

# **The Relevance of Regional Positions of MEPs: Against Methodological Nationalism in European Studies**

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**Abstract:** The European Parliament (EP)'s formal authority has considerably expanded since 1979. As a result, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the emergence of a European political class, along with the formal empowerment of the EP. Since Scarrow's seminal work on MEPs' political ambition and career in the late 1990s, recent studies extended the empirical scope to new Member States and/or assess more systematically the evolution of MEPs career paths over legislative terms. Nonetheless, this literature suffers from a bias that is far from being limited to European studies, as it has been already identified in legislative and parliamentary studies: "methodological nationalism". Indeed, earlier works have now established the relevance – or even predominance – of regional political arenas in multiple European countries. Including the analysis of the regional level is also pertinent while studying the EP, as the largest delegations precisely originate from regionalized and federal countries. To address this gap, this paper presents an empirical analysis of 2 209 MEPs career patterns over eight legislative terms (1979-2019) from seven regionalised and federal countries in the EU (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK), representing about half of all MEPs who ever served in the EP. The empirical analysis shows that ignoring regional positions conduct to the mischaracterisation of a substantial number of MEPs' career patterns. This finding has important consequences when political experience is used as a key factor explaining MEPs' legislative behaviour. It thus encourages other scholars to include the regional level more systematically, against "methodological nationalism"

## Introduction

The incremental empowerment of the European Parliament (EP) is one of the notable evolutions in the democratic functioning of the EU. A growing scholarship has, therefore, increasingly paid attention to the activity and influence of the EP – and of its members (MEPs) – on EU decision-making processes. Studies focusing on MEP's legislative behaviour already investigated the impact of various factors at different levels of analysis. A first batch of studies has assessed the power of the EP based on the evolution of its formal powers in the EU's decision making procedures and, in particular, its bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the Commission and the Council (for a full review, see. Hix and Hoyland, 2013). With the institutionalization of the EP, the literature on MEPs' parliamentary behavior has, furthermore, established the decisive roles of European parliamentary groups (EPGs) (Hix 2002; Kreppel 2002), the impact of distinct electoral rules (Daniel & Metzger 2018), national opposition status (Proksch & Slapin 2011), the effects of “early agreement votes” (Bressanelli et al. 2016), or the effects of new rules of roll call votes since 2009 (Yordanova & Mühlböck 2015; Hug 2016) – to cite but a few.

More recently, a growing literature has started to study in greater details the influence of MEPs' career orientation and ambition upon their legislative behaviour. As underlined by Matthew (1984:573), “legislative institutions change along with the types of people attracted to serve in them”. This line of research started with Scarrow's seminal work on MEPs' political ambition and career in the late 1990s. Various studies have extended the empirical scope to new Member States and over multiple legislative terms. Despite its respective merits, this literature suffers, however, from a notorious bias, namely: “methodological nationalism”. That is to say, MEPs' experience in domestic politics is almost exclusively defined as the offices served in national politics. In other words, despite the multilevel nature of European systems, it ignores other tiers of government. This empirical approach is more specifically problematic for the federal and regionalized Member States of the European Union (Austria, Belgium, Germany, UK, Spain, Italy, and France). And the latter covers about half of the MEPs delegation at the latest 2019 European delegations, but it was even more before the 2004 European enlargement. Beyond “methodological nationalism” (Schakel & Cheffrey 2012), scholars have yet demonstrated the relevance – or even predominance – of regional political arenas in multiple European countries (Stolz 2011; Dodeigne 2018). The inclusion of regional political offices to study the career patterns and behaviour of MEPs is, therefore, of predominant empirical and analytical importance. As a matter of fact, we identify that a quarter of all the 2 209 MEPs elected in federal and regionalized MS since 1979 have served in regional politics.

The article is organized as follows: the first section briefly summarizes the main why scholars should pay attention to MEPs' career, and most particularly, the effects on the latter on their legislative activities and behaviour. The second section argues that in the European multilevel system, where regional electoral arenas are empowered in various Member States, the study of regional offices should be systematic along national offices. The third section presents a short overview of existing categorization of MEP's career patterns and, building on previous works, introduces a finer categorization of MEP's career paths integrating regional experience. After the presentation of the dataset, the fourth section continues with the empirical analysis and discuss the empirical and analytical relevance of including sub-national political offices in the study of MEPs career paths. Finally, the article ends by a short conclusion.

## **1. The effects of MEPs' career on their legislative activities and behaviour**

For students of legislative studies, it is well established that the career orientation and ambition of office-holders critically impact the institutional capacity of a legislative assembly (Matthew 1984:573). This empirical observation is also valid for the MEPs in the EP. For Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix (2019:509), "the European Parliament is dependent on members who are prepared to commit themselves to the legislative activities in such a way that the European Parliament is able to strengthen its hand in its dealings with other EU institutions". Similarly, Daniel and Metzger (2018:91) outlined that the EP can only achieve its policy-making capacity when populated with MEPs seeing the EP as more than a second-order electoral arena. The study of MEPs' career and ambition has, therefore, gained interest in the scholarship. The impact of a MEP's career on its behaviour can be two-fold: the effects of a *former* political path upon a subsequent mandate in the EP (section 1.1) and the anticipation of a future *career position* while serving in the EP (section 1.2).

### **1.1 The impact of MEP's former career experience upon their legislative activities**

A first batch of studies has examined the MEPs' political experience via the seniority of MEPs in the EP itself. For instance, Hix (2004) found that seniority in the EP increases the likelihood of voting according to EPGs' official positions and to defect from national parties. Seniority within the EP also impacts a MEP's access to mega seats or to influential positions, such as Rapporteur (Daniel 2013, 2015), Committee assignments and Committee chairs (Corbet et al. 2005, Chiru 2020), group coordinators (Daniel and Thierse 2018), or codecision reports (Hermansen 2018a).

