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From Constraining to Catalysing Dissensus? The Impact of Political Contestation on Parliamentary Communication in EU Affairs

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Abstract

National parliaments have the potential to serve as transmission belts between the European Union (EU) and their citizens. By publicly communicating EU issues, they can enhance the visibility, public accountability and ultimately the legitimacy of supranational governance. Not least since the Eurozone crisis, this task has become increasingly important in the ever more politicised context of EU integration characterised by public and partisan contestation. Against this background, the aim of the paper is to investigate the communication efforts of national parliaments in EU affairs and, in particular, to analyse the impact of the levels of contestation of EU issues both within the public and the parliamentary arena on their communication activities. In a nutshell, in how far has political contestation acted as a catalyst for parliamentary communication of EU affairs? Our data on plenary activities in seven EU parliaments from 2010 to 2013 reveals that political contestation in public opinion has a positive impact, while contestation within parliament may hamper communication of EU affairs.

Keywords: National Parliaments, European Integration, Contestation, Parliamentary Communication

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Introduction

National parliaments have the potential to serve as transmission belts between the European Union (EU) and their citizens. Much of the existing literature has focused on the role of parliaments in scrutinising, monitoring and controlling (their government's) EU policy-making. Recently, however, the parliamentary communication function in EU affairs has gained increased attention: National parliaments are crucial as arenas for the debates over important EU issues and their national implications (Auel, 2007; Auel and Raunio, 2014a and b; de Wilde, 2011; Rauh, 2015; Wendler, 2014a and b). By communicating EU affairs to their citizens, they not only legitimise national politics in EU affairs, but can also add to the legitimacy of EU governance. This task is especially important within the broader discussion on the democratic legitimacy of the EU (e.g. Curtin *et al*, 2010; Follesdal and Hix, 2006), where the opaqueness and lack of accountability have been identified as core elements of the democratic deficit. Parliamentary communication of EU issues can contribute to making EU policy processes more transparent, and thus more accessible to and for their national public. In addition, by holding their governments accountable, that is by inducing them to explain European issues and decisions, to clarify European negotiation situations and to justify their

negotiation behaviour, national parliaments contribute to the public accountability of EU policy-making (Auel, 2007). Thus, the 'communicative performance of national parliaments in EU affairs is directly related to the often discussed democratic deficits of supranational governance: if MPs raise European issues, they offer a remedy to the otherwise opaque procedures, the overwhelming complexity, and the difficult attribution of political responsibility in decision-making beyond the nation state' (Rauh, 2015, p. 118). Importantly, this contribution of parliaments to the public accountability of EU policy-making depends crucially on whether they 'make the choices and political alternatives involved in European integration *visible* to the wider public they mean to represent' (ibid, p. 117, emphasis added; see also Norton, 1998, p. 1; Proksch and Slapin, 2015, p. 3). Scrutiny of EU documents, monitoring and influencing the government or voting on resolutions can – and often does (Auel and Raunio, 2012, pp. 16ff.) - take place behind the closed doors of parliamentary committees and still fulfil representative functions such as the representation and aggregation of the interests of the represented. Parliamentary communication, however, is a fundamental precondition for public accountability and the exercise of democratic popular control over government activities.

The democratic duty of representatives 'to give convincing accounts of their actions to the represented' and 'to communicate their reason for action" (Esaiasson *et al*, 2013, p. 26) has become ever more important in EU politics with the growing salience and public contestation of EU issues in both public opinion and national party politics, a phenomenon commonly discussed as the politicisation of EU politics (De Wilde and Zürn, 2012; Hutter and Grande, 2014; Kriesi and Grande, 2014; Rauh and Zürn, 2014; Statham and Trenz, 2012). The impact of EU decisions is, especially in the context of the eurozone crisis, increasingly (and painfully) evident for the citizens in the EU (Hurrelmann, 2014). While the famous term 'permissive consensus' (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970) has long served well to describe the

friendly ignorance of citizens towards the European Union, it has given way to a more 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) marked by growing public Euroscepticism and contestation of EU politics (Serricchio *et al*, 2013; Usherwood and Startin, 2013). Moreover, in their study of EU politicisation trends among citizens, Hurrelmann *et al* (2015, pp. 56-57, italics in original) have found a distinct pattern of '*uninformed politicisation*': the salience of EU issues has grown, but citizens' knowledge about the EU remains limited, resulting in 'a more diffuse yet also more fundamental feeling of disenfranchisement'. This sentiment is at the core of the profound disconnect between the EU and the citizens. Importantly, the rising public dissatisfaction with European integration has also filtered through to party politics (Conti, 2014) resulting in increased contestation of EU issues by political parties and turning EU politics into a subject of party competition (Kriesi *et al*, 2010). This has again become especially evident during the recent Eurozone crisis with the increasing success of Eurosceptic parties in domestic and European Parliament elections.

Thus, we can observe a growing contestation of the EU both within public opinion and within party politics, and both potentially impact the communication function of national parliaments. On the one hand, the growing public awareness of the relevance and 'consequentiality of EU decisions' (Hurrelmann, 2014, p. 88) has led to a greater *demand* for public explanation and justification of EU policy-making, and 'parliaments are one of the primary arenas for the public [explanation and] justification of decisions taken in the context of supranational governance' (Wendler, 2014a, p. 549). On the other hand, parliaments 'are an important setting for … party political contestation and polarization' (Ibid.), where parliamentary (party) actors can also actively *supply* policy choices and position themselves strategically for their electoral advantage (Rauh, 2015, p. 117).

