

Loose Bonds: The Members of the European Parliament as Regional Representatives in the EU

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“I spent most of my time making errands,” a Catalan MEP from the centralist *Partido Popular* commented on his term in the EP. This frank admission of the importance from ‘constituency service’ in the agenda of an MEPs suggest that scholars’ feverish search for regional interests in the European arena may partially focused on the wrong institutions.

The question of how regions participate in the integration process and to what extent they shape policy outputs has been a subject of considerable debate in the last ten years. Scholars interested in regionalism {Jones, 1995 #270; Keating, 1995 #274; Keating, 1995 #281; Loughlin, 1996 #334; Loughlin, 1997 #1234; Krämer, 1998 #469; Jones, 1995 #270; Keating, 1995 #274; Keating, 1995 #281; Loughlin, 1996 #334; Loughlin, 1997 #1234; Krämer, 1998 #469; Jones, 1995 #270; Keating, 1995 #274; Keating, 1995 #281; Loughlin, 1996 #334; Loughlin, 1997 #1234; Krämer, 1998 #469}, interest representation {Mazey, 1995 #366; Greenwood, 1997 #1040; Mazey, 1993 #1078; Mazey, 1993 #1082; Greenwood, 2003 #1097} as well as those in European integration theory {Marks, 1993 #352; Hooghe, 1995 #723; Marks, 1996 #357; Jeffery, 2000 #267; Jachtenfuchs, 2001 #258} have eagerly sought traces of regional interest in the Committee of the Regions, in the Directorates of the Commission, the numerous regional offices and lobbies and on the seats of the Council of Ministers. Until recently, the activities that regional parties pursue in the European Parliament have been largely overlooked {Raunio, 2003 #1691; Winter, 2001 #1724}.

My claim is that the members of the European Parliament, not exclusively, but particularly those belonging to a regional party play a central role in the regions’ interest representation strategy. Three main reasons back this claim: first, contemporary parliamentary representation always has a territorial dimension; most members of the European Parliament (MEPs) including those from the Spanish state-wide parties have links to a certain constituency, a city or a region. Secondly, the expansion of the EP’s powers has turned the chamber into one of the most influential actors in the European policy process, which since the early stages of the negotiation may influence policy-outputs in different ways. Thirdly, individual MEPs are endowed with an array of powers such as work in the committees and submission of questions most useful at the time of advancing or publicizing regional concerns. These three circumstances make the MEPs ideal regional representatives in the European arena.

This paper is part of a dissertation chapter in which I compare the opportunities the EP offers for regions and regional parties to advance their European agenda with those offered by other channels such as the CoR and the regional associations. The inspiration for this paper comes from the literature on regional parties {Acha Ugarte, 2003 #1722; Cortona, 2001 #12; Houten, 2003 #8; Lynch, 1996 #11; Lynch, 1998 #7; Lynch, 2003 #13; Méndez Lago, 2004 #10; Winter, 1998 #676} as well as from so-called parliamentary studies {Norton, 1993 #1568}. Additionally, I draw on a rich body of studies focusing specifically on the EP {Judge, 2003 #1545; Shephard, 2002 #1565; Shephard, 1999 #1566; Shephard, 1998 #1567; Farrell, 2002 #1584; Farrell, 2002 #1704; Hix, 2005 #1705; Hix, 2001 #1708; Bowler, 1995 #1709; Bowler, 1993 #1710; Scully, 2003 #1715}. Apart from this, I rely heavily on the twelve in-depth, semi-formalized interviews I conducted with MEPs between December and August 2004. Most interviews took place with parliamentarians involved either in regional or in audiovisual policy, two topics of great significance for European regions.

After this introduction, the paper deals successively with the powers of the EP, the territorial links of its members, and with the resources available to them to press forward regional concerns. The paper closes with a brief conclusion on the implications of further reinforcements of the EP’s powers.