In the multilevel European political system, scholars have furthermore paid attention to the effects of previous experience outside the EP, i.e. in the realm of *domestic* politics. A domestic career provides resources and experience that can empower the MEP once in the EP (in general terms, one's ability to influence the EP's decision-making). The analysis of former career positions has often been included as a control or a more marginal variable in this scholarship. Yet some authors directly linked MEP's career paths and role orientations to legislative behaviour: hence, Biro-Nagy (2016) outlined that MEPs with previous experience in subnational politics (local and regional mandates) tend to have a more generalist political role perception (i.e., politics vs. policy focus). The study of Van Geffen (2016) – probably the most in-depth analysis so far linking previous careers and legislative behaviour in the EP – make three important contributions to the field. First, the author found that unexperienced MEPs with domestic ambition (i.e., who make a career in domestic politics after their EP mandate) depict a lower attendance rate and a more limited number of motions tabled in parliament. Second, and not surprisingly, EP careerists (i.e., MEPs making their career mostly in the EP) are very active in the EP's work: they have the highest attendance rate and table more motions than the other MEPs. Third, Van Geffen (2016) also highlighted that MEPs making a career in the EP but who had made a career in domestic politics beforehand are almost as active as their 'EP careerist' colleagues.

### **1.2 The impact of MEP's ambition on their legislative activities**

Regarding future career positions, scholars have more recently aimed to assess how a MEP's prospects to move on to domestic politics determine his/her current behaviour. While relatively new in European studies, this line of research has long been developed by legislative scholars in the U.S. In line with Schlesinger's (1966) seminal work on the careers of U.S. Congresswomen and Congressmen, this literature posits that ambitious candidates – fuelled by their so-called *progressive* ambition – aim to move up to 'higher' positions. As a result, "politicians are not only interested in serving the needs of their current constituents but are also forward-looking in identifying the constituents that they would like to serve in the future" (van Geffen, 2016:1017). Yet, not all candidates seek to pursue a career outside the realm of their current mandate. Schlesinger (1966) also distinguished office-holders with *static* ambition (continuing to serve in their current legislative institution) and *discrete* ambition (to quit politics after a – very – short legislative experience).

Several studies have put this "ambition hypothesis" to the test in the EP. The first study is from Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard (2009) in which the authors assume that the age of

MEPs can be used as proxy of their career ambition. According to the authors, younger MEPs are more likely to present a progressive ambition, using their mandate in the EP as a springboard toward domestic politics. As they get older, MEPs increasingly face restricted access to national entry doors. For the authors, older MEPs are gradually more disconnected from domestic political and party issues while presenting undermined representation linkage with their local voters. Middle aged and older MEPs are thus more likely to present either a static ambition or a discrete (a “last stop” before retirement). Empirically, Meserve and colleagues did find that younger MEPs (in line with their assumed progressive ambition towards domestic politics) vote more frequently against the interest of the EPG, in comparison to older MEPs (static or discrete ambition in the EP). In other words, ‘nationally-oriented’ MEPs are less disciplined than ‘EP-oriented’ MEPs.

More recently, Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix (2019) have assessed the relevance of MEPs’ ambition and its varying effects under distinct structure of electoral incentives (party-centered and candidate-centered systems). Considering that we know little about the effects of ambition in the multilevel European system, their research design was innovative in several ways: (1) the authors conducted a systematic analysis of two types of legislative activities (votes and debates), based on a comprehensive dataset (1994-2014); (2) instead of using age as proxy, they rely on two ‘direct’ indicators of ambition (“stated” career ambition via EPRG MEP Surveys and “realized” career ambition via biographical longitudinal data of MEPs). Their results distinctively show that “MEPs with national level career ambitions participate less than those with European career ambitions. (...) The difference is larger in candidate-centered systems” (Hoyland et al., 2019: 503). They furthermore observe stronger effects in voting participation than in debates participation, as the latter represent a scarce good in the MEPs’ legislative activity.

## **2. Going beyond methodological nationalism: including regional political offices to analyse MEPs’ career patterns**

Despite the notorious merits of the studies presented above, they nevertheless suffer from a notorious bias, namely “methodological nationalism”. While the European multilevel system is defined by the presence of multiple political tiers (local, regional, national and European), the authors overlooked subnational tiers and focused exclusively on the national level when analysing domestic politics. Hence, for Hoyland and colleagues (2019), the idea of MEPs with “‘progressive ambitions’, who seek a career ‘back home’” is unidirectionally defined as a move towards the national electoral arena. Likewise, Merserve and colleagues distinctively wrote

about “nationally ambitious MEPs” when discussing their prospects for domestic politics. The regional arena is thus entirely excluded from the definition of “domestic politics”. In fact, Meserve and colleagues (2009:1020) specified in a footnote that in “some member states, local or regional elections may also provide the possibility of domestic office. Nonetheless, because the importance of these local and regional opportunities varies considerably across member-states, we leave a direct analysis of their impact to future research”. Hoyland and colleagues (2019: 5-6) also acknowledged this issue, but decided to focus exclusively on the national level because they assumed the “second-order nature” of regional elections<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, van Geffen (2016:1024) assumes “that the regional political level is not the main level competing with the European one”. However, the author also immediately conceded that this assumption might actually be at odds with the empirical reality across the various Member States and the “further research should be conducted to establish whether this is the case”.

