

In Sickness and in Health

A roll-call study of the Members of the European
Parliament's voting behavior during Covid-19

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Abstract

The voting behavior of the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) has been widely studied. However, little is written about the effects of crises. This thesis tries to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the MEPs voting behavior in relation to their European political group (EPG) and in addition their national party. This was done using the two theories: the two principal dilemma and the issue of salience, which hypothesized a decreased influence of the EPG and an increased influence of the national party. This was analyzed by doing a roll-call analysis of the final annual budget vote each year between 2014 and 2021 using coefficient of determination and cohesion index. When analyzing the effect on the national party, there was little difference in coefficient of determination between the years both prior to and during the pandemic. The results of the coefficient of determination for voting behavior and EPG showcased some but weak support for a Covid-19 effect, however this was strengthened by the results from the cohesion index done for the EPGs which displayed a larger decrease in cohesion for 2020 than the years prior. The support had however weakened to 2021 for which there was no clear support.

Key words: roll-call voting, Covid-19, salience, two-principal dilemma, European Parliament

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and problem discussion

The European Parliament (EP) is the co-legislator in the European Union (EU) vis à vis the Council. It is in the Parliament that the Members of the European Parliament (MEP) work and they are directly elected in a European election; however, this election is commonly seen as a second-order election based on national cues (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.11,160-161). The national nature of the election makes the voting behavior of the MEPs especially interesting as they are working in the European Parliament but are still heavily dependent on their national party. This has led to a plethora of studies about what influences the MEPs voting behavior in relation to their European political group (EPG) and their national party (see for example Hix et al. 2005, Klüver – Spoon 2015, Chiru – Stoian 2019).

Furthermore, the European Union has been described as being in a constant state of crisis, where one crisis is soon replaced by another (Bressanelli et al. 2020, p.329-330). Still, there are not many studies on how crises may affect MEPs' voting behavior.

The Covid-19 pandemic, one of the most recent crises, is notable for its scope and political response (Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020, p.1042, Wolff – Ladi 2020, p.1025). Since earlier research have indicated that MEPs' voting behavior is influenced by how salient the problem is to the national party (Klüver – Spoon 2015, p.561), the crisis's broad scope and its national ramifications may have had an impact on votes during this time. Investigating how these patterns are impacted during a significant crisis, such as the events of the pandemic between 2020 and 2021, would therefore be of great interest. Therefore, the Covid-19 crisis' impact on MEPs' voting behavior is the main topic of this thesis.

This thesis thus contributes to our understanding of how the Covid-19 issue affected MEP voting behavior and its findings are interesting to both the scientific community and the public. The findings could help close a knowledge gap about how crises may influence MEPs' voting behavior and provides a platform for the theory's ongoing development. Additionally, the great impact Covid-19 had on a large majority of the population in the EU makes it relevant for the citizens of the member states to be able to scrutinize how their elected officials have behaved in Parliament during the crisis.

1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic may have affected the voting behavior of MEPs in relation to their European political group. This will be answered using the following research question:

Did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the Members of the European Parliament's voting behavior in relation to the importance of their European political groups?

This is done using a quantitative, descriptive approach and following two well established theories; the two principal dilemma and the issue salience theory.

1.3 Delineation

Some delineations have been made to keep the content of this thesis concise and within the timeframe of the thesis.

The research question puts emphasis on the political group rather than the national party. This is not to suggest that lack of interested in the national party, as these two are related in accordance with the theory (section 4.1-4.2), part of the thesis will therefore include results for this as well even though the focal point in the thesis is on the effects of the European political groups.

Which votes are considered in the analysis is a further delineation. This for the analysis is another distinction. This thesis is based on the annual final budget vote, which equals to one vote for each year. In section 5.1, this is covered in more detail.

Moreover, the years included are 2014 to 2021. By including the years 2014 to 2019, this establishes a period of normality prior to the specific event of the pandemic.

2 Background

The background section is aimed at providing the necessary information regarding the functioning in the European Parliament including the organization of the political groups, roll call voting and the budget procedure as well as information about the European crisis and the uniqueness of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.1 Functioning in the European Parliament

The politics within the EP centers around the political groups. These are groups consisting of at least 32 MEPs from at least one fourth of the member states. The groups are formed by political affiliation and seated that way in, from left to right, in the Chamber. The MEPs work together within the groups and each group has its own internal organization consisting of a chair, a bureau and a secretariat funded by the Parliament's budget. Each group arrives at a common position after discussions within the group, the MEPs are however free to vote in any way they want. There were eight political groups within the 8th EP and 7 in the 9th EP, the biggest political groups being the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP) and Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D). However, not all MEPs are part of political groups, these are referred to as non-attached members (European Parliament n.d.(a), European Parliament n.d.(b)).

The basis for the material is roll-call votes (RCV). These are votes that are recorded at an individual level in the minutes, with information about how each MEP voted (yes, no or abstain) in the specific vote. The other two procedures, show of hands and electronic voting, do not provide the same level of detailed information of each MEP. RCV is mandatory on final legislative matters but can also be requested by at least thirty-eight MEPs or a political group (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.69). It is thus not all votes that get recorded by rollcall, but around a third of the votes (Braghiroli 2022, p.689). The RCV has, due to its detailed recording, enabled a large body of research on voting behavior (Hix et al. 2005, Klüver – Spoon 2015).

Nevertheless, there are studies that indicate potential risk for selection bias when generalizing from results based on RCV. The RCV may be used for strategic purposes when requested, such as to discipline its MEPs or to send a signal that the party is united (Hix et al. 2018, p.215-216). This may in turn lead to an under- or overestimation of the political groups' influence. Hug (2016, p.214) has shown that there are differences between the pressure from the EPG when the vote is mandatory and requested. When the vote was requested, the

pressure was heavier from the EPG, than if the vote was mandatory. However, using RCV has opened for insights into the voting behavior in the EP which is only possible due to the detailed information it provides.

The basis for the analysis is the annual budget vote within the EP. The content of the annual budget is dependent on the outline from the multi-annual financial framework (MFF). The MFF spans over seven years, the latest stretching from 2021 to 2027 and being heavily influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The annual budget then decides the details of revenues and expenditure for one year (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.241).

The legislative procedure for the budget can be summarized as follows. The Commission drafts a proposal within the limits of the MFF and sends it to the Council and Parliament. The Council then adopts or amends the budget to then forward it to the Parliament by the latest of October 1st. The Parliament gets 42 days to either adopt or amend the budget, an absolute majority is needed to amend. In case the EP does not amend the budget, it is the Council's version of the budget that gets adopted. If the budget gets amended by the Parliament, the Council needs a qualified majority to accept the amendments. Otherwise, a conciliation committee takes over, composed by the representatives from the Parliament and the Council, to find a joint acceptance by a simple majority in the EP and qualified majority in the Council to adopt the budget. In case the conciliation committee fails, the Commission will come with a new budget proposal (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.247).