So far, however, we know little about whether public or party political contestation do have an impact on the communicative performance of national parliaments – and in what way. As we will argue in more detail below, contestation can provide both incentives and disincentives for MPs and parliamentary party groups 'to go public'. Against this background, the aim of the paper is to investigate the communication efforts of national parliaments in EU affairs by focusing on plenary debates and oral questions. While parliaments certainly have other means of communicating political issues to their citizens, the plenary is the most visible arena, and plenary activities are key mechanisms to communicate policy positions to the citizens. Plenary debates are among the most important parliamentary means to communicate issues on the political agenda (Auel and Raunio, 2014a; Mayhew, 1974; Proksch and Slapin, 2015, pp. 21ff.; Rauh, 2015). Debates as such are, of course, no guarantee for transparency or accountability as information and justifications can remain incomplete or even be obscured by strategies of 'blame shifting' and 'credit claiming' (Lord and Pollak, 2010, pp. 977f.). But public debates provide the means by which the positions of some (i.e. government, governing parties) are continuously challenged by others (the opposition) and can thus be exposed to 'the best of disinfectants, sunshine' (Brandeis, 1914). Parliamentary questions, in turn, can be used by MPs to communicate issues in various, direct and indirect, ways, for example by requesting information publicly, by compelling the government to making a public statement and pressing it for action, or by publicly advocating constituency interests (Russo and Wiberg, 2010). 'Parliamentary question time' also seems to attract considerable public attention, at least where ministers or heads of government have to react to questions not known beforehand (Salmond, 2014).

We therefore use quantitative data on plenary debates and parliamentary questions on EU issues in seven member states (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK) over a period of four years (2010 to 2013) to analyse in how far political contestation

both within and without parliament acts as a catalyst for parliamentary communication of EU affairs. The paper is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of the, so far fairly scarce, literature on parliamentary communication in EU affairs. The next section develops the theoretical framework to explain variation in the parliamentary communication activities based on agency theory. Drawing attention to the fact that communication mainly refers to the role of MPs as agents of their citizens, we develop hypotheses on the impact of electoral incentives and disincentives, but also take institutional factors into consideration. Section three presents the data, followed by the empirical analysis in section four. The final section discusses the findings and concludes.

Beyond Scrutiny: Communication of EU Affairs

The role of national parliaments in the EU has generated considerable academic interest over the last years (for excellent overviews see Winzen, 2010; Rozenberg and Hefftler, 2015). Yet, due to the main focus on the scrutiny and control function of national parliaments in EU matters, we still know little about parliamentary communication in EU affairs. Empirical research focussing on parliamentary communication prior to 2010 gave little reason to be very optimistic. A study by Bergman *et al* (2003, p. 175) found a generally weak involvement of the plenaries in EU affairs. 'Europe' seemed rarely a topic outside of debates about Treaty changes (Maatsch, 2010) or on sessions of the European Council (Van de Steeg, 2010). Similarly, a comparison of EU debates in four national parliaments during 2002 and 2010 confirmed that, with the exception of the German Bundestag, especially day-to-day EU matters were rarely debated (Auel and Raunio, 2014b). Debates did, occasionally, take place on high profile EU decisions, such as the Service Directive, but often only after an ex-ante politicisation of the issue by actors outside the parliamentary arena and intensive reporting in

the media (Miklin, 2014). Interestingly, De Ruiter (2014) found a similar reluctance to communicate EU matters regarding policy issues integrated under the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) – even though OMCs deal with policy issues that are highly relevant from an electoral point of view, such as employment or social policy. Garcia Lupato's (2012) analysis of budget and investiture debates in Italy and Spain, finally, showed 'that there is not a real debate on European issues in general parliamentary debates. This de-politicization can … produce a clear deficit in the relation between the parliamentary debate, political competition and the voters' (ibid, p. 106).

Yet there are indications that the EU has since become a more important topic in Europe's plenaries. Rauh's study of plenary debates in the German Bundestag, for example, shows that 'the degree to which the supranational polity, its politics and its policies are mentioned in the publically visible plenary debates has significantly and substantially increased over the last 23 years' (Rauh, 2015, p. 13). Other studies suggest that especially the eurozone crisis had a rather strong effect in terms of parliamentary communication. Auel and Höing (2015), for example, conclude that the crisis had a considerable impact on plenary debates between 2010 and 2012: across all 27 national parliaments of the EU, on average more than 40 per cent of all EU debates focused on crisis-related issues. Studies have also found an increased politicisation of the EU in the plenaries due to the crisis, although the findings differ with regard to the lines along which polarisation took place. Puntscher Riekmann and Wydra (2013, pp. 575-6) show that opposition parties in Austria, Germany and Italy fiercely contested 'the socio-economic orientation of the policies (e.g. social European market order vs. neoliberal) as well as the advocacy of allegedly inevitable accompanying measures (e.g. further austerity measures), and demanded a different direction for policies (e.g. a financial transaction tax; more equitable distribution of tax burdens)'. Wendler's results (2014b) suggest a deepened party polarisation over both, EU integration and competing party

ideologies in the debates on the crisis management and EMU development in Austria, France, Germany and the UK. Closa and Maatsch's (2014) findings highlight the impact of parliamentary Euroscepticism and the government-opposition divide on debates regarding the European Financial Stability Facility. In contrast, Maatsch (2014) concludes that debtor or donor status with regard to the crisis bailouts had a stronger impact on parties' positioning in debates on anti-crisis measures than the parties' ideological position on the left-right dimension.