The goal of this paper is precisely to embrace this future line of research promoted by those scholars<sup>2</sup>. For that purpose, it is first necessary to discuss the “assumed hierarchy” between tiers in the multilevel European system. For that purpose, most authors rely on the “second-order elections” concept of Reiff and Schmitt (1980). In contrast with “first-order” national elections, “second-order” elections are elections where there is ‘less at stake’. This situation is reflected by (1) a lower turnout, (2) an electoral decline of parties in office in the national government and empowerment of opposition parties and finally, (3) distinct voters’ behavior vis-à-vis national elections. According to the authors, by-elections, municipal elections, the EP elections themselves and last but not least, various sorts of regional elections are good illustrations of this phenomenon. Therefore, theoretically, “second-order” electoral arenas should, therefore, be disregarded in the career orientation of MEPs as they do not provide the same electoral incentives for candidates, parties and voters.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader should also note that the EPRG MEP Surveys – which are used as the data source to identify ‘stated’ career ambition – only offer the position of member of the “national parliament” or the “national government” as explicit categories to recode a MEPs domestic ambition.

<sup>2</sup> We identify two main factors for this bias in the literature: the dynamic nature of regionalization processes and availability of longitudinal data (Daniel 2013, Whitaker 2014). The first reason is due to the fact that regionalization has been a dynamic institutional: various process of devolution and constitutional reform have taken place in the late 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the relevance of regional tiers as arenas that matter in the career of MEPs is a relatively recent knowledge. The second reason is connected to the first one: with the growing interest of regionalization in the scholarship, datasets on regional elections and regional career have only appeared in the mid 2000s, and more notoriously in the 2010s. In the wake of this regional importance, our goal is to systematically offer a more fine-grained categorisation of MEPs’ career paths. This exercise of taxonomy is of predominant empirical and analytical importance as it would wrongly categorize some MEPs as merely “rookies” in assessing their legislative behaviour.

Empirically, however, the subordination of the regional electoral arena to the national electoral arena – being the apex of a political system – is highly disputable. First, Jeffery and Schakel (2012) have put to the empirical test the second-order nature of regional elections, analysing a comprehensive dataset of 2 933 regional elections, covering no less than 313 regions in seventeen countries over no less than 68 years (1941-2009). While the authors acknowledge some merits to the second-order theoretical model, they also underlined its very limited empirical scope to a small proportion of elections: the effects are distinctively observed in hardly a fifth of the regions. Last but not least, regions with stronger authority are less affected than regional tiers with lower policy-making capacities.

Second, a significant number of Member States that send delegations of MEPs to the EP are federations and regionalized countries. Amongst the five biggest national delegations of MEPs, four originate from Member states with a federal or regionalized political system: Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain; and, arguably, all five delegations if we include France under its most recent institutional empowerment of regions. In total, there are thus 44,7 percent of MEPs who are elected in countries where regions matter – and even 54,6 percent if we include the French delegation. Furthermore, those Member States are political systems in which regional tiers present a high degree of authority – if not amongst the highest in the World (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK). As an illustration, the measures provided by the Regional authority index (RAI – Hooghe, Marks, Schakel, 2010) clearly show an increase in the degree of regional authority in the studied countries since 1979 (first direct EP election). Overall, with the exception of the UK, those Member States currently present high score on the index, ranging between 20 for France up to 37 for Germany<sup>3</sup>.

Last but not least, various studies have established that in those Member states, regional arenas matter as much – or even prevail over – the national electoral arenas in terms of career-orientation. For instance, Stolz's (2003) pioneering work identified three additional career patterns that better depict political trajectories in multilevel systems. First, regional offices can be prioritised over national offices in the 'inverse springboard model'. National legislators seek to serve at the sub-national level. Although this model is empirically less frequent, some authors have established that Italy (Tronconi and Verzichelli, 2016) present also some of its features. Secondly, regional and national arenas can be equally attractive, inducing movement in both

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<sup>3</sup> One might argue that this analysis overlooks the influence of national leadership in the recruitment of MEPs. However, the regional level of the party structure is powerful in the determination of the state-wide list for European elections. In federal political systems, party structure reflects the multilevel structure for most party missions, including recruitment of candidates (Detterbeck 2011; Fabre 2008).

directions and creating an ‘integrated career model’. Between elections, it is common to observe regional and national parliamentarians moving up to an office at another level. Belgium and Spain are often presented as textbook examples of such a pattern (Dodeigne, 2014; Fiers, 2001; Stolz 2010; Vanlangenakker, et al. 2013). Finally, regional and national political arenas can have their own dynamics, creating an ‘alternative career model’. Level-hopping movements are quasi-absent, and regional and national elites develop careers in compartmentalised electoral arenas. The United Kingdom are good illustrations of this pattern (Dodeigne, 2015; Stolz, 2010). As we will show in this paper, in the largest Member States such as Germany, Spain, Italy or France, between 19,78 percent up to 36,4 percent of MEPs have served in regional politics. The latter includes the highest function such in Governmental and parliamentary office in Lander, Autonomous Community, or Communities and Regions. The relevance of the regional arena is, however, particularly more salient in stronger regions (Dodeigne, 2018). To sum up, overlooking experience in regional arenas is thus highly disputable for a large delegation of MEPs, and even counter-factual in terms of their career orientation.