2.2 The Covid-19 crisis

The European Union is not unfamiliar with crises and has outlived several since its formation. In the past decade the intensity of crises has increased, with scholars referring to the EU as being in a permanent state of crisis or as being in a polycrisis (Bressanelli et al. 2020, p.330). Since 2009, and the beginning of the eurozone debt crisis, the crises have succeeded one another. The European debt crisis 2009 to 2014, was followed by the migration crisis in 2014 to 2019 (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.358). More recent crises includes the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.358), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the following electricity crisis (International Energy Agency n.d.). Furthermore, several other crises occurred concurrently, including the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the UK exit from the EU in 2020 and rising authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland (Hix – Høyland 2022, p.358-359).

That said, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, this was one in many crises the union has had to deal with. However, the uniqueness of the Covid-19 pandemic makes it possible to distinguish the pandemic from other crises. The pandemic hit Europe in March 2020 and affected almost all sectors, from health care, economic and social sectors to security and free movement (Wolff – Ladi 2020, p.1025). The pandemic hit countries and regions at different rates but had overall far-reaching consequences. The pressured healthcare and the drop in

production and income due to lockdown, as well as an accelerating unemployment, pressured the public spending (Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020, p.1046). Along with the increased public spending, the anticipated recession also increased the public debt, which in turn caused a new debt-to-GDP peak in 2020 (Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020, p.1046).

The Euro Crisis is the closest comparison that can be made for the Covid-19 crisis; however, the pandemic was more widespread, affected almost all policy areas, less predictable and was fully an exogenous shock (Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020, p.1042, 1044-1045).

3 Previous Research

Investigation of voting behavior in the EP is not something new and there is already extensive literature on what affects the MEPs to vote a certain way. This section aims to give some clarity into what has been done already and how this thesis will build upon that.

One of the earlier and more extensive studies was done by Hix et al. (2005). They were not the first (earlier examples are Attina (1990) and Faas (2003)) but this is where this thesis continues to contribute. What differentiates the Hix et al. study from the previous is the comprehensive sample size including all roll-call votes between 1979 and 2001. The study confirmed that the MEPs are acting more transnational than national by voting more cohesive with their party group than national affiliation. The study also identified a pattern of increased cohesion within the political groups, thus a trend where the MEPs vote increasingly more with their political group (Hix et al. 2005, p.220, 219).

However, to say that the political groups are what dictates how an MEP vote is to simplify the issue. The political groups do not enjoy full cohesion and it is widely accepted that the national party is the key determinant for the voting behavior of the MEPs. Hix (2002, p.688, 696) outlines the three possible explanations for the MEPs voting behavior; personal preferences, national party affiliation and European political group affiliation. He concludes that it is the national party that dictates the vote. Similarly, Faas (2003, p.859-860) found that the national party put pressure on the MEPs in votes that are of special importance to the national party. In these specific cases will the MEP diverge from the political group and vote in accordance with the national party.

Studies, in different circumstances, have shown support for this divide between the national party and the European political groups, where the national party is the key determinant for the MEPs voting behavior. A study by Klüver and Spoon (2015, p.561) has shown that MEPs are more likely to diverge and vote in line with the national party if there is a big ideological difference on issues that the national party values highly. Thus, pointing at both distance and salience as driving forces. Similarly, a study conducted by Chiru and Stoian (2019, p.935) focusing on two directives about security shows that the difference in ideological positioning between the national party and the EPG together with the level of salience the national party assigns the issue is determining whether the MEP will diverge from the EPG and vote in line with the national party.

Another circumstance that seems to matter is election. Lindstädt et al. (2011, p.64) shows in his study that when a European election is approaching, the MEPs are voting more in line with the national party than the EPG. This both strengthens the idea of the EP election as a second national election and the

priority of the MEPs to get re-elected. These results are extended in a study done by Koop et al. (2018, p.580) which confirm the results found by Lindstädt et al. and further show that the same goes for national elections. The study also displays that the electoral rules play a role in how big the election effect gets.

There is, however, less research that studies the voting behavior of MEPs in times of crisis. A few has been done, for example by Braghiroli (2015, 2022) who focuses on the divergence between EPG and national affiliation (note that this is not national party affiliation). He has conducted two studies related to crisis, one focusing on the Eurozone crisis and one focusing on the public health policies during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the eurozone crisis he finds the biggest difference between eurozone countries and non-eurozone countries and in the Covid-19 crisis he finds that the EPG outweighs the national affiliation when it comes to influencing the MEPs voting behavior. Furthermore, a study done by Högenauer (2017, p.1105) looked at debates concerning the migration crisis to test how well the MEPs argue in line with their European political group. The study finds that there were still high levels of EPG loyalty and that argumentation from a national perspective was avoided by most MEPs.

This thesis will proceed from what has been presented. The theories used are well-established and closely related to previous research. The thesis also focuses on the perceived gap related to crisis.

4 Theory

In this section the two theories are presented. The theories are not stand-alone theories but rather complementary to each other and is therefore used in tandem. However, they are to be presented one at the time. It is indicated in both subsections how they are connected, but a further explanation of this is presented in the last subsection that will present how the theories are used, the expected results and hypotheses.

4.1 The two principal dilemma

The two principal dilemma is widely accepted in the research on voting behavior in the European Parliament. The theory is outlined by Hix (2002, p.690-692), where he explain the voting behavior of the MEPs as being trapped between two principals. These two principals are the national party delegation and the European party delegation, that both have a high stake in how the individual MEP vote.

The EPGs, as described in section 2.1, play a significant role in how the Parliament works and functions. The EPGs may issue non-binding voting instructions to their MEPs. Even though the voting instructions are non-binding there are still incentives to follow them. The EPGs are crucial for the MEPs career within the EP as they control committee assignments and other key positions within the EP such as rapporteurships and vice-chairs. The MEPs are more likely to be rewarded with this if they are loyal to the political group (Faas 2003, p.846-847).

On the other hand, due to the domestic significance of the issues voted on, the national party has a considerable stake in how the MEPs vote. (Faas 2003, p.845, Braghiroli 2015, p.102). The national party may also issue voting instructions, which the MEPs have incentives to follow. Because EP elections are of second order, with an emphasis on the national arena, the national party is vital for the MEP's re-election. In EP election, MEPs frequently run under a national party name, with the national party either approving or determining the list of candidates depending on the voting system, and they also have a strong influence on the campaign. Furthermore, the national party plays a vital role in enabling a career outside of the EP (Hix 2002, p.691, Faas 2003, p.843-846).

This has implications for when the national party and the EPG take opposing positions. If both principals give voting instructions and these are opposite, the MEP must choose a side. This means that the MEP must decide whether to

accept the potential repercussions of not supporting the national party or the EPG. In these instances, the MEP will often vote according to the national party line since the MEP needs to be re-elected to have a possibility of making a career inside the Parliament. However, if the national party do not get involved, the EPG has a great chance of influencing their MEPs to vote a certain way, enforcing cohesion (Faas 2003, p.846-847). There are things influencing the dynamics between the two principals, such as the policy distance between the national party and the EPG as well as the size and strength of the national party and the EPG which will affect their ability to influence and to impose sanctions on the MEP (Hix 2002, p.691-692).