Links between the MEPs and the regions

Since 1979 the European Parliament is a directly elected body whose members are appointed by every member states according to direct universal suffrage. Only some decentralized member states provide for regional constituencies and the norms regulating the European elections differ significantly from one member state to another and. Significant steps towards a uniform electoral procedure - as provided by the art. 138(3) Rome Treaty - were only taken in 1996, when the Amsterdam Treaty reduced the requirement for a homogenous procedure and when the UK held in 1999 its first European elections according to a proportional system. In 2002 the Council amended the 1976 Act which regulated the election of the European Parliament. The decision reinforced the commitment to a proportional common procedure, but left to member states the regulation of all further details, as long as the 'essentially proportional nature of the voting system' remained preserved. Therefore, member states are free to establish the site and number of the constituencies.

What do MEPs represent? To what do they owe loyalty to regions rather than to member states or political groups? Students of legislatures assume that parliamentary representation encompasses a territory. Although assemblies do not only stand for this kind of interests, territorial matters constitute - together with party, social, and functional concerns - one of the things MPs represent {Judge, 2003 #1545, p. 93}. On the other hand, the territorial link existing in all assemblies acquires characteristic traits in the EP, which stem from the unusual size of the constituencies and the diverse regulations existing in every MS for the elections to the EP.

Links between MEPs and the regions originate from at least one of the following circumstances: the overlap between the constituencies for European elections and the regional boundaries, the elections of an MEP in the list of a regional party, or the professional or personal links of a candidate with a specific territory, which in one-constituency member may become his or her unofficial constituency. As a consequence of these three kinds of circumstances and notwithstanding that the Treaty maintains that the EP consists of 'representatives of the States' (Art. 189 TEC), strong links exist in several member states between the MEPs and the regions. The virtuality of these more or less informal connections is guaranteed by the representative mandate, which the Rules of Procedure establish for MEPs (Rule 2). This kind of mandate guarantees the members' independence vis-à-vis the respective parliamentary groups, parties, and executives. Further, the weak leadership within the political groups and the distance to the party bureaucracies at home increase the independence of the MEPs {Kohler-Koch, 1997 #1569, p. 6}, which they may use to advance territorial interests through 'constituency service'.

The connections between the MEPs and regional interests are stronger and apparent in the countries where the constituencies overlap with the boundaries between the constituent units of a federal member state. From the six most decentralized European countries, this is the case in the UK, where Scotland sends seven representatives to the EP, and in Belgium, where the country is divided in four constituencies and three electoral colleges¹⁴⁸. The Dutch speakers from Flanders and Brussels elect fourteen MEPs, the Francophone from Wallonia and Brussels elect nine members and the German speakers one. In the Federal Republic, the CDU and the CSU benefit from the possibility of submitting regional *Landeslisten* and the remaining political parties present a federal list, although the SPD has been considering regional lists.¹⁴⁹

Evidence from survey and open-ended interviews confirm the robustness of the link between MEPs and regions, particularly in countries encompassing more than one constituency for European elections. Parliamentarians designated in regional constituencies tend to maintain more intense contacts with citizens, to spend more time doing work in the respective home country, and to consider the interests of individuals more important and less significant the representation of national interest. The answers obtained in several in-depth interviews I conducted in the EP and in the EU-affairs departments of several German regions confirm the findings of the 2000 MEP survey undertaken by Simon Hix and Roger Scully (Shephard and Scully 2002: 163-9). An MEP from the German conservative party CDU who was in the chamber in the 1994-1999 legislature and was elected again in 2004 pointed to the increasing importance of the links between the MEPs and the regions: "Low Saxony and Hannover are locations for the auto, chemical and insurance industries. I represent their particular interests but this was not so from the founding (*Grundsatz*)..." Although other parties such as the SPD and the *Grünen* do not use regional list, the connection between the *Land* and the MEP also exists for them... For example, an official working in the office of the PM from Rhineland-Palatinate spoke of the social democratic MEPs from RLP, implying the connection between these MEPs elected in state-wide list and the region.

¹⁴⁸ The information on the constituencies and legislation has been obtained in the official site of the 2004 European elections, <http://www.elections2004.eu.int>

¹⁴⁹ Members of the Bavarian regional office, of the European Popular party in the EP and of the SPD made comments in this respect.

Furthermore, the connection is so strong that civil servants from the RLP would approach the regional MEPs even if they belong to the opposition party whenever they think that the representative is in a position as to press forward regional interests.

