

National Level Determinants of the Representative Quality of the Member States in the European Parliament

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Abstract: This article studies national factors which determine the representative quality of the member states in the European Parliament. The representative quality refers to the average national political experience of representatives of member states in the European Parliament. The article finds that the member states from Eastern Europe and the member states with smaller populations and higher electoral turnouts have higher representative quality in the European Parliament.

Keywords: Representative Quality; Candidate Quality; European Parliament; Members of the European Parliament

Avrupa Birliđi Ülkelerinin Avrupa Parlamentosu'nda ki Temsil Kalitelerinin Ulusal Boyutta ki Belirleyicileri

Özet: Bu çalışma ulusal düzeyde ele alınan bazı faktörlerin Avrupa Birliđi ülkelerinin Avrupa Parlamentosu'nda ki temsil kalitesine etkilerini analiz etmektedir. Bu makale de 'temsil kalitesi' Avrupa Birliđi ülkelerinin Avrupa Parlamentosu'nda ki temsilcilerinin geçmiş siyasi tecrübeleri kantitatif yöntemlerle hesaplanarak ölçülmüştür. Çalışma, Dođu Avrupa ülkelerinin ve nüfus bakımından küçük ve siyasi katılımın yüksek olduđu ülkelerin temsil kalitesinin daha fazla olduđunu bulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Temsil Kalitesi; Aday Kalitesi; Avrupa Parlamentosu; Avrupa Parlamentosu Üyeleri

1. Introduction

Existing studies on the elite in legislative politics are usually single-country case studies because language barriers make it difficult to undertake cross-national comparisons (Patzelt, 1999: 214). However, the European Parliament (EP) provides a unique opportunity to conduct cross-national comparisons because politically and socio-economically different countries operate under a single institutional framework. Yet scholarly attention to the EP is rare (Patzelt, 1999: 258). This is the case despite the fact that the

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powers of the EP have been steadily increasing (Hix et al., 2006: 494).

This article is an attempt to make a contribution to the EP literature by analysing what political and socio-economic factors at the national level influence the elite composition of the EP. Although several studies notice the existence of high political figures in the EP, these studies make no attempt to analyse cross-national variation of membership quality. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) coming from 27 distinctly different member states meet within a single European legislative institution. Not only do the member states have different institutional and socio-economic characteristics, but the general population and the elite also have different expectations from the EP. Following this analytical path, this paper assumes that national level variables will have a significant impact on who is elected to the EP and it tests its hypothesis against a set of socio-economic and political variables. The 'representative quality' in this paper refers to the average national political experience of representatives of member states in the EP. The article focuses on the 2004 EP and finds that the member states from Eastern Europe and the member states with smaller populations have higher representative quality in the EP. The membership of the European Union is expected to reach 32 by 2014 (Baimbridge, 2005: 45). All official and potential candidate countries but Turkey have small populations with a previous experience in communism. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it is possible to predict that the inclusion of these countries into the European Union will further increase the proportion of representatives with high level national political experience in the EP.

2. Political Experience in the European Parliament

A particularly understudied area in the EP literature is Members of European Parliament (MEPs) and their recruitment process. Several scholars focusing on the social background characteristics of MEPs find that the EP is far away from being a 'microcosm' of European society (for example, see Judge and Earnshaw, 2003: 92-5; Mather, 2001: 187-90). These works conclude that, similar to members of national parliaments (MNPs), MEPs tend to be male and middle-aged professionals and don't resemble the societies they represent in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds. Comparing MEPs to MNPs of Europe, Norris (1999) finds that MEPs are as politically experienced as MNPs of Europe and the EP now attracts members with previous political, educational, and occupational achievements and with European career ambitions. Some other studies mention the existence of leading ex-national politicians in the EP (Mather, 2001: 190; Corbett et al., 2003: 42-3). Case studies in Lodge (2005) also emphasise that high profile

national politicians ran in the 2004 EP elections in the member countries. However, although drawing attention to the existence of high political figures in the EP, these studies make no attempt to analyse cross-national variation of membership quality in the EP. Yet these studies show that the EP attracts representatives who already proved their political skills at the national level (see Table 1).

Table-1: Previous Parliamentary and Government Experience of MEPs

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004
MEPs with national parliamentary experience	45%	35%	26%	30%	28%	25%
MEPs with ministerial experience	16.7%	13%	14.1%	10.5%	10.2%	13.6%

Source: The 1979-1999 periods are from Corbett et al. (2003: 42, Table 10); the 2004 EP is the author's own calculation.

