Party discipline and intraparty accountability:
Finnish parties in the European Parliament

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Abstract

Do national party leaders enforce discipline in the European Parliament (EP)? This article examines whether and with what consequences for representation and accountability Finnish political parties mandate MEPs. It makes a conceptual contribution by identifying how party discipline shapes intraparty accountability; it makes an empirical contribution by providing an in-depth examination of how three Finnish parties structure relations with MEPs. The findings challenge a notion that underpins major recent studies of legislative behaviour in the European Parliament: that national parties systematically and successfully enforce discipline in relation to MEPs. These national parties pay little attention to the EP or to the activities of MEPs. The absence of intraparty accountability reinforces concerns that an accountability deficit exists at the heart of the EU.

Keywords: party discipline; European Parliament; accountability; representation; Finland.

Introduction[1]

Questions relating to the nature of the relationship between Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and two types of partisan actors – national political parties and the transnational parliamentary groups (EP Groups) – have stimulated considerable scholarly interest over the last two decades. A specific concern of the literature is the degree to which these two types of actors drive legislative behaviour in the EP. There is a clear discrepancy within the literature between some major studies that claim that national parties exercise considerable influence on MEPs (Faas, 2003; Finke, 2016; Hix, 2002, 2004; Hix, Noury, and Roland, 2007; Hix & Høyland, 2014; Lindstädt, Slapin, and Vander Wielen, 2011, 2012) and studies that either dispute this claim explicitly (Ringe, 2010), or that present evidence which casts doubt on this assumption (Aylott, Bergman, and Blomgren, 2013; Blomgren, 2003; Bomberg, 1998; Mühlböck, 2012; Poguntke, Aylott, Carter, Ladrech, and Luther, 2007; Raunio, 2000, 2002, 2007; Scully, 2002).

The question of partisan control is highly significant. Legislative behaviour shapes how and how well citizens' interests are advanced, and affects the strength of the connection between the governed and the governors. If national party leaders control

the behaviour of MEPs, as Hix et al. (2007) claim, this raises concerns that leaders compel MEPs to prioritise party interests and to neglect the interests of constituents (Farrell & Scully, 2007). Conversely, if national party leaders take minimal interest in the work of MEPs, as other studies suggest (Aylott et al., 2013; Poguntke et al., 2007), this raises concerns that leaders do little to ensure that MEPs are subject to accountability mechanisms. This is of particular concern in the context of the EP, given that citizens fail to hold MEPs to account (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014).

This article examines whether three Finnish parties enforce discipline in the EP, as a means of testing the claim that national party leaders control legislative behaviour in that setting. While the electoral system places Finnish parties in a weaker position to enforce discipline than many parties across Europe, they are typical of many parties operating in the EP in that they appear to have little incentive to enforce discipline due to the small size of their delegations. By demonstrating that Finnish MEPs operate with considerable independence from their parties, the findings shape understanding of the context in which at least a substantial minority of MEPs make decisions relating to representation. The inattentiveness of parties indicates that neither citizens nor parties hold Europe's elected representatives to account, reinforcing concerns that an accountability deficit exists within Europe's parliament.

The article is structured as follows. The first section sets out the conceptual argument that party discipline, representation, and accountability are intrinsically linked. The discussion demonstrates how party discipline can shape the nature of representation and accountability, and provides the analytical framework for the investigation of whether parties enforce discipline. The second section examines the widely accepted claim that national parties control legislative behaviour in the EP. The third section discusses issues relating to research design. The four subsequent sections provide an empirical examination of whether three Finnish parties mandate MEPs. The penultimate section brings together the empirical findings and considers whether they indicate that Finnish parties enforce discipline in the EP. The concluding section discusses the implications for the claim that legislative behaviour in the EP is driven by national parties, and examines the sense in which – if any – MEPs are subject to accountability processes.

Party discipline, representation, and accountability

This section sets out how party discipline, by shaping the nature of representation and accountability, can affect the legitimacy of a political system. The core argument is as follows. Party discipline entails subjecting legislators to accountability mechanisms in order to shape their representational behaviour. This has far-reaching consequences. Party discipline can affect the manner in which representatives provide representation, and which forms of accountability – if any – are feasible.

Understanding party discipline

Party discipline refers to practices whereby parties seek to compel legislators to follow instructions by providing incentives in the form of threats or rewards (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011; Kam, 2014, p. 399). A party's aim in enforcing discipline is to influence how representatives act. Parties seek to compel representatives to advance either the party's interests or the party's conception of the public good, and to act as party delegates rather than as independent trustees. Party discipline can shape the nature of the representation that representatives provide and – by implication – how and how well various interests are advanced. It can therefore affect the degree to which the political system is responsive to the concerns or interests of citizens.

To enforce discipline parties must fulfil four conditions. First, they need a compelling *reason* to enforce discipline. They need to identify that a discrepancy exists between how they would prefer the legislator to act and the actions that the legislator is considering. Parties must identify both their own preferences and those of legislators. Parties who wish to systematically influence the actions of their legislators need to monitor legislators before they take action. This entails continually keeping abreast of their views on a potentially broad range of issues.

