–M6), the interaction effect between policy distance and salience is statistically significant and positive, which indicates that the effect of policy distance increases with the salience of a policy area to a national party as hypothesized (H2). In addition, the AIC and BIC indicate that including salience and its interaction with distance has considerably increased the fit of the model. Hence, the ideological distance between a national party and its EP party group does not have a constant effect on MEP defection from her EP party group. The effect of policy distance is conditioned by the salience of policy issues to national parties. Policy distance only causes MEP defection if the policy issues at stake are salient to national parties. Our results support Hix's (2002) findings that MEPs take their cues from their national parties instead of their EP party group. However, at the same time, our findings suggest that national parties only instruct their MEPs to vote against the majority of their party group if the policy issue at stake is important to them.[10]

In order to further illustrate the interaction effect between salience and distance, we simulated predicted probabilities (King et al., 2000). Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities of MEP defection as the distance between their national parties and their EP party group increases, salience is at its minimum and maximum values, and all other variables are held at their mean (continuous variables) or median (categorical variables) values. The solid lines are the point estimates of the predicted probabilities and the dashed lines the 95 percent confidence intervals. Overall, the figure demonstrates that the likelihood that disagreement between national parties and EP party groups results in MEP defection rises with the salience of the issue to domestic parties. However, while the probability of MEP defection steadily increases with an increase in policy distance when salience is at its maximum, if salience is at its minimum value, the probability to defect stays more or less constant at an average value of 0.04.

With regard to control variables, the multi-level analysis yields the following results. While the effect of membership duration is positive when EP fixed effects are included, the duration of EU membership has a negative effect on MEP defection in the other five models. Moreover, the probability of MEP defection increases as the number of days until the next election decreases, suggesting that MEPs use defection to signal their policy commitments to their electorate the closer the vote is to an election. Model 4 shows that defection rates were much higher during the first parliamentary period compared to the succeeding periods, suggesting that the increase of decision-making competences and the institutionalization of parties in the EP has increased party group cohesion considerably (see also Hix et al., 2005, 2007). If an MEP's EP party group requested a roll-call vote, the likelihood that the MEP will defect decreases considerably, indicating that roll-calls are an effective disciplining instrument. The closeness of the vote has a surprising effect, as defection is more likely in a close vote. In terms of party size, the multi-level analysis demonstrates that members of large national parties that dominate the EP party groups are less likely to defect. Finally, we find that MEPs from national parties in government at the domestic level are less likely to defect from their EP party group than other MEPs.

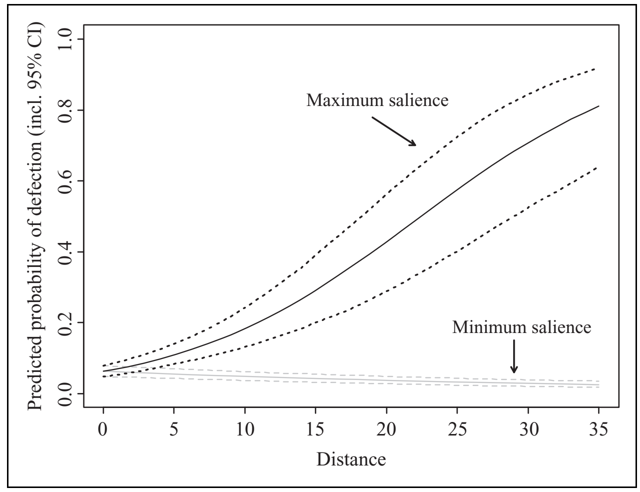

Figure 1. The effect of salience on MEP defection.
Note: This figure illustrates the predicted probability of MEP defection at different levels of ideological distance and policy salience. It is estimated on the basis of Model 3.

In line with Faas's (2003) findings, model 5 indicates that internal cohesion in the Greens/European Free Alliance party group is significantly higher than in the EPP, S&D and ALDE. This finding is hardly surprising as the G/EFA is a relatively homogenous EP party group made up of very similar niche parties (greens and left-wing regional parties), whereas the other three party groups bring together a wide variety of different parties, so internal cohesion is harder to achieve. Model 6 corroborates this finding as all other party families exhibit higher defection rates than green parties. One might argue that the effects of party size and party type are contradictory as seat-share has a negative effect on defection and green parties at the same time exhibit higher cohesion rates than other parties. These findings may be explained by the fact that there are different types of small parties. Spoon (2011: 5–6) posits that small party distinction is based on both size and ideology. Thus, an ideologically narrow party may be small in size (most green parties) or a major political actor (such as the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*); furthermore, an ideologically broad party may be small in size, such as the Swedish *Kristdemokraterna.* Thus, although our results show that the green party family and the Greens/EFA party group are ideologically more cohesive than all other families and groups, not all green parties are necessarily small parties.

Finally, concerning institutional features, the results indicate that larger district magnitude increases the likelihood of defection while centralization of candidate selection does not have a systematic effect on MEP defection. Our findings therefore contradict the results of previous analyses presented by Hix (2004) and Faas (2002, 2003), who found opposite effects. With regard to the legislative procedure and the voting rule, the multi-level analysis indicates that defection is more likely if the EP votes on a legislative initiative that is subject to co-decision and if the vote requires an absolute majority.

Conclusion

Combining roll-call votes and Euromanifestos data across four policy areas from 1979 to 1999, we find support for our argument that it is only when parties place a high level of importance on an issue, when levels of ideological distance are similar, that we see MEPs defect from their European party group. These results significantly advance our understanding of MEP voting behaviour and offer a solution to the puzzle of why some MEPs vote with their EP groups while others do not, when the electoral institutions and policy distance are held constant (Faas, 2002, 2003; Hix, 2002, 2004). Driven by a desire to affect policy, moreover, we show that the voting behaviour of MEPs is largely influenced by the issue preferences of their national parties. Thus, although MEPs may have two principals, our results are further confirmation that their behaviour reflects their national parties' policy preferences. Party competition in the EP is thus largely structured around the policy desires of national parties.

