The development of a European political class in the EP: a longitudinal analysis of MEPs' career patterns (1979-2019)

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The development of a European political class in the EP: a longitudinal analysis of MEPs' career patterns (1979-2019)

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Abstract: The European Parliament (EP)'s formal authority has considerably expanded since 1979. As a result, several studies have – conceptually and empirically – posited the development of a European political class over time. Since Scarrow (1997)'s seminal distinction between 'EP careerists', 'domestic- oriented MEPs', and 'short-term politicians', there has been no comprehensive and longitunal analyses of MEPs' career patterns in the EP, though. This paper presents the first systematic empirical analysis of all 3,654 MEPs' career patterns from the 28 Member States over 40 years (1979-2019). Using Borchert's (2011) analytical framework, the paper analyses how the "attractiveness", "accessibility" and "availability" of offices in the EP has shaped MEPs' career patterns. The main conclusion is that the development of a European political class is a distinctive trend of the EP. Furthermore, despite the recent rise of Euroscepticism, the professionalization of MEPs has never been as large as in the latest legislative terms. Yet, EPGs do not contribute equally to the rise of this European political class. On the opposite, fragmentation of party systems in the late 2000s and early 2010s has questioned the (historical) contribution of some of the most influential EPGs. In this wake, the paper argues that these latest developments could undermine the EP's formal policy-making capacity in the near future, as illustrated by the 2019 European elections (largest turnover and biggest electoral success of Eurosceptic parties).

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Word count: 8028 words

****** Work in progress ***

Introduction

The incremental empowerment of the European Parliament (EP) over time – now on an equal footing with the Council of the European Union regarding the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) – is one of the most notable evolutions in the democratic functioning of the EU. Along with the institutional empowerment of the supranational institution, several studies have – conceptually and empirically – posited the development of a European political class over time. According to the literature, the emergence of this European political class is a necessary condition for the empowerment of the EP: its influence in the EU policy-making depends upon its formal powers but, furthermore, about the profiles and behavior of members that serve in the institution (Daniel and Metzger (2018). That is to say, MEPs with long-term European-oriented political careers and 'willing to exercise and extent powers granted to their assembly' (Scarrow, 1997: 253).

In this regard, Scarrow (1997) was one of the first to outline the emergence of 'European Careerist' MEPs in the 1990s. Recent studies confirmed Scarrow's initial findings: the EP now appeals to an increasing number of European careerists devoted to the institution and seeking to empower it (Beauvallet-Haddad *et al.,* 2016; Biro-Nagy, 2019; Daniel, 2015; Verzichelli & Edinger, 2005; Whitaker, 2014). While this first batch of studies made important contributions to unpack the various career paths of MEPs, it also relies on 'fragmented' empirical evidence. Studies are often limited to single country case studies, and/or limited to specific legislative terms, and/or restricting their analysis to MEPs' background instead of encompassing the pre- and post-position served by MEPs throughout their political career. In other words, since Scarrow's (1997) seminal contribution, there has been no systematic analysis of MEP's career patterns that permits to circumscribe the evolution of the European political class over time.

In this wake, the objective of the article is to analyse the emergence and stabilization of the European political class in the EP on two accounts. First, the paper provides a longitudinal analysis (i.e. 1979-2019) of the political career of 3,654 MEPs from the EU 28 Member States, covering both pre- and post-EP legislative and executive offices held at the national level and regional levels. The latter tier of government has gradually gained importance over the last decades (Jeffery & Schakel, 2012), especially in the largest EU Member states having federal and/or regionalized structures (according to Dodeigne et al. 2021, about 25% of MEPs from regionalized and federal states had a regional experience). While our longitudinal study confirms the establishment of a European political class at an early stage in the EP's development (i.e. the second legislative term in 1984), it also shows that this trend is not linear

over time, across countries and party groups. Second, relying on Borchert's (2011) three A's conceptual framework ('attractiveness', 'availability' and 'accessibility' of offices), the article discusses evolutions in MEPs' career patterns in response to the EP's changing institutional opportunity structure. Overall, we observed important changes in the EP's institutional opportunity structure since the early 2010s (i.e. increased party fragmentation and competition, dual mandates regulation) that started jeopardizing the core of the European political class and threatens to undermine it further in the upcoming elections.

The next section gives an overview of existing research on MEPs' career paths and identifies current gaps in our knowledge. Section 2 presents the dataset and the operationalization of career patterns. Subsequently, we provide an analysis of MEPs career paths over time for the EU28. The article ends with a discussion of the findings according to the evolving institutional opportunity structures of the EP and discuss the implications of our findings for the development of the European political class.

1. MEP's career patterns: refining existing categories

In her seminal study of 1997, Scarrow's originally distinguished three main career paths. The first one "*Political dead-end"* is composed of MEPs who served in the EP only for a short period of time and who did not extend their political career after their EP mandate (i.e., commonly labelled "EP retiree"). The second career path gathers so-called "*Stepping-stone"* MEPs aiming at 'winning or regaining' a national mandate after their time in the EP (i.e. MEPs with a domestic orientation) and finally, the third category is composed of "*European careerists*", defined as those with a 'long and primary commitment' to the EP (i.e. MEPs with a European orientation). In the last years, these three career paths were further discussed and refined, albeit using different labels in the literature.

First, the "*political dead-end*" category now distinguishes across two types of short-termers: "*EP retiree"and "One-off MEPs" and "discrete European career"*. For instance, van Geffen (2016) introduced a distinction between "*EP retirees"* and "*One-off*" MEPs (i.e. MEPs without any political experience before or after their European mandate and serving in the EP for a short period of time). On this matter, previous studies highlighted the existence of a relatively small – but stable – share of "EP Retiree" (Biro-Nagy, 2016; Whitaker, 2014). On the opposite, the literature outlined a progressive increase over time of "One-off" MEPs (Van Geffen, 2016).

Second, the "*stepping-stone*" career pattern is composed of MEPs displaying a **domestic orientation** and was also further considered in the literature, even though their share is overall

relatively small (see. Van Geffen, 2016; Biro-Nagy, 2019, Whitaker, 2014; Høyland et al., 2019). In this category, Real-Dato and Jerrez (2007) proposed to make a distinction between MEPs using the supranational assembly as a *"training"* ground (i.e., MEPs using the EP as a space of professionalization before conducting a longer career at the domestic level) and situations where the EP is considered as a *"bridge"* between two domestic positions (i.e., the EP is then used as a 'transition' between mandates at the domestic level), while other authors regroup these two categories into one career pattern (see. also Biro-Nagy, 20019; Scarrow, 1997). In addition, we also included a last career pattern labelled "domestic two-track" MEPs. Contrary to MEPs using the EP as a "short-term" training ground, they spent a relatively substantial time in the EP (i.e. at least 7,5 years) before ending their career at the domestic level.

Third, the category of "European careerists" has attracted most attention from the scholarship, as it provides one of the strongest pieces of evidence of the development of a European political class (i.e. MEPs with a **European orientation**). The literature tends to point out towards the stabilization of such European "long-termers" (Biro-Nagy, 2016; Verzichelli and Edinger, 2005; Van Geffen, 2016; Salvati, 2016; Whitaker, 2014). Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) introduced a distinction between "*Euro-politicians"* (i.e., MEPs without prior political experience serving in the EP during multiple mandates) and "*Euro-expert"* (i.e., politicians with a significant domestic career but subsequently conducting a career in the EP) to highlight the importance of taking former domestic political experience into account, notably, upon parliamentary behaviour. Yet, in this study, we suggest to use the label of "Euro two-track" MEPs rather than "Euro expert" to avoid confusion over the term 'expert'. Actually, having a previous domestic political experience does not mean that these MEPs are 'expert' of national– and least to say European – politics when they start their second career 'track' at the European level.

