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## **Introduction: Connecting with the Electorate? Parliamentary Communication in EU Affairs**

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*National parliaments have often been described as latecomers to European integration, but there is little doubt that they have developed the institutional means to become more involved over the last years – and especially since the Lisbon Treaty. Accordingly, the main focus of the literature has been on this institutional adaptation and thus on the relationship between the parliament and the government in EU affairs. Other parliamentary functions, and in particular those that relate to their citizens such as the communication function, in contrast, have been largely neglected. Yet democracy depends on a viable public debate on policy choices and political alternatives to allow citizens to make informed political (electoral) choices and to exercise democratic control. This collection therefore investigates whether, and how, individual MPs, political parties, or legislatures as institutions ‘link’ with their electorates in EU politics. In this introduction, we discuss why engaging with the public in EU affairs is – or at least should be – an important aspect of parliamentary work, we introduce parliamentary means of communication and assess parliamentary incentives and disincentives ‘to go public’ in EU politics.*

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Keywords: *national parliaments; EU; parliamentary communication; information; media.*

### **Introduction**

The role of national legislatures in the political system of the European Union (EU) first received serious political and academic attention in the mid-1990s in connection with debates on how to cure the EU’s democratic deficit.<sup>1</sup> Academic interest in the topic drew further inspiration from the first comparative projects that showed domestic legislatures to be largely ineffective or uninterested in controlling their governments in EU matters (among many: Laursen & Pappas, 1995; Norton, 1996). Since then, the role of national parliaments has featured quite prominently on the research agenda of both parliamentary and EU scholars, with several comparative research projects on national parliamentary scrutiny of EU policies completed during the first decade of the new millennium (Auel & Benz, 2005; Barrett, 2008; Maurer & Wessels, 2001; O’Brennan & Raunio, 2007; Tans, Zoethout, & Peters, 2007).

Thanks to this lively academic debate, we are now in a much better position to evaluate the ways in which national legislatures are affected by and get involved in European politics. While national parliaments have certainly been late adapters to integration, there is no doubt that they can exercise tighter scrutiny of their

governments over EU matters than before. However, practically all existing research has focused on parliamentary scrutiny of EU affairs and emphasized institutional provisions. Interestingly, this preoccupation with government-related functions in EU politics can also be found among national MPs. As Raunio (2011) has shown, the debate in the Convention on the Future of Europe, for example, centred almost exclusively on issues of government scrutiny and compliance with subsidiarity principle. Even COSAC<sup>2</sup>, which has a basically unconstrained agenda and can discuss any issue it chooses, has so far focused mainly on different aspects of parliamentary scrutiny and, more recently, on the subsidiarity control mechanism.

In contrast, linkages between legislatures and citizens, and the parliamentary information and communication functions in EU affairs in particular, have been largely neglected. Within legislative studies, there are a number of publications that deal with the relationships between parliaments and their citizens (for example, Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Marschall, 1999, 2009; Norton, 1997, 2002). This neglect of parliamentary communication in EU affairs is rather surprising given that the opacity of policy-making processes and the lack of accountability have been defined as core problems in both academic and political debates on the democratic deficit of the EU (for example, Harlow, 2002; Curtin, Mair, & Papadopoulos, 2010). So far, much of this debate focuses purely on the European level, but the demand that EU policy problems, solutions and alternatives are debated in public and that decision-makers be publicly held accountable for their decisions to allow citizens to exercise control are fundamental pre-conditions for the legitimacy of domestic EU policy-making and thus the EU as a whole. Here, it has been argued that national parliaments are in a unique position to ensure that people are more connected with 'Europe' by making the EU more visibly present in national politics and more accessible to and for their national public (Auel, 2007). The expectation is that this will increase the democratic quality of EU governance, because it will give citizens greater awareness of and ownership over European decisions. In the short run, this may lead to a brake on further integration, but in the long run a more open debate could create a basis for a more democratic Union (de Wilde, 2009).

Given the lack of (comparative) empirical studies on how parliaments fulfil their information and communication functions in EU affairs, however, we are hardly in a position to assess to what degree parliaments actually do serve as channels between the EU and citizens. In fact, we know very little about whether and how individual MPs, political parties, or legislatures as institutions 'link' with their electorates in EU affairs. Do parliaments inform the public about European matters? Are EU issues debated in plenary and are these debates covered by the media? Do MPs and political parties use publicly accessible control mechanisms like parliamentary questions in EU matters? Do political parties and their parliamentary groups have specific mechanisms for interacting with their supporters in EU affairs? It may thus be true that 'parliaments provide a major space for public debate and are thus the ideal arenas for the deliberation of

important European issues and their national implications' (Auel, 2007, p. 498), but whether they actually do so remains largely unknown.