Secondly, party leaders must *communicate* to legislators how to act. That is, leaders must provide instructions.

Thirdly, for a party's efforts at enforcing discipline to have any prospect of success, the leadership must *issue threats* or make *promises of rewards* that legislators find

compelling. As goal-seeking actors, legislators have little reason to behave in ways other than those which serve their own interests.

Fourthly, parties must *monitor the behaviour* of their legislators. The most effective but costly way is to proactively monitor MEPs, to undertake 'police patrols oversight' (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984, p. 166). Less costly, but less effective, ways include requiring MEPs to report about their actions, or acquiring this information from an interested third party, a technique known as 'fire alarm oversight' (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984, p. 166).

Parties incur costs when carrying out the four activities outlined above. Leaders may calculate that these costs outweigh the potential reward. And there is no guarantee that a party's attempts to enforce discipline will be successful. Parties may fail to persuade legislators that they stand to obtain a more favourable outcome from obeying the party's command than from acting otherwise. Dissent is currently on the increase in many settings (Cowley, 2002; Kam, 2009).

Accountability and party discipline

Party discipline is linked to accountability in two highly significant ways. First, enforcing discipline entails subjecting legislators to accountability mechanisms. Intraparty accountability is at the heart of discipline; it is the mechanism that gives discipline its bite. Second, party discipline shapes the sense, if any, in which legislators are held to account. Party discipline can therefore shape the degree to which representatives advance the interests of citizens. This sub-section develops these claims.

The conventional understanding of accountability, informed by the principal–agent logic, indicates that accountability mechanisms are central to party discipline. Accountability emerges when the agent is aware that the principal will evaluate its performance at a later date and can issue sanctions or provide rewards on the basis of this evaluation (Mulgan, 2003, ch. 1; Borowiak, 2011, p. 7). Sanctions must include the ability to deauthorize the agent (Fearon, 1999); sanctions cannot be deployed arbitrarily, but must be linked to the principal's evaluation of the agent's performance (Gailmard, 2014, p. 91). Such accountability serves two functions: it has 'both

corrective and deterrent dimensions' (Borowiak, 2011, p. 61). The threat of sanction deters shirking and incentivises behaviour that advances the principal's interest; principals can deauthorize agents who perform poorly. There are two possible results: either the agent acts in a manner that pleases the principal or the principal may dismiss the agent.

The practice of enforcing discipline is based on parties subjecting their legislators to accountability processes and using accountability mechanisms to spur the legislator to act in a manner that is responsive to the party. Having outlined how they wish legislators to act, parties threaten legislators with sanctions for errant behaviour.[2] This acts as a deterrent. Parties subsequently monitor and evaluate the behaviour of legislators according to the degree to which they follow instructions. If dissatisfied, parties may expel incumbents or deselect them from the party's pool of electoral candidates. This provides for accountability's corrective function.

The consequences of party discipline for legislative accountability are highly significant. Agency theory warns that citizens must hold legislators to account if they are to benefit from the work of elected representatives (Mulgan, 2003; Borowiak, 2011). A fundamental assumption underlies the principal–agent conception of accountability: that *citizens* must hold legislators to account. Accountability deficits arise when citizens pay limited attention to the actions of legislators (Borowiak, 2011; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Yet in practice citizens are not the only societal actors which may hold elected representatives to account. Political parties may also hold legislators accountable.

In contexts of public inattentiveness, party discipline not only shapes the sense in which legislators are held to account, but also determines *whether* they are held accountable in any meaningful sense. There is no guarantee that citizens benefit from intraparty accountability: it is no perfect substitute for individual or collective accountability (Carey, 2009). However, there is a very real chance that citizens will benefit from intraparty accountability. First, legislators may be less willing to shirk simply from being subject to party oversight, particularly if they require the party's support to realise goals. Second, parties have an incentive to combat shirking even in settings where citizens are inattentive. In multi-level settings, parties can highlight

instances of rival legislators shirking at one level of governance to gain an advantage at another level. Therefore, the intraparty accountability that is a by-product of party discipline can determine the degree to which representatives strive to advance citizens' interests.

The claim of national party control in the EP

The notion that national parties – and EP Groups to a lesser extent – exercise considerable control over MEPs (Hix et al., 2007) is widespread. Several recent studies present the assumption of national party control as part of the theoretical framework (Klüver & Spoon, 2015; Lindstädt et al., 2011, 2012; Meserve, Pemstein, and Bernhard, 2009; Trumm, 2015). The theoretical basis for this claim is that national parties possess potent tools to compel legislators to follow instructions: most national parties control whether MEPs gain re-election or acquire positions in domestic politics; national parties and EP Groups share control over desirable positions and assignments within the EP. The empirical basis for the claim of party control is provided by evidence that national parties and EP Groups act cohesively at plenary divisions taken by roll call (e.g. Kreppel 2002; Hix et al., 2007). The finding that MEPs tend to vote with their domestic parties rather than with their Groups in cases of conflict is interpreted as an indication that MEPs are 'ultimately controlled by their national parties rather than their European political groups' (Hix et al., 2007, p. 138, p. 133).