These findings suggest that the growing public politicisation of EU politics is, at least as far as eurozone crisis issues are concerned, mirrored within domestic parliamentary arenas. Yet they tell us little about the more general extent to which national parliaments have communicated EU issues to their citizens and in how far this is related to and affected by political contestation. Given the time period covered by our data, we are not able to analyse whether parliamentary communication has indeed *increased* in comparison to earlier periods, for example as a reaction to the eurozone crisis. Moreover, the quantitative nature of our data does not allow us to analyse the degree of politicisation of EU issues in terms of *polarisation*. It can only provide a comparative analysis of politicisation in terms of the relative *salience* of EU issues for parliamentary communication. Rather, the aim of the paper is to contribute to the literature by investigating the impact of the levels of contestation over EU issues both within the public and the parliamentary arena on the communication activities of national parliaments. In the following, we develop a theoretical framework based mainly on electoral incentives and disincentives for members of parliament (MPs) and parliamentary party groups (PPGs) to communicate European issues to their citizens. In addition, we take institutional factors into account.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Synthesising common features of both classic and more recent accounts of the parliamentary communication function (e.g. Bagehot, 2009 [1867]; Mill, 1998 [1861]; Patzelt, 2003; Packenham, 1970; Raunio, 2011), we define parliamentary communication as public efforts by a parliamentary actor of informing, educating and/or mobilizing citizens. Such communication can be provided by parliamentary actors at three different levels (Marschall, 1999, p. 23): individual MPs, PPGs and by the parliament as an institution. Communication by MPs and PPGs follows a different logic than communication by the parliament as an institution (Sarcinelli and Tenscher, 2000, p. 86; Pollak and Slominski, 2014): Because the former compete for votes, they follow the rules of political competition and mainly focus on mobilisation. Parliaments as institutions, in contrast, provide neutral and balanced parliamentary information. Communication is more of an 'educational undertaking', a 'civic education project aiming to enhance the political knowledge of the electorate' (Pollak and Slominski, 2014, p. 111).

In this study, we focus on communication by MPs and parliamentary party groups in the plenary and draw on rational choice and agency theory. Both have become prominent approaches to the study of political representation in general and the role of national parliaments in EU affairs in particular. Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991, pp. 239-40) define an agency relationship as 'established when an agent has delegated … the authority to take action on behalf of … the principal'. One of the basic assumptions of agency theory is that any delegation of power to an agent creates risks for the principal in terms of agency loss (Lupia, 2003). Within the literature on national parliaments in EU affairs, the main focus has so far been on the various means of scrutinising and controlling their agent – the government - they can employ to prevent agency loss in terms of EU policy output and outcome. When it comes to the communication function, however, the logic is somewhat different from that

underlying scrutiny and oversight activities: Here, MPs act as agents of their citizens – and in most cases they would very much like to keep that job. In one of the most influential contributions, Mayhew (1974, p. 5) argued that legislative behaviour could be best understood if legislators were seen as 'single-minded seekers of reelection'. We follow Cox and McCubbins (1993, p. 100; see also see also Katznelson and Weingast, 2005, p. 8; Schlesinger, 1991, pp. 39-40) in accepting 'the usual emphasis on re-election' as not necessarily the only, but the most important component of legislators' motivation that 'is reasonable to consider in isolation'.

To be re-elected by their voters, MPs and PPGs must demonstrate credibility and signal to their voters that they represent their interests (Behnke, 2008, p. 14; see also Fenno, 1977, pp. 898-9). In other words, they have to convince their own principals that agency loss is negligible. We therefore expect them to communicate EU issues more frequently if they are faced with high levels of salience of and scepticism towards EU issues within the general public (*external contestation*). At the same time, however, contestation of EU issues *within* parliament, especially between governing parties, may make it more difficult for them to signal trustworthiness and thus may decrease parliamentary communication of EU issues (*internal contestation*). In the following, we develop hypotheses on the impact of electoral incentives based on external and internal contestation on the level of parliamentary communication in EU affairs. Moreover, institutional aspects are considered.

External Contestation: EU Salience and Public Euroscepticism

As outlined above, we assume that in member states where public opinion is generally more critical of EU integration, MPs as citizens' agents have an incentive to communicate EU affairs due to the potential electoral impact of EU politics. The greater the level of public

Euroscepticism, the more MPs and their parliamentary party groups need to try and (re-)gain voters' trust in the European integration project in general and their own European policies in particular. Public Euroscepticism, however, can be expected to have less of an electoral impact, if coupled with lukewarm salience of EU issues. Studies have indeed repeatedly shown the importance of high EU issue salience for issue voting in national elections (e.g. De Vries, 2007, 2010a). In other words, if EU issues do not play a vital role in voters' considerations, it does not matter as much whether or not they hold Eurosceptic opinions. MPs in member states, where EU issues are more salient, are therefore expected to have a greater electoral incentive 'to profile themselves on these issues and signal their positions to voters' (De Wilde, 2010, p. 72).

H_1: Public Euroscepticism: *The stronger Euroscepticism in public opinion, the more MPs/parliamentary party groups communicate EU affairs.*

H_2: Public EU Salience: *The more salient EU affairs are in public perception, the more MPs/parliamentary party groups communicate EU affairs.*

Internal Contestation: Parliamentary Euroscepticism and Coalition Disagreement

Above, we discussed our assumptions about the general impact of electoral incentives on parliamentary communication efforts and highlighted public Euroscepticism and the salience of EU issues. However, these general assumptions have to be qualified as it may not always be in the interest of parties to politicise EU issues. For mainstream parties (and especially governing parties, see below), EU issues are often more a liability than an asset (De Vries, 2010b). Reasons are internal dissent over EU integration (Edwards, 2009) or the fact that they are generally more Europhile than their voters (Mattila and Raunio, 2012). This leads to two

expectations: First, we expect the electoral incentives discussed above to be greatest for Eurosceptic parties on both ends of the political spectrum. While Eurosceptic parties on the right tend to capitalise on issues of national sovereignty and identity, parties on the left appeal more to fears of a 'neoliberal' Europe and social insecurities (De Vries and Edwards, 2009). Hence, both left and right wing Eurosceptic parties have an incentive to politicise EU topics, not least by triggering public confrontations in parliament, and may thus also force mainstream parties to respond.

> **H_3: Share of Eurosceptic parties:** *The greater the share of Eurosceptic parties in parliament, the more MPs/parliamentary party groups communicate EU affairs.*

Second, while mainstream parties are usually more supportive of European integration we can also find parties that are much less enthusiastic – the British Conservatives being the most famous example. This creates problems especially for coalitions. While disagreements between coalition partners increase the incentives to 'police the bargain' (Martin and Vanberg, 2004; see also Winzen, 2013, pp. 304-305), governing parties have no incentive to wash their dirty laundry in public, but rather to smooth out dissent internally to uphold 'the public impression of efficiency and competence' (Schüttemeyer, 2009, p. 5; see also Auel, 2007). Thus, stronger disagreement between coalition partners on EU issues is expected to act as a disincentive for parliamentary communication.

