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## ► To cite this version:

Nathalie Brack, Olivier Costa. Parliamentary questions and representation of territorial interests in the EP. Olivier Costa (ed.). The European Parliament in times of EU crisis: dynamics and transformations, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.225-254, 2019, European administrative governance, 978-3-319-97390-6. 10.1007/978-3-319-97391-3\_11 . halshs-01937957

**HAL Id: halshs-01937957**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01937957>**

Submitted on 26 Jan 2024

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# 10

## Parliamentary questions and representation of territorial interests in the EP

*Nathalie Brack<sup>1</sup> and Olivier Costa<sup>2</sup>*

in O. Costa (ed.), *The European Parliament in Times of Crisis: Dynamics and Transformations*, London, Palgrave, 2019, p. 225-254.

There is a common understanding that modern democratic politics is strongly linked to political representation (Best and Cotta, 2000; Sartori, 1987). And although political representation has numerous meanings, it generally refers to the process by which a community is made present within an assembly (Deschouwer, 2005; Pitkin, 1967). Because of its central role in modern democracies, the mechanisms of parliamentary representation have been extensively discussed and analysed in different ways by various sub-disciplines of political science.

In the EU, even if several ‘representative modes’ remain (Lord and Pollak, 2010), parliamentary representation has become central with the empowerment of the European Parliament (EP) and the parliamentarization of the European polity. Since its direct election, the EP has indeed played a growing role in order to alleviate the democratic deficit. As noted by Kröger and Friedrich (2013,56), ‘political representation is a *sine qua non* for the legitimacy of any democratic political system’. Therefore, parliamentary representation is not only the main vehicle for citizens’ participation in European politics, but it also plays a key role in the legitimization of the EU (Goetze and Rittberger, 2010). This has finally been acknowledged in article 10 of the treaty on European Union stating that ‘1. The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy; 2. Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament’.

It is therefore not surprising that representation in the EU has attracted a growing attention from scholars, especially in recent years. While some authors have tried to evaluate the political or social representativeness of the chamber, others focused on the way MEPs conceive and carry out their mandate. They have tested theories, developed in the framework of the US Congress, on the EP and its members (Hix et al., 2003; Yordanova, 2011). They have examined how MEPs vote, why they defect from the party line and how coalitions are formed (Coman, 2009; Faas, 2009; Hix et al., 2007; Kreppel, 2002; Trumm, 2015). Through sophisticated analysis of roll-call votes, this literature has considerably enriched our knowledge of legislative politics in the EP.

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However, the bulk of these studies have adopted a restrictive vision of the parliamentary mandate. They tend to concentrate only on one relation – the triangular relation between MEPs, their national parties and their parliamentary group – and one specific conduct: voting in plenary. Recently, with the ‘representative turn in EU studies’ (Kröger and Friedrich, 2013; Piattoni, 2013), a burgeoning literature has analysed how MEPs perform their representative function and their activities besides voting (Poyet, 2018). By drawing on the insights of role theory developed in other parliamentary settings, research has showed that MEPs have various and sometimes contradictory allegiances, and that they face a potentially infinite number of possibilities for action with a finite number of time, energy and resources (Costa, 2002; Farrell and Scully, 2007). Despite the specialization and professionalization of MEPs, there remains a great variety of ways they select their priorities, interact with citizens and follow various models of representation at the EU level (Farrell and Scully, 2010; Navarro, 2009b).

This paper aims to contribute to this reflection on parliamentary representation at the supranational level. More particularly, we will focus on the territorial dimension of the European mandate. This dimension is generally considered as a central part of the process of representation at national level, but has been neglected so far in the EP. Rather than assuming an electoral disconnection in the EP, we will therefore take an inductive approach to examine empirically to what extent territorial representation is reflected in MEPs’ practices.

To do so, we rely on an analysis of their written parliamentary questions, which constitutes another understudied area of EU studies. The content of MEPs’ questions are used here as indicators of MEPs priorities and centres of interest. Through an analysis of a sample of more than 8.000 questions, we show that a significant minority of these questions deals with national or subnational issues rather than pan-European concerns. And we also find that the focus of the questions can be explained by the MEP’s political affiliation and nationality, as well as the electoral system. The analysis also reveals that the crisis did not lead to a stronger focus on regional or national issues, at least when it comes to parliamentary questions.

The paper is structured around 6 sections. The first one provides a brief state of the art and highlights the lack of studies on territorial representation in the EP. The second section explains the choice to concentrate on written questions and explains the hypothesis while the third one describes the data. The fourth section constitutes a first examination of the database and concentrates on the territorial focus of the written questions of MEPs. The next section seeks to explain the variation in focus of MEPs’ parliamentary questions. Finally, we will examine whether the crisis has had an impact on the territorial focus of questions in the recent years.

## **1. Territorial representation in the European Parliament, a ‘blind spot’ in EU studies**

Representation is not only at the heart of modern democratic politics, it is also a central notion in which the EU realizes its democratic legitimacy. The EP has therefore served as a research laboratory for scholars to investigate political representation beyond the national level. As a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, representation has been studied from various perspectives. Most research has long tended to focus on ‘descriptive’ or symbolic representation (Pitkin, 1967): authors have compared the social characteristics of the representatives with those of the represented, to determine to what extent this assembly could be considered a

microcosm or a mirror of European societies (Beauvallet and Michon, 2009; Norris, 1997; Norris and Franklin, 1997). Others, inspired by the theoretical model of policy congruence (Miller & Stokes, 1963; for a methodological update: Golder and Stramski, 2010), have analysed the similarities between citizens and their representatives by examining the opinion congruence of voters and MEPs or their (Euro) party, on the left/right and pro/anti-integration scales in EP elections (Arnold and Franklin, 2012; Lefkofridi and Katsanidou, 2014; Marsh and Wessels, 1997; Mattila and Raunio, 2012; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). More recently, studies have instead considered representation as a dynamic process by which it matters less to know who the representatives are, than to know how they conceive and carry out their mandate. Inspired by a constructivist approach, scholars sought to understand the performative side of representation, focusing on non-electoral representation, or analysing representation in the EU from a more normative perspective (Bellamy and Castiglione, 2010; Lord and Pollak, 2010). Others concentrated on the representative activities of MEPs and revealed that ‘there is no univocal interpretation of the European mandate’ (Costa, 2002,9). Facing multiple principals, MEPs are relatively free to set their own priorities and carry out their mandate in various ways. Following the principal-agent perspective, the bulk of these studies tends to focus on the relationship between MEPs and their two main principals: the national party and the EP political group (Hix et al., 2007; Mülböck, 2012). The aim of these studies is to determine whether and why MEPs choose to defect from the party or group line, and if we should refer to national or European parliamentarians (Scully et al., 2012). They have considerably improved our understanding of legislative politics in the EP, but due to their restrictive vision of the parliamentary mandate, we still know little about how MEPs perform their representative function and their activities, besides voting (Busby, 2013; Priestley, 2008).