Finally, we also suggest including a last category of MEPs, composed of politicians displaying "**mixed career orientation**" (i.e., MEP's presenting both a domestic and a European orientation in their political trajectory). Indeed, in a multi-level political arena, such as the European Union, one needs to differentiate between MEPs who develop 'stable' careers and MEPs with more 'ambiguous' career orientation. In particular, this new category distinguishes between three type of career patterns. Almost entirely overlooked in the literature (but see. Navarro, 2013), the first type of pattern considers MEPs holding dual mandates at both European and domestic levels (be it with the regional or, until 2004, with the national levels). Even though this profile has been declining over time (from 20% to 10% per legislative term, see discussion), they are from being marginal. Furthermore, accumulating a domestic mandate

while serving in the EP could affect the parliamentary behaviour of those MEPs (e.g. deviating more systematically from EPGs' voting lines, when a piece of legislation affects domestic interests). The second type of career patterns in this category includes "discrete two track" MEPs. This career pattern consists of "ephemeral career" (Real-Dato and Jerez-Mir, 2007) at both the EU and domestic levels (national and/or regional), without clear orientation towards one or another. Finally, we created a last career path labelled 'integrated career'. These MEPs depict complex sequences of career (e.g., European-national-European-national-regional) with time served in office that does not permit to establish a clear orientation towards one level or the other. Figure 1 summarises the main MEPs career paths identified in the literature organized along the career orientation of MEPs.

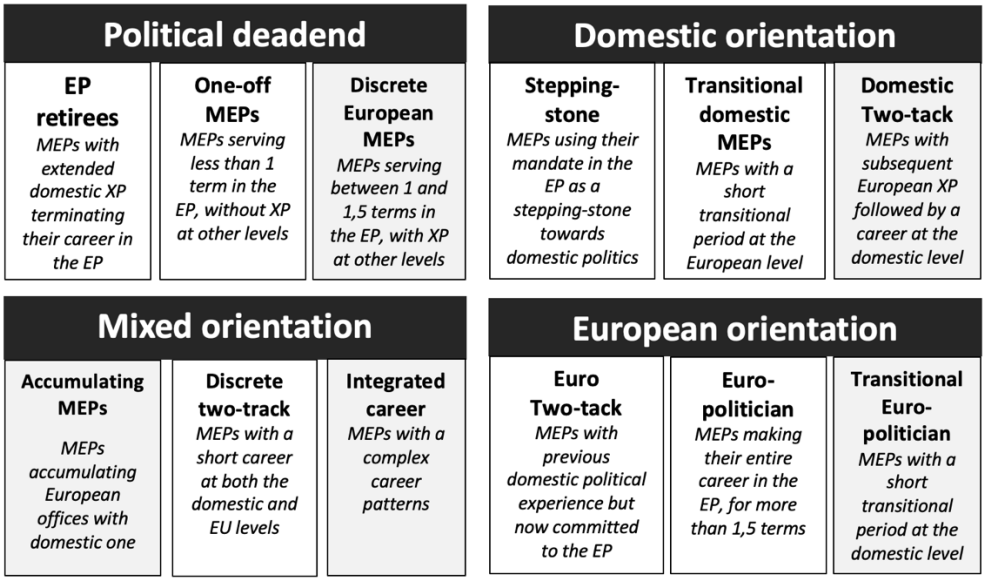


Figure 1: Categorization of MEPs' career patterns.
Categories highlighted in grey are new categories introduced in this paper.

Despite the rich and important contributions made by scholars working on MEPs career path, empirical evidence used to validate Scarrow's assumption remains fragmented. In particular, previous studies present limitations on four empirical accounts. First, studies adopting a longitudinal perspective and covering all first 8 legislative terms are rare and most often, these studies are country-specific (e.g., Beauvallet and Michon, 2016 on French MEPs; Real-Dato, Jerez-Mir, 2007; Real-Dato & Alarcón-González 2012 on Spanish MEPs; Kakepaki, Karayiannis, 2021 on Greek MEPs; or Bale and Taggart, 2006; Bíró-Nagy 2016, 2019 on central and/or eastern countries). Second, there is also a lack of a comprehensive study including all 28 Member States (but see Beauvallet-Haddad et al., 2016) and while it is done, the empirical analysis is often limited to a few legislative terms (e.g., Bale & Taggart, 2006; Beauvallet & Michon, 2016; Scarrow, 1997; van Geffen 2016; Salvati, 2016). Third, the coding

of both pre- and post- EP offices is not always included in this scholarship (see literature review on that account from van Geffen 2016). Finally, going beyond methodological nationalism, the inclusion of subnational offices – as a political arena in its own right – is almost systematically missing in the scholarship (see. remarks from Whitaker 2014, Høyland et al. 2019 on this regard).

2. Data and operationalization of career patterns

Our empirical analysis is based on an original dataset of EU-28 3,654 MEPs having served – once or multiple times – in the EP over the first eight legislative terms (1979-2019). First, the dataset builds upon existing biographical information on MEPs experience in the EP, gender, age and EPG (Hix and Høyland, 2011). Second, the dataset was completed with legislative and executive political offices held by MEPs before and after their time in the EP. For the latter, sources combined former studies (Dodeigne, 2018; Dodeigne forthcoming) as well as manual coding of political offices based on information published by official institutions or via biographies available online. In practice, for each individual career, we collected empirical data regarding the duration (in months) of their parliamentarian and governmental career at the domestic and European levels before, during (dual mandates) and after their EP mandates.

Because a significant number of Member states sending delegations of MEPs to the EP are federations or regionalized states in which regional tiers present a high degree of authority (see. Regional Authority Index; Hooghe et al., 2010), the dataset also includes systematic information related to subnational political offices for 7 out of the EU-28 Member States (i.e., Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK). Empirically, about a quarter of MEPs originating from federal or regionalized Member States (i.e., Austria, Belgium, Germany; UK, Spain, Italy; France) have served in regional politics (see. Dodeigne et al. 2021).

For the sake of parsimony, and in order to identify the development of a European political class in the EP, our operationalization of MEP's career patterns distinguishes between four broad types of career orientation: (1) "political dead-end", (2) "domestic-oriented" MEPs, (3) "European-oriented" MEPs and (4) MEPs with an "mixed orientation". In the "political dead-end" category, "EP retirees" are operationalized as MEPs with substantial previous domestic political experience (be it regional or national) and serving in the EP for no more than 1,5 legislative terms before ending their political career. "One-off MEPs" covers MEPs with no previous political experience that remain less than 1 full term in the EP before ending their political career. Finally, "discrete European" MEPs are politicians with no previous political experience remaining in the EP between 1 and 1,5 terms before ending their political career.

Regarding “domestic-oriented” MEPs, MEPs without previous political experience who started their career for less than 1,5 terms in the EP followed by a career at the domestic level of at least 1,5 terms were categorized as stepping-stone MEPs. “Domestic-two’ track MEPs are composed of parliamentarians having spent a substantial amount of time in the EP – between 1,5 and 2 legislative terms – and ending their political career at the domestic level. Finally, "Transitional domestic MEPs” are MEPs serving in the EP for less than 1,5 terms and using the supranational institution as a transition between two domestic mandates.

The third category, “European-oriented” MEPs, is operationalized the following way: “Euro-politicians” consists of MEPs with at least 1,5 terms in the EP but without any previous political experience (be it regional or national) before or after their EP mandates (i.e., MEPs spending their entire career in the EP). “Euro two-track” are MEPs serving at least 1,5 terms in the EP after their domestic career (regional or national) before ending their career. Albeit an unlikely scenario, “transitional European MEPs” are politicians serving at the domestic level for less than 1 term and using domestic elective mandates as a bridge between two European mandates.

Finally, the category of MEPs with “mixed orientation” gathers politicians for whom there is no clear career orientation emerging. More precisely, “discrete two-track” MEPs gathers politicians with a short political career at both the EU (i.e. average of 43 months) and domestic (average of 50 months) levels. “Integrated career” MEPs is operationalized as politicians having complex career patterns and sequences between the regional, national and EU levels. The last category includes “accumulating MEPs” and is composed of MEPs who held dual mandates during their service in the EP. While our dataset covers the first eight first legislative terms, we made sure that our categories remain valid when analyzing the ninth legislative term for those MEPs (i.e. for the censored data).