In sum, the theory is a simplification where the MEP are responsive to two principals, the national party, and the European political group. Meaning that if the MEP diverge from the EPG, that MEP is voting according with the national party line. In the next subsection the issue of salience and its implications for the two principal dilemma is presented.

4.2 The issue of salience

Already implied in the section 4.1, the salience of an issue to the national party affects the voting in the European Parliament. The salience of policy issue as a theoretical approach is clearly outlined by Klüver and Spoon (2015). The main idea of this theory is that the national parties within the same European political groups are not identical. The national parties have different stand points and will accordingly assign various levels of importance to issues voted on. It is when the national party and EPG differentiate on salient policy issues that have effect on the voting behavior of the MEP. It is in these cases that the national party delegation is more prone to inform and send voting instructions to the MEP, and as mentioned in section 4.1 , when these two principals are in conflict, the MEP is more likely to vote in line with the national party (Klüver – Spoon 2015, p.554-555).

The theory of issue salience will be applied in a more general manner. It will be demonstrated that the idea may be applied to a broader feature of salience, that where an overriding event, the Covid-19 pandemic, can make votes during that period more prominent. The consequences from the pandemic hit broadly on the population in all countries (Ladi – Tsarouhas 2020, p.1046), which increased the need for political measures. It is argued in this thesis that the politization of the pandemic and domestic pressure on the national parties to act will make the issues related to Covid-19 more salient to the national parties. It is also considered unlikely that all national parties within the political groups would value the same solutions and support the same proposals. Thus, when voting on issues that are related to the pandemic there will be a salience effect like the one described above.

4.3 Hypotheses

The aim is to use these two theories to answer the research question using two related hypotheses. By using the salience theory in a broader meaning, it will also be tested in a new context.

The two theories cannot answer the research question by themselves and is therefore used together. Whilst the two principal dilemma helps explain the relation between the European and national principal, the salience theory is one approach explaining what affects that relation.

The two theories are both highly relevant to the case. The Covid-19 pandemic presents a case of elevated importance that is thought to influence the outcomes of votes on matters related to the pandemic's consequences. The heightened importance is argued to influence the MEPs to vote more in line with their national party instead of their political group. It is therefore expected that the importance of the national party is increasing for the years 2020 and 2021. This argumentation formulates to the following hypotheses:

H1: The importance of the European political groups is lower in the years 2020 and 2021 than in the years 2014 to 2019 for the final vote on the annual budget.

H2: The importance of the national party is higher in years 2020 and 2021 than in the years 2014 to 2019 for the final vote on the annual budget.

The first hypothesis is the primary hypothesis and directly answers to the research question. This is also seen by the focal point in the results, focusing on the importance of the political groups and thus also the cohesion within the political groups. However, as described above, the MEPs are according to the theory voting either in line with the national party or the European political group. A decrease of the importance in the European political group is thus answered with an increase of the importance of the national party. The second hypothesis should therefore be seen as a supporting hypothesis, where an increase of importance is to be interpreted as support for the theory and first hypothesis. What is needed to support these hypotheses will be further discussed in the method section 5.3-5.4.

5 Material och Metod

This section aims to outline the necessary information about the specifics of the dataset, the formulation of the variables and an explanation to how and why the chosen methods, coefficient of determination and cohesion index, is used.

5.1 Material

The thesis is based on the VoteWatch dataset (Hix et al. 2022). This dataset is commonly used when quantitatively studying the voting behavior of the MEPs (See for example: Hix et al. 2005, Klüver – Spoon 2015, Koop et al. 2018, Chiru – Stoian 2019). Thus, using the dataset makes it easier to compare the results with those from past and future research. The dataset provides information on an individual level where the name, national party affiliation, European political group as well as other important information such as if the MEP have been active and when their time in office started and ended is provided. The dataset also provides detailed information on each vote such as title of the vote, type of procedure, type of vote, name of the rapporteur, responsible committee and which political group that sponsors the proposal. To this, information on how each MEP voted on each issue is provided, including whether the MEP voted yes, no, or abstain, and if the MEP did not vote, whether they were not an MEP, absent, did not vote, or whether it was motivated (for EP6) (Hix et al. 2022). Using the dataset has several advantages, including time saving, comparability and decreased risk of unsystematic and systematic errors as the dataset is done systematically with more resources.

5.2 The budget votes

It is the final vote of the annual general budget which is analyzed for each year between 2014 and 2021.

The budget vote was chosen because it is an annual reoccurrence compared to more specific policy votes. Also, the content within the vote differs from year to year, hence, it could be assumed that the content of the budget would be influenced by the strains of the pandemic.

The final vote was chosen due to not being sponsored by any political group and thus being a mandatory RCV. This means that the EPG is likely to put less

pressure on their MEPs (Hug 2016, p.214), which in turn may lead to a more unbiased analysis as the ingroup pressure associated with a requested RCV is excluded. It could have been interesting to include the budgets before the final one, however due to the time constraints within the scope of this thesis, it was not possible. The following table gives details on which votes that have been included.

Table 1. Table displaying the votes included in the analysis including information about their number in the dataset, date, institutional file and how many voted for each option.

Year	Number in the dataset	Date	Institutional file	Total number of votes	Votes yes	Votes no	Votes abstain
2014	131	22.10.2014	2014/2040(BUD)	561	416	109	36
2015	1871	28.10.2015	2015/2132(BUD)	577	397	108	72
2016	4231	26.10.2016	2016/2047(BUD)	591	418	117	56
2017	6034	25.10.2017	2017/2044(BUD)	535	35	487	13
2018	7879	24.10.2018	2018/2046(BUD)	601	138	461	2
2019	137	23.10.2019	2019/2028(BUD)	643	506	97	40
2020	4650	12.11.2020	2020/1998(BUD)	651	456	82	113
2021	10429	20.10.2021	2021/0227(BUD)	650	505	76	69

5.3 Variables and Unit of Analysis

Before explaining the methods to obtain the results, some background information and discussion about the unit of analysis and the variables is needed. Recall that the aim of the thesis is to investigate how Covid-19 have affected the voting behavior of the members of the European Parliament in the relation to their European political group. This will guide the formulation of the unit of analysis and the variables.

The unit of analysis is the individual members of the European Parliament, which allows a detailed approach.

The dependent variable is the voting outcomes at the final budget vote. Due to methodological implications, the dependent variable is formulated differently between the coefficient of determination and the cohesion index. For the coefficient of determination, a dichotomous variable is needed. The dependent variable will therefore include yes and no votes. This has been done by for example Klüver and Spoon (2015, p.556), they found that including abstain made little difference. It is therefore valid to exclude abstain for the purpose of using this method. For the cohesion index, there is no methodological obstacle to including abstain and it will therefore be included. Even though excluding abstain votes is shown to have little effect, including it when it is methodologically natural will give another degree of depth to the results. Therefore, the cohesion index will include all three voting options, yes, no, and abstain, as dependent variables.

