Achieving party unity : a sequential approach to why MPs act in concert

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research question

In most (European) parliamentary democracies individual Members of Parliament (MPs)[1] are constitutionally ordained as the main representative actors. Yet the political parties to which MPs belong are also considered to be actors—in fact key actors—in these parliaments. Both political theory as well as empirical political science have tended to resolve this tension between the constitutional position of individual MPs and the role of political parties to which MPs belong in favor of latter, thereby privileging the political party group as the main representative actor and object of scientific investigation.

In normative political theory the *mandate-independence controversy* (Pitkin, 1967), which revolves around the dyadic representative relationship between an individual MP and his constituents, was replaced by an almost complete adherence to the *responsible party model* introduced by the American Political Science Association (APSA) in 1950. Whereas the former comes close to neglecting political parties, the latter considers political parties to be the main representative actors. In fact, E.E. Schattschneider, the chairman of the APSA Committee on Political Parties, contended that "political parties created democracy and [...] modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties" (1942, XXVII). One of the requirements of the *responsible party model* is the precondition that MPs who belong to the same political party ought to behave in concert in order to enable the political party to implement its policy program. In other words, political party groups ought to act as unitary actors (Thomassen, 1994, 252).

From a more rationalist theoretical perspective, political party organizations are held to solve collective action problems, inherent to the political process, in both the electoral and legislative arena (Cox and McCubbins, 1993). In the electoral arena, political parties present voters with a limited number of policy programs which they promise to enact,

[1] For the sake of consistency and clarity, individual Members of Parliament (MPs) are referred to using masculine pronouns, but readers should be aware that *he/him/his/his/himself* also refer to *she/her/hers/herself*. This also holds for the more general terms 'legislator' and 'representative'.

and the party label therefore functions as a valuable cue that allows voters to predict what candidates running under the label will do once elected. In the legislative arena, unified political party groups mean that the parties in the executive can count on the support of their parliamentary counterpart, which enables them to enact into laws the policies they promised during the campaign. In other words, unified political parties enable the constitutional chain of delegation (Strøm et al., 2003), and without them the accountability of the executive and legislature to voters "falls flat" (Bowler et al., 1999a, 3), or at least is arguably more difficult to realize.

In line with the so-called virtue of unified political parties, there is a tendency to point to the significance of MPs' dissent. Indeed, the effect of MPs' dissent may range from the relatively inconsequential defeat of a government bill, to the destabilization of the party (group) leadership, to the fall of the government (Kam, 2009, 7-11). The desirability of unified political parties, however, can also be questioned. The increase in electoral volatility and decrease in political party membership (Katz et al., 1992; Mair and Van Biezen, 2001; Van Biezen et al., 2012) found in many European democracies since the 1970s, cast doubt upon the legitimacy of political parties as representatives of voters and party members, especially in terms of political parties' responsiveness and accountability. If political parties' programs are not deemed representative translations of the electorate's and party members' preferences, then the representativeness of political parties, and the virtue of their unity, may also be disputed.

One could also take issue with unified political party groups when it comes to the legislature's ability to hold the executive accountable. In the Netherlands, for example, the 2003 rapport on the electoral system by minister De Graaf argued that highly disciplined, unified parliamentary party groups are problematic for the tradition of the strong separation of powers between the executive and legislative branch of government. In the United Kingdom, the 2000 Committee on Strengthening Parliament, chaired by Lord Norton of Louth, also identified the development of strong parties as contributing to the imbalance in the relationship between parliament and government, in that unified parliamentary party groups limit the ability of parliamentarians to hold government accountable. Thus, one can debate whether unified political parties enable the constitutional chain of delegation and accountability, or stand in its way.

