

Attention to EU Affairs in the Spanish Parliament: The Role of Credit-Claiming and Issue Saliency Strategies

Anna M. Palau  *

Department of Political Science, University of Barcelona, Avda. Diagonal 684, Barcelona, 08034, Spain

* Correspondence: apalau@ub.edu

Recent research demonstrates that the salience of EU affairs in domestic parliaments is mainly driven by government parties. This has been interpreted as illustrating the so-called opposition deficit thesis and mainly explained considering governments' informational advantages and reporting duties. Drawing on a dataset on oral questions introduced in plenary meetings in the Spanish parliament, this article sheds new light on government and opposition MPs' incentives to raise attention to the EU. Results show that in Spain, where there is no party conflict on European integration, government MPs pay attention to EU affairs following credit-claiming strategies. These strategies are likely in the context of EU events and when the perceived benefits of integration are high, and unlikely under critical junctures, when the EU cannot be framed as a governmental success. Opposition MPs pay less attention to EU affairs but they still use the EU to give visibility to issues that are of interest to their voters.

Keywords: Credit Claiming, Europe, Issue Saliency, Parliamentary Questions, Spain

Research on the Europeanisation of domestic parliaments focused initially on exploring the impact of Europe on parliaments' power and influence with a focus on identifying a de- or re-parliamentarisation process (e.g. Raunio and Hix, 2000; Saalfeld, 2005; Follesdal and Hix, 2006). The emphasis was on the analysis of institutional reforms, for example, the establishment of specialised EU affairs committees, with a view to contribute to the democratic-deficit debate. This led to the proliferation of case studies and comparative research on the topic (Bergman, 1997; Maurer and Wessels, 2001; Cooper, 2012; Karlas, 2012) mainly because formal rules are observable and easy to compare across countries. However, as literature reviews on the topic emphasise (Winzen, 2010;

Hefffler *et al.*, 2015), one of the greatest shortcomings of this research is the lack of empirical and behavioural elements. Most analysis measure institutional opportunities rather than changes in parliamentary behaviour in practice (Auel *et al.*, 2015).

Recent research has moved towards this direction, exploring the Europeanisation of parliamentary behaviour from an empirical perspective (e.g. Finke and Dannwolf, 2013; Navarro and Brouard, 2014; Auel *et al.*, 2015, 2016; Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015; Rauh, 2015; Gava *et al.*, 2019). In line with this literature, Rauh and De Wilde (2018) found, contrary to their expectations, that government and not opposition parties contribute more to raise plenary debates on the EU in Germany, UK, Netherlands and Spain, a finding they qualify as 'rather disturbing'. As a possible explanation, they signal to the informational advantages of governing actors. However, the authors recognise that more research is required in order to investigate this hypothesis. The goal of this article is to contribute to this line of research by investigating government and opposition MPs' motivations to raise attention to EU issues in the Spanish parliament. The case of Spain is interesting because thus far, electoral considerations and party preferences have been incorporated into the analysis of parliamentary behaviour mainly taking into consideration the role of euroscepticism and the politicisation of European integration (Karlás, 2012; Auel *et al.*, 2015; Ladrech, 2015; Rauh and De Wilde, 2018). We know little about how Europe influences parties' parliamentary strategies in countries where EU affairs are consensual. More research is required also to assess the impact of the economic crisis on MPs' behaviour, exploring the interaction between preferences, institutions and contextual factors.

Based on the analysis of parliamentary control questions, this article shows that government MPs exploit information asymmetries on EU affairs to their advantage, using the EU to give visibility to positive developments following credit-claiming strategies.¹ These strategies are likely in the context of EU events and when the perceived benefits of integration are high, and unlikely under critical junctures, when the EU cannot be framed as a governmental success. Opposition parties pay less attention to EU affairs, which corroborates the so-called opposition-deficit thesis (Mair, 2007, 2013; Karlsson and Persson, 2018; Rauh and De Wilde, 2018). Nonetheless, they still use the EU to give visibility to issues that are of interest to their voters. Overall, results corroborate parliaments' communicative function, namely their role as scenarios where party competition occurs and as arenas used by parties to send messages to their voters (Auel and Raunio, 2014; De Wilde, 2014; Miklin, 2014; Auel *et al.*, 2016).

¹The concepts of credit claiming and blame avoidance were popularised following the work of Weaver (1986).

The article is organised as follows. The next section focuses on the conceptual framework and hypotheses. After that, the research design section justifies the use of parliamentary questions as initiatives under study and explains the operationalisation of variables. Next comes a brief description on the content and evolution of Europeanised parliamentary questions, followed by the testing of hypotheses and the presentation of results. This article finishes with the conclusions where, in the light of results, the main contributions of the article and the avenues for future research are discussed.

1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Existing research has already explored to what extent institutional factors influence parliamentary attention to EU affairs. Some authors argue that attention has increased in parallel to the intensification of the integration process (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Gava *et al.*, 2019). The salience of EU affairs increases with the progressive delegation and pooling of sovereignty through EU treaties, a process that Rauh and De Wilde (2018) refer to as authority transfer, and also with the number of directive and legislative initiatives adopted at the supranational level (authority exercise). From this perspective, what motivates attention to the EU are accountability mechanisms and the reduction of information asymmetries because domestic parliaments do not have direct access to European decision-making frameworks.

The literature, however, has identified a number of variables that mediate responses to Europeanisation pressures. Researchers from the Observatory of Parliaments after Lisbon project (Auel *et al.*, 2015) have developed, in the light of the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, a new indicator on institutional strength that takes into account three variables: first, parliaments' access to EU-related information; secondly, scrutiny infrastructure, namely parliament's capacity to deal with and process information; and thirdly, oversight, which refers to parliament's capacity to shape and control the government's negotiation position at the EU level. By combining this indicator of institutional strength with data on parliamentary activity on EU affairs (including mandates, committee meetings, debates, opinions and hearings), the main conclusion is that there is a 'clear and strong correlation' between institutional strength and overall level of parliaments' activity on EU affairs.

