

Policies with and without Politics: Committees and the Differentiated Politicization of Legislative Debates in the European Parliament

La politisation des politiques publiques dans l'UE : Les commissions parlementaires et la politisation des débats législatifs au Parlement européen.

Thomas Laloux (FNRS, ISPOLE, UCLouvain)

thomas.g.laloux@uclouvain.be

Damien Pennetreau (FNRS, ISPOLE, UCLouvain)

damien.pennetreau@uclouvain.be

Thomas Laloux is a F.R.S-F.N.R.S research fellow and PhD candidate at the ‘Institut de Science politique Louvain Europe’ at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium). His main research interest lies in the EU legislative decision-making and focuses more particularly on inter-institutional negotiations. His work has appeared in *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Journal of Common Market Study* and *European Political Science*.

Damien Pennetreau holds a FRESH Grant from the F.R.S-F.N.R.S and works as PhD candidate and research fellow at the Institut de Science politique Louvain Europe at the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium). His main research interest lies in the interactions that occur between policy implementation, media framing and citizens’ opinion. He is part of the ERC QualiDem (Grant n°716208 – <https://qualidem-erc.eu/>)



Plenary debates in the European Parliament (EP) constitute important venues for politicization, as they provide the institutional arena for MEPs to publicly express and confront their positions about future policies. Yet, given the central role of committees in EP decision-making and the differences between them, the politicization of plenary debates is likely to vary according to the committees that prepared the legislative files. This article examines that hypothesis, and tests possible explanations for differences in the politicization of plenary debates across committees. The politicization of debates is measured by the number of MEPs who participate in the debate. The results show that legislative debates about files prepared in committees that are less consensual in their internal decision-making tend to be more politicized. However, the analysis does not provide evidence that the saliency of the issues committees deal with affects the politicization of the plenary debates.

Parce qu'ils permettent aux députés européens d'exprimer publiquement et de confronter leurs positions sur les législations à adopter, les débats en plénière au Parlement européen constituent des espaces importants de politisation. Cependant, étant donné le rôle central des commissions dans le processus décisionnel du PE et les différences entre elles, la politisation des débats en plénière est susceptible de varier selon les commissions qui ont préparé les dossiers législatifs. De ce point de vue, le présent article vise à comparer la politisation des débats en fonction de la commission parlementaire responsable du dossier. En pratique, nous mesurons la politisation des débats à l'aune du nombre de députés qui y participent. Les résultats confirment que la politisation des débats législatifs diffère en fonction de la commission qui est chargée de préparer les dossiers débattus. Les débats à propos des dossiers venant de commissions qui ont des processus décisionnels plus conflictuels tendent à être plus politisés. Par contre, les résultats ne permettent pas de conclure que l'importance des enjeux traités par une commission a un effet sur la politisation des débats en plénière portant sur ses dossiers.

An important share of European Union (EU) legitimacy problems is said to extend from the fact that the EU adopts “policy without politics” (Schmidt, 2006, 22), which results in “depoliticized policy debates that do not resonate with European citizens” (Schmidt, 2011[Cécile Gr1][DP2], 30)¹. The European Parliament (EP) is often seen as the main public forum in EU legislative decision-making, and therefore the place to bring politics into the decision-making process (Lord, 2013; Ripoll Servent, 2018). Yet, existing research suggests that the politicization of plenary debates varies. On the one hand, the EP is commonly referred to as a consensual institution, which leaves little room for public politicization in debates (Brack and Costa, 2018). On the other hand, public conflicts about policies do occur during plenary debates (Högenauer, 2017; Frid-Nielsen, 2018). Moreover, plenary debates are an important forum for MEPs to communicate on their positions regarding the legislative acts to be adopted (Slapin and Proksch, 2010). Within this framework, this paper examines how and why the politicization of legislative plenary debates in the EP varies.

While the EP plenary is potentially the main arena for public justification and thus public conflicts, most of the substantial work is, in fact, conducted within EP committees. Committees are the main locus for legislative policy-making in the EP (Roger et al., 2017). Negotiations in committees anticipate and pre-empt plenary conflicts (Roger and Winzen, 2015). In sum, in the EP the work is divided between committees, which conduct the work of negotiation and deliberation, and the plenary, which adopts the final decision and provides the public with justifications thereof (Lord, 2018; Ripoll Servent, 2018). Committees largely differ, not only

¹ The authors wish to thank Tom Delreux, the editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions. Thanks are also due to participants to the 2018 CEE research days for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this article.

regarding the issues they deal with, but also regarding their internal functioning (Whitaker, 2011; Ripoll Servent, 2018). Given their central role in EP decision-making, these differences between committees are likely to affect the politicization of plenary debates. Against this background, this article aims to assess whether the politicization of legislative debates in plenary differs according to which EP committee was responsible for preparing the file(s) debated, and to contribute an explanation for why this may be.

We develop and test three hypotheses regarding why debates are more politicized when files are from certain committees. The first hypothesis assumes that internal characteristics of the committees are drivers for the politicization of legislative debates. The second and third hypotheses assume that it is not the committees as such that matter, but rather the importance of the issues, for EU citizens or for political groups respectively, they cover.

Practically, we operationalize the politicization of legislative debates by the MEPs who participate in a given debate. The number of actors involved is an important dimension to the level of politicization. As stated by Pieter de Wilde (2011, 567), "interested parties may have very different demands on policy, but if they do not voice them, politicization remains inhibited". De^[DP3] Wilde, followed by others (e.g. Grande and Hutter, 2016^[Cécile Gr4]^[TL5]), therefore includes the number of actors as a key indicator of politicization, together with saliency and polarization. Accordingly, while this is only one side of the story, the number of participants in a debate is decisive for its politicization. In other words, participation in debates provides limited but important insights into their overall level of politicization. In sum, following the distinction made by Frédéric Merand and Laurie Beaudonnet (2019) ^[Cécile Gr6]^[TL7], this paper studies the politicization of issues in majoritarian institutions (i.e. the EP) through the dimension of number of actors involved in the debates.

The analysis is based on an original dataset, which includes information on 148 debates that occurred over a period from September 2014 to March 2018. For each debate, the dataset contains the names, nationalities, and political groups of the MEPs who participated. We compare the politicization of debates according to the committees responsible for the file(s) debated and test our hypotheses by means of regression analysis.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature about plenary debates in the EP and the politicization thereof. Section 3 presents our theoretical arguments and hypotheses in more detail. Section 4 describes the data and method. Section 5 provides an overview of MEPs' participation in EP legislative debates. Section 6 presents the results of our analysis. Finally, section 7 displays our conclusions.