> **H_4: Coalition disagreement over EU integration:** *The greater the disagreement over European integration between governing parties, the less MPs/parliamentary party groups communicate EU affairs.*

Institutional (Dis)incentives

Finally, we also take into account that legislative behaviour in general not only depends on *electoral*, but also on *institutional* incentives (Shepsle, 1989; Strøm, 1997). One institutional factor that immediately comes to mind is the classic distinction between working and debating parliaments (Loewenberg and Patterson, 1979; Polsby, 1975). However, recent studies have found this classic distinction to play no role when it comes to the communication of EU politics (Auel and Raunio, 2014b). This finding is related to a second factor, the degree of delegation of EU affairs to committees. While we can generally observe a strong emphasis on committee work in EU affairs, national parliaments differ with regard to whether committees are able to take decisions on behalf of the whole parliament or whether the plenary has to be involved. Yet the assumption that the level of delegation has an impact on the debating activity of national parliaments in EU affairs has also been disconfirmed in recent research (Auel *et al*, 2015a).

What research has shown, however, is that the level of EU scrutiny activity of national parliaments depends to a considerable extent on their institutional strength in EU affairs (Auel *et al*, 2015a). This is not surprising, given that institutional opportunities are a precondition for effective scrutiny activity. When it comes to parliamentary *communication* of EU issues, however, it has been argued that a different logic may be at play and that stronger institutional power may indeed lead to less communication of EU issues. Governing parties, in particular those of strong national parliaments, may rather want to monitor the government behind closed doors without public criticism that might damage the reputation of the cabinet (Auel 2007; Auel and Raunio 2014b). For example, the main parties in the strong Nordic parliaments have deliberately 'depoliticised' European integration through cross-party cooperation in the EAC with the aim of manufacturing consensus in national integration policy (Bergman and Damgaard eds., 2000; Raunio, 2014). Thus, it can be expected that MPs

in institutionally strong parliaments, i.e. those with effective oversight instruments, focus more on influencing policy behind closed doors in committee or parliamentary party group meetings. On the contrary, MPs in institutionally weaker parliaments may try to compensate this lack of control via a stronger focus on the communication function (Auel and Rittberger, 2006).

> **H_5: Competition between control and communication function:** *The stronger parliamentary control and oversight powers in EU affairs, the less MPs/parliamentary party groups communicate EU affairs*.

Case Selection, Data and Operationalization

For the empirical analysis we selected the parliaments (lower houses only) of Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK. These seven member states were chosen to provide a representative subgroup in terms of size, length of membership, geographical location and public opinion on EU integration. In addition, their parliaments differ in terms of their formal power in EU affairs (Auel *et al*, 2015b), the share of Eurosceptic parties as well as the type of government.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables consist of oral questions and plenary debates on EU issues in these seven parliaments over a period of 4 years (2010 to 2013). To ensure that results are not biased by the size of parliament, we divided the absolute number of oral questions by the number of MPs. In addition, we accounted for differences in parliamentary rules and routines by calculating the share of questions on EU issues out of all questions as well. Similarly, to

take into account that the length of debates varies between parliaments, we not only looked at the absolute number of debates on EU topics in 2010-2013, but also at the share of plenary debating time spent on debating EU issues.[1] Data on the parliamentary activities was collected in the context of the *PACE – Parliamentary Communication of Europe* research project, using mainly parliamentary websites as sources.[2] In addition, we draw on data collected in the context of the *OPAL* project (see Auel *et al*, 2015a).

Independent Variables

Public Euroscepticism: To test the impact of public Euroscepticism, we draw on Eurobarometer data that measures the percentage of citizens stating that they 'do not trust the EU' per year (annual average of the Eurobarometer Surveys 73-80[3]).

Salience: Unfortunately, the salience of EU issues or EU integration in public opinion is difficult to measure. We therefore used the trend in turnout across the elections of 2009 and 2014 as a proxy. We are, of course, aware that turnout at EP elections depends on a number of factors. Yet, *inter alia*, turnout can be interpreted as the percentage of voters for whom the EU is salient enough to take part in the elections. Whether they do so because they are Eurosceptic or more Europhile is not relevant for the measure of salience. We use the change in turnout between the elections in 2009 and 2014 to capture whether the salience has increased or decreased over the course of our period of investigation.[4]

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1 Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain information on the overall number of debates on all issues. We can therefore only compare the share of plenary time spent on EU debates.

2 The data collection took place between November 2013 and September 2014.

3 The data was retrieved through the Eurobarometer Interactive Search System, online at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index.cfm?lang=en

4 An alternative measure would have been the share of respondents who named the EU among the greatest problems facing their country in the European Election Study, EES (De Vries 2010a). However, given the wording of the question, this mainly measures salience in terms of negative attitudes.

Share of Eurosceptic parties in parliament: To measure the strength of Eurosceptic parties within parliaments, we calculated the seat share of all Eurosceptic parties for each parliament based on the Chapel Hill 2010 data set (Bakker *et al*, 2015).[5]

Coalition disagreement: Inspired by Winzen (2013, p. 310), we calculated the standard deviation of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2010 scores for the position on EU integration for the governing parties.

Institutional Strength in EU affairs: To test the hypothesis on the institutional strength in EU affairs, we draw on the *OPAL* score of institutional strength (Auel *et al*, 2015b), which measures parliamentary strength in EU affairs along three dimensions: access to information, the parliamentary infrastructure and oversight powers. Since we are especially interested in the trade-off between parliamentary influence and communication, we use the scores for formal oversight powers only.

Table 1 provides an overview over our dependent and independent variables.