Existing research has also demonstrated the importance of taking into account the governing status of MPs (Rauh, 2015; Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015). Even though opposition parties have more incentives to reduce information asymmetries, Rauh and De Wilde (2018) corroborate, contrary to their expectations, that government MPs are more likely to raise debate on EU affairs in Germany, UK, Netherlands and Spain. They suggest that this can be related to governments'

informational advantages: 'knowing about the nature and extent of EU policies and socialisation into regular EU oversight activities have an effect on the supply of EU-related debates' (Rauh and De Wilde, 2018, p. 211). However, more research is required in order to explain this government-opposition divide. Parliamentary attention to the EU does not only respond to information asymmetries and accountability mechanisms but might also have other purposes.

The literature on party competition reminds us that parties rarely pay attention to issues that do not benefit them electorally (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). From this perspective, radical eurosceptical parties pay attention to EU affairs because they have issue ownership on the topic (De Vries, 2007; Green-Pedersen, 2012; Navarro and Brouard, 2014). The existence of hard euroscepticism in the party system could explain why in countries where EU affairs are divisive, EU issues are likely to reach highly salient parliamentary arenas, like plenary meetings, while in countries where European integration is a consensual issue, EU affairs should be mainly discussed behind closed doors, in specialised parliamentary committees (Saalfeld, 2005; Winzen, 2013). The literature has also emphasised the importance of considering internal party dynamics. Winzen (2013) demonstrates that parliamentarians improve their access to information about government policies if governing parties are internally divided over European integration. Generally, parties with eurosceptic factions are likely to avoid public debates, promoting the discussion of EU affairs behind closed doors, unless the occurrence of EU events makes the debate inevitable also for them (Guinaudeau and Palau, 2016). EU events, such as European Parliament elections or Council meetings, open a window of opportunity, notably for challenger parties or parties internally divided on European integration to politicise the topic. For the same reason, divisions within the government coalition can also contain the debate unless external events situate EU affairs to the forefront of political debates.

Nonetheless, with the focus on party conflict on European integration, a question remains unanswered: do government and opposition MPs in Europhile countries have other motivations, besides the reduction of information asymmetries and accountability mechanisms, to raise attention to EU affairs? Existing research has overlooked that parties, and their MPs, can use the EU to give visibility to issues (different from European integration) that are of interest to their voters. In decentralised states, regional parties with parliamentary representation in the national parliament can use this arena to gather information on EU decisions, reducing information asymmetries, but at the same time, to behave strategically, using the EU to emphasise the interests of their constituencies (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015; Palau, 2018). Regional parties have a strong constituency focus and are likely to emphasise implementation rather than decision-making issues when referring to the EU (Högenauer, 2017).

Pursuing also an electoral motivation, it is possible that other opposition parties, different from regional parties, use the EU following issue saliency strategies. For example, a left-green party might use the approval of EU Directives on environmental issues to attack the incumbent, blaming it for implementation deficits and/or emphasising the secondary role of green policies on the executive agenda. In doing so, it can pursue the reduction of information asymmetries but also electoral motivations, oriented to signal to their voters that the party cares about the environment. These strategies are not likely on the part of parties internally divided on European integration, as they would raise debate on the topic, a question they might prefer to avoid, but can be effectively used by Europhile parties in countries where European integration is a consensual topic. As a result, I expect that in a Europhile country:

H1: Opposition MPs pay attention to the EU following issue saliency strategies.

Government MPs, on the contrary, are more limited to follow such strategies mainly because the incumbent cannot avoid particular debates and is forced to pay attention to issues that it would rather prefer to avoid (Green Perderson and Mortensen, 2010). The exercise of political authority attributes the government certain advantages but also certain obligation and commitments in relation to EU affairs. The executive has privileged access to EU decision-making centres and information but, as the main representative in front of EU institutions, has also reporting duties and needs to explain and justify decisions, especially in the context of important EU events. The government (and government MPs) can use parliamentary control sessions in order to fulfil these duties, but their incentives to respond to accountability mechanisms are not constant. Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.* (2015) point to the importance of taking into consideration EU events but also variations in public opinion. In Europhile countries, public support for integration is mainly attributed to the benefits that the country is believed to gain from EU membership both at the political and economical level. Public opinion positive attitudes towards the EU mainly rely on the advantages that Europe offers thought of in terms of better public policies and economic prosperity (Díez Medrano, 2010).

Economic benefits associated with EU membership have been extensively used in public opinion literature to explain support for European integration (Anderson and Reichert, 1995) but its impact on parliamentary behaviour has not been systematically explored.² The main thesis of this article is not only that

²Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.* (2015) explore the association between variations in the benefits perceived from integration and parliamentary attention to the EU in Spain but they do not test this relationship systematically (the statistical model includes only one explanatory variable and no control variables).

EU events and variations in the benefits perceived from integration matter but that there is an interaction effect, both work together to impact government MPs attention to the EU. When membership is associated with benefits, executive elites can strategically exploit information asymmetries on EU affairs to their advantage, using EU events to give visibility to positive developments. It is likely that they 'use' Europe following a legitimating strategy, reporting EU decisions as being in the best interests for the country, and transmitting the image of being good negotiators, appropriately defending domestic interests in front of EU institutions (Woll and Jacquot, 2010). Executives are subjected to a certain degree of coercion but they have some room of manoeuvre to use the EU in order to advance on their reform projects and to gain or maintain credibility in front of voters at domestic level, as part or re-election-seeking behaviour. As a result, I expect that in a Europhile country:

H2: Government MPs pay attention to the EU following credit-claiming strategies. These are more likely in the context of EU events and when the perceived benefits from integration are high, and unlikely under critical junctures, when the EU cannot be framed as a government success.

The perceived costs and benefits of integration were seriously altered by the euro crisis, one of the most serious critical junctures faced by the European project. This was different from other critical economic situations because it highlighted the impact of EU decisions for citizen's daily lives and the redistributive consequences of EU decisions between and within countries (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). It eroded the output-based legitimacy of integration (Jones, 2009) and resulted in the emergence of new dilemmas for political parties (Mair, 2007; De Giorgi and Ilonszki, 2018). As a result, it probably transformed both government and opposition MPs' incentives to raise attention to EU affairs.