The objective of this volume is to provide first and (necessarily) preliminary answers to these important and until now unanswered questions. The next section of this introductory article introduces parliamentary means of communication and discusses parliamentary incentives and disincentives 'to go public' in EU politics. The second section outlines the structure and results of this volume.

### **Parliamentary Communication in EU Affairs: Means and (Dis)Incentives**

The general research question of this volume is whether and how national parliaments communicate EU affairs. Communication is a two-way process that entails not only providing information, explanations and justifications, but also listening to others. The communication function of national parliaments is thus something of an umbrella term for a number of parliamentary functions. The classic catalogue of parliamentary functions by Walter Bagehot (2001 [1867], pp. 99-102), for example, distinguishes between an *informing function* ('it makes us hear what otherwise we should not'), a *teaching function* ('to alter [society] for the better [by teaching] the nation what it does not know'), and a broader *expressive function* ('to express the mind of the English people on all matters which come before it'), which necessarily includes the element of listening as a precondition to know what the mind of the people actually is.

It has been argued that the communication function is best achieved through frequent personal contact between the representatives and the represented (Fenno, 1978). In the short run, the argument goes, such close contact means that the representative hears about opinions and views first hand and can directly respond to them. In the long run, the expectation is that such personal contacts will build trust. However, people are not only hard to find (Fenno, 1978, p. 234) but there are also so very many of them. Thus, in practice representative democracy means mainly indirect communication, with representatives who voice citizens' interests on their behalf. Democratic political representation is realised through an 'activation of the communicative current' (Urbinati, 2006, p. 24) through continuous communication on, and the constant 'making present' of the represented in, choices over public policies. Within the parliamentary arena, such communication takes place between different parliamentary parties. Parliaments are thus the 'means by which the measures and actions of government are debated and scrutinised on behalf of citizens, and through which the concerns of citizens ... may be voiced. The extent to which they carry out such actions, *and are seen by citizens to carry out such actions*, may be argued to constitute the essential underpinning of legitimacy of the political system in the eyes of electors' (Norton, 1998, p. 1, emphasis added). The following provides an overview of the most important means that parliaments have to provide information and to communicate EU issues to their citizens.

### *Plenary Debates*

Plenary debates are among the most important instruments of parliaments to fulfil their communication function. Plenary debates may provide an effective forum for both articulating and representing societal interests and informing the electorate about issues on the political agenda. Although it is questionable whether citizens actually follow plenary debates, at the very least such debates provide the electorate with the opportunity to learn about what is on the agenda of European politics and what the positions of parties are in these matters – particularly if the debates are covered by the media. Information and accountability can, of course, be obscured by strategies of ‘blame shifting’ and ‘credit claiming’ (Lord & Pollak, 2010, p. 977f.). But parliamentary debates provide the means by which the justifications of some (government or governing parties) can be continuously challenged by others within (the opposition) and outside of the parliamentary arena (media, interest groups and so on) and thus be exposed to the ‘best of disinfectants, sunshine’ (Brandeis, 1913, p. 11).

### *Transparency in Parliamentary Committees*

Whether committees meet in public can have a major impact on the ability of the electorate to follow parliamentary work. Despite significant cross-national variation, the handling of EU affairs has gradually become more transparent and public in national parliaments. According to COSAC (2009), in around half of the lower houses of national parliaments (14/27) the European Affairs Committees (EAC) meet in public. However, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between public and private EAC meetings. The main problem is that some do sit in camera, but publish the minutes on the web afterwards or allow the press to be present (for example, Cyprus, Estonia, France and Spain). This means that information on the proceedings is basically public, even if the actual meetings are not. One could even argue that providing minutes or streams on the web may be more important as it provides regular information to a larger audience than attendance at meetings, which is necessarily limited. In turn, most EACs have the option to either close part of their otherwise public meetings (such restrictive practices being normally used in connection with more sensitive EU matters, for instance, security policy, or perhaps when the minister appears in the committee before a council meeting).

### *Parliamentary Questions*

While there is variation with respect to the openness of committees, parliamentary questions are accessible to the public throughout the EU. Parliamentary questions are particularly interesting as they are multi-functional, and MPs ask questions for several reasons. Among the most important of these are asking for information, committing the government to making a public formal statement and pressing it for action, defending constituency interests, and informing the policy-makers of problems they might be unfamiliar with. The attractiveness of parliamentary questions is enhanced by the fact that MPs or parliamentary party groups can practically raise any issue they want. ‘Parliamentary question time’ also seems to gain more

attention in the media than other parliamentary activities (Salmond, 2013). Parliamentary questions are used in every EU national legislature, but there is variation between the parliaments regarding both the types of questions used and the procedural details concerning the submission and answering of questions (Russo & Wiberg, 2010; Strøm, Müller, & Bergman, 2003).

