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Between Ideology and Nationality: Drivers of Legislative Oversight in the European Parliament's Economic Dialogues

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Abstract

What drives the behaviour of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in legislative oversight? In this article, we explore the interplay between the ideology and nationality of MEPs in policy fields where the two dimensions are likely to come into conflict. Focusing on EU socio-economic governance, we collect an original dataset of parliamentary questions asked during the Economic Dialogues with the European Commission (2012–2019). By means of content analysis, we detect variation in MEPs' preferences relating to two dimensions central to this field, that is, economic effectiveness and social inequality. We argue that the variation in MEPs' concerns can be explained to different degrees by their ideology and nationality. We find that ideology plays a highly significant role in shaping the type of questions posed in legislative oversight; however, the nationality of MEPs is also an important driver of behaviour, especially when a member state is disproportionately affected by EU measures.

Keywords: European Parliament; legislative oversight; economic dialogues, economic and monetary union; social policy

Introduction

By design, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) represent multiple constituencies simultaneously: their transnational political group, their national party, their member state, and potentially their regional or local government unit (Scully and Farrell 2003). The first two constituencies capture the ideology of MEPs (Hix 2002), whereas the other two reflect the extent to which they represent territorial interests (Brack and Costa 2019). In theory, there can be tension between the ideology and nationality of an MEP, although this has not been explored systematically in academic studies. Existing literature has focused on the effect of ideology and nationality on the behaviour of MEPs separately, in line with different domains of parliamentary activity. For instance, research on voting behaviour has shown that ideology represents the main factor shaping the preferences of MEPs—along both the left/right and the pro-/anti-European dimensions (Kreppel 2002; Noury 2002; Hix et al., 2007, 2019; Otjes and van der Veer 2016). Conversely, studies on parliamentary questions demonstrated the key role of territorial constituency concerns amongst MEPs, who use oversight instruments to signal opposition to their national government (Raunio 1996; Proksch and Slapin 2011; Jensen et al., 2013; Font and Durán 2016). What happens, however, when the ideology and nationality of an MEP come into conflict with each other? Under what conditions does ideology matter more (or less) than nationality in driving the behaviour of MEPs?

To answer this question, we explore a field in which there is inherent tension between the ideology and nationality of MEPs. Considering the domestic salience and redistributive character of socio-economic policies (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018), we consider it pertinent to discuss the so-called asymmetry between economic and social issues in European Union (EU) policy-making (Copeland and Daly 2018; Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019). There are two dimensions to this asymmetry. First, the functioning of the internal market and the Eurozone (economic integration) receive far more attention from EU institutions in absolute terms, as reflected by the time spent on decision-making and the resources invested in the process (Savage and Verdun 2016; Maricut and Puetter 2018). Second, the effects of economic integration are not correspondingly balanced in the field of social protection, which remains the responsibility of member states (Ferrera 2017). In the context of the euro crisis (2009–2015), scholars described a subordination of social and employment objectives to economic goals of budgetary austerity and productivity increases (Hermann 2017; Dawson 2018). At the plenary level, the European Parliament (EP) was a vocal critic of this subordination and actively pushed for a stronger focus on social priorities (European Parliament 2011, 2015). Concerning the specific preferences of MEPs, the few studies available on the topic examine parliamentary debates and voting behaviour (Cencig and Sabani 2017; Vesan and Corti 2019) and thus omit other types of parliamentary activity.

In this article, we study legislative oversight and the range of parliamentary questions addressed by MEPs to the European Commission—the main EU executive actor accountable to the EP (Article 14 Treaty on European Union). Specifically, we construct an original dataset of 505 parliamentary questions based on a new type of committee hearings institutionalised after the euro crisis—known as the Economic Dialogues (de la Parra 2017; Dionigi 2020). Although the EP holds Economic Dialogues with other EU bodies and individual member states, we investigate the Economic Dialogues with the Commission because this is the institution responsible for proposing economic and social policy recommendations and is hence typically associated with EU policy-making in the field (Akbik 2022, chap. 5).

Our article makes three contributions. First, we provide a conceptual clarification of the asymmetry between economic and social issues in EU governance, which is far more ambiguous in practice than in theory. Transposed to legislative oversight, we argue that the substance of the debate refers to the normative benchmarks behind parliamentary questions on socio-economic topics. Drawing on Dawson and Maricut-Akbik (2021a), we identify ‘effectiveness’ as the value most closely related to economic issues because it is consistent with an interest in (economic) performance and goal achievement, including through the strict enforcement of fiscal rules. Simultaneously, we link social issues with a focus on ‘inequality’ and the importance attached to policy decisions oriented towards the common good, without creating disadvantages amongst citizens or member states (Dawson and Maricut-Akbik 2021a). Second, our analysis explores MEPs’ behaviour in a new setting (committee hearings of EU executive actors) and thus complements previous analyses of written parliamentary questions (Jensen et al., 2013; Font and Durán 2016; Guinaudeau and Costa 2021) or studies of voting behaviour during the euro crisis (Cencig and Sabani 2017; Vesan and Corti 2019). Finally, we investigate empirically the factors explaining why MEPs emphasise either effectiveness or inequality in parliamentary questions. We find that ideology has been partly overshadowed by nationality

in the context of the euro crisis, as MEPs from debtor countries challenged the increasing inequality amongst citizens or member states—regardless of their party affiliation. In other words, the nationality of MEPs is likely to become a primary driver of behaviour when their member state is directly and disproportionately affected by EU measures. In all other circumstances, ideology remains the main factor shaping the preferences of MEPs.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by summarising existing literature on MEPs' legislative behaviour and then clarify the debate on the asymmetry between economic and social issues in EU governance. Next, we introduce our hypotheses, the dataset and the research design. The results of the statistical analysis are followed by a discussion and conclusion emphasising our contribution to the literature.