In contrast to these member states, Austria and Spain have retained an electoral legislation which designates the whole country's territory a single constituency. This option weakens the links between voters and representatives, but favours large, state-wide parties vis-à-vis tinier regional ones. In Italy prevails a different solution for the definition of the constituencies. For the European election, the territory of this member state is divided into five constituencies grouping several regions. The French legislator established a similar system of eight constituencies encompassing several regions for the elections celebrated in May 2004. Alain Lamassoure, at present an MEP for the three Pyrenean regions, experienced the former one-constituency system and, after explaining how they used to be contacted by lobbyists from all corners of the country, underlined the difficulties experienced in the past when the French MEPs had to "play different roles," namely the representation of functional interests and of the territories they were attached to, in some cases by a dual mandate. Then, he added a comment which reveals to what extent the MEPs from a centralized country see themselves as regional representatives: "Now, it is far better. France is divided into eight constituencies. I am elected by ... representing the three regions neighbouring the Pyrenees ... eighteen departments... That means that we - my colleagues and I after being elected in this constituency - represent the airspace industry, which in France is based in Toulouse and Bordeaux, the wine industry, forestry..."

Being elected to the EP in the ballot of a regional party establishes a vigorous link between the member and that territory. In decentralized countries where there is a single constituency as in Spain, this mechanism provides regions and regional parties with an alternative way to place their representatives in the European chamber. Hence, regional parties across the European Union have seen European elections as an additional resource and as an opportunity to appoint more elected charges. In fact, some regional parties have been more successful at European than at member state elections {Lynch, 1996 #341}. Regional parties have traditionally supported European integration, since they consider (wrongly?) that the EU rather promotes than jeopardizes decentralisation, respects cultural pluralism, and most importantly, contributes to erode the member state {Lynch, 1998 #1383, p. 191}. The Spanish regional parties have manifested the importance they assign to the presence in the European Parliament demanding the central government the establishment of constituencies for the European elections overlap with the regional boundaries, an amendment which would facilitate their access to the chamber.

Finally, a link between an MEP and a territory may be a result from having developed his or her career around a conurbation, a province, or a region. In fact, a study of the MEPs elected in 1999 showed that about 50 of them were former regional representatives or regional PMs (Judge and Earnshaw 2003: 94). Additionally, approximately 29% of the MEPs had held or were holding regional and local elected offices in 1994; five years later the percentage was 34% (Marther 2001: 191). When former regional and local representatives are elected to the European Parliament, they are prone to maintain contact with the regional and local executives as well as with business interests and trade unions at home. For example, an MEP elected in the list of the Spanish conservatives, a party which defends a centralist conception of Spain, defines himself as "...a Galician MEP elected in a Spanish constituency, but I am Galician and my gravity centre is Galicia, therefore I orientate myself towards the Galician interests, of course. This does not depend from the constituency." Another, Madrid-born member of the PP explained in an interview that he entered into the PP list for the European elections to substitute a deceased colleague native from the Canary Islands. As a consequence, the successor spent the following years travelling to the islands on a weekly basis; his engagement for the autonomous communities led him to successfully advance a reference to the European outermost regions in the Amsterdam Treaty.

These two examples are more than anecdotal. In fact, the two largest Spanish parties exploit existing personal or professional links or create new ones between the MEPs and specific autonomous communities. Their objective is to obtain party lists to the European Parliament including candidates from all autonomous communities. Since accession in 1986, four European elections under the single-constituency system have been celebrated in Spain and voters expect the parties to introduce someone from their regions. Accordingly, the local newspapers scrutinize the list seeking for the candidate to the MEP for the corresponding autonomous community¹⁵⁰. The practice of including candidates from diverse areas is habitual in many member states whose legislation does not provide for regional constituencies (Corbett 1998: 79).

¹⁵⁰ See *Andaluces en las listas* in El País 07.06.04, Sevilla edition.

The Reinforced Powers of the EP cooperation to co-decision (Goehring 98).