### *Informing the Electorate*

One of the classic functions of parliaments is that of informing the public about political matters. Citizens can obviously learn about policy issues through all of the other above-mentioned means of parliamentary communication. Here, however, we refer specifically to means of making information and documents available to the public. Parliaments as institutions can provide information about the EU to the electorate, for example online or through their information offices. This can include original EU documents, documents produced by the national government or by parliaments themselves – such as stenographic minutes, opinions or reports of the EACs – but also information on European institutions, policies and procedures or the involvement of parliament in EU politics more generally. In addition, political parties and MPs can provide information through the media, especially the social media, by emphasising European policies in their programmes or through more direct means such as party events or public talks.

### *Is Anyone Listening? The Importance of Media Coverage*

Finally, any discussion of parliamentary communication remains incomplete without the distinction between two kinds of openness of a political system: transparency and publicity (Hüller, 2007). While transparency requires that information is publicly available, publicity is only achieved if citizens are actually aware of the information. While parliamentary information and communication can, of course, be directly accessed via the various means discussed above, citizens experience politics primarily indirectly through the media. This raises the question to what extent the national media consider parliamentary activities in EU affairs newsworthy. Due to the ‘digitalization of traditional media spheres and the practices of publishing, sharing and commenting political news online’ (Michailidou & Trenz, 2013, p. 262), parliaments have to compete for media attention in an increasingly unpredictable and fluid public arena. Since the seminal study of Galtung and Ruge, (1965), news value research has identified a variety of factors impacting news selection that is too broad to be discussed here in detail (for an overview see O’Neill & Harcup, 2009). However, a plausible hypothesis based on this research is that media coverage in general depends both on the salience of ‘Europe’ in the country (though not necessarily the degree of Euroscepticism, see Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königsłow, 2009) and on the level of party competition over Europe – the more fiercely parties, and their prominent (famous) MPs in particular, fight (entertainingly) over the EU, the more the media should cover parliamentary involvement in EU affairs.

### *(Dis)Incentives for Going ‘Public’ in EU Affairs*

While parliamentary information and communication is easily demanded and justified, the question remains: what are the incentives for MPs and political parties to do so in EU affairs? Considering that re-election is the primary goal of most MPs and their parties, we expect them to have greater incentives to engage publicly with EU affairs in member states where EU issues are more salient and public opinion is generally more critical of EU integration (Raunio, 2005; Saalfeld, 2005). This will signal to the voters that they are doing their job of representing voter interests and of controlling the government in EU politics. Where, in contrast, European affairs play no role in voting decisions or where the permissive consensus prevails, there are far fewer electoral benefits to be gained from investing in public activities.

Second, MPs will engage in public activities if they expect a payoff in terms of policy influence and control. Indeed, parliamentary resolutions and mandates may have a greater impact on the government's negotiation position if made publicly, because this will make it more difficult for the government to ignore or circumvent them in the Council negotiations (for example through abstentions). In addition, publicity strengthens parliamentary control through debates or questions. While critical questioning behind closed doors may be unpleasant for ministers, having to defend their European policies in public is much more uncomfortable due to the potential negative publicity and public embarrassment. To what extent especially governing parties and MPs make use of these advantages will also depend on how much they trust the government to represent their policy preferences in EU negotiations (Saalfeld, 2003). This trust can be assumed to be greatest in the case of single-party governments. Although governing party MPs and ministers may not agree on every single issue, we can expect their interests to be fairly similar – unless the party is deeply internally divided over the EU. Divergent preferences and thus less trust, however, can be expected for coalition governments. Here, coalition partners not only have to negotiate compromises, but they also have a stronger incentive to control the other coalition partners' members of government publicly. Trust can finally be considered lowest in the case of minority governments that cannot rely on the trust and support of a loyal majority in parliament.

However, there are also a number of reasons why parties and MPs may generally prefer to conduct their EU business away from the prying eyes of the public. Negotiations between government and parliament (and especially between the cabinet and its party groups) are clearly facilitated by closed doors. The establishment of EACs reduces the use of plenary, as the former coordinate parliamentary work in EU matters and are often authorised to speak on behalf of the whole parliament in these issues. While MPs may defend committee deliberations behind closed doors with the need to further national interests and to allow confidential exchange of views between government and parliament, this mechanism clearly also serves the interests of the mainstream parties. Governing parties in particular may want to monitor the government behind closed doors without public criticism that might damage the reputation of the cabinet (Auel, 2007). Indeed, main parties in several EU countries, especially in the Nordic region, have deliberately 'de-

politicised' European integration through cross-party cooperation in the EAC with the aim of manufacturing consensus in national integration policy (Bergman & Damgaard, 2000).