### **3. Career paths of MEPs: what we know and what we should know**

Beyond “methodological nationalism”, it is therefore necessary to provide a more fine-grained categorisation of MEPs’ career paths, including regional offices that are – analytically and empirically – relevant to the reality of the European multilevel system. For that purpose, the first sub-section (section 3.1) introduces the existing categorization of MEP’s career paths and identifies the main evolutions since Scarrow’s seminal work in the late 1990s. Building upon categories found in the former scholarship, the second sub-section (section 3.2) introduces a finer categorization of MEP’s career paths integrating regional experience. Furthermore, scholars should not only study past but – and probably even more importantly – post-EP experience (ambition) to assess the effects of experience and ambition on MEPs’ legislative behaviour. As stated by Whitaker (2014:1524): “Understanding this can only be done with comprehensive data on MEPs’ post-EP careers”. This paper, therefore, presents a genuinely longitudinal analysis of MEPs’ career patterns.

#### **3.1 Existing categorization of MEPs’ career paths**

Scarrow’s study (1997) on French, German, Italian and British MEPs identified three main career paths, covering the first three legislative terms (1979-1994). The first career pattern covers MEPs short-termers, who served in the EP only for a short period of time, and who did not extend their political career after their EP mandate. She called their career a “*political*

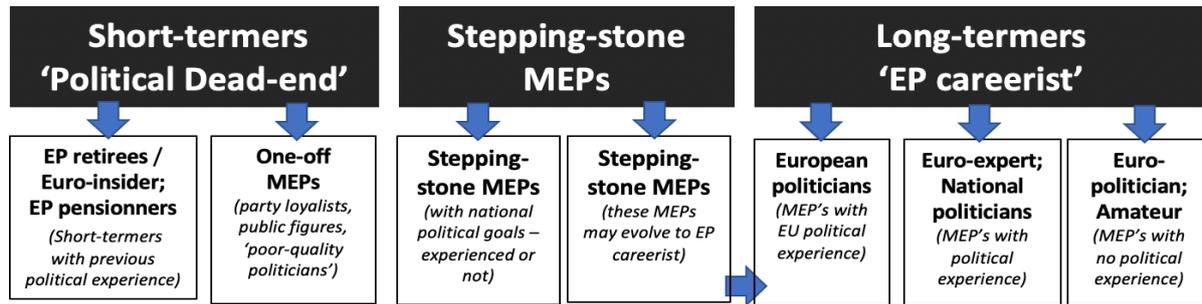
*deadend*". She identified two sub-types of short-termers: MEPs retiring from domestic political life and joining the EP as a consolation prize and MEPs using the EP as a 'gateway' towards a career outside of politics. The second career pattern gathers so-called "*Stepping Stone*" MEPs aiming at 'winning or regaining' a national mandate after their service in the EP. Finally, "*European Careerists*" are defined as those with a "long and primary commitment" to the EP.

Building on Scarrow's work, scholars have extended her approach (Salvati, 2016; van Geffen, 2016; Verzichelli & Edinger, 2005). For instance, in the "*Short-termers*" category, van Geffen (2016) also makes a distinction between "*EP retirees*" (i.e., MEPs at the end of their political career) and what he labels as "*one-off*" MEPs. These MEPs usually do not have any political career before or after serving in the EP, and usually only stay in the EP for no longer than two legislative terms. They are office-holders with no previous political experience, "Party Loyalists" rewarded by their party, but who do not conduct a career in the EP. They can also be "MEPs who turn out to be poor-quality politicians and who are deemed unfit for a political career at either the European or domestic political level" (van Geffen, 2016: 1021). Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) had already introduced a similar distinction between two types of politicians entering the EP after their career in the national parliament: "*EP pensioners*" (i.e., golden parachute MEPs) and "*Euro-insider*" (i.e., MEPs that were already involved in EU affairs before joining the EP). The main distinction between these two types of MEPs lies whether their previous career was 'domestically' or 'Europeanly' oriented.

The "*European Careerists*" category also received an important attention from scholars. For instance, Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) identified "*Euro-expert*" (i.e., politicians with a significant domestic career but now committed to supranational issues) and "*Euro-politicians*" (i.e., MEPs without any major political experience and directly recruited for a career at the European level). Van Geffen (2016) also makes a similar distinction based on the former national mandates served by MEPs. Also, the work of Salvati (2016) identifies three paths in the development of a European parliamentary career that he labels as "Amateur (politician)" (i.e., MEPs with no previous domestic experience and/or presence of an alternative background), "national politician" (i.e., MEPs with substantial previous national or subnational experience) and "European politician" (i.e., MEPs that are re-elected in the EP).

Finally, Verzichelli and Edinger (2005) also rightly outlined that some stepping-stone *mindful* politicians with domestic objectives may progressively consider to make a career at the European level, albeit this category is difficult to operationalize in practice because it requires to measure and record MEPs' individual ambition.

Overall, figure 1 summarizes the main evolutions since Scarrow’s original categorization.



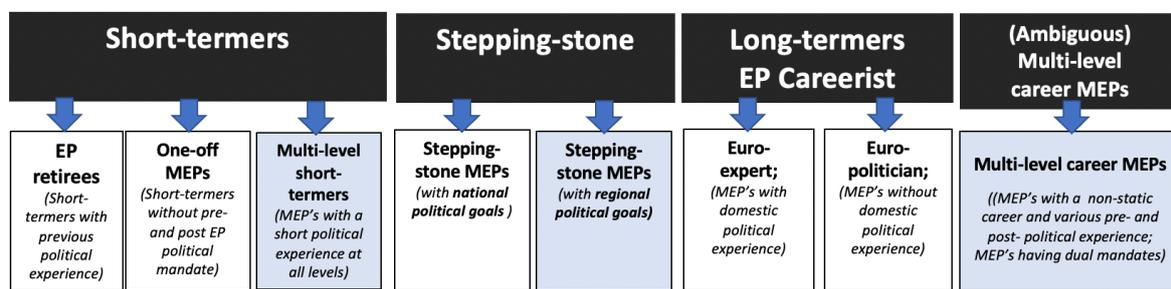
**Figure 1:** Summary of existing categorization of MEPs career paths (the authors)