Moreover, given the ‘widely-held assumption that any electoral connection to the EP is weak because of the way EP elections (do not) work’ (Hix et al., 2003, 194), the territorial dimension of the European parliamentary mandate remains largely overlooked by these scholars. The linkage between voters and their elected representatives is a fundamental aspect of the representative process, (Pitkin, 1967) and many studies on national parliaments have demonstrated that elected representatives spend much of their time and energy dealing with constituency representation (Cain et al., 1987; Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974; Wahlke et al., 1962; Costa and Kerrouche, 2017).

However, in the case of the EP, a very limited literature addresses the issue of territorial representation (Beauvallet and Michon, 2010; Costa et al., 2009; Scully and Farrell, 2001, 2007; Poyet, 2018). These studies show that MEPs prioritize certain of their allegiances, and attempt to communicate with citizens despite the institutional constraints. Indeed, the regionalization of the European elections and the possibility of preferential voting (or single transferable vote) in a majority of countries, combined with the empowerment of the EP, all give incentives to MEPs to engage in constituency service, or at least to develop closer relationships with their voters. A territorial dimension is thus emerging in the EP’s deliberation, mostly as a way for MEPs to increase their representativeness and the EP’s legitimacy. This territorial dimension is reflected in the activities of the MEPs, through their choice of committees, their belonging to an intergroup or through their parliamentary questions (Costa, 2002). But their activities and relations with their voters remain very heterogeneous (Brack and Costa, 2013; Costa et al., 2009; Farrell and Scully, 2010). Katz (1999) argues that the variation in the way MEPs deal

with their relations with their constituents is due to the national political culture, whereas other studies stress the impact of the electoral system as well as individual-level factors, such as previous political experiences and MEPs attitudes towards the EU (Farrell and Scully, 2001; 2007; Chiru and Dimilescu, 2011). Navarro (2009a) also shows that MEPs use written questions to please constituents, and that a significant proportion of them contains a territorial reference.

By building on these few studies, this paper aims to examine the emergence of this territorial dimension in the EP's deliberation, and to analyse the variation among MEPs according to their EP group, the type of electoral list they are elected under and their nationality. To do so, we rely on a new database that focuses on MEPs' parliamentary questions.

## **2. Parliamentary questions as indicators of MEPs' priorities**

Parliamentary questions are an important tool for measuring individual MPs' role, orientations and more particularly, their focus of representation (Blidook and Kerby, 2011). This instrument is certainly not the most powerful legislative mechanism, but its use induces very low costs for legislators, and makes it easy for them to address issues of their interest. It is therefore an excellent indicator of their priorities (Chiru and Dimilescu, 2011; Navarro and Brouard, 2014; Raunio, 2009) and the perceptions they have of their parliamentary mandate.

Questions can be used for various reasons. They perform several macro-functions such as gaining information, controlling the executive and developing a reputation regarding a specific topic. Most scholarly work has used parliamentary questions to address issues of accountability and control, or to test for policy specialization among MPs (Martin, 2011; Proksch and Slapin, 2011, 2013). But parliamentary questions also perform micro-functions for legislators such as generating publicity, defending territorial interests and showing concern for the interests of constituents (Bailer, 2011; Lazardeux, 2005; Raunio, 1996). MPs may thus use parliamentary questions to cultivate more personal relationships with their constituents, as well as to maintain an electoral connection (Saalfeld, 2011). Russo (2011) for instance showed how parliamentary questions can serve MPs to appear as though they are constituency-oriented. More importantly, in contrast to other activities such as voting, tabling amendments and making speeches which are more controlled by party discipline or institutional constraints, questions allow MEPs a greater room for manoeuvre at the individual level (Raunio, 1996) which allows them to display their true preferences and interests.

In the case of the EP, one would not expect a strong electoral connection. Indeed, there is a great uncertainty about whom MEPs are supposed to represent. Additionally, formal and informal rules encourage MEPs to act not as representatives of a constituency or a particular country, but as representatives of the 'European people'. According to the treaty, the EP is composed of representatives of the European citizens and MEPs have always favoured a 'general' conception of their mandate (Costa, 2002): they claim to represent collectively the EU citizens, and thus have refused to exclude the MEPs from given countries when deliberating about policies for which they enjoyed opting-outs. In addition to that, the nature of the EP's competence and the priority given to a technical approach of legislative work discourage MEPs to import local issues or individual constituents' cases in the chamber (Brack and Costa, 2013). On an informal basis, most MEPs avoid making references to their nationality during debates and speeches, or do it only to illustrate their arguments (with the exception of some Eurosceptic

and Nationalist members). But even though MEPs are supposed to represent the general interest of European citizens, MEPs are elected at the national level. Although it has been discussed for many years, there are no European-wide lists yet. If there are some common basic principles for EP elections, the rules are not harmonized and MEPs are elected in national contexts, sometimes on regional (anchored) lists and/or with preferential voting (Costa, 2015). Moreover, these elections are largely second-order: emphasis is more on national than European issues and voter turnout is generally low compared to general election (Schmitt and Reif, 1980; Marsh, 1998; Viola, 2015). In addition to that the general European interest is a quite abstract notion and since the end of the 1990s, MEPs have promoted closer relations with regional and local levels as a way to balance the abstract nature of the supranational mandate, and to increase the legitimacy of the institution and its members (Costa, 2002, 15).

It is therefore not that surprising that MEPs tend to refer to (sub-) national territories in their parliamentary activities, especially in their questions. The study of Navarro (2009a) shows indeed that a significant proportion of questions mention local, regional or national issues and that if questions are used in relation to MEPs' specialization, they are also used to please their constituents. Similarly, Chiru and Dimilescu (2013) demonstrated that even though most questions of Romanian MEPs are related to issues discussed in committees, confirming the specialization logic, the second most important pattern they found was related to constituency work.

