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Selective scrutiny: Eurosceptic opposition parties tend to emphasize general matters in their parliamentary questions about the EU

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Selective scrutiny: Eurosceptic opposition parties tend to emphasize general matters in their parliamentary questions about the EU

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Scrutiny activities from domestic opposition parties in European Union (EU) affairs crucially contribute to the functioning of democratic accountability in the EU. While we know a lot about the extent of these activities, we know relatively little about their content. Roman Senninger studies the policy issues addressed in parliamentary questions about the EU in the Danish Folketing and shows that (1) the content of questions has been broadened over time and that (2) Eurosceptics strongly emphasize general EU matters.

European integration presents domestic legislatures with challenges. Most striking one is their loss of power towards EU institutions because of transfers of legislative authority from national parliaments to the European level. Within national parliaments, opposition parties suffer the most. They tend to struggle to find information about what the national executive is doing and deciding at the European level. Hence, domestic opposition parties have incentives to scrutinize their government in EU affairs. At the same time, they hold the potential to crucially contribute to the functioning of democratic accountability in the EU.

Recent research shows that they are indeed the most active EU scrutiny actors. The key question in understanding the scrutiny activities of opposition parties is thus no longer *whether* domestic opposition parties scrutinize their government in EU affairs. Instead, it is more useful to ask *which* aspects of the European Union they scrutinize. Parties can address very general issues such as EU treaties and institutions, or they can talk about very specific issues such as agricultural subsidies, recycling and social benefits for low-income families. Scholars show that parties do not necessarily pay attention to the same

aspects when they talk about the EU. Parties tend to choose the EU issues they wish to address selectively in a way that fits their general strategies and ideological outlook.



Opposition parties follow different strategies in their EU scrutiny activities. Eurosceptic opposition parties emphasize general EU matters while mainstream opposition parties scrutinize a broader set of policy issue areas



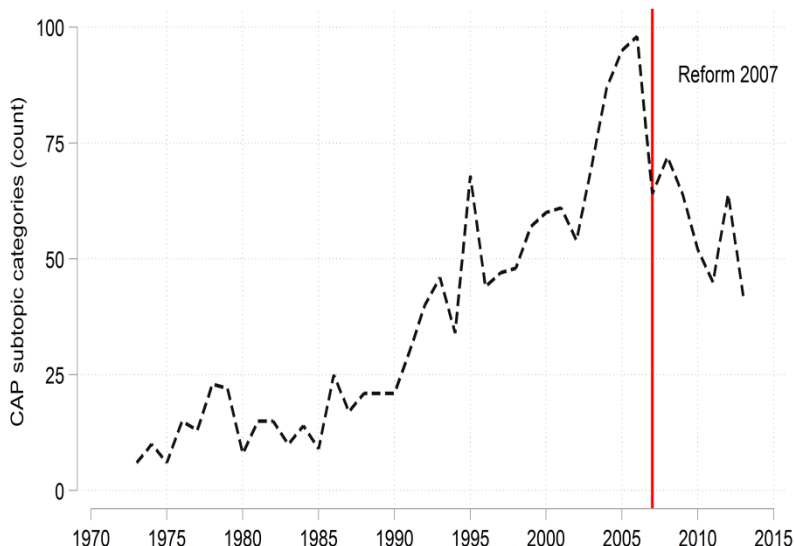
In a forthcoming article based on parliamentary questions about the EU by opposition parties in the Danish *Folketing* from 1973 to 2013, I demonstrate that this is also the case for EU scrutiny activities. In particular, there is a divide between mainstream opposition parties and Eurosceptic opposition parties. Eurosceptic opposition parties emphasize general EU matters while mainstream opposition parties scrutinize a broader set of policy issue areas.

To start out, Figure 1 describes the development of the annual number of policy issues that are addressed in opposition parties' parliamentary questions about the

European Union. If parties in general do not ask EU-related questions about a broad range of different issues, it would be redundant to

explain differences with respect to general aspects of the EU across parties.