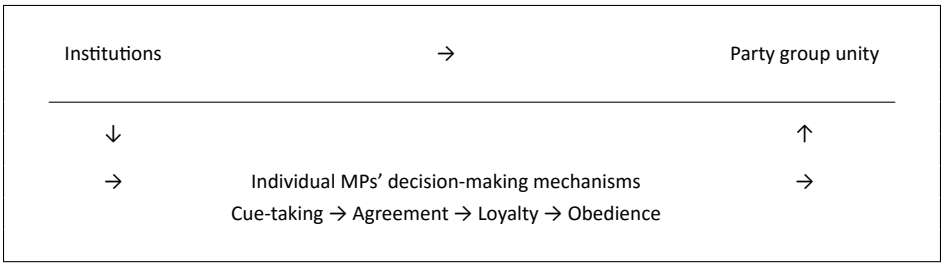
That in practice parliamentary party group unity is the rule rather than the exception in (European) parliamentary democracies, at least in terms of parliamentary voting behavior, has led many scholars to treat party group unity as an assumption, or to take it as a given, rather than a phenomenon in need of explanation (Bowler et al., 1999a; Olson, 2003). Indeed, in numerous studies of representation, parliamentary behavior, and coalition formation, the political party group is considered the main unit of analysis (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a). Kam (2009, 2) refers to this view of the party group as a unitary actor as the orthodox view—"MPs' deviations from the party line being so infrequent and inconsequential that they can safely be ignored". This perspective is not limited to political scientists, however. In his theoretical analysis of the causes of party group unity in Germany, Patzelt (2003, 102) notes that "[b]y and large, legislators' individual voting behavior seems to be an issue of no real interest in Germany. [...] final unity of action is taken for granted to such a degree that neither the margin or actual

composition of a German cabinet's majority on the floor is treated as a topic worthy of documentation or analysis".

Although parliamentary party group voting unity may be quite common, 'normal' (Olson, 2003, 165) or even 'natural' (Patzelt, 2003, 102) in (European) parliamentary democracies, this is not say that it is equally high in all party groups, or that party group voting unity is just as common in legislatures and parties in other parts of the world. There is now a substantial body of comparative empirical research that looks at how institutional differences explain (cross-national) variations in party group voting unity (Carey, 2009; Depauw, 2003; Depauw and Martin, 2009; Sieberer, 2006). These studies undeniably contribute to our knowledge of party group voting unity across systems and our understanding of how voting unity may vary with and within institutional configurations. Jensen (2000, 210) argues, however, that if one seeks an in-depth understanding of party group unity and how it is brought about, merely looking at the outcome—parliamentary voting—is not enough. Moreover, studying the direct relationship between legislative, electoral, and party institutions and voting behavior does not allow one to distinguish between the different theoretically plausible ways in which party group voting unity is brought about. Widely recognized, for example, is that party unity may result from parties, but more specifically party groups, consisting of MPs who share the same policy preferences (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Bowler et al., 1999a; Kam, 2001a, 2009; Krehbiel, 1993, 2000). Rational-choice perspectives emphasize that party group unity may also be the consequence of party (group) leaders 'whipping' their MPs (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Bowler et al., 1999a; Hazan, 2003; Jensen, 2000; Kam, 2009; Krehbiel, 1993, 2000; Ozbudun, 1970). Sociological approaches, which emphasize the internalization of norms and role conceptions, add that party group unity may also arise from MPs' shared sense of allegiance to the party (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Hazan, 2003; Jensen, 2000; Kam, 2009). Finally, Andeweg and Thomassen (2011a) as well as Skjaeveland (2001) and Whitaker (2005), point out that cue-taking may also serve as a pathway to party group unity. This entails that MPs take their voting cues from their party group specialist or spokesperson as a result of the division of labor within their party group.

