How open are the national parliaments about EU affairs and what explains the variation?

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Abstract:

In the context of multiple crises currently besetting the EU questions how do the national parliaments respond to European integration and communicate EU affairs to their citizens become ever more important. The aim of this paper is to present a framework to evaluate how open and transparent national parliaments of the EU are in a way they handle European affairs and to explain the variation in their responses. The main finding of this paper is that newer member states from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are significantly less open in this regard than their counterparts in other regions of the EU. Four factors are considered to explain this difference: power of parliamentary committees, strength of pro/anti EU cleavage, length of democratic experience and securitization of EU membership. Analysis suggests that the latter two factors have significant influence on the Openness of a parliament.

KEYWORDS: National parliaments; EU; Scrutiny; Debates; CEE

Introduction:

Since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008 EU had to undertake more and more responsibility, which meant that highly salient matters which affect the lives of millions of Europeans were decided on the EU level. Currently EU has to manage the refugee crisis and their relocation throughout the member states, the aftermath of sovereign debt crisis and ongoing assistance to Greece, and decide on sanctions to Russia in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. As EU took on these new challenges, public interest in EU matters and the decisions made in Brussels has reached the highest levels in recent years. Broader public has not only become more interested
in European affairs but also started to demand more accountability from their representatives for their actions at the EU level (Hobolt and Tilly 2014).

In this context national parliaments of the EU member states started to receive more attention as the intermediaries between the EU institutions and their citizens. Furthermore, this increase in interest has exposed significant differences between these institutions in a way they handle EU affairs and present them to their citizens at home. While some parliaments rose up to this task and did quite well facilitating a national debate over these issues and sharing the relevant information with the general public, others did not.

This paper aims to map out the variation of how open and transparent national parliaments are in a way they deal with EU affairs and to provide possible explanations why such variation exists. Preliminary findings suggest that the national parliaments in the ‘newer’ member states in the CEE are significantly less open about how they handle the EU affairs than their counterparts from Western Europe. This paper considers four factors that could explain why such variation occurs: strength of parliamentary committees, the depth of pro/anti EU cleavage in a member state, amount of democratic experience and securitization of EU membership. Analysis carried out in the paper lends support for the latter two factors.

The paper has five parts: the first part presents an overview of the literature analyzing parliamentary responses to European integration and presents and argument why Openness of the national parliaments matters in this sphere. The second part outlines the measurement model used to map out the variation among the member states and presents the results. The third part is dedicated to the hypotheses explaining why such variation occurs, while the fourth part presents analysis and results. Finally, the fifth part summarizes and concludes.

Part 1 – Openness of the National Parliaments

Through the precise meaning of the term ‘Eurosceptic’ is still debated, there is an agreement that in its heart lies a populist argument sharply contrasting the interests of Brussels elites and those of the ‘ordinary people’ (Krouwel and Abts 2007). From this perspective EU is portrayed as overly bureaucratic and un-democratic entity, where decisions are made in secret meetings behind closed doors and the interests of a single country represented by its democratically elected government of the member states can be overruled by the majority of the members. With the Eurosceptic
sentiment on a rise throughout the continent manifested most recently by ‘Brexit’, many agree that it is necessary to bring EU matters closer to home in order to calm the Eurosceptic sentiment and prevent further disintegration of the union (Duff 2008).

National parliaments have a dual role to play in this process. On one hand they are tasked with scrutinizing cabinet’s actions in the EU level and holding the members of the executive branch accountable for their actions there. Simultaneously, they have to perform a variety of other functions: a) express the will of the people; b) inform the public about the current events and c) educate the public by explaining the complicated issues at hand (Bagehot 1867/2001 99-102).

Until recently, literature on parliamentary responses to the European integration focused almost exclusively on the scrutiny function of the national parliaments, while neglecting the rest. However, given the recent interest in the parliaments perform their communicative functions, this topic started to gain more traction. Yet, relatively few papers have been published on this topic and comparative analyses have been even scarcer (with the exceptions of Gattermann, Högenauer and Ariella Huff 2015; Auel and Raunio 2014 a&b; Pollak and Slominski 2014). The main turning point which marked the shift from focusing on scrutiny powers of the parliaments to their communicative functions happened soon after the Lisbon Treaty greatly expanded the role of national parliaments in the EU decision making process and gained traction during the financial and euro crises when the EU took on new responsibilities of managing its effects.