These findings furthermore demonstrate that national politics matters in the European Parliament. MEPs are not disconnected from their national party preferences and, in fact, their behaviour is driven by how salient issues are for their national party. Our results follow recent work which has found that domestic politics influences the behaviour and preferences of voters and parties in the European arena (e.g. de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012). With the increasing evidence of the interplay of national and European politics, these findings are an additional indication of the rising importance of the EP as a legislative institution and suggest that the disconnect between politics at the national and European levels, often referred to as the 'democratic deficit', is perhaps decreasing.

Finally, our results have important implications for legislative behaviour more generally. Being responsible to two different principals is not restricted to MEPs, but is a more general phenomenon. For example, Members of Parliament (MPs) are simultaneously responsible to party groups as well as to local parties. While party groups control the allocation of committee memberships, speaking time and parliamentary leadership positions in the national legislature, local parties are responsible for the nomination of candidates. In line with our findings, we expect that in situations of conflict between MPs' national party groups and their local parties, they will vote in line with the instructions provided by their local parties. Given that MPs generally seek re-election, we expect candidate nomination to be the stronger control mechanism as re-election is a precondition for a career in the legislature.

Appendix

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Defection	405966	0.06	0.24	0	1
Distance	766188	3.72	3.98	0	31.26
Salience	766188	6.32	4.83	0	49.06
Distance*Salience	766188	31.49	66.21	0	1172.21
Membership duration	766188	9.04	0.59	7.17	9.62
Days until next national election	766188	737.91	446.44	0	2014
Roll-call vote requested by EPG	766188	0.13	0.34	0	1
Closeness of vote	766188	0.33	0.30	0	1
Seat share	766188	0.17	0.11	0.01	1.32
Government participation	766188	0.54	0.50	0	1
Candidate selection	766188	0.85	0.99	0	2
District magnitude	766188	50.82	36.77	1	99
Co-decision	766188	0.01	0.08	0	1
Absolute majority	766188	0.05	0.22	0	1
EP 2	766188	0.16	0.36	0	1
EP 3	766188	0.34	0.47	0	1
EP 4	766188	0.48	0.50	0	1
EPP	766188	0.38	0.48	0	1
S&D	766188	0.53	0.50	0	1
ELDR	766188	0.07	0.26	0	1
Communists	766188	0.001	0.04	0	1
Liberals	766188	0.04	0.20	0	1
Conservatives	766188	0.12	0.33	0	1
Nationalists	766188	0.006	0.08	0	1
Regionalists	766188	0.004	0.06	0	1
Social Democrats	766188	0.56	0.50	0	1
Christian Democrats	766188	0.24	0.43	0	1

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Notes

1. It is, of course, important to recognize that both MEPs and legislators more generally have a third principal – the electorate. In this study, however, we follow Hix (2002) and only consider MEPs' decisions as a response to two principals.
2. Importantly, Hix et al. (2006: 497) have noted that roll-call votes are not necessarily a representative sample of all the votes taken in the EP.
3. To check the robustness of our findings across different codings of the dependent variable, we repeated the analysis with a conceptualization of defection that takes abstentions into account. As the results are substantially the same no matter whether abstentions are included or not, we only present the results based on the 'Yes' and 'No' votes.
4. See http://personal.lse.ac.uk/hix/HixNouryRolandEPdata.HTM for a disclaimer about missing information in the roll-call dataset.
5. The maximum relative seat-share value is 1.32. This represents one MEP from the French Rassamblement pour la République (RPR) who was in the ALDE in the second EP, when the rest of the delegation was in the EPP. As the French RPR had a total of 41 MEPs and the total size of the ALDE group was 31, the relative seat-share for the RPR was over 1. When we re-ran Model 3 with a dummy variable for this MEP's roll-call votes, the variable was positive and significant, demonstrating that the RPR was less able to control its MEP who was not in the same EP group as the rest of its delegation. The remaining results are unchanged.
6. Alternatively, one could also set up a cross-classified model in which the observations are simultaneously clustered into national parties and votes, but unfortunately these models could not be computed due to the small number of cases in some of the clusters. In addition, from a theoretical standpoint, clustering into national parties is most important as we consider the salience of policy areas to national parties as well as the ideological distance between national parties and EP party groups as the crucial explanatory variables.
7. Given that these previous studies relied on much more limited data, we do not believe that our findings are necessarily comparable to theirs, rather we build on what they have found. However, we also recognize that because of the differences in data, we cannot replicate their findings for the relationship between policy distance and defection.
8. Re-running models M4–M6 with both the distance and salience variables, but omitting the interaction term, yields similarly puzzling results.
9. We repeated the analysis for all possible reference categories for parliamentary period, EP party group and party family. No matter which reference category we selected, the results for the interaction of distance and salience variable remain unchanged.
10. Given that salience varies on the level of national parties, we repeated our analyses treating national parties as the unit of analysis and computed their defection rates as the share of their MEPs that voted against the majority of the EP party group. Across all model specifications, we found similar results. We chose to focus on the MEPs' decision as our key unit of analysis because although national parties and EP party groups provide instructions, at the end of the day each MEP makes her own decision about how to vote on a particular legislative initiative and whether and which instructions to follow. In addition, conducting the analysis on the level of individual MEPs also allows for taking into account the varying size of national parties in the EP.

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