The independent variable responds greatly to the two principal dilemma, being the national party affiliation and European political group. For the coefficient of determination, two analyses are done, one with the national party as the independent and one with the European political group. In the cohesion index, only the EPG will be analyzed due to the emphasis in this study and the time constraints. Instead, it relies on the theoretical correlation between the two principals, the national parties, and the European political group.

5.4 Coefficient of determination

The first method is the coefficient of determination, the R-squared. This method is useful for determining how much variance in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variable. This is done by calculating how well the unit of analysis (x) compares to the regression line by dividing explained variability (C) by the total variability (A). The R-squared should be understood as a measure of fit, ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates that the variability cannot at all be explained by the independent variable and the 1 indicates that the independent variable provides full explanation (Rogerson 2015, p.233-234). The outcome of the R-squared does not provide an absolute measure of explanation, but should instead be used for comparison, either with previous research or within the same study (Teorell – Svensson 2007, p.177).

This analysis allows for one dependent variable at the time, the two dependent variables are thus analyzed individually. Hypothesis one is strongly related to the dependent variable European political group, while hypothesis two is strongly related to the dependent variable national party affiliation. The R-squared analysis provides a stable comparable value which can be used to compare over the years, detecting trends of how much of the voting variation can be explained by the political groups respectively national party. One should however be careful in comparing the R^2 -value between the two dependent variables as there are different conditions for the two variables. One clear example is that the national party affiliation may have a high degree of explanation as some national parties only consist of one MEP, the vote of that MEP will then always be in line with the national party and thus affecting the degree of explanation of the R-squared. Though, the R-squared can be used to compare the different trends, but not the exact values.

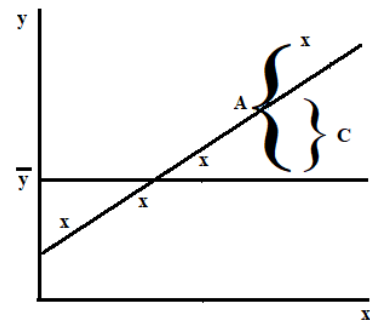


Figure 1. Visual representation of the calculation of the coefficient of determination. Where x is the units of analysis, A is the total variability, C is the explained variability and \bar{y} represents the mean value of y . Adapted from (Rogerson 2015,

5.5 Cohesion index

The second method used is a cohesion index. The aim of using this method is to see if there are any internal changes among the political groups that can explain the R-squared results.

This method will focus on the European Political group cohesion. Due to the emphasis of the thesis and the time constraints the cohesion of the national parties will not be analyzed. However, it is assumed that the two principals will affect one another, following both the two principal theory and the salience theory (section 4), where the increase in salience is assumed to create bigger cohesion to the national party and bigger defection to the European political groups. Emphasis is thus placed on hypotheses one and indirectly relating to hypothesis two.

The index used to measure political group cohesion is the Agreement Index (AI), constructed by Hix et al. (2005), which follows the following equation:

$$AI_i = \frac{Max(Y_i, N_i, A_i) - \frac{1}{2}((Y_i + N_i + A_i) - Max(Y_i, N_i, A_i))}{(Y_i + N_i + A_i)} \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

The index uses a max function, which returns the highest number of the three voting options to find how most MEPs in the political group voted and how this stand in relation to the ones that defected from the party line. The variables should be interpreted as table 2 expresses. The index creates an output, AI_i , ranging from 0 to 1. The index value equals with zero if the votes are equally distributed over the three voting options (2005, p.215).

Table 2. Explanation of Y_i , N_i and A_i in the AI equation. Based on Hix et al. (2005, p.215)

Y_i	Number of yes votes expressed by group i
N_i	Number of no votes expressed by group i
A_i	Number of votes expressed by group i

To illustrate, an imaginary political group consisting of 75 members of Parliament is used. If all of these voted the same, generating 75 votes yes, no or abstain, the index number would be 1. If the members, on the contrary did not agree and voted equal parts on all the three options, generating 25 votes yes, 25 votes no and 25 abstaining, the index number would be 0. The index thus generates 1 if there is total cohesion and 0 if there is no cohesion at all.

The AI index has great similarities with other voting agreement indexes, specifically the Rice index and the Attinà index. The Rice index, in its pure formulation does not include a third voting option, and the Attinà index provides both positive and negative results (Hix et al. 2005, p.215-216). The AI index was chosen due to its ability to include all three voting options and the results being positive. Including abstain votes ensures a higher level of details and

minimizes the risks of measurement errors, as abstaining may be the majority vote within a party and where yes/no votes are votes of defection. Not including abstain votes may in worst case produce the opposite results. To illustrate this, the same imaginary political group as before, consisting of 75 members. If 65 of the MEPs in this group voted abstain, with 10 members defecting, 5 voting yes and 5 voting no, an index not including abstain votes would generate an answer of zero cohesion. This would then be misleading results as 65 out of 75 voted abstain. Furthermore, by giving a 0-1 output the index is easy to interpret, compare and opens for the possibility to use the results future research requiring a dichotomous variable.

The close similarities with other indexes, where the AI to a 98% degree corresponds with the Rice index and is only a rescaling of the Attinà index (Hix et al. 2005, p.216), creates great possibilities to compare the results of this thesis to other research results.

5.6 Methodological evaluation

It should be noted that the methods outlined above does not take causality into account. Using these methods, it is thus not possible to establish any causal link between the Covid-19 pandemic and the voting behavior. However, if there is strong support for the two hypothesis this can be a step on the way to, in future studies, establish causality.

Furthermore, the methods do not take other variables into account that could influence the results. This could for example be elections, the new MFF for the vote in 2020 and 2021 or country specific conditions.

Another potential limitation is the risk of systemic errors in the selection of material and formulation of variables, which was touched upon in section 5.1 and 5.2.

6 Results

This section aims to outline and highlight the key parts from the results from the coefficient of determination and the cohesion index.

6.1 Coefficient of determination

The first method that was conducted was the coefficient of determination. This is done separately for the European political group and the national party as these variables are highly correlated due to that the MEPs usually are part of a national party, and those parties are in turn forming the European political groups. The result for the EPG is outlined first and then the results for the national party, ending with a combined graph of the two.

Figure 2 displays the results for the European political group as the independent variable to explain the variation in vote, that is how much the European political group can explain why the MEPs vote a certain way in the final budget vote. As figure 2 shows, the R-squared values are fluctuating ranging from 0.61 at the lowest and 0.85 at the highest. The year that sticks out is especially 2017 at 0.85. It also seems like the R-squared levels are higher for the 9th EP (2019-2021) with two out of three values being over 0.7 compared to the levels of the 8th EP (2014-2019) that only had one over 0.7 in 2017. When looking at the fluctuation, the biggest difference is between 2016 to 2017, 2017 to 2018 and 2018 to 2019. In the other years, the fluctuation is around the same, being around 0.04 to 0.08.

Analyzing the years 2020 and 2021, the values does not differ much from the earlier years. The value for 2020 is the third lowest at 0.67 after the values in 2018 and 2014. The value for 2021 is instead the second highest at a level of 0.75. The fluctuation is a negative 0.06 between 2019 and 2020 and positive 0.08 between the years 2020 and 2021.