This scholarship introduced finer categorizations, but some shortcomings remain. First, some studies do not systematically analyze pre- and post- EP positions: they merely cover MEPs’ previous political experience and socio-demographic indicators when entering the EP (Beauvallet-Haddad et al., 2016). Missing in the literature (van Geffen 2016), the analysis of both pre- and post-EP offices however allow to describe more accurately the diversity and to take into account dynamics of career patterns. Second, and probably the most important shortcomings this paper aims at contributing, despite the growing importance of regional electoral arenas, the inclusion of subnational offices has been almost systematically overlooked in previous studies (but see remarks from Whitaker 2014, Høyland et al. 2019).

### 3.2 MEPs’ career paths: a new typology including subnational offices

Our categorization of MEPs’ career patterns distinguishes between four broad categories: (1) short-termers, (2) stepping-stone MEPs, (3) long-termers MEPs, and finally, (4) ambiguous multilevel career pattern. First, short-termer MEPs are defined as politicians with a very short political experience in the EP. This can take the form of ‘EP retirees’ (i.e., short-termers in the EP after a domestic political career) and “one-off MEPs” (i.e., short-termers without previous political experience and not pursuing a political career after their EP mandate(s)). The second category, “stepping-stone MEPs” (i.e., MEPs using the EP to (re)gain a domestic political office) makes a differentiation between MEPs with national and MEPs with regional political goals. These MEPs are expected to have no or only a limited political experience before their EU mandate. Their EP mandate(s) are used as a moment of political professionalization before (re)entering the national or regional political arenas. Third, the long-termers EU careerist category consists of MEPs largely devoted to the EP. As for previous studies, we also make a distinction between “Euro-politicians” (i.e., MEPs without previous political experience that

do most of their career at the European level) and “Euro-expert MEPs” (i.e., MEPs having a significant political experience but that are now devoted to the EP). Finally, the ambiguous “multi-level career MEPs” category is composed of individuals with experience at several levels of government in a non-ordered manner. In this study, MEPs with multi-level careers are defined as MEPs with (a) experience served at two or three levels of government (i.e., regional and/or national and/or European), or with (b) distinct complex sequences (e.g., national-European-national-regional); and/or (c) with time served in office that does not permit to establish a clear orientation towards one level or the other. The following figure (figure 2) summarises the four main categories of main MEPs career paths as identified in this study.



**Figure 2:** Categorization of MEPs career path in this study

Compared to previous categorizations, we make two important contributions to the study of MEPs career paths. First, we consider not only national (legislative and executive) but also regional positions. As explained previously, not including regional experience in the analysis would constitute a serious bias, as experienced regional MPs – including those from the strongest European regions – would be treated as simple rookies. Building on this, we further distinguish stepping-stone’ MEPs between politicians with *national political goals* from the ones having *regional political goals*. Second, we also outline the necessity to add a new career pattern, the one of *ambiguous multi-level career MEPs*. Indeed, it is clear that very complex MEPs’ career patterns appear when considering pre- and post- experience in a genuinely multilevel perspective (from regional to national and European levels).

#### 4. Empirical analysis: regional experience matters

The analysis is based on an original dataset of 2 209 Austrian, Belgian, British, French, German, Italian and Spanish MEPs having served – once or multiple times – during the 1979-2019 period. Our case selection is heuristically driven by the seminal classification in regional and federal studies (Swenden 2006). We cover all three federations (Austria, Belgium and

Germany) and four regionalized countries (France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom). According to the regional authority index (Hooghe, Marks and Schakel 2010), those regional tiers present some of the highest scores of regional authority across the world (see. supra). The dataset builds upon existing biographical information on their experience in the EP, as well as gender, age and EPG (Hix and Noury 2009 – completed until 2019). In addition, the dataset is completed with pre- and post-EP offices served at both national and regional levels (be they legislative and executive offices). For the latter, sources combined former studies (Dodeigne, 2018) as well as official results published by institutions or via biographies available online.

We now turn and discuss the operationalization of MEP's career paths. In the short-termers category, 'EP retirees' are defined as MEPs with domestic political experience (be it regional or national) and serving in the EP for no more than 1,5 legislative term. 'One-off MEPs' are MEPs with no previous political experience that remain (less than) 1 full term in the EP. In addition, these MEPs have not held any political mandates after their EP mandates. Regarding the stepping stone politicians, we have operationalized it as follows: 'stepping stone with national ambitions' are MEPs that served less than 1,5 terms in the EP, and at least 1,5 terms at the national level (i.e., the career at the domestic level must be longer than the one at the EU level). The same rationale applies for 'stepping stone with regional ambitions': MEPs that are less than 1,5 terms in the EP and with a longer career at the regional level. The third category, long-termers EP careerist, is operationalized the following way: 'Euro-expert' are MEPs that served at least 1,5 terms in the EP after their domestic career (regional and/or national) while 'Euro-politicians' consist of MEPs with at least two terms in the EP but without any previous political experience (be it regional or national). Finally, the category of 'Ambiguous multi-level MEPs' gathers politicians with complex career patterns, in the sense that these EP parliamentarians held mandates in the EP and/or at the national and/or at the regional levels without a clear career pattern emerging. While our dataset covers the first eight first legislative terms, we made sure that our categories remain valid when analyzing the ninth legislative term for those MEPs.