1. The Theoretical Debate: Drivers of Behaviour amongst MEPs

The political behaviour of MEPs is a topic subject to countless studies in political science and beyond. Most research centres on the EP's legislative powers and the development of party politics in a transnational setting (Hix et al., 2007: 3). In this context, scholars established the centrality of ideological conflict along the left–right dimension, focused on the representation of distinct socio-economic views rather than territorial units (Kreppel 2002; Hix et al., 2007; McElroy and Benoit 2007). Moreover, the emergence of left–right dynamics was coupled with the consolidation of a grand coalition between the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D). Over time, the dynamic has changed, as more voters embraced Eurosceptic parties and the EP became increasingly fragmented (Hobolt 2015, 2019). Since 2014, a second ideological dimension has become the main factor shaping the preferences of MEPs, in line with their support or opposition to EU integration (Hix et al., 2019). In connection to the euro crisis, several studies demonstrated the impact of pro-/anti-European positions on the behaviour of MEPs (Otjes and van der Veer 2016; Blumenau and Lauderdale 2018). By contrast, there is less research on the role of nationality as a driver of voting behaviour; if anything, such studies examine parliamentary speeches (Proksch and Slapin 2010) or debates (Vesan and Corti 2019; Migliorati and Vignoli 2021) as opposed to roll-call votes. Overall, existing evidence overwhelmingly suggests that ideology remains the strongest factor influencing MEPs' preferences, at least when it comes to ex ante dimensions of parliamentary activity.

By comparison, research on the behaviour of MEPs in ex post instruments such as legislative oversight points to different findings. Studies on parliamentary questions have found that government–opposition dynamics at the national level constitute a key driver of legislative oversight: for instance, MEPs from national opposition parties are more likely to ask questions of other EU institutions and signal violations of EU law in their respective countries (Raunio 1996; Proksch and Slapin 2011; Jensen et al., 2013; Font and Durán 2016). Simultaneously, national electoral systems can play a role, as MEPs from candidate-centred systems tend to ask more questions than MEPs from party-centred systems (Sozzi 2016). In economic governance, Dionigi (2020) has linked the nationality of MEPs and their country's fiscal status with their propensity to ask questions in the Economic Dialogues with their own government. Although there are a few descriptive studies that examine the types of questions asked across political groups

(Guinaudeau and Costa 2021; Akbik 2022), nationality remains the key explanation for MEPs' behaviour in legislative oversight.

In the last decade, however, the field of economic governance has brought the conflict between the ideology and nationality of MEPs to the fore. Examining the legislative packages adopted during euro crisis, Cencig and Sabani (2017) found that national interests and country-level economic variables were better predictors of MEPs' voting behaviour than their party affiliation. In relation to the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights, Vesan and Corti (2019) showed how the EP got caught in between ideological (left–right) and national (creditor–debtor) divisions, as old and new conflict lines came to clash with each other (cf. Ferrera 2017). As these studies examine voting behaviour and legislative amendments, it remains unclear whether the clash between ideology and nationality is a persistent problem for MEPs across domains of parliamentary activity. Against this background, we investigate legislative oversight through parliamentary questions as a domain of EP activity that does not require party discipline; in fact, each MEP has the freedom to pose her own questions, allowing for a more genuine measure of individual behaviour. Similar to earlier studies, we explore economic governance as a field likely to exacerbate conflict lines in the EP owing to its inherently redistributive and politicised character (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018). To substantiate the discussion, we focus on a well-known policy debate in the field, as illustrated below.

2. The Substantive Policy Debate: Beyond the Asymmetry between Economic and Social Issues in EU Governance

In the academic literature, there is a long-standing empirical and normative debate concerning the asymmetry between economic and social issues in EU governance (Hermann 2017; Dawson 2018; Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019). Empirically, the asymmetry dates back to the European Economic Community and the objective to complete the internal market by prioritising market efficiency and liberalisation at the expense of social protection (Scharpf 2002). Normatively, the emphasis on negative integration (removing barriers to trade) has been criticised by scholars who argued that the EU also required positive integration through a stronger social dimension (Leibfried 1994). In the late 1990s, the absence of social policy from the EU agenda was acknowledged at the highest political level: in 1997, the European Council held a special summit on employment (European Council 1997) and in 2000 launched the Lisbon Strategy with the goal to create, amongst other things, 'more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' in the EU (European Council 2000). Subsequently, the Lisbon Strategy introduced the 'open method of coordination' in social policy fields, a voluntary way for member states to coordinate on issues such as employment, pensions and social inclusion (de la Porte and Pochet 2002). In parallel, labour market and wage reforms were included in the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines (BEPGs) in view of maintaining the fiscal balance (Deroose et al., 2008).

According to different commentators, the euro crisis (2009–2014) deepened the asymmetry between economic and social issues in EU governance in two ways (Dawson 2018; Maricut and Puetter 2018). First, the conditionality attached to financial assistance programmes affected social protection standards in beneficiary countries, as governments

were required to reduce public sector salaries and holiday pay, increase working time and the retirement age, or expand flexible forms of work (Garben 2017, p. 45). Second, social policy priorities took a back seat with the introduction of the European Semester, the reformed framework for the coordination of EU economic, budgetary, and social policies (European Commission 2021). In its first years, the Semester consolidated the trend that started with the BEPGs: for example, from 2011 to 2015, the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) mentioned social policy only in relation to market development, promoting competition, or encouraging labour market flexibilisation (Copeland and Daly 2018, p. 1014). Over time, the European Commission made political commitments to 'streamline' the social dimension into the process of economic policy coordination and subsequently achieve a 'Social Triple A rating' (European Commission 2019). Simultaneously, more social actors were included in the decision-making process, leading some authors to identify a gradual 'socialisation' of the European Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; Clauwaert 2019).

Overall, the asymmetry between economic and social issues is easier to understand in theory than to recognise in practice. For instance, studies on EU policy discourse showed that the term 'structural reforms' is typically used to denote market liberalisation, deregulation and public administration reform, but it also appears in the context of social investment and fiscal flexibility—which is contradictory (Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019). Moreover, it is questionable whether we can equate the higher number of social policy recommendations or increased involvement of social actors in decision-making with a more socially oriented policy agenda (Maricut and Puetter 2018; Jordan et al., 2021). Empirically, how would we even know that social goals have been given a 'useful, autonomous meaning' amongst EU priorities? (Dawson 2018, p. 200). For instance, during 2014–2019, the Commission adopted an impressive list of 25 measures in the employment and social field, including the so-called European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2019). This could mean that the Commission actually reduced the asymmetry between economic and social issues or that it simply adopted a strong political rhetoric in the field, without substantive impact (Dawson and Maricut-Akbik 2021b).