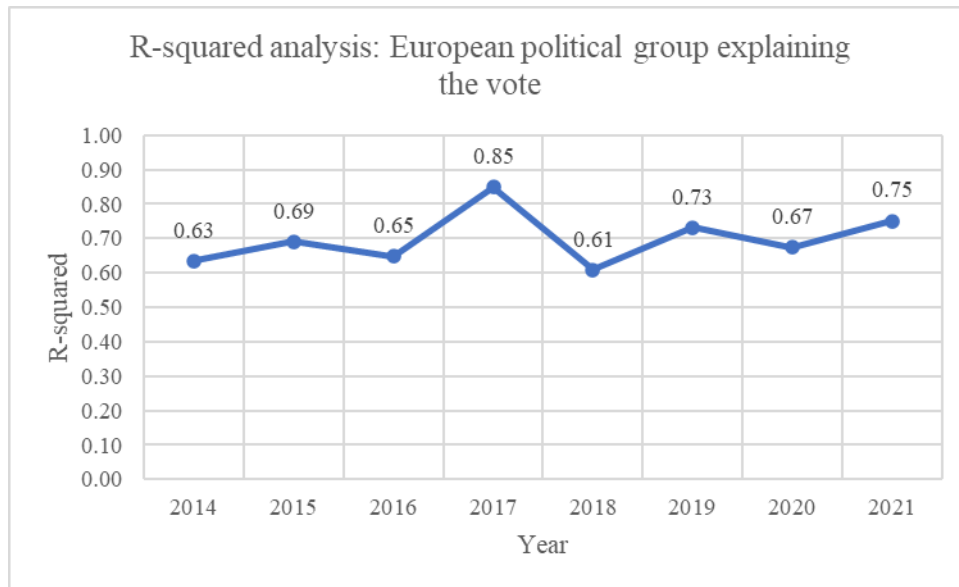


Figure 2. R-squared values for European political groups' ability to predict vote outcome in the final budget vote each year.

Source: Calculated from *Votewatch* (Hix et al. 2022) dataset.

Figure 3 shows the results for the national party affiliation as the independent variable to explain the variation in the vote, in other words how much the national parties can explain why the MEPs vote a certain way in the final budget vote. The values are at a high level ranging between 0.86 and 0.99. The year that sticks out especially is 2018 at the lowest level, being 0.86, with the other years being between 0.95 and 0.99. The values are thus rather stable, with the fluctuation ranging from 0.00 to 0.03, except for the difference between 2017 to 2018 at 0.09 and 2018 to 2019 at 0.1 due to the low level in 2018.

Analyzing the years 2020 and 2021 the values do not differ much from the years before 2017 and 2018, however they consist of the highest R-squared values at 0.99 for both years. The fluctuation is 0.03 between 2019 and 2020 and 0.00 between the years.

For the readers that might wonder about the implications of national parties with only one MEP, the R-squared analysis has been run another time excluding these parties. The results were almost identical, the graph is available in the Appendix (see [figure 1](#)).

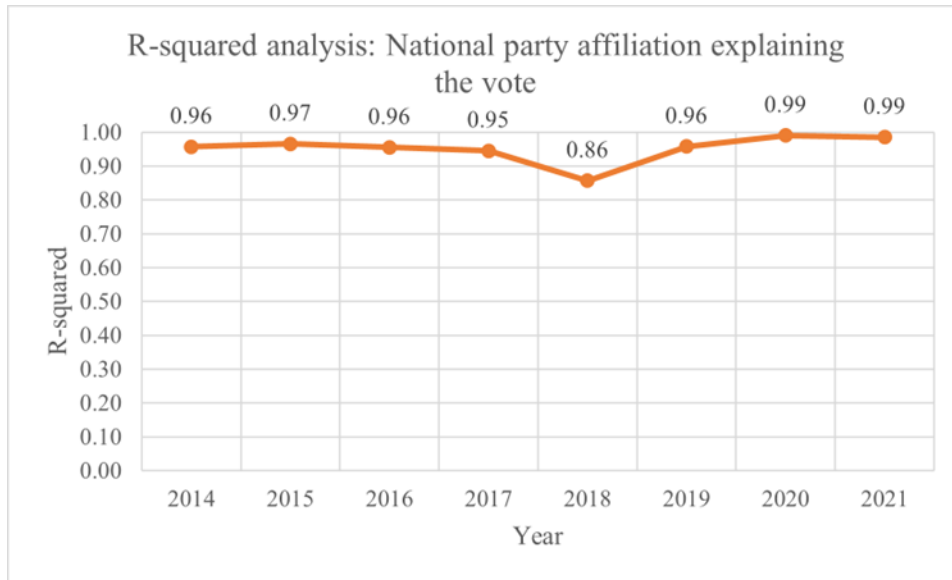


Figure 3. R-squared values for national parties' ability to predict vote outcome in the final budget vote each year.

Source: Calculated from Votewatch (Hix et al. 2022) dataset.

Figure 4 displays the results from both the R-squared analyses at the same time in one graph. What can be observed is that there is much more fluctuation in the political group than the national party. For the years 2014 to 2016 and for 2018 to 2019 the two graphs follow similar pattern where they increase and decrease at the same time. For the other years 2017 and 2020 the opposite is true, an increase in one equals a decrease in the other. For the year 2021, there is not a lot of change in R-squared for national party and none of the previous patterns can be distinguished.

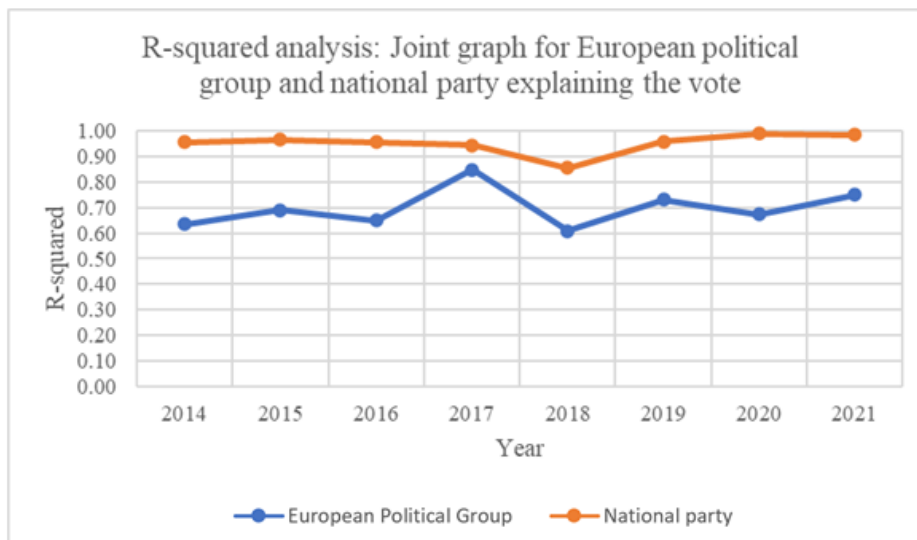


Figure 4. Average across European political groups' and national parties' ability to predict vote outcome in the final budget vote each year.