I. The politicization of legislative debates in the EP

Formally, plenary debates in the EP are regulated by Article 162 of the institution's rules of procedure. This article divides speaking time into categories: The first part of the debates is dedicated to key actors of the decision-making process, for example rapporteurs and representatives of political groups. Then, the remaining time is allocated to rank-and-file MEPs; this usually constitutes the larger part of the debate (Ripoll Servent, 2018). The interventions of MEPs are limited to one minute. The number of interventions is decided on a proposal of the Conference of Presidents, which consists of the president of the EP and the chairs of each political group. Regarding political groups, one portion of the interventions is divided equally between groups, and another is divided according to the size of each group (Corbett et al., 2016) [Cécile Gr8]^[TL9]. Then, political groups allocate their speaking time

between different debates, which means that they can “prioritize topics that are particularly close to their heart” (Högenauer, 2017, 1094).

In today’s EU legislative decision-making, the role of plenary debates is largely symbolic, as the MEPs’ legislative work is mainly done in committee and in trilogue negotiations. The content of EU legislations is actually decided in committees, where substantial conflicts are resolved (Roger and Winzen, 2015; Roger et al., 2017). As a result, the plenary must decide on a take-it-or-leave-it proposal, and debates therein can hardly have an impact on the final acts. Moreover, the existing literature describes EP debates as extremely formal and regulated (Brack and Costa, 2018; Garssen, 2016), and therefore “unexciting” (Ripoll Servent, 2018).

Yet, however symbolic and unexciting they may be, plenary debates remain important for MEPs, and for the EU legislative process. For MEPs, the plenary is less a place to interact and try to persuade their counterparts than it is a place to take a position (Slapin and Proksch, 2010; Lord and Tamvaki, 2013). From this perspective, plenary debates are the main institutional arena for public communication throughout the EU legislative decision-making process (Lord 2013, 2018). Debates provide MEPs with a crucial opportunity to express their positions regarding the policies to be adopted, and to attract media attention (Proksch and Slapin, 2015; Ripoll Servent, 2018). For instance, Eurosceptic MEPs strategically use debates to raise attention from the outside world (Brack, 2015). This makes speaking time a “highly coveted resource” in the EP (Ripoll Servent, 2018, 234), mainly reserved for prominent members of political groups (Sorace, 2018). In sum, EP plenary is the main forum in the EU to publicly support or contest legislation to be adopted, and thereby “specific institutional venue for politicisation” (Wonka, 2016, 127).

Most of the literature studying the politicization of debates in the EP has examined the content of the speeches made therein. Scholars focused on the

positions taken by MEPs to identify the main cleavages during debates [Cécile Gr10]^[TL11].² Proksch and Slapin (2010) argued that MEPs' speeches are primarily divided over the issues of EU integration and national positions, rather than over left–right politics. This result differs from the dimensions of conflicts expressed through voting, where left–right politics is an important line of conflict (Hix and Høyland, 2013). However, studies about specific policy areas suggest that the main dimension of conflicts varies depending on the characteristics of the debates. Debates on asylum (Frid-Nielsen, 2018) and migration (Högenauer, 2017) are characterized by a left–right line of conflict, while conflict regarding globalization is an important division in other areas (de Wilde et al., 2015). Finally, Högenauer (2017) observed that political groups are generally highly cohesive with their members' interventions during debates about the migration crisis.

An exception to this focus on the content of speeches is the work of Jonathan Slapin and Sven-Oliver Proksch (2010), who looked at the reasons why MEPs participate in plenary debates. They argued that MEPs' relationship with their political groups, as well as the selection mechanisms of their national parties, were important factors for explaining the number of speeches made by each MEP. Yet, they mostly considered the individual characteristics of MEPs. That is to say, they focused on explaining why particular MEPs take the floor, but did not draw comparisons across debates to examine whether politicization differs between them.

In sum, we have some knowledge about who talks in the EP plenary and what they say, but we know little about which debates attract a greater or

2

It is noteworthy that an important literature also aimed at identifying such dimensions of conflict through plenary votes (e.g. Hix et al., 2007). Two main lines of conflict were identified in plenary votes: a left–right dimension and a pro-/anti-European integration dimension.

lesser number of participants, that is to say, which debates are more or less politicized. Considering the importance given to vivid policy debates to restore the EU's legitimacy (Follesdal and Hix, 2006[Cécile Gr12][TL13]; Schmidt, 2013), the lack of knowledge about which debates trigger politicization in the EP might come as a surprise. By exploring the politicization of legislative debates in comparative perspective, this study contributes to filling this gap, thereby improving our understanding of EU legislative politics.

This paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, it sheds light on differentiated politicization inside the EU. Thus far, the literature studying politicization within the EU has either examined the level of politicization on one particular issue (e.g. Bellamy and Kröger, 2016; Rauh and de Wilde, 2017) or tried to identify transversal lines of conflict across MEPs (Hix et al., 2006; Roger et al., 2017). Yet, scholars have barely aimed at comparing politicization inside the EU polity, or at explaining potential differences. Second, it contributes to a better understanding of how the EP functions. While committees and the plenary play different roles in EP decision-making, the link between the substantial work in committees and the plenary debates resulting therefrom has not been investigated yet.

Investigating the politicization of legislative debates in the EP plenary also empirically contributes to the larger debate on the democratic legitimacy of EU policy-making. Public debates are identified as a crucial element for the accountability of any democratic decision-making, including in the EU (Lord, 2013). They fulfil the important democratic function of providing justification, which is required for a legislation to be legitimate (Lord and Tamvaki, 2013). Yet, to effectively perform this function, debates have to be politicized, that is, “sufficiently large and conflictual to ensure a sufficient exchange of arguments in which political parties defend different positions” (de Wilde, 2009, 2).

Two reasons are put forward for this need for politicized debates. First, debates must assure that all the arguments can be exchanged and heard before the final decision is made, that is to say, before MEPs vote on the file (Eriksen and Fossum, 2002; Bächtiger, 2014). Such exchange is necessary to guarantee that MEPs are fully informed of the existing alternatives before they make their choices. Second, debates must enable voters to assess the behaviour and positions taken by all parties to identify the alternatives and thereby be better informed when they cast their vote (Follesdal and Hix, 2006). In the EU, the EP plenary has to assume most of this burden of public debates and justification (Lord, 2013; Ripoll Servent, 2018). Hence, examining the politicization of plenary debates enables us to identify whether there are blind spots of public justification in the EU, that is, whether there is a lack of public justification for some policy areas. Thereby, this process helps to better assess the accountability of EU legislators.