The sway of the EP over European politics expanded during the period of reforms which the Single European Act initiated in 1987 {Corbett, 2000 #1547@105} {Shephard, 1999 #1566@149}. In the late 1980s, the new versions of the treaty reinforced EP's powers by introducing the assent and the cooperation procedures. In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty regulated a new co-decision procedure, which the Amsterdam Treaty simplified and widened in its scope. As a result of these changes, the EP has increased its legislative powers dramatically and has moved from being an advisory body to being a co-legislator. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the EP does not participate in several of the Community's fundamental policies such as agriculture, competition, the negotiation of external trade agreements, which are central to the Common commercial Policy, and the European Monetary Union, which was the only field member states did not upgrade from

Thanks to its lawmaking-powers, the EP may influence EU-legislation in five different ways (Nugent 197-8). Firstly, the chamber participates in policy discussions with the Commission ahead of the publication of a proposal; sometimes during these discussions the ideas of an EP-committee will be commented with Commission's members. Secondly, the EP may also prepare its own-initiative reports, some of which include calls for legislative proposals. These calls do not bind the Commission, which makes them mostly ineffective and their number has declined. Instead, the EP may resort to the Art. 192 TEC, which allows the EP to request a proposal from the Commission if the chamber deems a Community act necessary for the implementation of the Treaty. The Commission would have difficulties not to react to a request of this kind enacted by the EP, but absolute majorities to pass such a request are difficult to obtain and this resource has been sparsely used. In the third place, the EP may introduce new budgetary lines because the Commission and the Council are bound by a political agreement to create a legislative base for the lines created by the EP. However, this tool works only if the Commission and the member states represented in the Council agree to collaborate with the chamber, since they could otherwise resort to the European Court of Justice where they would have good chances of getting the Court to declare illegal the budget lines. Fourthly, the EP may exert some direct influence on the Commission's annual legislative programme, which the MEPs and the Commission officials discuss after its publication in November and before the plenary emanates a resolution on the programme before the end of the year. Finally, and most importantly, after 1992 the EP bears on important EU-legislation thanks to the new procedures introduced by the treaties and in particular with regard to acts passed according to assent or co-decision (see Nugent 199-201 and Goehring 97).

The Parliament's capacity to influence legislative outputs varies with the relevant procedure and from one policy-field to another (Shephard 1999: 146; for a list of subject and the relevant procedure {Corbett, 2000 #1547}). Beyond a mere scrutiny of relevant legislation, scholars have analysed the actual use that the EP makes of its powers. This task involves a number of difficulties, the most important of which is to estimate the significance of the amendments introduced by the EP since many are of technical nature and the Council may accept them only after a compromise; on the contrary, other amendments may modify the essence of an amendment to a larger or a lesser extent. In spite of these difficulties, Neill Nugent, a scholar of European politics, concludes that the EP occupies a central position in the legislative process within the Council and the Commission and that the chamber has modified decisively many proposals with a highly political content (Nugent 202-3). Although he acknowledges that the influence exerted by the EP varies according to procedure and policy field, Mark P, Shephard assigns the chamber a central role in the legislative process (1998: 167). Finally, and with regard to the co-decision procedure, it seems appropriate to claim that the EP is "a genuine co-legislator with the Council..." (Judge and Earnshaw 2003: 291). Thanks to the increased powers of the EP, the ability of MEPs to introduce regional interests in the legislative process grows as well as the attractiveness of the EP as a channel to publicize regional concerns.

The Resources Available to the MEPs

The EP offers its members different resources they may use to advance regional concerns. MEPS may respond to the preferences of their constituent by voting in the chamber according to the perceived preferences of their electors (policy responsiveness) and by advancing specific interests of individuals, business associations and trade unions (constituency service) (Norton and Wood 1993, Ch. 1). This section explores the means accessible to MEPs to fulfil these two functions in a way beneficial to their constituencies.

To obtain the maximal advantage of the opportunities offered by the EP, regional parties must belong to one political group. In fact, the European Free Alliance in the EP was born in 1979 with the aim of facilitating the access of regional parties to the European Parliament in order to form a regionalist political group, which "was seen as being the best strategy for advancing regionalist demands and

interests within European institutions.” {Lynch, 1998 #1383@194} However, not all regional parties have become members of the EFA-promoted groups: Rainbow (1984-1994), Radical (1994-1999) and of the Greens-EFA (1999-). In reality, the importance of the regionalist element of the group decreased in 1994 and an informed observer like Tapio Raunio has pointed out that belonging to a divided and tiny group like EFA may be counterproductive for a regional party {Raunio, 2003 #1691}.