In other words, the asymmetry between economic and social issues is difficult to operationalize because a focus on economic policy can be motivated by social priorities and the other way around: social policy can serve to achieve economic goals. For this reason, we argue that a better way to engage in the debate—especially in the context of legislative oversight—is to explore the normative benchmarks behind an apparent interest in economic or social issues. Drawing on Dawson and Maricut-Akbik (2021a), we identify effectiveness as the value most closely related to economic issues because it is consistent with an interest in (economic) performance and goal achievement, including through the strict enforcement of rules. Simultaneously, we link social issues with a focus on inequality and the importance attached to policy decisions oriented towards the common good, without creating disadvantages between citizens or member states.¹ Accordingly, we investigate whether MEPs are interested in the effectiveness of EU policy or alternatively whether they are concerned with the inequality resulting from EU measures. The advantage of this conceptualisation is that it assumes no inherent hierarchy between the two

¹Dawson and Maricut-Akbik (2021a) use the concept 'publicness' instead of inequality, which fits better in a judicial context than in a parliamentary one.

normative values—effectiveness and inequality—which are both part of legislative oversight and crucial for holding actors accountable.

Having established the contours of MEPs potential preferences in EU socio-economic governance, we can now introduce our key hypotheses.

3. Theory and Hypotheses

To start with, it is reasonable to assume that MEPs follow different logics when exercising legislative oversight. Some might be driven by the party and socio-economic identities to which they belong, whereas others by their territorial constituency demands. Inspired by existing studies, we develop three expectations regarding drivers of legislative oversight in EU socio-economic governance. Since our object of analysis will be the Economic Dialogues with the Commission (established in 2012), we discuss policy developments during and after the euro crisis.

In relation to party dynamics, we focus on the ideological cleavage between left- and right-wing political groups. Drawing on cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), the left–right dimension captures a classic conflict between advocates of state intervention versus supporters of the free market. Typical areas of contention between left- and right-wing parties include tax rates, unemployment spending and social security contributions (Bartolini 2000). Transposing this logic to EU socio-economic governance, we expect right-wing parties to emphasise issues such as yearly growth, productivity, fiscal balance, favourable conditions for investment, etc. In the context of the European Semester, right-leaning political groups would prioritise the effectiveness of the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP), asking the Commission to apply the rules in a strict way. Conversely, left-wing parties would focus on social aspects such as unemployment, poverty, pensions, the problems with labour market flexibility and the inequality between member states created by trade surpluses captured in the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure (MIP). In the framework of the Economic Dialogues, left-leaning groups would ask about the Joint Employment Report or the social consequences of imposing sanctions in the EDP or the MIP on countries that were already affected by austerity measures. More generally, MEPs would question labour market flexibility and the erosion of the European social model. Accordingly, our first hypothesis posits that:

H1 The more left-wing a political group in the European Parliament, the more likely its MEPs are to ask questions about inequality in legislative oversight.

Given the subject matter under investigation (EU socio-economic governance), the left–right dimension clearly supplants the potential effect of pro-/anti-European views on the preferences of MEPs. This is because Eurosceptic MEPs have varying complaints in the field: they criticize, for instance, the lax application of fiscal discipline by the Commission (e.g. the German *Alternative für Deutschland*), the destruction of the welfare state by EU-promoted austerity policies (the Greek *Laikí Enótitá*) or the intention of some member states to create a fiscal union and thus further undermine national sovereignty

(e.g. the French *Front National*).² In other words, when it comes to effectiveness or inequality questions, the concerns raised by Eurosceptic MEPs are ultimately rooted in their ideological leaning. For this reason, we consider it sufficient to only examine the left–right dimension in our study.

Furthermore, we address the national affiliation of MEPs, which is considered in relation to the composition of the Eurozone and the effects of the euro crisis (for a similar analysis on legislative behaviour, see Cencig and Sabani 2017). The crisis laid bare the consequences of introducing a single currency to diverse economies and thus affected the lives of millions of citizens across Europe. Whereas some people faced unemployment or loss of income as a result of bailout programmes imposing austerity, others failed to understand why their tax money had to support distant governments in other member states (Schelkle 2017). In the dichotomy between debtor and creditor countries, EU economic governance became linked to politically sensitive questions about redistribution and solidarity (Ferrera 2017). Accordingly, we distinguish between MEPs coming from debtor, creditor and non-Eurozone countries, with the main expectation that MEPs from debtor countries are more likely to ask questions about inequality, the social impact of austerity measures, reducing unemployment and increasing solidarity between member states more generally. Conversely, MEPs from creditor countries will be more interested in the effectiveness of reforms and whether budgetary rules are being implemented systematically in the European Semester. Lastly, the dynamic should not affect MEPs from non-Eurozone countries, whose countries were not impacted directly by the euro crisis. In other words:

H2 If an MEP comes from a debtor country (as opposed to a creditor country or non-Eurozone country), then she is more likely to ask questions about inequality in legislative oversight.

Finally, we consider the interaction between coming from a creditor/debtor/non-Eurozone country and the ideological leanings of an MEP. Here, we expect the euro crisis to have blurred the distinction between right- and left-wing parties in creditor and debtor countries. One of the well-known narratives of the crisis is the lack of solidarity between Northern and Southern European member states, also known as the core–periphery conflict in EU governance (Laffan 2016). Led by German *ordo-liberal* ideas on the importance of strict rules in fiscal policy, creditor countries imposed their commitment to ‘sound money’ at the EU level (Bulmer 2014). Following this logic, MEPs from creditor countries are expected to focus on improving fiscal discipline, the implementation of structural reforms or an increase in productivity in the European Semester, irrespective of their right- or left-wing orientation. By contrast, MEPs from debtor countries will emphasize the inequality caused by austerity measures or high unemployment rates in the member states. For their part, non-Eurozone countries are less affected by the dynamic between creditor and debtor countries, so MEPs from these countries are more likely to maintain the left–right division in asking parliamentary questions about the Semester. To follow the format of the hypotheses above:

²All examples are taken from the dataset of questions compiled for the article.