Concerning government MPs, recent research shows that mainstream left- and right-wing parties often had very different ideas about how the euro crisis should be tackled, for example, via austerity policies or via deficit spending (Miklin, 2014, p. 1204). However, even if confronted with an electorate critical towards the EU, mainstream parties are not likely to discuss their views publicly and their differences are likely to be pushed into the shadow, especially if there are internal party divisions on the European question and eurosceptic parties have significant number of seats in the parliament. In the case of Europhile governing parties, I expect that in the context of the euro crisis they are no longer capable of using the EU following credit-claiming strategies, as the EU can no longer be framed as a governmental success. In the face of approving highly unpopular and electorally costly decisions, they are likely to avoid the debate or alternatively to engage in blame-shifting strategies, transferring responsibilities to

EU institutions. However, blame-shifting strategies are not likely in debtor countries that depend from Brussels' money (Bohle, 2014; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Kröger and Bellamy, 2016).

Concerning opposition MPs, radical eurosceptic parties have found in the euro crisis the perfect scenario to politicise European integration (Hutter *et al.*, 2018). The main question here is how it might have influenced the behaviour of opposition Europhile parties. On the one hand, opposition mainstream parties might not be interested in boosting debate on the topic, in order not to compromise in front of EU institutions, considering the possibilities they enter office in future elections. As existing research has already demonstrated, there is a strong consensus among mainstream parties on EU affairs so they are not likely to politicise the topic (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). On the other hand, because citizens with economic left-wing orientations are more critical with the EU than those with right-wing orientations, I expect, potential debate comes from non-mainstream parties, especially those from the left, which preferences are more at odds with the policy measures adopted to overcome the euro-crisis (Broz, 2013; De Giorgi and Ilonski, 2018). These parties, close to soft eurosceptical positions, face the dilemma of collaborating with the incumbent to pass important policy decisions or to take the opportunity to attack and weaken it, moving their positions close to that of their voters, more critical with EU policies. In multilevel systems of government, it is also likely that the crisis transforms regional parties' strategies, as they can use the EU not necessarily to criticise European integration or EU policies but to blame the central government for having to implement unpopular decisions at regional level, reporting him as a poor negotiator in Brussels (Palau, 2018). The exposed above supports the next hypothesis:

H3: Following the outbreak of the euro crisis, attention to the EU decreased among government MPs and increased among opposition MPs, especially those from left and regional parties.

2. Research design

The analysis relies on a dataset that includes information about 13,412 oral questions introduced in plenary sessions in the Spanish parliament from 1986 to 2015. The data was collected by the research group Q-Dem, www.q-dem.com (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2014, 2015).³ While being subjected to some limitations, for example, concerning cross-institutional comparisons (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011), the analysis of parliamentary questions has many advantages.

³This includes questions from legislature 3 to legislature 10 excluding those raised by groups, like the mixed parliamentary group, which parties are not included in the party manifesto project databases, and therefore some of the control variables in the regression model could not be calculated.

First, because control sessions are scheduled weekly, they allow exploring what motivates the entry of EU affairs into the agenda from a more dynamic perspective compared to other types of initiatives, such as speeches or plenary debates. Secondly, questions are introduced on a particular topic, so they are appropriate in order to explore issue attention dynamics (Navarro and Brouard, 2014, p. 197). Thirdly, parliamentary questions serve accountability and scrutiny purposes but compared to other initiatives, such as written questions, they are more associated with strategic action and political theatre (Norton, 1993). Question time, broadcasted by TV, is the media star of parliaments, forcing members of government and opposition groups to talk publicly (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011). However, even if public and televised, question time is characterised in Spain for limited spontaneity of debates and the government having substantial control on the process. As Salmond (2014) argues, spontaneous, open question times institutions, provide the parliamentary opposition the means, through surprise questioning, and the opportunity, through raucous debate, to tie government politicians' reputation (Salmond, 2014, p. 370).

Oral questions in plenary meetings are introduced by individual MPs at a fixed question time, generally on Wednesday, and have to be registered in advance (between the Tuesday and Thursday of the previous week, the control session is scheduled). This allows the member of the executive responsible for answering having time to prepare the response. The right of reply (following the executive response, MPs have the right to respond and after that the governmental actor says the last word) guarantees a more dynamic exchange of views. However, the total time per question is limited to five minutes, and parliamentary practice indicates that members of the government rarely use the second response time. It is also worth mentioning that even though questions are introduced by individual MPs, in practice, the strong party discipline means that parties control the process (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015, p. 92). In 1996, an amendment to the standing orders introduced a more dynamic process by allowing the substitution of already scheduled questions for questions related to the Council of Ministers, which takes place on Fridays, or questions on matters of topical interest. However, this can hardly be interpreted as reinforcing opposition because the firsts have to be registered before Friday 8 p.m., and the seconds before Monday 12 a.m., and require the unanimity of the Speakers Board and the agreement of the government. The Oral Question Index developed by Garritzmann (2017), which takes into account the spontaneity dimension, corroborates the low opportunities provided by this parliamentary instrument to opposition groups in Spain, as in other southern countries, characterised by a weak opposition.

Overall, even though the institutional setting has allowed for more flexibility over time, the government has strong control of question time so that it cannot

only control the issue content of questions but also frame response following a particular political strategy. In the case of opposition MPs, they have the capacity to use questions to emphasise strategically particular issues but can hardly use them to put the government under serious trouble. It is also worth mentioning that there are asymmetries among opposition groups. The rules regarding oral questions have been modified several times introducing variations in the total number of questions that can be introduced by parliamentary group and session, but generally, those with more seats can introduce a higher number of questions per control session (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015, p. 90). Therefore, MPs calculate cautiously the opportunity cost of paying attention to issues related to the EU, especially those from groups that, according to their number of seats, can introduce only few questions in the control sessions. As a result, as I explain in the next section, the regression model controls, among other variables, for variations in agenda capacity.

2.1 *The operationalisation of the variables*

The empirical analysis includes both descriptive statistics and a logistic regression model. The dependent variable is operationalised using a dummy variable that gathers information about the EU content of oral questions introduced in plenary meetings. A question is considered as having EU content if its wording explicitly refers to an EU policy or institution. This includes, for example, questions oriented to gather information about EU decisions, like one about the negotiations of a Common Agriculture Policy reform or questions oriented to know about the position of Spanish authorities in front of EU institutions, for example, regarding the celebration of a European Council meeting. Questions that refer to domestic issues with an EU frame, for example, one asking the government about whether an independent Catalonia would remain in the EU, are also considered as Europeanised. The database includes also information about the issue content of questions, coded according to the 21 topics of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) methodology (www.comparativeagendas.net).