Going beyond isolated observations, this article is designed to provide a cross-national comparative perspective of the determinants of the representative quality of the member states in the EP. In fact, there are 27 countries with significantly different social, political, and cultural characteristics represented in the EP today.² What impact do these countries have on political representation in the EP? Perhaps, some countries send more nationally-well known politicians to the EP than others do. Indeed it would be interesting to see how the 2004 enlargement, which brought eight ex-communist countries into the Union, affected the political composition of the EP? Such questions have remained unanswered in the literature and this study should be considered as a first step to address these questions.

More specifically, this article seeks to understand which member countries are more likely to choose representatives who held an elected office in the national parliament or government. As mentioned earlier, the literature shows that the EP now attracts members with high social and

² The European Parliament has currently 27 members. Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union in 2007 but they are excluded from this study since they held their elections to the European Parliament after this study's empirical work was completed.

political status. However, the level of such attraction will change from one country to another since member countries vary in their political and social structures. Which countries are more likely to be represented by members with significant national political experience in the EP? The number of countries represented in the EP is expected to reach 32 by 2014 (Baimbridge 2005: 45) and studying the impact of national factors on the European Parliament's elite composition may help us to gain a better understanding of the impacts of future enlargements on the EP.

3. Variables and Hypotheses

This article studies what political and socio-economic factors at the national level influence the elite composition of the EP. The dependent variable is the representative quality of the member states, which is the average national political experience of representatives of the member states in the EP. Several studies in American politics assume that measuring previous elective office holdings is sufficient enough to understand the 'quality' of candidates (for example, see Carson et al., 2007; Bond et al., 1997). In these studies, a higher level of previous elected political experience is assumed to be associated with a higher level of candidate quality. Following this path, this paper quantifies the 'quality' of representation of the member states by studying their representatives' previous elected office holding.

To measure the level of representative quality for each member state, the mean value of national political experience of MEPs of the member states is calculated. For example, on average, the British MEPs have a national political experience of 0.19, whereas the same value for the Latvian MEPs is 1.78 (see Table 2). In calculating the national political experience, MEPs who held national elected offices (in lower or upper houses) before elected to the EP are coded 1. MEPs who held national ministerial offices or presidency are coded 2, since such national offices may be associated with higher political skills and experiences. Members who did not hold national elected office before being elected to the EP are coded 0. A country's representative quality score was then calculated by adding these numbers and dividing them by the number of seats of that country in the EP.

The first independent variable is the 2004 Eastern European enlargement. The 2004 enlargement added ten new states with 162 new representatives into the EP. More importantly, eight of these ten states have significantly different political and social systems because of their communist experiences. Schmitt (2005) focuses on the 2004 EP elections and finds that the eight new East European member states displayed different

electoral patterns in the elections than the rest of the member states. Therefore, it can be expected that the East European member states may also send representatives with different levels of quality to the EP. Moreover, the East European member states are significantly different than the rest of the member states with their distinct historical, political, economic, and social developments. What the EU means for the East European member countries is probably different from what it means for the rest.

Table-2: Representative Quality Scores of the Member States in the 2004 EP

Member State	Representative Quality Score	Member State	Representative Quality Score
Austria	0.61	Italy	0.51
Belgium	0.83	Latvia	1.78
Britain	0.19	Lithuania	0.85
Cyprus	1.00	Luxemburg	1.50
Czech	0.58	Malta	1.00
Denmark	0.57	Netherlands	0.00
Estonia	1.40	Poland	0.69
Finland	1.00	Portugal	0.88
France	0.41	Slovakia	1.00
Germany	0.11	Slovenia	1.14
Greece	0.42	Spain	0.56
Hungary	0.79	Sweden	0.42
Ireland	1.17		

In fact, Auers (2005: 749) observes that the ‘quality of the candidates standing for election’ in Eastern Europe in the 2004 EP elections was ‘striking.’ He mentions that many top politicians ran for a seat in the EP in 2004. Therefore, in an attempt to understand how the eight ex-communist states differ in their representative quality from the rest in the EP, this study assumes that the *East European member states will be represented by*

nationally prominent politicians. Assuming a significant impact, the eight ex-communist member states that were included into the Union with the 2004 enlargement are coded one (1); and, the remaining 17 member states are coded zero (0).