H3 If an MEP comes from a debtor (as opposed to a creditor or non-Eurozone) country, then she is more likely to raise inequality questions regardless of her ideological orientation.

In the next section, we describe our dataset and the measurement for the subsequent quantitative analysis.

4. Data and Research Design

Our dataset comprises all parliamentary questions posed orally to the European Commission in the framework of the Economic Dialogues between 2012 and 2018. Keeping in mind that the legislation creating the Economic Dialogues entered into force in December 2011 (the so-called Six-Pack), the first parliamentary hearing with the Commission took place in June 2012. Moreover, since 2019 was an electoral year, there were no Economic Dialogues held before the EP elections in May. We thus capture the dynamics of the EP's 7th and 8th parliamentary terms in the Committee for Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON) and the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), where the Economic Dialogues were held. The dataset includes the type of questions asked as well as the nationality, political group affiliation and committee membership of MEPs for all questions identified.

Dependent Variable

The empirical investigation focuses on the variation in the social/economic issues underlying the questions posed by MEPs in the Economic Dialogues. Essentially, we aim to grasp whether and why questions may focus on either inequality or effectiveness in EU socio-economic governance. Using the software Atlas.ti, two independent coders have manually categorised the data.³ In total, we identified 505 single-topic questions in 19 committee hearings, following the logic that an MEP could ask different questions at any one time and that some questions included multiple interrogative sentences on the same topic.

Although we acknowledge that the topic of questions can overlap at times, it is possible to identify the leading concern of an MEP when asking a question (for examples of coding, see Tables A1–A3 in Appendix S1). Accordingly, the code 'effectiveness' was applied to three categories of questions. The first refers to the lack of implementation of recommendations in the European Semester and what can be done to increase member state's ownership over the process. The second category focuses on the achievement of objectives, which can include various issues such as return to economic growth, the results of financial assistance programmes, reaching social targets, reducing unemployment, etc. Although the latter can also feature in inequality-related questions, the difference lies in the substantive concern of the MEP: Does the question focus on goal achievement or on the (moral) necessity to improve the conditions of disadvantaged citizens or member states? The third category of effectiveness questions connects rule compliance with the achievement of goals. For instance, in December 2014, Swedish MEP Gunnar Hökmark (EPP) criticised the approach of the Commission regarding the application of fiscal rules:

³The first coder categorised the whole dataset, whereas the second coder classified 20% of questions. The resulting intercoder reliability is 80%, kappa = 0.6814, which is considered 'substantial' (Landis and Koch 1977).

'Do you see that no penalties could cause a damage to the credibility of the Stability Pact, because the credibility of the Stability Pact is helping us all?' (European Parliament 2014). From this perspective, the Commission needs a uniform approach to fiscal discipline; otherwise, the effectiveness of the whole Eurozone is endangered.

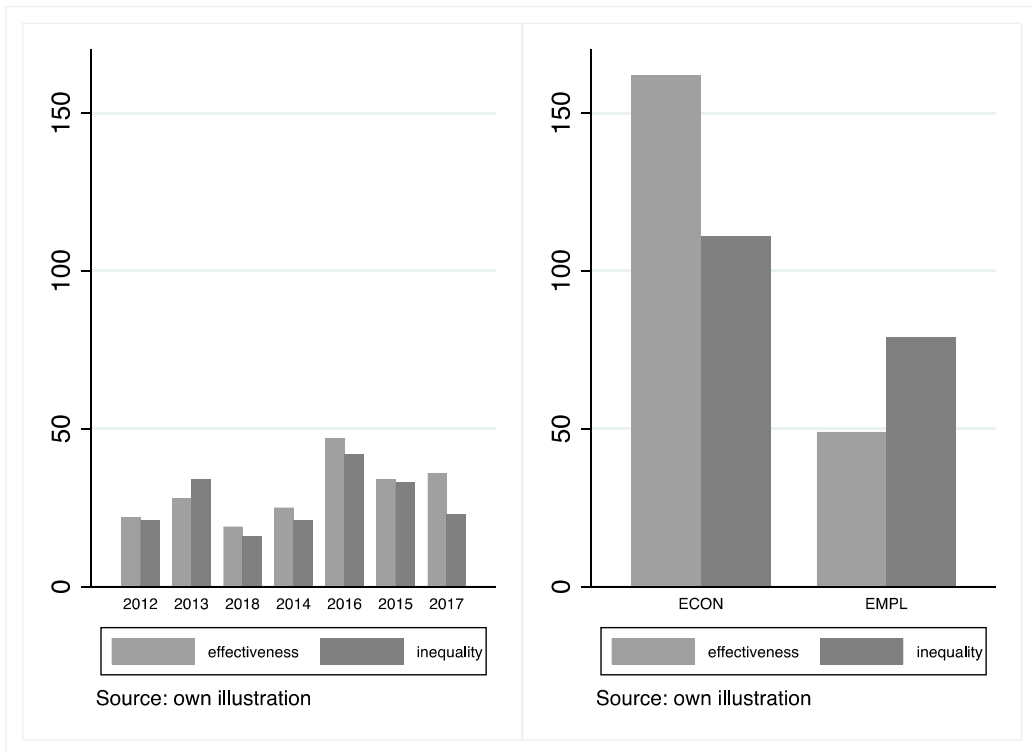
Conversely, inequality-focused questions address the social impact of EU economic and fiscal instruments, their (un)fairness and the imbalances raised by EU policies. In this context, MEPs ask concrete questions about the disadvantages between citizens produced by raising unemployment, labour market reforms leading to precarious employment, poverty and social exclusion or the social effects of austerity measures (reduction of salaries and holidays, increasing the retirement age, etc). Simultaneously, inequality questions address the disadvantages between member states created by spillover effects from one economy to another (e.g. Germany's trade surpluses flagged in the MIP) and request solutions to rebalance divergences between Eurozone economies more generally. Finally, inequality questions criticise the lack of flexibility of fiscal rules, which increase pre-existing divergences between member states. For instance, on 30 May 2017, Italian MEP (EFDD) Laura Agea made the following intervention: 'The situation of Greece is emblematic. You're starving a whole people. [...] But we're supposed to be pleased that the structural reforms are being properly enacted. [...] when are you finally going to decide that you've made a mistake and you've been going down the wrong path?' (Table A2 in Appendix S1). This example is interesting because it could potentially be linked to effectiveness (i.e. is austerity working?); however, the clear reference to Greek people as a group disadvantaged by structural reforms reflects a concern for inequality and the social consequences of austerity.