The claim that political parties systematically control MEPs is contested. Frech (2016) and Wilson, Ringe, and van Thomme (2016) find that national parties tend not to sanction rebels: MEPs who are loyal to the national party at roll call divisions are no more likely to be re-selected or to receive a high position on the party's list.[3] Ringe (2010) provides an alternative explanation based on shared preferences for the party cohesion observed in the EP. He argues that since MEPs are unable to develop an expertise in every area in which the EP is active, they seek and follow guidance offered by colleagues within their national party delegations and EP Groups. Ringe's challenge has been largely ignored by mainstream scholars of the EP; his study was not cited by the main proponents of the party control claim in a major review article (Hix & Høyland, 2013). This is surprising, given that the findings of virtually all studies on the nature of relations between MEPs and their national parties implicitly

cast doubt on the notion of party control (Aylott et al., 2013; Blomgren, 2003; Mühlböck, 2012; Poguntke et al., 2007; Raunio, 2007; Scully, 2002).[4] These studies suggest that MEPs operate largely autonomously and are subject to little oversight. The evidence that party–MEP are weak does not sit easily with the idea that parties systematically enforce discipline.

National parties cannot necessarily be expected to mandate MEPs. Parties seek to realise goals (Strøm, 1990) within a multi-level context. They must make trade offs between goals within any single setting, and between levels of governance. Parties may prioritise the national level, where the most attractive goals are realised. Further, while enforcing discipline may assist parties to avoid negative media coverage, their size limits the scope for realising goals. Enforcing discipline may prove counterproductive, since inflexible national delegations may become sidelined in coalition-formation processes (Scully, 2002: 14). National parties may feel that enforcing discipline is unnecessary if unity arises from MEPs' sense of loyalty to the party, 'homogeneity of preferences', and 'the division of labour within parliamentary parties' (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2010: 655).

Given these conflicting accounts, it is currently unclear whether, and to what extent, national parties enforce discipline within the EP. Consequently, it is unclear how practices of party discipline (or the lack thereof) shape processes of representation and mechanisms of accountability within the EP.

Research design and case study selection

This study examines the claim of partisan control by focusing on practices within three Finnish national parties during the seventh EP term (2009–14). At the beginning of that term there was a total of 736 MEPs, from 161 national parties. How instructive are Finnish parties when examining the claim of national party control?

Finnish parties – much as the overwhelming majority of parties represented in the EP – have few MEPs and therefore seemingly little reason to enforce discipline. No Finnish party won more than three seats at the 2009 EP election. The governing parties collectively have held no more than nine EP mandates since 2009. More than 75% of national delegations following the 2009 election comprised of fewer than 5

MEPs (121 out of the 161); half (49.6%) of all MEPs were affiliated to national delegations with fewer than 10 MEPs. Since MEPs are rarely full members of more than two committees, it appears that the national delegations to which half of all MEPs were affiliated were unable to follow proceedings in all of the EP's 20 committees. There is a limit to what parties can hope to achieve in terms of pursuing goals through the work of such a small number of legislators.

Many parties are better placed than Finnish parties to provide compelling threats to MEPs. Finnish EP elections are conducted using an open list system. Leaders can deploy the 'ultimate' sanction of deselecting incumbent MEPs (Raunio, 2007: 133), but unlike many party leaders across Europe, cannot use list ordering as a sanctioning tool. Party leaders from countries using closed and ordered list systems are in a stronger position to provide potent election-related threats than those from Finland, if candidate selection is centralised. Despite some recent contrary evidence (Bailer, 2017), this study follows the conventional expectation that the parties best placed to enforce discipline are more likely to do so.

Findings relating to Finnish parties can be generalized to parties operating under open list and STV systems (i.e. parties that have a similar ability to provide compelling incentives) and to at least some of the multitude of small parties that operate under closed and ordered list systems (i.e. parties that have an equally limited incentive to enforce discipline). There is little basis for generalizing these findings to the main parties of large member states.

The three national parties examined are the National Coalition Party (KOK), the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Finns Party (PS). KOK is an integrationist, centre-right party. Its three MEPs were affiliated to the European People's Party (EPP) and the party was in government for the duration of the period under study. The SDP is a centre-left, integrationist party. Its two MEPs were affiliated to the Socialists and Democrats Group (S&D). The PS is a Eurosceptic populist radical right party (Arter, 2010, p. 502–3). Its leader, Timo Soini, won the party's first EP seat in 2009. He returned to the national parliament in 2011 and was replaced by Sampo Terho. Both were affiliated to the Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD) during the 2009–14 term.