Electoral-system related factors should also have an impact on the level of representative quality of the member states. Several studies find that electoral rules play a significant role in shaping the social compositions of parliaments (for example, see Norris and Franklin, 1997; Norris, 2003; Farrell and Scully, 2007; Farrell, 2001). Although successive reforms have aimed to create a 'uniform' electoral procedure for EP elections, different ballot structures adopted by the member states remain as an important variation. Farrell and Scully (2007: 77-8) distinguishes two main types of ballot structures used in the 2004 EP elections: 'candidate-based' and 'party-based.' Candidate-based ballot structures are 'open' electoral systems in which voters can express their preferences for particular candidates. It is noted that candidate-based systems place greater emphasis on 'personal reputations' since people vote for individual candidates (Carey and Shugart, 1995: 419). On the other hand, in 'party-based' ballot structures, or 'closed' systems, people vote for a party and candidates' rank of order on their party list determine their electoral success. Party-based systems also include ballot structures that provide very 'limited' opportunities for the voter to improve the ranking of candidates through personal votes. On the other hand, Farrell and Scully count some party-list systems as candidate-based if voters have a reasonable chance to influence the ranking of candidates. Since candidates' personal reputations are emphasized in candidate-based systems, it can safely be assumed that the *member countries adopting 'candidate-based' systems are more likely to be represented by high political figures in the EP*. Thus, the member states with candidate-based systems are coded one (1), and with party-based systems are coded zero (0).

Another main form of electoral variation in the 2004 EP elections, as identified by Farrell and Scully (2007: 74-6), was between regional and national systems. Farrell and Scully classify Belgium, Britain, France, and Ireland as countries adopting a regional system, in which the country is divided into several regions and the seats are allocated regionally. The remaining member states are classified as a national system, in which the whole country is treated as a single constituency and the seats are allocated nationally. Since this paper assumes that nationally held elective offices determine the representative quality in the EP, it can be argued that the *member countries adopting 'national list' systems are more likely to be represented by high national political figures in the EP*. Therefore, the

member countries that adopted national systems are coded one (1), and are otherwise coded zero (0).

Electoral turnout is the fourth independent variable in analysing the impact of national level factors on the representative quality of the member states. The literature on electoral turnout in EP elections is vast. Yet, to the best knowledge of the authour, no study has made an attempt to analyse the relationship between electoral turnout and the representative quality of the EU member states. The electoral turnout in the 2004 EP elections varied significantly from one country to another (see Table 3). What was the impact of these varying turnout rates on the EP? Perhaps, higher turnout rates may show the public interest in the EU project and encourage nationally well-known politicians to run for EP elections. Thus, it may be assumed that *countries with higher electoral turnout rates will bring members with higher national political status.*

Finally, population and the GDP per capita are the fifth and sixth independent variables. This study expects that smaller states in population and economy will display different recruitment patterns. At the national level, there are studies showing a relationship between socio-political backgrounds of legislators and socio-economic characteristics of their constituencies (for example, see Tachau, 1980). At the international level, Kronsell's (2002) case study of Sweden's EU membership shows that the EU empowers its small members in political terms. Moreover, the countries with lower GDP per capita may be more dependent on the EU for economic development and markets. Therefore, the elite in smaller countries may be more interested in the EU and may want to become a part of the EP, which is increasingly becoming more powerful and influential in the Union. It is thus hypothesised that *smaller countries in population and GDP per capita will be represented by nationally prominent politicians.*

4. Data and Methodology

To understand which countries are more likely to send their political 'stars' to the EP, this study takes the average previous national political experience of the member states as the dependent variable. In calculating the level of representative quality of the member states, only experience in the national executive and national legislative bodies (lower and upper legislative institutions) is taken into consideration. However, there are lower level elected bodies that can also provide political skills, knowledge, and experience. For example, a MEP can gain political skills in local or regional parliaments and get elected to the EP without being a member of a national

parliament. However, this study only focuses on national legislative institutions when calculating the political backgrounds of MEPs.

Table-3: The Member Countries and the Independent Variables

Member	Post-Communist	Candidate Based	National System	Turnout (%)	GDP Euro	Population (*000)
Austria	NO	NO	YES	42	26,910	8,067
Belgium	NO	NO	NO	91	25,860	10,356
Britain	NO	NO	NO	39	26,380	59,843
Cyprus	NO	NO	YES	71	18,930	715
Czech	YES	NO	YES	28	15,210	10,203
Denmark	NO	YES	YES	48	27,190	5,383
Estonia	YES	YES	YES	27	10,230	1,356
Finland	NO	YES	YES	41	24,500	5,206
France	NO	NO	NO	43	25,120	59,630
Germany	NO	NO	YES	43	24,050	82,537
Greece	NO	NO	YES	63	17,820	10,555
Hungary	YES	NO	YES	38	13,400	10,142
Ireland	NO	YES	NO	60	29,600	3,963
Italy	NO	YES	YES	73	23,580	57,844
Latvia	YES	NO	YES	41	8,890	2,331
Lithuania	YES	YES	YES	48	10,050	3,462
Luxemburg	NO	YES	YES	90	45,270	448
Malta	NO	YES	YES	82	16,800	395
Netherlands	NO	NO	YES	39	26,570	16,193
Poland	YES	NO	YES	20	10,400	28,218
Portugal	NO	NO	YES	39	16,830	10,407
Slovakia	YES	NO	YES	17	11,900	5,379
Slovenia	YES	NO	YES	28	16,920	1,995
Spain	NO	NO	YES	46	21,200	40,409
Sweden	NO	NO	YES	37	25,340	8,941