During the coding, several questions ($n = 104$) were found to be irrelevant to our research puzzle. For instance, some questions ask for information about specific issues, such as the Commission's position on the tax union or priorities in the next European Semester cycle. Other questions criticised the democratic accountability and legitimacy of EU measures because they fail to involve the European Parliament, national parliaments, civil society or citizens more generally. Yet, other questions demanded clarifications about the methodology used to calculate budget deficits or macroeconomic imbalances. Although such questions are obviously important, they do not concern the effectiveness or inequality of EU measures. Consequently, we drop these observations from the dataset.

The remaining data ($n = 401$) displays a preponderance of questions focused on effectiveness (211), followed by inequality (190) (Figure 1a). Over time, we see that effectiveness questions are generally more common than the other two categories, with one exception—2013—when inequality questions prevail. This is likely related to the contrast between the higher economic growth rate (capturing the Eurozone's exit from recession after the crisis) and the still skyrocketing unemployment rate, which captured the imbalances between member states in their return to growth (European Commission 2017, pp. 10–12).

Next, regarding the personal characteristics of MEPs, we first note that ECON Committee members ask far more questions than EMPL Committee members (Figure 1b). The outcome is a structural feature of the Economic Dialogues, which once or even twice a year are held in the ECON Committee alone. For each question, we only considered the committee where an MEP is a full member, although there are a handful

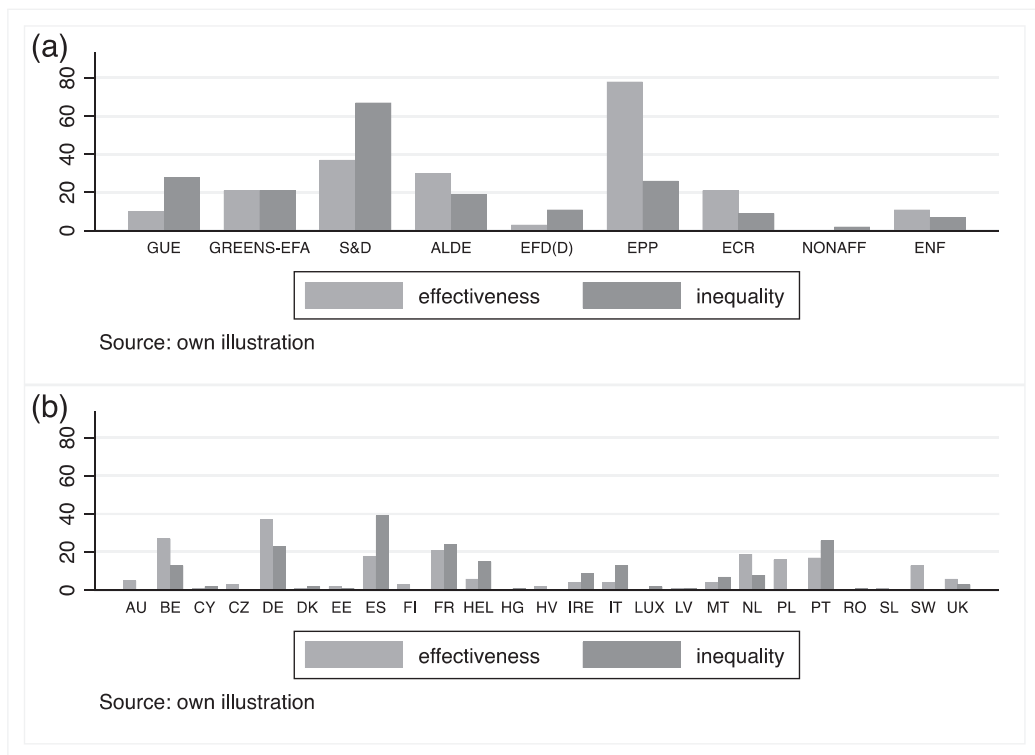
Figure 1: Types of questions in the Economic Dialogues, over time (1a) and across committees (1b)



of cases where MEPs from the EMPL Committee act as substitutes in the ECON Committee and the other way around. For the purposes of our categorisation, we assume that the primary affiliation of an MEP to a committee supplants their role as substitutes in a second committee because that is where they conduct their main activities (Yordanova 2013, p. 81).

Moving to the topic of questions, our data show that ECON Committee members ask in absolute numbers twice as many effectiveness questions as members of the EMPL Committee. Next, with respect to EP groups (Figure 2a), the largest political groups in the EP—the EPP and the S&D—ask the highest number of questions. This is consistent with the EP’s rules of procedure, which stipulate that speaking time is allocated in order of the size of political groups and in proportion to their total number of members (Rule 162 of the 8th parliamentary term). The most significant change from the 7th to the 8th parliamentary term refers to the decrease in the vote share of the largest groups (especially the EPP) in favour of right-wing Eurosceptic parties: ECR, EFDD and the newly established ENF (Hobolt 2015). Finally, in terms of nationality (Figure 2b), German MEPs ask the highest number of questions (62% of which are effectiveness-oriented and 38% inequality-oriented), followed by Spanish MEPs (66% of which concern inequality issues

Figure 2: Types of questions in the Economic Dialogues, by EP group (2a) and MEPs' nationality (2b)



and 34% concerning effectiveness) and Portuguese MEPs (65% of which prioritize inequality and 35% prioritising effectiveness).