On the basis on these few studies as well as on the literature on role orientations in the EP, this paper examines the focus of representation of MEPs through an analysis of their parliamentary questions. We expect (*H1*) to find a significant proportion of questions mentioning local, regional or national issues, attesting to the (often neglected) importance of territorial representation and constituency service in the EP. We also expect (*H2*) that the priority given to territorial issues will vary according to the MEP's political affiliation, nationality and the electoral system. More precisely, MEPs from small, marginalized and Eurosceptic groups are expected to ask more questions (*H2.1*) and to focus more on local, regional and national issues given their opposition or reluctance towards European integration and European policies (*H2.2*) (Brack, 2015, 2017; Proksch and Slapin, 2011). Indeed, they will make more use of this mechanism to control the EU institutions as well as their national government. And these questions are likely to concentrate on the national or subnational level, which is often considered by Eurosceptics as the sole or most important level for democracy. Moreover, following Navarro's work (2009a), we could also expect (*H2.3*) that MEPs from the periphery of Europe concentrate more on territorial issues than MEPs from founding Member states. Finally, the work of Farrell and Scully (2001, 2007, 2010) as well as of Bowler and Farrell (1993), along with a rich literature on the relation between the electoral system and legislators' attitudes and behaviour (see a.o. Carey and Shugart, 1995; Deschouwer and Depauw, 2013; Hetshusen et al., 2005), has shown how the electoral system influences substantially the constituency orientations of MEPs. We expect (*H2.4*) that MEPs elected under closed lists will orient their activities around the needs of the party leadership while those elected under open lists will focus more on the concerns of their constituency because they have to compete with fellow candidates from the same party.

Finally, we will analyse the evolution of MEPs territorial focus through time. Our main database covers the period 1994-2011, but we have also collected data on the more recent period

of time, with a less detailed coding (2011-2016). This allows us to determine if things have changed through time, especially as a result of the rise of Euroscepticism. Indeed, with the crisis, the visibility of EU affairs increased along with the share of populist and Eurosceptic MEPs after the 2014 EP election. We could hypothesize that it has had an impact on parliamentary questions, in the sense of a growing focus on national issues. We thus expect (**H3**) a rise in the national focus of questions in the recent years, as a consequence of the success of populism and Euroscepticism.

### 3. Data

There are three main types of questions in the EP. First, *questions for oral answer with debate* may be put to the Council or to the Commission by a committee, a political group or at least 40 Members; the Conference of Presidents (of groups) decides whether they should be placed on the agenda. Second, *questions during 'question time'*, inspired by the House of Commons after the enlargement to the UK, are mainly addressed to the Commission; however, specific question hours may be held with the Council, the President of the Commission, the High Representative of the Union and the President of the Eurogroup. Questions must be submitted in writing to the President of the EP, who rules on their admissibility and on the order in which they are to be taken. Given the high number of question proposals, it is not easy for an MEP to be granted the right to ask a question. Third, *questions for written answer* must be submitted in writing to the President who forwards them to the addressees (Commission, Council, President of the European Council, High Representative of the Union or the ECB). Although there are not many institutional constraints on these written questions, MEPs must respect the 'guidelines for questions for written answer'.<sup>3</sup>

This paper focuses on questions for written answer, directed at the Commission, for three main reasons. First, this is the most stable procedure, which allows for comparison over time (Navarro, 2009a). Second, they are the most popular form of questioning. While in 1962, 180 written questions were asked, there were 2692 written questions in 1987, 6660 in 2007 and 11321 in 2011 (data from the European Parliament, Directorate-General for the Presidency). The number has reached a peak in 2015 (15329), and declined since (9313 in 2016 and 7563 in 2017) as a result of an institutional strategy to limit the use of this tool (see below). Third and most importantly, questions for written answer are the less constrained form of questioning. The other types of questions (of the Question time or for oral answer with debate) are more or less controlled by political groups and highly constrained by the agenda. For a very long period of time, there was basically no limitation to the number of written questions that could be formulated by MEPs, some members asking more than 1000 questions during a parliamentary term. Since the 2014 European elections, the European Commission has criticized the inflation of the number of written questions, and the cost they induce (1.500 Euros by question on average). In July 2014, MEPs were called to limit the number of their written questions to 5 per month. Since the last general revision of the rules in December 2016, an MEP can ask 'a maximum of twenty questions over a rolling period of three months' (rule 130.3).

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<sup>3</sup> Annex to the Rules of Procedure which stipulates that questions must be clear regarding their target, fall within its sphere of competence, be of general interest, be concise and understandable, contain no offensive language and should not relate to strictly personal matters.

Overall, the rules now limit the number of questions MEPs can ask, but they can still make an extensive use of that tool, with a maximum of 80 questions per year as the main author, and as many as they want as a supporter. Also, this limitation is quite new (July 2014). We consider therefore that an analysis of MEPs' written parliamentary questions is a reliable method for gaining better understanding of their preferences and more particularly, for examining territorial representation in the EP.

In order to determine if territorial issues are mentioned in MEPs' questions, two databases have been created by 'extracting' information from the EP's website. The first one includes all the written questions from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1994 to 30<sup>st</sup> September 2011; this makes 84.169 cases, i.e. an average of 5.000 questions per year. The second database runs from September 2011 to June 2016. It includes 58.903 written questions, i.e. an average of nearly 12.000 a year. For each question, the databases include the following information: date of the question, target, topic, author, political group, question (full text) and Internet link. Considering the huge number of questions, we have coded a sample of 6.022 questions in the first database and 2.522 in the second one (only for the 8<sup>th</sup> legislature, i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> July 2014 - 30<sup>th</sup> June 2016), by selecting a random sample for each year. For those questions, we have added three types of information that were not present on the EP's website in order to test our hypothesis. First, we added the nationality of the author. Second, following the classification of Farrell and Scully (2010) a variable mentions the type of electoral lists used in the country of the MEP for EP elections (open and STV - ordered – closed); it should allow to determine if MEPs from candidate-based systems are more focused on territorial issues. Another variable specifies whether the lists are regional (or regionally anchored) or not. Third, the territorial dimension of each question has been coded. The objective here is to indicate the lowest territorial level to which the question refers (including in arguments, explanations, examples...).

To do so, the coding was done in several steps. First, the 'territorial level' of the question was coded. The code indicates for each question the lowest territory mentioned:

1. Individual Dimension: Single cases, particular demands (linked to a territory)
2. Local Dimension (town, 'home', sub-regional entity, electoral stronghold)
3. Regional Dimension
4. The MEP's Own Constituency (explicit notion)
5. National Dimension
6. EU Dimension
7. International Dimension / Foreign Country / EU's Relation to a Foreign Country
8. Global Dimension / International Organisations
9. No Indication of Any Geographical Focus
10. EU Institutional Dimension

In the analysis here below, for matters of readability, we use two simplified typologies:

- individuals (1); local (2); regional (3 and 4); national (5); EU (6); outside EU (7, 8);
- subnational (1-4); national (5); EU (6); Non-EU (7-8).

Second, we distinguished whether this level of territoriality was mentioned as the main object of the question (ex. problem in a factory within the constituency, economic crisis in Greece, floods in a region...), or if it is only mentioned as a way to illustrate a question that refers more generally to the EU, to a country or to general interest. Often, MEPs write a question that has a general purpose but is illustrated by references to the situation in a specific territory.



