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From Constituency to Continent? Measuring the Shift of Territorial Representational Focus in MEPs' Parliamentary Activity (1994-2024)

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Abstract

As a supranational legislative institution, the European Parliament (EP) is known to put a particular pressure on its members (MEPs) when fulfilling their mandates. MEPs are famously known for being “the servants of two masters”, i.e. they must serve the interests of their domestic (s)electorate from the territorial districts they were elected in, while being loyal to their European party groups in the EP. This situation is particularly challenging when MEPs face conflicting interests from competing principals. Yet, this situation is not specific to the EP but rather reflects the inevitable “compounded representation” at the heart of federal political systems. In these systems, there is a trade-off balancing “self-rule” with “shared rule” as federal systems present parliamentarians with a classic representational dilemma: standing up for their specific constituency versus addressing the broader interests of the wider polity. This research note analyses how MEPs balance this compounded representation in their parliamentary activity. Because of the continuous extension of EU policy-making powers over the last decades (Maastricht 1993, Amsterdam 1999, Lisbon 2009), along with the institutionalization and empowerment of the EP in the decision-making processes, this analysis is of particular interest for both scholars of European and legislative studies. Have MEPs been shifting their territorial focus as the influence of the EP was increasing? On the opposite, do they remain foremost representatives of national interests? To answer these questions, we introduce a novel conceptualization of territorial representational focus, operationalizing it as a spectrum ranging from localized (constituency-focused) to polity-wide (supranational European) representation. Drawing on a comprehensive dataset spanning three decades (1994–2024) and encompassing the careers of 3,654 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who tabled 187,612 parliamentary questions, we present the first systematic measurement of territorial representational focus in parliamentary activity. For that task, we leverage several natural language processing (NLP) techniques, transformer-based models and Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) capabilities. Our findings reveal how territorial focus in MEPs' questions evolved over time while varying across policy domains, EPGs, countries and MEPs' seniority. Overall, our approach lays the groundwork for future research by offering a new empirical tool to study territorial representational tensions in MEPs' parliamentary behaviour.

Keywords: European Parliament, MEPs' parliamentary Behaviour, European integration

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1. Introduction

Like any other legislative institution, the European Parliament (EP) is made up of elected representatives (MEPs) who seek to act in the interests of the (s)electorate who (s)elected them in their home territorial districts. In the EP, MEPs have to serve the interests of their domestic (s)electorate while balancing them with the European positions of the political group to which they belong in the EP. As famously described, MEPs are “the servants of two masters”. This situation is particularly problematic when MEPs face conflicting interests from their competing principals (Hix, 2002). The MEPs’ conflicting allegiances to two principals are, however, not unusual for scholars of regionalism and federalism. After all, in most types of multilevel federal systems, representatives are elected in subnational districts to serve in the national parliament. MPs inevitably face conflicting territorial interests (especially in regions with strong sub-national identities and ethno-regionalist parties) when coordinating national policy-making processes with the national parliamentary group. In other words, there is an inevitable trade-off in federal systems which leads to compounded representation at the heart of the federal idea. In the EP, as in any other multi-level system, the way in which elected representatives choose to prioritize allegiance to one principal over another has critical implications. As an institution, an EP populated only by MEPs focusing on their sub-territorial interests would arguably be undermined in its policy-making capacity for the broader Europe-wide interests. In contrast, MEPs cannot ignore territorial specificities, without risking undermining the trust and legitimacy of their sub-national (s)electorates.

In this research note, we contribute to the debate on representation in multi-level systems, and in the EP in particular, by analysing the territorial representational focus of MEPs in their parliamentary behaviour. Because of the continuous extension of EU policy-making powers over the last decades (Maastricht 1992, Amsterdam 1999, Lisbon 2009), along with the institutionalization and empowerment of the EP in the decision-making processes, this analysis is of particular interest for both scholars of European and legislative studies. Have MEPs been shifting their territorial focus as the EP’s influence was increasing; or do they remain first and foremost representatives of national interests? Are EPGs, Countries, MEPs’ ambition and even policy domains confounding factors that enhance or moderate the differences observed?

To answer these questions, we present a novel measurement of territorial representational focus that spans from domestic (sub-national and national) representation to European representation. Following Kinski & Crum (2020) we, furthermore, distinguish within the European focus between transnational and supranational (truly European) representation. Our measurement of territorial representational focus in parliamentary activity uses several natural language processing (NLP) techniques, transformer-based models and Retrieved-Augmented Generations capabilities. Our new measurement covers seven types of territorial focus (sub-national and national, forming the domestic focus; European transnational and European supranational, constituting two aspects of a European focus; finally, international, mixed, and non-territorial focus). We apply the new measurement scale on a comprehensive dataset spanning three decades (1994–2024) and encompassing the careers of 3,654 MEP’s parliamentary activity. Our measuring of parliamentary activity covers the territorial. Focus of 187.617 written parliamentary questions. Our findings reveal how territoriality in MEPs’ questions evolved over time, while varying across countries, EPGs, MEPs’ career ambition and policy domains. They offer new insights into the dynamics of territorial representation in the EP. This research note contributes to a better understanding of the shifting dynamics of political representation and accountability within the EU’s multi-level governance structure. While this note does not aim to test causal relationships, it lays the groundwork for future research by offering a new empirical tool to examine the territorial representational tensions in MEPs’ parliamentary behaviour.

2. Territorial Representation Focus in Multilevel Systems

2.1. *Compounded representation and territorial dilemma for representatives*

The EU is conceptualized by the literature as a federal political system (some even conceptualize it as a quasi-federation). Federal political systems are designed to combine central and regional governments that engage in “self-rule” but do also share rule among them (“shared rule”) (Elazar, 1987, p. 5). Scholars have argued for a specific type of representation in federal polities: compounded representation (see Brzinski et al., 1999). The element of joint decision-making is central in the concept of compounded representation, defined as “the interaction between principals and agents under conditions of shared rule, in which multiple agents compete for and share authority in overlapping jurisdictions and are accountable for multiple constituencies” (Brzinski et al., 1999, p. 10). Compounded representation in multilevel systems is designed to represent the territorial diversity of a given polity, in which the resulting territorial conflicts are the inevitable trade-off at the very heart of the federal idea (Burgess 2006). Indeed, multilevel systems induces a classic dilemma for principals (voters) and agents (parliamentarians), namely how to construct accountability in a federal system? In the literature, the classic tension between representing the entire population vs. the specific constituency has been studied widely in many federal settings (e.g. Russo, 2021; Zittel et al., 2019). This scholarship has led to the identification of two different practical models of representation: the partisan representation, prevalent in many Western European countries and the individual representation that argues that MPs are individual agents or collectivist, representing the geographical constituencies that elect them – a representational type that is dominant among US legislators (Zittel et al., 2019).

In this wake, a large field of study has long analyzed the representation of constituency interests in the US Congress, highlighting citizens’ issue preferences (Erikson & Wright, 1980; Miller & Stokes, 1963). Analyzing congressional inquiries (Lowande et al., 2019) show that women, members of ethnic/racial minorities and veterans are more likely to represent their constituents, highlighting the importance of shared experience. Clinton (2006) shows that how responsive members of the US Congress are to their district voters depends, in part, upon the party. Outside of the US, other large federal nations like Germany have also received considerable attention. Zittel et al. (2019) argue that, in European countries, territorial representation can serve as a complementary strategy for MPs with a party-focused representation. They show that the degree of geographic representation in parliamentary questions in the German Bundestag depends upon the level of localness (connection) and on electoral volatility in the districts (Zittel et al., 2019). Further studies on geographic representation in Portugal (Borghetto et al., 2020) and Italy (Russo, 2021) emphasize the non-electoral factors as policy specialization as a main driver for picking up constituency topics (Borghetto et al., 2020) and highlight the importance of personal background and political experience (Russo, 2021).

The concept of compounded representation has been applied as well to the EU, both theoretically (Benz, 2004; Lord & Pollak, 2010; Pollak, 2014), and empirically. In the latter case, the effect of compounded representation has been studied regarding the role and behaviour of MEPs’ allegiance in legislative voting behaviour (Hix & Hoyland, 2013), their representational roles (Brack & Costa, 2013; Costa & Navarro, 2003; Farrell & Scully, 2010; Gherghina & Chiru, 2010; Katz, 1997; Wessels, 1999) and, more recently, regarding their parliamentary activity (Brack & Costa, 2019; Chiru, 2022; Chiru & Dimulescu, 2011; Navarro, 2010; Sozzi, 2016). We contribute to this literature by developing a tool to empirically test the implications of compounded representation, enabling us to map its change over time, and laying the groundwork for future research to test casual relationships. The previous studies analysing representation in the EP highlighted five groups of determinants of territorial

representational focus in MEPs' parliamentary, namely (1) variation over time due to institutional and political changes, (2) variation across parties/party groups, (3) variation across countries, (4) variation by policy domains, and (5) variation following MEPs' career ambition. If our new territorial representation measurement accurately describes MEPs' behaviour, we expect to observe variations in territorial focus according to these factors. This premise will allow future research to test more precisely specific causal mechanisms regarding MEPs' territorial focus in the EP.

2.1. Expectations for variations in territorial representations focus

First, we seek to assess changing patterns of MEPs' territorial specialization overtime because of **institutional changes**. The progressive institutional strengthening of the EP in its legislative, budgetary, and oversight functions represents a key development in the EU's democratic framework (Hix & Hoyland, 2013; Meissner & Schoeller, 2019; Rittberger, 2012; Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2005). Since 1957, the EP's role in lawmaking has massively expanded from a consultative position to a co-deciding actor, while its policy influence—including on budgetary matters—has grown through successive treaties (Mény, 2009; Shackleton, 2017; Vitrey de Gardebosc & Mesdag, 2019). This institutional evolution is also reflected in its increased authority over the Commission, both in the appointment process and, more recently, in the election of its president (Christiansen, 2016; Gattermann et al., 2016; Hobolt, 2014; Rittberger, 2012). Investigating variation of representation over time, Brack & Costa (2019) found no changes in MEPs' territorial focus between 2014 and 2016. However, we argue that the effect of institutionalization of the EP can only be observed on the long run. Our period of analysis (1994-2024) starts from the post-Maastricht constraining dissensus in the mid-1990s and continues over two major institutional changes in the early 2000s after the Amsterdam Treaty (1997/1999) and in the early 2010s after the Lisbon Treaty (2007/2009). We expect MEPs' territorial representational focus to vary over time with a shift towards a European focus (in comparison to a domestic representation) because of the increase of the EP's power and influence in EU decision-making processes. Furthermore, our period of analysis allows us to track the effects of a series of "critical events" in the 2010s and early 2020s (e.g. financial and Euro crisis, migration crisis, Brexit and Russo-Ukrainian War) which have potential for undermining the EP's process of institutionalization. While these observations might lead us to expect a drop in the European representational focus in the 2010s, there are also factors that could potentially counterbalance such trend. The EU's rather cohesive response during the COVID health crises and the current security/military crisis strengthen the EU and could cause MEPs to represent Europe rather than their country or constituency.

Second, building on Brack & Costa (2019), we expect variations according to **political party affiliation**. MEPs from small and Eurosceptic political groups have been shown to be more likely to have a territorial focus in their questions (Brack & Costa, 2019). Therefore, we expect to observe variations in MEPs' territorial representational behavior according to EPGs' access to decision-making in the EP (Aldrich, 2018). The basic argument being that MEPs from parties or party groups that are not pivotal in decision-making in the EP will focus on representing their domestic constituency rather than Europe as a whole. This control of EP's decision-making cover two main groups of EPGs. On the one hand, there are two (formerly) largest EPGs (EPP and Socialists) who were holding an absolute majority until the 2014 elections (inclusive). They used to form the 'grand coalition' effectively controlling decision-making processes in the EP. Other groups, on the other hand, remained only pivotal actors (e.g., the Liberals and the Greens, and arguably the Conservatives in most recent terms). Therefore, we expect the territorial focus of EPGs with limited influence on decision-making to be skewed towards domestic interests, given their weaker within the EP (i.e. the Radical

Left, the Eurosceptics and the technical groups). Furthermore, we expect that the changes in the fragmentation of European party systems affect territorial focus over time. In 1979, the EP included MEPs' delegation from 57 national political parties. By 2004, this number had nearly tripled to 168, reaching 212 by 2019. Beyond a general party fragmentation in favour of niche and entrepreneurs' parties, one of the notorious changes has been the increasing electoral success of Eurosceptics' parties (EFDD, ENF, ID) and more recently the (far-right) conservative parties. We expect the territorial representation to vary in favour of greater domestic representational focus with this rise of the Eurosceptic parties.