3. MEPs career patterns: towards the emergence and stabilization of a European political class?

The first objective of this article is to measure the emergence and stabilization of a European political class since 1979. To do so, we provide the comprehensive analysis of the evolution of career paths of all MEPs from the EU-28 (i.e. 1979-2019) since Scarrow’s first publication more than two decades ago. Originally, she identified that 28 percent of British, French, German and Italian MEPs during the 1979-1989 period had European-oriented careers, a proportion perfectly similar to MEPs with political dead-end career in the EP. Besides, only 16% of the MEPs she classified presented a career with domestic orientation.

3.1 The emergence of a European political class

Overall, the empirical analysis confirms Scarrow's initial finding, even when extending the empirical analysis over the most recent legislative terms (1979-2019) and across all 28 member states. In particular, figure 2 shows that "European-oriented" MEPs emerged and stabilized in the third legislative terms (1989-1994), in proportion extremely similar to MEPs with "political dead-end" career. These two career patterns oscillate from 25% each in the early EP's legislative terms about 33% each in the most recent terms and are the two dominant career orientations in the EP. In parallel, we observe a structural decline – albeit very slight – in the proportion of MEPs with "domestic" and "mixed" career orientations. While the latter two career patterns were still covering 28 % of MEPs serving in the EP in the early 1990s, they dropped to 15 % in the 2014-2019 legislative term. Finally, MEPs whose career path cannot be classified (i.e. censored data) has been relatively constant over time (between 17.4 and 27 %, with the evident exception of the first term).

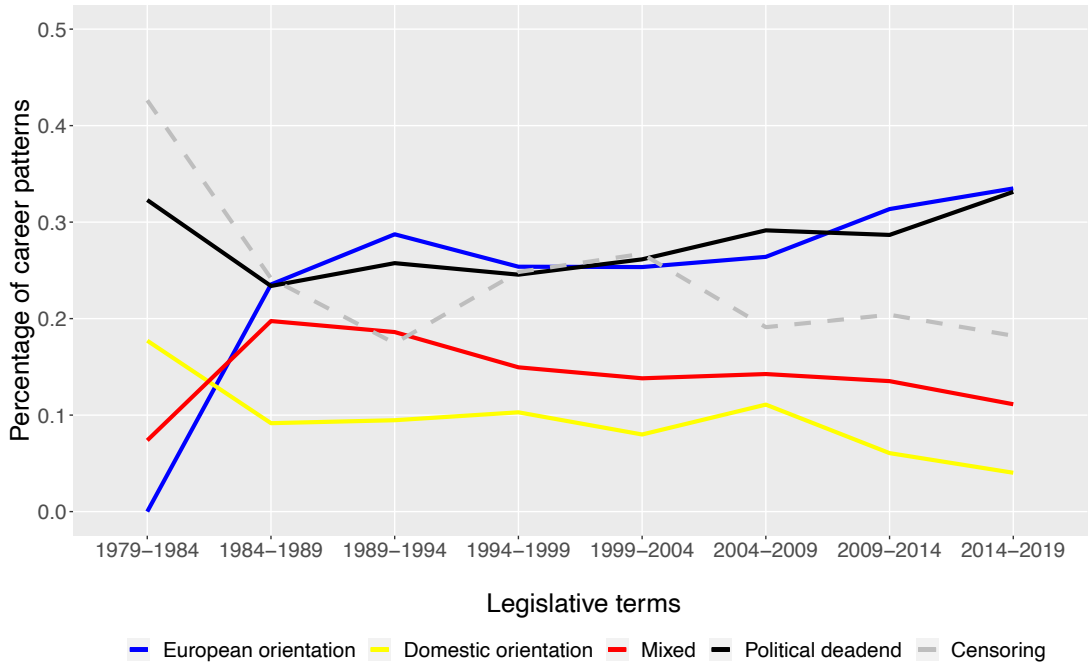


Figure 2: Evolution of career orientation in the European Parliament (1979-2019)

In comparison to other multilevel democracies (Stolz 2011; Dodeigne 2018), our findings outline that the EP can be considered as an "integrated electoral arenas" – like Belgium or Spain for instance – as it displays relatively strong interactions between European and domestic electoral arenas. Indeed, amongst all 3.654 MEPs who served in the EP, 28,6% percent have either former experience in domestic politics before the EP mandate ("Euro two-track", n=310),

during their EP mandate (accumulating with other domestic office, n=298), or after their EP mandate ("domestic pattern" =440). In other words, the EP does not show evidence of a clear hierarchical structure between tiers of government, such as the U.S. where ambitious politicians move from state legislatures upwards towards the Congress (Schlesinger 1966); or downwards towards the substate level such as in Brazil (Samuels 2003). The EP also clearly diverges from other multilevel democracies such as Canada and the UK where such level-hopping is extremely rare considering the hermetic "alternative electoral arenas", where MPs conducted their political career separately in the regional or national levels (Dodeigne 2018).

3.2 Towards a more professionalised European political class

Our findings also shows that the legislative professionalization of European-oriented MEPs has substantially extended (figures 3a and figures 3b). While the average time of service of European-oriented MEPs was respectively of 104 months in the 2nd legislative term, they have – almost constantly – developed more professionalized EU career over time, reaching up to 170 months of service on average in the 7th legislative term (i.e. almost three full legislative terms, totalizing 14 years of service on average). By comparative standards of time of service in national legislatures, these European-oriented MEPs are amongst the most professionalized parliamentarians across the world (Matland and Studlar, 2004; Whitaker 2004; Dodeigne 2018). These results confirm, therefore, Scarrow's anticipation about "the development of European careerists […] is likely to be self-reinforcing, because the greater the role that the Parliament claims, the more likely it is to attract those with European interest" (Scarrow, 1997:261).

In addition, the gap in parliamentary experience has widened over time when compared to the second dominant career orientation in the EP. Indeed, the parliamentary experience of "political dead-end" MEPs has – self-evidently[5] – remain constant (i.e. hardly one legislative term of service, see figure 3a). This means that these MEPs are now seating along European-oriented MEPs who have been largely more experienced in comparison to any of counterparts, providing them with more strategic and influential resources in the EP (Van Geffen, 2016; Whitaker 2014).

[5] Of course, the 'potential' of increase in experience is also limited by the operationalization of this career pattern (between 1 and 2 legislatives).

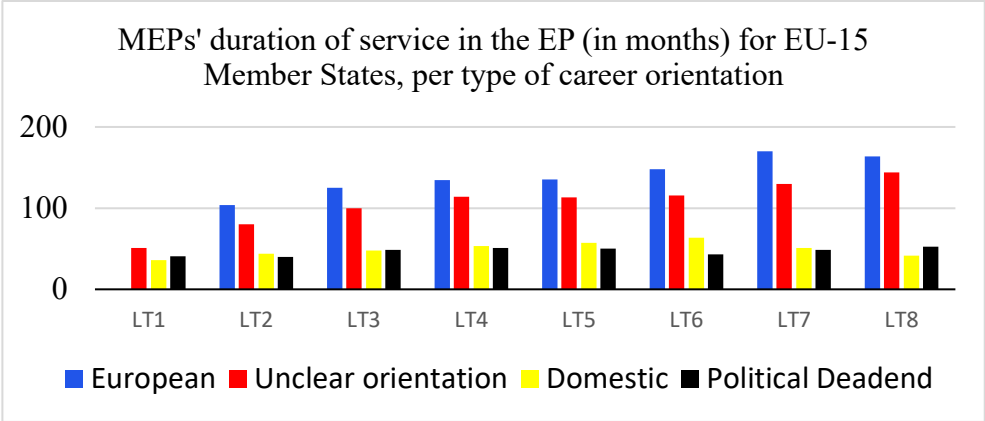


Figure 3a: Career duration of MEPs over time (1979-2019 – EU 15)

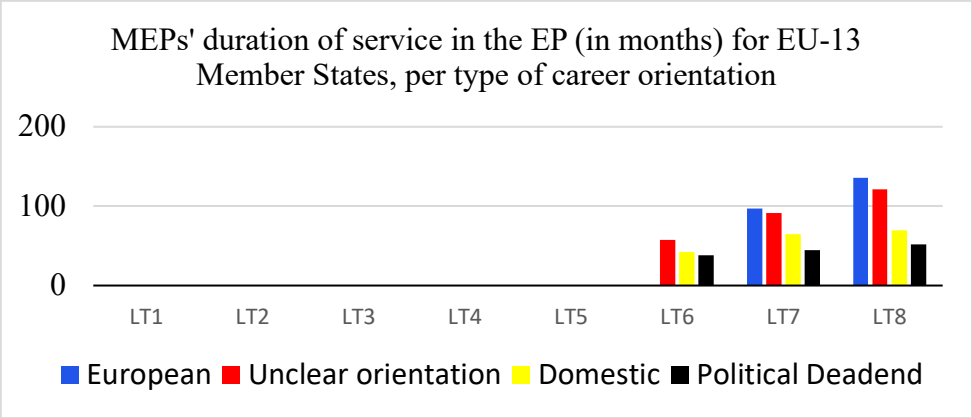


Figure 3b: Career duration of MEPs over time (1979-2019 – EU 13)

3.3 Cross-country and EPGs variation of the European political class

The development of the European political class is far from being uniform and must be carefully put into perspective *vis-à-vis* the large variance observed across Member States and EPGs. Indeed, the results outline that some Member states and EPGs in particular are the main driving forces behind the development of the European Political class. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the distribution of career orientation respectively by Member States and EPGs.