II. Hypotheses: internal contestation, issue saliency, and issue ownership

Following the “strategic and partisan-rhetoric approach” (Bächtiger, 2014), we assume that MEPs select the debates they take part in using a cost-benefit approach. Anchored in rational choice theory, this approach [Cécile Gr14][TL15] focuses on the strategic rational decisions of political actors to make a speech during debates (Bächtiger, 2014; Bäck and Debus, 2016). More precisely, this approach argues that, given time constraints, MEPs cannot participate in all debates. Therefore, they take the floor to politicize debates when they think that doing so provides them with the most benefits (Slapin and Proksch, 2010).

From this perspective, we develop three possible reasons why the politicization of plenary debates differs depending on the committee that is responsible for preparing the files to be debated. First, we expect the politicization of debates to differ according to which committee is responsible for the files because committees differ in their internal functioning. Committees are the main place wherein MEPs negotiate legislation and thus compromises, both among themselves and with the Council (Roederer-Rynning and Greenwood, 2015; Roger et al., 2017). The high level of autonomy enjoyed by committees in the EP has led to differentiated norms of conduct in their functioning (Roederer-Rynning and Greenwood, 2017; Ripoll Servent, 2018). In particular, committees differ as to the level of consensus they build for the report they adopt. Some committees are more consensual while others are more competitive (Settembri and Neuhold, 2009; Ripoll Servent, 2018). In other words, decisions are more contested within some committees while others build stronger consensus among their members.

We expect the conflict-proneness of a committee to lead to more politicization in the plenary debates about its files. The literature on parliaments has already shown that intra-institutional division triggers more participation in debates (Slapin and Proksch, 2010; Giannetti et al., 2015). When negotiations in committee are more contested, MEPs' positions are harder to assess a priori because the range of positions in the EP is wider. In such cases, the need for an MEP to communicate about his or her position is greater because of the risk of misunderstanding, which leads to more politicized debates. Conversely, when a strong consensus is reached in committee, the position of one MEP is more likely to be the consensual position. The incentive to politicize debates is thus lower as MEPs' positions are easier to assess, and the need to publicly express them is less important. As a result, our first

hypothesis (H1) reads: *the more conflictual a committee is, the more debates about files from this committee are politicized.*

Second, we expect the politicization of debates to differ according to the committees responsible for the files because committees cover different policy areas. Most EP committees are organized around specific policy issues (Ripoll Servent, 2018), e.g. the environment or fisheries. These issues do not equally interest MEPs, and the benefit for them to participate in debates is therefore likely to differ across issues. Particularly, MEPs have incentives to focus on debates from committees whose main issues are more important to the citizens. Indeed, the literature shows that doing so enhances MEPs' visibility vis-à-vis these issues, and thereby increases their probability of being re-elected (Bäck and Debus, 2016; Giannetti et al., 2016). Conversely, the less citizens consider the main issues of a committee to be salient, the less incentive MEPs have to participate in debates on files prepared by this committee. Accordingly, our second hypothesis (H2) reads: *debates about files from committees dealing with issues that are deemed important by EU citizens are more politicized.*

Third, we also expect political groups to emphasize debates from different committees. Here, our hypothesis again relies on the issues committees deal with, rather than on their internal functioning. Theories of party competition have argued that strong connections might exist between a party and an issue (Schattschneider, 1960; Budge and Farlie, 1983). In other words, parties care more about some issues and specialize in those, or at least pay more attention to them (Budge, 2015; Seeberg, 2017). From this perspective, not only are political group members more likely to take the floor in debates for policies they care about, but bringing these issues to the fore during debates is actually advantageous for them (Baumann, 2016; Bäck and

Debus, 2018). Focusing on ‘its own’ issues is also beneficial to the positioning and reputation of a party (Slapin and Proksch, 2010).

In the EP, there are two reasons why it is likely that political groups focus on different issues. First, political groups in the EP are largely aggregations of "like-minded parties, sharing – at least – similar policy objectives" (Bressanelli, 2012, 751). Therefore, their members are likely to prioritize the same issues (Högenauer, 2017). Second, as they allocate plenary times, group leaders can constrain MEPs’ participation in debates (Slapin and Proksch, 2010). Therefore, leaders can prioritize issues that are beneficial to their own groups. In sum, we expect groups to politicize debates about files from committees whose issues matter the most to them. Accordingly, our third hypothesis (H3) reads: *the more important a committee issue is for a political group, the more MEPs from this group participate in debates about files from this committee*. Table 1 below summarizes our three hypotheses.

[Table 1 near here]

III. Data and method

Our dependent variable, that is, the level of politicization of a debate, is measured by the number of MEPs involved in plenary debates in the EP. To test our third hypothesis, we use the number of MEPs involved from each political group as dependent variables. The record of EP debates is publicly available on the European Parliament website. For each debate, we collected the names of all participants, the category under which they [Cécile Gr16]^[TL17] on the floor (i.e. if they spoke as rapporteur, on behalf of a political group, as a non-particular intervention [Cécile Gr18]^[TL19] or under the catch-the-eye procedure), their nationality and political group.

Importantly, to construct our dependent variable, we only considered the interventions made by rank-and-file MEPs, that is, we did not consider the interventions reserved for key actors in the procedure. The reason is that, as the number of key actors participating is fixed at the beginning of the procedure, it does not provide any information on the politicization of the debates. Data were collected for all the acts adopted from the beginning of the 8th EP to March 2018. Overall, 238 legislative acts were adopted in this period, among which 167 (70%) were debated. This resulted in a dataset containing information about 148 debates. The difference between the number of files and the number of debates is due to the fact that several acts could be debated together within one debate [Cécile Gr20][TL21], when the issues tackled are considered alike.

To measure our first independent variable, the level of contestation of a committee,³ we used the Index of Political Perturbation from Settembri and Neuhold (2009). The index was specifically developed to assess the extent to which committees are consensual when adopting reports by measuring how distant the majorities are from the consensus on average. For each committee the index gives a score indicating how conflictual this committee is. For our second independent variable, we used a binary proxy identifying which committees are responsible for issues that are considered important by the EU citizens. To identify the priorities of the EU citizens, we used the results of EUROBAROMETERS between 2014 and 2017. They suggest that, for the period of our sample, the committees dealing with the most important issues to EU citizens are (the identified issues are in parenthesis) ENVI (climate change, the environment), ECON (economic situation, pensions, rising prices, taxation),

3

Files for which more than one committee was responsible were coded as a specific category (n=9).

EMPL (unemployment, pensions), LIBE (immigration, terrorism) and ITRE (energy supply).⁴

To assess the priority of each group, we used the Euromanifesto project dataset, which identifies the priorities of political groups based on their Europarty manifesto for the 2014 elections. To link each issue identified in the manifestos with the corresponding EP committee, we used the categorization system of Whitaker (2011). Eventually, we controlled for the number of debates each committee was responsible for.