The findings are based on analysis of 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in Brussels and Helsinki between 2012 and 2017 with MEPs, their staff, party officials (including the Party Chair and/or the International Secretary of each party), and an official from Finland's Permanent Representation to the EU (for a list of interview questions, see Appendix A). To protect the anonymity of interviewees, the specific position of only some respondents are disclosed. While the interviews dealt with sensitive issues, there are strong grounds for thinking that respondents did not withhold information or provide socially desirable accounts. MEPs criticized their parties for the weak links and the lack of interest shown; party officials acknowledged that the situation is regrettable and largely accepted responsibility. Further, there is a logical consistency to the accounts provided: since parties are inattentive to the EP (a finding that is not consistent with socially desirable responses), it is logical that they do not develop preferences, provide instructions, monitor behaviour, or threaten to sanction incumbents.

The remainder of the article examines whether these three national parties fulfil the four conditions of enforcing discipline outlined above: to develop preferences regarding MEP behaviour, to issue instructions, to provide MEPs with incentives, and to monitor behaviour. The investigation begins by examining whether parties seek to influence whether incumbents are re-elected. The analysis then focuses on how parties structure relations with MEPs during the parliamentary term.

Candidate Selection and the Election Campaign

The empirical examination begins by investigating the conduct of Finnish parties during the EP election campaign period. Do parties attempt to promote the prospects of favoured candidates? If so, leaders may seek to shape the behaviour of MEPs by providing inducements relating to their re-election prospects.

KOK selected its twenty candidates centrally in 2009 and 2014 (see also Mickelsson and Nurmi, 2009), with incumbent MEPs effectively guaranteed a position on the party's list.[5] An MEP claimed that (s)he could be 'lazy' and vote 'against the party' and still be reselected.[6] The party does not present a set of 'top candidates' or formally provide additional support to individuals.[7] Candidates do not receive

campaign funding from the party centrally;[8] they plan and run their campaigns independently.[9] The party's campaign posters in 2009 and 2014 featured a photograph of, and information about, all candidates.[10] The party's regional branches operate independently of the party's central organization, and it is common for these to provide candidates from those areas with financial and other practical campaign support.[11] While KOK formally provides all candidates with the same support, there is a perception that the party gives preferential treatment to certain candidates in a subtle way. Many believe that the party channels publicity to certain individuals by nominating them to represent the party at high-profile media events, such as TV debates.[12] Nevertheless, the key issue here is that KOK's leadership does not provide MEPs with inducements relating to electoral campaigns during a parliamentary term.

Prospective KOK candidates are required to sign up to a list of statements,[13] which include a promise to maintain at least minimal links with the party during the term, if elected; few relate to behaviour during the term. MEPs pay little attention to this document since they could barely recall its content at the midpoint of the parliamentary term.[14]

The SDP also used a largely centralised system to select candidates for the EP elections in 2009 and 2014.[15] The party's Council, comprising of around sixty members who represent the party's local branches, nominated most candidates. The party's executive committee approved these nominations and selected the remaining candidates.[16] The leadership, and the party's General Secretary in particular, had extensive influence over the process.[17] There is no question of deselecting incumbent MEPs (see also Raunio, 2007: 141). It is a challenge for the party to find twenty candidates who are willing to run a 'serious' campaign and who have a realistic prospect of attracting personal votes.[18] SDP lists candidates alphabetically at EP elections, unlike at national elections which are also conducted using open lists, when they are listed in order of preference (see Aylott et al., 2013: 107). The party views the use of a centralised selection process simply as a way to facilitate this task. The system is not used to ensure that leaders can easily deselect incumbents.[19]

The SDP leadership treats each candidate equally during EP election campaigns.[20] In 2009 the party offered to contribute up to approximately €10,000 to the campaign of

each candidate on condition that the candidates' campaign organizations pledged an equal sum.[21] Local party branches could provide individual candidates with additional funding, but these organizations operate independently of the leadership.[22] Campaign material commissioned by the party featured all candidates.[23] The most experienced politicians tend to be selected for major events such as TV debates, and the team of candidates is said to view this as a sensible approach.[24]

The selection processes employed by the PS in 2009 and 2014 were strongly leadership-centred. Candidates were selected by the party's executive committee.[25] The leader had extensive influence over these processes, but no formal control.[26] The issue of preferential treatment was irrelevant in 2009; the party was unlikely to win more than one seat and Soini's candidature dominated the party's campaign. Soini's success was based on his personal appeal rather than on the party providing his campaign with preferential support. The PS contested both elections as 'a completely open race',[27] giving no preference to any of its candidates, including the use of publicity material.[28] Candidates were not required to sign a contract stating their loyalty to the party in the event of their election in 2009 or 2014,[29] as was expected of candidates at the 2011 national parliamentary elections (Arter, 2011, p. 1291).

These three parties under discussion use centralised candidate selection systems. There is a view within two of the parties that leaders provide greater support to favoured candidates. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that these parties use the process of selecting candidates, or the allocation of campaign resources, to provide MEPs with incentives relating to their behaviour during a parliamentary term.

Staffing and communication practices

To enforce discipline, national parties must develop preferences independently of its EP delegation and must issue MEPs with instructions. This requires employing policy experts who liaise with MEPs. Do the staffing practices of these parties enable them to develop preferences regarding how MEPs act? And do their communication practices suggest that they provide MEPs with instructions? By providing a general overview of staffing and communication practices, this section provides an initial indication of how closely Finnish parties engage with their MEPs and with the policy

issues that arise within the EP. The subsequent section examines in greater detail whether these parties develop preferences and communicate these to MEPs.