In order to explore issue saliency strategies as defined in Hypothesis 1, there is no survey data available for the period under analysis informing us about how voters associate parties with particular issues (or providing information on which issues voters consider their parties to be more competent). As a result, the analysis relies on a descriptive analysis based on percentage differences across issues and on existing ideas developed by the issue ownership literature (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Left parties are more likely to emphasise issues like welfare or environment, and right parties those related to macro-economic issues, public safety or the efficacy of public administration. To explore whether regional parties use EU-related question to give visibility to the interests of their

constituencies, following [Chaqués-Bonafont et al. \(2105\)](#), explicit mentions to regional institutions or policies in the wording of questions are considered.

In order to test Hypotheses 2 and 3, the logistic regression model includes a number of independent variables, interaction terms and control variables (as defined in Section 5). The impact of EU events is analysed considering a variable created by [Guinaudeau and Palau \(2016\)](#) including information about whether in a particular month some of the following events occur: celebration of council meetings, ratification of treaties, European Parliament elections and key events related to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the euro crisis. The governing status is analysed using a dummy (with value 1 if the MP that introduces the question is from the governing party). Data on the risk premium (Eurostat), a basic indicator of the solvency and financial stability of a country, are used to measure the impact of critical junctures. The risk premium is calculated as the difference between the 10-year bond yield of Spain and the 10-year German bond yield.⁴ Alternatively, Eurobarometer data on country benefits from being a member of the EU could be used, but this indicator does not provide data until 2015 and is collected on a bi-annual basis, too aggregated for our purposes.⁵ All the same, the correlation between this variable and the risk premium is very high (0.8 statistically significant). Variations in the benefits perceived from integration are strongly associated to the country economic situation.

As control variables, the model takes into consideration, first, the pivotal status of the MP parliamentary group. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of taking into account minority governments and coalition dynamics in the analysis of parliamentary scrutiny ([Holzhacker, 2005](#); [Karlas, 2011](#)). This variable has been operationalised in the following way: a pivotal group is one that either gives formal external support to the government through the signature of a pact or votes in favour at the moment of the confidence vote; secondly, the ideological distance with the incumbent. This is measured using the standard left-right scale (Rile), developed by the Manifesto Project (MARPOR). The Rile index is a measure that could range from -100 —if the whole manifesto is devoted to ‘left’ categories—to 100 —when the whole manifesto is devoted to ‘right’ categories ([Budge et al., 2001](#)). To calculate the ideological distance, the Rile index of the incumbent party has been subtracted from the Rile index of each opposition party,⁶ considering the data of the electoral manifestos related to the corresponding legislature. Third, variations in parliamentary groups’ agenda capacity. Those

⁴I used the Maastricht criterion bond yields series of the Eurostat database.

⁵Other indicators, for example, those provided by Parlemeter data, have the same problem.

⁶If there is more than one party in the parliamentary group, I took the average. I did not consider the questions introduced by the mixed group.

groups with more agenda capacity, namely those that can introduce more questions in a parliamentary control session, have a more fragmented and diverse agenda, paying attention to a wider variety of issues (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015, p. 30). As a result, their MPs could proportionally pay more attention to the EU than those from groups that can only introduce a few questions. Finally, the model controls also if there is a trade-off in the way oral questions are used in the plenary floor. In the plenary, there are alternative forms of contact and dialogue on EU affairs, for example, debates in relation to European Council meetings (Hefftlér *et al.*, 2013; Wessels *et al.*, 2013). If such debates take place, it could be that MPs decide not to introduce parliamentary questions in plenary meeting on EU affairs. As a result, a dummy variable with value 1 collects information on the celebration of plenary debates in relation to European Council meetings. The data were collected using the Spanish Parliament Database (www.congreso.es).⁷

Next, before the presentation of results, I provide a short description of the evolution of parliamentary scrutiny on EU affairs in the Spanish parliament. To explore the impact of the deepening of the integration process, I first compare the percentage of Europeanised questions introduced in plenary meetings with the percentage of Europeanised legislation over time and across the 21 CAP topics.⁸ Second, to know whether information asymmetries are fought in more specialised committees, I explore the EU content of all the oral questions introduced in parliamentary committees from 1986 to 2015 (a total of 23,548 questions). These include oral questions introduced in the European Affairs Committees (EACs) but also those raised in all other committees (on Agriculture, Health, Economy, etc.). The issue area of the committee was coded and classified using the 21 CAP topics, and the EU content of questions following the same criteria used for the codification of Europeanised plenary questions. Data on oral questions introduced in committees are available at www.q-dem.com (Q-Dem databases).

3. Increasing parliamentary scrutiny on EU affairs?

In Spain, attention to EU issues in domestic oversight sessions is low and has not increased over time parallel to the intensification of the Europeanisation process (see also Palau and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2012; Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015). For

⁷I collected information on all the appearances of the government in the plenary to inform about European Council meetings. In these appearances, first the President gives a speech, followed by the participation of parliamentary groups. For the period 1986 to 2015, 102 debates took place.

⁸Originally, the data on the Europeanisation of Spanish legislation were collected for the period 1986–2012 to contribute to a comparative paper on the Europeanisation of legislation in national parliaments (Brouard *et al.*, 2012). Now, it is available in the Q-Dem webpage for the period 1986–2015.

the period covered in this article, which includes, contrary to previous research, the post-crisis period, results show that as average 41% of legislation passed in the Spanish parliament is totally or partially decided in Brussels, but only 7% of the total oral questions introduced in plenary control sessions mention the EU. Even in policy areas highly Europeanised, the percentage of questions referring to the EU is very low. For example, in environment, 74% of legislation is Europeanised but only 8% of questions refer to the EU. The same occurs in commerce and banking, with 57% of legislation Europeanised and 5% of questions, or foreign trade (65% versus 12%). Even though the Europeanisation process intensifies following the outbreak of the economic crisis, reaching 75% of legislation with EU content, attention to EU affairs in parliamentary control sessions has not increased to unprecedented levels (Figure 1).