This can be the result of the MEPs will to better explain the question, but also of his/her interest in a specific situation that needs to be framed in a broader context to render the question acceptable.

Finally, a last code is devoted to references to a category of the population as an example. We have used a dummy that takes the value 1 when the question is referring to a specific group (students, farmers, disabled persons...) and 0 when no specific group is mentioned. For instance, a question related to the Erasmus programme, mentioning the situation of the students of a specific university, will be coded '5' (Europe) regarding the main territorial level, '3' regarding the illustration (region) and '1' regarding the reference to a precise group of population (students).

#### **4. An exploration of the content of MEPs' parliamentary questions over time**

The question of the territorial focus of Members of Parliament is in no way specific to the EP. As demonstrated by various scholars, it is central in the theory of representation (Pitkin, 1967; Wahlke et al., 1962). In all parliaments, there is a tension between the level of public action (the nation, federation, state, or whatever), and the level of attention of MPs (their constituency, their fief, their town...). Various studies have demonstrated the importance of geographical representation and the necessity for elected representatives to keep in touch with their voters (Wahlke et al., 1962; Davidson, 1969; Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1987; Nay, 2002; Farrell and Scully, 2010). At the same time, there is a strong tradition of prohibition of imperative mandate in Europe: MPs are not supposed to follow the instructions of their voters or constituents, but to focus on (their own perception of) the general interest – and, more concretely, the instructions of their political group.

It is thus interesting to see how those two sets of factors are combined: do MEPs nevertheless bring local, regional or national issues to the EP, as brokers of those levels, or do they follow the 'European' approach to the mandate promoted by the rules?

Globally speaking, we see on figure 1 that MEPs are following the rules: the majority (51.4%) of their questions deals with EU issues, attesting to the common approach of representation in the EP. It is rather striking to see that individual and local cases are mentioned in less than 7% of the questions. However, we can also note that national issues represent a bit less than 1/5 of the questions (17.7%), and that references to individual cases together with subnational and national issues account for a third of the questions (31.2%). As for the issues outside the EU (non-EU countries and international organisations), they represent 17.4% of the questions in our sample, which shows that the EU external action is an important topic for the EP (Stavridis and Irrera, 2015). Crisis in other regions of the world are at the centre of some questions asked by MEPs.

## Figure 1: Breakdown of questions by territories as main theme

<FIGURE 10.1 ABOUT HERE>

As we explained earlier, the focus on pan-European issues is largely due to institutional constraints. It is difficult for MEPs to import local issues into the chamber due to the nature of the EP's competences and the way the institution functions. The EP, like all EU institutions, does not deal with local matters or with policies that only impact certain regions. Generally speaking, MEPs are thus not likely to easily obtain resources for their constituency through their European mandate. As opposed to many national chambers, there is no specific legislative or budgetary tool that allows MEPs to practice 'pork barrel politics'. The priority given to a technical approach for the EP's legislative work is another limitation, since it discourages members from dealing with concrete or individual cases. But despite this institutional context, a significant minority of questions still deals with national, local and regional concerns. This proves that MEPs are not disconnected from their territorial basis.


If we turn to the examples mentioned in the questions, the territorial dimension of representation is even clearer: MEPs are often inspired by cases from the national, regional or local levels or even specific individuals. Indeed, more than ¼ of the questions mention a national example, 9% specific individual cases and 11% local or regional territory. 'Only' 31% of the questions refer to an EU-wide example.

## Figure 2: Breakdown of questions by territories as example

<FIGURE 10.2 ABOUT HERE>

So for instance, MEPs may either frame a broad question concerning a directive but be inspired by their own national situation, or try to avoid getting their questions rejected for being outside the EU's competence or being too precise:

### ► **Subject: Payment of periodic training courses for lorry drivers**

 Answer(s)

Directive 2003/59/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council<sup>(1)</sup> of 15 July 2003 requires drivers undertaking carriage of goods to update every 5 years ‘the knowledge which is essential for their work, with specific emphasis on road safety and the rationalisation of fuel consumption’.

A recent judgment by the Danish Labour Court ruled that employers are not obliged to pay for the periodic training required, but that the drivers themselves should bear the costs. In other words, drivers should pay for the further training needed in order to work as drivers — or else they lose their jobs.

Can the Commission confirm that employers can demand of drivers that they pay for their own further training if they wish to keep their jobs? Or does the Commission consider that this is an expense that should be met by employers?

Can the Commission say what stage the other Member States have reached in implementing this directive? Can the Commission say whether drivers in the other Member States have to pay for their own further training? In Denmark, drivers lose their right to exercise their profession if they do not follow the courses in question. Is this also the case in the other Member States?

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**(1)** OJ L 226, 10.9.2003, p. 4.

#### ***4.1. Variation according to the EP political group***

The literature about representation styles, focus and roles has underlined the impact of ideological orientations and party membership on MPs' behaviour (Davidson, 1967; Wessels and Giebler, 2011). We expect therefore to find an impact of the group variable on the territorial level they consider (H2). More precisely, our hypotheses are that MEPs from small and marginal groups tend to ask more questions (H2.1) and to focus more on territorial issues than MEPs from the main groups (H2.2).

First, in terms of level of activity, we can see from table 1 that MEPs from Eurosceptic groups are a bit more likely to ask written questions than the average. This is also the case of non-attached members, who do not have many other tools that allow them to be active within the EP. If we focus on the 7<sup>th</sup> EP term (2009-2014), the differences among groups are clearer (table 2). Indeed, small groups and Eurosceptic MEPs use more often questions than members from

large groups (see also Behm, 2015 and 2016; Morris, 2013). This is due to two elements. First, they are more often excluded from the decision-making process in the EP and less likely to be in charge of a report or opinion. So they tend to be more prone to use individual means such as questions and speeches. Second, given their critical stance towards the EU, they tend to use their questions to gain information that can then be used in their campaign against the EU at home (Brack, 2018).

**Table 1: number of questions by MEP and by group (1994-2011)**

<TABLE 10.1 ABOUT HERE>

**Table 2: number of questions by MEP / group between 2009 and 2014**

<TABLE 10.2 ABOUT HERE>

**Table 3: Territorial focus of the questions according to EP groups**

<TABLE 10.3 ABOUT HERE>

We see that there are important differences between the groups regarding the territorial focus of questions. The 3 main groups (Socialists, Conservatives/Christian-democrats and Liberals) focus more on the EU level, which is coherent with their global support for European integration, as well as their will to make the EP an arena where pan-European issues can be discussed. Our hypothesis (H2.2) seems thus confirmed. The percentage of EU related questions is much lower for the Conservatives, Eurosceptics, the Radical left and non-attached members, which is, once again coherent with their critical approach of European integration, and their will to promote a more intergovernmental conception of Europe, or to defend the nation-state. They also pay quite some attention to subnational issues (i.e. individuals, local or region concerns).