KOK employs a Secretary for International Affairs in a part-time capacity.[30] The remit is broad. This official coordinates the party's activities in the context of the EU and further afield. While this includes liaising with the party's EP delegation, the official is not expected to engage with EP policy work.[31]

The party leadership does not have a system for communicating directly with MEPs. MEPs have the right to participate at the weekly meetings of the party's national parliamentary group, and the head of the delegation has the right to attend the party's monthly board meeting.[32] They seldom attend these meetings since they are held when MEPs are usually in Brussels or Strasbourg.[33] Communication takes place informally, on an ad hoc basis,[34] either when MEPs take proactive steps to contact party officials,[35] or in rare instances where the party 'happens' to engage with an EU-related issue.[36] The evidence reflects Aylott and colleagues' findings (2013: 114) and contradicts Raunio's claim that links have strengthened (2007: 140). Both sides acknowledge that contacts between KOK and its MEPs are 'loose' and that the relationship does not work well.[37] An official noted that the links have not been 'close enough' and that they should be 'tighter'.[38] Another official expanded on this:

> Both sides have complaints. The MEPs' view is that they are forgotten here and [that] the party is not interested in them, and the party's view is that the delegation neglects the party and is not very eager to cooperate.[39]

Corroborating this account, an MEP claimed that the party 'forgets' about its MEPs when they are working outside Finland,[40] while another stated that the failure to maintain links is 'a real problem'.[41] KOK's desire to maintain systematic links with MEPs is limited.

The SDP's investment in EU affairs is similarly modest. The party employs one International Officer, who deals with virtually all issues relating to external affairs. This official is not expected to follow the passage of individual pieces of EU legislation, or to provide policy advice on specific issues to MEPs.[42] An MEP noted

that there were more people working on EU affairs in each MEP's office in the EP than in the whole party in Finland.[43]

The SDP structures relations with its MEPs in a loose manner. The party's two MEPs are organized within the party structure as a 'technical group' that is formally independent of the central party organization.[44] The head of the party's EP delegation is a member of the party's executive body, and both are members of the party's European Working Group.[45] The head of the delegation rarely attends meetings of the party executive since they are often held when the EP is in session.[46] MEPs are sometimes able to attend meetings of the European Working Group, which take place approximately once a month.[47] It is mainly the party's broader 'policy lines for the future' which are discussed rather than issues relating to 'day-to-day' policy-making.[48] As a result, these meetings provide the party leadership with little scope to develop preferences relating to the behaviour of MEPs.

Communication takes place almost exclusively between MEPs and their personal contacts within the SDP. Despite the fact that some MEPs have a 'good relationship' with party leaders on a personal level, they claim that it is 'very, very difficult' for them to exchange views with party officials.[49] One MEP described the task of discussing policy issues with the party organization as 'mission impossible', and complained that the party's engagement with EU affairs is 'very weak'.[50] Officials acknowledge that links with MEPs are inadequate.[51]

In contrast to the two other cases, it is clear that links between the PS and its MEP were strong during the first two years of the 2009–14 parliamentary term. The MEP in question, Timo Soini, served as party leader. The party did not establish a formalised system for maintaining links to its MEP during Soini's time as an MEP, nor following his departure.[52] The party employed a full-time International Officer, whose role was broader than simply liaising with the party's team in the EP. Links between the party and its team in the EP were based on informal connections, and it was inevitable that the party's links with Soini's replacement, Sampo Terho, would be considerably weaker. Indeed, the MEP was 'quite isolated' from the party organization.[53] This was unsurprising given that the PS' domestic parliamentary party grew from five to 39 parliamentarians following the 2011 election, the point at which Terho first entered

the EP.[54] The MEP had only met 'high-ranking people from the party' twice during his first year in office. [55]

Much of the communication between the MEP's office and other PS party figures during this term was conducted through an Assistant based in Helsinki,[56] described as 'the only living link' between the MEP and the party organization.[57] Despite the weak connection between the party and the MEP, the direct links between Terho and the party leader were stronger. They met on a monthly basis,[58] and further informal communication took place as required.[59]

This exploration of communication practices provides an initial suggestion that these three Finnish parties do not seek to foster strong links with their EP delegations. The parties' limited engagement in the work of MEPs suggests a lack of desire to influence behaviour. Most MEPs do not prioritize staying in touch with party leaders. There is little indication that MEPs need to maintain close links with the party to realise goals.

Developing and communicating preferences

It should not be assumed that political parties have defined preferences regarding the behaviour of legislators, particularly in the context of the EP since the chamber tends to deal with less publicly salient issues than state-level legislatures. This section examines whether Finnish parties hold preferences regarding how MEPs serve as elected representatives in general, whether they develop preferences on the policy issues that are considered in the EP, and whether Finnish parties provide MEPs with instructions.