So far the literature on the matter is still relatively new and there is no consensus over how parliaments’ capacity to perform their education and communicative functions ought to be measured or even called. In their introduction to the special issue of Journal of Legislative Studies, Auel and Raunio suggested five focus areas, through which to evaluate how well parliaments perform these functions: 1. Plenary debates; 2. Transparency of committee work; 3. Parliamentary questions; 4. Informing the electorate; 5. Media coverage (Auel and Raunio 2014b). In their article printed in the same issue, Auel and Raunio analyze the debates over the EU issues in four member states (France, Germany, Finland and the UK) (Auel and Raunio 2014a), while also in the same issue Pollak and Slominski (2014) focus on how Austrian parliament communicates EU issues to the citizens.

There is a lot to be gained by studying each of these focus areas individually and developing more in depth understanding how national parliaments perform in these areas across the EU. However,
this paper takes a different approach and instead seeks to offer a measure which would allow to compare all 28 EU member states in this sphere, though it comes at an expense of slightly narrowing its focus. Instead of analyzing the whole range of communicative functions of the national parliaments in their relationship with the EU, this paper focuses instead of how openly and transparently these parliaments deal with the EU related issues, by measuring the Openness of the national parliaments. The model used to measure this concept is loosely based on the recommendations by Auel and Raunio, but excludes parliamentary questions and media coverage. Parliamentary questions are excluded for two reasons: first, their primary function is to ensure communication between parliament and the cabinet rather than that between the parliament and the citizenry. Second, due to the different parliamentary rules, what exactly is considered a parliamentary question differs in each country, which means that it is almost impossible to gather comparable data on the matter (Wiberg 1995). Media coverage is excluded because it is largely outside the parliaments’ control and has very little to do with the Openness of the parliament, as media coverage does not depend solely on the information supply from the parliaments’ side.

In this paper Openness of the national parliaments concerning European affairs is conceptualized as a degree to which parliament facilitates debates over EU related issues and degree to which it is willing to share information related to these matters with the wider public. The operationalization of this concept and the overall measurement framework are outlined in the next part of the paper.

**Part 2 – Measuring Openness**

The model used in this paper to measure Openness of the national parliaments in how they handle EU affairs is based on three out of five focus areas suggested by Auel and Raunio: 1. Parliamentary debates; 2. Transparency of committee work; 3. Informing the public (Auel and Raunio 2014b), because of this, this model is divided into three segments. The first segment deals with the plenary debates over EU issues. Since the aim of this paper is to measure how open and transparent the national parliaments are in how they deal with the EU affairs, the focus is placed on the existence of plenary debates over EU issues as such, rather than the content of these debates.

The second segment deals with the Openness and transparency of European Affairs Committees (EACs). In all EU parliaments EACs are the main body where EU issues are deliberated, as dealing
with them on the plenary floor would take up too much time (therefore plenary debates are usually reserved for the most important issues). For this reason, it is very important if EACs conduct their operations in an open and transparent manner and if they allow outside participants in their meetings.

The third segment deals with how well parliaments share the information related to the deliberation of EU affairs with their citizens and if ordinary people have a chance to know when important issues were deliberated or what was the outcome of such deliberation. More detailed representation of the measurement model is presented in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Indicators and scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plenary debates</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Plenary involvement | Do parliamentary rules of procedure allow for plenary debates over EU issues?  
3 – Yes; 0 – No. |
| Routine involvement of the plenary | Is the plenary involved in the scrutiny of EU affairs on a routine basis?  
– Have there been at least three plenary debates on the European issues in the last three months?  
2 – Yes; 0 – No. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Openness of the EAC</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Open EAC meetings | Are EAC meetings open to the public?  
2 – Yes; 0 – No. |
| EAC meeting broadcasts | Are EAC meetings broadcasted over television or internet?  
1 – Yes; 0 – No. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing the public</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Agenda | Are the agendas of the EAC meetings made publically available before hand?  
1 – Yes; 0 – No. |
| Minutes | Are minutes or transcripts of the EAC meetings made publically available afterwards?  
1 – Yes; 0 – No. |
Each segment has two indicators, which vary in their importance, as reflected by different weights assigned to them. The first indicator in the first segment focuses on the standing orders of a parliament to allow for the deliberation of EU related matters outside the treaty change to be deliberated on the plenary floor. It is given the highest weight, as such formal provisions are a necessary precondition needed to have EU related debates at all. The second indicator with slightly lower weight focuses on the frequency of such debates or, in other words, if parliaments are making use of their formal rights in practice. This segment is given the highest weight compared to the other segments, because having a plenary debate is the most open and transparent way to deal with the EU issues, which not only allows all MPs to attend, but also allows more of them to actively participate in the deliberation than a simple committee meeting. Furthermore, it also gives a better chance for MPs to connect with their constituents or to raise their concerns better than any other form of deliberation.