It reflects the tendency of many Eurosceptic MEPs to consider themselves as promoters of their region or district in the EP, or to use the parliamentary questions either as a way to control their own government on national, regional or local issues, or as a tool to show to their voters that their interests are brought forward in the EP (Brack, 2015; Proksch and Slapin, 2011). For instance, these MEPs clearly used parliamentary questions in order to deal with constituency or regional issues:


**Parliamentary questions**

**26 February 2010**

E-0985/10

**WRITTEN QUESTION by Martin Ehrenhauser (NI) to the Commission**

► **Subject: Constituent's question: possible EU funding for building intergenerational housing**

 [Answer\(s\)](#)

This question is tabled at the request of a constituent from the State of Styria in Austria. For the care and nursing of older people, intergenerational housing projects not only present financial advantages when compared with traditional care centres for older people, they also prevent social exclusion and promote intergenerational exchanges. Owing to demographic change, new housing concepts are needed for the older members of society. Younger families can also benefit from such housing concepts, since older people can also help with child care.

1. Is the Commission aware of the concept of intergenerational housing?
2. Has it already contributed towards such projects through the regional and structural funds, a pilot project or any other provision of funds?
3. Is it aware of any projects (co-)financed by the Commission or Member States?
4. What options already exist for funding or promoting such projects with EU funds?
5. Does the Commission intend to give the funding of intergenerational projects greater attention in future?

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Original language of question: **DE**


Whereas others tend to use question in order to control the national government and its actions:

**26 June 2001**

E-1846/01

**WRITTEN QUESTION by Esko Seppänen (GUE/NGL) to the Commission**

► **Subject: Finnish system of tax credits on dividends**

 [Answer\(s\)](#)

It is clear that the system of tax credits on dividends applicable in Finland disproportionately favours Finnish shareholders over foreign shareholders. Has the Commission considered this unusual system, and does it intend to take any action to ensure the equal taxation of national and foreign shareholders?

---

Original language of question: **FI**

**Table 4: Territorial focus of the examples mentioned in questions according to EP group**

<TABLE 10.4 ABOUT HERE>

If we turn to the examples mentioned in the questions (table 4), we can see a similar pattern: MEPs from the main groups are more likely to mention EU examples whereas members

from the radical left and radical right (non- attached) tend to refer more often to (sub)national concerns, in order to illustrate their point of view in their parliamentary questions.

#### ***4.2. Variations according to nationality and the electoral system***

Nationality seems to interact with the focus on representation in MEPs parliamentary questions ( $p < .001$ ). As expected, MEPs from periphery countries (Southern and to some extent Eastern European countries) tend to refer more to subnational or national concerns. This is particularly the case for Spanish, Portuguese, Italian as well as Polish MEPs who mention subnational issues in one fifth of their questions. Others, such as the Irish (21.5% of their questions), Bulgarian (23.1%), Czech (36.8%), Maltese (57%), Greek (34%), Swedish (20.5%) and Hungarian MEPs (45%), rather tend to concentrate on national concerns. But for several countries, especially from the latest enlargements, the number of questions in our database is too low to allow us to draw conclusions.

As far as the electoral system is concerned, it seems that our hypothesis is not confirmed by the data. Indeed, MEPs elected under an open list are as likely to mention subnational or national issues as those elected under a closed list. And they asked more EU-related questions than MEPs under closed-list systems (table 5). In addition to that, those elected on regional (or regionally anchored) lists tend to focus more on pan-European issues, whereas MEPs elected on national lists more often mention (sub)national concerns.

#### **Table 5 : Focus of representation according to the type of electoral list for EP elections**

<TABLE 10.5 ABOUT HERE>

#### **Table 6 : focus of representation according to regional / national list for EP elections**

<TABLE 10.6 ABOUT HERE>

### **5. Explaining the variation in MEPs' focus of representation**

In order to test further our hypotheses, we performed two binary logistic regressions. For the first regression all member states are taken into account, and we want to determine the effect of political affiliation as well as the electoral system on the focus on representation of MEPs. The dependant variable is the reference to territory, more precisely the fact that a question does (or not) mention a national or subnational level of territory. The independent variables are, all things being equal, the EP political group to which the MEP belongs to (with the largest group, i.e. Christian-Democrats, being the reference category) and the degree of openness of the electoral lists for EP elections (the open lists are the reference category). We did not include in the model the regional or national nature of constituencies, since there is too much collinearity with the previous variable.

**Table 7: Regression 1: Effect of political affiliation and electoral system (All Member states)**

<TABLE 10.7 ABOUT HERE>

The regression confirms our previous observations: all things equal, far-left MEPs are 2.6 times more likely to mention a given territory than the Christian-Democrats. The ratio is 1.9 for Greens, 1.2 for non-attached and 1.4 for conservatives. This tends to confirm our hypothesis on the territorial focus of MEPs from small, marginalized and Eurosceptic groups (H2.1) although the ‘Eurosceptic’ group is not the most territorially-oriented (and does not reach the level of significance).

If we look at the type of electoral lists, distinguishing ‘ordered’ and ‘closed’ lists, we see that MEPs elected on ordered lists have 1.5 times less chance (1/0.65) of mentioning a national or subnational territory in their question than MEPs elected under open lists. But the results for MEPs on a closed list is not in the expected direction and does not reach statistical significance. This partially confirms our hypothesis H2.4: there is less incentive for the MEPs elected on ordered lists to be focused on their constituency, contrary to MEPs elected under open-list systems or STV.

In order to analyse the impact of the country of election, another logistic regression was performed, taking into account a sample of Member states. Indeed, the number of questions in our sample is low for many member states, especially those that only recently entered the EU (countries of the enlargements of 2004 and 2007) or that have only a very limited number of MEPs (Luxembourg). The analysis is therefore restricted to 9 countries: France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece and UK.

We could not consider in this regression the variable related to the type of lists, since it presents, for obvious reasons, a high degree of collinearity with the respective countries of MEPs.

**Table 8: Regression 2: 9 member states representing at least 5% of the sample (including the variable ‘lists’)**

<TABLE 10.8 ABOUT HERE>

It can be seen from table 8 that the country of election of MEPs is a significant predictor of the focus on representation in parliamentary questions. Hence, a Greek MEP has 3.7 times more chance to ask a question dealing with a given level of territory than a French one. This also applies to the other Southern countries that entered the EU in the 1980s: Spain (2.9) and Portugal (2.7). The ratio is far lower for UK, the Netherlands and Belgium. We can conclude that the hypothesis H2.3 is confirmed, at least for the countries that joined the EC in the 1980s: MEPs from the periphery of Europe concentrate more on territorial issues than MEPs from founding Member states with the exception of Italy. However, it remains to be verified for the countries that entered the EU in the 2000s, for which the number of cases in our database is too low.