IV. Participation: different across countries, not groups

Figure 1 displays the distribution of the number of MEPs intervening in debates. This distribution per debate is right-skewed. Most of the debates gather between 5 and 25 participants, while a right tail thus goes up to 51 participants. The average participation in debates is 17.64 MEPs, the median is 15. Since there are 751 MEPs sitting in the EP, this result implies that the median participation in legislative debates is a little bit more than 2% of MEPs (2.23%).

[Figure 1 near here]

The most debated or politicized debate[Cécile Gr22][TL23] garnered 51 participants; this was the debate about Regulation 2016/1624 on the European

4

Importantly, we controlled for multicollinearity in the models and found no relationship between the independent variables, which allowed us to eliminate potential endogeneity problems.

Border and Coast Guard (ETIAS). More specifically, its purpose was to establish a European Border and Coast Guard, built by Frontex. This result comes as no surprise given the current migration crisis and the sharply diverging views in that regard. Furthermore, this directive in particular has raised several criticisms in the EP (Ruhrmann and FitzGerald, 2018).

The debate with the second most participants was the one related to the Trademarks Package (Directive 2015/2436 and Regulation 2015/2424). It garnered 49 participants. Again, this legislative proposal, a very important matter for corporations and businesses, was highly contested (Senftleben, 2016). The third most debated act was Regulation 2015/1017, extending the duration of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) initiative (a post-financial crisis institution). Hence, two (ETIAS and EFSI) of the three debates with the most participants were related to two current crises faced by the EU: migration and economic turmoil, while the third was related to the core competences of the EU (trade and competition), and was of key importance to the business world.

At the other end of the scale are consensual and narrow (non-)debates. The three debates with the fewest participants dealt with technical and non-conflictual issues: Regulation 2017/1129 on the prospectus to be published when securities are offered to the public or admitted to trading; Regulation 2017/1130 defining the characteristics for fishing vessels (recast), and Regulation 1384/2014 on tariff treatment for goods from Ecuador. These files were only lightly contested in the EP. Few or no amendments were brought to the commission proposal, and the vast majority of MEPs voted in favour. Hence, this confirms the relevance of our proxy for the level of politicization of a legislative debate.

To look more closely at who takes the floor during legislative debates, figure 2 displays the distribution of interventions for each political group

(above), as well as member state (below), according to the number of seats.⁵ This means that, if intervention shares were perfectly distributed among groups or countries, they would all be situated on the diagonal (X would equal Y). One observes that, as far as political groups are concerned, this is almost the case. The share of interventions by political groups corresponds proportionally to their size.

The picture is different when it comes to member states. One can see that a majority of them are located close to the diagonal line. Still, one can also observe that Greek and, to a lesser extent, Croatian MEPs take the floor much more frequently than their fellows from other countries do. Conversely, French, German, and British MEPs speak less often than their share of seats would suggest. These results converge with the trend observed by Slapin and Proksch in 2010, with the noticeable exception of the GUE-NGL (which is “communist”, in Slapin and Proksch’s terms). Our data indicate that this group does not speak disproportionately anymore.

[Figure 2 near here]

One explanation for the lower participation of large member states (France, the UK, or Germany) may be linked to the fact that they have the largest contingents, making it more difficult for all MEPs to speak. This may be reinforced by the fact that, for instance, many German MEPs are in the EPP group. Since there are 34 Germans in the EPP group, it may be that some of them leave the floor to EPP members from other countries in order that all

5

Descriptive statistics for each group and member state are provided in the annexes.

national groups have a chance to speak, as required by Rule 162 (§6) of the EP rules of procedure. This could make it more difficult for the numerous German MEPs to speak. Another part of the explanation may be that these countries are less active in the EP because of their strength in both the European Council and the Council of the EU, as well as their strong national and patronal lobbies. This may reduce their need to rely on EP plenary debate. Besides this explanation, the emerging pattern here is that participation in the legislative debates varies more from member state to member state than from one political group to another.

v. Differentiated politicization of debates according to the committees responsible for the files

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the number of interventions in debates according to which committee was responsible for the files debated.⁶ The vertical black lines inside the plots indicate the mean number of MEPs involved in debates for the whole sample. As expected, the degree of politicization during plenary sessions varies according to the committee that was responsible for the files debated.

[Figure 3 near here]

Debates about files from ECON, IMCO and PECH seem to be less politicized. This is an interesting observation since those committees deal with highly Europeanized policy areas. Similarly, debates on the INTA committee's files are also less politicized. In contrast, more MEPs are involved in debates

6

Descriptive statistics for each committee is provided in the annexes.

about files from EMPL, ENVI and LIBE. Debates on AGRI files are also among the most politicized. One possible explanation is related to the important budgetary impact of this committee, as well as to tensions over its possible reform.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted regression analyses using the number of MEPs involved as the dependent variable. More particularly, to test H1 and H2 we built a first model with the total number of MEPs involved in a debate as the dependent variable. Then, to test H3 we built a model for each political group, with the number of MEPs from this group as the dependent variable. Since our dependent variables are count variables, and since their distributions are not normal, we conducted event count models. Specifically, we conducted either negative binomial (NB) or poisson regressions, depending on which one fits the data best.⁷ The results are displayed in Table 2.

[Table 2 near here]

Regarding overall participation, the results support our first hypothesis. The level of average contestation within a committee, as measured by the IPP, has a positive and significant effect on the politicization of a debate. That is to say, the more a committee is consensual in the adoption of its reports, the less the plenary debates about its files are politicized. We do not find such an effect for the saliency of committees' issues for the citizens. While the effect is

7

Negative binomial regression model was applied when the count data were over-dispersed. Diagnostics on the goodness of fit of Poisson and negative binomial models are available upon request. Some political groups' interventions display an important proportion of zero, which could have suggested the use of zero-inflated or hurdle models. However, such models assume that (at least some of) the zero values are generated by a different mechanism than the positive ones, that is to say that two decisions occur, first either 0 or positive, and then the exact positive value. As we do not assume that this is the case with our dependent variable, we run NB models instead.

positive, as we expected, it is not significant. Hence, the results do not support our second hypothesis.

The empirical analysis does not support our last hypothesis either. For none of the groups is there a positive and significant relationship between the importance a group attaches to the issues of the responsible committee and the number of its members that participate in the debates. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the effect of the other variables varies across political groups. This suggests that political groups do behave differently in the debates they prioritize. In that regard, it is noticeable that (centre-)right wing groups' members (i.e. EPP, ECR, and EFDD) participate more in debates prepared by committees dealing with issues that are important to EU citizens while, conversely, the Greens participate less in those debates.