Note: GDP is the gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power parity in 2003 and drawn from <http://www.elections2004.eu.int>. 'Population' is of 2004 and from Mather (2005: 29, Table 3.3). 'Turnout' is from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>. 'Candidate-Based' is from Farrell and Scully (2007: 77, Figure 4.1). 'National Constituency' is from Farrell and Scull (2007: 75, Table 4.2).

The importance of local and regional legislatures varies from country to country. In the legislatively decentralised countries, local and regional governing bodies play a greater role while in some other countries they don't. Also, in some countries there are no regional parliaments. National parliaments exist in every country and they are the central legislative institutions and the common denominators that can be used in

comparative legislative studies and recruitment. Also, nearly all MEPs have experiences in local party branches or councils and what differentiates members from one another is their previous office holdings at higher levels (Kaeding, 2004: 363). A similar approach has also been taken previously by Best and Cotta (2000) and Borchert and Zeiss (2003).

The focus of this paper is the 2004 EP. There are several reasons in studying the 2004 Parliament to understand the cross-national variations of the quality of representation. First, dual membership of the EP and national parliaments was abolished by the 2004 EP elections. Second, the 2004 European enlargement increased the membership of the EU from 15 to 25 and brought distinctly different countries into the Union. The increase in membership and its diversity now enables us to conduct healthier cross-national empirical analysis.

Data on the political backgrounds of MEPs are collected from the official website of the EP (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>). Using the information provided in the website, national political backgrounds of individual members are coded. Then, the average values of national political experiences of the representatives of the member states (dependent variable) are subtracted and an EU Member States Data Set is created. The EU Member States Data Set is further supplemented by the institutional, socio-economic and political variables (independent variables). All independent variables used in this study are presented in Table 3. The SPSS computer program is utilised in generating the data sets and running the appropriate statistics. However, the Post-Communist states and GDP variables are highly correlated ($r = -0.73$) and the correlation is statistically significant at 0.01. Yet when another model is run by excluding the GDP variable, no major changes occurred in the coefficients, error terms, and the p values. Therefore, the correlation between the GDP and Post-Communist variables does not jeopardise the strength of the research model. There are no major correlations between the remaining independent variables.

5. Analysis

Table 4 is designed to present what national level variables influence the distribution of nationally well-known politicians across the member states. Table 4 reveals a statistically significant relationship for the Post-Communist and the Population variables. According to the above OLS regression model, East European MEPs are more politically experienced at the national level than MEPs from the remaining 17 countries.

Table-4: Factors Affecting the Representative Quality in the 2004 EP Elections

	Unstandardized			
	Coefficients (<i>b</i>)	s.e.	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i>)
(Constant)	0.419	0.455	0.920	0.370
Post-Communist States	0.495*	0.230	2.151	0.045
Candidate-based systems	0.174	0.154	1.130	0.273
National-constituency	-0.102	0.192	-0.529	0.603
Electoral turnout	0.006	0.004	1.464	0.160
Population	-8.14E-06*	0.000	-2.518	0.021
GDP per capita	3.08E-06	0.000	0.253	0.803

Note: Dependent variable is the average national political experience of the representatives of the member states. R square for the model is .60 and Adjusted R square is .46. The number of observations (N) is 25.

* Significant at the .05 level

As Table 5 below shows, the average representative quality value for East European countries in the EP is 1.02; whereas the corresponding average value for the remaining 17 countries is 0.66 and the mean difference (0.37) is statistically significant at 0.05. In short, the representative quality of the East European countries in the EP is much higher than the representative quality of the rest. Auers (2005: 749) also takes attention to the quality of East European candidates in the 2004 election contest. In explaining why this is the case, Auers notes that the EP attracts the national elite with its generous financial benefits. Also, the East European media shows greater attention to the EP than the media in the remaining EU countries and this attracts the national elite. Finally, Auers notes that, ‘as the new member states have no experienced “old hands” in the European Parliament, the parties – and the voters – seem to have felt compelled to put forward mature politicians capable of competently representing their interests’ (2005: 749). An alternative explanation for the higher membership quality of East European countries in the EP may be found in the uninstitutionalized political and social system in these countries. Perhaps the Eastern European elite view the EP as a good place for retirement or having a political seat until a better one becomes available at home. Another possible explanation

could be the fact that EU integration in these countries was very important in the post-Cold War era for both political and economic reasons. The integration process was a ‘return’ to Europe after the long Cold War separation. Facing the political and economic domination of Russia, the elite in these countries committed themselves to the EU membership. Also, the EU could provide structural funds and market development. In short, it is possible to provide multiple explanations for the higher representative quality of Eastern European states. Future studies can research how East European MEPs differ from the rest in their motivations and recruitment process.