The low saliency of EU affairs in the plenary is not compensated by increasing attention to the topic in more specialised committees. The percentage of Europeanised questions introduced in committees is also very low, as Figure 1 illustrates. For the period 1986–2015, the percentage of oral questions introduced in the EAC represents

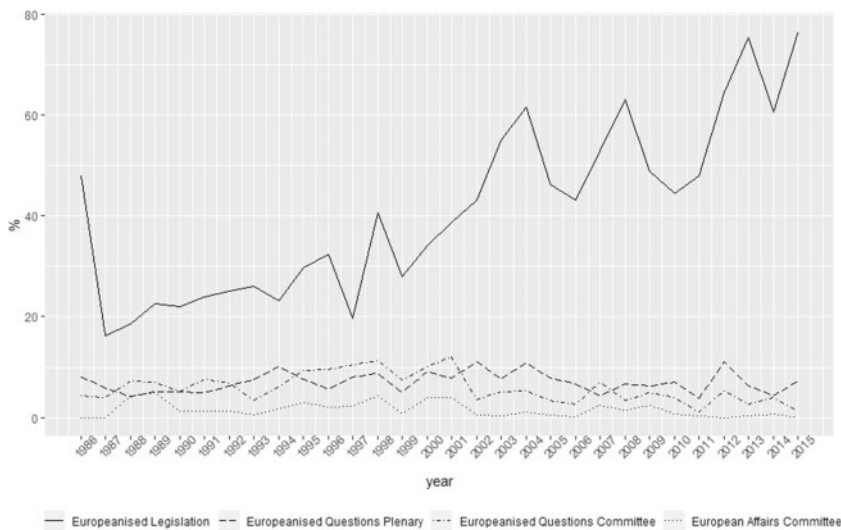


Figure 1. Europeanisation of the legislative and scrutiny function: Spanish Parliament (1986–2015).

Notes: Europeanised legislation: percentage of all legislation passed in the Spanish parliament that have EU content. Europeanised Questions Plenary: percentage of all oral questions introduced in plenary meetings that have European content. Europeanised Questions Committee: percentage of all oral questions introduced in parliamentary committees that have European content. EAC: percentage of the total oral questions introduced in committees that are introduced in the EAC.

Source: Own elaboration based on Q-Dem databases (www.q-dem.com).

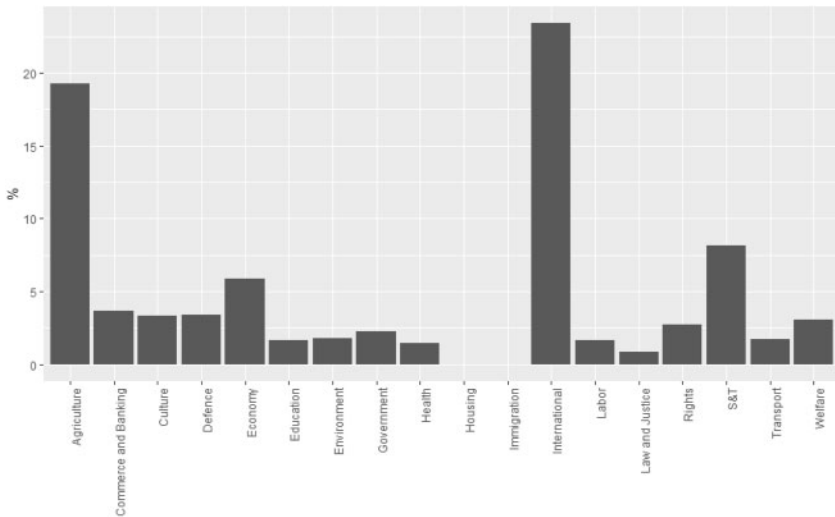


Figure 2. Percentage of EU-related oral questions introduced in parliamentary committees: Spanish Parliament (1986–2015).

Notes: The figure shows the percentage of EU-related question introduced in parliamentary committees coded according to the CAP topics. There are no committees on public lands (questions on this topic are included in environmental committees), foreign trade and energy (question included in commerce and banking committees).

Source: Own elaboration based on Q-Dem databases (www.q-dem.com)

only 2% of the total questions introduced in committees and, overall, only 6% of the total oral questions introduced in parliamentary committees have EU content. [Figure 2](#) shows the percentage of EU-related questions introduced in committees coded according to the CAP topics. Parliamentary committees on agriculture and international affairs are those more Europeanised with 19 and 23% of questions having EU content. Committees on science and technology and on economic issues show moderated Europeanisation levels (8 and 6%, respectively). In environmental committees, a highly Europeanised issue, only 2% of questions refer to the EU. Those where references to the EU are almost inexistent include health, housing, welfare, immigration and law and justice committees, with less than 1% of questions Europeanised.

Overall, attention to the EU in parliamentary control sessions shows variations over time and across issues that the formal delegation of competences towards the EU cannot fully explain. The low saliency of EU-related issues in the plenary is not compensated by attention to more specialised committees. Next, I explain whether the Europeanisation of questions in the plenary responds to issue saliency strategies, as defined by Hypothesis 1.

4. The role of issue saliency strategies

Between 1986 and 2015, government MPs introduce proportionally more EU-related questions in plenary meetings than opposition MPs do (between 8% and 12%).⁹ Among the opposition, regional parties are those introducing more questions having EU content, especially those from Catalonia and the Basque Country. If we look at the data aggregated by parliamentary group, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*) introduces 8.7% of EU-related questions, the Catalan nationalist party (*Convergència i Unió*) 9.1% and the PNV (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*) 8.9%. The regional Canarian Coalition introduces slightly fewer questions with EU content, a 5%. State-wide opposition parties introduce, as average, 5% (the far left, *Izquierda Unida* (IU), 5.2%, and the PP and the PSOE 5.2 and 5.1%, respectively, when they are in opposition).

Results corroborate that regional parties in Spain use the EU to give visibility to the interests of their regions (see also [Chaqués-Bonafont et al. 2015](#); [Palau, 2018](#)). This is illustrated by the high percentage of questions with EU content introduced by MPs of regional parties that mention the EU, and also regional interests, in the same parliamentary question: 64% of the total EU-related questions in the case of the Canary Island group (*Coalición Canaria*), 44% in the case of ERC, 30% CIU and 52% the PNV. This contrasts with the 2.3 and 2.5% of questions introduced by MPs of state-wide mainstream parties (the PP and the PSOE). Only the far left, IU, introduces questions mentioning regional interests when forms parliamentary group with the Catalan group, ERC, in the IX legislature. Regional parties, and especially Catalan and Basque parties, introduce EU questions on issues related to culture and language issues, for example, asking the government to facilitate the recognition of the Catalan or Basque language in EU institutions. Regional groups use also the national parliament in order to reduce information asymmetries regarding issues that are of interest to their territories, like benefits from EU funds (e.g. Common Agricultural Policy). These findings are consistent with the constituency focus of parliamentary questions found by previous research ([Martin, 2011](#); [Russo, 2011](#); [Navarro and Brouard, 2014](#)).