Table 1: Overview Variables

Variables	**Mean**	**Std. Dev.**	**Min**	**Max**
No oral questions/MP	.071	.067	0	.274
Share oral questions	5.073	5.095	0	24.138
No debates	21.36	12.93	4	51
Share of plenary time	8.17	5.20	2.21	23.25
Public Euroscepticism	54.96	10.31	32	73
Salience	1.06	1.99	-1.06	4.83
Eurosceptic parties	20.83	17.44	0	48.58
Coalition disagreement	.665	.598	0	1.87
Formal oversight rights	.539	.188	.25	.75

[5] The Chapel Hill data is based on expert surveys; respondents were asked to assess 'the general position on European integration that the party leadership took over the course of 2010' on a scale from 1 = strongly opposed to 7 = strongly in favour. A party was considered as Eurosceptic if it had a score of 3.5 or below.

Let's talk Europe – Empirical Analysis

To test the hypotheses developed above, we ran a multiple linear regression analysis using STATA 13. Since our observations are nested within parliaments (four years per parliament), we used a regression with clustered standard errors (Primo *et al*, 2007) (Table 2). Running a regression with such a small number of cases does, of course, mean that the results have to be interpreted with special care. We have selected our cases carefully, but the possibility to draw generalised conclusions on the basis of seven parliaments over a period of four years is necessarily limited. Thus, we interpret the results as broad findings rather than as precise statistical results. In addition, we provide added-variable plots to illustrate the findings.

Table 2: Regression results

Variables	**Oral questions**	**Share Oral questions**	**Number of debates**	**Percentage of plenary time**
Formal oversight rights	-.161***	11.860**	8.045	26.635***
	(.023)	(3.285)	(9.784)	(1.925)
Eurosceptic parties	.002*	.039	.786**	-.217***
	(.001)	(.054)	(.166)	(.031)
Coalition dissent	-.092**	-5.392**	-14.761*	4.460***
	(.024)	(1.391)	(4.978)	(.656)
Salience	.033**	.516	5.364**	-.144
	(.005)	(.216)	(1.259)	(.171)
Public Euroscept.	.001*	.199*	.473***	.109**
	(.000)	(.060)	(.083)	(.029)
Constant	*.057*	*-10.043*	*-21.204*	*-10.441*
	(.009)	*(3.824)*	*(11.533)*	*(2.528)*
R^2	.763	.364	.681	.683

Notes: Entries are coefficients with standard errors adjusted for 7 country clusters in parentheses. N = 28, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

As table 2 shows, formal oversight rights of national parliaments do have the expected impact on the number of oral questions, but overall our assumptions on weaker parliaments

using communication to compensate for the lack of strong oversight rights could not be confirmed. Most importantly, strong oversight rights increase both, the number (but not significantly at the 95% level) and the share of plenary time spent on debates. Thus, although strong parliaments may try to influence the government behind (closed) committee doors, there is no indication that this comes at the expense of public debates in the plenary (see figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: added variable plot 'no debates/formal oversight rights'

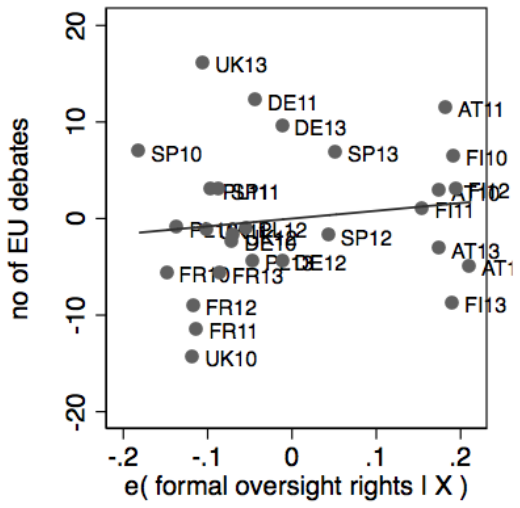
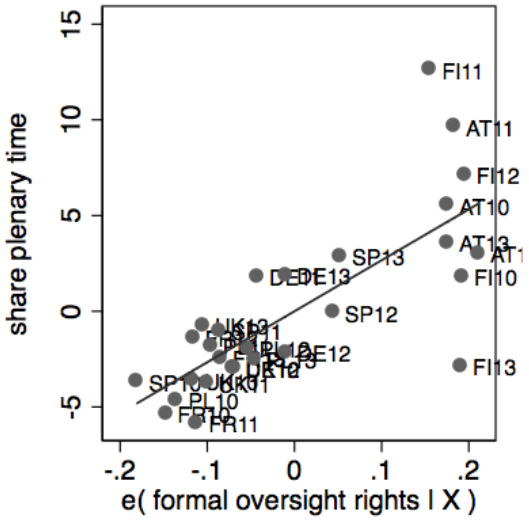
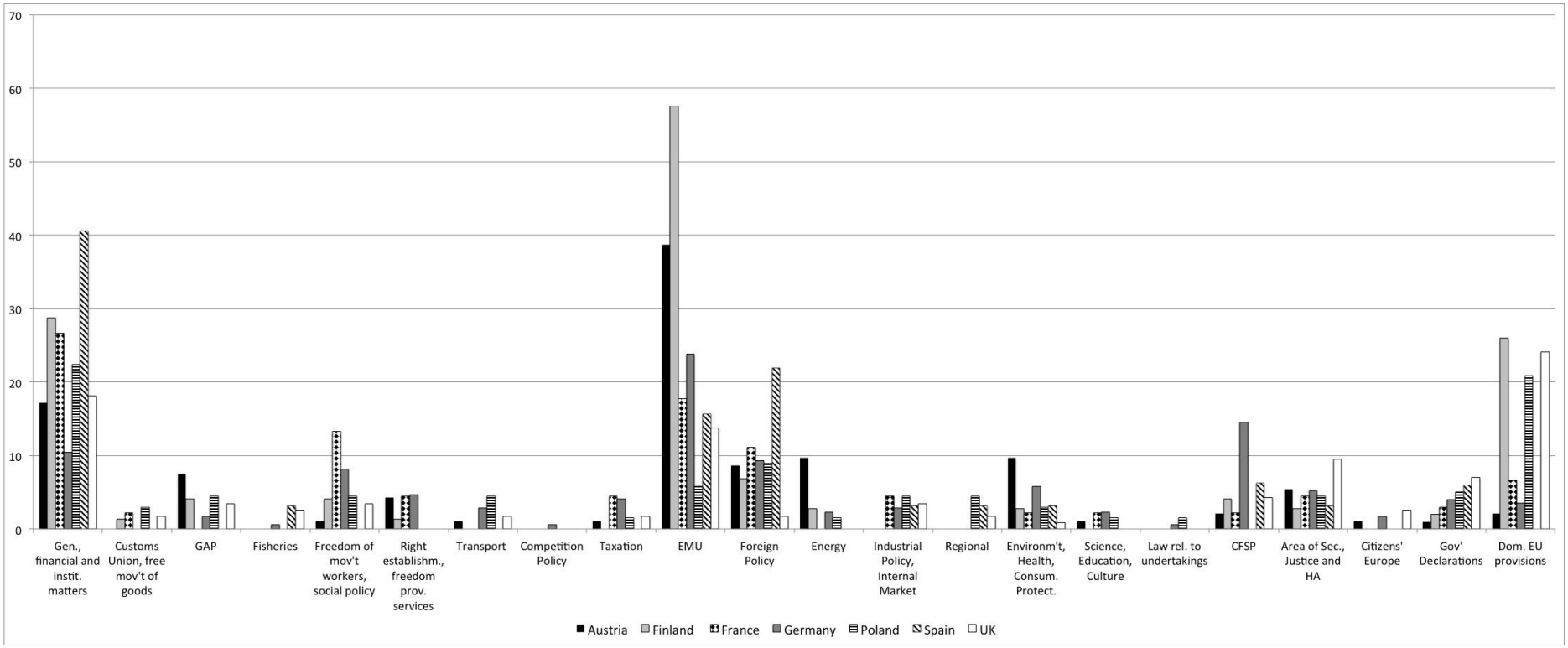