KOK does not provide MEPs with a model of representation to follow. MEPs are not told how to divide their time between Brussels and Finland, or how much time to allocate to various activities.[60] An official acknowledged that the party has no clear idea of how MEPs should carry out their work,[61] and rarely asks MEPs to undertake specific activities.

No one within KOK's central party organization keeps abreast of, or develops policy preferences on, issues under consideration in the EP. The support available to MEPs

when dealing with day-to-day committee work or any tasks requiring specialist knowledge is 'non existent'.[62] An official acknowledged that the party possesses no expertise relating to the issues considered by the EP.[63] It 'would be unheard of' for MEPs to receive direct guidance on how to act.[64] In short, KOK does not provide policy guidance or voting instructions,[65] and lacks the ability to do so. The party has been in government as part of coalitions since 2008. Yet neither party officials nor ministers channel instructions through Finland's Permanent Representation to the EU, the arm of the civil service which operates in Brussels.[66] These insights suggest that KOK MEPs have the freedom to act independently not only of their domestic party, but also of the national government.

Given that KOK does not provide instructions or expect its delegation to develop a common voting position,[67] it is natural that it does not seek to incentivize the behaviour of MEPs by operating a system of threats and rewards. Indeed, thinking in those terms is anathema to the party. Sources in Brussels and in Helsinki acknowledge that the party would have little effect on its MEPs even if it did attempt to apply pressure.[68] They do not believe that the party has the means to provide MEPs with a strong enough incentive to modify their behaviour.[69] An official acknowledged that the party does not possess the 'kind of power' necessary to 'force' MEPs to do anything.[70] MEPs perceive themselves to be 'much more independent … than MPs in the national parliament' and view the EP as 'a totally different world' compared with the Eduskunta where being 'obedient to the whip' is key.[71] MEPs feel that they have extensive freedom to act against party wishes, and claim a greater sense of responsibility to their personal voters rather than to their party.[72]

Similarly, the SDP provides little guidance concerning how MEPs should act as representatives.[73] The party believes that MEPs have the right to carry out their work independently since they have been elected on the basis of a personal vote.[74] Officials further believe that it would be inappropriate to give 'any orders or direct guidance' to MEPs due to the quasi-autonomous status of the EP delegation.[75] There is no 'code of conduct or any written rules' that outline how MEPs should act.[76] Party officials feel powerless to influence how MEPs spend their time.[77] MEPs organize their work schedules independently of the party, and do not accept all invitations to address party meetings.[78]

The task of developing policy positions is left to MEPs, and the party does not develop policy preferences independently of its EP delegation.[79] Officials acknowledged that the party–MEP 'link is not strong enough for the party leader to even know what is going on' in the EP,[80] that the party does not have the 'resources nor willingness' to provide policy guidance or voting instructions,[81] and that it is 'really up to the MEPs to decide what they do … [because] on a daily or weekly or monthly basis there is no coordination'.[82] MEPs feel 'very free to do what we want' in the EP since the party is 'not guiding us'.[83] Officials are aware that 'MEPs are *highly* independent actors',[84] and acknowledge that there have been instances when they 'have voted in a different way than the party would have liked but there are no consequences'.[85] Nevertheless, the party does not seek to incentivize the behaviour of MEPs.

Neither Soini, as leader, nor Terho as his replacement in the EP, were given a model to follow by the PS. Terho was expected to undertake some work in Finland, particularly when elections were held, but was given no specific guidance on how to allocate time to various activities.[86] The party leadership has 'never given any orders' relating to the general behaviour of its MEPs.[87]

The PS does not provide voting instructions or guidance that may be construed as such.[88] The PS team in the EP develops policy positions independently of the party. Despite such extensive independence there were, in theory, some limits on the actions of a PS MEP at parliamentary divisions. The MEP is expected to oppose proposals to increase the power of the EU and measures that would result in an increase in the cost of Finnish membership. It is unclear what measures the party would take against an MEP who did not comply. Since the party does not believe that this would ever happen, it has never issued an MEP with threats.[89]

These discussions indicate that the Finnish parties examined do not as a rule develop policy preference relating to the policy issues discussed in the EP, and do not provide legislators with guidance or instructions relating to how they should approach various aspects of their role as MEPs.

Monitoring and reporting

Since the three parties do not seek to persuade MEPs to follow guidance, it is unsurprising that they do not monitor the activities of MEPs, including their voting behaviour. The requirements made of MEPs to report to the party concerning their work are minimal. KOK MEPs are expected to write an annual report that provides an overview of their activities in '*really* general' terms;[90] SDP MEPs must provide a similar overview twice a year;[91] PS officials place no formal reporting requirements on MEPs,[92] content that the MEP will 'come and tell us something' if paths happen to cross.[93] The degree to which such exchanges enable parties to follow the work of MEPs is limited. MEPs are aware that their parties are not following their work closely. [94] The parties would need to transform their monitoring practices fundamentally if they wished to enforce discipline successfully.