VI. Conclusion

Because they enable MEPs to publicly express and confront their positions about policies to be adopted, plenary debates in the EP constitute important venues for politicization (Wonka, 2016). Yet, MEPs have to select the legislative debates they engage in, resulting in differentiated politicization across debates. Particularly, given the central role of committees in EP decision-making and the difference between them, the politicization of plenary debates is likely to vary according to which committees prepared the files to be debated. From this perspective, this article has aimed to examine whether that was the case, and to contribute an explanation for potential differences across committees.

As we expected, the results show that the politicization of debates does vary according to the function of the committee responsible for the files debated. The debates about files from certain committees are significantly

more politicized. Debates related to the LIBE, ENVI, and AGRI committees garnered significantly more MEPs than those about other issues. In contrast, the files ECON, PECH, and IMCO were responsible for were significantly less debated. From a politicization perspective, this indicates that in the EU the level of politicization differs from policy to policy. Although debates from certain committees tend to confirm the policy-without-politics argument (Schmidt, 2006), other debates seem more politicized.

Regarding our hypotheses, the results support our first hypothesis, namely that the internal functioning of committees has an effect on the politicization of debates. This suggests that, in the EP, the institutional structure and the process whereby a decision is prepared matter with respect to the politicization of public debates about that decision. In contrast, we cannot confirm our second hypothesis, as we did not find evidence that debates about files from committees whose issues are considered salient by EU citizens are more politicized. Nor did we find support for our third hypothesis. Members of political groups do not seem to politicize debates more when the files have been prepared by a committee whose policy areas are close to those salient to their own political group's manifestos. This is an intriguing finding since the literature assumes that the priorities of a party are an important explanation for its members' behaviour. The results suggest, however, that political groups exhibit different behaviours regarding which debates they prioritize.

From a normative point of view, the conclusion is twofold. On the one hand, the lack of politicization of some debates is potentially problematic. If one assumes that public and inclusive debates are necessary to adopt legislation that is legitimate (de Wilde, 2009), the fact that this is not – or is only to a small extent – the case for some legislation may raise questions about its legitimacy. This is particularly the case for debates about ECON files since,

following the Euro and financial crisis, far-reaching and contested measures have been managed by this committee (e.g. Regulation 2015/760 creating European long-term investment funds, or Regulation 575/2013 on prudential requirements for credit institutions and investment firms). The lack of MEPs' involvement in ECON debates could indicate a lack of public justification about these measures, which potentially raises normative concerns. Furthermore, our results could also indicate that MEPs do not prioritize debates about topics that matter the most for EU citizens. If true, such incongruence between the citizens and the priorities of their representatives could be detrimental to the "quality of [EU] democracy" (Rosset and Stecker, 2019, 145).

On the other hand, the greater politicization of debates about ENVI and LIBE files paints a different picture. These committees are indeed related to two important crises faced by the EU in recent (and probably also the coming) years, which raised public awareness and concerns. The fact that MEPs do talk more about these debates could indicate that they took these societal concerns into account, and would mean that – at least in some cases – the EP is reactive to public opinion. If so, this would highlight an important feature of parliamentary debates in the EP and in MEPs' behaviour regarding their reactivity to events and issues central to the public's agenda.

As final words, perhaps the most important outcome of our results is that they call for further research, both about debates in the EP and about differentiated politicization in the EU polity. More particularly, we identify several future lines of study. First, other researchers could further develop our results by better explaining why debates about files from certain committees are more politicized in the plenary while debates from others, such as ECON, garner fewer participants. We developed three hypotheses, but there are other explanations to be tested. For instance, one could examine in more detail the

impact of committee norms regarding inter-institutional negotiations, such as differences in who is involved in trilogues (Häge and Ringe, 2019) on the politicization of subsequent debates.

Second, our analysis shows that there was variation across committees but also between debates, regardless of the committees responsible for the files. Much of this variation has still to be explained. In other words, further research should look for reasons why some debates are more politicized than others, along with which committee was in charge of the files. For instance, one could examine the different politicization of policy areas per se which this study, given its focus on committees, only partially addresses. All in all, this limitation invites further research that refines our results.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine whether these results travel in the EU political system beyond the EP, for instance, whether the lower politicization that we observed about debates on ECON files, or the higher level observed for ENVI and LIBE files, also occurs in other EU arenas such as the Council. This would allow the black box of EU politicization to be further opened by identifying in more detail which EU policies are politicized, in which forums and why, rather than merely examining whether EU integration is politicized at the national level. Taken together, such research would contribute to assessing what contentious issues MEPs and, more broadly, the EU want to tackle. Thereby, it would refine our understanding of how the politicization process occurs at the EU level.

References

Bächtiger André (2014), "Debate and Deliberation in Legislatures", in Shane Martin, Thomas Saalfeld and Kaare Strøm (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Legislative Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Bäck, Hanna and Debus, Marc (2016), *Political Parties, Parliaments and Legislative Speechmaking*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Bäck Hanna and Debus Marc (2018), "Representing the Region on the Floor: Socioeconomic Characteristics of Electoral Districts and Legislative Speechmaking", *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. **71** (1), p. 73–102.

Baumann Markus (2016), "Constituency Demands and Limited Supplies: Comparing Personal Issue Emphases in Co-sponsorship of Bills and Legislative Speech", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. **39** (4), p. 366–387.

Bellamy Richard and Kröger Sandra (2016), "The politicization of European integration: National parliaments and the democratic disconnect", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. **14** (2), p. 125–130.

Brack Nathalie (2015), "The roles of Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament and their implications for the EU", *International Political Science Review*, vol. **36** (3), p. 337–350.

Brack Nathalie and Costa Olivier (2018), *"Democracy in parliament vs. democracy through parliament? Defining the rules of the game in the European Parliament"*, The Journal of Legislative Studies, vol. **24** (1), p. 51–71.

Bressanelli Edoardo (2012), *"National parties and group membership in the European Parliament: ideology or pragmatism?"*, Journal of European Public Policy, vol. **19** (5), p. 737–754.

Budge Ian (2015), *"Issue Emphases, Saliency Theory and Issue Ownership: A Historical and Conceptual Analysis"*, West European Politics, vol. **38** (4), p. 761–777.

Budge, Ian, and Farlie, Dennis (1983), *Explaining and Predicting Elections: Issue Effects and Party Strategies in Twenty-Three Democracies*, London, Allen & Unwin.

De Wilde Pieter (2009), *"Designing Politicization: How Control Mechanisms in National Parliaments Affect Parliamentary Debates in EU Policy-Formulation"*, Arena Working Paper, vol. 13, p. 1–24.