The first indicator of the second segment measures if the EAC meetings are open to the public and the media, while the second one looks into if they are broadcasted over TV or internet. Out of these, the first indicator is given a higher weight, as physical presence of the media representatives in the committee chamber opens up possibilities to interview committee members directly after the meeting and ask them to clarify their stance on issues at hand.

In the third segment first indicator measures whether or not agendas of EAC are made publically available and the second one measures if the transcripts or minutes of the EAC meetings are available to the public. This information is crucial in order to have more public involvement in the deliberation of EU matters (as citizens need to know when certain matters are deliberated to participate) and to have more accountability from the parliaments (citizens need to know what has the parliament or the EAC decided). However, this segment is given the smallest weight compared to the other two, since quite often parliamentary announcements or other information is not picked up by the media or fails to resonate with the general the public (Auel and Raunio 2014b).

Openness scores were calculated separately for lower and upper parliamentary chambers. Weights used in this index help to differentiate between lower and higher importance aspects of Openness of the national parliaments and to more adequately reflect differences between EU members in this regard. However, since assignment of weights was done at author’s discretion, to ensure all
the analysis in the paper are performed on both weighted and unweighted versions of the Openness measure.

*Figure 1: Openness scores*

Figure 1 above presents the Openness scores for EU member states. There is significant variation among them with the national parliaments of Cyprus, the Netherlands and Slovenia being the least open and Spain, Austria, Luxemburg and France being the most open when dealing with European affairs. However, it is also important to note that the vast majority of ‘newer’ EU members from the CEE have lower Openness scores than their peers from other regions. The difference between them is shown in the boxplot in Figure 2.
The subsequent part of the paper presents four hypotheses why such variation of Openness occurs among the EU member states, with the special focus to why parliaments in the CEE are less open then their Western counterparts.

**Part 3 – Hypotheses**

This part presents four hypotheses used in this paper to account for variation in terms of Openness among the parliaments in the EU member states. Since Openness, as conceptualized and measured here, mostly reflects the existence of certain rules and norms in the parliamentary standing orders, this paper does not consider individual or party level factors, as it is quite unusual that the standing order of the parliament would reflect the desires of a single individual or a party group, but not that of absolute majority of the MPs. Instead this paper focusses on the environmental and institutional factors or, in other words, broader institutional or cultural context in which the parliament is located.
Our first hypothesis considers the power of parliamentary committees as a factor which could potentially explain the variation in terms of Openness among the EU parliaments. It could be expected that parliaments with stronger committee systems and especially stronger EACs would deliberate EU matters in the committee rather than on plenary floor. Furthermore, one of the aspects which is appealing to many MPs about committee work is being able to deliberate matters at hand behind closed doors, thus eliminating the need for partisan grandstanding (Strøm 1998). This leads to the first hypothesis:

**H1: Parliaments with stronger EACs would be less open.**

Second, we argue that the demand for Openness is greater in the countries where the pro-anti EU cleavage is stronger. MPs being rational actors will have higher incentives to go public with EU related issues either through debates or by making the EAC more transparent, if they can mobilize their voters connect with their constituents or to use EU issues to criticize cabinet’s policy. However, if all major political parties are in principal agreement over EU issues, no such incentives exist.

**H2: Parliaments are more open in the countries with more pronounced pro-anti EU cleavage.**

The third hypothesis considers parliamentary Openness a result of pressures from the civil society and active citizenry for more parliamentary accountability. Since civil societies are weak in post-authoritarian regimes and tend to grow stronger over time, in this paper amount of democratic experience is used as a proxy for strength of the civil society.