Discussion

This investigation provides a comprehensive account of how Finnish parties structure relations with their MEPs. Two key findings emerge. First, none of the three parties examined carry out any of the four activities that underpin the practice of enforcing discipline: to develop preferences, to provide guidance, to offer incentives, and to monitor the activities of MEPs. This cannot be because Finnish parties know that their MEPs always act according to the party's preferences. The three parties know little about the activities of MEPs, and the leaders of KOK and the SDP are aware that their MEPs have not always acted in line with the party's wishes.[95] Second, there is a considerable degree of commonality between these three parties.

The passivity with which Finnish parties relate to MEPs stems in large part from the fact that they rarely hold crystalized preferences regarding the behaviour of MEPs. These parties have no clear idea of how they would like legislators to approach the role of MEP in general, and do not engage with the EP sufficiently to form preferences on policy issues. The parties are mostly unaware of what issues are under consideration within the chamber at any given time, and even less aware of the policy options available. Since these parties usually hold no more than latent views regarding how MEPs should act, it is unsurprising that they do not issue instructions, make threats or promise rewards to MEPs, or monitor whether MEPs act in accordance with the party's preferences.

To think in terms of 'party discipline' is to miss the point entirely in the case of the Finnish parties examined. Neither the parties nor their leaders *wish* to shape the behaviour of MEPs. They do not believe that it is correct for parties to mandate MEPs, and are aware that they could not enforce discipline successfully even if they sought to do so. Parties are willing to allow MEPs to adopt the role of trustees in all aspect of their work. Consequently, MEPs are aware that they have extensive autonomy to decide how to spend their time, which issues to prioritise, and which policy positions to promote.

It is largely out of indifference, rather than as a result of a conscious process of strategic decision-making, that Finnish parties do not enforce discipline in the EP. These parties prioritise relations with domestic legislators and with domestic political processes. They show little desire for investing resources to enable them to engage more closely with the EP. The extent of the investment is to employ an International Officer, a single official, to deal with *all* aspects of their parties' international engagement activities. These parties show little interest in managing relations with MEPs, let alone in micro-managing their activities.

Conclusion

Several leading scholars maintain that legislative behaviour in the EP is extensively driven by national party discipline. Empirical findings relating to the three Finnish case studies presented in this article challenge this. None of the three Finnish parties examined enforce discipline in relation to their MEPs. They have no obvious reason to do so, have no belief that they have a right to do so, and have no realistic means of enforcing discipline successfully. These parties pay little attention to the activities of MEPs.

The indifference shown towards MEPs suggests that the appeal of realizing EU-level goals is minimal. These parties are state-centric organizations, who focus on pursuing goals domestically and ignore the opportunities for realizing EU-level objectives. While these parties are in some sense multi-level actors, they do not appear to be multi-level goal seekers.

These findings may well apply beyond parties operating under open list systems, to many other small parties in the EP. Links with MEPs are weak primarily because Finnish parties are not interested in realizing goals within the EP, rather than due to their inability to enforce discipline successfully. From a theoretical perspective, there is no reason why other small parties should have a greater interest in realising goals in the EP. From an empirical perspective, evidence presented in several studies suggests that links are too weak to enable national parties to enforce discipline (e.g. Aylott et al., 2013; Blomgren, 2003; Poguntke et al., 2007). This article's findings, together with the evidence presented in the studies alluded to above, suggest that partisan control in the EP is substantially more limited than many scholars claim. Further detailed case study work would provide a means of corroborating this claim.

Two sets of implications can be drawn from the findings. That these implications relate to the nature of representation and accountability in the EP is not surprising. As this article has shown, there is a close relationship between the three concepts that lie central to this study: party discipline, representation, and accountability. The primary aim of party discipline is to shape the behaviour of representatives; the primary means of enforcing discipline is for parties to hold legislators directly to account.

First, scholars of the EP must be ready to radically change their understanding of the institutional context in which MEPs operate as representatives, especially if additional case study material providing similar findings surfaces. Rather than being subject to strong pressure from partisan actors, at least some MEPs enjoy a considerable degree of independence. Scholars need to move away from the use of terms such as 'control' and 'compel'. Second, while Europe's citizens are unable to hold their supranational representatives accountable (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014), some of Europe's national parties do not make the investment required to undertake this task on their behalf. Evidence of intraparty accountability is scarce. This suggests that there is little to deter MEPs from shirking and that poor performance goes unpunished in the EP. Europe's elected parliament is a context in which citizens are particularly vulnerable to agency losses. These considerations reinforce concerns that an accountability deficit exists at the heart of the EU.

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[1] The author would like to thank Tapio Raunio for hosting him as Visiting Scholar at Tampere University in 2012.

[2] The practice resembles a principal–agent relationship that is governed by a behaviour-based contract (where principal rewards agents for following instructions) rather than by an outcome-based contract (where principals provide no instructions and reward agents for acting in the principal's interest).

[3] Determinants of re-election in party-centered systems include influence on the voting behaviour of other MEPs (Wilson et al., 2016), membership of powerful committees (Frech, 2016), and holding influential positions (Hermansen, 2016).