Third, we expect variations across **countries**. Previous literature has shown that MEPs from countries that are considered more in the periphery of Europe are more likely to have a domestic territorial focus in their questions (Brack & Costa, 2019). This finding can be explained by a connection between the geographic location of a country and the representational connection to Europe of its MEPs. Other studies have also highlighted the importance of country location (in this case 'accession') for representational behavior (Trumm, 2015). Building upon previous studies on the roles and behaviours of political elites and MEPs from Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) (e.g. Bíró-Nagy, 2016; Chiru, 2015; Semenova et al., 2013), we argue that the territorial behavior of MEPs elected from recently joined member states (EU13) is likely different from the former (Western) member states (EU15). Joining the EU later, the history of EU 13 countries differs fundamentally from the one of the former EU15 members: political elites of EU 13 countries look back on decades of socialism and only a recent democratic transition (Navarro, 2010). This could induce a greater representational focus on their constituencies and domestic interest for MEPs from these countries. However, countries differences induced by membership differences (time since accession) are meant to decrease over time.

Fourth, we argue that territorial representational behavior varies **by policy domains** (see Dodeigne et al., 2025b). The EU's policy scope and the related EP's power strongly differ across issue domains, increasingly expanding into core state functions (Winzen, 2016). While economic affairs are largely EU-regulated, security and defense policies remain largely national prerogatives. Accordingly, we expect MEPs to exhibit a more European focus on policies under EU regulatory power than on core domestic issues. The saliency of topics also affects (regional) representation in the EU (Tatham, 2012). Furthermore, we argue that institutional changes (e.g., Amsterdam and Lisbon treaties) affecting the power distribution between the EU and the member states should reflect territorial focus shifts over time in different policy domains. The Maastricht Treaty (1992/1993) likely shifted MEPs' attention to budget and taxation at the EU level with the completion of the European Monetary Union (EMU). Likewise, the Amsterdam Treaty (1997/1999) strengthened the EU's role in migration and security through Schengen and Frontex, encouraging a European focus on justice and home affairs. The Lisbon Treaty (2007/2009) established a framework for the internal energy market and interconnectivity, likely fostering a 'Europeanized' focus for MEPs engaging the Commission on the Green deal. Even in traditionally national sovereign areas (external affairs, security, and defence), the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and European External Action Service (EEAS) is likely to induce a mixed European-national focus in parliamentary behaviour. Similarly, increasing European influence is seen in research and innovation through programs like Horizon Europe, as well as in education, culture, and sports, where the EU plays a growing but supportive role in completion with member states' action.

Finally, we expect variation of representational behavior **across individual MEPs**. Several authors have shown that the age of the MEP and/or their political experience affect MEPs' territorial behavior (e.g. Bíró-Nagy, 2016; Chiru, 2022). Chiru (2022) showed that older MEPs are less likely to submit questions with a regional or national focus and more likely to act with

European attention. Following previous evidence, we expect that, due to increased socialization in the EP, an increase in time spent in the EP (i.e. MEPs' seniority) should be associated with an increase in European territorial representational focus. A further strong determinant of political behavior is the MEPs' career ambition (Hoyland et al., 2019). We argue that the territorial representational focus of an MEP should vary depending on his or her ambition to stay in the EP; or to use the EP as a stepping stone towards domestic politics because of his or her national ambition.

3. Methods and data

3.1. Data: MEPs' behaviour studied via written parliamentary questions (1994-2024)

The goal of this research note is to present a new measurement of territorial representation focus for MEPs' legislative behaviour. According to Hall (1996), legislative behavior covers 'what decisions to make' (i.e. voting behavior and amendments) and 'how active to be' (parliamentary activities in terms of attendance and written parliamentary questions). In this note, we specifically cover the latter dimension, focusing on MEPs' territorial representation in written parliamentary questions (WPQs). While previous studies have largely relied upon quantitative measurement of the level of activities (van Geffen 2016), the content of parliamentary behavior is surprisingly overlooked in much of the literature. The rich variety in the forms of parliamentary questioning (Sanchez and Wiberg, 2011), and the fact that it is used in all legislatures, makes it an interesting scrutiny instrument to study. Parliamentary questions in the EP serve several functions: they are used as an information-seeking tool as well as to control the European Commission, the Council and more recently, the European Central Bank. Other authors highlight the role of questions as a form of obstruction (Jensen et al., 2013) and a tool to promote MEPs' reputation among relevant groups (i.e. constituencies, interest groups, national party or the EPG) (Sozzi, 2016; Martin, 2011). In addition, parliamentary questions are described as a two-way information channel (Raunio 1996), as they can also be used to send information to the executive (Rozenberg and Martin 2011).

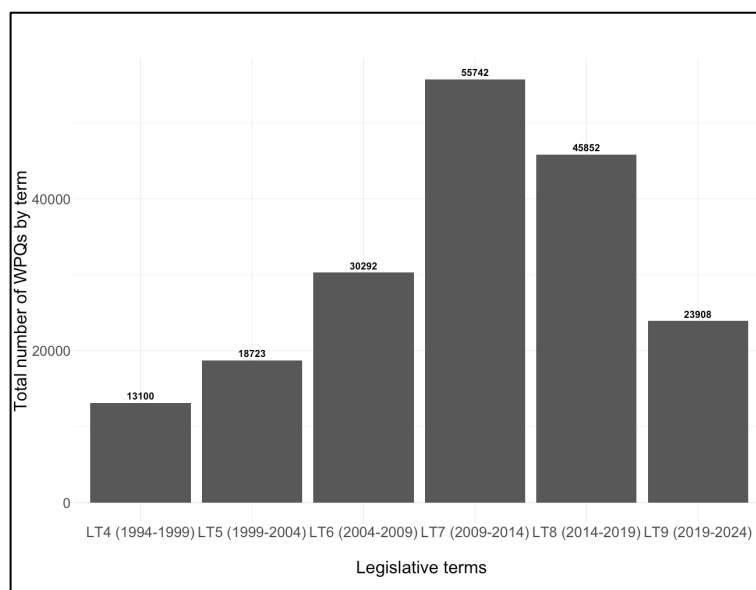
Overall, as argued by Rozenberg and Martin (2011), the analysis of parliamentary questions is a proxy to study MEPs' preferences. Recent studies have shown how it critically reveals territorial priorities (Chiru, 2022), or gendered specialization in policy areas (Dodeigne, Erzeel, et al., 2025). In line with this scholarship, we study WPQs to reveal MEPs' territorial priority in their legislative behaviour. Furthermore, as underlined by Navarro (2009, see also Brack and Costa, 2019), the procedure for WPQs in the EP has the advantage to be rather stable (at least until 2014), which allows comparison over time¹. Furthermore, WPQs permit to specifically analyse individual parliamentary behaviour because of (1) accessible at the individual level and requires little parliamentary effort or skills, (2) are relatively independent of control from the party leadership and (3) MEPs face few institutional constraints to use them (see footnote 2). Our dataset covers the entire set of WPQs tabled by MEPs between 1994 and 2024 (no archives available before 1994). The number of WPQs significantly rose from 1994 until 2014, with a peak during the 2009-2014 legislative term (which triggered modifications in the EP's internal rules of use of WPQs)². Our comprehensive datasets cover 187.617 WPQs over the last five legislative terms (see figure 1). As some questions are tabled jointly by multiple MEPs

¹ Defined in Article 130 of the EP's Rules of Procedure, there exist two subtypes of written questions: non-priority (E) and priority (P) questions. While the number of priority questions is limited to one question per month per MEP (until the 8th term), there is no limit regarding the number of non-priority questions an MEP could table (Priority questions shall be answered within a three-week period and non-priority questions within six weeks)

² Given the important increase in the number of questions tabled, modifications were introduced in the EP's Rules of procedure for the 8th legislative term (Brack and Costa, 2019). From July 2014 to December 2016, MEPs could ask a maximum of five questions per month. This number changed a second time during 8th legislative term (EP's rule of procedure of December 2016). The new limit was set to 20 WPQs over three months (i.e., 80 per year).

(6.9 percent of all WPQs), some analysis (e.g. variance by MEPs' ambition) are based on WPQs with single author only (93.1 percent).

Figure 1. Total number of WPQs tabled by terms (1994-2024)



3.2. Measuring territorial representation focus: a new empirical scale

The scholarship has empirically assessed the kind of territorial focus of MEPs' behaviour (Brack & Costa, 2019; Chiru, 2022; Kinski & Crum, 2020). While these studies offer valuable insights, their main limitations stem from the restricted time scope and/or limited sample sizes, which hinder the possibility of conducting a large-scale, systematic analysis of MEPs' territorial behavior. Recent advancements in Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques have significantly expanded the empirical possibilities. The rapid progress in NLP permits to overcome past methodological constraints, substantially increasing possibilities for very large-N corpus with greater accuracy and efficiency. For that goal, we combined Named Entity Recognition (NER) and transformer-based models (i.e. Llama 3.3-70B-Instruct), while relying on Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) capabilities of the GPT-4o model.

To determine the territorial focus of each WPQ, we analyzed the extent to which MEPs explicitly refer to domestic (sub-national or national), European, or international locations and identities. To identify and classify such references, we followed a structured approach of five steps (see Figure 1). First, we used a NER (Schweter et al., 2021) to detect explicit references in each WPQ. NER is a tool that automates information retrieval from text by predicting shallow semantic labels for word sequences. It classifies entities into four predefined categories: "persons", "locations", "organizations", and "miscellaneous". For our analysis, we focused on all words categorized as "locations" to capture geographical references.

Secondly, we retrieved 'unidentified' locations from the "miscellaneous" category thanks to a Large Language Model (LLM) (Llama 3.3-70B-Instruct) using a few-shot approach³ (Brown et al., 2020) to retain only identity-related references. Through this approach, 13.145 out of 56.333 entities in the "miscellaneous" category were classified as identity related. Overall, the

³ The base instruction prompt was as follows: "Analyze the provided input and determine whether a supra-national, national or sub-national identity is mentioned. You must answer exclusively 'Yes' or 'No'." This prompt was supplemented with eight examples.

first and second step yielded 38.772 place-related entities and 13.145 identity-related entities, resulting in a total of 51.917 classified entities (i.e. names of cities, lake, countries, villages).

The third step aimed to identify the country associated with each previously established entity. However, while LLMs have demonstrated remarkable performance across various NLP tasks – including classification, language translation, and text summarization – they often struggle with domain-specific inquiries and knowledge-intensive tasks. These limitations can lead to inaccuracies and irrelevant outputs. Identifying the geographic location of the retrieved entities is an example of such a challenge where LLMs still exhibit notable shortcomings. To address these issues, researchers have developed what is known as Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) (Lewis et al., 2020). This approach enhances the capabilities of LLMs by dynamically retrieving information from external knowledge sources and incorporating it into the model’s responses. By doing so, RAG mitigates the risk of generating unreliable information and significantly improves response accuracy (Lewis et al., 2020). We used OpenAI’s GPT-4o model (OpenAI, 2024) via its chat interface, which provides access to real-time web searches. This enables the model to generate more precise responses regarding the geographic location identified entity^{4,5}. To ensure the reliability of the model’s outputs, we conducted a manual review, with particular attention to entities that the model could not associate with a single country. Of the 51.917 entities identified by the NER process, the GPT-4o model successfully determined the location (country or supranational region/entity) for 46.609 entities.

The fourth step focused on identifying the electoral constituency for the European elections associated with entities exclusively linked to Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the UK – countries where MEPs were not (always) elected through a single nationwide electoral constituency. To determine which entities were associated with a single electoral constituency in each country, we once again leveraged OpenAI’s GPT-4o model RAG capabilities. Of the 13.490 entities previously identified in these countries, the model successfully linked approximately 86% to a specific electoral constituency⁶.

Fifth, after identifying the country for each entity (and electoral constituency, if applicable), we matched these references to the country (and, if relevant, the electoral constituency) with the MEP’s national delegation. This process allowed us to quantify, for each WPQ tabled MEPs, the number of references at different territorial levels: (1) sub-national, (2) national, (3) transnational European, (4) supranational European, and (5) International. Sub-national references were those associated with the electoral constituency where the MEP was elected, while national references related to the MEP’s home country. Transnational European references were linked to another EU country that is not the MEP’s home country, whereas supranational European references were those directly associated with the European Union as a broader polity. Moreover, (6) international references encompassed entities beyond European countries or the EU relating to external affairs (e.g. trade, development). Finally, a minor proportion of WPQs are simply tabled with (7) non-territorial focus (20.1% of all WPQs). Table 1 illustrates the final classification with examples for the different categories.