De Wilde Pieter (2011), *"No Polity for Old Politics? A Framework for Analyzing the Politicization of European Integration"*, Journal of European Integration, vol. **33** (5), p. 559–75.

De Wilde Pieter, Junk Wiebke Marie and Palmtag Tabea (2015), *"Accountability and opposition to globalization in international assemblies"*, European Journal of International Relations, vol. **22** (4), p. 823–846.

De Wilde Pieter, Leupold Anna and Schmidtke Henning (2016), *“Introduction: The Differentiated Politicisation of European Governance”*, *West European Politics*, vol. **39** (1), p. 3–22.^[DP24]

Eriksen Erik O. and Fossum John E. (2002), *“Democracy through Strong Publics in the European Union?”*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. **40** (3), p. 401–424.

Frid-Nielsen Snorre S. (2018), *“Human rights or security? Positions on asylum in European Parliament speeches”*, *European Union Politics*, vol. **19** (2), p. 344–362.

Garssen Bart (2016), *“Problem-Solving Argumentative Patterns in Plenary Debates of the European Parliament”*, *Argumentation*, vol. **30** (1), p. 25–43.

Giannetti Daniela, Pinto Luca and Pedrazzani Andrea (2016), *“Setting Parliamentary Calendars: How Parties Allocate Time for Plenary Debates on Bills”*, *Political Studies*, vol. **64** (4), p. 1016–1035.

Häge Frank M. and Ringe Nils (2019), *“Rapporteur-shadow rapporteur networks in the European Parliament: The strength of small numbers”*, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. **58** (1), p. 209–235.

Hix Simon and Høyland Bjørn (2013), *“Empowerment of the European Parliament”*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. **16** (1), p. 171–189.

Hix Simon, Noury Abdul and Roland Gérard (2006), *"Dimensions of politics in the European Parliament"*, American Journal of Political Science, vol. **50** (2), p. 494–520.

Högenauer Anna-Lena (2017), *"The European Parliament in Times of Crisis: Transnationalism under Pressure?"*, Journal of Contemporary European Research, vol. **13** (2), p. 1090-1108.

Lord Christopher (2013), *"The democratic legitimacy of codecision"*, Journal of European Public Policy, vol. **20** (7), p. 1056–1073.

Lord Christopher (2018), *"The European Parliament: a working parliament without a public?"*, The Journal of Legislative Studies, vol. **24** (1), p. 34–50.

Lord Christopher and Tamvaki Dionysia (2013), *"The politics of justification? Applying the 'Discourse Quality Index' to the study of the European Parliament"*, European Political Science Review, vol. **5** (1), p. 27–54.

Proksch Sven-Oliver and Slapin Jonathan B. (2010), *"Position Taking in European Parliament Speeches"*, British Journal of Political Science, vol. **40** (3), p. 587–611.

Proksch, Sven-Oliver and Slapin, Jonathan B. (2015), *The politics of parliamentary debate*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rauh Christian and De Wilde Pieter^[DP25] (2017), *"The opposition deficit in EU accountability: Evidence from over 20 years of plenary debate in four member states"*, European Journal of Political Research, vol. 57 (1), p. 194–216.

Ripoll Servent, Ariadna (2018), *The European parliament*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Roederer-Rynning Christilla and Greenwood Justin (2015), *"The culture of trilogues"*, Journal of European Public Policy, vol. 22 (8), p. 1148–1165.

Roederer-Rynning Christilla and Greenwood Justin (2017), *"The European Parliament as a developing legislature: coming of age in trilogues?"*, Journal of European Public Policy, vol. 24 (5), p. 735–754.

Roger Léa, Otjes Simon and van der Veer Harmen (2017), *"The financial crisis and the European Parliament: An analysis of the Two-Pack legislation"*, European Union Politics, vol. 18 (4), p. 560–580.

Roger Léa and Winzen Thomas (2015), *"Party groups and committee negotiations in the European Parliament: outside attention and the anticipation of plenary conflict"*, Journal of European Public Policy, vol. 22 (3), p. 391–408.

Rosset Jan and Stecker Christian (2019), *"How well are citizens represented by their governments? Issue congruence and inequality in Europe"*, European Political Science Review, vol. 11 (2), p. 145–160.

Ruhrmann Henriette and FitzGerald David (2018), *"The Externalization of Europe's Borders in the Refugee Crisis, 2015–2016"*, UC San Diego Working Papers.

Schattschneider, Elmer E. (1960), *The Semi-sovereign People. A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, London, Wadsworth.

Schmidt, Vivien A. (2006), *Democracy in Europe: The EU and national politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Schmidt Vivien A. (2006)^[DP26], "The Problems of Identity and Legitimacy in the European Union", in Sonia Lucarelli, Furio Cerutti and Vivien A. Schmidt (eds.), *Debating Political Identity and Legitimacy in the European Union*, Abingdon, Routledge, p. 16-37.

Schmidt Vivien A. (2013), *"Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, Output and 'Throughput'"*, *Political Studies*, vol. 61 (1), p. 2-22.

Seeberg Henrik B. (2017), *"How Stable Is Political Parties' Issue Ownership? A Cross-Time, Cross-National Analysis"*, *Political Studies*, vol. 65 (2), p. 475–492.

Senftleben Martin (2016), *"Wolf in Sheep's Clothing? Trade Mark Rights Against Goods in Transit and the End of Traditional Territorial Limits"*, *International Review of Intellectual Property and Competition Law*, vol. 47 (8), p. 941–959.

Settembri Pierpaolo and Neuhold Christine (2009), *“Achieving Consensus Through Committees: Does the European Parliament Manage?”*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. **47** (1), p. 127–151.

Slapin Jonathan B. and Proksch Sven-Oliver (2010), *“Look who’s talking: Parliamentary debate in the European Union”*, *European Union Politics*, vol. **11** (3), p. 333–357.

Sorace Miriam (2018), *“Legislative Participation in the EU: An analysis of questions, speeches, motions and declarations in the 7th European Parliament”*, *European Union Politics*, vol. **19** (2), p. 299–320.

Whitaker, Richard (2011), *The European Parliament’s Committees: National party influence and legislative empowerment*, London, Routledge.

Wonka Arndt (2016), *“The Party Politics of the Euro Crisis in the German Bundestag: Frames, Positions and Salience”*, *West European Politics*, vol. **39** (1), p. 125–144.