The data above illustrates the variation in our dependent variable. Every year, effectiveness concerns lead the topics of questions raised by MEPs from the ECON Committee. The EMPL Committee shows an opposite dynamic, but it has fewer MEPs taking the floor during Economic Dialogues with the Commission. As regards political groups, left-wing MEPs from the S&D and GUE/NGL seem to favour inequality questions, whereas the EPP, the Liberals, ECR and ENF prioritise effectiveness-related concerns. The EFDD is an interesting exception because their members come mostly from Lega and the Five Star Movement, the two Italian populist parties whose popularity increased during the euro crisis. More generally, in terms of nationality, the prima facie evidence suggests that MEPs from countries that experienced financial hardship during the euro crisis (Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Ireland) prioritise inequality issues, although they also pose a considerable share of effectiveness-related questions.

Overall, these descriptive statistics provide preliminary evidence of drivers of parliamentary questions at play, which will be further disentangled by the ensuing statistical analysis. Before that, we introduce the operationalisation of our independent variables.

Independent Variables and Controls

We include several explanatory variables in our model, according to our theoretical framework. To measure the ideological positioning of MEPs' groups, we use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017). MEPs are attributed scores between 0 and 10 on the general left–right, the economic left right, and GAL-TAN scale based on their political group affiliation (corresponding to the variables LRGEN, LRECON and GAL-TAN). Differently from previous research (McElroy and Benoit 2007; Otjes and van der Veer 2016), we use the economic left–right dimension as our main explanatory variable, since it is the closest to our area of investigation—socio-economic governance. However, we still consider the other measurements of ideology as robustness checks. To obtain the positioning of each party group, we compute the weighted average of the sum of the positions of each party member of each parliamentary group. The resulting positioning scores of EP groups are in line with previous research (McElroy and Benoit 2007).

Second, we distinguish between debtor, creditor and non-Eurozone countries. Debtor countries are those that benefited from financial assistance through the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) during the crisis: Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain (European Stability Mechanism 2020). We add Italy to the group owing to its high levels of public debt and consistent support from the European Central Bank's quantitative easing programme, despite not being formally bailed out through the ESM (European Central Bank 2021). Creditor countries include all the other 13 Eurozone countries (Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia), although technically Latvia and Lithuania joined in 2014 and 2015, respectively. By contrast, non-Eurozone countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Hungary, Sweden, Poland, Romania, United Kingdom) were less affected by the consequences of the euro crisis or the tension between creditor and debtor countries.

In terms of controls, we consider committee membership, which takes a value of 1 if the primary affiliation of an MEP is ECON and 0 if the affiliation is EMPL. This assumes that EMPL Committee members are more interested in inequality than effectiveness because of their specialisation in social issues. Moreover, we consider the potential effect of a country's general wealth, trade balance and bank exposures as a potential influence on the type of questions MEPs ask in the Economic Dialogue. The question is whether effectiveness questions are more likely to be posed by MEPs that come from countries that are richer, have a trade surplus or have banks that hold a low level of bonds issued by the home government, that is, sovereign exposures. Besides our main distinction between debtor, creditor and non-eurozone, these variables might affect national stances on effectiveness and inequality in different directions. Accordingly, we consider national wealth by controlling for country gross national income (GNI)⁴ and national balance of trade in the internal market based on World Bank and Eurostat data. Finally, we control for domestic sovereign exposures by using data from the European Central Bank and the Deutsche Bank (Mai et al., 2021). We summarize this data in Table A4 of Appendix S1.

In the next section, we present our statistical model and findings.

⁴We use GNI and not GDP because the latter distorts Ireland's wealth (Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020).

Table 1: Determinants of issue raised in parliamentary questions (inequality vs. effectiveness)

DV: Issue = inequality vs. effectiveness	Model 1	Model 2(interaction effect)
Economic left–right	−0.324** (0.121)	−2.067*** (0.481)
GNI	0.0142(0.0992)	0.0315(0.0762)
Trade Balance	−0.00395 [†] (0.00156)	−0.00459** (0.00175)
Creditor	1.331* (0.542)	−6.527* (2.832)
Debtor	2.308*** (0.616)	−8.094** (2.737)
Exposure	0.0868(0.430)	−0.0609(0.321)
Committee = ECON	−0.801** (0.250)	−0.641* (0.266)
Creditor*economic left–right		1.503*** (0.519)
Debtor*economic left–right		2.060*** (0.496)
Constant	−0.206(2.871)	8.075* (3.155)
Observations	401	401
Pseudo R ²	0.175	0.227
Average VIF	0.15	0.15

Notes: Multivariate logistic regressions with country clustered standard errors in parentheses. Year fixed effect not in table. [†] $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Analysis and Findings

Our dependent variable is a dummy taking the value of 1 when a question focuses on inequality and 0 when a question focuses on effectiveness. As mentioned earlier, we limit our analysis to the subsample of questions tackling either inequality or effectiveness, which lowers the number of observations to 401.⁵ To test the determinants of issue variation in MEPs' questions, we run a multivariate analysis by means of logistic regression models with year fixed-effects and country-level standard errors in order to obtain heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation-consistent standard errors (Freedman 2006). To test H3, Model 2 includes the interaction term between economic status and ideology.⁶ Results are reported in Table 1.