⁴ The base instruction prompt was as follows: *“I will provide several inputs. For each input, please identify the corresponding country. If you’re uncertain about any entry, indicate it as 'Unknown.’ Present your findings in a table format.”*

⁵ RAG capabilities are unavailable when accessing the model via the API, which relies solely on pre-trained knowledge without real-time retrieval.

⁶ The remaining cases spanned multiple electoral constituencies and were therefore classified as nationwide. However, the number of entities associated with a single electoral constituency varied slightly over time, as electoral districts and their geographic boundaries changed in some countries (e.g., the UK and Ireland). We accounted for these variations in our procedures.

For the sake of parsimony, our current analysis merge these categories into 4 main groups: (1) “No territorial focus”; (2) “Exclusively Domestic” (be they subnational or national); (3) “Exclusively European” (be they transnational or supranational); (4) “Exclusively International” and (5) “Mixed focus” (combination of any other reference). Table 2 provides the frequency of WPQs in each of these categories. The largest share of questions has an exclusively European focus (29,2%) while about one fifth of all questions have an exclusively domestic focus (18,2%). There is thus a significant gap towards European focus overall. Furthermore, a rather large share of international questions (18.0%). Finally, WPQs with mixed territorial representational focus are minor but noteworthy (14.3%).

Figure 2. Illustration of the methodological approach

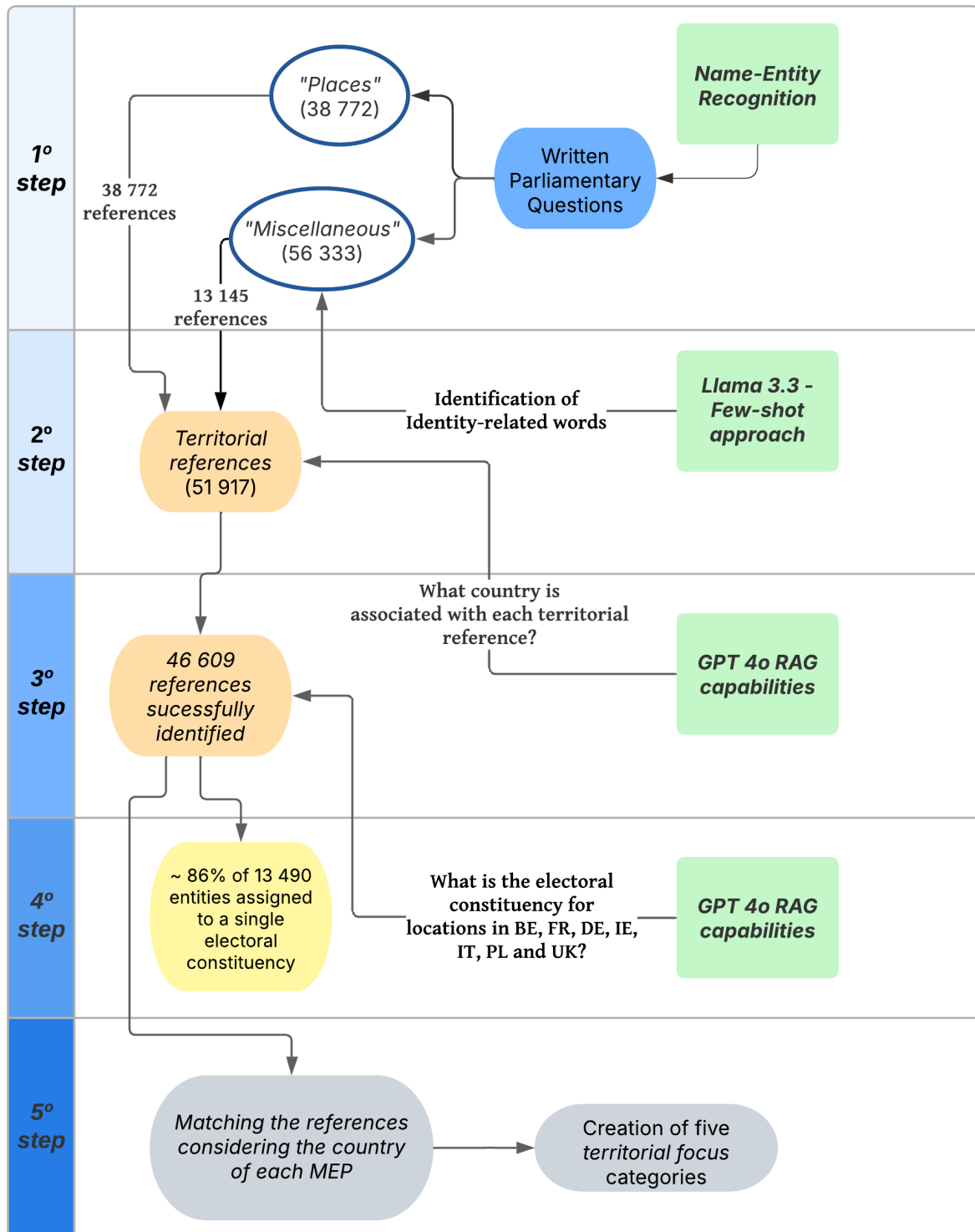


Table 1. Illustration of operationalization of territorial focus

Country of the MEP	References	Sub-national	National	Trans European	Supra European	International	Territorial Focus
<i>Netherlands</i>	Occupied Palestinian Territories; Israel	NA	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)	Occupied Palestinian Territories; Israel (2)	Exclusively international
<i>Portugal</i>	Madrid; Munich; Euro Area	NA	None (0)	Madrid; Munich (2)	Euro Area (1)	None (0)	Exclusively European (Transnational & European)
<i>Spain</i>	Madrid; Catalonia; Spain	NA	Madrid; Cataloni; Spain (3)	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)	Exclusively Domestic
<i>Belgium (Flemish electoral college)</i>	Lillo; Dessel	Lillo; Dessel (2)	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)	Exclusively Domestic
<i>Germany (Bavaria)</i>	Munich; Berlin; Madrid; EU-based; Italy	Munich (1)	Berlin (1)	Madrid; Italy (2)	EU-based (1)	None (0)	Mixed focuses

Table 2. Frequency of WPQs by territorial focus

Territorial focus	Number of WPQs	Percentage of WPQs
<i>Exclusively domestic focus</i>	34.137	18.2%
<i>Subnational*</i>	<i>N.A.</i>	<i>N.A.</i>
<i>National</i>	<i>34.137</i>	<i>18.2%</i>
<i>Exclusively European focus</i>	54.854	29.2%
<i>Supranational</i>	<i>29.574</i>	<i>15.8%</i>
<i>Transnational</i>	<i>15.441</i>	<i>8.2%</i>
<i>Both supra and transnat</i>	<i>9.839</i>	<i>5.2%</i>
<i>Exclusively International focus</i>	33.805	18.0%
<i>Mixed categories</i>	26.831	14.3%
<i>Non-territorial focus</i>	37.990	20.2%
<i>Total</i>	187.612	100%

* *Note:* Coding of this category is currently under analysis at this stage of the project.

3.3. Independent variables: variation over time and across EPGs, countries, policies, MEPs

For variation over time, our dataset includes information about the legislative term during which WPQs are tabled by MEPs (from the 5th term in 1994-1999 until the 9th term in 2019-2024). This period follows directly the Maastricht Treaty (1992/1993) while it includes two main institutional treaty modifications, namely the Amsterdam Treaty (1997-1999) and the Lisbon Treaty (2007/2009). Our dataset covers EPGs through the following categories: EPP, Socialists, Liberals, Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, Conservatives, Eurosceptics, and Non-inscrit & Technical. In a next version of this paper, we will match the MEP's national party affiliation with distinct measures of Euro-enthusiasm/Euroscepticism (CHES). Regarding variations by

countries, we make create a dummy variable distinguish membership of adhesion between EU15 member states (pre-2004 enlargement) and EU 13 member states (post-2004 enlargement). Furthermore, regarding, policy domain, we rely on Winzen et al.'s (2022) analytical framework which covers 22 policy domains. Policy classifications are based on both automated imputation of a policy dictionary (Dodeigne et al. 2025), and the RoQUEST dataset as part of the *Evolv'EP* project (Dodeigne, Hubert, et al., 2025). For our expectation regarding MEPs' career ambition, we use the *Evolv'EP* biographical data (Dodeigne et al. 2024), covering all 3,654 MEPs who served at least once during the first eight legislative terms from 1979 to 2019 (a current update is being finalized for 2019-2024). All subnational, national and European offices (be they legislative or cabinet offices) are recorded before and after time of service in the EP. Career realized ambition distinguish European career-oriented, domestic career-oriented, integrated career at both levels, short-termers and censored data without yet clear career orientation. Besides, we also directly measure MEPs' seniority in the EP as the number of months served in each terms when WPQs are tabled. Finally, for the regression analysis, our models include a series of control variables in terms that shape parliamentary behaviour, namely electoral systems (Sozzi, 2016) using COMEPELDA data⁷, and MEPs' age and gender (Chiru, 2022).

4. Empirical findings

4.1. Descriptive statistics: Variation of Territorial Representational Focus

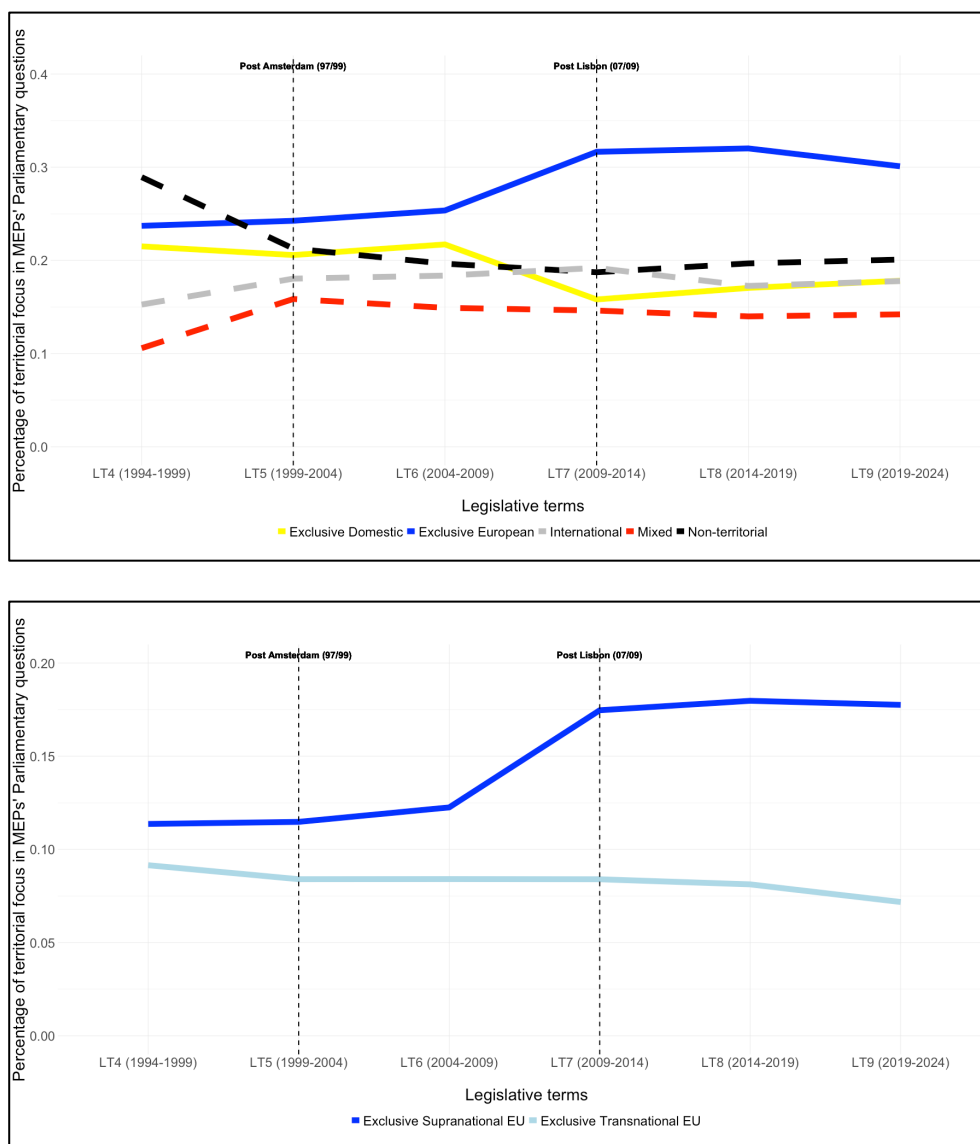
We now discuss the variations of MEPs territorial representational focus according to our five main expectations. For the sake of parsimony, we mostly focus on European and domestic representational focus (which is at the heart of the MEPs' dilemma). Figure A1 in the appendix provides additional information about variance for international focus. **First**, we consider **longitudinal trends as the EP has been empowered and institutionalized**. Figure 2 shows a clear increase in the European focus of the WPQs tabled by MEPs after Lisbon Treaty. This increase has reached a sort of plateau during the 8th term (2014-2019), and slightly decreased afterward during the 9th term. While European focus barely reached 23.7 percent of the questions in the 4th term (1994-1999), it became the most important territorial focus in the following terms, reaching the highest value in the 8th term (2014-2019) with 30.1 percent. Furthermore, we observe that this increase in European focus is mostly due to a pure European representational focus, not due to a transnational focus where MEPs would mention each other's members states issues in a sort of intergovernmental dynamic (Kinski, 2021). In line with our expectation of the institutionalization and empowerment of the EP, the supranational institution of the EP mostly deals with European matters and has limited concerns for domestic issues after Lisbon Treaty.