Comparative scholars often make assumptions and theoretical arguments about the presence of these pathways to party group voting unity and how they may be influenced by institutions. Institutions are, for example, argued to influence the constellation of MPs and their policy preferences in parliament, thereby affecting the homogeneity of preferences within party groups (Carey, 2007; Depauw, 2003; Sieberer, 2006). Those same institutions are also, however, expected to instill in MPs particular norms of loyalty to potentially multiple actors with competing policy preferences (Kam, 2009), and provide MPs with incentives to either cooperate or compete with their fellow party group members (Carey, 2007; Depauw and Martin, 2009; Sieberer, 2006). At the same time, institutions are held to equip these competing principals, including political party (group) leaders, with carrots and sticks to elicit cooperation from their MPs (Carey, 2007; Depauw, 2003; Sieberer, 2006). Whether these pathways are actually and equally affected by institutional settings has, however, rarely been put to the test, since most studies that do deal with them consist of single-case studies that focus on one theoretical ap-

Figure 1.1: The study of party group unity



proach that highlights one pathway.[2] Scholars may thus claim that party groups that vote in unity are 'cohesive', 'homogeneous', 'disciplined' or 'loyal' as a result of these institutions, but to be frank, we do not actually know which (combinations of) pathways are at work, because the relative contribution of each of these pathways to party group unity is impossible to determine on the basis of voting behavior alone, as is the effect of institutions on these pathways.

Moreover, studies that assume that parliamentary party groups are unified, as well as those that look at the relationship between institutions and party group voting unity, tend to pay insufficient attention to the fact that these groups consist of individuals, and that party group unity results the decisions made by individuals when casting their votes (Becher and Sieberer, 2008). As pointed out by Laver (1999, 23-24) "[t]he danger of the unitary actor assumption in this context is that it may encourage us to take a quite unwarranted anthropomorphic view of how parties decide. [...] Yet a political party comprises a group of individuals, and each individual not only has his or her own utility function but is clearly capable of autonomous action".[3] Studying only the outcome—party group voting unity—, however, does not allow one to gauge *how* MPs come to vote in concert; *why* individual MPs vote with the party group line. These research questions form the starting point for the studies included in this book.

The theoretical argument put forward in this book is that the different pathways to party group unity mentioned above can be viewed as affecting MPs' decision-making process, and that this decision-making process is likely to consist of a chain of multiple steps that are ordered in a particular sequence (see Figure 1.1). In deciding whether to toe the party group line, an MP first asks himself whether he has an opinion on the vote

[2] See Andeweg and Thomassen (2011a) for an exception of a single-case study, and Kam (2009) for an exception of a comparative analysis, that deal with more than one pathway.

[3] Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991, 26-27) make a similar argument, in that the unitary actor assumption ignores the chain of delegation within political parties themselves and the principal-agent relationship political parties engage in with their own MPs, as well as potential agency related problems political parties may encounter: "the very same problems of collective action that delegation is intended to overcome—prisoners' dilemma, lack of coordination, and social choice instability—can re-emerge to afflict either the collective agent or collective principal".

at hand. Due to the substantial workload of parliament and resultant division of labor applied within parliamentary party group, an MP may not have an opinion on all topics that are put to a vote in parliament. If the MP does not have an opinion, he will follow the voting cues given to him by his fellow party group member who is a specialist, or acts as the parliamentary party spokesperson, on the topic. This first decision-making mechanism resembles the cue-taking pathway to party group unity forwarded by Andeweg and Thomassen (2011a), Skjaeveland (2001) and Whitaker (2005).

If the MP does have an opinion on the vote at hand, he moves on to the second decision-making stage. Now, he ascertains whether his own opinion on the vote is in agreement with his party group's position. If so, he will vote in accordance with the party group line out of simple agreement. This decision-making mechanism is based on the preference homogeneity pathway, which holds that party group unity results from the fact that an individual is likely to join the political party with the policy program that most closely reflects his own political preferences, and parties are likely to select candidates for office whose policy preferences match those of the party (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Carey, 2007; Depauw, 2003; Krehbiel, 1993; Sieberer, 2006). An MP's opinion on a specific vote can further be (in)formed through the process of deliberation within the party group.