#### **4.1 The (regional) experience of MEPs**

Overall, out of the 2 209 MEPs elected from regionalized and federal countries (see table 1), 1 004 MEPs merely served in the EP (45,4 percent), while 647 of them (29,3 percent) conducted a career at both the national and European levels. While some MEPs served in regional, national and European politics (261 MEPs, 11,9 percent) during their political career, an important share of MEPs only had a career at the regional and European levels (297 MEPs, 13,5 percent). In

total, 558 MEPs (25,3 percent) have thus served at least once in regional politics before and/or after their European mandate(s).

<b>Career patterns</b>	<b>Nb. of MEPs</b>	<b>Percent</b>
MEPs who served only at the <b>European</b> level (EP)	1 004 MEPs	45,4
MEPs who served at the <b>national and European</b> levels	647 MEPs	29,3
MEPs who served at the <b>regional and European</b> levels	297 MEPs	13,5
MEPs who served at the <b>regional, national and European</b> levels	261 MEPs	11,9
Total	2 209 MEPs	100%

**Table 1:** Distribution of MEPs political experience across governance levels

In particular, the share of MEPs that held at least 1 regional mandate is relatively stable in the three EU federal Member States: 23,28% of Austrian MEPs (17 out of 73); 27,83% of German MEPs (103 out of 370) and 27,69% of Belgian MEPs (36 out of 130). Regionalized countries depict much more variation. For instance, of all 7 countries analysed, it is the French MEPs that represents the biggest share of political regional experience, with 36,29% – 192 out of 529 – of French MEPs. We also found that one third of Spanish MEPs served in regional politics (35,90%). On the opposite, in the United Kingdom, only 3,63% of MEPs (11 out of 303) have held a regional mandate. In between, we found Italy, with 19,77% of MEPs having also served at the regional level. More critically, these MEPs held 2,2 mandates at the regional level for a total duration of 105,7 months (almost 9 years). In other words, this experience is not anecdotal at all: by comparative standards, it actually represents a rather extensive duration (Dodeigne, 2018).

The results show that, in federal and regionalized countries, the degree of mobility – and thereof stability in career patterns – can shape very differently. Interestingly, the patterns observed converged with those observed in domestic politics: regional and national present integrated political arenas with permeable institutional boundaries (e.g., Belgium or Spain), or, on the opposite, with a clear-cut separation between political arenas and the quasi-absence of level-hopping movements between regional and upper levels (e.g., the UK) (Dodeigne, 2014, 2018). In this situation, the results for German MEPs reflect the permeable institutional boundaries between the Länder and the national – yet with higher European transfers than those observed between national and regional politics (Borchert and Stolz 2011: 218-9).

Empirically, the inclusion of regional political offices to study the career patterns of MEPs seems to be of predominant empirical importance: overall, up to a quarter of MEPs (25,3 percent) originating from regionalized and federal Member States also spent a part of their

career at the regional level, with a total of 13,5 percent of MEPs only acting at the EU and regional levels. Table 2 presents a summary of the share of MEPs having held a mandate at the regional level before and/or after their service in the EP.

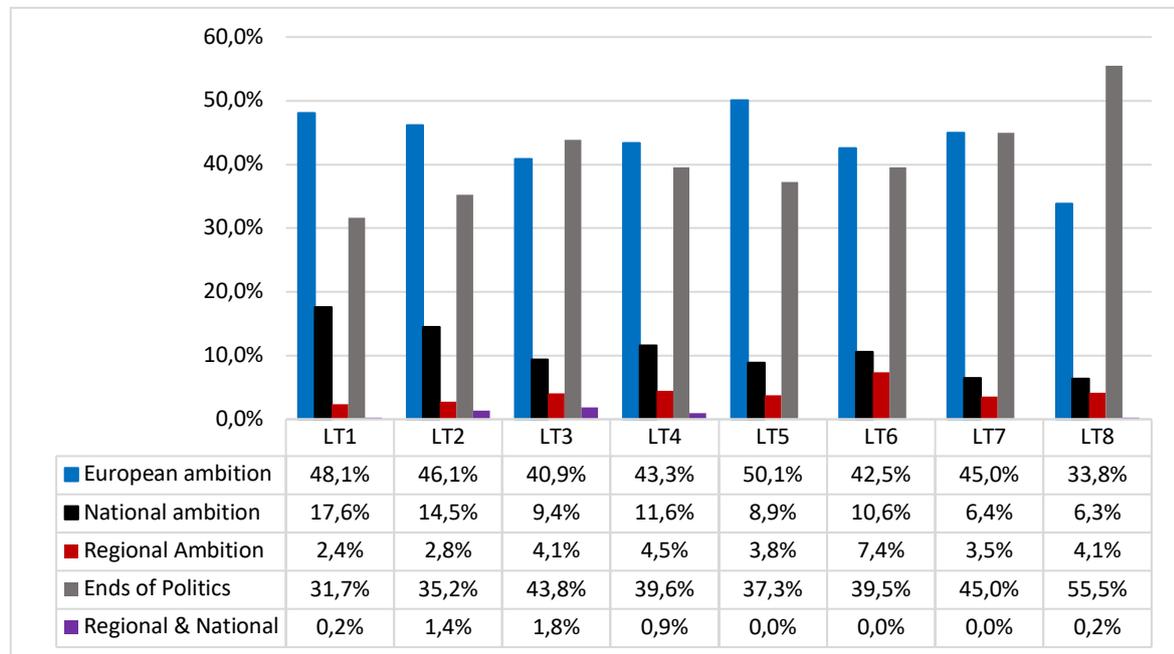
Countries	First EU elections	Percent of MEPs with a regional XP	Average mandate / duration in months
<b>Federations</b>			
<b>Austria</b>	1996	23,3% of MEPs (17 out of 73)	2,4 mandates / 98,0 months
<b>Belgium</b>	1979	27,7% of MEPs (36 out of 130)	1,7 mandates / 71,3 months
<b>Germany</b>	1979	27,8% of MEPs (103 out of 370)	2,8 mandates / 119,0 months
<b>Regionalized countries</b>			
<b>France</b>	1979	36,3% of MEPs (192 out of 529)	2,0 mandates / 128,1 months
<b>Italy</b>	1979	19,8% of MEPs (103 out of 521)	2,0 mandates / 96,4 months
<b>Spain</b>	1979	35,0% of MEPs (100 out of 286)	2,3 mandates / 76,4 months
<b>UK</b>	1973	3,6% of MEPs (11 out of 303)	1,7 mandates / 61,7 months
<b>EU7</b>	1979	<b>25,3% of MEPs (558 out of 2209)</b>	<b>2,2 mandates / 105,6 months</b>