However, as argued in the theoretical framework, regional parties are not the only ones I expected use the EU to their advantage. To a lower extent but the MPs of state-wide opposition parties, and especially those from the left, use also the EU to give visibility to issues that are of interest to their voters. [Figure 3](#) shows the issue content of EU-related questions introduced by the PP, the PSOE and IU, the state-wide parties with parliamentary representation in all the legislatures

⁹Under the period of analysis, the PP was governing from 1996 to 2004 and from 2011 to 2015. The PSOE from 1986 to 1996 and from 2004 to 2011.

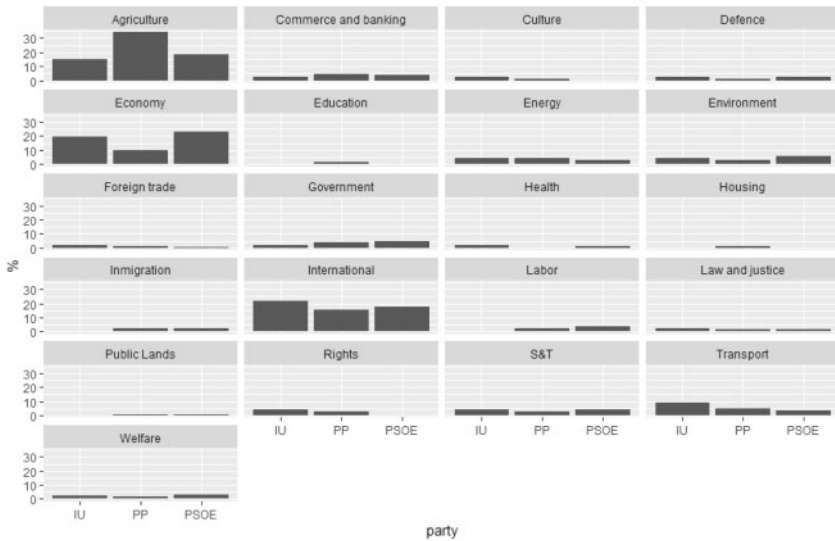


Figure 3. Issue content of EU-related questions introduced in plenary meetings: Spanish Parliament (1986–2015).

Note: The figure shows the percentage of EU-related questions introduced in plenary meetings by the MPs of state-wide parties on the CAP topics.

Source: Own elaboration based on Q-Dem databases (www.q-dem.com)

under analysis. For mainstream parties (the PSOE and PP), to remove the governing status effect, the figure includes only data for those legislatures in which they are in opposition. Results show, in line with the issue ownership literature, that the socialist party (PSOE) and the far left (IU) use the EU to pay proportionally more attention to issues related to welfare, environment or health, compared to the conservatives (PP). The PSOE and IU introduce 2.2 and 3.1% of EU-related questions on welfare issues and the PP only 1.5% (Figure 3). In the case of environment, 5.4% and 4.3% versus 2.6%. In the case of health 1.6 and 2.2% while the PP introduce no EU related questions on the topic. The PP asks proportionally more EU-related questions on issues related to agriculture (34.5% compared to 18.6% the PSOE and 15.2% IU), a topic hard to identify with a particular party according to the issue ownership literature.

As Figure 3 illustrates, the MPs of all parliamentary groups introduce more EU-related questions on the topics of agriculture and international relations. Attention to agriculture can be explained not because the electoral salience of the issue but for its economic impact. The European agricultural policy is the most subsidised EU policy, and a source of income with influence on the economic development of many regions in Spain. Because of the hard membership conditions imposed by the EU at the time of accession, the agriculture policy has been always a source of conflict between Spain and the EU. Attention to international affairs is explained

because this category includes EU events, from treaty ratifications to Council meetings that increase attention to EU issues. Finally, in line with the issue ownership literature, the conservatives pay proportionally more attention to banking and industrial policy (4.6% compared to 3.9% the PSOE and 2.2% IU). However, contrary to what could be expected, the PSOE and IU pay more attention to economic affairs than the PP (23.3% the PSOE and 19.6% IU). This is explained, as the next section illustrates, by dynamics related with the economic crisis. Party preferences matter but MPs also react to external events and variations in contextual factors.

5. Credit-claiming strategies and the impact of the euro crisis

In order to go beyond a descriptive analysis to explore the reasons why government and opposition MPs introduce Europeanised questions, the analysis relies on a logistic regression model that includes as dependent variable the oral questions introduced in plenary meetings, with a dummy variable with value 1 if questions have EU content (0 otherwise). According to the hypotheses, the model includes as explanatory variables the governing status of the parliamentary group MP, variations in the risk premium and the occurrence of EU events. In order to know to what extent government MPs pay attention to EU affairs when there are EU events, the model includes an interaction term between these two variables. To explore whether government MPs' incentives to introduce EU-related questions during EU events is mediated by variations in the economic situation and perceptions of benefits associated to European integration, the model includes an interaction with governing status and variations in the risk premium, and a triple interaction including also the occurrence of EU events. As defined in the methodology section, the model includes also a number of control variables resulting in the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Europeanised Questions} = & C + \beta_1 \text{GovStatus} + \beta_2 \text{RiskPremium} + \beta_3 \text{EUevent} \\ & + \beta_4 \text{AgendaCapacity} + \beta_5 \text{PivotalParty} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{Ideological Distance} + \beta_7 \text{PlenaryDebate} \\ & + \beta_8 \text{GovStatus} * \text{EUevent} + \beta_9 \text{GovStatus} \\ & * \text{RiskPremium} + \beta_{10} \text{EUevent} * \text{RiskPremium} \\ & + \beta_{11} \text{GovStatus} * \text{PlenaryDebate} + \beta_{12} \text{GovStatus} \\ & * \text{EUevent} * \text{RiskPremium} + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Results of the row model, without interactions, show that governing status is the most important variable in explaining why Spanish MPs introduce Europeanised questions in plenary control sessions (Table 1). The variable governing status is positive and statistically significant, corroborating that government parties introduce higher proportion of questions with EU content

Table 1 Regression results: explaining attention to EU affairs in oral questions introduced in plenary meetings