The growing emphasis on European focus, accompanied by a corresponding decline in domestic attention over time—particularly during the 2009–2014 period—might be attributed, at least in part, to the dynamics set in motion by the Eurozone crisis. In the countries most severely affected by the budgetary and economic crisis (Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Spain, and Italy), there was a notable decline in domestic focus, mirrored by a marked increase in European territorial focus (see Figures A2 and A3 in appendix). This remains valid when we focus solely on policy domains directly linked to the Eurozone crisis, such as budgets, taxes and finances. These shifts suggest that, at the height of the financial crisis, the political discourse of the MEPs from these countries was increasingly directed towards the European level, emphasizing the actions undertaken, proposed, or expected from key European institutions (European Commission, the Council, and the European Central Bank).

⁷ Däubler T, Chiru M and Hermansen SS (2022) Introducing COMEPELDA: Comprehensive European Parliament electoral data covering rules, parties and candidates. *European Union Politics* 23(2): 351–371.

However, we witness to a slight decrease of the European representational focus after 2019. This dynamic could potentially be an indication for the mentioned re-orientation of MEPs during the recent crises and/or the effect of the increased representation of Eurosceptic parties. As expected, we observe a decrease from 21.7 percent to about 15-17 percent after 2010s regarding WPQs with domestic focus. Other categories (international and mixed focuses) are relatively stable around 15 percent. Finally, we observe that the non-territorial focus largely drops after 1999 to stabilize around 20 percent. Overall, these descriptive stats corroborate our expectation regarding increase of European focus along with the institutionalization of the EP.

Figure 2. Evolution of MEPs’ territorial focus over time (1994-2024)



Second, on Figure 4 (left plot), we observe differences **across EPGs** in the expected direction (albeit often limited in terms of magnitude). The largest and most influential EPGs (EPP and Socialists) present the highest share of questions with a European focus amongst their members (with respective 32.9 and 30.5 percent, above the mean of 28.3 percent). The liberals that became a pivotal actors since the end of the Grand coalition also present the highest ratio in European focus (30.3 percent). By contrast, the least influential groups have the lowest share (especially GUE with 21.3 percent of European focus). Importantly, the picture is almost fully reversed true for the domestic representational focus by EPGs. MEPs from the EPP and Socialists present the lowest ratio of specialization in domestic focus, with 15.3 and 15.7

percent respectively. In contrast, the radical left focus twice as much in domestic matters (30.9 percent), which, however, be an effect of issue ownership. Indeed, WPQs related to budget and taxes rank amongst the highest percentage of domestic focus, which might explain the larger domestic focus of GUE-NGL MEPs. Likewise, environment and agriculture, which constitute core issues for the Greens, are the policy most associated with domestic specialization (25.6 percent are domestic framing, about twice as the average for other policies).

Finally, domestic specialization is much more limited for MEPs from Conservative and Eurosceptic groups (respectively 16.8 and 20.1 percent). In fact, Conservative-MEPs and Eurosceptic-MEPs present a considerable share of WPQs with European focus (respectively 26.8 and 28.4 percent). Although these trends may seem surprising, some may argue that is the *raison d'être* of nationalist-sovereigntist MEPs to specialize predominantly in European-centred WPQs as a way to criticize the supranational polity that they precisely oppose. Because our current analysis does not include a sentiment analysis of the type of criticisms, this cannot yet be verified with certainty. But our findings suggest that further analysis integrating the tone towards the targeted European level (or domestic level) should be systematically used (be they a positive, neutral or negative tone). Even with these cautious remarks, our descriptive statistics provide empirical evidence for our expectations about EPGs.

Third, Figure 4 (center plots) shows difference **across countries** (Figures A2 and A3 in the appendix, furthermore, present evolution in European and domestic over time for each country). Interestingly, this is where some of the most significant variance is observed. Contrary to what we expected, we observe that most of the Central and Eastern European EU13 countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Lithuania, Romania, Latvia, Estonia) have an above average European representational focus. We also find a mix of older EU15 states and EU13 (Greece, Hungary, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Cyprus, Italy), most of them in the periphery, to have the most pronounced domestic representational focus. This runs counter to our expectations with regard to the Eastern and Central European states and provides a possible indication of a periphery vs. centre dynamics.

Fourth, Figure 4 (left plots) presents the distribution of MEPs' territorial representational focus by **policy domains**. Policies such as environment, agriculture and fisheries, budget and education are the policies with the highest proportion of domestic territorial representations. Considering the redistributive nature of agriculture and fisheries policies towards domestic economic actors, this is probably not surprising to observe such a higher percentage. Policy areas such as enlargement, external relations, defense and trade are less frequent in domestic representation and more European in nature. This is not surprising for some of these areas as the EU has exclusive sovereignty (e.g. Trade). However, other typically predominant national policies (e.g. defence) are also clearly European. Regarding international focus, we observe without surprise that some policy domains are overrepresented (e.g. defense and external relations). The EU's policy-making power is, however, not static over time and display empowerment, including for the role of the EP in scrutinizing specific policy arenas. In this respect, Figure 5 confirms that whenever the EU/EP get more influence in a specific policy area, the European focus of MEPs have followed accordingly. This is particularly the case on the environment, for which we see a decrease in domestic representational focus and an increase of mixed (in line with the kind of shared rules between Member states and the EU for this policy over time). Likewise, as the Amsterdam and Lisbon treaties extended the EU's policy-making and influence in external affairs (including the scrutiny of the EP over the High representative of the EU as Vice-president of the Commission), we see a clear increase of European focused question by MEPs after 1999. However, the international geopolitics is also influential, as shown by the increased of international focus after the 2009 (and thus the relative decrease of European focused WPQs accordingly).

Figure 4. MEPs' European (blue) and domestic focus (yellow) focus by descending order across EPGs (left), Countries (center), and policy domains (right)

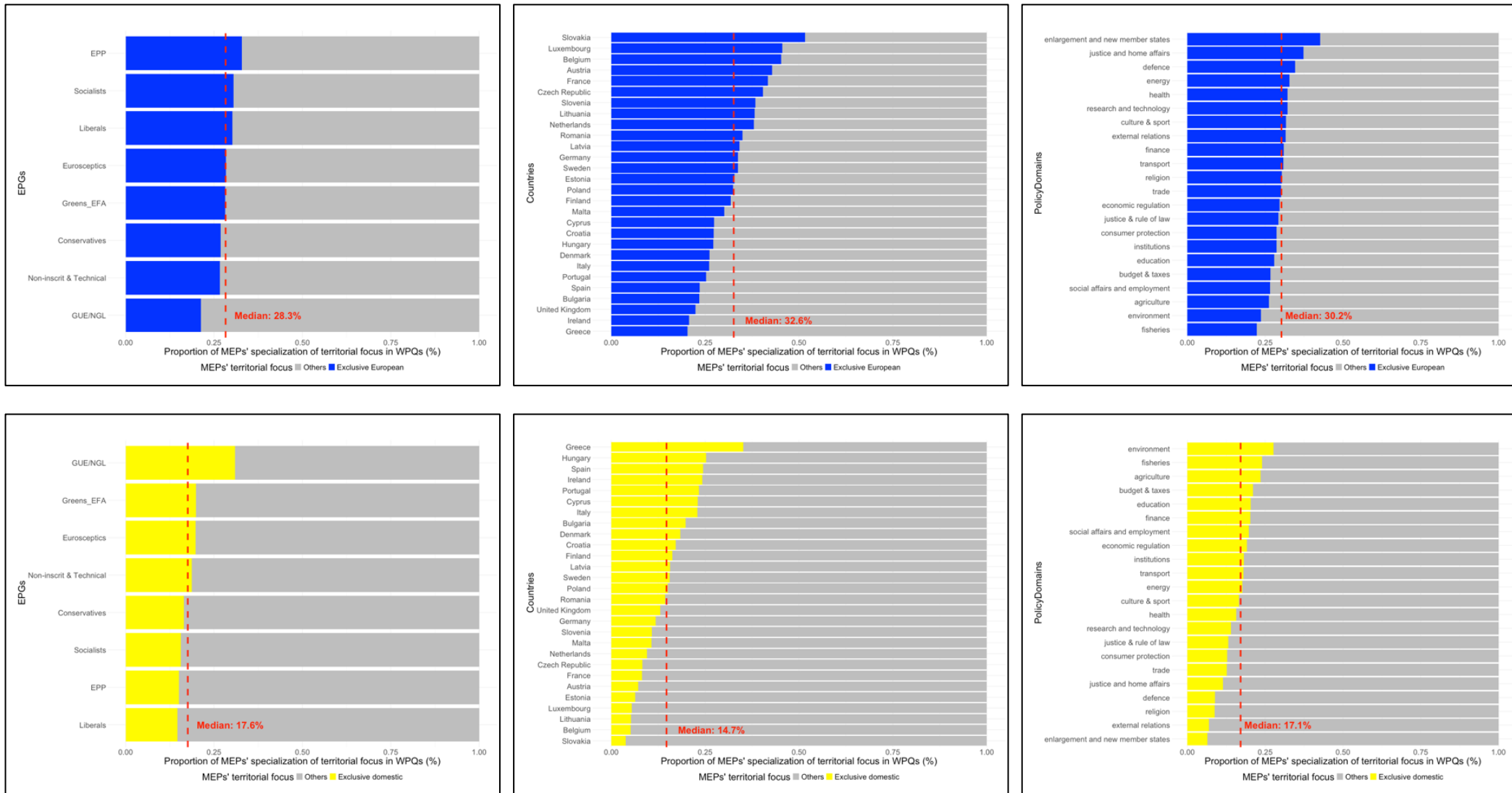
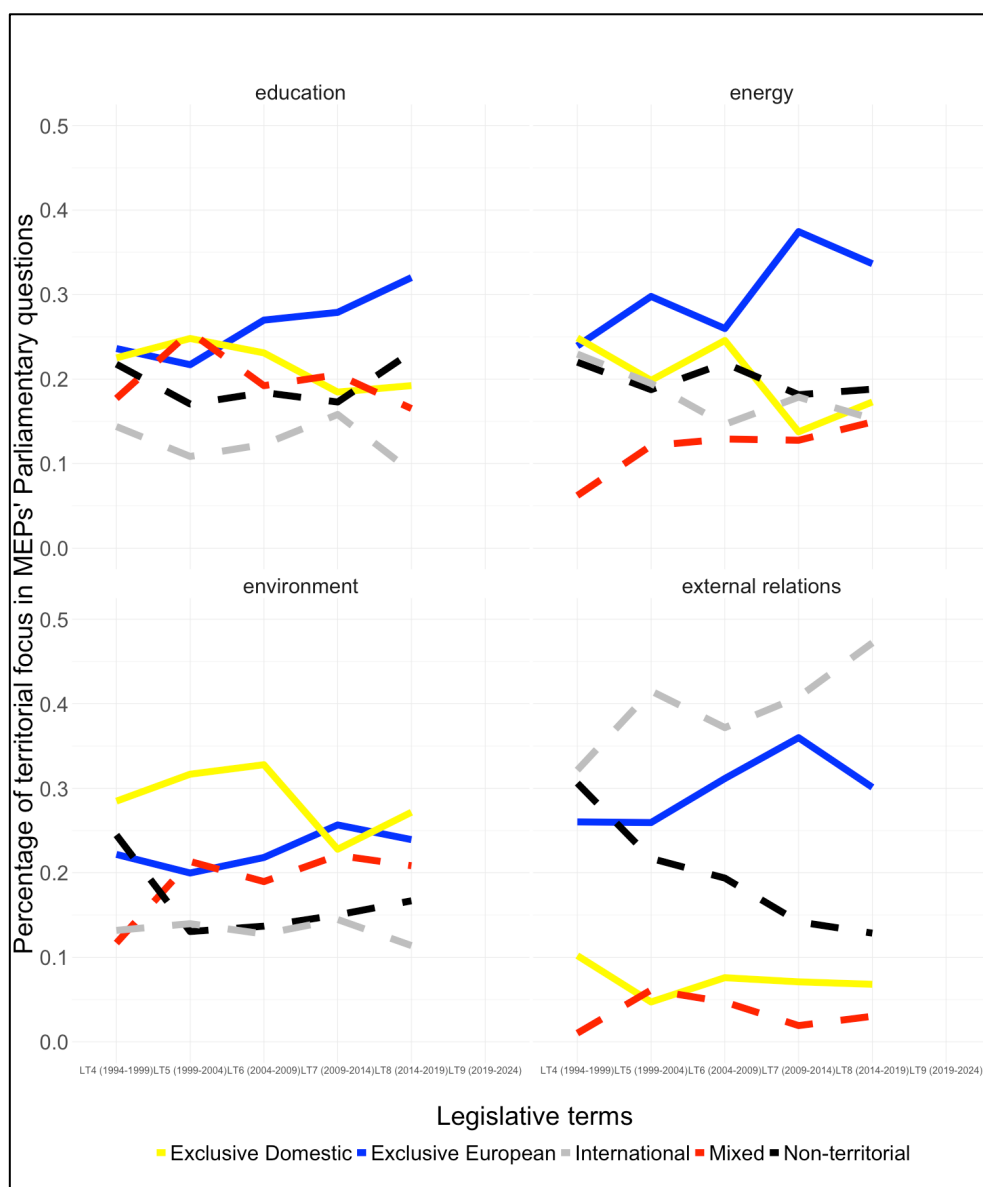
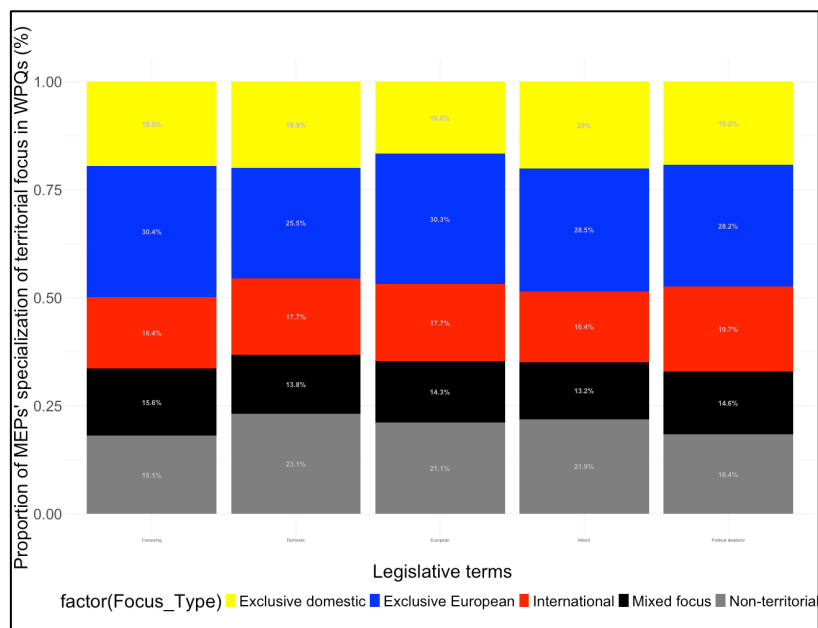


Figure 5. MEPs' Territorial focus by over time for selected policy domains



Finally, the analysis of **MEPs' individual determinants** of territorial representational focus. MEP's career orientation shows some differences across territorial specialization in parliamentary behaviour (Figure 6). In line with our expectation, we do observe that MEPs with European career orientation specialize slightly more in European focus (30.3 percent) and less in domestic focus (16.6 percent), while MEPs with domestic orientation present a slightly differentiated ratios (respectively, 25.5 percent and 19.9 percent). Likewise, we observe that European territorial representational focus tends to be slightly more prevalent amongst MEPs with greater seniority. For both indicators of MEPs' career orientation and seniority, differences remain however marginal – albeit statistically significant. They also reveal very large standard deviations (i.e. large differences of behaviour between MEPs with the same kind of career orientation/seniority), suggesting that MEPs' individual determinants can only be assessing while, furthermore, controlling for evolution over time across legislative terms, EPGs, and countries. This is what we do in the next section.

Figure 6. MEPs' Territorial focus by realized career ambition



4.2. Regression analysis

We now turn to multivariate hierarchical models which allow us to assess the impact of our factors 'all other things being equal'. Because those MEPs are elected in as many as 28 countries, and they serve over multiple legislative terms while they belong to various EPGs, our models account for the hierarchical structure of our dataset, and we estimate regression models with random intercepts. Because we are interested in the MEPs' parliamentary behaviours with two competing principals (national domestic electorate and European party groups), our dependent variable is the territorial gap regarding the predominance of European over domestic focus in MEPs' parliamentary questions⁸. Figure 7 shows that this creates a continuous variable from -1 (i.e. domestic predominant focus) to +1 (i.e. European predominant focus)⁹. The mean is 0.1 with a standard deviation of 0.4 (IQR is 0.4 and CV is 2.8). This variable tends to be normally distributed around the median value (albeit slightly-skewed).

Our model is the following:

$$Territorial\ gap_{ijk} = \alpha MEPs_{ijk} + \tau EPGs_{jk} + \delta Countries_k + \alpha_i + \tau_j + \delta_k$$

- $MEPs_{ijk}$ includes vectors of individual factors (*Seniority_{ijk}*, *Term of service_{ijk}* & *Gender_{ijk}*)

- $EPGs_{jk}$ includes a categorical variable to differentiate EPGs ($EPGs_{jk}$)

- $Countries_k$ includes vectors of Country factors (*Electoral systems_k* & *EU Membership_k*)

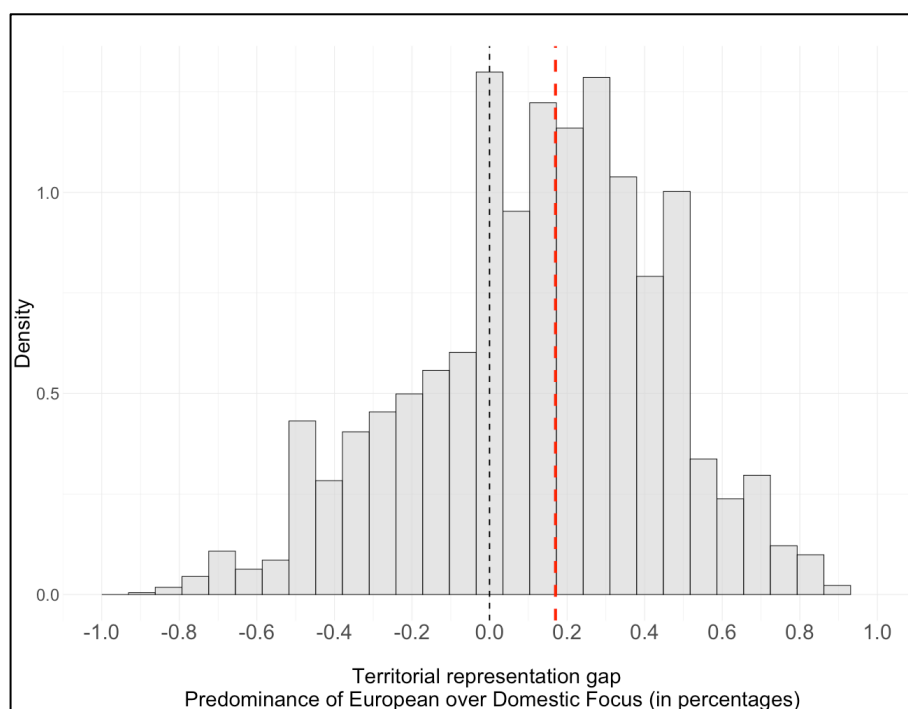
- $\alpha + \tau + \delta$ are the vectors of the coefficients associated to $MEPs_{ijk}$, $EPGs_{jk}$, $Countries_k$

- $\alpha_i + \tau_j + \delta_k$ are respectively intercepts for the levels of MEPs, EPGs and countries.

⁸ We also tested additional models with Beta regression assessing the effects of MEPs' specialization on concentration on European and domestic focus (0-100%), the results were highly consistent.

⁹ We might change this variable in future.

Figure 7. Density of MEPs' territorial gap (predominance of European over domestic focus)

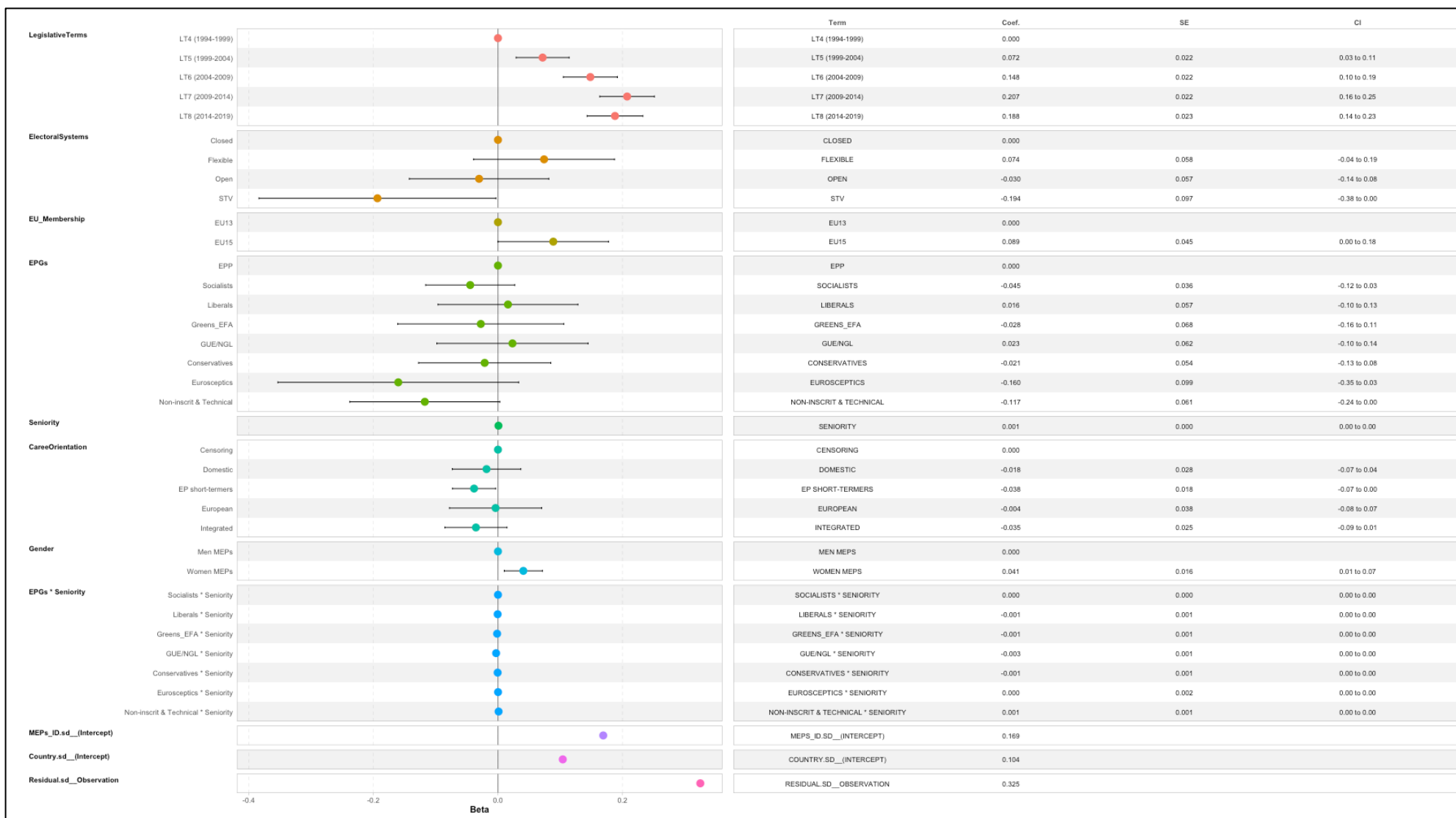


Legend: The dashed black line represents the absence of territorial gap, positive values on the right indicate predominance of European over focus while negative values indicate predominance of domestic focus in MEPs' parliamentary activity. Red dashed line represents the median value (0.17).