If we look at groups, considering only the 9 ‘big’/‘oldest’ member states, we see again that political affiliation matters: far-left, green and conservative MEPs are more likely to make a reference to a given territory than EPP or S&D MEPs.

## 6. The variation in MEPs’ focus of representation through time

Finally, we analyse the evolutions of the territorial focus of MEPs since the European elections of May 2014, and before the entry into force of the new rules, that have limited the use of written questions by MEPs. To do so, we used a second database and examined the territorial focus of written questions submitted between the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2014 and the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2016. As mentioned previously, we expect (*H3*) a rise of the focus on national issues, as a consequence of the growing number of populist and Eurosceptic MEPs in the house and, more generally, of the success of critical voices towards European integration in most EU countries. As hypothesized by Cristoforetti and Querton in this volume, we can even assume a ‘contamination effect’ of mainstream MEPs by the more nationalist approach of Eurosceptic members. Indeed, as populist and Eurosceptic actors claim to represent the people and denounce the gap between elites and citizens, it might lead mainstream MEPs to show their concerns for their voters or national citizens through their parliamentary questions.

The data however does not support this hypothesis: the figures for 2014-2016 are totally in line with those for 1994-2011, and we can even notice a slight decline in the national focus of MEPs written questions.

**Table 9: Territorial focus of the questions – comparison 1994-2011 / 2014-2016**

<TABLE 10.9 ABOUT HERE>

## 7. Conclusion

This paper shows that MEPs make different uses of written questions and have diverging foci of representation. In most cases, they refer to EU issues, with no reference to a given territory. The general focus is thus a European one, and they act quite in line with the general approach of the mandate, as it is promoted by the leaders of the institution: a non-imperative approach, oriented towards the defence of all European citizens interests. However, in a significant minority of cases (a third), MEPs ask questions about their country, region or constituency. This confirms our first hypothesis. Our results reveal the multidimensionality of the European mandate. Since MEPs are quite free using parliamentary questions, they can use this tool to advocate for local or national issues, or to act as interest brokers for their citizens or actors in their constituency. This is another way to show (next to interview-based studies of representation focus and style and to discourse or roll-call vote analysis) that MEPs are not acting mainly along national lines, and that they combine different approaches to their mandate. They adapt their behaviour to their beliefs and to the expectations of their electors or party, not only during votes and speeches, but also when they ask questions.

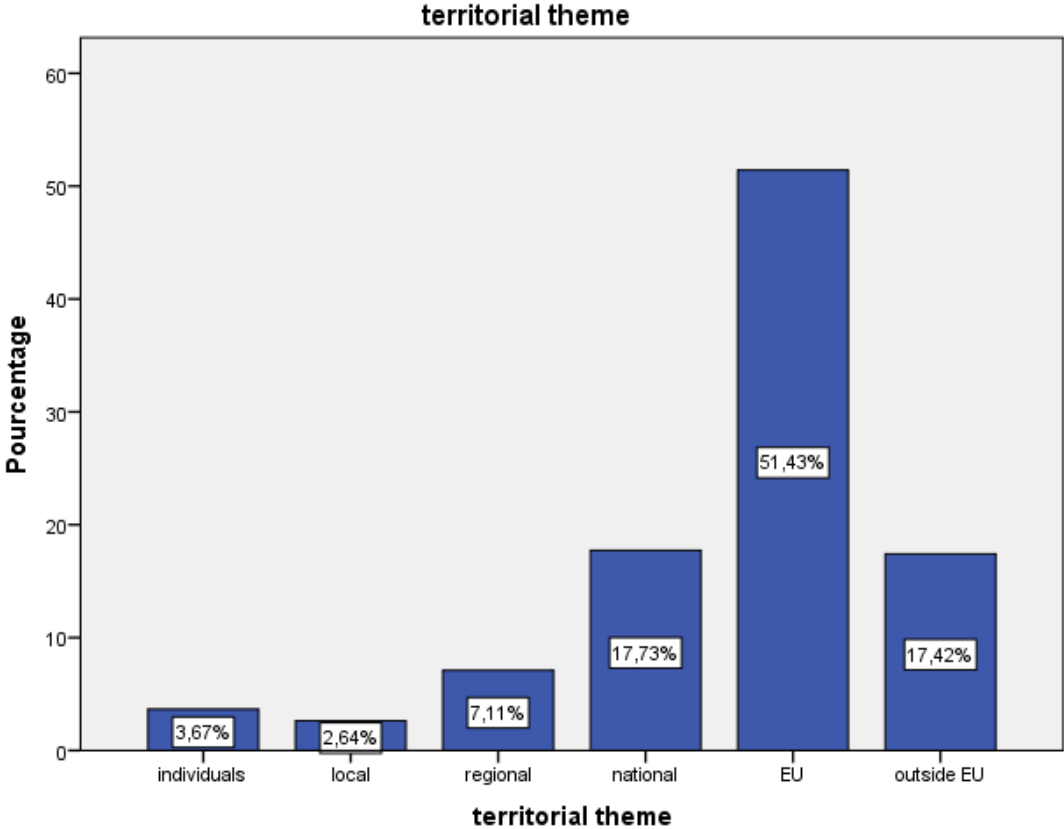


This first analysis also partially confirms other hypotheses. Generally speaking, the MEP's likelihood of giving priority to territorial issues varies according to their political affiliation, nationality and the electoral system. More precisely, MEPs from small, marginalized and Eurosceptic groups are asking more questions (H2.1) and tend to focus more on local, regional and national issues (H2.2). MEPs from the periphery of Europe concentrate more on territorial issues (H2.3). MEPs elected under ordered lists have a more EU approach than those elected under open lists, who are more concerned by their constituency (H2.4).