First, we observe that some countries are large 'contributors' to the European career pattern. While the average percentage of European-oriented MEPs is 24.5% per country, the Netherlands, the UK, Germany and Austria are significantly above with more than 40% of European careerist (i.e. respectively, 48, 48, 46 and 44%). On the opposite, Greece and 8 of the 13 East and European Members States have fewer than 22.5% with such profile. We should also note that two of the largest founding countries (Italy and France) are also below the average with hardly 18 percent of their MEPs displaying a European career pattern. As a mirror effect, countries with the highest percentage of European-oriented MEPs often have the lowest proportions of domestic-oriented career, and *vice-and-versa* for the those with the lowest

highest percentage of European-oriented MEPs. We also observe that some countries such as Ireland and Finland stand out in the mixed-orientation career pattern: they were often the most flexible in terms of regulation for accumulating domestic and European office (before the 2004 regulation). Finally, the geographical cleavage seems the strongest for the political dead-end orientation, with all EU-13 countries having the highest share (but Latvia and Estonia).

Second, there is also major variation across EPGs: not surprisingly, the two largest groups are the one where European-oriented careers are the strongest while the political dead-end pattern are the lowest. The EPP and the Socialists respectively contribute to 31 and 30% of European-oriented careers, while the mean across EPGs is substantially lower with 22 percent. Likewise, the EPP presents the lowest (41%) and the Socialists the third lowest (45%) proportion of MEPs with "political dead-end" career amongst their ranks, while the average is 46 percent. In contrast with the EPP and the Socialists, the Eurosceptics and the non-technical groups present an almost perfectly inversed picture: they are overrepresented in political dead-end MEPs (respectively 68 and 60%) and underrepresented in the European-oriented career patterns (respectively 14 and 15 percent). The other groups (Liberals, Greens/EFA, Conservatives, and radical left) tend to have in between situation where deviation from the average percentage is milder and not systematic across career patterns.

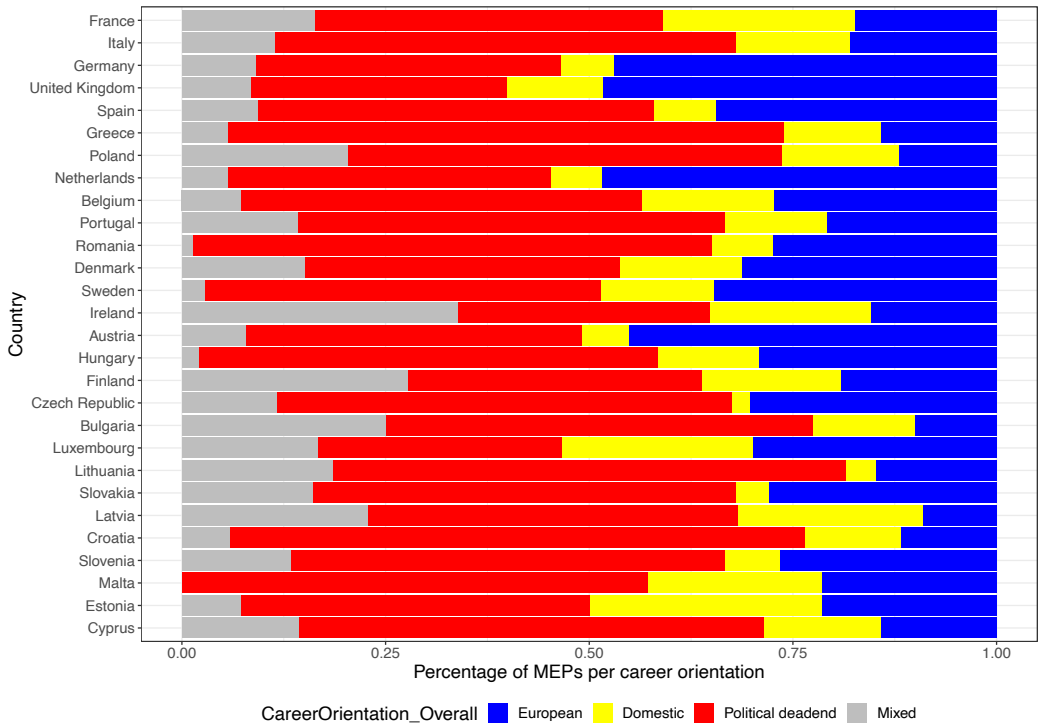


Figure 4a: Distribution of career orientation, by Member states (1979-2019)