If the MP does not agree with his party group's position, however, he moves on to the third decision-making mechanism, party group loyalty. If an MP subscribes to the norm of party group loyalty, he will disregard his own opinion and opt for the position of his party group of his own accord. This decision-making mechanism reflects the pathway to party group unity emphasized by sociological perspectives. An MP votes with the party group out of a sense of duty, because he is aware of the expectations associated with his role as a delegate of his political party. He thus follows a 'logic of appropriateness' (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Hazan, 2003; Jensen, 2000; Kam, 2009; Norton, 2003).

If the MP does not subscribe to the norm of party group loyalty, or his conflict with the party group's position is so intense that his loyalty does not supersede his disagreement, he could be moved to still vote with the party group in response to the anticipation, threat, promise or actual application of party discipline in the form of positive and negative sanctions, which is the fourth decision-making stage. This is the pathway to party group unity specified by rational choice inspired approaches that maintain that political behavior is determined by a 'logic of consequentiality' (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011a; Hazan, 2003; Jensen, 2000; Kam, 2009; Krehbiel, 1993; Norton, 2003). Finally, if the MP has an opinion on the topic that is at odds with the position of his party group, he does not subscribe to the norm of party group loyalty, and is not amenable to positive and negative sanctions, the MP will dissent and vote against the party group line.

This sequential decision-making model is admittedly not exhaustive, as it focuses on the relationship between an MP and his party group, and thus pays less attention to other potential actors that may (attempt to) influence an MP's behavior. It does provide a clear and structured model of MP decision making when it comes to voting with the party group. The first aim of this study is to ascertain the relative role that each of these decision-making stages plays in determining MPs' voting behavior in parliament. The

fact that the mechanisms are placed in a certain order is important for our understanding of how party group unity is brought about. If most MPs usually simply agree with the party group's position, for example, disciplinary measures by the political party (group) leadership are likely to be otiose, and describing party groups as 'disciplined' bodies thus paints a false picture. If, alternatively, party discipline turns out to be the most important determinant of party group unity, referring to party groups as 'homogeneous' or 'cohesive blocs' would be inaccurate, as according to the sequential decision-making model, party discipline only becomes necessary when MPs do not agree with the party group line and do not subscribe to the norm of party group loyalty.

The second aim of this study is to test the assumptions and theoretical arguments that scholars make concerning the influence of institutions on the different decision-making mechanisms. It may be, for example, that parties' candidate selection methods have a strong impact on the number of MPs who usually agree with the party group line in the first place, whereas electoral systems are relatively more important in determining the number of MPs who subscribe to the norm of party group loyalty. These findings may be interesting for policymakers and political reformers who deem unified party groups undesirable or argue that political parties' programs are not representative translations of the electorate's preferences. Following the first example above, if MPs' agreement with the party group's position is the most important determinant of their voting behavior, and this agreement is found to be influenced mainly by parties' candidate selection methods and not by electoral institutions, then reforming the electoral system as suggested by the 2003 Dutch report by minister De Graaf would not have the effect of making the parliamentary body as a whole more representative of the electorates preferences, as party candidate selection takes place before elections do. Alternatively, if political reformers would like to see MPs to be more responsive and loyal to their voters, and MPs' decision to vote with the party group out of loyalty is mainly affected by the electoral system, then altering the electoral system may have that effect.

Individual MPs' answers to questions included in various elite surveys are used to gauge the presence and relative contribution of each of these decision-making mechanisms. The first two studies in this book both rely on the 2010 international-comparative PartiRep MP Survey, which was held in 15 countries among members of 60 national and subnational parliaments. The comparative character of the survey allows us to study how the relative contributions of the different MP decision-making mechanisms differ per parliament, and whether these differences may be explained by the different institutional configurations. The third study combines the Dutch responses from the 2010 PartiRep MP Survey with the Dutch Parliamentary Studies, which were held in 1972, 1979, 1990, 2001 and 2006. The Dutch case is a representative case in terms of the electoral volatility and decrease in party membership found in many European parliamentary democracies, and these survey data allow us to study whether the use of the different mechanisms has changed over time. These specific data sets are discussed more elaborately in the corresponding chapters. It should be noted, however, that as the three studies in this book rely on different data sets that do not all include identical or equally appropriate measure for each decision-making mechanism, it is not possible to include the full sequence of decision-making mechanisms in all three studies and comparisons

across the analyses should be done carefully.[4]