The main reason why some regional parties shun membership in the EFA is that they see themselves as dominant parties in their respective home regions. As a consequence their MEPs preferred to become members of the mainstream groups of the EP {Lynch, 1998 #1383}. Most importantly in the context of my research is the case of the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, a Christian-Democratic party which integrated in the European Popular Party. Around 2000, and as a result of the difficulties derived of belonging to the same group as the Spanish Popular Party, the PNV integrated in the Greens/EFA. Michl Ebner, from the MEP from the *Südtiroler Volkspartei*, has remained in the EPP instead of integrating in the EFA. In a similar way, some Catalan conservatives have been part of the ELDR. However, some political parties of certain relevance for my research are or were part of the EFA, such as a Basque member from *Eusko Alkartasuna* and several others from *Ezquerria Republicana de Catalonia* and *Bloc Nacionalista Valencia*.

Engaged MEPs may exert a decisive influence in the EU-decisions through their work in the committees {Corbett, 2000 #1547; Morcillo-Laiz, 2005 #1581}. Admittedly, it is complicated for a single member in a Parliament with several hundreds of seats to advance his or her regional constituency's concerns. However, members well-placed in a committee, such as the President, the rapporteur and the chiefs of the political groups, may enjoy from those opportunities are the target of intense lobbying {Shephard, 1999 #1566}, as the case of the Galician MEP Daniel Varela (EPP) shows. The Galician rapporteur of the ERDF amended the proposal of the Commission in order to include in the regulation two elements clearly beneficial for his region, namely the possibility of financing tourist infrastructure and the reinforced attention to peripheral areas. To claim that rapporteurs with territorial links may incorporate regional concerns to their drafts reports does not imply that they are in a position as to warrant that the provisions will be retained in the final decision or that their amendments will be accepted by the Parliament and the Council. Rather, some MEPs choose a committee where they perceive a 'constituency advantage' {Corbett, 2000 #1547} and they wait for an opportunity to advance the regional interest either as rapporteurs or introducing amendments to the draft report. Here, if the rapporteur encounters a number of MEPs with strong regional roots or with a similar stance, as it may be the case in the regional policy or in the cultural policy committee, he or she will probably have to make concessions to the regional interests, since the rapporteur is "the servant of the committee, not their Group" {Corbett, 2000 #1547}.

In the committees, all members hold are in a position to defend regional interests. All committee members are allowed to introduce amendments, a prerogative which in the plenary only groups and coalitions of 32 MEPS possess. Although no guarantee exists of the amendment being approved, the presentation of amendment opens new ways of publicity and of damaging political rivals. For example, as the reform of the Commission's proposal for the structural funds presented in 1998 suppressed the community initiative CONVER, the regional government in RLP contacted Ralf Walter, a SPD-MEP from the region who was at the time a member of the Committee for Regional Policy. In the preceding programming period, RLP had benefited from CONVER, which tackled the problems associated to troops withdrawal from European regions. Accordingly, Walter introduced amendments to the Commission's proposal, in order to avoid the disappearance of the CONVER or, at least, some support aimed at regions such as RLP troubled by the disappearance of military bases.

MEPs may increase their effectiveness, or at least the publicity levels of their interest representation efforts, by becoming members of one of the numerous intergroups. These are clusters of MEPs sharing interest for a certain topic, but integration in an intergroup does not imply necessarily to gain access to additional resources from the European Parliament such as more question time or funding, although some intergroups receive support from political groups and lobbies. These clusters of MEPs do not possess an official status, with the only exception of the Elected Local and Regional Representatives created in 1981. Participation in the intergroups constitutes an opportunity for MEPs to organise coordinated action and to publicize more widely their concerns or demands. Additional groupings with obvious regional relevance are the stateless nations, regional and minority languages and the audiovisual intergroups.