Table 3 shows the results of this model¹⁰. Even with a parsimonious model, a significant part of the variance in territorial gap is explained: the marginal R-squared and the conditional R squared are respectively of 8 percent and 33 percent. Besides, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) is of 27 percent – ICC indicates the proportion of the total variance of the random effect. This implies that a limited amount of the total variance is located at the MEPs-level (τ_{00} MEPs is the largest) and more marginally at country level (τ_{00} Country which about three times lower). Overall, the model confirms that the EP's legislative terms and the EPGs are two main key explanatory factors of the variance in the territorial gap. Seniority is also statistically significant, and even stronger when considering MEPs' seniority effect by EPGs (interactive effects). Regarding diagnosis, our models confirm that the goodness-of-fit is unmistakably better when considering the hierarchical structure of electoral competition. Yet, the model is underperforming because of extreme – albeit rare – parliamentary behaviour (i.e. MEPs' specialization only in domestic or purely in European representation). Therefore, our model underestimates observed data around the mean because of this extreme behaviour. This issue creates residuals that are problematic. However, the results are very consistent even excluding extreme behaviour from our dataset while the model fit is much better (see Figure A6 with posterior predictive checks in appendix).

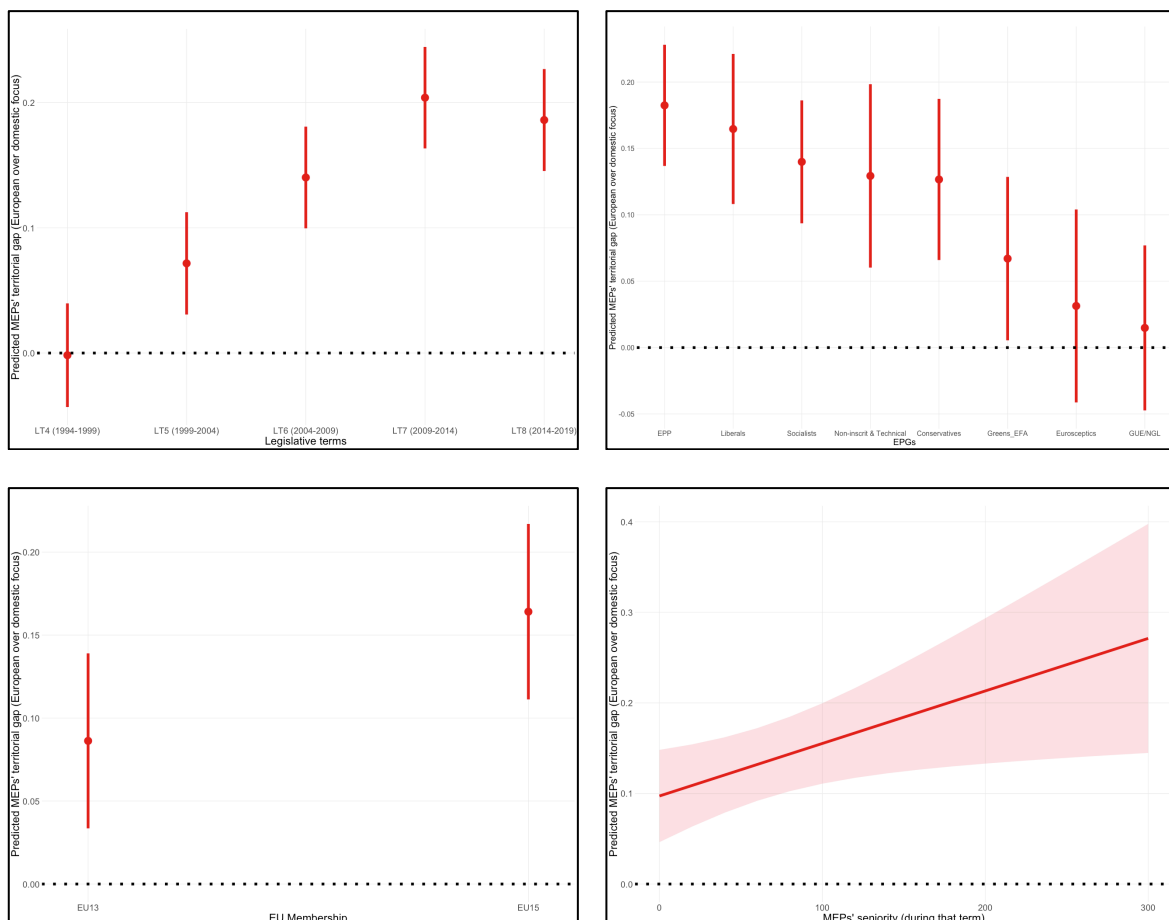
¹⁰ Because we only focus on WPQs with single authors (to be able to match the dataset with MEPs' individual characteristics), the total number of WPQs is 152.743 (as the 9th legislative term is not yet included in the dataset). The WPQs are stacked by MEPs by legislative term in order to estimate MEPs' territorial specialisation measured multiple times over legislative terms. In theory, this model includes as many as 12.444 observations (i.e. MEPs' territorial gap measured five times for each legislative since 1994). Because most MEPs serve only one term in the EP (Dodeigne et al., 2024), most MEPs present only a single observation though. Besides, some information is missing for some WPQs. Overall, Table 3 presents our models based with a total number of 3.164 measurements of territorial specialisation in WPQs (Level) from 2085 MEPs (level II). We also included a random effect for the 28 countries (level III). The main advantage of this model is to be able to include time-varying covariates (e.g. the effects of MEPs' seniority increasing over time).

Tableau 3. MLM linear regression of MEPs' European predominance over domestic focus (with random effects by countries and MEPs)



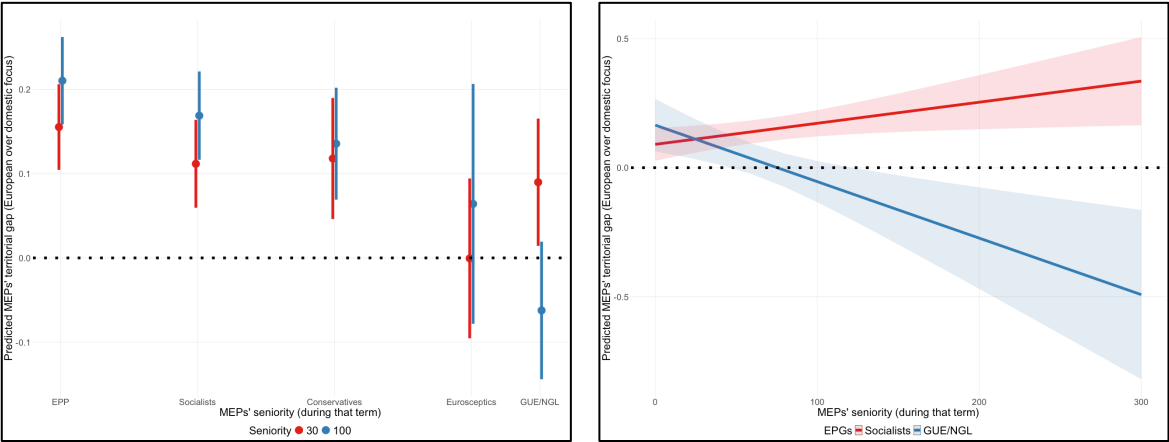
The results are the following. First, regarding legislative terms, our results unmistakably show that the empowerment of the EP since the late 1990s contributed to a greater European focus in the MEPs' parliamentary activity. While the 4th term was characterized by an almost perfect balance between European and domestic focus, the European focus increased continuously to reach a plateau in the 2010s. Figure 9 shows that the predicted values for the 4th term is located on the dotted line, which reflects the equal distribution between the two types of focuses, while it increased by up to 20 points of percentages towards greater European focus in the 8th term. Although the confidence intervals indicate some non-negligible variance within terms, the increase is neat and beyond doubt. There is however a slight decrease observed during the 9th term (2019-2024). Second, EPGs largely determine the way MEPs shape their territorial focus in parliamentary work. On the one hand MEPs from influential groups have a dominant European predominant focus (+ 12 -17 points of percentages for EPP, Liberals and Socialists, but also the Non-Inscrits & Technical as well as Conservatives. On the other hand, Green/EFA, and most particularly Eurosceptics and GUE/NG are clearly less Europeanly driven. Those MEPs present similar representational activity for both domestic and European focus (i.e. territorial gap is close to zero, as indicated by the overlap with the dotted line). Third, Seniority also matters strongly. Figure 9 shows that as they gained more experience in the EP, MEPs continuously allocate more of their WPQs activity to European-related focus. The difference is 2.5 great for most experienced MEPs compared to rookies. Fourth, regarding the divide between new and former member states, our results confirm a more strongly territorial gap for EU15 countries compared to EU13 (the difference in percentages points is twice as big).

Figure 8. Predicted gap of European over Domestic focus (based on coefficients from Table 3)



Finally, our analysis reveals that MEPs’ seniority in the EP reshapes their territorial interests as they spend time more time in the supranational assembly. This indicates potential socialization effects within the EP, which even highlights some of the strongest differences across EPGs. Figure 9 shows that Eurosceptics MEPs who acquired more seniority in the EP (from 30 to 100 months, i.e. from a half-term towards almost two complete terms) will significantly shift their territorial attention towards greater European focus. As a reminder, the effects of seniority are observed across all EPGs (see above), but it has important consequences for Eurosceptics MEPs who – on average – entered the EP with a much greater domestic interest. There is, however, one exception to that trend, namely GUE/NGL MEPs. Contrary to all other EPGs, their seniority in the EP tends to make them even more focus on domestic rather than European matters. Future analyses are necessary to understand whether this is connected to specific national country delegations, policy domains or even critical events (e.g. 2008-2012 finance and economic crises).

Figure 9. Predicted gap of European over Domestic focus (based on coefficients from Table 3)



5. Discussion: next steps for the project

The European Parliament is composed of MEPs who are famously known for being “the servants of two masters”, i.e. they must serve the interests of their domestic (s)electorate from the territorial districts they were elected in, while being loyal to their European party groups in the EP. When MEPs face conflicting interests from competing principals, should MEPs prioritize their specific constituency territorial interests or addressing the broader interests of the wider European polity? This question is of particular interest considering that the European structure of opportunity has dramatically evolved over the last decades, increasing EUs policy-making capacity and empowering the EP in decision-making procedures. In this respect, our empirical analyses unmistakably show evidence of a shift over time in MEPs’ representational focus toward a more European representational focus. First, our results suggest that this trend is likely driven by the EU's increased policy powers and the EP’s empowerment following major institutional changes at the end of the 1990s and 2000s (respectively the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997/1999 and the Lisbon Treaty in 2007/2009). Yet, in the most recent legislative term (9th term, 2019-2024), this trend slightly reversed, with some decrease in European focus and limited growth in domestic concerns. Our empirics suggest that the electoral surge of Eurosceptic parties explain this reversal trend since the 2010s and 2020s. Future research is needed to provide a better understanding of these developments and what drives them.

Second, our analysis confirms that larger and more influential EPGs focus more on European issues, while smaller, radical, and nationalist groups emphasize domestic concerns. Whether these party groups use European-level questions to critique the EU is subject to further

investigations. The planned sentiment analysis is the next step of coding goals in a future version of the paper. While the tone of such specialization should provide greater understandings of these trends, a substantial part of the explanation most likely lies in the “issue ownership” on the questions asked. Third, our results reveal significant country-level variation. Our multivariate analyses confirm a divide between MEPs’ parliamentary from the 2004 enlargement wave (EU13) and MEPs elected in member states with long-term membership (EU15). Beyond this divide, country-level variation reveals, however, more complex patterns beyond a geographical divide. Indeed, several EU15 members states, particularly in the periphery of Southern Europe, exhibit a stronger domestic focus, revealing a clear centre-periphery divide.