Figure 2: added variable plot 'share debates/formal oversight rights'



This is an interesting result that contradicts findings from periods before 2010. The German Bundestag, the Austrian Nationalrat and the Finnish Eduskunta are all parliaments with very strong oversight powers and active debaters at the same time. Auel and Raunio (2014b), in contrast, have found hardly any plenary debates in the Eduskunta between 2002 and 2010. The same is true for the Nationalrat, where Bergman *et al* (2003) found an only 'weak' involvement of the plenary in EU affairs (see also Miklin, 2015).

Figure 3: Parliamentary Debates by Topic (% of all EU debates in each parliament)



Note: Since debates can cover more than one EUR-lex category, the percentages per parliament can add up to > 100%

Although our data does not allow a comparison with parliamentary communication activities before 2010, there are, as mentioned above, clear indications that the eurozone crisis has had a decisive impact on debating patterns in these parliaments. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of debates by EUR-lex classification to which we added two categories, debates on government declarations covering a range of EU topics, and debates on domestic provisions for EU politics. As the figure demonstrates, debates concerning the European Monetary Union (EMU) were important for all parliaments, but especially for those of Austria and Finland.

Given the importance of the crisis it is hardly surprising that parliamentary communication was also clearly a reaction to public opinion. Both public Euroscepticism and, especially, salience seem to provide incentives for parliaments to go public. Where the EU is an important topic – even if the public is less sceptical of EU integration – parliaments felt compelled to communicate EU issues – possibly precisely to avoid (further) increase in Euroscepticism.

While the above shows that parliamentary actors are responsive to public opinion and contestation when it comes to communicating EU issues, contestation of EU integration *within* parliament, in contrast, rather leads to a de-emphasis of EU issues: Different positions within coalitions on European integration decrease the absolute number of all types of activities, and especially the number of plenary debates (Figure 4). These results confirm our expectation that coalition partners that disagree over EU issues try to avoid airing out their differences in public. Yet this result is challenged by the fact that parliaments with internally divided coalitions do spend a greater share of plenary time discussing EU issues, and this impact becomes only a little weaker once we remove the two outliers (FI11 and FI13; see figure 5) from the data set (see also table 3). One reason could be that EU affairs in general

and the eurozone crisis in particular sparked especially long plenary debates in parliaments with internally divided coalitions, which clearly merits further investigation.

Figure 4: added variable plot no debates/coalition dissent

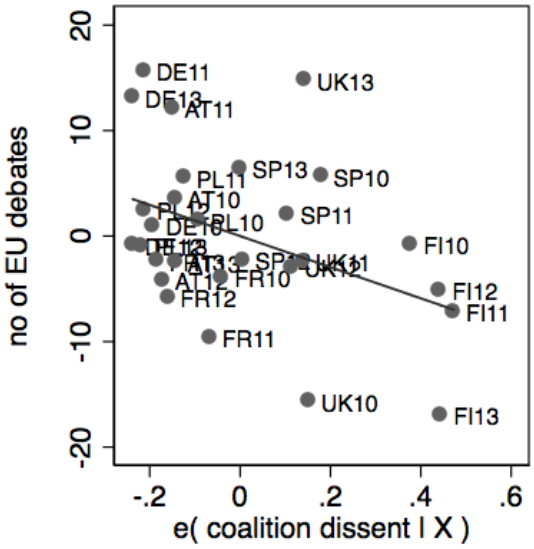
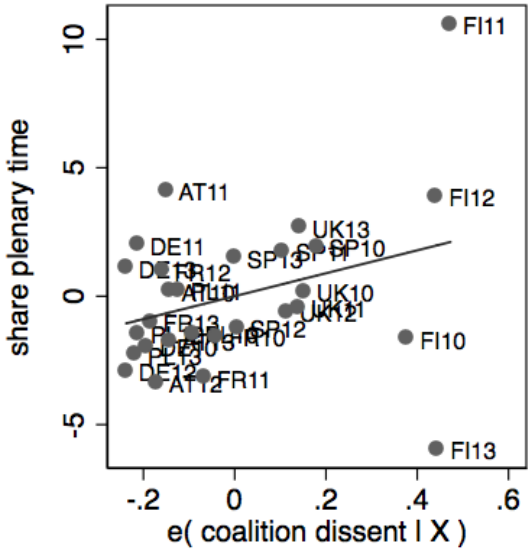