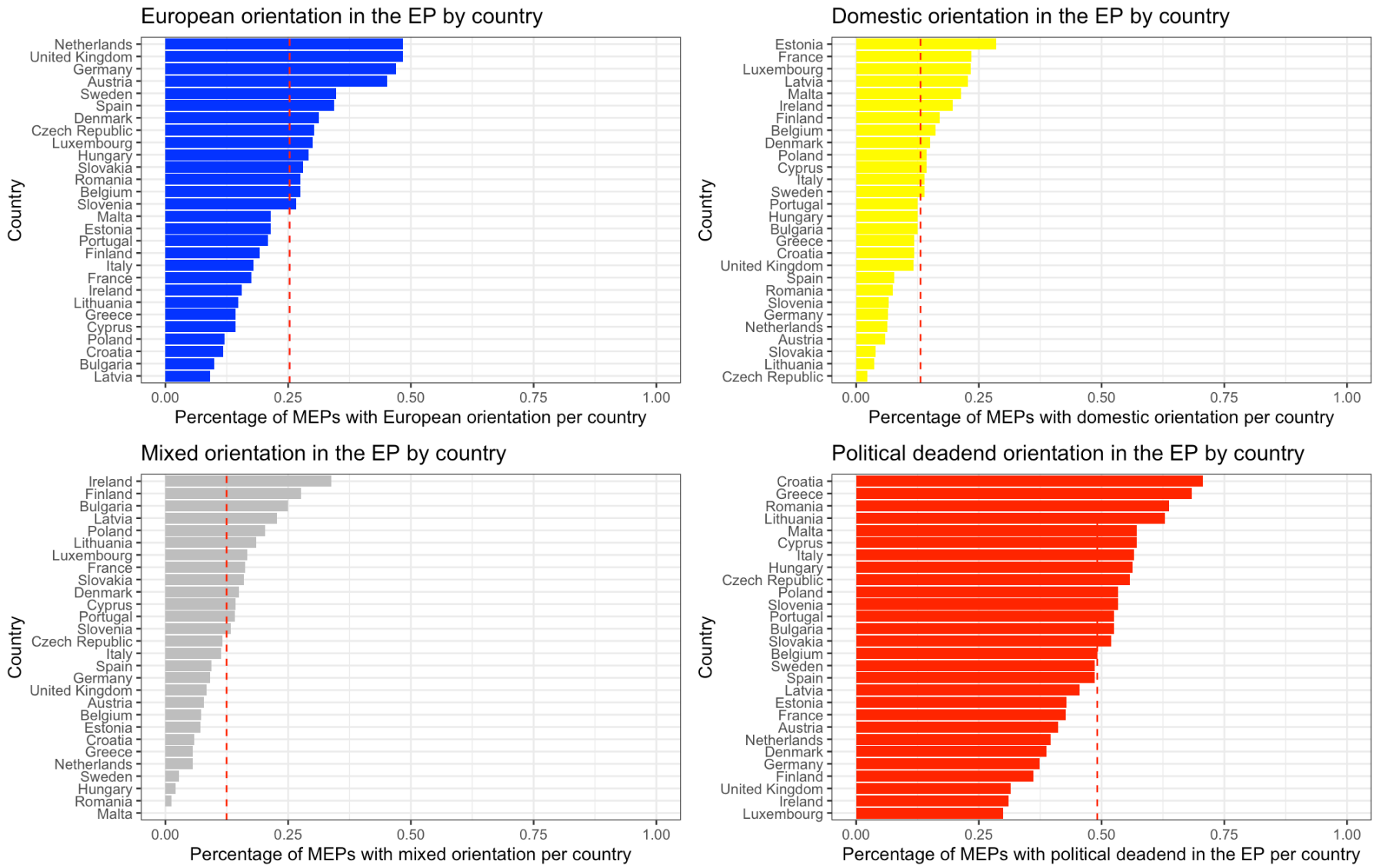


Figure 4b: Distribution of career orientation, by Member states (1979-2019)

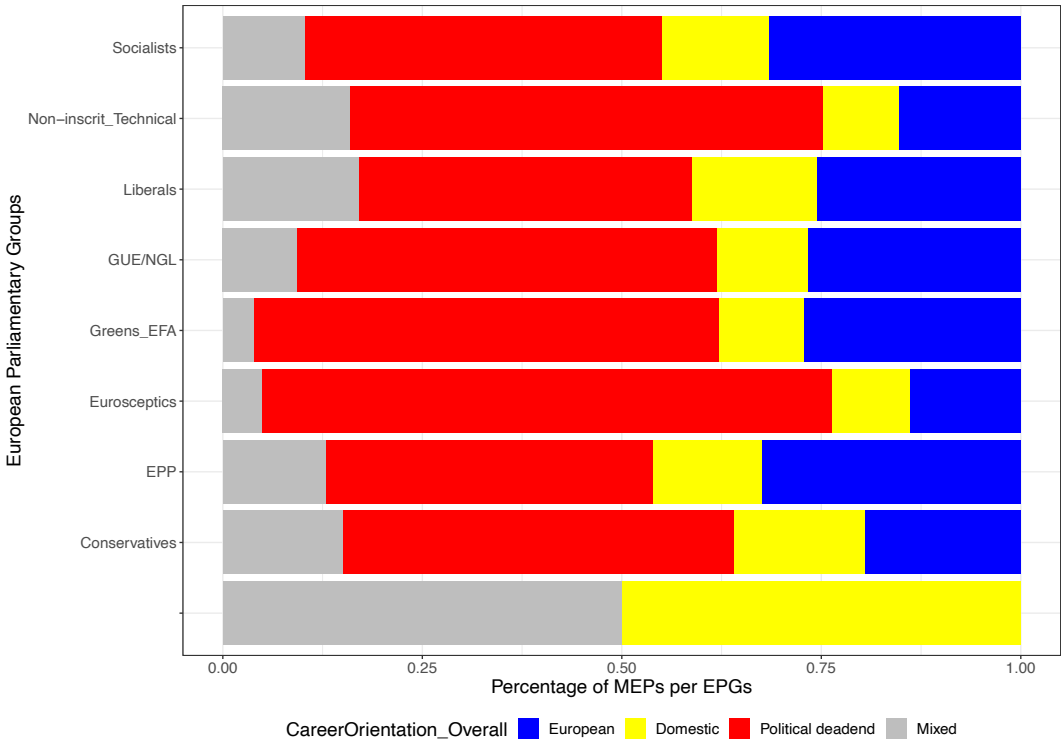


Figure 5a: Distribution of career orientation, by EPGs (1979-2019)

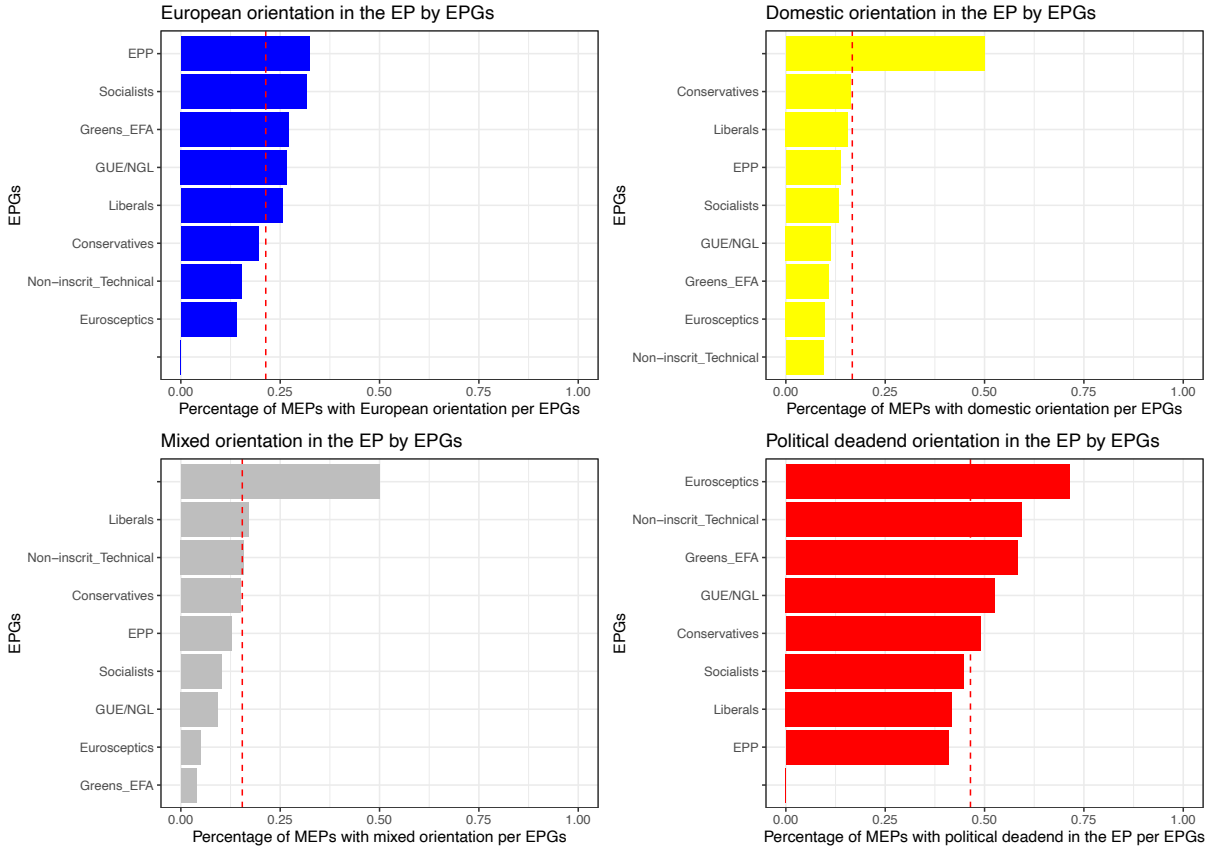


Figure 5b: Distribution of career orientation, by EPGs (1979-2019)

4. Understanding the evolution of MEP's career paths: attractiveness, availability and accessibility of the European offices

The section 3 showed that the development of MEPs' career patterns present distinct features, as well systematic variance across certain Member states and EPGs. Using Borchert's (2011) three A's framework (i.e. attractiveness, availability and accessibility) as an heuristic device, we now discuss the main evolutions of MEPs' career patterns as a response to the changes of the political and institutional opportunity structure of the EP over time.