**Table 2:** Share of MEPs having held a mandate at the regional level before/after their EP mandate(s)

Another way of showing the relevance is to replicate Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix's (2019) operationalization of MEPs' 'domestic ambition', including regional office. In their article, the authors make the distinction between the national political career (MEPs who went back to the national level within five years after their EP mandate) or the European political career (MEPs pursuing their career at the European level, in the EP or in the Commission). The other MEPs were categorized as having a non-political career or retiring from politics.

In this article, we followed Hoyland, Hobolt and Hix's operationalization, but we added regional ambition or both regional/national ambition (i.e., the MEPs that became members of both their regional and national parliaments/governments). In their study, this kind of MEPs were recorded as ending politics. As visible in figure 1, overlooking MEP's regional ambition in federal and regionalized countries (1979 until 2019) is, unmistakably, not anecdotal. Whereas MEPs with regional ambition hardly exist in this first two legislative terms (clearly dominated by MEPs with national ambition), they have been representing between about half and three quarter of the MEPs with national ambition. Because Hix and colleagues found that

MEPs with national ambition behave significantly differently from those with a European ambition in their parliamentary activities, we can similarly posit that such regional ambition could – substantially – refine our current knowledge of the MEPs’ legislative behaviour.



**Figure 1:** MEPs ambition (1979-2019).

#### 4.2 Career patterns of MEPs from federalized and regionalized Member states

While the previous descriptive statistics outline the empirical relevance of regional politics in the MEPs’ political paths, we now seek to unpack and discuss in greater details how it specifically shapes the MEP’s career orientation in regionalized and federal EU Member States.

Overall, the distribution of career patterns over time – for all 2 209 MEPs from federal and regionalized MS – confirms some of the main findings highlighted in the literature. First, in every legislative term, at least 33% of MEPs are long-term ‘EP politicians’, outlining the development and stabilization of a ‘European Political class’ (Dodeigne et al. 2021). MEPs see their time in the European Parliament as a career in itself (Daniel, 2015; Beauvallet-Haddad et al., 2016; Scarrow, 1997; Whitaker, 2014). The share of ‘Euro-expert’ (i.e., MEPs with domestic experience previous to their EU career) range between 10.8% and 13.9% across Members states, while the share of ‘Euro-Politicians’ (i.e., MEPs making their career at the European level) fluctuates between 23,1 and 34% of MEPs. Second, the EP never was and is not an elderly retiree home (Whitaker, 2014). The share of ‘EP-Retirees’ have been most of the time around 5% but slightly increased in the sixth legislative term up to 7.3% and reach their peak in the eighth term with 9.2%. Third, our analysis also identified MEPs using the EP as

springboard towards domestic politics, but their share is overall quite low. Those aiming for a national career represent a maximum of 2.8% of MEPs – at the exception of LT1, with 6,3% - while the share of MEPs aiming at a regional career is even lower (1.8%). Fourth, a striking finding is the high number of MEPs who enter the EP without previous political experience, stay less than one full term in the EP and do not continue their political career after their time in Brussels. These ‘One-off MEPs’ increased over time from 14.9% in the second term up to 19,5% in LT7 and reaching a peak in the eighth term with 24.2%<sup>4</sup>, thereby emphasizing the same phenomena as van Geffen (2016)<sup>5</sup>. Finally, since the second term, the second strongest group on average in the EP is composed of the ‘Ambiguous multi-level MEPs’, one of the new proposed categories. Their amount lies between 43% (LT1) and 18.2% (LT7) and allows to capture those MEPs with experience in at least several levels of government in a non-ordered manner, yet with time served in office that does not permit to establish a clear orientation towards one level or the other. Overall, since LT1, this type of career pattern has continuously decreased. Figure 2 summarizes the distribution of career patterns over time.

Evolution of MEPs' career patterns (EU-7)