In addition, focusing on EU matters may not be a very attractive option for most parties or MPs from an electoral perspective either. In terms of re-election, specific EU policies can be important for their constituencies (for example, in terms of attracting regional policy funds), but not necessarily for the voters in general, who still base their voting choices primarily on domestic issues.<sup>3</sup> What is more, for many parties the costs of engaging in public activities on Europe may even outweigh any potential benefits. Regardless of the data used, there is a consistent body of work showing that national mainstream parties across the EU are ideologically less cohesive on integration than in traditional socio-economic issues that dominate domestic political discourse (for example, Hooghe & Marks, 2007; Marks & Steenbergen, 2004). Thus, the issue of European integration may threaten the internal cohesiveness of political parties, and party leaders may be reluctant to emphasise an issue that threatens to divide their party since disunity may reduce a party's electoral popularity. Despite intra-party dissent, mainstream parties are also generally more supportive of integration than their voters (Mattila & Raunio, 2012), and this can impact negatively on their vote shares in elections (Hobolt, Spoon, & Tilley, 2009). For mainstream parties, EU issue voting is thus often more of a liability than an asset (De Vries, 2010) and avoiding public activities related to EU affairs may therefore be a logical response from parties aiming at electoral success.

### **Overview of this Volume**

Overall, the contributions in this volume paint a rather sobering picture of parliamentary communication in EU affairs. Especially in the plenary, Europe seems a rare guest. The contribution by Katrin Auel and Tapio Raunio investigates how institutional and party-related factors impact the level and nature of parliamentary debates in four national parliaments. It shows that EU issues, especially normal policy matters rather than 'high politics' questions, were rarely debated in the British House of Commons or the French *Assemblée Nationale* between 2002 and 2010. In the Finnish *Eduskunta*, which is regarded as one of the most powerful and active parliaments in the EU, they found literally only a handful of plenary debates. A relatively positive example, in contrast, is the German *Bundestag*, where over 20 per cent of all plenary sessions included an EU topic. Since 2010, however, they do observe an increase (partly steep) in parliamentary debates, which is mainly due to the euro crisis.

The article by Fabio García Lupato, in turn, investigates the overall salience of Europe and its usage by national parties in parliamentary budget and investiture debates in Italy and Spain between 1986 and 2006. It shows how both ideology and government-opposition dynamics affect the discourse of parties, with governing parties defending the EU and using it to legitimate their programmes and budgetary decisions, while opposition to Europe comes mainly from smaller and ideologically radical parties. Yet while he

observed a slowly growing politicisation of EU issues in Italy, the overall party consensus on EU matters in both Spain and Italy implies that there are no real debates on European issues. In addition, especially in budgetary debates, the EU is often seen or portrayed as an external constraint, which contributes to the depoliticisation of national politics.

The article by Pieter de Wilde assesses the explanatory power of European integration theory for the politicisation of the EU in mass media and national parliaments. By comparing debates on the EU budget in newspapers and in parliamentary plenary sessions in the Netherlands, Denmark and Ireland, it investigates how visible the EU is, who communicates and how sense is made of EU issues. De Wilde shows that the politicisation of EU budget differs mostly between mass media and parliaments, rather than across countries or over time. While the visibility of EU issues has risen in both arenas, corresponding to the increased powers of the Union, different institutional operating logics explain best which actors dominate the debates and how EU issues are framed. It also suggests that regardless of the extent to which parliaments perform their communicative role, parliamentary communication is very rarely reported by the media: the extent to which parliaments publicly debate EU affairs, and thus ‘transparency’, only marginally affects the ‘publicity’ in the sense of reaching mass audiences through media coverage.

Rik de Ruiter’s contribution investigates aspects of parliamentary communication with regard to policy issues integrated under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). OMC often deals with policy issues that are highly relevant from an electoral point of view, such as employment or social policy. At the same time, the OMC’s benchmarking processes provide national parliaments with important information to monitor and assess their government’s policies. De Ruiter found that British and Dutch opposition MPs do use OMC reports to criticise or shame the government for its policy choices, but they do so mainly through questions in committees, while shaming activities in the plenary are rare. As a result, OMC-related activities received little attention from newspapers, and the link established between the citizens and OMCs through the communicative function of national parliaments is weak.