Source: Calculated from Votewatch (Hix et al. 2022) dataset.

6.2 Cohesion index

The cohesion index was done to get a deeper understanding of the effect the Covid-19 had on voting behavior in relation to the European political group. First a total cohesion is presented, this was done by calculating the cohesion for each political group for each year and then taking the mean of that. After that the individual cohesion index for each political group for each year is presented to get an even more detailed understanding.

Figure 5 presents the results from the calculated mean cohesion within the European political groups for each year. In other words, in general how well the MEPs vote together with their political group.

The index values vary throughout time, with the lowest being 0.67 in 2020 and the highest being 0.89 in 2017. There is also a lot of fluctuation with changes between 0 and 0.16.

Looking at the years 2020 and 2021, the drop in 2020 is the greatest difference between two years with a decrease of 0.16, and the index level for 2020 is the lowest at a level of 0.67. The decreased level also seems to stay low for 2021, being the third lowest value after 2020 and 2014. However, the difference between 2019 and 2020 is not much bigger than that between 2016 and 2017, where there was an increase of 0.14. Regardless of the previous trend, there are signs of a clear decline in 2020

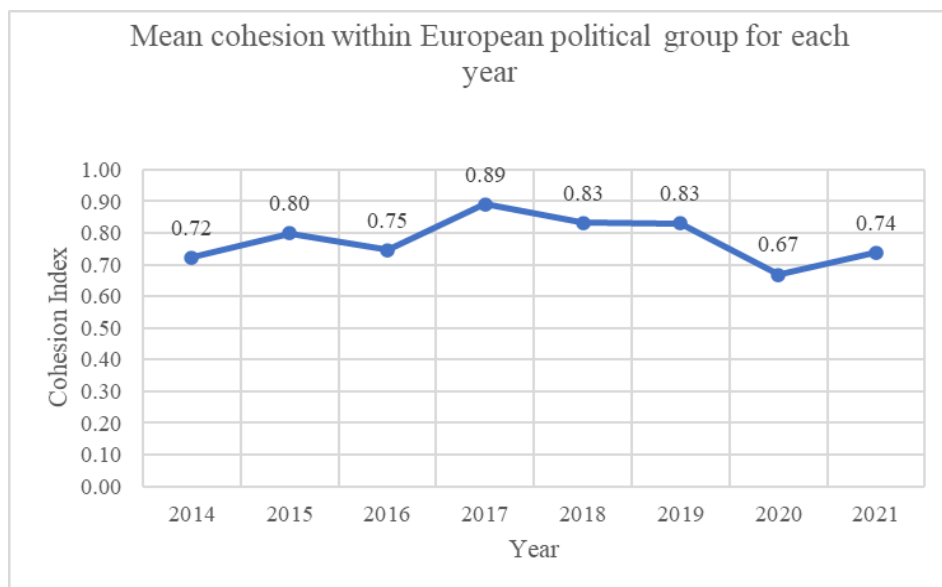


Figure 5. Calculated mean cohesion within the European political groups in the final budget vote each year.

Source: Calculated from Votewatch (Hix et al. 2022) dataset.

From figure 5, there was a drop of cohesion in the year 2020. However, this was a mean index calculated from the different political groups. In figure 6, the cohesion results for each political group are presented for each year to find out what the voting behavior looks like at a more detailed level. The aim is not to

give a detailed explanation for each political group, but rather to identify the big differences and patterns behind the mean cohesion index shown in figure 6.

At the first glance at figure 6, it is evident that there are big differences in the level of cohesion between the political groups and much can be analyzed from these results, therefore the focus will be on the potential change in cohesion for the years 2020 and 2021.

Focusing on these years some political groups have a clear drop in cohesion in the years 2020 and in some cases that level stays for 2021 as well. Four political groups showed a drop in cohesion between 2019 and 2020. The political group that had the most drastic decrease between the years 2019 and 2020 was the Identity and Democracy Group (IDG) that enjoyed total cohesion for all years before 2020 with one exception of 2018. Two groups that had less of a drastic decrease but where there was a clear break in the trend was the Renew Europe Group (REG) and the Group of the European People's Party (EPP). These two groups had similar voting pattern, which also goes for the decrease in 2020. Another group that shows a decrease between 2019 and 2020 is the Left group in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL (The Left). The Left have had a lot of fluctuation between the years which is important to keep in mind when assessing the drop in 2020.

In some of these cases the decreased level of cohesion stayed in 2021. For the IDG the decreased level stayed almost the same as in 2020. The impact on the Left and the EPP was lessened. The drop in 2020 was gone by 2021 in the REG, where the level of cohesion is back at one of its highest levels of cohesion.

The other three political groups; European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (the Greens/EFA) and the Group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D), showed no indication of a drop in 2020 nor in 2021. The Greens/EFA and S&D even experienced some of their highest levels of cohesion.

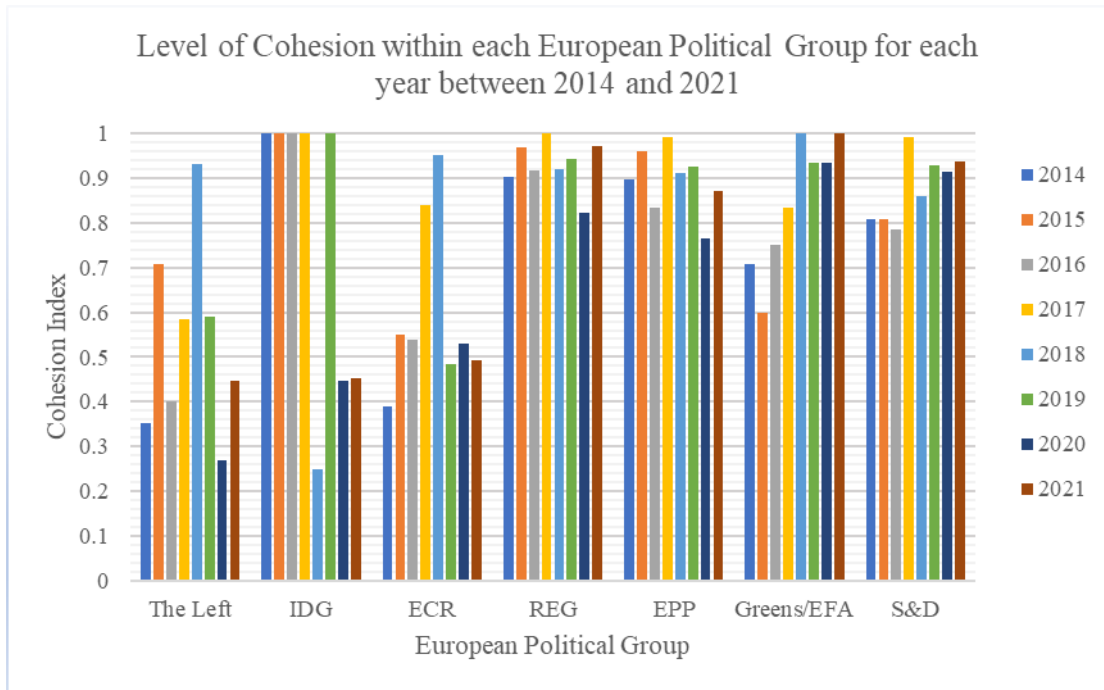


Figure 6. Calculated voting cohesion on the final budget vote for each year between 2014 and 2021 within each European political group using the Agreement index.