Figure 5: added variable plot share debates/coalition dissent



A somewhat surprising finding is that – at least in the parliaments under investigation – Eurosceptic parties had a fairly weak impact on parliamentary communication efforts. A stronger presence of Eurosceptic parties leads to a statistically significant, but rather small increase in the number of both oral questions and debates – and it even has a negative impact on the share of plenary time devoted to EU issues. This is especially unexpected regarding the number of oral questions: While Eurosceptic parties (with the exception of the British Conservatives in our sample) as smaller opposition parties often lack the institutional power to set the plenary agenda, oral questions could be considered as an ideal communication instrument for them. However, as figures 6 and 7 demonstrate, the number of oral questions is much more driven by the salience of EU issues rather than the presence and strength of Eurosceptic parties. The findings also remain true when we omit outliers from the data (see table 3 below).

Figure 6: added variable plot no oral questions/ salience

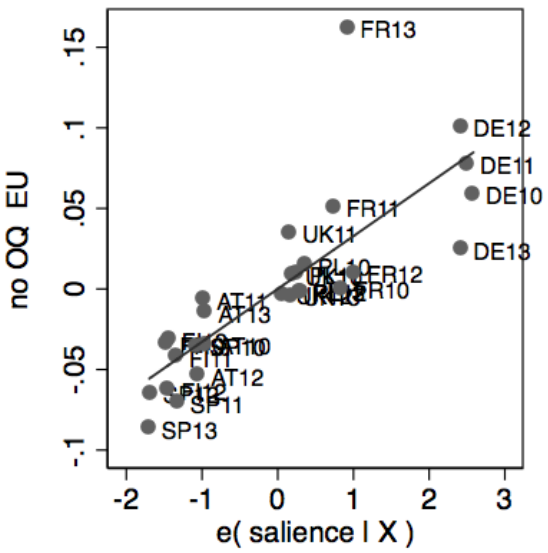


Figure 7: added variable plot no oral questions/ Eurosceptic parties

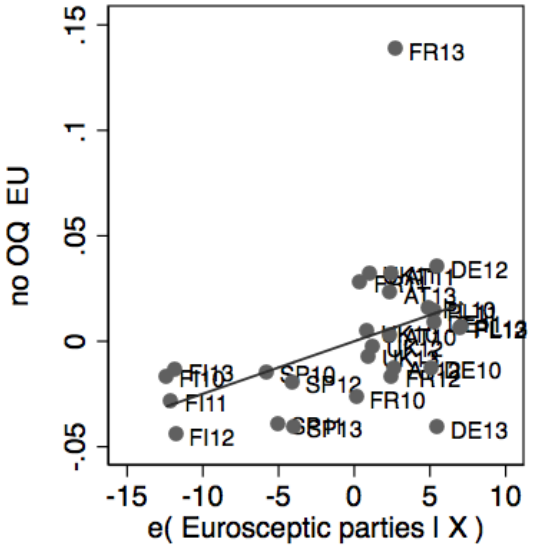


Figure 8 investigates the impact of Eurosceptic parties on oral questions a bit further. As the data shows, Eurosceptic parties in Austria, France, Germany and Poland are indeed responsible for a greater share of EU questions than would be expected based purely on their seat share (see the comparison in figure 9). However, opposition parties are generally more active than governing parties when it comes to oral questions – overwhelmingly so in the German Bundestag. More importantly, opposition parties are active question askers regardless of whether they are Eurosceptic or not, which explains the overall fairly weak impact of Eurosceptic parties on oral questions. Exceptions to the above are the Assemblée Nationale and the British House of Commons. In both parliaments, the governing parties are more active than the opposition parties when it comes to asking oral questions, and the UK House of Commons is also the only case where a Eurosceptic party is in government.

Figure 8: Share of oral questions by parties' government/opposition and pro/anti-EU status