Table 1: Hypotheses

Independent Variable	Expectations
Contestation in the committee	<i>H1: The more a committee is conflictual, the more debates about files from this committee are politicized</i>
Saliency of the issues the committee deals with for EU citizens	<i>H2: Debates about files from committees dealing with issues that are deemed important by EU citizens are more politicized.</i>
Saliency of the issues the committee deals with for the political groups	<i>H3: The more the issues a committee covers are important for a political group, the more MEPs from this group participate in debates about files from this committee.</i>

Figure 1: Distribution of interventions per debates

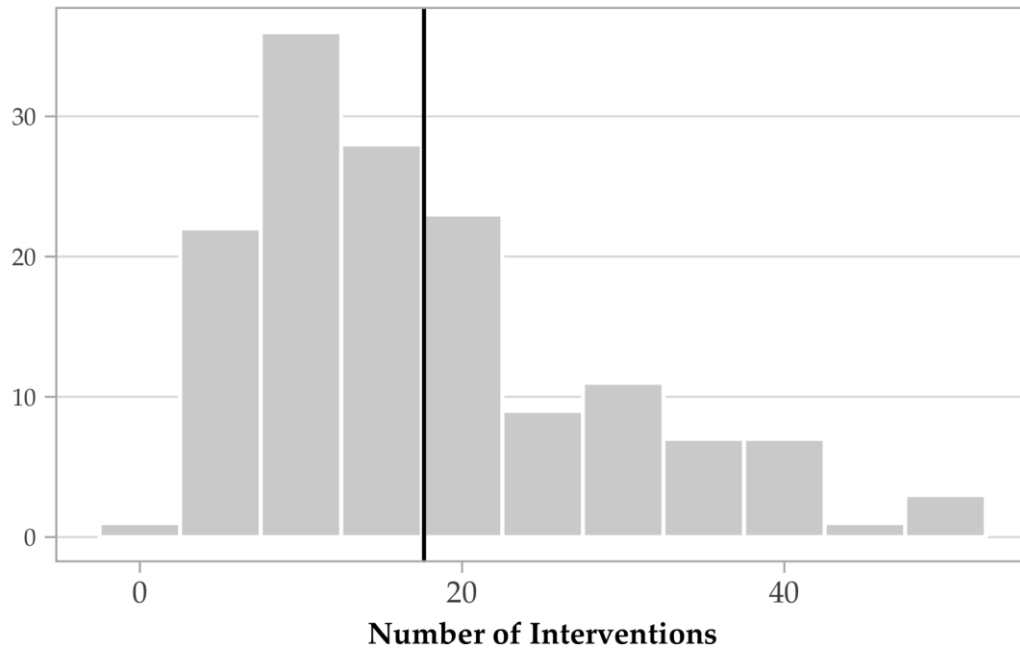
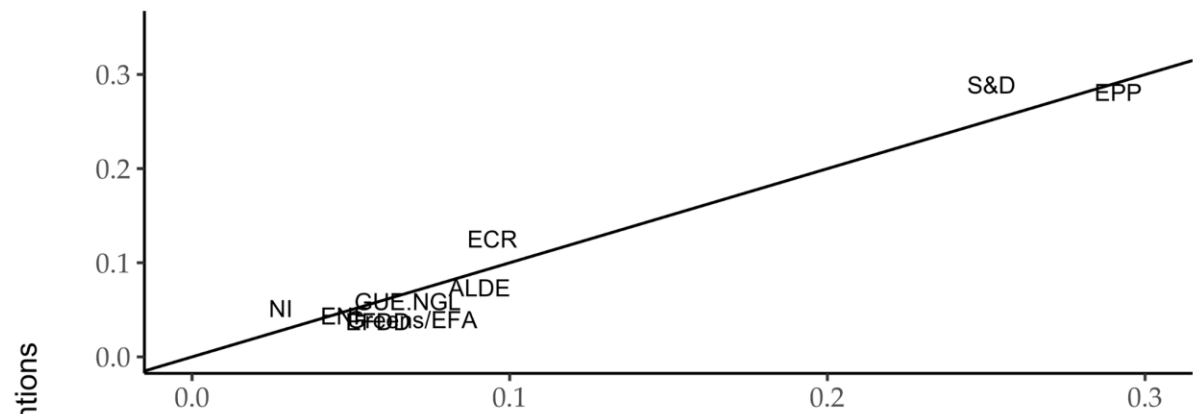


Figure 2: Participation in debates by member states and political groups

Repartition of Interventions

Per Political Groups



Per Nationality

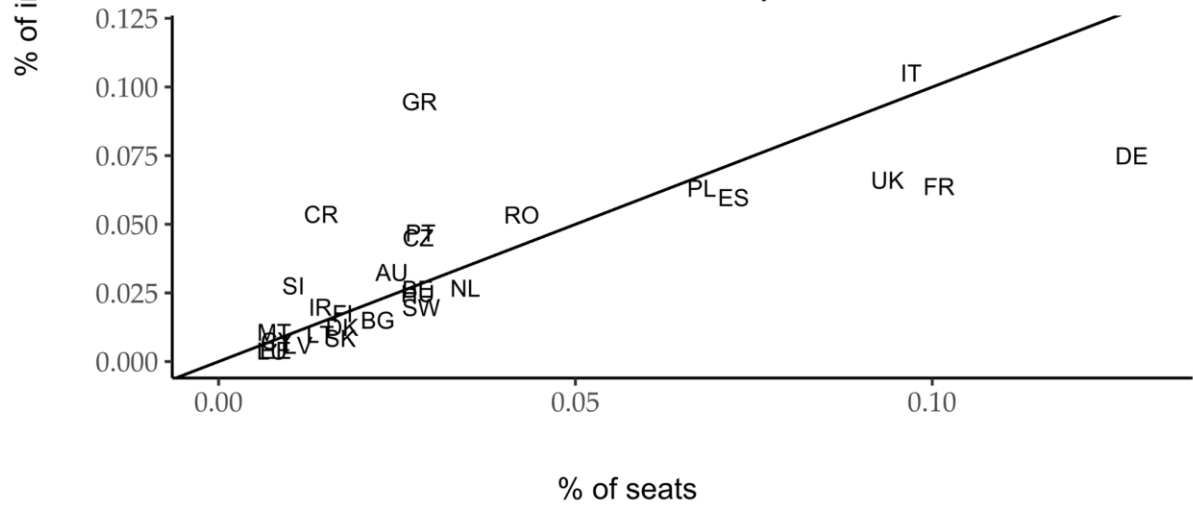
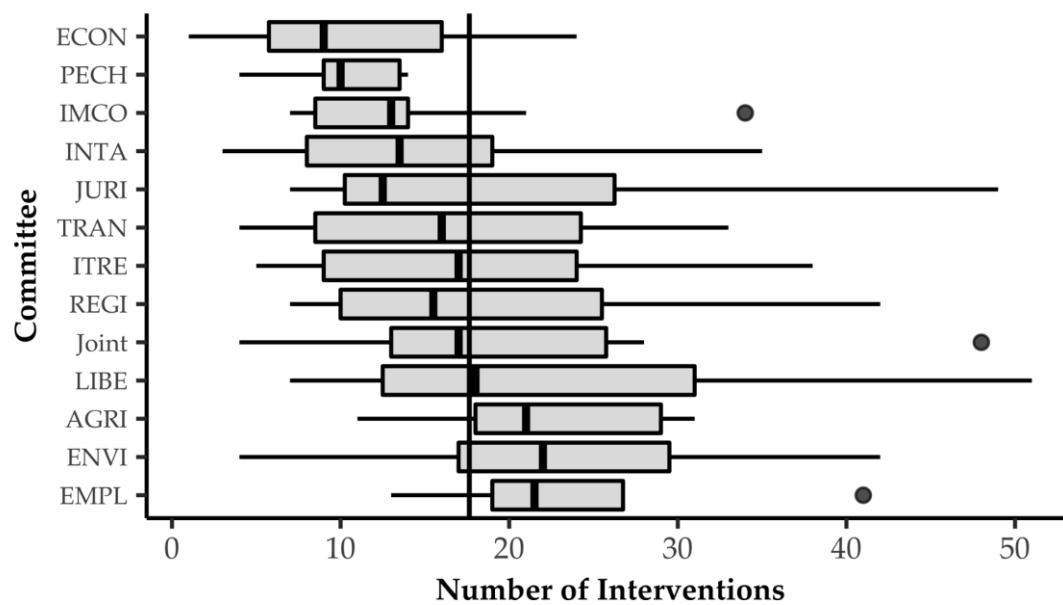