Source: Calculated from *Votewatch* (Hix et al. 2022) dataset.

Note: The abbreviations follow those in the *VoteWatch* data and corresponds to the parties as follows. The left: The Left group in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL¹; IDG: Identity and Democracy Group²; ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group; REG: Renew Europe Group³; EPP: Group of the European People’s Party (Christian Democrats); Greens/EFA: Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance; S&D: Group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament⁴.

To sum up the cohesion index, figure 5 showed a decrease between 2019 and 2020, when taken a detailed approach, seen in figure 6, this drop entailed differences within the European Parliament where four groups, the Left, IDG, REG and EPP showed a decreased level of cohesion, which lasted for the year 2021 for the Left, IDG and EPP. The detailed approach also showed that there was no decrease for the last three political groups, the ECR, the Greens/EFA and S&D.

¹ Before January 2021 they were called European United Left/Nordic Green Left.

² Before the 2019 election called Europe of Nations and Freedom Group.

³ Before the 2019 election called Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.

⁴ Note that the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group is not included as they did not exist during the 9th European Parliament

7 Analysis

In the following section the aim is to analyze the results in relation to the two theories and hypotheses. This in turn to be able to answer the research question on how Covid-19 has affected the voting behavior of the MEPs in relation to the importance of their EPG. Emphasis will, as mentioned in section 1.3, be on the effect of EPG. However as this is related to the national party affiliation that is discussed as well.

Focusing on the first hypothesis, the focal point in this thesis, the results from the R-squared and the cohesion is to be analyzed. The hypothesis predicted a reduction in R-squared values in 2020 and 2021, the results from this method are ambiguous and could provide contradictory signs. The value for 2020 is difficult to evaluate and has various possible interpretations. There is in fact a decrease in 2020, it could thus be interpreted as a break in the positive trend of rising R-squared values since 2019. This could, in turn, indicate that Covid-19 influences voting behavior in respect to EPGs. Another interpretation is that there is no break in the pattern with that small variation, and that the decrease in 2020 instead should be interpreted as part of a fluctuating pattern. Therefore, indicating that the Covid-19 has no effect on voting behavior in relation to political groups.

In either case, it is apparent that Covid-19 showed no effect on the hypothesis for the year 2021 as this year's R-squared was the second highest. Furthermore, it is evident that from these results the year 2020 needs to be further evaluated, which the cohesion index provides.

The cohesion index strengthens the evidence for the first hypothesis, which expected a decline in the influence of European political groups and, as a result, a lower level of cohesion. The cohesion index displays a pattern like that of the R-squared with EPG as the independent variable. The differences in the results between the two methods is most apparent for the years 2018 and 2019, where the cohesion index has a smoother development with higher levels in 2018 and 2019. The correspondence between the two methods should be interpreted as strengthening of the pattern observed. Furthermore, when looking at the years 2020 and 2021, the smoother development the drop in 2020 more compelling. When using the mean cohesion index, the lowest level of cohesion is also observed in 2020, further strengthening the support for the first hypothesis.

At the more detailed level however, the cohesion index displays a heterogenous Parliament where only some groups show a drop in 2020. It is thus clear that if the drop in 2020 is to be understood as an effect of Covid-19, it has an uneven effect.

Furthermore, the support seen in 2020 is not as visible in 2021. In the R-squared it is even one of the largest levels and in the cohesion index the 2021

cohesion levels shows a clear upward trend. Moreover, the effect is gone for most political groups that showed an effect in 2020. It is thus clear that if the drop in 2020 is to be understood as an effect of Covid-19, the Covid-19 effect has diminished by 2021.

Focusing on the second hypothesis the evidence is not straight forward. Support for the second hypothesis is attained through the R-squared analysis with the national party as the independent variable. It needs a clear increase in the R-squared levels in the years 2020 and 2021 to show support, however, the results of the R-squared is weak and ambiguous.

There are indications of support for the second hypothesis, R-squared are at the highest levels in 2020 and 2021 with the third biggest difference being between the year 2019 and 2020. However, these results are not enough to say that there is support for the second hypothesis. Another potential support is the joint graph in figure 4. If there would be a clear pattern of the two principal dilemma, meaning an increase in one would also mean a decrease in the other then the support from the cohesion index for hypothesis one could be extrapolated to hypothesis two. However, this pattern is not evident in figure 4. It can thus not be said that there is support for the second hypothesis without further evaluation.

What do these results then mean for the theories. For the two principal theory there is little support because, as mentioned, the R-squared pattern for the national party and the political group are not in line with the theory. However, the pattern does get better when comparing the R-squared for national party with the cohesion, which could indicate that a calculated cohesion index for the national parties could show a more in line pattern with the theory.

For the salience theory, explicitly adapted to Covid-19 as a whole, there is partial support. There is a pattern that indicate this change for the political groups where there is a drop in 2020. However, the effect does not last for 2021, it differs between the political groups and there is little support for the effect in the national party. There is thus some support, meaning that it did show an effect for some party groups.

However, as the two theories are intertwined, their results need to be evaluated together. The lack of effect in the national party means that the support found for the political groups to be seen in that light. There is support for the idea that Covid-19 has had a salience effect on the political groups, decreasing their importance. However, it cannot be said that it is due to the national party affiliation without further investigation. What might explain these results is discussed in the following section.

8 Discussion

This section aims to discuss the analysis and different possible explanations, focusing on the little change for the R-squared in national party, the internal differences within the Parliament and the reduced effect in 2021. Each of these parts will entail a short summary of what was hypothesized, followed by a discussion trying to explain the outcome. Moreover, this section also aims to highlight the most evident limitations of the thesis as well as present possible avenues for future studies.

8.1 Potential explanations to the result

It was hypothesized that there would be a considerably bigger difference between 2019 and 2020 for the national party. The R-squared, however, does not display an increase that can support this, which could be due to several reasons such as methodological differences between the R-square and cohesion index or the theory not being totally applicable.

Firstly, this could be methodologically explained by the exclusion of abstain in the R-squared analysis. Much of the support for the first hypothesis is based on the cohesion index as the support for the hypothesis was less prominent in the R-squared analysis. The different results could depend on the exclusion of abstain in the R-squared and taking into consideration the great number of abstain votes in 2020 (see table 1) this could partially explain the vote. If a method which included abstain was used for the national party, then perhaps the results would look different.