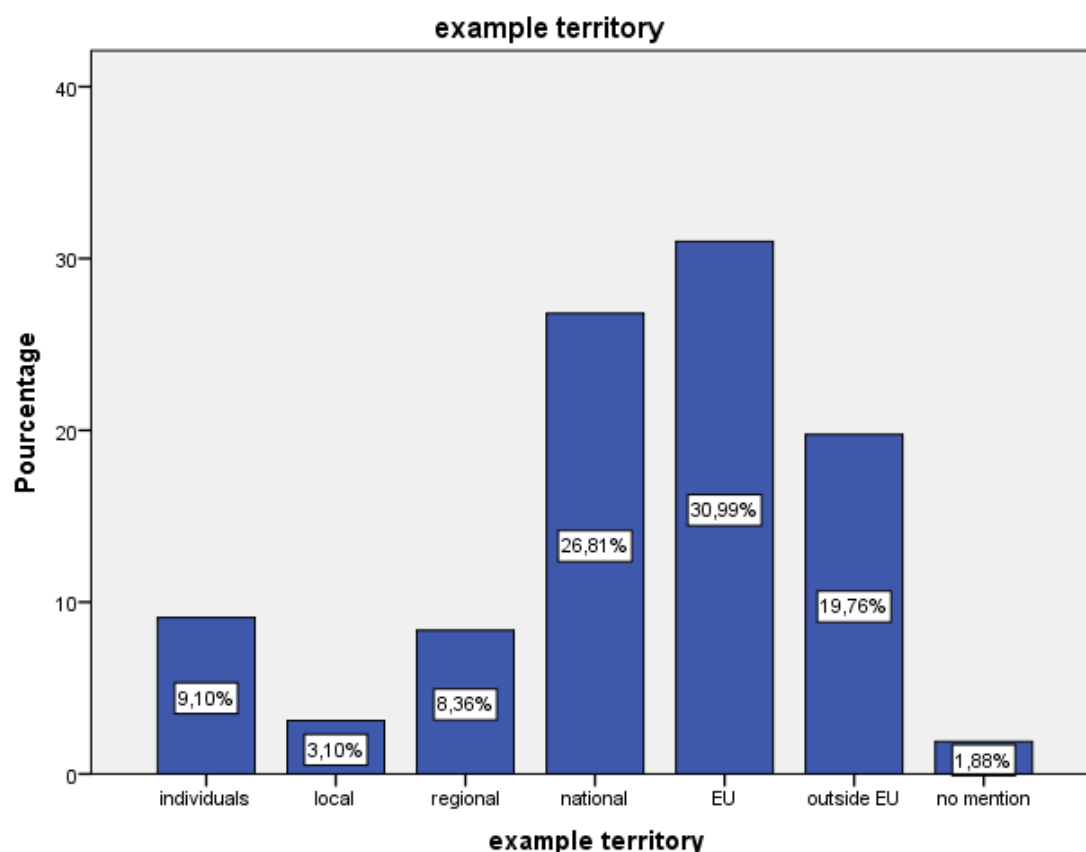
Finally, we have seen that, despite the rise of Euroscepticism within the EP and in the member states, and notwithstanding the context of doubts that surrounds European integration, the territorial focus of MEPs did not change (H3) in the recent years (2014-2016).

These results attest of the relevance of studying parliamentary questions in order to understand the linkage between MEPs and the different levels of governance. Further analysis is however needed to explain the variations among MEPs in their focus on representation, notably by adding other types of predictors such as MEPs' previous political experiences, the status of their national political party but also by refining variables related to the electoral system.

**Figure 1: Breakdown of questions by territories as main theme**



**Figure 2: Breakdown of questions by territories as example**



**Table 1: number of questions by MEP and by group (1994-2011)**

	Number of question (coded)	Percentage	Number of MEPs 1994-2011	Number of questions by MEP
Radical left	225	9,9	152	1,5
Greens/regionalists	185	8,2	172	1,1
Socialists	494	21,8	778	0,6
Liberals	195	8,6	264	0,7
Christian-Dem/Conservatives	687	30,3	967	0,7
ECR	30	1,3	75	0,4
UEN	75	3,3	72	1
Eurosceptic	100	4,4	111	0,9
Radical right group	10	0,4	18	0,6
Non attached	240	10,6	103	2,3
UPE	28	1,2	34	0,8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2269</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2746</b>	<b>0,8</b>

**Table 2: number of questions by MEP / group between 2009 and 2014**

	Number of question	Number of questions by MEP
Radical left (GUE/NGL)	4568	<b>130.5</b>
Greens/regionalists (Greens/EFA)	4294	75.3
Socialists (S&D)	12296	62.73
Liberals (ALDE)	7778	93.71
Christian-Dem/Conservatives (EPP)	22890	83.85
ECR	4964	87.1
EFD	6581	<b>212.3</b>
Non attached	5829	<b>176.64</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>69200</b>	<b>94.02</b>

**Table 3: Territorial focus of the questions according to EP groups**

EP GROUP			territorial questions				Total
			subnational	national	EU	outside EU	
EP Far-Left group	N		155	178	254	111	698
	% in group		22,2%	25,5%	36,4%	15,9%	100,0%
Greens/Regionalists	N		130	106	245	106	587
	% in group		22,1%	18,1%	41,7%	18,1%	100,0%
Social Democrats	N		135	160	677	202	1174
	% in group		11,5%	13,6%	57,7%	17,2%	100,0%
Liberals	N		47	77	315	66	505
	% in group		9,3%	15,2%	62,4%	13,1%	100,0%
Christian Democrats	N		189	303	1020	282	1794
	% in group		10,5%	16,9%	56,9%	15,7%	100,0%
Conservatives	N		56	68	160	72	356

	% in group	15,7%	19,1%	44,9%	20,2%	100,0%
Eurosceptics	N	26	67	141	71	305
	% in group	8,5%	22,0%	46,2%	23,3%	100,0%
Non-attached	N	70	109	285	139	603
	% in group	11,6%	18,1%	47,3%	23,1%	100,0%
Total	N	808	1068	3097	1049	6022
	% in group	13,4%	17,7%	51,4%	17,4%	100,0%

$p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .118$

**Table 4: Territorial focus of the examples mentioned in questions according to EP group**

EP GROUP			territorial example					Total
			Subnation.	Nation.	EU	Non-EU	No	
EP group	Far-Left	N	215	227	120	124	7	693
		% in group	31,0%	32,8%	17,3%	17,9%	1,0%	100,0%
	Greens/Regionalists	N	169	142	144	121	8	584
		% in group	28,9%	24,3%	24,7%	20,7%	1,4%	100,0%
	Social Democrats	N	187	297	445	228	21	1178
		% in group	15,9%	25,2%	37,8%	19,4%	1,8%	100,0%
	Liberals	N	91	126	188	80	19	504
		% in group	18,1%	25,0%	37,3%	15,9%	3,8%	100,0%
	Christian Democrats	N	316	459	629	345	36	1785
		% in group	17,7%	25,7%	35,2%	19,3%	2,0%	100,0%
	Conservatives	N	89	98	89	71	8	355
		% in group	25,1%	27,6%	25,1%	20,0%	2,3%	100,0%
	Eurosceptics	N	42	97	81	78	7	305
		% in group	13,8%	31,8%	26,6%	25,6%	2,3%	100,0%
	Non-attached	N	125	163	164	139	7	598

	% in group	20,9%	27,3%	27,4%	23,2%	1,2%	100,0%
<b>Total</b>	N	1234	1609	1860	1186	113	6002
	% in group	20,6%	26,8%	31,0%	19,8%	1,9%	100,0%