[4] Messmer's (2003) study of the British Labour Party under Tony Blair serves as the only partial exception to this trend. Ovey's (2002) findings suggests that links between Labour and MEPs were weaker than Messmer claims, and there is no evidence that Labour systematically enforced discipline in the EP.

[5] Interviews, Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; KOK official, 21/11/12; former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).

[6] Interview, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).

[7] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.

[8] Interviews, former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).

[9] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.

[10] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; former KOK official, 29/11/16.

[11] Interviews, former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).

[12] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 28/11/12; former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).

[13] Interviews, former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).

[14] Interviews, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).

[15] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.

[16] Interviews, SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP MEP, 29/6/16; SDP official, 29/11/16.

[17] Interviews, SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP official, 29/11/16.

[18] Interviews, SDP MEP, 29/6/16; SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP official, 29/11/16.

[19] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.

[20] Interviews, SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP official, 20/11/12, SDP official, 29/11/16.

[21] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.

[22] Interview, SDP MEP, 29/6/16.

[23] Interview, SDP official, 20/11/12.

[24] Interview, SDP MEP, 29/11/16.

[25] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.

[26] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.

[27] Interview, PS/EFD, 9/5/12.

[28] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 26/6/12; PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.

[29] Interviews, PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17. Correspondence, PS/EFD, 24/3/14.

[30] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; former KOK official, 29/11/16. Correspondence, KOK official, 27/1/17.

[31] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; former KOK official, 29/11/16. Correspondence, KOK official, 27/1/17.

[32] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK official, 28/11/12; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A). Correspondence, KOK official, 27/1/17.

[33] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).

[34] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[35] Interview, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[36] Interview, KOK MEP, 5/6/12.
[37] Interview, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[38] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.
[39] Interview, KOK official, 28/11/12.
[40] Interview, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[41] Interview, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[42] Interview, SDP official, 25/6/12.
[43] Interview, SDP MEP, 29/6/16.
[44] Interviews, SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP MEP, 29/6/16.
[45] Interviews, SDP MEP, 20/6/12; SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP official, 20/11/12; SDP MEP, 29/6/16.
[46] Interviews, SDP MEP, 20/6/12, SDP official, 17/10/12.
[47] Interview, SDP official, 20/11/12.
[48] Interview, SDP official, 20/11/12.
[49] Interview, SDP MEP, 20/6/12.
[50] Interview, SDP MEP, 20/6/12.
[51] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.
[52] Interview, PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[53] Interview, PS/EFD, 9/5/12.
[54] Interview, PS/EFD, 9/5/12.
[55] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 13/11/12.
[56] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 26/6/12.
[57] Interview, PS/EFD, 9/5/12.
[58] Interview, PS/EFD, 13/11/12.
[59] Interview, PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[60] Interviews, KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK official, 28/11/12.
[61] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.
[62] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A); KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[63] Interview, KOK official, 28/11/12.
[64] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 21/11/12; Assistant to KOK MEP 20/9/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[65] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK official, 28/11/12; Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A), KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[66] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; Finnish Permanent Representation to the EU official, 27/6/12; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[67] Interviews, Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[68] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 21/11/12.
[69] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.
[70] Interview, KOK official, 21/11/12.
[71] Interview, KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[72] Interviews, former KOK official, 29/11/16; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A).
[73] Interviews, SDP official, 17/10/12; SDP official, 20/11/12.
[74] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.
[75] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.

[76] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.
[77] Interview, SDP official, 17/10/12.
[78] Interviews, SDP official, 20/11/12, SDP MEP, 29/6/16.
[79] Interviews, SDP MEP, 20/6/12; SDP official, 20/11/12; SDP official, 29/11/16.
[80] Interview, SDP official, 29/11/16.
[81] Interviews, SDP official, 20/11/12, SDP MEP, 25/6/12.
[82] Interview, SDP official, 29/11/16.
[83] Interviews, SDP MEP, 29/6/16; SDP MEP, 20/6/12.
[84] Interview, SDP official, 29/11/16.
[85] Interview, SDP official, 20/11/12.
[86] Interviews, PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 22/11/12.
[87] Interviews, PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 26/6/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[88] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 22/11/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[89] Interview, PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[90] Interviews, Assistant to KOK MEP, 20/9/16; KOK MEP, 5/6/12; KOK official, 21/11/12; KOK official, 28/11/12; KOK MEP, 30/11/16(A), KOK MEP, 30/11/16(B).
[91] Interview, SDP official, 20/11/12.
[92] Interviews, PS/EFD, 9/5/12; PS/EFD, 22/11/12.
[93] Interview, PS and/or EFD, 9/5/12.
[94] Interviews, KOK MEP, 5/6/12, KOK official, 21/11/12; SDP MEP, 20/6/12; former Assistant to SDP MEP, 28/11/16; PS/EFD, 26/6/12; PS/EFD, 13/11/12; PS/EFD, 8/2/17.
[95] Interviews, former KOK official, 20/11/12; SDP official, 29/11/16.