

“Poor linkage and lacking representation: a thorn in the side of the European Parliament only?”

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Europe is experiencing a profound democratic malaise and contemporary democracies are facing an extreme challenge as more and more voices become critical of their institutions. Populist and radical parties are on the rise, reflecting the growing discontent of segments of the population towards traditional parties and elites (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2007, Mair 2011). At the same time, the current financial and economic crisis seems to further undermine public confidence in the democratic institutions and their representatives (Armington & Guthmann 2013): 69% of the citizens do not trust their national parliament, 66% feel their voice do not count in the European Union (EU) and almost half of them are not satisfied with the way democracy works, be it at national and European levels (Eurobarometer 79.5 and 80, 2013).

Again this backdrop, it is more important than ever to study the linkage between citizens and representatives, especially through an analysis of the mechanisms of parliamentary representation (Arnold & Franklin 2012). Indeed, parliaments and their members are at the core of the core of contemporary democracies. Parliamentary representation remains the main vehicle for citizens’ participation in political life and it plays a key role in the legitimization of the political systems, especially in the context of the EU (Costa & Magnette 2003, Deschouwer & Depauw 2013).

Therefore, the research presented here aims to analyse the linkage between elected representatives and citizens in the European multilevel polity. To do so, an innovative research design is proposed: namely, to study the relationship between representatives and their districts both at the national and EU levels. The objective is to explain the variation in the way Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) conceive and carry out constituency representation, in comparison to their national counterparts. But the research also examines to what extent the potential disconnection of the EP differs from the linkage between national parliamentarians and voters. In this respect, it will provide original empirical evidence as to the assumed specificity of the EP with regard to political representation. At the crossroads of

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legislative and EU studies, this research contributes to the literature on parliamentary representation and on its legitimization potential for the EU.

2. Constituency representation in the European Parliament, a ‘blind spot’ in EU studies

As noted recently by several authors, the linkage between citizens and political decision makers is one of the most important topics in the study of democratic political systems (Shapiro et al. 2010). The research aims to understand the relationships between representatives and citizens in the European multi-level polity. It concentrates on one fundamental aspect of the representative process, namely the linkage between voters and their elected representatives (Pitkin 1967). Indeed, political representation essentially refers to a relationship between a representative and those represented by him or her. Many studies have demonstrated that members of parliament (MPs) spend much of their time and energy meeting their constituents in order to develop personal ties and maintain loyalties that may be transformed into electoral resources (Cain et al. 1987, Fenno 1978). These studies stress that this “constituency service”, including a wide range of activities such as maintenance of personal contacts and promotion of voter interests and concerns in the geographical area in which the member is elected, constitutes a key dimension of the representative mandate (Hetshusen et al. 2005, Mayhew 1974, Nay 2002).

However, this aspect of the representative mandate remains generally understudied in the case of the EP and very little empirical research exists on the relationship between MEPs and their districts, i.e. “constituency representation” (Farrell & Scully 2010). As Hix and his colleagues (2003: 194) noticed, “this area remains largely neglected, perhaps because of the widely-held assumption that any electoral connection to the EP is weak because of the way EP elections (do not) work”. Most research focuses then on descriptive and symbolic representation, seeking to assess the social and political representativeness of the assembly. They investigate whether the social characteristics of representatives affect their behaviours, or examine policy congruence between voters and MEPs (McEvoy 2012, Norris & Franklin 1997). Other scholars start with the assumption of an "electoral disconnection" between MEPs and citizens to concentrate on the triangular relationship between MEPs, national parties and parliamentary groups (Hix et al. 2007, Mülböck 2012). Recently, there has been a renewed interest in political representation from a theoretical and normative perspective, leading some authors to speak of a “representative turn” in EU studies (Kröger & Friedrich 2013, Piattoni 2013). Promoting a more dynamic conception of political representation, some authors seek to understand what happens in between the formal moments of authorization and control in

terms of communication while others focus on non-electoral representation or propose new theoretical tools to study representation in the EU (Bellamy & Castiglione 2010, Lord & Pollak 2010, Saurugger 2010). Finally, a still limited body of literature has developed to concentrate on territorial representation in the EP. These studies demonstrate that the institution, in its quest for democratic legitimacy, attempts to initiate closer ties to its citizens, and that MEPs have divergent views on political representation. However, these works tend to remain largely theoretical (Costa & Navarro 2003), to concentrate on one specific country (Brack & Costa 2013) or to adopt a macroscopic perspective, focusing primarily on the effects of cultural factors and strategic considerations arising from the electoral system to explain MEPs' heterogeneous behaviours (Farrell & Scully 2007, Katz 1997).