Independent variables	Dependent variable EU-related questions	
Governing status	0.474*** (0.074)	0.572*** (0.171)
Risk premium	-0.031* (0.017)	-0.038 (0.030)
EU events	-0.040 (0.077)	-0.314** (0.136)
Agenda capacity	-0.014 (0.008)	-0.021** (0.008)
Pivotal status	-0.082 (0.147)	-0.068 (0.148)
Ideological distance	0.007** (0.003)	0.006 (0.003)
Plenary debate	0.114 (0.081)	0.078 (0.102)
Governing status * EU events		0.323 (0.211)
Governing status * Risk premium		-0.113** (0.057)
EU events * Risk premium		0.103*** (0.039)
Governing status * Plenary debate		0.066 (0.167)
Governing status * EU events * Risk premium		-0.142* (0.079)
Constant	-2.653*** (0.111)	-2.525*** (0.134)
Observations	13,412	13,412
Log Likelihood	-3367.048	-3349.700
Akaike Inf. Crit.	6750.095	6725.400

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

compared to opposition parties. If interpreted as odds ratios,¹⁰ results indicate that the odds of introducing an oral question having EU content increases by a factor of 1.61 for government MPs (Figure 4a). Because attention to EU affairs on the part of government MPs could be strongly related to the exercise of political authority and the predominant role the executive plays in the EU decision-making process, the conceptual model signalled that their attention to EU affairs would increase during EU events. The interaction term shows a positive (although not statistically significant) association between the two variables: government MPs pay more attention to EU affairs when there are EU events. However, the theoretical framework states that their attention to the EU cannot be explained only by EU events but depends also on contextual factors. According to Hypotheses 2, government MPs use information asymmetries to their advantage following credit-claiming strategies that are more likely to be pursued when there are EU events and when the perceived benefits from integration are high.

The negative and statistically significant coefficient of the interaction term with the variables governing status and the risk premium corroborates that when the economic situation deteriorates government MPs pay less attention to EU

¹⁰The logistic regression coefficients in Table 1 give the change in the log odds of the outcome for a one-unit increase in the predictor variable.

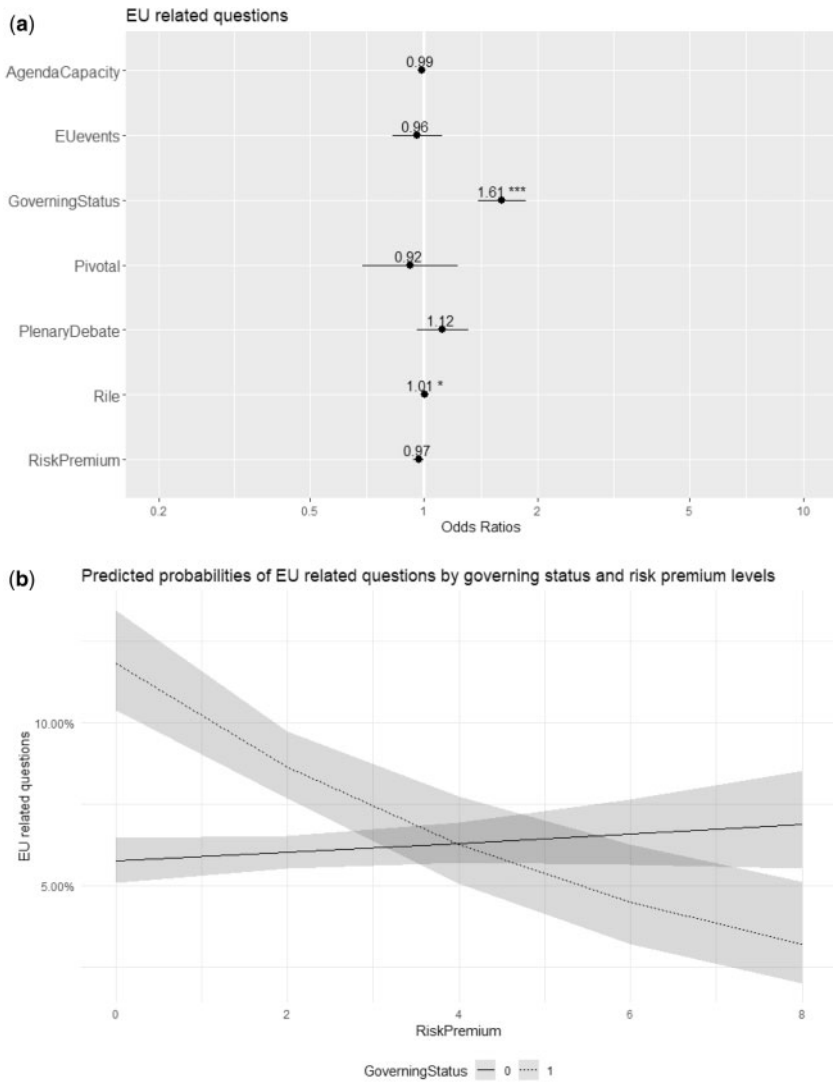


Figure 4. Regression results: row model odds ratios and predicted probabilities of EU-related questions by governing status and risk premium levels.

affairs. [Figure 4b](#) show that the predicted probability of introducing an EU-related question decreases for government MPs as the risk premium increases, holding the rest of the variables at their means. On the contrary, for opposition MPs it slightly increases. The negative, and statistically significant coefficient of the triple interaction, confirms that government MPs are especially likely to remove EU issues from the scrutiny agenda when there are EU events and the

economic situation is bad (Table 1). Overall, these results confirm Hypothesis 2. It is also worth mentioning that, according to the regression results, when there are plenary debates around European Council meetings there is not a trade-off in the way oral questions are used: neither government nor opposition MPs introduce fewer questions, but the opposite. Figure 4a shows that when there is a plenary debate, the odds of introducing a parliamentary question with EU content increases by a factor of 1.12. Both, the variable plenary debate and the interaction term with governing status are positive (and not statistically significant). This further corroborates that accountability mechanisms and information asymmetries alone cannot explain MPs attention to EU affairs.