Logically, the ultimate dependent variable in a study of party group unity would be MPs' final behavioral outcome, usually operationalized as legislative voting. When possible and if available, aggregate voting patterns are presented in order to gauge and discuss general trends and differences, although there are limitations in terms of valid comparability due to the wide variation in voting practices across parliaments, and the fact that the voting data may reflect different periods of time (and thus different MPs). This, in combination with the fact that the surveys are anonymized and we thus do not know which response belongs to which MP, unfortunately makes it impossible to connect MPs' survey responses to their voting behavior in parliament.[5] Even if it were possible to connect MPs' survey responses to their voting behavior, the fact that party group voting unity in European democracies is very high, in some parliaments almost perfect, would make statistically testing the relative explanatory power of each of the mechanisms difficult. Furthermore, even if there was enough variance in terms of MPs' voting behavior in parliament at the aggregate level, and it were possible to connect MPs' survey responses to their voting behavior, the ultimate test of the sequentiality of the model would be to apply the model to MPs' decisions regarding specific votes. These data-related problems make the study of party unity in general, and the assessment of the sequential decision-making model specifically, more difficult, but nonetheless do not make the study at hand less interesting.

1.2 Plan of the book

First, chapter 2 reviews the history and study of representation, in both normative and empirical theory, paying special attention to the representational role ascribed to respectively the individual MP and the political party as a unitary actor. Chapter 3 then moves on to review the theoretical and empirical literature on party group (voting) unity and the pathways to party group unity, leading to the further development of the sequential decision-making model introduced above. Next, the mechanisms in the sequential decision-making model are explored in three separate studies. As stated above, individual MPs' answers to questions included in various elite surveys are used to gauge the presence and relative contribution of each of these decision-making mechanisms. Furthermore, in each chapter hypotheses are developed and then tested regarding the effects of different settings on each of the stages of MPs' decision making. Thus, the decision-making mechanisms are the main dependent variables.

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[4] The PartiRep MP Survey was translated into 14 different languages by the respective members of the PartiRep project. We assume that that this was done with utmost precision and care, but we cannot rule out that the translation process, as well as cultural context, resulted in differences in meanings and interpretations of the survey questions and answering categories.

[5] Apart from Kam (2009) and Willumsen and Öhberg (2012), most studies on party unity and its determinants have not been able to connect candidates' and/or MPs' survey responses to actual legislative (voting) behavior.

1.2. Plan of the book

The main aim of this book is to test and illustrate the potential of the sequential decision-making model, not to offer a comprehensive explanation of party group unity by including all potential independent variables found in previous literature. The first study is a synchronic cross-country analysis of MPs' decision making in 15 national parliaments that focuses on the effects of electoral institutions, political parties' candidate selection procedures and government participation (see chapter 4). The second study starts with a synchronic comparison of the relative importance of the decision-making mechanisms among national and regional representatives in nine multi-level countries (see chapter 5). The analysis is then repeated at three different levels of Dutch government (national, provincial and municipal), which allows us to keep country context and formal institutions (relatively) constant. The third and final study is a diachronic analysis of changes in behavioral party group unity (parliamentary voting and party defections) as well as MPs' decision-making mechanisms in the Dutch national Parliament between 1945 (1972 for the attitudinal data) and 2010 (see chapter 6). By focusing on one parliament through time, system, electoral, legislative and party institutions are held (relatively) constant. The final chapter brings together the three studies; we summarize our findings with regard to each of the decision-making mechanisms, and highlighting a number of implications and potential avenues for future research.