**Table 5 : Focus of representation according to the type of electoral list for EP elections**

			territorial questions				Total
			subnational	national	EU	outside EU	
Electoral lists	open	Count	183	248	721	217	1369
		%	13,4%	18,1%	52,7%	15,9%	100%
	ordered	Count	96	159	529	210	994
		%	9,7%	16,0%	53,2%	21,1%	100%
	closed	Count	529	661	1847	622	3659
		%	14,5%	18,1%	50,5%	17,0%	100%
<b>Total</b>		Count	808	1068	3097	1049	6022
		%	13,4%	17,7%	51,4%	17,4%	100,0%

p<.001, Cramer's V .048

**Table 6 : focus of representation according to regional / national list for EP elections**

			territorial questions				Total
			subnational	national	EU	outside EU	
EP lists	national	Count	418	624	1325	521	2888
		%	14,5%	21,6%	45,9%	18,0%	100%
	regional	Count	390	444	1772	528	3134
		%	12,4%	14,2%	56,5%	16,8%	100%
<b>Total</b>		Count	808	1068	3097	1049	6022
		%	13,4%	17,7%	51,4%	17,4%	100%

p<.001, Cramer's V .119

**Table 7: Regression 1: Effect of political affiliation and electoral system (All Member states)**

Logistic regression    Number of obs = 6022  
LR chi2(9) = 184.05  
Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

Log likelihood = -3644.3022

Pseudo R2 = 0.0246

-----  
 territoria~c | Odds Ratio Std. Err. z P>|z| [95% Conf. Interval]  
 -----+-----

**EPgroup5 (ref=Christians dem. )|**

2 (far-left)		<b>2.566703***</b>	.2398863	10.09	0.000	2.137084	3.082689
3 (Green/regionalists)		1.943967***	.1965704	6.57	0.000	1.594472	2.370068
4 (Social Dem.)		.884822 N.S.	.0759253	-1.43	0.154	.7478518	1.046879
5 (Liberals)		.9233923 N.S.	.1081244	-0.68	0.496	.7340321	1.161602
6 (conservatives)		1.387617***	.1733493	2.62	0.009	1.086257	1.772584
7 (euroscept.)		1.151465 N.S.	.156964	1.03	0.301	.8814905	1.504124
8 (Non-Attached)		1.216936*	.128967	1.85	0.064	.9886901	1.497874

**lists (ref=open)|**

1 (ordered)		<b>.6458576***</b>	.0630561	-4.48	0.000	.5333749	.7820615
2 (closed)		1.025893 N.S.	.0732333	0.36	0.720	.8919467	1.179954

The level of significance are: \*\*\*  $p < 0,01$  \*\*  $p < 0,05$  \*  $p < 0,1$

**Table 8: Regression 2: 9 member states representing at least 5% of the sample (including the variable 'lists')**

Logistic regression                      Number of obs = 5005

LR chi2(15) = 299.19

Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

Log likelihood = -2984.4118              Pseudo R2 = 0.0477

-----  
 territoria~c | Odds Ratio              Std. Err. z P>|z| [95% Conf. Interval]  
 -----+-----

**nationality |**

2 (Belgium)		1.245593 N.S.	.2761691	0.99	0.322	.8065852	1.923543
3 (NL)		1.380456 N.S.	.2809764	1.58	0.113	.9263396	2.057194
5 (Germany)		2.012779***	.4055346	3.47	0.001	1.356113	2.987419
6 (Spain)		2.92062***	.53564	5.84	0.000	2.038756	4.183935
7 (Italy)		2.302992***	.4259872	4.51	0.000	1.602672	3.309331
8 (Portugal)		2.767416***	.5709443	4.93	0.000	1.846986	4.146536
9 (Greece)		3.716456***	.6930934	7.04	0.000	2.578611	5.35639
10 (UK)		1.41726*	.2582709	1.91	0.056	.9915917	2.025658

2 (far-left)		2.330396***	.2560882	7.70	0.000	1.878845	2.890471
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3 (Green/regionalists)		2.218627***	.2487909	7.11	0.000	1.780872	2.763985
4 (Social Dem.)		1.062216 N.S.	.1054962	0.61	0.543	.8743268	1.290481
5 (Liberals)		1.261117*	.1681631	1.74	0.082	.971074	1.637791
6 (conservatives)		1.651632***	.2334477	3.55	0.000	1.251991	2.178839
7 (euroscept.)		.9561796 N.S.	.1562189	-0.27	0.784	.6941794	1.317065
8 (Non-Attached)		1.471507***	.1836082	3.10	0.002	1.152267	1.879193
<b>EPgroup5 (ref=Christians dem. )</b>							
lists							
1   (omitted)							
2   (omitted)							

**Table 9: Territorial focus of the questions – comparison 1994-2011 / 2014-2016**

EP GROUP			territorial questions				
			subnational	national	EU	outside EU	
EP group	Far-Left	<i>1994-2011</i>	22,2%	25,5%	36,4%	15,9%	
		2014-2016	17,5%	16,2%	36,2%	29,9%	
	Greens/Regionalists	<i>1994-2011</i>	22,1%	18,1%	41,7%	18,1%	
		2014-2016	17,3%	14,2%	49,6%	18,9%	
	Social Democrats	<i>1994-2011</i>	11,5%	13,6%	57,7%	17,2%	
		2014-2016	7,0%	12,0%	62,2%	18,5%	
	Liberals	<i>1994-2011</i>	9,3%	15,2%	62,4%	13,1%	
		2014-2016	7,3%	14,1%	53,6%	25,0%	
	Christian Democrats	<i>1994-2011</i>	10,5%	16,9%	56,9%	15,7%	
		2014-2016	5,9%	9,0%	68,7%	16,1%	
	Conservatives	<i>1994-2011</i>	15,7%	19,1%	44,9%	20,2%	
		2014-2016	12,2%	18,6%	44,7%	24,5%	
	Eurosceptics	<i>1994-2011</i>	8,5%	22,0%	46,2%	23,3%	
		2014-2016	EFDD	34,9%	10,0%	37,0%	18,0%
		2014-2016		ENF	8,3%	8,3%	60,0%
	Non-attached	<i>1994-2011</i>	11,6%	18,1%	47,3%	23,1%	
		2014-2016	10,7%	24,6%	46,7%	18,0%	
<b>Total</b>		<b><i>1994-2011</i></b>	<b>13,4%</b>	<b>17,7%</b>	<b>51,4%</b>	<b>17,4%</b>	
		<b>2014-2016</b>	<b>11,6%</b>	<b>13,6%</b>	<b>54,7%</b>	<b>19,9%</b>	



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