4.1 The rising attractiveness of the EP and the rise of European politicians

Attractiveness is understood as the interest that a certain political arena triggers amongst the potential aspirants to office (Borchert, 2001). In this regard, the incremental empowerment of the EP in terms of its legislative, budgetary, and scrutiny functions is an important evolution in the democratic functioning of the EU. The question of the empowerment of the EP has been extensively discussed by European scholars (e.g. Meissner, Schoeller, 2019; Hix and Høyland , 2013; Rittberger, Schimmelfennig, 2006; Rittberger, 2012). Since 1952, the EP's legislative decisioning role evolved from consultation to codecision, while its policy scope – including regarding budget – has been extended through the multiple treaties (Schackleton, 2017; Mény, 2009; de Gardebosc, Mesdag, 2019). The same type of observation can also be made regarding the increasingly important role of the EP in the investiture of the Commission (Rittberg, 2012) and, more recently, regarding the election of the president of the Commission with the *Spitzenkandidaten* system (Christiansen, 2016; Gattermann et al., 2016; Hobolt, 2014).

The EP has therefore progressively become an attractive political arena in its own right, thanks to a complete institutional repertoire to either control the Commission, influence legislative outputs and fulfil (individual) MEPs' ambitions with the possibility to gain mega-seats and key (influential) positions (i.e. rapporteurs, (vice)chair of EPGs and Committees).The potential effects of the formal empowerment of the EP upon MEPs career patterns have been outlined by several scholars (Beauvallet-Haddad *et al.,* 2016; Biro-Nagy, 2019). Their main observation is that the stronger the EP, the more attractive the supranational should be. Our results point out towards three main conclusions regarding the rising EP's attractiveness.

First, our results do not conclude to a structural increase of European-oriented MEPs over time, nor to a notorious expansion of such profile in the EP after the adoption of treaties that have significantly empowered the supranational parliament (e.g. after the 1992 Maastricht treaty). The only notorious exception is the post-Lisbon period which has coincided with a significant increase of European-oriented MEPs (from about a quarter before 2009, to about a

third of MEPs afterwards). Yet, this increase has also to be put into perspective with the changes occurring in terms of availability of seats (see below). On this matter, the increasing attractiveness was less about the constant rising of European-oriented MEPs, than the structural decline of MEPs with domestic-oriented career (from 30 to 10% over the eight legislative terms), as well as the mixed orientation (from 25 to 15%). In other words, even when the percentage of MEPs was on a plateau of about 25% from 1984 to 2009, the core of this European political class has increasingly professionalized with a legislative experience growing constantly (see figures 3a and 3b). All in all, we can conclude that the growing attractiveness of the EP has been contributing to the development of a European political class.

Second, we have observed that the development of such European-oriented MEP greatly varies across EPGs. The two largest EPGs (EPP and socialists) are overrepresented in this category, while the Technical and Eurosceptics groups are overrepresented in both the political dead-end and domestic ambition patterns. The Liberals, the Greens and the Radical left occupy a sort of intermediary position. In this wake, we can conclude that the attractiveness of the EP has affected MEPs' career orientation differently, depending on their political affiliation across EPGs. The explanation behind this trend is simple: some EPGs have more resources and are more influential in the EP (i.e. the Socialists and the EPP holding an absolute majority until the 2014 elections inclusive); while the other political groups are only pivotal actors (e.g. the Liberals and the Greens, and arguably the Conservatives in most recent terms), if not marginalized and excluded from most of the EPs' decision-making processes (i.e. The radical left, the Eurosceptics, and the technical). In this respect, our comprehensive empirical analysis confirms the main conclusions from previous scholarship that observed that incumbents and/or domestically experienced MEPs are more likely to (re)enter the EP (Pemstein et al. 2015; Aldrich 2018), or serving longer (Bíró-Nagy 2016; Beauvallet-Haddad et al. 2016) when belonging to vote or policy-seeking European political groups.

Third, even though the development of an EU parliamentary class is observable across all EU-28 Member States, there exist important differences between 'older' EU-15 and 'newer' EU-13 Member States. Indeed, delegations of MEPs from the 'newer' EU-13 Member States have contributed to a limited extent to the development of a European political class, while overcontributing to the political dead-end career patterns.

4.2 Availability of seats in the EP: a new opportunity for politicians?

Availability of seats in the EP is understood as the number of seats available for which a candidate can compete (Borchert, 2011). In this regard, the first direct election of the EP in 1979 was not only an important step regarding the development of a direct channel of participation for citizens and in how MEPs are representing citizens (Dreischer, 2015), it was also a major change for politicians in terms of career mobility. Apart from the German federation, multi-level governance was, in the early days of the EP, a novel territory for most EU Member States (Schmitt & Toygür 2016). Joining the EU meant new political offices for which politicians can compete as well as new opportunities in terms of career mobility. In this respect, following the successive EU enlargements and Treaty reforms, the size of national delegations sent to Brussels and Strasbourg were modified on several occasions. For almost all Member States, this meant a progressive decrease in the number of seats available except for Germany and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands that are today better off than in 1979 (i.e., Germany: from 81 seats to 96 in 2014; The Netherlands: from 25 seats to 26) (Salm, 2019). Overall, the number of seats in the EP remains relatively limited though, especially when compared to political mandates available at the national and/or regional levels (Slavati, 2016). Therefore, we can only conclude to a marginal impact of seats redistribution on career orientation.

The most important institutional evolution rather concerns the practice of dual mandates between the EU and the national level, a practice which was common in the early days of the EP (Beauvallet-Haddad, 2016; Navarro, 2013; Verzichelli and Edinger, 2005). In 2002, a Council decision has forbidden the accumulation of domestic office while serving in the EP from the 2004 European elections and onwards, except for the opting-out provisions (i.e., until 2007 for Ireland and 2009 for the United Kingdom)[8]. As such, the sixth legislative term was a decisive evolution in the institutional opportunity structure: MEPs who used to accumulate offices had to make a career choice between the national and the European political arenas. On this matter, we observe that most of the MEPs seem to have opted for a European career, as the percentage of MEPs with mixed orientation has been declining (about 10% in LT8) while European careerists has been growing. This was furthermore reinforced by the increased attractiveness of the EP – especially post Lisbon. Nonetheless, this electoral reform did not

[8] As a reminder, we observed that Irish MEPs have twice as much as of the mixed pattern compared to the average MEPs in all EU-28 Member states.

entail the disappearance of all types of dual mandates, as the legal frameworks regarding dual mandates between local and/or regional political offices with an EP mandate remain national.

4.3 The accessibility of seats in the EP: facing an increased competition and fragmentation

Accessibility describes the relative ease with which a certain position can be obtained (Borchert, 2011: 122). On this matter, specific electoral rules related to seat availability and, more critically, the evolution and transformation of party systems have strongly impacted the structure of opportunity of the EP. We identified two important evolutions that impact the accessibility of seats in the EP: an increase in party fragmentation at the domestic level and within the EP and the progressive increase of Eurosceptic political groups.

First, party fragmentation is unmistakably one of the most notorious evolutions in European and domestic politics over the last decade – albeit with important cross-country variations (Casal Bértoa, 2021). While a total of 57 national political parties were represented in the EP in 1979, this number evolved to 168 in 2004 and reached the record of 212 national political parties in 2019 (European Parliament, 2019). Overall, the number of national political parties represented in the EP has increased faster than the number of Member States, with an increase of the number of national delegations within EPGs. Consequently, the electoral competition and, therefore, accessibility of seats in the EP, is now more challenging than it previously was and in particular for 'historical' contributors of European-oriented MEPs.

On the one hand, it became harder for long-term MEPs serving in the EP (European-oriented pattern) to remain in office in a highly fragmented system: their own seats were contested because of the electoral decline of (established) parties that used to dominate domestic and European elections (i.e. traditional national party families such as the Socialists and Christian-democrats). Figure 7 is particularly illustrative in this regard as it shows an indicate that together, the EPP and the S&D lost about 20% of their seats since the 1999 elections and that this can be associated with the increased party fragmentation (Bolin et al., 2019). On the other hand, because of the high volatility of electoral results in a context of party systems under transformation, a new cohort of MEPs with "political dead-end career" has rapidly grown (from about one-quarter before the 2010s to one-third in the 8th legislative term).