Secondly, the result could be explained by the way in which the abstain votes are interpreted. The number of abstain votes in 2020 could potentially be strategical votes. As mentioned in previous research (section 3) Mühlböck and Yordanova (2017 p.324) show that the abstain votes are normally used when the individual MEPs are trapped between their principals. The number of abstain votes might thus be an indication of torn MEPs between these two and that the MEPs are not voting more with one of the principals.

Thirdly, the result for national parties could be explained by other principals than the national party and the EPG. This could be the electorate or the national ministries that affects how the MEPs lay their vote, which this thesis does not take into consideration. The lack of effect in the importance of the national party may thus be due another principal answering to the drop of importance of the political group.

Fourthly, the results for the national party could further be explained by its connection to the EPGs. The MEPs normally vote with their political group, which also means that they in most cases vote with their national party as the national party is part of an EPG. The levels for the national party should thus be high and have little fluctuation as it is only in the cases where the national party line diverge from the EPG and the EPG is better at appealing the MEPs that they do not vote with the national party. Small changes within the analysis of the national party could therefore be enough to indicate support. Following this logic, the results should not be disregarded as of lack of support.

It was also hypothesized that there would be an overall drop in 2020 and 2021. The results, however, showed internal heterogeneity and not a perfect pattern of the theory. This could be due to several reasons, including the relation between political group and national party, country specific conditions, strengths of the political groups.

Firstly, the position of the national party in relation to the political group can influence how well the political group can retain its internal cohesion. Depending on the direction in which the national party possesses strength the outcome can be different. If the national party is considerably big it may influence the political groups position on issues more, making the national party less likely to issue voting instructions to its MEPs. However, if the political group consists of more than one big influential party the situation may be less stable. If these two do not agree than the cohesion is likely to be low and if they do it is likely to be high. Similar effects may be found if the national party has little influence over the political groups position but has a strong hold over its MEPs, it should be more likely that they issue voting instructions diverging from the political group. Depending on the composition of national parties in the political group, the internal cohesion will vary.

Secondly, other differences within the political group may affect how well they retain internal cohesion. One such effect could be country specific conditions. The Covid-19 pandemic hit the member states unevenly and the response and measures taken differed. It is likely that national parties from countries that got hit harder, for example experienced a higher economic toll, will prioritize its countries need over the issue position of the EPG. Moreover, due to the uneven effects it is not unlikely that the member states would have different priorities. Political groups consisting of MEPs representing multiple member states may thus have a lower cohesion.

Thirdly, in addition to the differences in composition the political groups differ at other things as well. This includes different level of influence in Parliament and in the specific budget vote as well as different ideologies, which may explain the heterogenic effect in 2020. It is not far-fetched that political groups that have a large proportion of seats in the Parliament, are important for the vote to pass or holds key positions such as rapporteurship, may have more to say on issues. The political groups also represent different parts of the ideological spectrum and may thus be in favor of different proposals and prioritize differently. The heterogenic results, regardless of the reason, imply that the salience theory was unable to provide an overall explanation.

It was further hypothesized that the levels in 2021 would be like that of 2020. However, in all parts if the results the effect lessened or even disappeared to 2020, except for the R-squared for the national party. The reasons to this could be anything from that the salience has lessened to that year, to the drop in 2020 being not being caused by the increased salience of the pandemic.

Firstly, without going into any details about Covid-19, a lot happened between 2020 and 2021. The vote in 2020 was within the first year of the pandemic, whereas by 2021 the pandemic was no longer something new. Similarly, there could be differences between the content of the budgets between the years. If the budget in 2020 focused more on Covid-19, it is possible that this held a higher salience than in 2021, and thus giving a lower result in 2021.

Secondly, as this thesis only describe the pattern and imply causality but does not establish causality, there is a risk of misjudging what caused the drop in 2020. The drop may be due to other factors than increased salience from the pandemic.

In sum, there are multiple possible explanations to the results and this section has highlighted the main ones. The small effect for national party can be explained by the methodological differences between R-squared and cohesion index, interpretation of abstain, other principals than the two included in this thesis or the relation between national parties and EPGs. The results from national party should thus not be disregarded but rather subject for further investigation. The internal heterogeneity in the Parliament can be explained by the power relation between national party and EPGs, internal differences between the political groups and differences such as ideology and position in Parliament. To get a full understanding of why there were such differences in cohesion between the political groups a more detailed study with that as focal point would be needed. The lack of support for the hypothesis in 2021 may be due to lessened salience or that the 2020 effect was due to other causes than the pandemic.

8.2 Limitations

In this section potential sources of error are to be discussed. Focus is on what else, other than the pandemic, that could have affected the budget vote in 2020 and 2021 including the multiannual financial framework, Brexit, and the 2019 European election

A potential source of error is the 2019 election. The election changed the composition within the Parliament with new individuals and new proportions between the political groups. This may influence the results such as if less cohesive political groups win more seats in the election, which in turn may affect the total mean cohesion within the Parliament.

Similarly, Brexit and the departure of the British MEPs in 2020 can potentially influence the results. The British MEPs did not vote in the 2020 and 2021 budget vote and thus creating a different Parliament, where some parties gained or lost MEPs due to redistribution (European Parliament 2020). This follows the argumentation in section 8.1 about country specific conditions as well as ideological and internal differences between the political groups.

Another potential source of error is that the budget votes lay under different multiannual financial frameworks. One stretching from 2014 to 2021, and one stretching 2021 to 2027. Note that each vote applies to the following year. Which makes the votes in 2020 and 2021 subject to the new MFF. If the new MFF differs greatly from the previous one that may affect how the voting behavior of the MEPs. For example, if the new MFF is more politically charged than the one before, the national parties may be more prone to issue voting instructions.

Additionally, the vote in 2020 was taken before an agreement of change within the MFF was done (European Parliament n.d.(c)), therefore could the vote analyzed in this thesis be drafted to fit the MFF for 2021 to 2027 as it was before the changes.

Despite said potential limitations, the results of the thesis should not be disregarded as they are still valid and should be regarded for future studies of the subject.

8.3 Future research

From this study it becomes clear that there are multiple avenues that could be pursued in future research.

Firstly, it could be interesting to investigate the causality by including other potential factors such as the election or Brexit to name a few. It could also be meaningful to test these factors as well as the ones in this thesis against other

principals. This would clarify the tendencies found in the results as well as potentially discover a relationship not covered in this study.

Secondly, looking at different types of votes, other than the final budget, may help establish a more holistic viewpoint as well as distinguish the results of this thesis as either a one-off occurrence or a general pattern.

Thirdly, it could be interesting to look at other established crisis events to be able to compare voting behavior during crisis. By looking at multiple events this could help expand the theory of salience.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate if the Covid-19 pandemic affected the MEPs voting behavior in relation to their European political group and in addition also national party affiliation. The results indicated support for the first hypothesis, which predicted a drop in influence from the EPG on the voting behavior of MEPs. The second hypothesis, which predicted an increase of influence from the national party on the MEP's voting behavior did not find any support and thus cannot the decrease in EPG be explained by the national party either without further research.

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Appendix

Figure 1.