Figure 1. Issue expansion in parliamentary questions about the EU



Note: The issue coding scheme is based on the [Comparative Agendas Project](#) which has a maximum of 236 individual sub-issue categories.

The figure suggests that there has been an increase over time. While the number of policy issues has been relatively stable from Denmark’s accession to the European Community in 1973 until the 1990’s (around 10 to 20 issues per year), we see a steep rise thereafter. Especially after the ratification of the treaty of Maastricht (more than 60 different issue categories) and around the discussion of the *Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe*, many different subtopic categories have been addressed. A reform of questioning procedures in 2007 led to a decrease in the number of issues addressed in questions about the EU.

In sum, the result shows that opposition parties have broadened the range of issues addressed in EU-related questions and wish to play an active role in EU decision-making.

However, not all opposition parties have incentives to acknowledge the transfer of

legislative authority to the EU. While the overall politicization of European integration in domestic politics has increased in recent decades, parties pursue very different strategies regarding attitudes towards the EU, issue emphasis and issue framing.



By emphasizing general EU matters, Eurosceptic parties advertise their Eurosceptic outlook to become more visible in public debates about the future of the EU



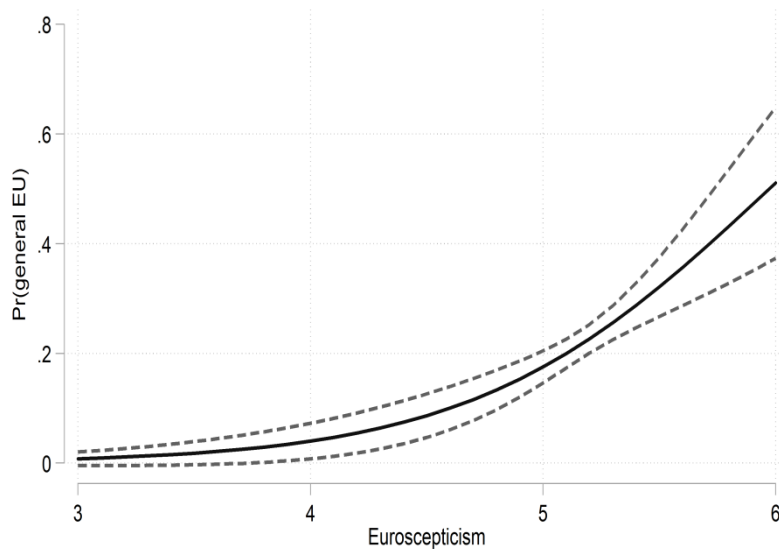
Parties with critical attitudes towards the EU have a greater potential to mobilize the Eurosceptic electorate by making general discussions about the EU salient on the political agenda. They broadly avoid becoming involved in technical and complicated discussions about policies especially since they

are neither held accountable for EU policy output nor expected to react to it. Instead they focus on very general aspects which allow them to communicate their Eurosceptic outlook.

My findings show that this is also the case for EU scrutiny activities. Eurosceptic parties are

more likely to focus on general EU matters such as treaties, institutions and enlargement. Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of Euroscepticism (based on party manifesto data) on the fraction of general questions about the EU out of all questions about the EU.

Figure 2. Marginal effect of Euroscepticism (CI 95%)



Note: The value of 5 on the Euroscepticism scale (x-axis) can be interpreted as a neutral position towards the EU.

This finding implies that the most active opposition parties make strategic use of the scrutiny instruments at hand. As a result, they tend not to actively contribute to holding the government's policy-decisions in EU affairs to account but advertise their Eurosceptic outlook and try to become more visible in public debates about the future of the EU by emphasizing general EU matters.

The wider implication of my finding is that political parties hold the reins in parliamentary scrutiny in EU affairs. Formal rules provide domestic parliamentary actors with opportunities. However, the extent, purpose and content of EU scrutiny depend on the incentive structures of political parties.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on Roman Senninger's forthcoming article in European Union Politics, titled 'Issue Expansion and Selective Scrutiny - How Opposition Parties Use Parliamentary Questions about the European Union in the National Arena, 1973 – 2013'.



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