In order to contribute to fill in this gap, this research adopts an individual-level approach and develops a comparative research design to study the linkage between MEPs and their voters.

3. An actor-centered approach and an original comparative methodology to study constituency representation in the EP

Drawing on role theory in its new institutionalist variant (Searing 1994), I intend to investigate the motivations, attitudes and behaviours of parliamentarians in relation to their voters and to constituency representation. Although the concept of role has not been the main driver of research on the EP so far, it has provided researchers who have used it with a theoretical tool to understand the multiple aspects of the parliamentary mandate (Bale & Taggart 2006, Brack 2013, Navarro 2009). This research examines how MEPs conceive and carry out their mandate, their relationships with citizens and how they cope with the challenges of constituency representation at the supranational level. It is structured around *two main research questions*. First, how do MEPs promote, if at all, the interests and concerns of their voters in the EP? Second, how can we explain the heterogeneity of their parliamentary practices and conceptions of the relations between representatives and voters? As regard the first question, I expect to find a relatively high heterogeneity in the ways MEPs conceive and carry out their representative mandate and in the links they have with their voters. To explain this heterogeneity, the literature puts forward three main types of factors: cultural, institutional and individual-level factors. I expect that MEPs' attitudes and behaviours related to constituency representation are influenced by a combination of the three. As far as the electoral system is concerned, MEPs elected in small districts and an open-list system should

have more incentives to cultivate a personal vote and to attach more importance to constituency representation (André et al. 2012, Farrell & Scully 2010, Carey & Shugart 1995). Following Katz (1997), I also expect to find some effect of the nationality and the political culture. Some scholars also demonstrated the importance of individual-level factors and more precisely, previous political experiences and the attitudes towards the EU and the EP (Bale & Taggart 2006, Brack 2013, Navarro 2009). Therefore, I expect that these factors affect MEPs' attitudes and behaviours. Finally, I will control for party affiliation, gender, age and the characteristics of the constituency (socio-economic characteristics as well as the distance between the EP and the constituency) (Costa & Kerrouche 2007).

To examine these questions, the research uses an actor-centered approach and mobilizes the tools and analytical frameworks provided by EU studies, comparative politics and legislative studies. As Farrell and Scully (2010:37) noted, there is a need to move from a macro-perspective on institutions and aggregate outcomes towards a more micro-level analysis of individuals. Such an approach is particularly fruitful for understanding the multidimensionality of the parliamentary mandate while taking the subjective aspects of the representative process into account. The methodology is based on a comparative design and mixed methods.

First, a comparative design at two levels is used: a “horizontal” comparison between individual MEPs from different national delegations on the one hand and a “vertical” comparison between MEPs and MPs on the other hand. This original comparison should provide a better understanding of MEP motivations, attitudes and behaviours and show how they reconcile the constraints and incentives provided by the institutional, cultural and electoral factors. More particularly, the comparison between national and European parliamentarians will allow assessing the impact of political culture on the way they conceive and carry out their representative mandate. It also allows me to examine empirically to what extent MEPs differ from MPs in their attitudes towards constituency representation and so, to assess the specificity of the EP.

The research will focus on parliamentarians from 7 Member states: Belgium, France, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Finland. The cases were selected according a most similar system design, which allow to examine the influence of the variation of the macro-level factors such as the electoral system and of national culture. Indeed, despite the relative uniformity of the electoral system for EP elections, there is enough variation in their electoral system (size of the constituencies, ballot structure), which

should shape legislator's attitudes and behaviour in terms of constituency representation. In addition, these countries have differentiated parliamentary cultures, some with a majoritarian system, others opting for a proportional representation system in national elections (Ireland being an intermediate case). Finally, in terms of state structure, the selected cases are differentially positioned on a continuum from centralized to federal states.

Second, the research relies on both qualitative and quantitative methodologies which will allow, through their complementarity, to better understand the studied phenomenon and bring the most information regarding MEPs' attitudes, motivations and behaviours (Brady & Collier 2004). This research focuses on four types of data. First, I will rely on existing databases on M(E)Ps attitudes (PARENEL and IMPLOC among others²). Second, semi-structured interviews are currently conducted with MPs and MEPS of the 7 countries to investigate their conceptions of constituency representation and their links to their constituents. Third, data concerning the parliamentarians' socio-biographical details will be collected and analysed. Finally, a sample of MEPs' parliamentary questions will be studied to determine whether specific territorial interests are defended. This mixed-method approach, combining interviews, surveys and the analysis of recorded behaviour such as parliamentary questions, provides the best opportunity to paint the most reliable possible picture of the life of a legislator (Martin 2011: 486).

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² See : http://dev.ulb.ac.be/cevipol/fr/projets-recherche_parenel.html
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