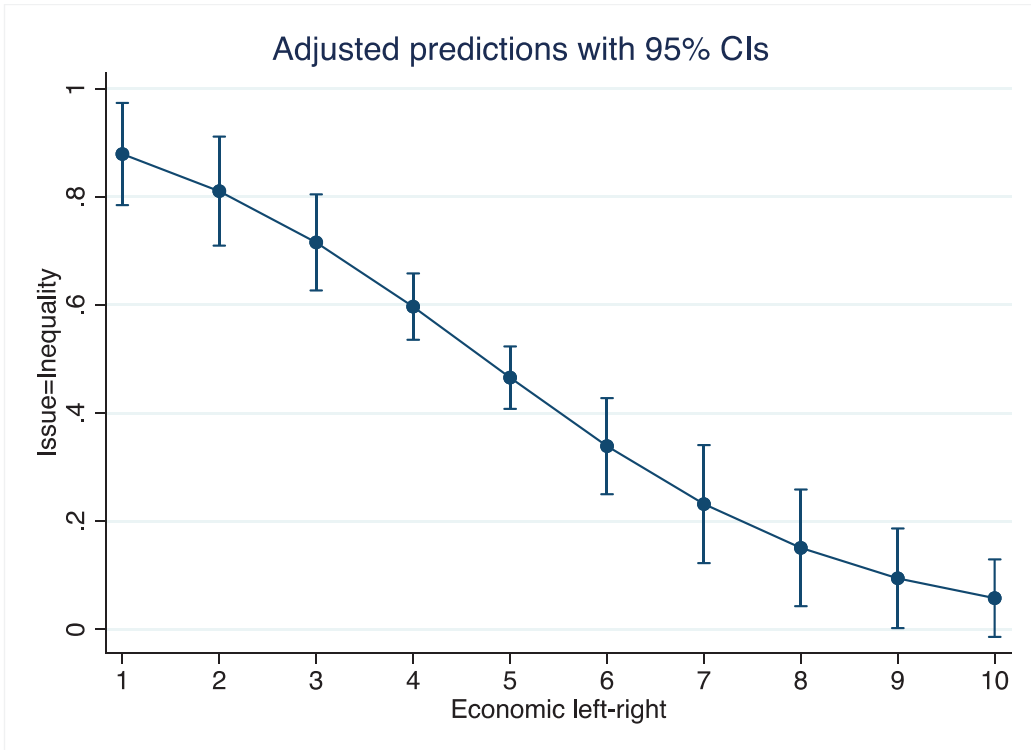
The results broadly corroborate our hypotheses and are robust across models, with Model 2 showing a slightly better performance. Importantly, in line with H1, ideology has a sizeable and significant impact on the kind of question asked across models. As shown in Figure 3, the more right-wing an MEPs, the less likely she is to pose inequality questions. The size of the effect is considerable: on average, extreme right-wing MEPs are nine times less likely to pose inequality questions than their extreme-left counterparts.

In turn, in line with H2, a country's economic status plays a significant role in the kind of questions asked in the Economic Dialogues. Results are significant and sizeable in both models. As shown in Figure 4, on average, MEPs from debtor countries are almost twice more likely to pose inequality-related questions than MEPs from creditors countries and three times more likely to do the same compared with those from non-Eurozone countries. The sharpest difference is to be found in respect to non-Eurozone countries, which tend to be the ones more likely to pose effectiveness-related questions and, conversely, the least

⁵We also ran multinomial logistic regression models including the third category, which showed that this dimension does not display any significant variation across groups (see Figures A4–A6 in Appendix S1).

⁶We have also run regression models with GAL-TAN and LRGEN, which display almost identical results (see Appendix S1, Figures A1–A3).

Figure 3: Effect of ideology on the probability of an MEP raising inequality-focused questions in the Economic Dialogues

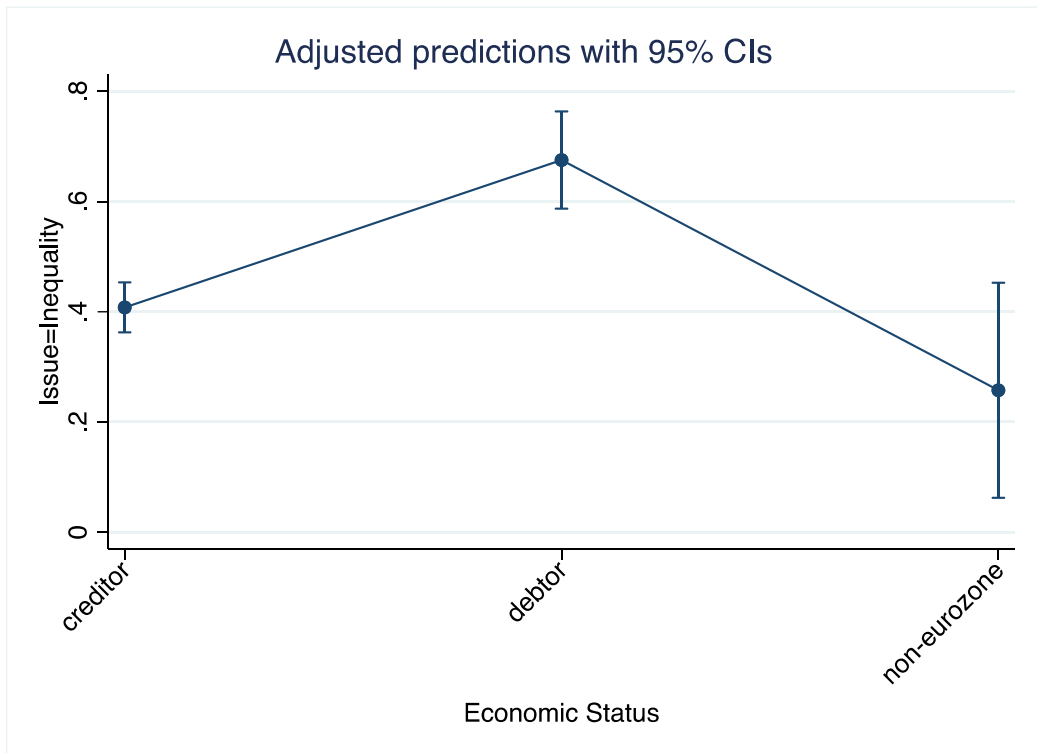


likely to worry about inequality. These results make sense considering that non-Eurozone countries are affected only indirectly by Eurozone measures and therefore are more concerned about its overall effectiveness than about policies being fair.

Furthermore, our analysis suggests that the effect of right–left positioning is indeed moderated by the economic position of the speaker’s country, as argued in H3 (Figure 5). For both creditor and non-Eurozone countries, left–right ideology has a significant and sharply negative effect on the likelihood of asking effectiveness-related questions. In both country clusters, the most right-wing MEPs are on average 8–10 times more likely to ask effectiveness-related questions compared with extreme leftist parties. The same does not apply, however, to MEPs from debtor countries, as no significant variation emerges between left-wing and right-wing parties: in practice, as argued in our theoretical framework, MEPs from debtor countries seem to care more about inequality regardless of their ideological leaning. This finding corroborates H3 insofar as ideology matters less for MEPs from debtor countries.