Written questions are resources available to all MEPs and, although their effectiveness may not affect the actions of the Commission or the Council, it possesses particular significance for members engaged in the defence of minority interests, as the regional ones are often in the chamber. The reason is that the right to introduce written questions assists to every MEP, who may submit one priority question

every month, which should be answered by the recipient in the next three weeks, and unrestricted number of non-priority questions which should be answered before six weeks (Judge and Earnshaw 235). The Rules of Procedure also prevails for oral questions, which the Commission answers in one week and the Council in three; they may lead to a debate. However, in the case of oral questions, there is no room for manoeuvre for individual MEPs, because according to Rule 42 only a committee, a political group or 32 MEPs may table an oral query. Additionally, the RoP prevail a 60-minute and a 90-minute period for questions to the Council and to the Commission during plenary sessions. These mechanisms, which faintly resemble the British 'question time,' have been superseded by the establishment of parallel, but briefer, scrutiny arrangements during the sessions of several committees. Oral questions may only be tabled by a committee, a political group or 32 MEPs; hence, individual MEPs representing regional interest can only introduce them only with the support of other members. One of the uses MEPs give to written and oral questions, as well as to the debates, is making 'constituency points' and publicizing "grievances experienced by their electorates" (Judge and Earnshaw 237).

Service responsiveness, one of the measures of parliamentary representativeness, consists of MEPs assuming tasks in the immediate benefit of their constituency. MEPs assume this role when they use their (more or less) privileged position in the European arena to buttress a regional industrial or economic project, but also by the introduction of parliamentary questions. For example, during the 1994-9 legislature the Catalan MEP Joan Vallvé introduced numerous written questions to the Commission with regard to the extension of the Ibiza airport. According to his own words, these activities derived not from his ecologism but were triggered by his network in the Balearic Islands. At the time, the Catalan coalition *Convergència i Unió* had assumed the European-policy concerns of a group of a minor social democratic party from the Balearic islands, whose members prompted Vallvé to raise the issue in the EP. Yet, service responsiveness is not a privilege of MEPs from regional parties.

The Catalan MEP from the *Partido Popular* I mentioned at the beginning of this paper admitted to have contacted members of the Commission to ensure support for bids for funding benefiting his region. The projects he supported included an Olympic swimming pool in Mataró and cloister in Girona. It is interesting that he used the contacts the party provided him to advance Catalan concerns. For example, he would get hold of the PP-member and Commissioner at the time Marcelino Oreja to identify the officials responsible for a topic of importance for Catalonia.

Engaged MEPs may advance regional interests through a number of mechanisms. Some of them bear immediately upon policy outputs such as the preparation of legislative reports and the work in the committees. Other instruments available to MEPs like the introduction of written questions or the lobbying of Commission's decision-makers are for undertaking casework for the constituency.

Conclusions

The EP offers several regions a possibility to act in a co-ordinated fashion through their MEPs. Coordinating interest representation may also take place through sectoral, specialized associations, lobbying the Commission. The difference is that in the EP regional MEPs are mandated to participate in the decisions-making process. Whereas third-level lobbyists can merely make the case for the regions and depend ultimately on the goodwill of the Commission, regional MEPs have a voice and a vote in the outputs of the institution.

My research has shown the importance of the EP for the regions' interest representation strategies. This a distinctive claim because it adds an additional channel of interest representation to those identified by multi-level governance scholars {Hooghe, 2001 #245}. However, my contribution is not only relevant for theories of European integration; it also contributes to current research on lobbying in the EP and on regional parties. Whereas former scholarship provided partial quantitative evidence of territorial aspect in the MEPs' work, the material obtained in my qualitative interviews does not only confirm that hypotheses, but offers new insights on how the territorial link plays a role even for MEPs from state-wide parties in member-state with only one-constituency. Furthermore, my research places the focus on the consequences of parliamentary representation for the clout regional interests may exert in the European arena. In contrast, former scholarship on regional parties in the EU took the organization of parties as its dependent variable {Raunio, 2003 #1691; Winter, 2001 #1724}. Finally, this paper makes an original contribution by combining insights from scholarship on the internal operation of the EP {Maurer, 2003 #1720; Judge, 2003 #1545; Corbett, 2000 #1547; Corbett, 1998 #1549} with ideas from the research on the role of MEPs as representatives {Scully, 2002? #1573; Hix, 2001 #1708; Scully, 2003 #1715}.

On balance, after the expansion of its powers the EP offers the regions, to a greater extent than other extra-state channels, the possibility of participating in European politics in a more visible way, through an institution whose function is to publicize discussions. This allows regions not only to articulate their demands in the European public sphere, but also to achieve symbolic successes and, occasionally, to shape legislation.

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