Fourth, our analysis shows that policies with strong redistributive nature, such as agriculture and fisheries, have unsparingly a higher domestic representational focus, while areas like enlargement, defence, and external relations are more European in nature, though some EU-exclusive policies are not always framed as a pan-European. Fifth, regarding MEPs individual factors, our initial analysis shows that the MEPs’ seniority strongly matters: as they gained more experience in the EP, MEPs show a stronger European-related focus. This effect even significantly counterbalances the (originally) domestic focus for Eurosceptics MEPs favouring greater European representational focus. Yet, seniority tends to enhance domestic focus for GUE/NGL MEPs.

Finally, when we consider all explanatory factors together, the conclusions are clear: the rise in European focus is primarily driven by the institutionalization and empowerment of the European Parliament, as well as the European Union’s increasing sovereignty across various policy domains. Meanwhile, variations in European focus among MEPs are largely explained by differences between European party groups. While these exploratory analyses trace the evolution of territorial focus in the EP over time and identify key factors contributing to the growing European emphasis, future research should investigate the more complex (and interrelated) causal mechanisms underpinning MEPs’ representational focus. Meanwhile, for future versions of this paper, we intend to proceed with the following steps: 1) sentiment analysis on WPQs, which will enable us to evaluate whether European-level questions are mainly used to criticize, support, or gathering information from the EU; 2) include MEPs’ career information from 9th term (2019-2024) for our regression analysis; 3) finalizing the sub-national focus for the countries where MEPs are not elected through a single, nationwide, electoral constituency.

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Appendices

Figure A1. MEPs' international by descending order across EPGs, Countries, and policy domains

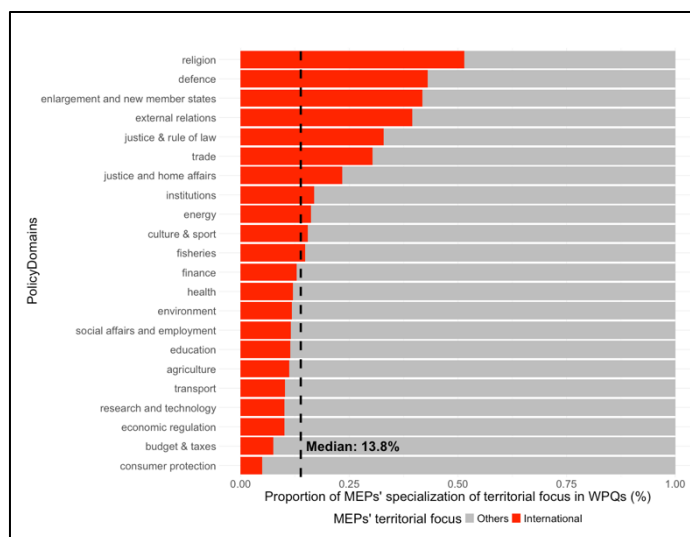
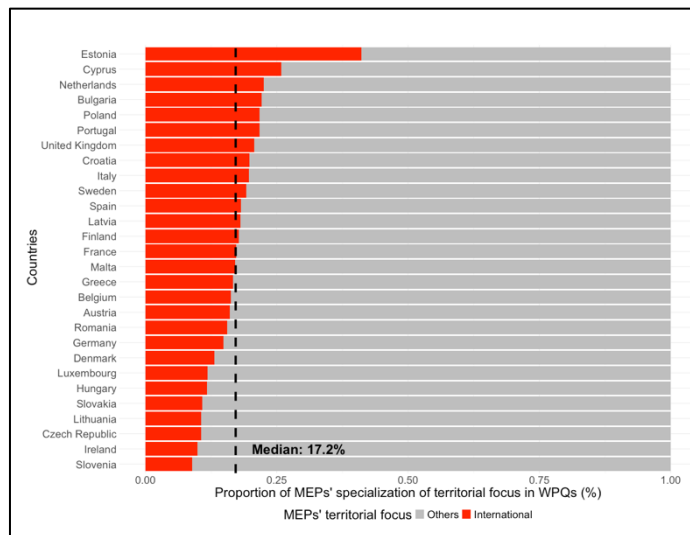
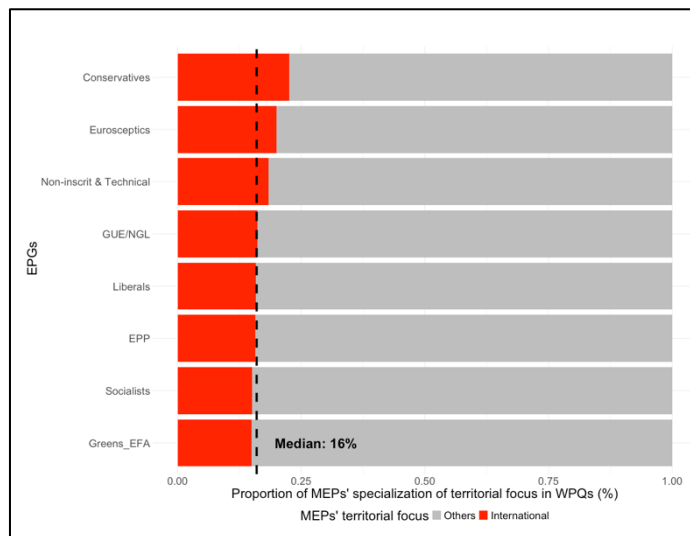


Figure A2. Evolution MEPs' territorial focus over time for EU15 (pre-2004 enlargement)

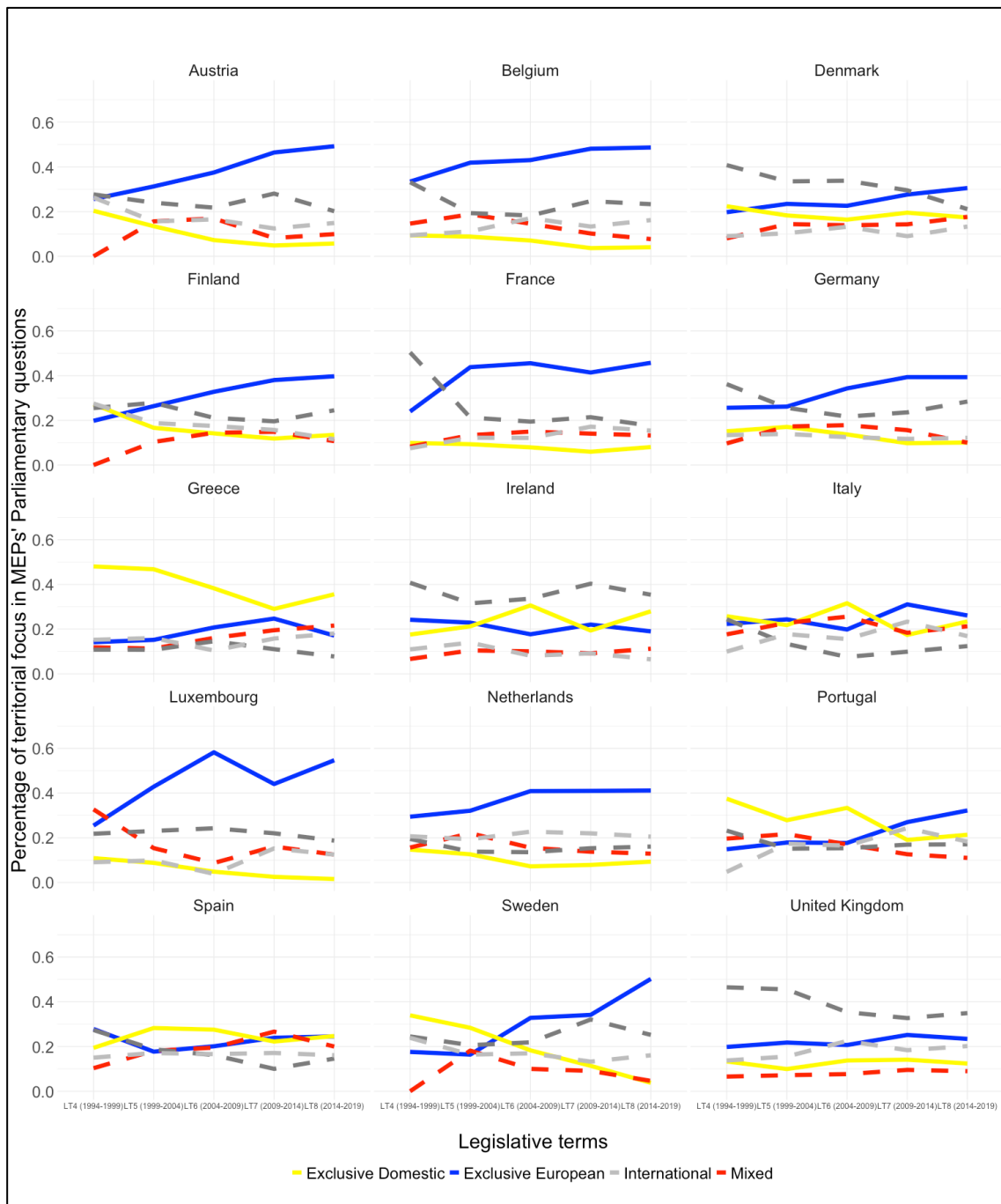


Figure A3. Evolution MEPs' territorial focus over time for EU13 (post 2004 enlargement)