Table-5: The Representative Quality Scores of East European Countries and the Remaining EU Countries

Eastern European Countries (mean)	Remaining 17 Countries (mean)	Mean Difference
1.02 (N=8)	0.66 (N=17)	0.37*

* Significant at the .05 level

A statistically significant but negative relationship exists between populations of the member states and their membership quality. In other words, the smaller countries are more likely to send more nationally high profile politicians to the EP. It is possible to argue that smaller countries are more dependent on the EU than bigger countries in political and economic terms. Membership in the EU empowers smaller countries and being part of such a larger entity may be prestigious for the elite. Although ideological affiliations of MEPs largely determine their voting behavior (Hix et al., 2006), Raunio (1996: 379) finds that MEPs represent multiple interests including national interests. The ‘professionalisation theory’ assumes that members with high political skills better serve their constituencies (Norris, 1999: 86-7). If this assumption is correct, the presence of MEPs of smaller countries who are more politically experienced and skilful may in some part counterbalance the numerical strength of larger countries in the EP when national issues gain prominence.

Finally, the remaining variables (Candidate-based, National Constituency, Turnout, and the GDP variables) are found to be statistically insignificant. However, the Candidate-based electoral system and Turnout

variables are close to being statistically significant and their coefficients are in the hypothesised directions. As expected, the model shows that the member states with candidate-based electoral systems are more likely to be represented by nationally well-known politicians. The research also finds the Turnout variable positively related to the representative quality of the member states. The representative quality is higher in countries where the electoral turnout in the 2004 EP elections was also higher ($p = 0.16$). More research needed to fully explore these relationships.

6. Conclusion

The European Parliament has been increasing its powers and has now come to a position wherein it is considered to be part of a 'bicameral' legislative system (Corbett, 2005). Although it provides unique opportunities for cross-national research, the EP has largely been neglected (Patzelt, 1999: 258). This study aims to contribute to the EP literature by analysing the cross-national variations of representative quality in the EP.

Members of the European Parliament coming from 27 distinctly different states meet within a single European legislative institution. Not only do the member states have different institutional and socio-economic characteristics, but the general populace and the elite also have different expectations from the EP. Following this analytical path, this paper assumes that national level variables will have a significant impact on who is elected to the EP and it tests its hypothesis against a set of socio-economic and political variables. The study finds that the member states from Eastern Europe and the member states with smaller populations have higher membership quality in the EP. In fact, there are six ex-prime ministers in the European Parliament, four of whom come from East European countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia). The other two ex-prime ministers come from two countries with small populations (Denmark and Finland), supporting the Population variable.

The membership of the European Union is expected to reach 32 by 2014 (Baimbridge, 2005: 45). All official and potential candidate countries but Turkey have small populations with a previous experience in communism. Therefore, based on the findings of this study, it is possible to predict that the inclusion of these countries into the European Union will further increase the proportion of representatives with high level national political experience in the EP.

It is assumed that political skills and experiences of legislators are one of the determinants of the effectiveness of parliaments (Norris, 1999: 86). Increasing level of 'representative quality' in the EP may therefore play

a role in its overall effectiveness. Moreover, this paper shows that smaller countries have higher ‘quality’ MEPs than bigger countries have. Although the previous research showed that MEPs vote along ideological lines (Hix et al., 2006), politically influential and experienced members of smaller countries may in some part counterbalance the numerical strength of the bigger countries when national interests gain prominence. However, although this paper assumes that MEPs with higher national political experience are associated with higher representative ‘quality,’ the relationship between having national political experience and being more effective in the EP has yet to be proven. Few studies include previous national political experience as an independent variable and their findings are inconclusive. Bowler and Farrell (1995: 240) find that nationally important figures in the EP are more likely to receive important committee assignments. On the other hand, Kaeding (2004: 366) finds no statistically significant relationship between having previous national political experience and the rapporteurship allocation in the EP. Future research should study whether MEPs with previous national political experience make a difference in the EP. This paper should only be considered as an initial step toward an understanding of the dispersion of representation quality of the member states in the EP

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