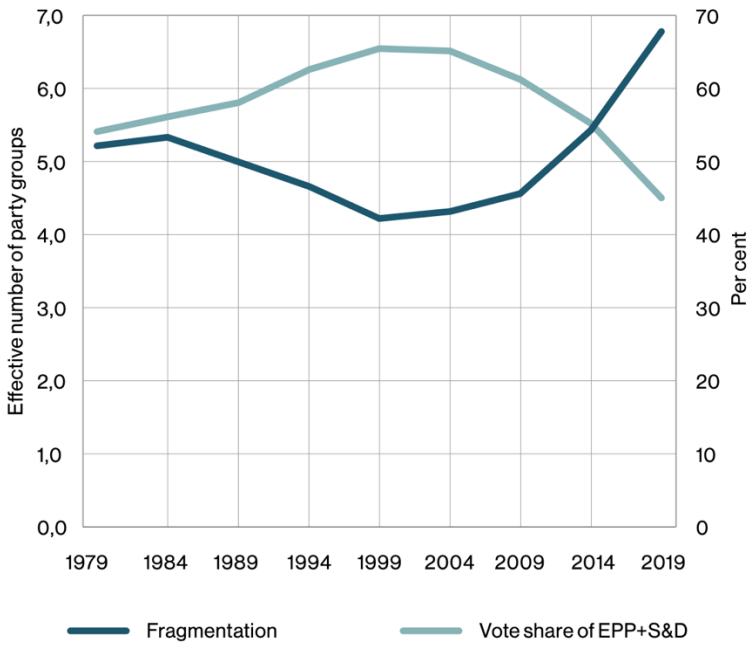
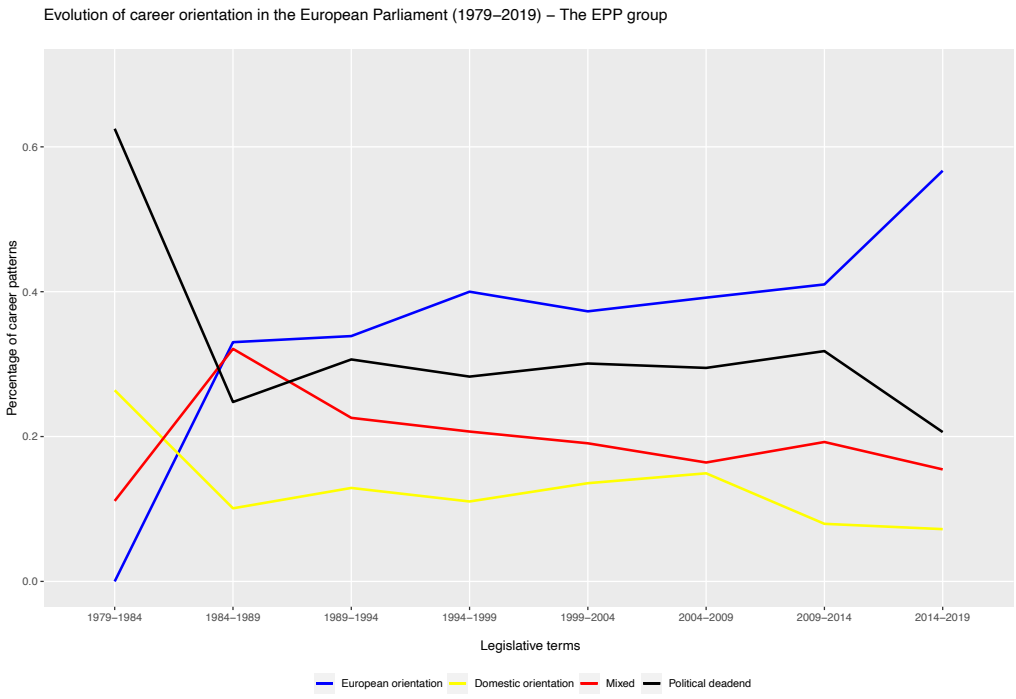


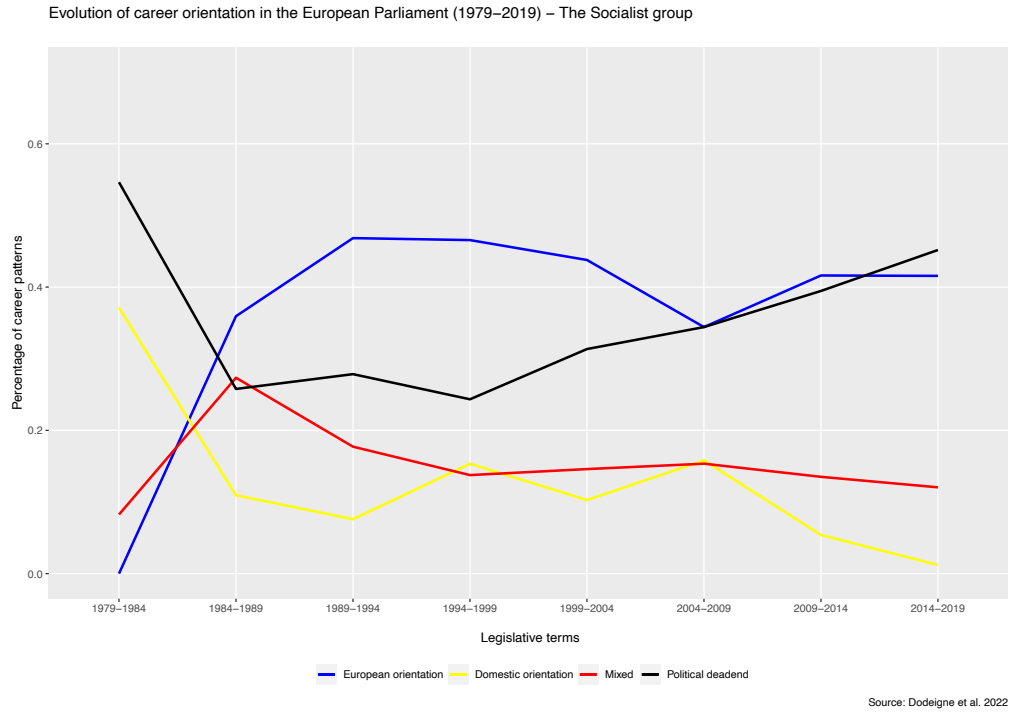
Figure 7. Party system fragmentation and vote share of EPP and Socialists
Source: Bolin et al. (2019)

Overall, it is the development of European political elites that is being put at stake. As illustrated in figure 8b, the most striking evolution is the transformation of MEPs career patterns amongst the Socialists group. While the group had amongst the highest share of European-oriented career from the 1980s until the 1990s, electoral turmoil has started to erode this career orientation with a particularly strong decline in the 6th legislative term, stabilizing around 40 percent since the 2010s with some of its lowest share observed since 1989. Part of this decline is due to generational renewal amongst socialist ranks (long term MEPs who served in the 1980s and 1990s have been replaced by a younger generation of MEPs), but not only. As we can see, the share of socialist MEPs with political dead-end career has been constantly on the rise, coinciding with the electoral defeats of various social-democrat parties in Scandinavia as well as in Western and Southern Europe (see. appendix a and b, Benedetto, Hix, Mastrorocco, 2020). The EU enlargements and the relative success of social democrat parties in eastern Europe – albeit some cross-country variation - could not inverse this tendency, this is even the opposite that takes place. Indeed, the political dead career orientation is one of the biggest career orientations in most eastern Europe countries.

So far, this decline in the core of the European political class has been largely balanced by the corresponding increase of European-oriented amongst the EPP (see. figure 8a). The latter become the first group in the EP in 1999, replacing the Socialists for the leadership in the EP. This has coincided with a neat increase of European-oriented EPP MEPs (totalizing 58 percent

of all their MEPs in the 8th legislative term and associated decline of political dead-end (minus 10 points, reaching hardly 20 percent of EPP MEPs).