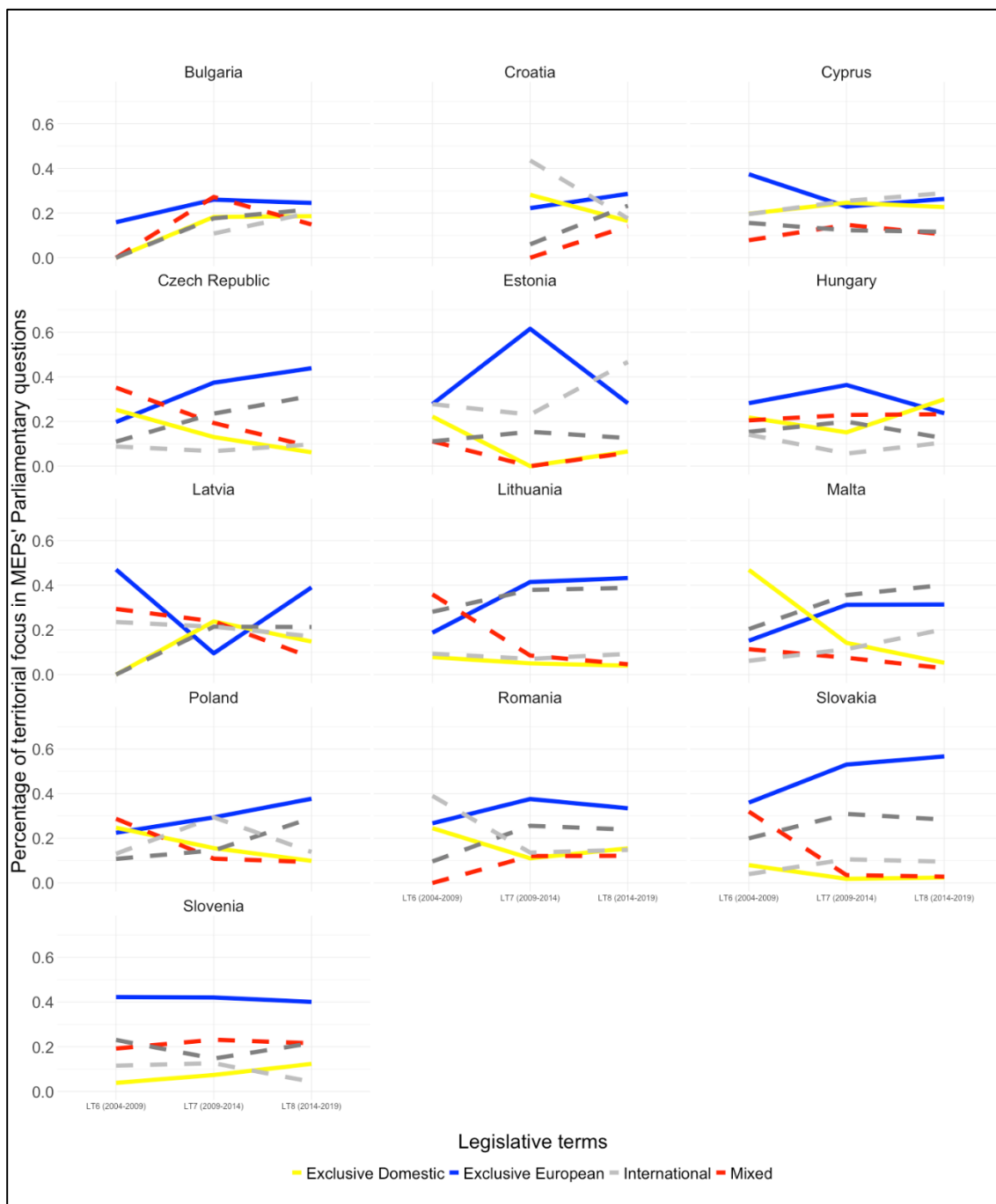


Figure A4. Evolution MEPs' territorial focus over time by policy domains

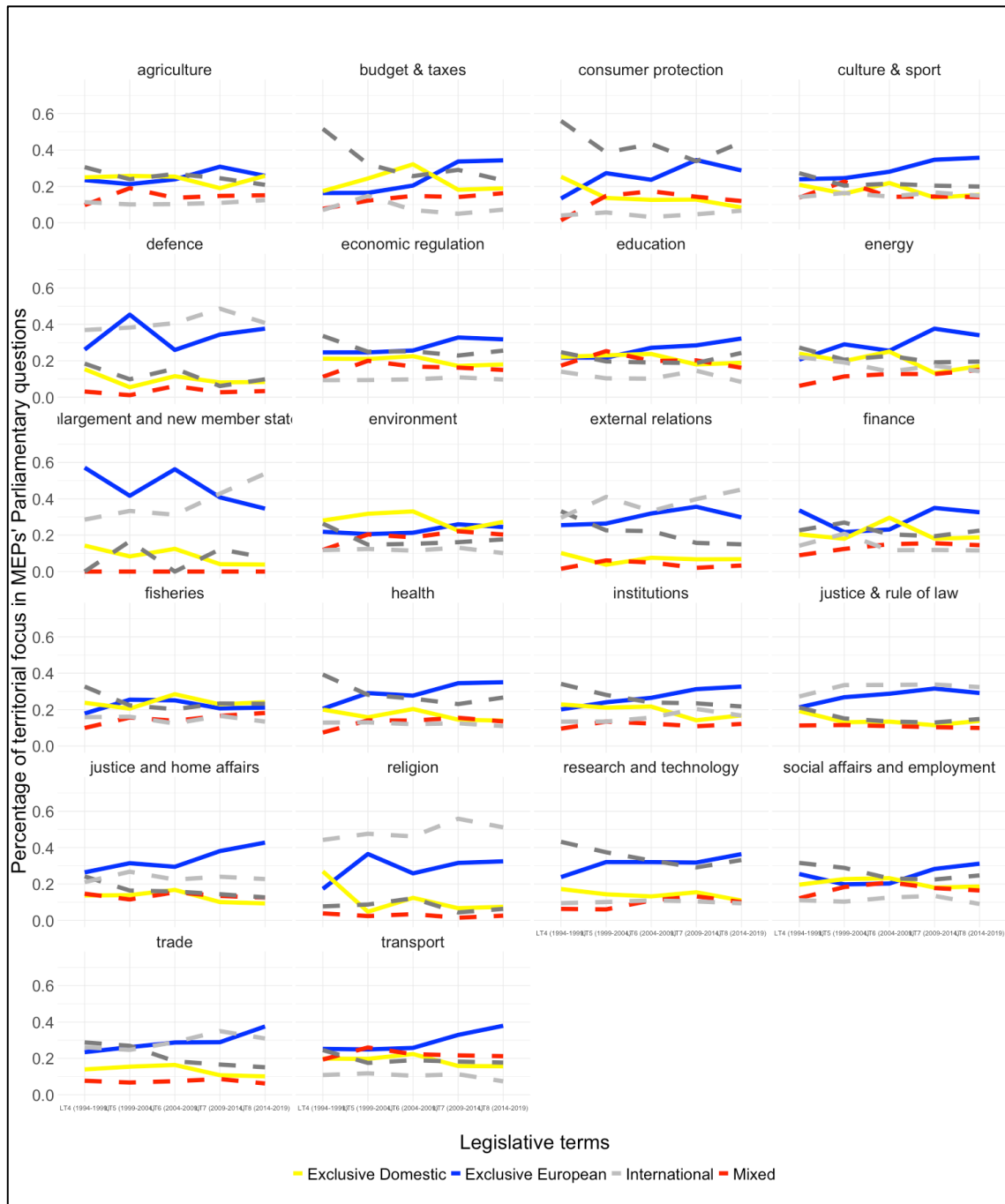


Figure A5. Evolution MEPs' territorial focus over time by policy domains)

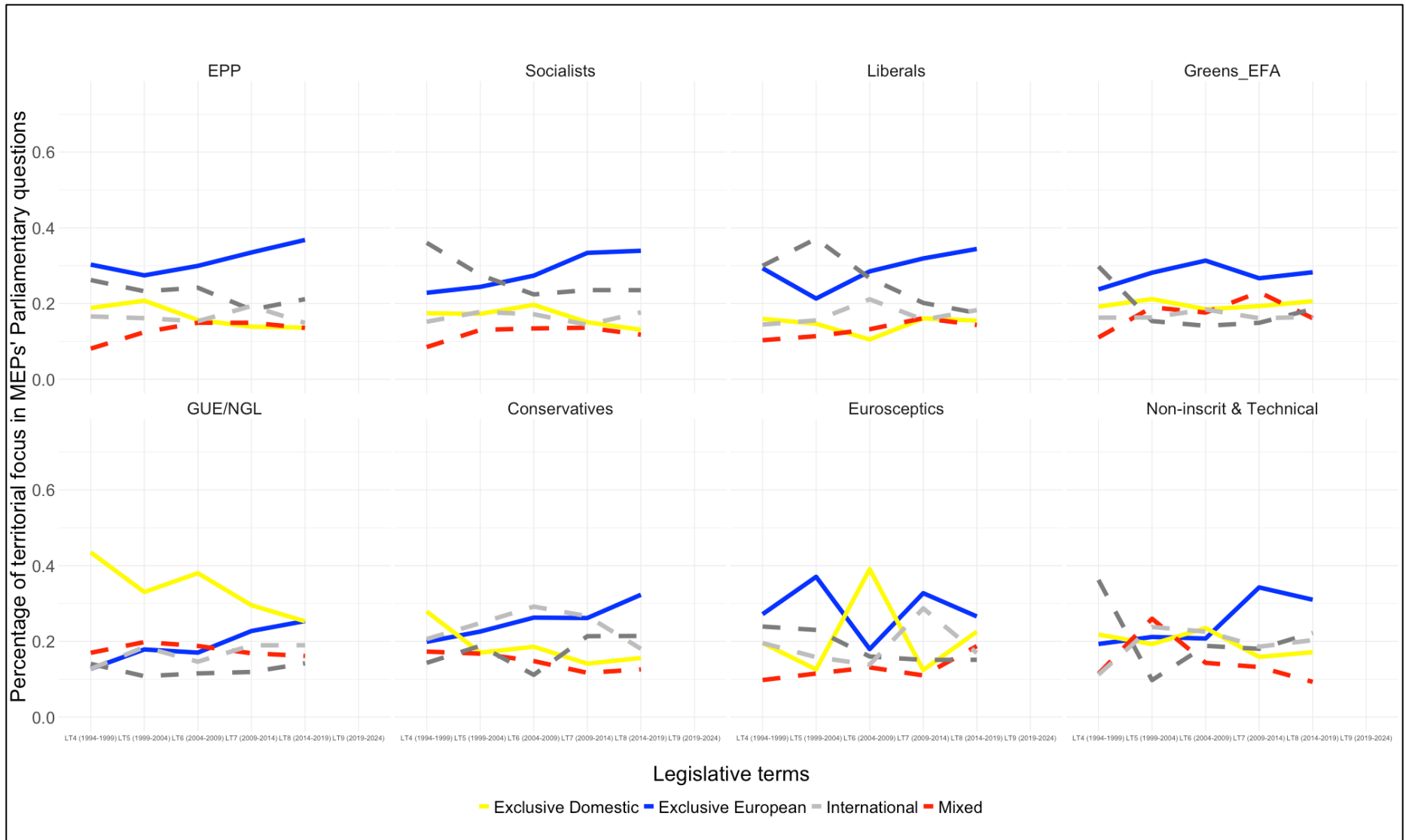


Figure A6. Model diagnosis with posterior predictive check (with and without extreme behaviour)

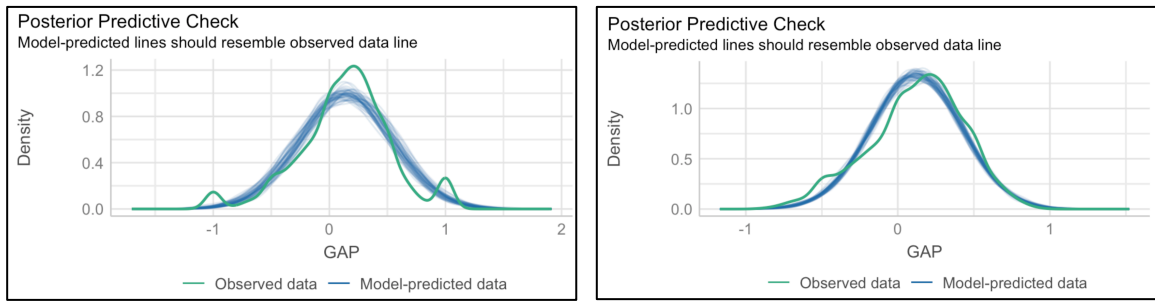


Tableau A1. Beta regression (random effects by countries) of MEPs' specialization in domestic focus (left) and European focus (right)

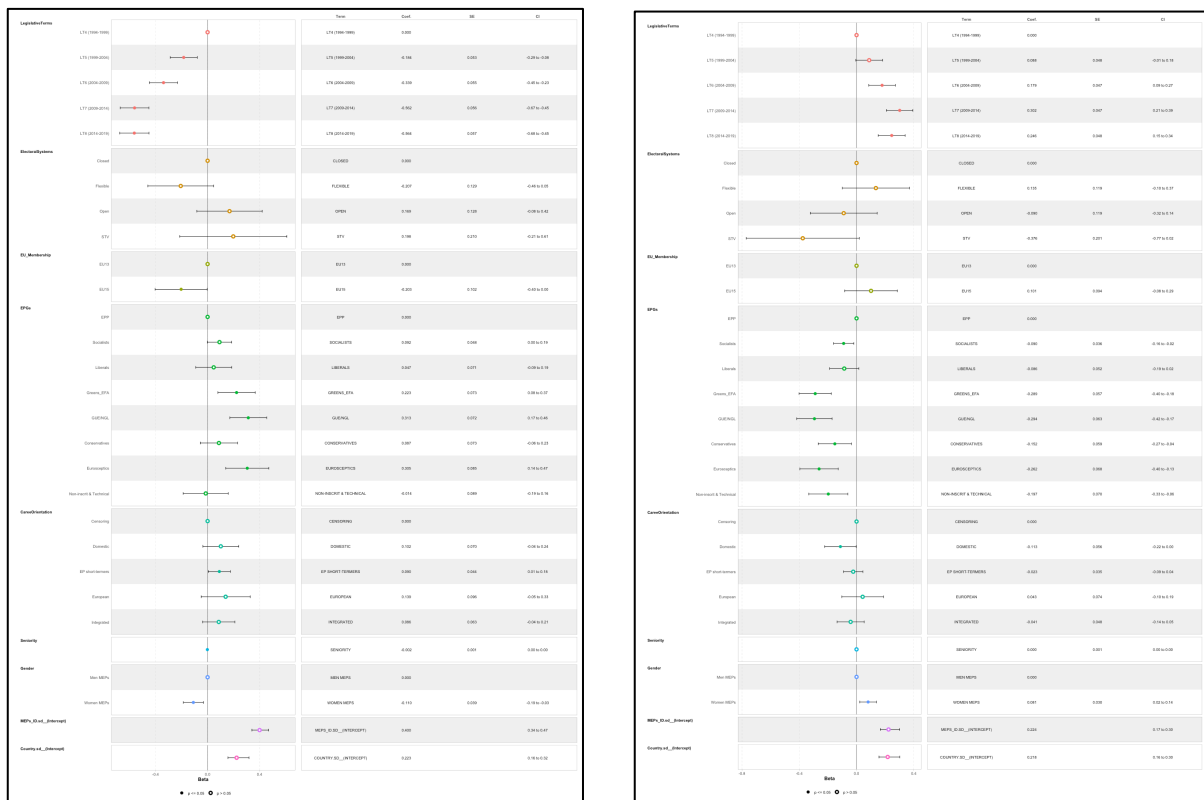


Figure A11. Predicted quantities of Domestic (left) and European focus (right) based on alternative Beta regression models