The percentage of Europeanised questions introduced on economic affairs, commerce and banking by government MPs for the period 1986–2015 supports the idea that government parties behave strategically, paying attention to EU affairs to obtain electoral advantages and avoiding debate if this can compromise the executive in front of EU institution and or electoral results. The euro crisis was among the main concerns of Spanish public opinion and important decisions were taken at the EU level but government parties mainly avoided the debate in parliamentary control sessions because at that time EU policies and decisions could not be framed as a governmental success. On the contrary, in the mid-1990s when it became clear that Spain was going to fulfil the convergence criteria, MPs from the conservative government, the PP, increased attention to the topic. Almost 1% of the total parliamentary questions introduced by government MPs referred to EU economic and monetary affairs, when in previous legislatures never reached more than 0.2%. Once the EMU was realised, attention to economic affairs started to decline and interestingly, following the outbreak of the economic crisis, nor the socialists (in office between 2004 and 2011) neither the conservatives (governing from 2011) introduced a single question related to EU economic and monetary policies in the Spanish parliament. During the crisis, they increased attention to economic-related issues but never used an EU frame in their questions, even though EU institutions were behind the policy measures implemented that resulted in very unpopular policy decisions.

Opposition MPs, on the contrary, introduced more questions on EU economic and monetary affairs following the outbreak of the crisis, but they did so following different goals and strategies.¹¹ The far left, IU, whose preferences were more at odds with the policies implemented following EU recommendations, increased parliamentary scrutiny but only once the conservatives reached power in 2011 governing with absolute majority. Even though not being statistically significant, the control variable ‘pivotal status’ shows a negative

¹¹See also the discussion in [Chaqués-Bonafont et al. \(2015\)](#) for the period 1986–2011.

effect on attention to EU affairs. Because during the minority government of Zapatero, IU had the capacity to influence the parliamentary majority, it adopted a less conflictual mode of opposition during that legislature. On the contrary, once the conservatives reached power in 2011, IU is the party that paid more attention to EU-related economic and monetary affairs. 5.4% of the total questions introduced by IU during the first Rajoy legislature were devoted to this topic when in previous legislatures never reached beyond 3%. The Socialists (PSOE) introduced 3.3%, less than the far left, but significantly more than in previous legislatures when the percentage of questions introduced on EU economic and monetary affairs never reached beyond the 0.3% of total questions.

The crisis brought also unprecedented attention to EU economic and monetary affairs in the agenda of regional parties. CIU, which had never introduced a single question on this topic, not even during the minority government of Zapatero (when was also a pivotal party), introduced 3.3% in the first legislature of Rajoy. These questions were oriented to ask the government about budgetary stability goals defined by the central government to fulfil EU recommendations, which the Catalan government perceived involved unfair limits for regional authorities, and especially for Catalonia. The reasons why CIU moved towards secessionist positions go back to the outbreak of the economic crisis (Maiz *et al.*, 2010; Colomer, 2017). However, economic downturn reinforced the use of remedial and instrumental arguments on the part of separatist parties to make their case for independence. Among the arguments advocated by CIU and other secessionist parties were that independence would correct the ‘fiscal plundering’ of the state improving the well-being of the citizens (Dalle and Serrano, 2019, p. 11). Catalan regional parties used the EU following blame-shifting strategies, not to blame the EU but the central government.

Because of the Basques’ special fiscal status, the Basque country was not so seriously affected by the central government adjustment policies, so the PNV increased attention to EU economic and monetary affairs but to a lower extent, introducing only 1% of questions on the topic. The PP also increased the percentage of questions devoted to this topic when it was in opposition, during the Zapatero minority government (1.1%). These questions were not oriented to question EU policies and decisions but to embarrass the Zapatero government urging it to accomplish policy reforms in line with EU recommendations. This can be explained because some of these policies were in line with the conservative policy preferences and also because given its high probability to enter office in the next elections the conservative did not want to compromise in front of EU institutions (Palau *et al.*, 2015).

6. Conclusions

The goal of this article was to advance research on parliamentary attention to EU affairs. To this end, the Spanish case, as a quasi-federal system of government without radical eurosceptical positions in the party system, and among the southern countries more seriously hit by the euro crisis, provided an appropriate scenario for the analysis. What can we learn at the light of results? First, results corroborate that we are facing an opposition deficit in EU accountability as signalled by previous research (Mair, 2007, 2013; Karlsson and Persson, 2018; Rauh and De Wilde, 2018). This deficit can be observed in the low levels of scrutiny on EU affairs compared to the percentage of Europeanised legislation, and in the low attention opposition MPs pay to EU affairs compared to government MPs. On EU issues, the Spanish parliament hardly performs its functions as government watchdog (Rozenberg and Heffler, 2015). Secondly, results shed new light on government and opposition parties' motivations to pay attention to the EU, emphasising the importance of parliaments as scenarios where party competition occurs and not only as legislative and scrutiny institutions. In Europhile countries, attention to the EU cannot be explained only taking into consideration accountability mechanisms and the reduction of information asymmetries. Governing status drives attention to EU issues but the government does not use the parliamentary arena only motivated by reporting and accountability duties associated with the exercise of political authority and its role as representatives in front of EU institutions. Government MPs use information asymmetries to their advantage increasing attention to EU affairs in the context of EU events and when the perceived benefits from integration are high, using the EU to give visibility to positive policies and developments. These credit-claiming strategies are not likely under bad economic circumstances, when EU policies and decisions cannot be framed as a governmental success. Overall, governing status matters but its effect is conditional upon the occurrence of EU events and contextual factors.

Concerning opposition MPs' motivations to raise attention to the EU, results demonstrate that they are oriented to reduce information asymmetries but also use the EU to emphasise issue that are of interest to their voters. This is the case of regional parties that emphasise constituency interests (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2015; Palau, 2018) but also of opposition state-wide parties which, in line with the issue ownership ideas, refer to the EU following issue saliency strategies in the parliamentary arena. Contextual factors also influence their behaviour, as the raise in attention to EU affairs following the outbreak of the economic crisis, especially on the part of left and regional MPs, illustrates. Parliamentary questions, however, were more oriented to weaken the incumbent rather than to openly questioning EU policies and decisions. Overall, this article illustrates that

even in countries where European integration is a consensual topic, or only soft eurosceptical positions exist in the party system, the EU might play a role in domestic party competition. An obvious limitation of the analysis is its case study nature, which raises concerns regarding the generalisation of results. More research is required in order to test whether other cases support the findings for the Spanish case. The conceptual framework developed in this article can support avenues for future comparative research on the topic.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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