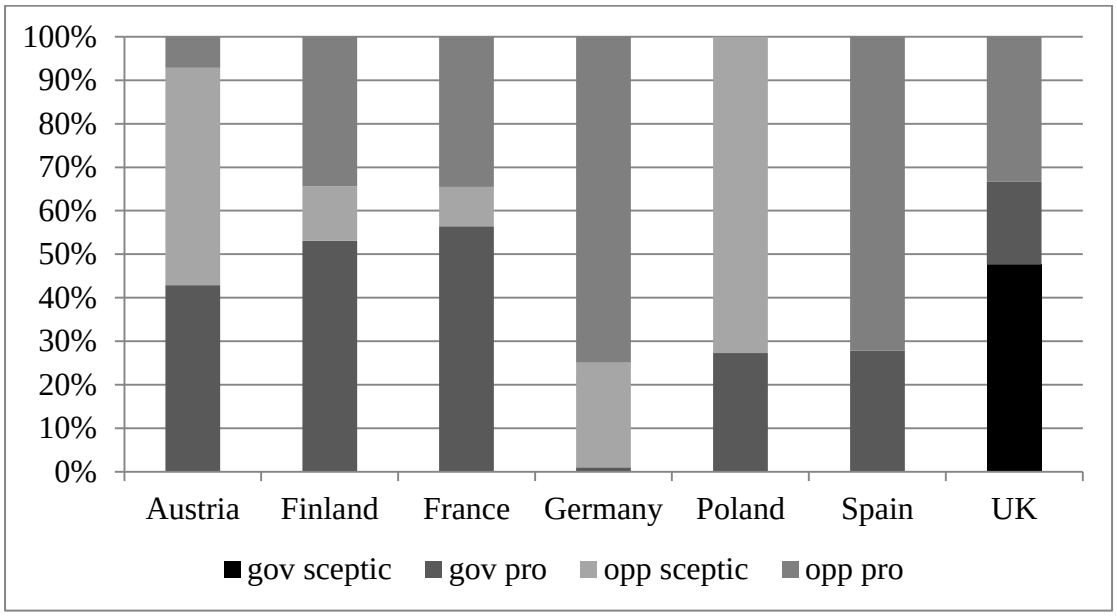
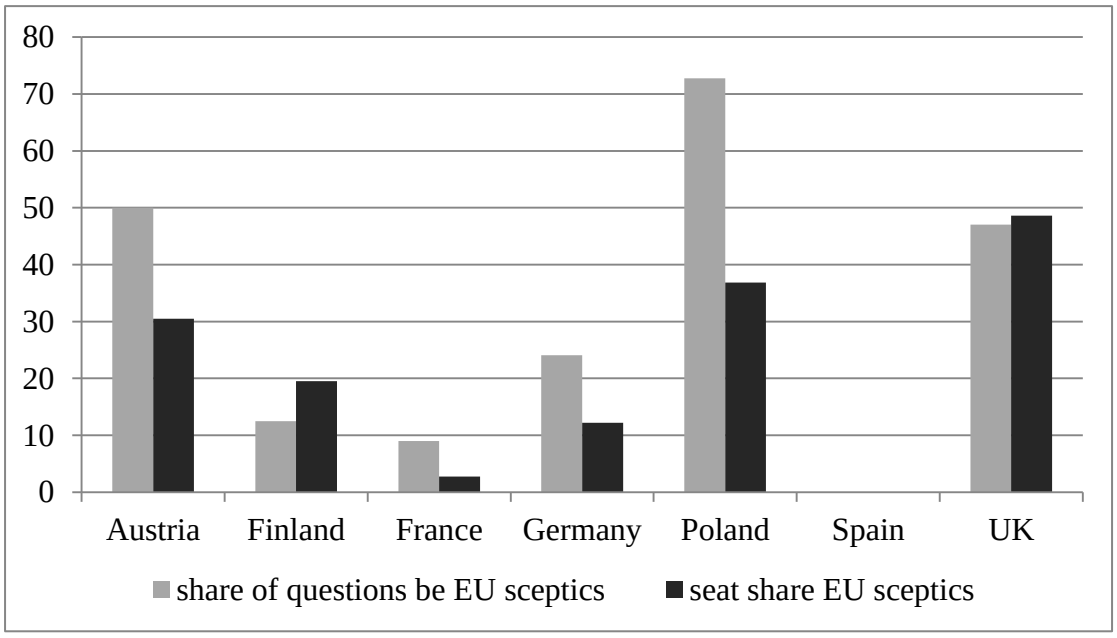


Figure 9: Comparison of seat share and share of oral questions for Eurosceptic parties



Overall, we have been able to confirm our hypotheses only to some extent. As expected, external contestation clearly acted as a catalyst for parliamentary communication activities. Our expectations about both, internal contestation and institutional incentives, in turn, were

only partially confirmed. Especially the impact of institutional oversight rights had a positive effect – the opposite of what we expected. Finally, these results also hold if we omit a number of outliers from the regressions. As table 3 shows, the strength of some coefficients changes slightly, as does the significance of some predictors. However, the results remain very similar.

Table 3: Regression results – outliers omitted

Variables	Oral questions	Share Oral questions	Number of debates	Percentage of plenary time
Formal oversight rights	-.131***	3.609**	8.045	26.771***
	(.016)	(.534)	(9.784)	(1.446)
Eurosceptic parties	.002**	-.014	.787**	-.198**
	(.000)	(.019)	(.166)	(.036)
Coalition dissent	-.062***	-3.127**	-14.761*	3.837**
	(.009)	(.830)	(4.978)	(.792)
Salience	.280***	.921***	5.364**	-.123
	(.002)	(.103)	(1.259)	(.155)
Public Euroscept.	.001**	.094**	.473**	.133**
	(.000)	(0.26)	(.082)	(.028)
Constant	*.055*	*-1.384*	*-21.204*	*-11.896*
	(.016)	*(1.342)*	*(11.533)*	*(2.494)*
R^2	.877	.670	.681	.809
N	26	27	28	26

Notes: Entries are coefficients with standard errors adjusted for 7 country clusters in parentheses, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Conclusion

Especially since the outbreak of the eurozone crisis, EU issues have gained in importance both for national politics as well as public opinion. Against this background, the aim of this paper was to analyse the impact of political contestation on parliamentary communication of EU affairs. We expected public communication of MPs and their parliamentary party groups

to follow the logic of political contestation, and we distinguished between electoral and institutional incentives for communication. Regarding the former, our data reveals that greater political contestation in public opinion has a positive impact on communication of EU affairs. In other words, across our sample of national parliaments a more 'constraining dissensus' acts as a 'catalysing dissensus' with regard to communication. Our results on the impact of political contestation within parliament, however, are more ambiguous: The presence and strength of Eurosceptic parties is surprisingly not a decisive factor for parliamentary communication, while disagreement between the governing parties decreases the overall number of communication activities. Overall, this does suggest that parliamentary contestation of EU issues does little to further parliamentary communication, and may even harm it in the case of internal coalition dissent. Finally, we can also not confirm that strong formal oversight rights in EU affairs come at the expense of parliamentary debates.

While this aspect needs to be analysed in more detail, our findings do suggest that they are influenced by the fact that our period under investigation covers the most turbulent time of the eurozone crisis. Parliamentary actors, both at the individual (MPs) and collective level (PPGs), reacted to greater levels of public Euroscepticism and especially the increased salience of EU issues. This is even true for institutionally strong parliaments that previously dealt with EU affairs mainly within the committees and provided little in terms of communication, such as Austria and Finland. Thus, at least with regard to the sheer level of communication efforts, our results support the findings in the literature on the politicisation of EU issues within national parliaments. Whether this is a more durable trend that will extend beyond the Eurozone crisis, is another question.

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