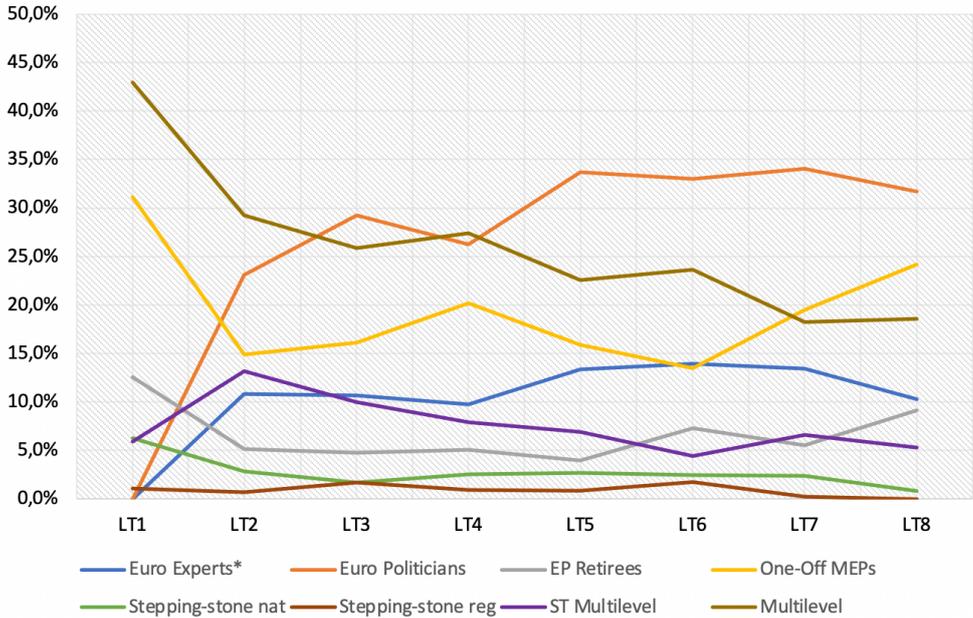


Figure 2: Distribution of career patterns over time

<sup>4</sup> Important note: these MEPs could, in our categorization, become springboard MEPs in a couple of years. In addition, it is interesting to note that there was an important decrease between LT4 and LT6, two legislative period where the number of ‘Euro-experts’ and ‘Euro-politicians’ were increasing.

<sup>5</sup> Van Geffen used 2 EP terms as a threshold to categorize ‘one-off’ MEPs. In our operationalization, we decided to use only 1 EP term, as we believe that (1) less than two terms (i.e. 10 years) is already quite a substantial European experience, and (2) because we followed the 1,5 mandate threshold from Scarrow (1997) to identify ‘EU-committed’ MEPs, it was therefore more consistent to decrease the number of EP terms for ‘one-off’ MEPs. Finally, on a minor, we think that a duration of 1 EP term is better fit with the name ‘one-off’ (i.e., one, in the sense, 1 EP term).

However, our key interest is to assess to what extent the inclusion of regional offices refines those categories, and the direct implications for the current literature on MEPs' career and legislative behaviour. First, we observe that 264 MEPs used to be operationalized as having served only in the European parliament, while they also served in regional politics. For some of the existing categories, overlooking regional offices had limited effects: hence, "short-termers" (n=58), irrespective of the level of service, remain both conceptually and empirically MEPs with a very short political experience (i.e., they are MEPs with 'discrete' ambition in Schlesinger's terms). Other categories are, however, more disputable: we hence observe a substantial proportion of MEPs considered as "one-off MEPs" in the current literature (n=129, i.e. 61 multilevel MEPs and 68 EP retirees in our classification), while they bring to the EP a substantial experience in regional politics. And the previous literature (cf. supra) leads us to expect from the latter to have more "know-how" and influence than mere rookies, who must learn the rules of the game. The same kind of reasoning also apply for our 57 "Euro-experts" MEPs who will commit most of their political experience in the EP in the long run, but were considered as relatively novice parliamentarians in the early stage of their career – despite the often extensive regional experience they brought from the start of their service in the EP.

Finally, the conclusions are more mixed for MEPs with time of service at the regional, federal and European experience (n=250). In the current literature, their multilevel experience was already partly covered by the offices service in national politics. However, the time served in national politics was posterior to the EP, making them rookies in the existing categories – overlooking their potential regional experiences. On the opposite, some of these MEPs were considered as Euro-Experts (national experience followed by an experience in the EP), whereas their political career ended only several years after, but in regional domestic politics.

## **5. Conclusion**

Since Scarrow's seminal work on MEPs' political ambition and career in the late 1990s, recent studies extended the empirical scope to new Member States and/or assess more systematically the evolution of MEPs career paths over legislative terms. Nonetheless, this literature suffers from a bias that is far from being limited to European studies, as it has been already identified in legislative and parliamentary studies: "methodological nationalism". Indeed, earlier works have now established the relevance – or even predominance – of regional political arenas in multiple European countries. Including the analysis of the regional level is also pertinent while

studying the EP, as the largest delegations of MEPs precisely originate from regionalized or federal countries.

To address this gap, this paper presents an empirical analysis of 2209 MEPs career patterns over eight legislative terms (1979-2019) from seven regionalised or federal countries in the EU (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK), representing about half of all MEPs who ever served in the EP. Overall, the empirical analysis shows that including subnational political offices is both empirically and analytically relevant. Empirically, up to a quarter of MEPs (25,3%) originating from regionalized and federal Member States also spent a part of their career at the regional level, with a total of 13,5% of MEPs only acting at the EU and regional levels. Analytically, the inclusion of subnational political offices allows introducing a more fine-grained categorisation of MEPs career paths, notably by identifying new career paths that are theoretically and analytically relevant such as (short-term) “multi-level” MEPs or “stepping-stone MEPs” with *regional* political goals. In addition, the inclusion of subnational political offices also permits to enhance our understanding of MEP’s ambition, as our finding show that, while not the biggest category in itself, regional ambition of MEPs is not to be overlooked. Overall, our empirical analysis unmistakably shows that the inclusion of regional offices in the MEPs’ political paths is far from a mere refinement of existing categories, but conducts to severe misconceptions of their career patterns. These findings have important consequences when political experience is used as a key factor explaining MEPs’ legislative behaviour. It thus encourages other scholars to include the regional level more systematically, against “methodological nationalism”.

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