The contribution by Eric Miklin therefore argues that domestic politicisation of Europe may require European policy proposals that polarise centre-left and centre-right parties. By changing the incentive structure of national parties, such proposals could help to overcome parties’ reluctance to publicly discuss European issues and hence provide citizens with electoral alternatives in EU decision-making. Examining the parliamentary processing of the Services Directive in Austria and Germany, Miklin also shows how the higher salience of polarising proposals can induce national parliaments to pay more attention to the proposal, resulting in tighter scrutiny of the government. This reduces the risk of agency losses in Council decision-making, with ministers better aligned to the preferences of their parliamentary principals.



Julien Navarro and Sylvain Brouard explore the Europeanisation of parliamentary questions in the French National Assembly (1988-2007). While the overall share of EU-related questions is very low, parliamentary attention for EU issues has slowly increased over time, but still focuses mainly on the ‘big issues’ such as treaty negotiations or the French EU presidency. Navarro and Brouard find variation mainly between the types of questions under consideration. Written questions relating to EU issues, which are deemed technical, are most closely related to a genuine interest in European politics, and politicians with strong pro- or anti-European views tend to ask more such questions than their colleagues. Oral questions, the most visible to the voters, are submitted in relation to local district concerns, even in the case of questions dealing with European issues: they serve more direct electoral purposes. Questions to the government, finally, are mainly used by MPs of cabinet parties to scrutinise their government, especially when the minister in charge comes from a different party within the coalition. In contrast, positions on the EU or government-opposition dynamics seem to play an overall smaller role: Eurosceptic and opposition deputies were no more likely to ask EU-related questions than pro-European and governing party MPs.

Focusing on three consecutive treaty revisions (Nice Treaty, draft Constitutional Treaty and Lisbon Treaty), the contribution by Johannes Pollak and Peter Slominski investigates a broader supply side of political communication by analysing whether and how various information tools such as press releases, organising events and public debates, as well as recent forms of web-based tools such as websites or blogs, have been used to inform citizens about these important EU issues. The results are again discouraging: neither does the parliament as an institution make any specific efforts to link the supranational level with the national electorate, nor do the parliamentary party groups engage in communicating over Europe beyond press releases. Even individual MPs are reluctant to communicate with their constituents over Europe, since it is an activity not rewarded either by their party organisation or by voters. Taken together, all communication efforts are top-down in character and do not aim at any deliberative engagement with the citizens.

The final contribution by Jürgen Neyer addresses fundamental questions about democracy and the appropriate role of national parliaments raised by the multi-level nature of EU governance. Given the serious problems individual domestic legislatures face in controlling their governments in European affairs, his contribution highlights the importance of parliaments becoming key mediating institutions between European citizens and EU decision-making. Drawing on a concept of legitimacy that centres on the idea of justification, Neyer suggests that national parliaments become more actively involved in the European constitutional process. Such a role could be achieved through transforming COSAC into an Inter-parliamentary Constitutional Assembly responsible for treaty revisions.

To conclude, the studies in this collection clearly suggest that so far most parliaments seem not to live up to their task of bringing ‘Europe’ closer to the citizens or enabling them to make informed political choices and

to exercise democratic control in EU affairs. Stronger scrutiny rights and procedures in EU affairs have certainly raised parliamentary awareness of European issues. Parliaments have overall also become better at controlling and influencing their governments in EU politics. However, as long as such scrutiny or participation takes place mainly in the EAC and other standing committees, the impact in terms of democratic legitimacy remains limited. Given the low public profile of EU politics in most parliaments, domestic actors involved in EU politics remain fairly untroubled by *public* parliamentary accountability to their citizens. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of the contributions by Auel and Raunio as well as Pollak and Slominski, the data for the contributions in this collection dates from before the outbreak of the euro crisis. To what extent the euro crisis has changed these dynamics is thus not entirely clear. As the contribution by Auel and Raunio shows, we can observe an increase in plenary debates on EU issues over the last few years, which is at least partly due to the euro crisis. Similarly, Pollak & Slominski indicate that especially the right wing parliamentary party groups initiated debates on the euro crisis in Austria. Whether this politicisation will last, however, and spill over into other aspects of European politics, is at least doubtful. So far, national parliaments, and the parties acting within them, fail to keep their ‘promise of communication’.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent overviews of the literature see Goetz and Meyer-Sahling (2008), Raunio (2009) and Winzen (2010).

<sup>2</sup> The Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union, a parliamentary conference at the EU level consisting of members of European Affairs Committees of national parliaments and members of the European Parliament.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in her case study on the Danish scrutiny system, Møller Sousa (2008, p. 441) shows how the incentive structure works against more active involvement in European affairs, with the MPs feeling that neither the media nor the voters are interested in EU matters.