Figures 8a and 7b: Career patterns evolution over time for EPP and the Socialists

In the meantime, the strengthening of Eurosceptic political groups also had an effect on the composition of the EP. Since 2004, McElroy and Benoit (2012: 152) observed that "[a]ll of the

member states now have some form of a Eurosceptic party competing in European elections. In the 2009 elections, far-right parties also won substantial support in some member states where they were not traditionally powerful […]". Brack and Startin (2015) even claim that Euroscepticism has become mainstreamed, as it became an increasingly legitimate political view across European Member States. Overall, since 2004, there is a progressive expansion in the share of Eurosceptic MEPs: from 19.1 percent in 2004, it increased to 30.5 percent during the 2014-2019 legislative term, making Euroscepticism a 'stable component of European politics' (Brack, 2020:1). As we have observed, this phenomenon had tremendous effects on the officeholders attracted to serve in the EP as well as on the type of career orientation that can be found in the EP. Indeed, Eurosceptic parties had contributed largely to the new cohort of "Political deadend" (72%, see. figure 5a and 5b). And even when they provided delegations of "European-oriented MEPs", the latter are by definition against the empowerment of the very institution they serve into, raising questions on their impact on the EP as an institution. It remains to be seen if and how the increase of Eurosceptics MEPs will translate into influence (Bolin et al., 2019), but this is a phenomenon to keep in mind while studying the evolution of career patterns in the EP.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Since Scarrow's seminal work on MEPs' political career in the late 1990s and despite the merit of previous works, the literature still faced empirical gaps in order to comprehensively assess the evolution of MEPs' career patterns over time. To contribute to this research agenda, our paper had a two-folded objective. Not only did we seek to map evolution of career patterns of all 3,654 MEPs from the 28 Member States since 1979, but we furthermore aimed at understanding how the (evolving) institutional opportunity structure of the EP shapes the development of the European political class over time. We posited that the increasing attractiveness of the EP, as a result of its institutionalization and formal empowerment, could trigger the development of European-oriented MEPs. Nevertheless, this trend can also be undermined because of a decreased *availability* of seats (in particular regarding dual mandates) as well as the reduced *accessibility* of seats in the EP in a context of greater electoral competition and party fragmentation.

Our empirical analysis has unmistakably established that the EP is increasingly appealing to a larger number of European-oriented MEPs. In addition, these MEPs have never been as experimented as in the eight legislative terms: they serve on average 14 years, a duration that has been almost continuously on the rise since the direct elections of the EP in 1979. Yet,

this trend is not uniform across countries, party groups and over time. In particular, while MEPs from the Socialist group used to have the highest share of European-oriented MEPs in the 90's, their electoral misfortune in the late 2000s and early 2010s resulted in the decline of such European-oriented parliamentarians. We also observed an increase of 'short-termer' MEPs ("political dead-end" orientation) as well as a decrease of domestic and mixed career orientations over time. Finally, in comparison to other multi-level systems, our findings also indicate that the EP can be considered as an "integrated electoral arenas", where regional, national and European levels are highly connected by exchange of personal, but not clearly in the direction of any tiers of government.

Beyond the development of an European political class, the article also highlighted the damaging effects of some changes in the opportunity structure of the EP. Party system transformations across Member states show that the undermining of the core of the European political class is – arguably – already at work amongst the second biggest group of the EP, namely the Socialists. The recent electoral success of the Conservative and the Eurosceptic parties (with mild or severe negative positions about European integration) could not only result in an ever more fragmented European Parliament, it could also contribute to undermining the core of Euro careerists of other EPGs and in particular the EPP that is often one of the direct electoral competitors of those parties. Still, despite the increase of Euroscepticism's electoral strength in the EP, our empirical data did not show that the European political class is (yet) entirely threatened. That being said, the 2019 European elections remind us that this trend is far from being certain, though: the latest elections present the greatest turnover of MEPs ever observed since 1984, coupled with a higher degree of fragmentation of the assembly and an increase of Eurosceptic MEPs. In this wake, the literature has long established that the type of personals serving in legislative institutions matters (Matthew 1984). In other words, the profiles of MEPs affect the extent to which the EP can achieve its policy-making powers.

In the future, scholar could further investigate how the changing composition of the EP and the different types of career patterns affect, in practice, its policy-making capacity. The literature on MEPs' parliamentary behaviour has already established the decisive roles of several structural-level factors, such as EPGs, electoral rules, or opposition status. Yet, further research should be conducted by looking at 'individual level factors', and in particular the impact of career patterns on (non)legislative behaviour. On this regard, Meserve et al. (2009) outlined that 'nationally-oriented' MEPs are less disciplined than 'EP-oriented' MEPs. Høyland et al. (2019) and van Geffen (2016) showed a link between career ambition and parliamentary activities.

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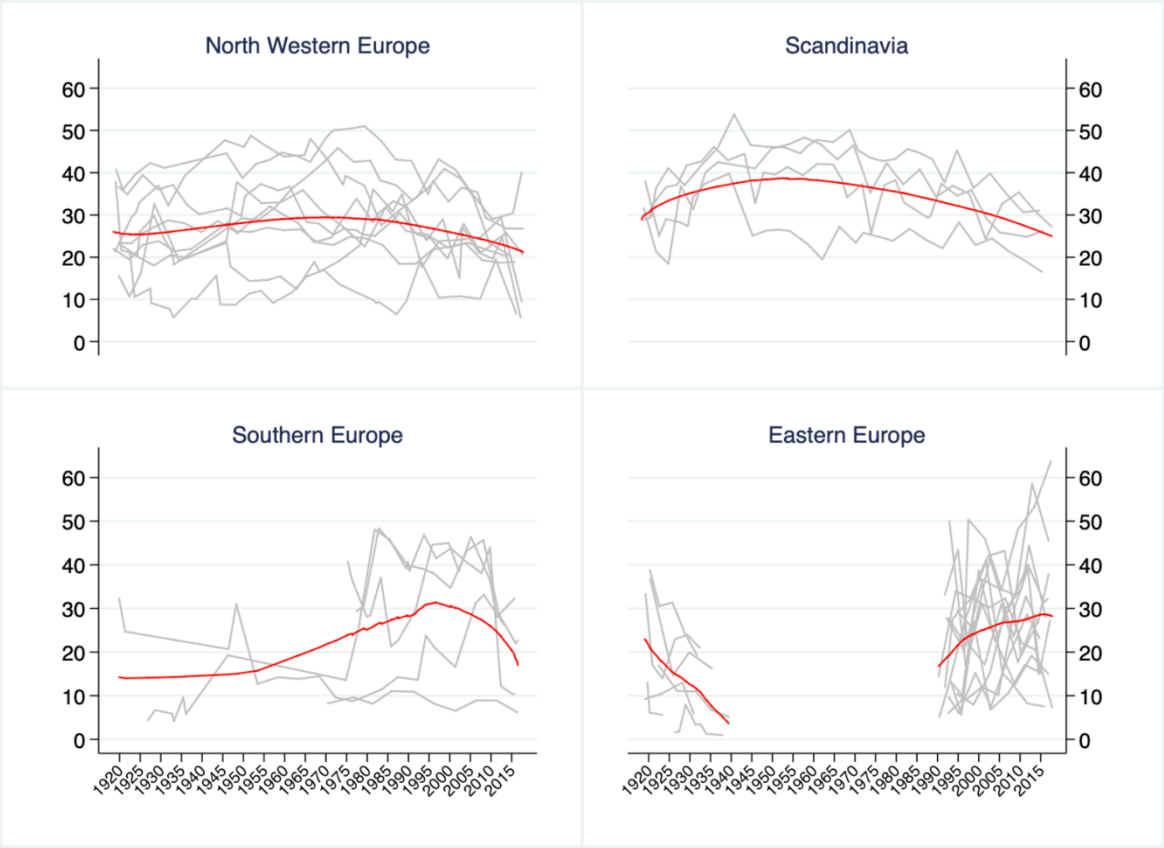
Appendix

Note: The lines are estimated by locally weighted scatterplot smoothing.

Appendix a-b: Vote share of socio democratic parties in eastern and western Europe (1979-2017)Source: Benedetto, G., Hix, S., Mastrorocco, N. (2020).



Appendix b: Vote share of social democratic parties in 4 regions (1979-2017)
Source: Benedetto, G., Hix, S., Mastrorocco, N. (2020).