Figure 3: Participation in debates across Committees.



Note: Committees with only one file (i.e. AFET, CONT and BUDG) were excluded from the figure.

Table 2 : Regression analyses

Variable	ALL	EPP	S&D	ALDE	ECR	EFDD	Greens/EFA
Model	NB	NB	NB	NB	P	P	NB
Index of political perturbation	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03** (0.01)	0.06** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.04)
Committee issues Salient for EU citizens	0.17 (0.12)	0.44** (0.19)	-0.05 (0.17)	0.57* (0.33)	0.44** (0.18)	0.92** (0.37)	-0.86** (0.42)
Saliency of the Committee issues for the Group		-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.05** (0.03)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.023 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)
Number of Debates	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.001 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.05** (0.02)	0.07** (0.03)
Constant	2.22*** (0.19)	0.93*** (0.22)	1.12*** (0.18)	-0.74* (0.38)	0.36 (0.23)	-0.78* (0.42)	-0.75 (0.53)
N	148	148	148	148	148	148	148
theta	3.48*** (0.48)	4.77*** (1.18)	9.04*** (3.18)	2.88** (1.23)			1.77** (0.89)
AICc	1085.55	736.44	716.63	449.33	519.29	323.21	333.59

Note: Entries are the unstandardized beta coefficients with robust standard errors (SE) reported in parentheses. Significance: * < 0.10; ** < 0.05; *** < 0.01.

Annexes

Annex 1: Descriptive statistics of political groups' participation to debates

Political Group	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.	S.D.
GUE/NGL	0	0	1	0,99	2	5	1,15
EFDD	0	0	0	0,64	1	3	0,85
ENF	0	0	0	0,74	1	4	1,02
ECR	0	1	2	2,12	3	8	1,53
ALDE	0	0	1	1,24	2	7	1,42
EPP	0	3	4	4,75	6,25	14	3,18
Greens/EFA	0	0	0	0,67	1	5	1,01
S&D	0	3	5	4,88	6,25	14	2,79
NI	0	0	1	0,87	1	5	1,00

Annex 2: Descriptive statistics of Member states' participation to debates

Member State	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu.	Max.	S.D.
AU	0	0	0	0,55	1	3	0,77
BE	0	0	0	0,45	1	3	0,69
BG	0	0	0	0,26	0	3	0,56
CR	0	0	1	0,91	1	4	0,97
CY	0	0	0	0,13	0	2	0,39
CZ	0	0	0,5	0,76	1	6	0,99
DK	0	0	0	0,21	0	2	0,50
EE	0	0	0	0,07	0	2	0,30
FI	0	0	0	0,30	0	6	0,76
FR	0	0	1	1,07	2	6	1,31
DE	0	0	1	1,26	2	7	1,46
GR	0	1	1	1,60	2	11	1,32
HU	0	0	0	0,42	1	3	0,68
IR	0	0	0	0,34	1	3	0,53
IT	0	1	2	1,78	2	9	1,38
LV	0	0	0	0,10	0	1	0,30
LT	0	0	0	0,17	0	2	0,44
LU	0	0	0	0,07	0	1	0,25
MT	0	0	0	0,18	0	2	0,40
NL	0	0	0	0,45	1	4	0,72

PL	0	0	1	1,07	2	4	1,13
PT	0	0	1	0,79	1	4	0,87
RO	0	0	1	0,91	1	5	0,92
SK	0	0	0	0,14	0	2	0,37
SI	0	0	0	0,47	1	4	0,67
ES	0	0	1	1,01	2	6	1,23
SW	0	0	0	0,33	0	4	0,68
UK	0	0	1	1,12	2	6	1,35

Annex 3: Descriptive statistics by Committee

COMMITTEE	N.	Min.	1 st Qu.	Median	Mean	3 rd Qu.	Max.	S.D.
EMPL	4	13	19	21,5	24,25	26,75	41	11,87
ENVI	23	4	17	22	23,26	29,5	42	10,21
AGRI	5	11	18	21	22	29	31	8,19
LIBE	19	7	12,5	18	22,58	31	51	13,01
Joint	8	4	13	17	20,38	25,75	48	13,54
REGI	4	7	10	15,5	20	25,5	42	15,64
ITRE	9	5	9	17	18,56	24	38	12,84
TRAN	8	4	8,5	16	17	24,25	33	10,56
JURI	10	7	10,25	12,5	18,8	26,25	49	13,33
AFET	1	15	15	15	15	15	15	NA
INTA	16	3	8	13,5	14,56	19	35	9,00

IMCO	11	7	8,5	13	13,82	14	34	7,78
BUDG	1	12	12	12	12	12	12	NA
PECH	10	4	9	10	10,4	13,5	14	3,24
ECON	16	1	5,75	9	10,56	16	24	6,21
CULT	2	7	7,25	7,5	7,5	7,75	8	0,71
CONT	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	NA