Amongst controls, we observe a strong effect of the trade balance, that is, the higher the net exports of a member state, the higher the likelihood of its MEPs raising effectiveness questions. Moreover, it appears that ECON Committee members are on average much more likely to ask effectiveness questions compared with EMPL Committee

Figure 4: Effect of economic status on the probability of an MEP raising inequality-focused questions in the Economic Dialogues

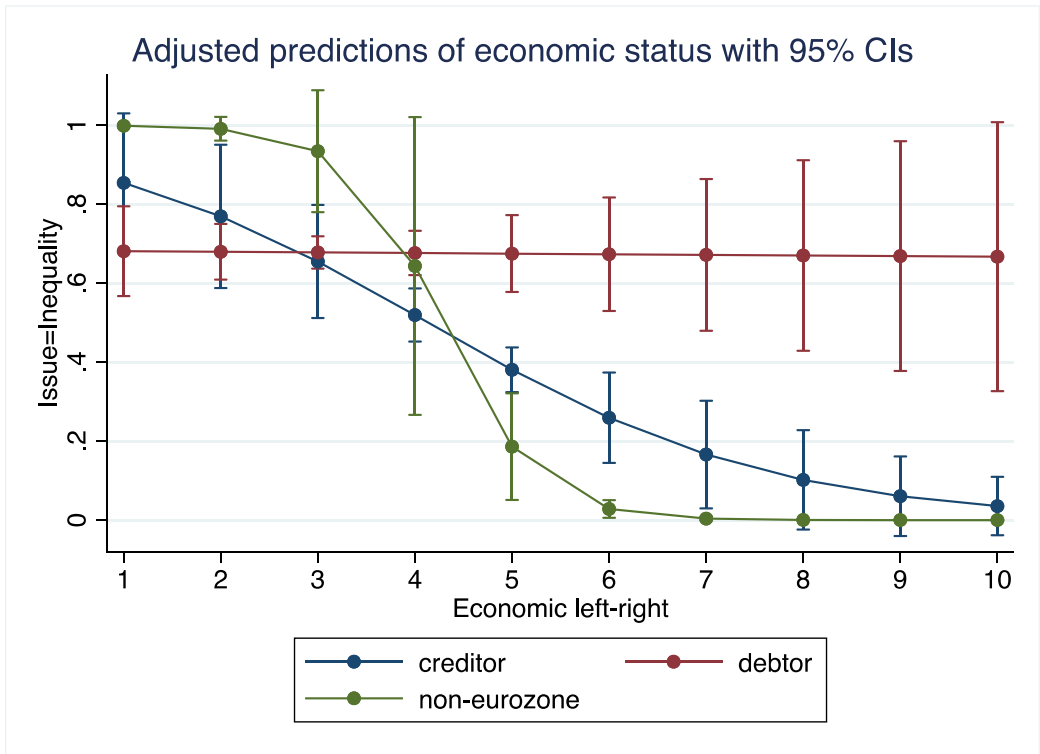


members. The GNI does not yield consistently significant effects, and neither do domestic sovereign exposures. Finally, no significant year-effects are present.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

To sum up, what have we learned about drivers of legislative oversight in the EP? Our main finding is that ideology and nationality impact *greatly and simultaneously* the behaviour of MEPs under different circumstances. In general, the ideological leaning of MEPs is a crucial factor shaping legislative oversight, as illustrated by the propensity of left-wing MEPs to raise inequality concerns. However, nationality becomes important when the economic position of a country is disadvantaged by EU measures, thus driving MEPs to question the inequality amongst citizens or member states regardless of their ideological orientation. In fact, when we interacted the ideological leaning of MEPs with their countries' economic status, we found significant differences between MEPs from creditor or non-Eurozone countries and those from debtor countries. In other words, the territorial constituency of MEPs trumps their ideological positioning when their member state is disproportionately affected by EU measures. Although the results confirmed our

Figure 5: Interaction effect between economic status and ideology on the probability of raising inequality-focused questions



initial expectations, they also revealed the far-reaching consequences of the euro crisis on the EU political system.

Beyond the euro crisis, our findings complement the literature on drivers of behaviour in the EP. Based on existing studies (Section 1), we knew that MEPs' ideology was crucial for voting behaviour, whereas national considerations played a key role in legislative oversight. Yet, the tension between the two drivers of behaviour remained underexplored, despite evidence that redistributive policy areas such as socio-economic governance were bound to create a clash between the ideological and national orientations of MEPs (Cencig and Sabani 2017; Vesan and Corti 2019). In this article, we focused on legislative oversight as the site where MEPs were free to pursue individual interests in the absence of the usual party discipline seen in roll-call votes. By the same logic, other domains of parliamentary activity where MEPs have more freedom—for example, speeches or debates—are likely to display the tension between ideology and nationality. Moreover, this tension is not unique to the euro crisis. In socio-economic governance, we could observe similar dynamics during the Covid-19 pandemic (as some countries were disproportionately affected by the virus in early 2020) or the recent energy crisis (where some governments are more dependent on Russian gas than others). In other words, any asymmetric event or crisis is likely to fuel the tension between the ideology and nationality of MEPs:

for instance, a refugee crisis will impact the position of MEPs from 'frontline' member states, whereas a new trade agreement with a third country will affect those economies that produce similar goods and face increased competition. The point is that the importance of nationality depends on the asymmetric circumstances of an EU policy decision, which may or may not be triggered by a crisis.

Finally, our research contributed to the substantive policy debate regarding the distinction between economic and social issues in EU governance. As we sought to operationalize the distinction in the context of legislative oversight, we came to realise that critics of the subordination of EU social issues to economic and fiscal priorities are essentially concerned with the growing inequality amongst citizens and/or member states. Conversely, those who prioritise the effectiveness of existing EU instruments are not necessarily advocates of neoliberalism; in fact, an MEP who focuses on social policy in legislative oversight might simply be interested in the performance of member states on different targets, such as combatting poverty or reducing unemployment. This is not the same as a concern for inequality amongst citizens or member states. In the end, the debate on the asymmetry between economic and social issues in EU governance might be too simplistic and morally unambiguous in a context where ideology and a country's economic circumstances play a key role. For this reason, we argued that the scholarly debate might be better served by qualifying the asymmetry with the distinction between effectiveness and inequality concerns in EU socio-economic governance. Future research will show if the distinction applies to other policy areas.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Supporting Information.