**H3: Parliaments in ‘older’ democracies are more open than those in the ‘young’ ones.**

Finally, some EU members, especially those in the CEE view EU membership as a guarantee of their security. From that perspective, countries which perceive belonging to the EU as a security issue are more likely to try to be ‘good Europeans’ and present unified support for the EU. In such circumstances presenting evidence for discord among political actors regarding EU related issues (through debates or opening up EAC meetings) could be perceived as damaging and could lead to less Openness.

**H4: In states where EU membership is perceived as a security issue, parliaments are less open.**
Data on the strength of EACs and levels of plenary activity comes from OPAL dataset (Institutional strength measure) (Auel and Tacea 2013). Data on the strength of pro-anti EU cleavage and level of EU securitization in a country is obtained from Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2016). Cleavage score is calculated by measuring the distance between the most Eurosceptic and Euroenthuзиastic parliamentary parties. Cleavage score is calculated by measuring the distance between the most Eurosceptic (per 110) and Euroenthuзиastic (per108) parliamentary parties. Meanwhile, since the links between the country’s security and EU membership are the strongest in Eastern Europe and since biggest perceived security threat to these states is Russia, the measure for EU securitization is calculated by looking into how often parliamentary parties in a given country mention Russia negatively in their manifestos (per6013). Measure for years as democracy is calculated using V-Dem data (Coppedge et al. 2016) by calculating for how many years a country has sustained liberal democracy index score above 0.6. If a country has sustained such rating since before the Treaty of Paris, then the measure is calculated from 1950.

Since this study takes upper and lower chambers of national parliaments as separate cases, the number of observations analyzed in this paper is 40. The sample size is too small to be suited for any regression-based models and, therefore, the main method of analysis used in this paper is analysis of variance (ANOVA). Though it does not show the precise relationship between two variables, it can still show if the relationship is statistically significant thus making it useful for this study.

**Part 4 – Analysis and results**

Results for ANOVA analysis are shown in Tables 3 and 4 below. Table 3 contains ANOVA results for the weighted version of the dependent variable, while Table 4 presents ANOVA results for its unweighted version. Table 5 contains Pearson correlation coefficients.
### Table 3: ANOVA Results (Weighted DV)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partial SS</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>EAC Power</td>
<td>331.6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>EU Cleavage</td>
<td>89.86</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Democratic Exp.</td>
<td>161.72</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.97</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: ANOVA Results (Unweighted DV)

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partial SS</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>EAC Power</td>
<td>110.33</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>EU Cleavage</td>
<td>25.69</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 3</td>
<td>Democratic Exp.</td>
<td>58.52</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 4</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>28.42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: Pearson correlation coefficients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Openness (weighted)</th>
<th>Openness (unweighted)</th>
<th>EAC Power</th>
<th>EU Cleavage</th>
<th>Democratic Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness (weighted)</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.37*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness (unweighted)</td>
<td>0.96***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAC Power</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Cleavage</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Exp.</td>
<td>0.34*</td>
<td>0.37*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.69***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>-0.44*</td>
<td>-0.42*</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-0.69***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p values: *** = .00; ** ≤ .01; * ≤ .05*
Analysis carried out in this paper failed to find any support for the first and second hypotheses, but the third (democratic experience) and the fourth (securitization) factors were shown to have significant effect on the Openness of the national parliaments regarding the EU affairs. The influence of these factors goes in the same direction as stipulated in the hypotheses. These results remain robust considering both weighted and unweighted versions of the Openness measure. However, considering that both democratic experience and securitization measures are highly correlated suggests that more analysis is needed to definitively conclude what influences the overall Openness level, as high levels of correlation could mean the influence of some external variable.

**Conclusion**

In the current environment of crises and prevailing grim expectations regarding the future of the union, how national parliaments deal with EU affairs at home is of paramount importance. It matters not only how successful national parliaments are in keeping the executive accountable for their European policy, but also how well they communicate and present EU related issues to their citizens at home. This paper demonstrated that there is a substantial variation among the EU member states in how openly and transparently their parliaments deal with EU affairs even at the basic level. Member states differ substantially on whether or not they allow plenary debates over EU issues or in a way they share information on these issues with their citizens.

Possibly, the starkest contrast in terms of Openness is between ‘older’ member states in the West and ‘younger’ democracies in the CEE. This paper has considered four factors as to why such differences occur: the power of parliamentary committees, the depth of pro/anti EU cleavage in a country, the amount of its democratic experience and securitization of EU membership. This study finds some support for the latter two factors, though more research is needed to definitively explain the prevailing variation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:


