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Regional representation in the European Parliament: Parliamentary Questions on Geographical Indications

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Abstract:

The European Parliament represents the citizens of the European Union. However, individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) also face incentives to represent more narrow regional economic interests. Geographical Indications such as Feta or Champagne are an ideal policy area to study regional representation. Their defined regions provide clear incentives and a reliable measurement of regional representation. This article codes and analyses the written questions on Geographical Indications posed by MEPs during the period 2009-2019. Descriptively, we find that MEPs often mention products from their region. We also find that MEPs focus their questions on contentious products and on politicized free trade agreements. Quantitatively, logit regressions provide evidence for more regional representation by MEPs from countries with regional lists for EP elections. We conclude with the implications of our research for representation in the European Union, and the idea of transnational lists.

Keywords: European Parliament, Regional Representation, Parliamentary Questions, Geographical Indications, Trade Agreements

JEL codes: F13, O34, Q17

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1 Introduction

This article uses parliamentary questions (PQs) in the European Parliament to study territorial representation in the EU. It codes and analyses the 428 written questions on Geographical Indications posed by Members of European Parliament (MEPs) during the period 2009-2019. Geographical Indications (GIs) such as Feta or Champagne are an ideal policy area to study the political economy of territorial representation. Their defined production regions provide both clear incentives and a reliable measurement of territorial representation.

The European Parliament (EP) is a supranational parliamentary institution. Its members are directly elected in the member states. There are no term limits. Over time, its importance has been strengthened (Hix and Høyland, 2013) in response to allegations of a democratic deficit in the EU. Understanding the incentives and behaviour of MEPs is hence important: the EP is a key actor in EU decision making, and is seen as important for democratic legitimacy. While MEPs are often expected to keep a European perspective, individual MEPs also face incentives for the representation of more narrow national or regional economic interests. Whereas voting behaviour is a thin indicator subject to party discipline (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011; Russo, 2011; Sozzi, 2016b), parliamentary questions offer a unique window into the focus and representative efforts of individual MEPs (Meijers and van der Veer, 2019; Meijers, Schneider and Zhelyazkova, 2019).

In addition to the importance of understanding MEPs' incentives and behaviour, parliamentary questions on GIs offer insight into the substantive concern of MEPs qua GIs. This is relevant to improve our understanding of the international political economy of trade and intellectual property protection.

We contribute to the literature on the international political economy of trade and on representation in the European Parliament (Walczak and van der Brug, 2013; Lefkofridi and Katsanidou, 2014; Staat and Kuehnhanss, 2017; Sorace, 2018b) in the following ways. First, we construct a dataset of all EP questions on GIs over the period 2009-2019 (N=428), classified by MEP, theme, and GI products mentioned. Themes and subthemes were coded by hand. In terms of territorial representation, we code regional representation if

an MEP asks a question on a GI from their birth region, and national representation for a GI from their country. Second, we qualitatively analyse the content of the questions. Third, we identify the effect of regional lists in EP elections on regional representation.

Our findings point to three overarching take-aways. First, a lot of questions on GIs concern international trade, and especially politicized trade agreements and products. Second, there is a lot of regional representation in GI questions: 25% of questions relate to a GI from the MEP's birth region, and an additional 34% to a GI from their country. Especially MEPs with a nationalist or regionalist party ideology are involved in these. Third, MEPs from countries with regional lists for EP elections are more likely to engage in regional representation.

2 Geographical Indications and written parliamentary questions

In essence, Geographical Indications are a form of intellectual property used to identify goods that come from a specific place and possess qualities or a reputation that are linked to that place of origin. In the European Union (EU), agricultural foodstuffs and wine such as Feta cheese, Parma ham, or Champagne are among the most famous examples. These names cannot be used by other food producers in the EU, nor in countries outside the EU when a dedicated agreement on a list of protected GIs has been negotiated. The EU has over 3,000 GIs for wines and spirits, with a turnover of over 75 B€ in 2017 (AND-International, ECORYS and COGEA, 2020).

While the protection of GIs is EU-wide, the benefits are reaped in the region of origin (Crescenzi *et al.*, 2022). Which products receive protection is therefore a matter of international political economics. Two examples further prove that this is a relevant and controversial topic. First, within the EU there has been much debate and even legal action about the protection of Feta (Gangjee, 2007; Wax, 2019), with Denmark and France contesting the name for which Greece has obtained protection. Second, in its external relations, GIs are a key demand of the EU in free trade negotiations, which involve the construction of a list of protected products. In the past, several Member States (such as

Cyprus or Greece) have threatened to veto agreements because of insufficient protection for 'their' products (Huysmans, 2022).

The study of parliamentary questions (PQs) in the EP has received increasing attention in recent years, either to study oversight dynamics (Proksch and Slapin, 2011), issue competition and politicization (Meijers and van der Veer, 2019; Guinaudeau and Costa, 2022) or territorial representation (Sozzi, 2016b; Brack and Costa, 2019). It is to this latter perspective of territorial representation that our study can contribute in particular. Because of their link to a specific territory, GlS as a policy area are uniquely suitable to objectively determine whether national or regional representation is at work.

A large-scale study concluded that (sub)national representation is less important than an EU or outside-EU focus in the EP, as it is assumed not to deal 'with local matters or with policies that only impact certain regions' (Brack and Costa, 2019, p. 237). With a focus on GlS, that premise obviously differs, which raises expectations to find an outlier case in terms of territorial representation and a regional link between MEPs and their constituency.

From a scholarly point of view, parliamentary questions are in many ways useful to get a grip on the political dimension of a topic. Even though PQs are not the most powerful instrument, the costs associated with them are very low, they are less subject to party discipline, and they are often very detailed. All of this renders them an important tool to study MEP priorities, interests, and general legislative behaviour (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011; Sorace, 2018a). Indeed, they can be considered multi-functional (Raunio, 1996). They can be used to receive or transmit information, to scrutinize the European Commission, the Council of Ministers or specific EU agencies (Proksch and Slapin, 2011; Font and Pérez Durán, 2016), to indicate policy priorities (Meijers and van der Veer, 2019; Guinaudeau and Costa, 2022), as input material for communication to public audiences (Guinaudeau & Persico 2021) or to signal responsiveness or representation to MEPs' domestic constituencies (Sozzi, 2016b; Brack and Costa, 2019; Meijers, Schneider and Zhelyazkova, 2019).

Written PQs are the most accessible type of questions, as there are few constraints in terms of party approval, EP President authorization, or word or topic limits (Sorace,

2018a). They hence provide richer data compared to simple binary voting indicators, which are furthermore only available for texts being put to a vote. Written questions may be posed towards the President of the European Council, the Council, the Commission, or the High Representative for Foreign Affairs.¹

Our main focus is on territorial representation. However, to identify the drivers of questions with regional representation, it is necessary to first identify the drivers of GI-related questions overall. In the following subsections, we construct theoretical expectations of the patterns of GI-related parliamentary questions, in terms of (i) the drivers of PQs, and (ii) territorial representation in those questions (regional, national, EU, or other).

2.1 Drivers of parliamentary questions on Geographical Indications

A first driver of PQs is MEP specialization. MEPs serve on dedicated policy committees and specialize in policy areas (Proksch and Slapin, 2011). For GIs, the committee for agriculture and rural development (AGRI) is most relevant.

A second driver of PQs is MEP ideology. In general, literature shows that MEPs from (small and) Eurosceptic groups ask more PQs than average, as they are often excluded from the decision-making process in the EP, and are assumed to use these questions as input material to campaign against the EU back at home (Proksch and Slapin, 2011; Brack and Costa, 2019). Qualitatively, ideology is also a predictor of the type of parliamentary questions (Akbik and Migliorati, 2023).

In our case, we are dealing with questions revolving around food, which has a close connection to culture, heritage, and collective identity (Ranta & Ichijo, 2022). Especially in the last 10 years, the phenomenon of 'gastronationalism' (DeSoucey, 2010) is on the rise: the connection of nationalist projects with national food culture. Hence, we expect MEPs from nationalist and regionalist parties to ask more questions on GIs.

A third but debated aspect in studies evaluating the drivers of written parliamentary questions is opposition status. Notably, domestic opposition status has been identified as

¹ For more details, see the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament, Rule 117 for EP7 and Rule 130 for EP8.

a significant determinant for using PQs as a control mechanism of the EU executive (Proksch and Slapin, 2011; Font and Pérez Durán, 2016). The argument is that written questions allow politicians without party representation in the Council to reduce informational asymmetries. Using PQs, they can bypass the national government they are not part of, and reach out directly to the Commission. However, this finding was not replicated in the study by Sorace (2018a).

A final level of determinants of asking PQs is nationality. Applied to the topic of Geographical Indications, we expect questions to correlate most strongly with the number of GIs registered in every country. Indeed, GIs are very unequally distributed across member states (Huysmans and Swinnen, 2019), and MEPs tend to ask more questions when their country is disproportionately affected (Akbik and Migliorati, 2023). The 'Southern Five' (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) have over 75% of EU GIs. They care about GIs for both economic and gastronomic reasons (DeSoucey, 2010; Huysmans, 2022; Ranta and Ichijo, 2022). GIs are also a contentious aspect of trade agreements, where we see the same Southern Five countries being more active in getting the Commission to protect their GIs (Huysmans, 2022). We will hence also control for the number of GIs at the country level.

Note that there are no term limits for MEPs and the elections are held at the same time across the EU. This means that at any given time there is no cross-sectional variation across MEPs in the need to convince electorates. Hence year fixed effects will be sufficient to account for differences in incentives prior to elections.

2.2 Drivers of territorial representation

There was long little interest in the territorial perspective of PQs, i.e. whether MEPs would use these questions to signal to their (sub)national constituencies that they are attentive to issues relevant for their home region (though see Marsh & Wessels, 1997).

A seminal study by Raunio (1996) showed that PQs do sometimes defend (or signal) constituency interests, as one third of PQs in his database were identified as questions on (sub)national themes. In its wake, others have identified territorial representation as a recurring characteristic of European politics inside the EP. In a recent large-scale study,

Brack & Costa (2019) again concluded that ‘only’ one third of all PQs have a (sub)national focus. They explain this low number by arguing that the EP ‘does not deal with local matters or with policies that only impact certain regions’ (p. 237).

In case of GI-related questions, we would expect the share of (sub)national representation to be higher. Given that the topic is inherently geographical, we would expect GI-related PQs to be posed by MEPs from that specific region, or at least from the same country. Given our database with exclusively GI-related questions, we therefore expect this percentage to be much higher, serving as an upper bound of territorial representation in the EP.

Beyond the observation that territorial representation exists, there is also a lively literature aiming to assess what drives such a regional or national orientation (Sozzi, 2016b; Brack and Costa, 2019; Chiru, 2022). The key novel question we take up here is whether the use of regional lists leads to more regional representation than nation-wide lists for European elections. Because regional lists mean that politicians need votes from their region, we hypothesize that regional lists lead to more regional representation:

H1. MEPs elected from regional lists are more likely to engage in regional representation.

Another popular hypothesis to control for is that the ballot structure and district magnitude is important (Farrell and Scully, 2007; Sozzi, 2016a). The idea is that more open electoral systems (i.e. candidate-focused, with election fortunes depending on the personal results of politicians) incentivize MEPs to focus on constituency interests (Hix and Hagemann, 2009). In contrast, closed (i.e. party-centred) electoral systems make MEPs more dependent on the national party since they need to obtain a high position on the electoral ballots (Bowler and Farrell, 2011; Däubler and Hix, 2018).

A study by Sozzi (2016) found that MEPs coming from the open Italian electoral system ask more questions for personal reputation matters (and hence, focused on (sub)national constituencies) than in the closed French system. However, follow-up studies show ambiguous results. A large-scale study of 8,000 written PQs found no statistical significance of electoral institutions determining which MEPs ask questions with a territorial dimension (Brack and Costa, 2019). Likewise, Chiru (2022) does not find

statistically significant results between open and closed systems, but only for single transferable vote systems.

There are other determinants found to systematically affect (sub)national orientation in PQs. One of these is party ideology, with mostly radical (left and right) and Eurosceptic MEPs as more active in terms of representing (sub)national constituencies (Brack and Costa, 2013, 2019; Chiru, 2022). The explanation is that these MEPs are more excluded from the main (committee) work in the EP, as well as their more anti-European ideology, which translates in them partaking in EP politics to inform back to their domestic region. Likewise, nationality is again found to be important: MEPs from small and/or peripheral countries seem to ask more PQs referring to their home region (Raunio, 1996; Brack and Costa, 2019).

For GIs specifically, since they connect to identity and (gastro)nationalism, we especially expect more regional representation for MEPs from nationalist and regionalist parties.

3 Data

The aim of this study is to gain insights in the drivers of written parliamentary questions about GIs, as well as on the extent of territorial representation involved. That requires data on parliamentary questions and on the universe of MEPs over the period studied. Given the increased role for the EP since the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, we focus on the two most recently completed legislatures: EP7 (2009-2014) and EP8 (2014-2019).

3.1 Parliamentary questions on GIs

First, we perform a descriptive content analysis on all written PQs on Geographical Indications in legislatures EP7 and EP8. Appearing either in the title, or in the main text, we searched the European Parliament database on the basis of the following keywords and acronyms: Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Geographical Indication(s) or designation of origin.²

² To check to validity of this approach, we also searched for some famous GI names such as Feta and Champagne without the keywords. Only a handful of questions did not also contain the keywords. It seems unlikely for lesser-known GIs to be referred to in a question without the keywords we used.

The resulting questions were manually coded with the following information: question title, legislature, number, date, MEP name, MEP group, and (if applicable) how many MEPs co-authored the question.³ The total number of questions extracted this way was 428. Section 4 gives more description of the nature of the questions, including a classification into themes. It shows among other insights that MEPs asked a lot of questions about trade agreements, and in particular the politicized TTIP and CETA negotiations with the US and Canada.

We proceeded by coding additional information on MEP, specific GI, and territorial representation.

At MEP level, we extracted additional data on the basis of the information presented on the European Parliament website. This included nationality, birthplace, and national political party. On the basis of the latter, we further coded on an annual basis whether the MEP's national party was in opposition or in government, drawing on the ParlGov project database.⁴ Party ideology was coded on the basis of European Party groups and the categorization of national parties in the Party Manifesto database. Third, MEP birthplace was converted into a variable 'NUTS 1 birthplace', based on the Eurostat 2023 nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS). For example, someone born in 'Verona' was coded as 'Northeast Italy' (ITH).

3.2 Measuring territorial representation

We coded whether a territorial link was present in the question in order to distinguish those questions from general ones (e.g. asking whether the Commission thinks non-food products might also be protected in the future). We interpreted this territorial link broadly as any type of reference to a nation, a region, community, local business, or product that can be traced back to a territory. In most cases this referred to the specific GI of concern,

Individually checking more than 3000 GIs was not feasible, especially since GI names without the keywords may result in false positives (e.g. "Gouda" may show up in a question unrelated to Gouda Holland PGI, or "Parma" may show up in a question unrelated to Prosciutto di Parma PDO).

³ In case of supporting MEPs co-authoring a question, the PQ was still entirely attributed to the first author.

⁴ For Spain, Belgium, and the UK we looked at the party's opposition status in federal government, hence not looking at Catalunya, Flanders, or Scotland.

such as Roncal, Ouzo, or Rioja. But also, for example, when an MEP is concerned about foreign products with 'Italian-sounding names', a territorial link was coded – in this case 'Italy'. When the MEP refers to 'businesses in my region who alerted me that ...' again a territorial link is present, and coded here as the NUTS1 birthplace of the MEP (cf. above). Through this procedure, we were able to distil even more relevant territorial information than we would solely on the basis of specific GIs mentioned.

This territorial link was then recoded into the relevant NUTS region 'PQ NUTS1'. When a specific (prospective) GI is mentioned, the GI NUTS1 region was coded by the authors based on the GI product specification.⁵ If the GI extends beyond a single NUTS1 region (e.g. Grana Padano, Parmigiano Reggiano) or the territorial link referred to a country, the NUTS0 was coded (i.e. the entire country). Consider the example of Feta, a GI that covers most of Greece. If we had coded all the NUTS1 regions it covers, rather than coding it as NUTS0, basically any question on Feta would have automatically counted as regional representation. By not doing this, we take a conservative approach and only identify true cases of regional representation.

The MEP birthplace and territorial link ultimately serve to calculate our third aspect: territorial representation. On the basis of a comparison between 'NUTS1 birthplace' and 'PQ NUTS1' we are able to evaluate whether the territorial link identified in the question matches the region (and nation) of the MEP posing the question. Hence, when both NUTS1 designations overlap, the representation is coded as 'regional'. If not, we further checked whether at least the representation is 'national' (NUTS0 of question overlaps with NUTS0 of MEP birthplace), or European (MEPs asking questions about GIs in other EU countries). If none of these was present, we categorized the PQ as 'non-territorial'.

In total, we find that approximately 60% of questions (254/428) involve some form of either regional (25%) or national (34%) representation. Recall that both the earliest study by Raunio (1996) and the large-N analysis by Brack & Costa (2019) found an upper limit of 33% of (sub)national representation. It is clear therefore that GIs is definitely a topic

⁵ For the product specification of GI products, see the GI view database (<https://www.tmdn.org/giview>) and <https://www.qualigeo.eu>.

dominated by territorial considerations, where MEPs are (or like to be seen as) concerned about products stemming from their region or country.

We use MEP birthplace, and not MEP constituency to establish the territorial link. Mostly, one would expect that MEPs ask questions with territorial links to the region where they were elected. The problem is that in many Member States the European elections take place in one nation-wide constituency which makes it difficult to assess subnational territorial representation. Instead, we use the assumption that the birthplace of MEPs will closely match their constituency focus.⁶ In combination with the fact that some MEPs had birthplaces outside the EU (hence, not having territorial representation in our operationalization by default) this means that our results on territorial representation are probably slightly underestimating the levels of territorial representation.

3.3 *Data for regressions*

The main explanatory analyses will be conducted on a database of all MEPs serving in EP7 and EP8 (2009-2014; 2014-2019). For each MEP, we counted the number of PQs on GIs per calendar year, as well as the number of PQs with regional representation. We collected data on MEPs from the EP website and other public sources where needed.

The unit of analysis is the MEP, per calendar year (separate for the two halves of 2014 in each of the legislatures). MEPs who served in both legislatures hence appear 12 times in the dataset.

We use two different dependent variables. Depending on the regression, it is either *GI questions* or *Regional Representation*. *GI questions* is a count of the number of GI questions per MEP, on an annual basis. *Regional Representation* is the count of GI questions referring to a GI from their birth region.

We have explanatory variables at several levels: individual (MEP), political party, and country.

⁶ As a test, we coded all Italian, Polish, Belgian, and Irish questions on the basis of constituency. Constituency matched birthplace NUTS1 region in 170 of 186 questions.

AGRI is a dummy variable equal to 1 for MEPs that served as members on the EP committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, including both full members and substitutes. It was taken from the EP's website.⁷

Ideology is a categorical variable using the categorization of the Party Manifesto database (Lehmann *et al.*, 2022), which coded every party in one of the following categories: ecological (ECO), socialist or other left (LEF), social-democratic (SD), liberal (LIB), Christian-democratic (CD), conservative (CON), nationalist and radical right (NAT), agrarian (AGR), ethnic and regional (ETH) or other. Given the theoretical expectations, regressions in the main analyses will use dummy variables for *Nationalist Party* and *Ethnic-regional Party*. Nationalist parties include Lega Nord (Italy), Golden Dawn (Greece) and FPÖ (Austria). Ethnic-regional parties include the Basque Nationalist Party (Spain), the Scottish National Party (UK), and the South Tyrolean People's Party (Italy).

Party Group is a categorical variable based on the European Party Groups in use during the legislatures EP7 and EP8, such as the European People's Party (EPP) or Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD). It was taken from the EP website. There is some correlation between *Ideology* and *Party Group*, but it is far from perfect. For instance, within the EPP, there are parties coded as agrarian, Christian-democratic, conservative, ethnic-regional, liberal, and nationalist and radical right.

Opposition is coded per MEP per calendar year. Based on the ParlGov database, we coded for every year between 2009-2019 whether the MEP's domestic party was in opposition. This was coded as such when the party was in opposition for more than 6 months of that year.

Country GIs is a count of GIs (food, wine, and spirits) registered by the previous calendar year in the GI view database, expressed in hundreds. For example, for Italy with 869 GIs in 2019, *Country GIs* is equal to 8.69 for 2019. Note that while some GIs are added over time, there is relatively little time variation in this variable.

Regional lists is a dummy variable equal to 1 for countries that elect MEPs with subnational lists through constituencies or districts, as shown in the Online Appendix. Over the period

⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/archives/7/agri/members>

concerned, seven countries used constituencies or districts: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom (Oelbermann, Palomares and Pukelsheim, 2010). However, some care is needed: for France, Ireland, and Poland the regional lists do not match the NUTS1 regions, so we code *Regional lists* as missing and do not use observations from those countries for our analyses. This is because our coding of *Regional Representation* is based on matching NUTS1 regions for GI and MEP birthplace. If the Regional lists are too big or small with respect to the NUTS1 regions, or cross-cut them, using those observations would introduce measurement error. Hence it is cleaner not to use them for identification. Germany in theory allows parties to present separate lists in the 16 Bundesländer, but only the CSU-CDU collaboration presented a separate CSU list in Bavaria, so we code *Regional lists* as 0 for Germany.

List Openness is an index ranging from 3 to 9 and is taken from Farrell & Scully (2007). It codes how open the lists are and hence how much incentives an MEP has for territorial representation (Sozzi, 2016b). This variable is not available for Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia since they joined after the variable was coded. In a robustness check, we use a more up to date but less fine-grained measure of ballot structure dividing systems in closed, open, and flexible (Däubler and Hix, 2018).

Year is a number ranging from 1 to 12 to code the calendar years in 2009-2019, taking into account the change of legislature in 2014. Year 6 is the first half of 2014 for the end of EP7, while Year 7 is the second half of 2014 for the start of EP8. This variable can be used to control for time trends in questions and for the unequal duration at the start and end of legislatures.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for our main variables. The Online Appendix contains a correlation matrix.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of data on MEP-year basis.

Variable	N	Mean	Min.	Max.	Source
GI questions	9,102	0.047	0	16	European Parliament
Regional Representation	9,102	0.012	0	10	Author coding
AGRI	9,102	0.109	0	1	European Parliament
Nationalist party	9,102	0.082	0	1	Party Manifesto
Ethnic-regional party	9,102	0.030	0	1	Party Manifesto
Party Group	9,102	Categorical			European Parliament
Opposition	9,102	0.557	0	1	Parlgov
Country GIs	9,102	2.207	0	8.69	GI View
Regional lists	7,464	0.269	0	1	Oelbermann et al. (2010)
List Openness	8,364	4.283	3	9	Farrell & Scully (2007)
Year	9,102	6.470	1	12	European Parliament

4 Qualitative analysis

With respect to the content of the question, we first inductively coded themes and subthemes, based on the title and the text. In many cases, this theme was straightforward, such as ‘free trade agreement’ or ‘imitation’. In more difficult cases, both authors discussed where best to categorize the question. On the basis of an ongoing discussion of main and subthemes (and several recoding rounds) we concluded with the (sub)themes listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Question themes, Parliamentary Questions on GIs in the EP 2009-2019.

Main theme	Questions	Subthemes
External	159	Offensive, defensive, FTA list, among third countries trade
Regulation	114	Non-food, COOL, domestic regulation, categorization, nutrition labelling, planting rights, and other regulation
Applications	74	Status inquiry, amendments, procedures, cross-border, Commission support
Compliance	71	Evocation, Online, Imitation, Inspection
Other	10	Promotion, climate change, poverty
Total	428	

The biggest theme is ‘External trade’, covering four subthemes. First, questions where the EU has an offensive interest (59 questions), i.e. seeking protection of EU GIs outside of the EU Single Market. Second, questions where the EU has a defensive interest (47 questions), such as concerns that opening up trade will lead to competition with cheap non-GI imports. Third, questions on whether specific GIs would be put on the lists for protection in specific free trade agreements (FTAs) such as TTIP with the US or CETA with Canada (47 questions). Fourth, questions on trade and trade agreements among third countries outside of the EU (6 questions).

Questions in the category ‘Regulation’ are general inquiries into the evolution and (potential) adaptation of the GI legislative framework (e.g. asking whether non-food products could also become eligible for GI protection) and GIs in relation to other pieces of EU or domestic regulation, such as country-of-origin labelling (COOL) or planting rights for vines. ‘Application’ questions on the other hand specifically mention certain GI products, to ask about the status of a GI approval request, or whether the Commission would consider supporting a GI request for a specific product.

The theme ‘Compliance’ is the internal counterpart of ‘External trade’ as questions here concern possible imitation or evocation of GIs (and associated inspection requests) within the EU single market.

Table 3 provides basic information about the most common nationalities and ideologies of MEPs asking questions about GIs. As expected, the ‘Southern Five’ countries are at the top of the list. Italian MEPs in particular far outweigh their colleagues, with 170 questions, amounting to 40% of the entire database.

In terms of domestic opposition, 301 questions out of 428 (70%) stem from MEPs whose party was in domestic opposition most of the calendar year.⁸ While this suggests an important role for opposition status, this has to be statistically confirmed by contextualizing this figure in the overall distribution of the domestic opposition status of MEPs.

The results in terms of territorial representation are in line with expectations that the policy area of GIs is an outlier. In total, we find that approximately 60% of questions (254/428) involve some form of either regional or national representation, with the former accounting for 25% of questions. Recall that both the earliest study by Raunio (1996) and the large-N analysis by Brack & Costa (2019) found an upper limit of 33% of (sub)national representation. It is clear therefore that GIs is definitely a topic dominated by territorial considerations, where MEPs are (or like to be seen as) concerned about products stemming from their region or country.

This is also confirmed when breaking down representation figures per country. For all top-8 nationalities, national representation numbers range between 40-80%, with Italian, Greek, and Portuguese MEPs on the upper bound. Specific regional representation figures are somewhat lower, especially so for France and Greece. For the latter this can be explained by the observation that several famous products (such as Feta) do not belong to one specific region, but are a ‘Greek’ product. Likewise, the higher figure for Portugal could be explained by the fact that the entire continental part of Portugal is considered as one NUTS region, the others being the overseas territories of Madeira and the Azores. Every product from mainland Portugal is therefore considered ‘regional’, somewhat distorting the picture.

⁸ We also coded the domestic opposition status at the exact date when the question was asked. Using this even more precise measure, 319 questions (75%) stem from MEPs whose party was in domestic opposition at the exact time of the question.

Table 3. Country and regional representation share by nationality and ideology.

Country	#PQs	Country share	Region share
Italy	170	68%	29%
Spain	73	51%	25%
France	46	43%	4%
Greece	31	77%	6%
Portugal	26	62%	46%
UK	19	63%	53%
Croatia	13	62%	31%
Bulgaria	12	42%	0%
Other	38	45%	29%
Total	428	59%	25%

Ideology	#PQs	Country share	Region share
CON	99	55%	18%
NAT	93	66%	28%
SD	89	55%	20%
CD	44	75%	36%
LEF	39	59%	31%
ETH	25	76%	56%
other	19	37%	11%
LIB	12	33%	8%
ECO	6	33%	17%
AGR	2	100%	50%

Connecting these figures to ideology shows that especially ethnic-regionalist, Christian-democratic and nationalist MEPs that make this territorial connection, at least at national level. Of these, the ethnic-regionalist group especially stands out when looking at the share of regional representation: 56% of their questions pointed to a specific regional link between the question content and the birthplace of the MEP posing the question.

The final set of descriptive statistics deals with the evolution over time, the themes dealt with in specific periods, and the particular GIs mentioned in PQs. Figure 1 shows the amount of questions by year and theme for 2009-19. We see a clear peak of attention for GIs around the period 2015-2016, particularly driven by attention for GIs in external trade.

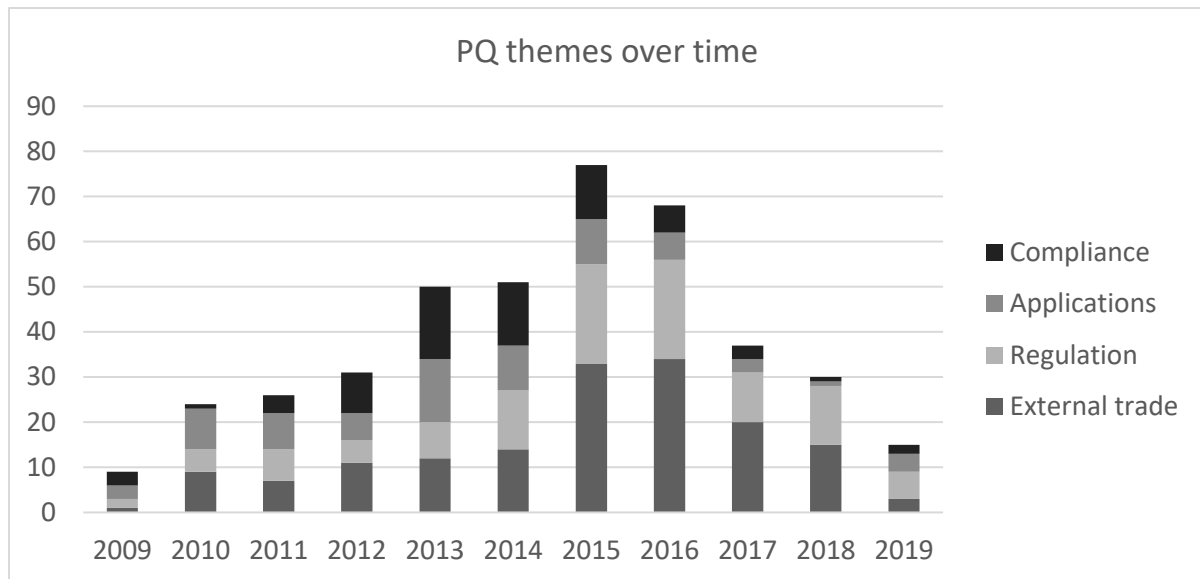


Figure 1. Themes of parliamentary questions on GIs over time, 2009-2019.

We coded the specific FTAs mentioned in 'external trade' questions and find that seven trade agreements or countries were mentioned more than 5 times: TTIP (50 questions), CETA (23 times), China (15 times), Morocco (11 times), Mercosur (14 times), the WTO (10 times) and the United Kingdom/Brexit (7 times). TTIP and CETA, arguably the two most politicized EU trade agreements that were under negotiation over the time period 2009-2019 (De Bièvre and Poletti, 2020), are clear outliers. Many questions showed genuine concerns and hopes for increased GI protection in the target countries, often focusing on products from the MEPs country or region.

However, as Table 7 in the Online Appendix shows several questions were misleading in suggesting that GI protection within the EU would be scuppered as a result of the deal, or that the proposed trade agreements would somehow lower protection in the target countries (when the status quo was, in fact, no protection at all). These questions illustrate that some MEPs opposing FTAs were either poorly informed, or deliberately misrepresenting the proposals. This suggests that the broader politicization of these FTAs might have led MEPs to use misleading questions on GIs to oppose unpopular trade agreements with, or to opportunistically signal regional concern.

Concerning the type of GIs that are mentioned, the results especially point to the political salience of GIs of cheese. This is in contrast to the relatively few questions on wine, whereas these are in general the product category that has the most protected products.

Table 8 in the Online Appendix shows the number of specific GIs mentioned compared to the overall distribution of GIs across the largest 10 categories, confirming the high ratio of PQs on cheese.

5 Regional lists and regional representation: results

Because we can only observe regional representation when a GI-related question is asked to begin with, we first run regressions to identify the drivers of the overall number of GI questions. We will then use those variables as controls in our regressions of regional representation; either directly or as first-stage variables in a zero-inflated negative binomial model. The Online Appendix shows the following variables to be the most significant predictors of the number of GI questions: *Opposition*, *AGRI*, *Country GIs*.

Our main analysis concerns regional representation. Because this variable has a much lower expected value (0.012 questions per MEP per year) and few observations with more than one question on a GI from the MEP's birthplace, we conduct a logit analysis on whether there is at least one question with regional representation, which is the case for 75 observations. Given the small number of positive observations, we will also use a firthlogit regression for robustness (Firth, 1993; King and Zeng, 2001).

For regional representation, H1 focuses on a country characteristic that is hypothesized to give more incentives for regional representation: the use of regional lists. So far, the literature has suffered from the fact that there may be other sources of variation at the country level that are hard to control for. If regional lists correlate with such unobserved country characteristics, the findings so far may be spurious. In contrast, our focus on PQs on GIs only has the important advantage that we can control for the key driver of PQs at the country level, namely whether a country has many GIs. In addition, since our main variable of interest varies at the country level, we cluster standard errors at the country level.

As Table 5 in the Online Appendix shows, several countries consist of only a single NUTS1 region. Because that may lead to spurious coding of regional representation, we drop those countries from the analysis, leaving the 14 countries with multiple NUTS1 regions.

Table 4 shows 3 models. Model 1 uses *Regional lists* to test H1. Model 2 adds country-level control variables: the *List Openness* index variable (not available for Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia), and *Country Gls*. Model 3 uses a more up-to-date but less fine-grained measure of ballot structure: *Closed ballot* (baseline), *Open ballot*, or *Flexible ballot* (Däubler and Hix, 2018). Contrary to some prior research, *Open ballot* appears negative and significant. However, this result is not robust when excluding the variable *Regional lists*.

Table 4 shows *Regional lists* to be statistically significant across different specifications: MEPs from countries with regional lists for EP elections are more likely to engage in regional representation. Nationalist and ethnic-regional parties also appear more likely to engage in regional representation.

Figure 2 illustrates the substantive significance of *Regional lists*, confirming H2.



Figure 2. Predicted probability of Regional Representation based on Model 2.

Table 4. Logit regressions of Regional Representation.

Logit of Regional Representation	(1) Main variables	(2) Country controls	(3) Ballot structure
Regional lists	1.651*** (0.588)	1.368*** (0.442)	2.560*** (0.899)
List Openness		-0.504 (0.307)	
Open ballot (v. Closed)			-6.729** (2.847)
Flexible ballot (v. Closed)			0.361 (0.632)
Nationalist party	1.624*** (0.516)	0.983** (0.500)	1.460*** (0.364)
Ethnic-regional party	1.237 (0.983)	1.260 (0.928)	0.953 (0.850)
Opposition	0.432 (0.272)	0.409* (0.222)	0.329 (0.212)
AGRI	1.354*** (0.284)	1.246*** (0.314)	1.321*** (0.296)
Country Gls		0.370** (0.176)	0.998** (0.396)
Party Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-7.992	-6.360	-9.193
N	5,982	5,412	5,982
Pseudo R squared	0.173	0.190	0.217
Log pseudolikelihood	-296.4	-285.2	-280.7
Clusters	14 countries	12 countries	14 countries

Standard errors clustered at the Country level in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

5.1 Robustness checks

The Online Appendix shows a number of robustness checks. To gauge whether a lot of across-country variation is unexplained by our model (which turns out to be not the case), we replace all country-level variables by country fixed effects. This drops MEPs from countries where there is no regional representation. The log pseudolikelihood improves only slightly, from -285.2 to -271.6.⁹ This suggests that *Country GIs* is a good predictor of regional representation on GIs at the country level. When we look at regional representation as the dependent variable, we can have more confidence in the effect of country-level variables being properly identified rather than being spuriously driven by correlation to important unobserved country characteristics.

Italy is overrepresented in PQs on GIs. The control *Country GIs* explains this to a large extent, as the difference between the main models and Model 1 of Table 11 shows. However, to test explicitly whether our results are not driven by Italy, we drop all Italian observations. This requires dropping *Nationalist party* due to collinearity (no nationalist parties outside of Italy engaged in territorial representation). The coefficient for *Regional Lists* remains positive and significant, confirming our results are not driven solely by Italy.

Given the rarity of observing regional representation, the Online Appendix uses a firthlogit regression instead (Firth, 1993). Note that this technique does not allow clustering standard errors. *Regional lists* remains significant. Whereas *Nationalist party* loses significance, *Ethnic-regional party* becomes significant at the 5% level.

Our findings are also robust to using a zero-inflated negative binomial model as in Proksch & Slapin (2011), where we used *Opposition*, *AGRI*, and *Country GIs* for the zero-inflation stage, as the Online Appendix shows. We chose the variables for the zero-inflation stage based on their significance in the regressions with the number of GI-related questions as outcome; when there are few questions to begin with, the count of regional representation is likely to be zero.

⁹ The pseudo R squared values cannot be compared directly because the samples are different. The model with country fixed effects perfectly predicts the observations from countries without regional representation, and those are dropped from the sample. Hence the pseudo R squared (on the remaining sample) can be lower rather than higher.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Members of the European Parliament are often assumed to represent the European citizens. However, they also face incentives for the representation of more narrow regional economic interests. We have argued in this paper that Parliamentary Questions on Geographical Indications provide a unique window to study the incentives and behaviour of MEPs, especially with regards to regional representation.

Descriptively, we find that there is a lot of regional representation in GI questions. Where others found less than one third of questions had a (sub)national focus (Raunio, 1996; Brack and Costa, 2019), we found 25% of questions had a focus on the MEP's birth region, and an additional 34% on the MEP's country – so in total almost 60% of (sub)national representation. This shows that even transnational parliaments are used for (sub)national representation, especially on topics with a direct regional link, such as GIs.

A lot of questions on GIs concern international trade, and especially politicized trade agreements and products. TTIP and CETA, arguably the two most politicized EU trade agreements that were under negotiation over the time period 2009-2019, are clear outliers. Given the link between GIs and (gastro)nationalism, it is not surprising that MEPs from nationalist and ethnic-regional parties appear to ask more questions on GIs and to be more likely to engage in territorial representation by asking questions on GIs from their region.

Consistent with the opposition oversight model (Proksch & Slapin, 2011), we find that MEPs whose party is in opposition domestically ask more parliamentary questions. Because we code opposition status on an annual basis and cluster standard errors at the MEP level, this finding arguably contributes to the literature, which had conflicting findings so far. Our finding on domestic opposition holds even when using only within-MEP variation – a significantly more precise and stringent specification than used thus far in the literature. Future research should use a similar specification but on a comprehensive dataset of parliamentary questions.

Looking at the drivers of regional representation, we find that it is more likely for MEPs from countries with regional lists for EP elections. We could not replicate the finding that

MEPs from countries with open lists engage more in regional representation. Focusing on GIs has two key advantages. It allows for a straightforward coding of region representation: MEPs asking questions on GIs from the region of their birth. Second, one can control for the most important cross-national determinant of the overall number of questions, namely the number of GIs a country has. This means that our results are less likely to be driven by spurious correlation to unobservable country characteristics than the existing literature looking at all PQs. Nevertheless, because this finding is identified cross-nationally from a small number of countries using regional lists, caution remains necessary.

Our findings are relevant for debates on the democratic deficit in the EU, and the role of the European Parliament in remediating that deficit. On the one hand, regional representation indicates that MEPs are close to their citizens. For those advocating a European 'demoicracy' (Cheneval and Schimmelfennig, 2013) or a Europe of regions (Drèze, De Grauwe and Edwards, 1993), this may be highly desirable. On the other hand, if one believes MEPs should represent the European people as a whole, these findings are problematic. Depending on the stance one takes, using regional lists for European Parliament elections should either be encouraged or discouraged (Hix and Hagemann, 2009). In fact, believers in a European demos may consider our findings an additional argument for transnational lists (Verger, 2018) rather than national, let alone regional lists.

To conclude, Geographical Indications such as Feta and Prosecco receive political attention in the European Parliament. As could have been expected, GIs are an outlier case in terms of territorial representation, as 25% of GI questions focuses on specific GI products from the MEP's birth region. MEPs from countries with regional lists for EP elections are especially likely to engage in regional representation, which is relevant for the debate on the democratic nature of the European Parliament.

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Disclosure statement

No conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

Replication data will be provided for publication with the article in case of acceptance.

8 Online Appendix

8.1 Regional lists

Table 5. Regional lists in EP elections of 2009 and 2014.

Country	Districts or constituencies	NUTS1 regions	Regional lists
Austria	1	3	0
Belgium	3	3	1
Bulgaria	1	2	0
Croatia	1	1	0
Cyprus	1	1	0
Czech Republic	1	1	0
Denmark	1	1	0
Estonia	1	1	0
Finland	1	2	0
France	8	14	Mismatch
Germany	16	16	0
Greece	1	4	0
Hungary	1	3	0
Ireland	4/3	1	Mismatch
Italy	5	5	1
Latvia	1	1	0
Lithuania	1	1	0
Luxembourg	1	1	0
Malta	1	1	0
Netherlands	1	4	0
Poland	13	7	Mismatch
Portugal	1	3	0
Romania	1	4	0
Slovakia	1	1	0
Slovenia	1	1	0
Spain	1	7	0
Sweden	1	3	0
United Kingdom	12	12	1

Note: In Belgium there is a small difference between the language-based constituencies (Dutch, French, German) and the NUTS1 regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels). France had more NUTS1 regions than districts, i.e. the districts combined (parts of) multiple NUTS1 regions; in 2019 it switched to national lists. Germany allows parties to present separate lists in the 16 Bundesländer, but only the CSU-CDU collaboration presented a separate CSU list in Bavaria. Ireland had 4 districts in the 2009 election, 3 districts in the 2014 election. Poland has more districts than NUTS1 regions but they are not nested (i.e. some districts combine parts of multiple NUTS1 regions). In the United Kingdom, for the constituencies Gibraltar is added to the NUTS1 region of South West England.

8.2 Correlation matrix

Table 6. Correlation matrix.

Variable	GI Q	Reg.	AGRI	Nat.	Ethn.	Opp.	C GIs	Distr.	Open
GI questions	1.00								
Regional Representation	0.74	1.00							
AGRI	0.13	0.06	1.00						
Nationalist party	0.08	0.04	-0.03	1.00					
Ethnic-regional party	0.02	0.04	0.06	-0.05	1.00				
Opposition	0.04	0.03	-0.03	0.15	0.11	1.00			
Country GIs	0.17	0.09	0.05	-0.00	-0.02	0.03	1.00		
Regional lists	0.08	0.05	0.04	-0.04	0.06	0.04	0.47	1.00	
List Openness	0.05	0.03	-0.02	0.11	-0.01	0.02	0.33	0.20	1.00

8.3 Questions on politicized trade agreements and products

Table 7. Examples of misleading questions on GIs and trade agreements.

MEP	Question title and excerpt
Nikolaos Chountis Greece, GUE/NGL E-010777-13	<i>Feta and Gorgonzola, victims of the trade agreement with Canada</i> ‘[...] Canadian producers will be allowed to use the names “feta” and “gorgonzola” and, furthermore, will be able to promote and market these cheeses within the EU under those names [..]’
Mario Borghezio Italy, ENF E-001582-18	<i>Authorisation by the EU of counterfeit food</i> ‘The free trade agreements drawn up or being drawn up between the European Union and Canada (CETA), South America (Mercosur) and Japan legalise, for the first time in history, imitations of the most well-known “Made in Italy” food products: from “Japanese” Asiago to “Brazilian” Grana Padano [...]’
Marc Tarabella Belgium, S&D E-009679-15	<i>Protection of Belgian and European PDOs</i> ‘[...] what the purpose is of a trade deal with Canada if that country can now start producing Belgian and European products for itself? [...]’
Ska Keller Germany, Verts/ALE E-000422-15	<i>Trade agreement and regional specialities</i> ‘[...] What plans does the Commission have to protect European regional food specialities where their designations of origin are threatened by a trade agreement?’

Table 8. Parliamentary questions by GI category.

Product category	GIs registered	PQs	PQs/GI
Wine	1,665	38	0.02
Fruit & vegetables	515	20	0.04
Cheeses	264	40	0.15
Meat products	206	10	0.05
Fresh meat	186	8	0.04
Oils and fats	159	9	0.06
Other Annex I (spices etc.)	111	4	0.04
Baked goods	102	8	0.08
Fish and seafood	73	5	0.07
Other animal-origin products	62	1	0.02

8.4 Drivers of parliamentary questions

Our first analysis is a linear regression of the number of GI questions on the explanatory variables. Because MEPs are repeatedly observed, standard errors are clustered at the MEP level. Results in terms of direction and significance levels are similar using a negative binomial count model. We present the results of linear regressions first because of their ease of interpretation.

Table 9 shows the results of 4 models. Model 1 uses the main variables, including year fixed effects to control for period length (notably the half year starts and ends of legislatures) and variation in PQ drivers over time. Model 2 uses country fixed effects to control for all possible sources of variation at the country level, which then requires dropping *Country GIs* since that would be perfectly colinear with the country fixed effects. Model 3 adds *Nationalist Party* and *Ethnic-regional party* as well as fixed effects for EU party groups, hence controlling for the Eurosceptic, Nationalist, or extremist nature of some party groups. Model 4 uses only within-MEP variation by adding MEP fixed effects.

As Table 9 shows, being from a party in domestic opposition is statistically significant across specifications. It is also substantially significant: domestic opposition adds in expectation 0.02-0.03 GI questions per year, compared to a baseline of 0.05 questions per year. Among the controls, as expected due to MEP specialization the coefficient of being a member of the AGRI committee is large and significant. The number of GIs at the country level is also strongly significant. Comparing the explained variance (R-squared) of Model 1 and 2, *Country GIs* is able to account for a lot of the cross-country variation in PQs.

Our results on *Opposition* contribute to the literature on parliamentary questions and being from a party in domestic opposition (Proksch and Slapin, 2011; Sorace, 2018a). Using MEP-commissioner dyads, Proksch & Slapin (2011) found a significant positive effect of being in opposition for EP6 (2004-2009), but they did not cluster standard errors at the MEP level. In contrast, Sorace (2018) did not find a significant effect for EP7 (2009-2014). We combine EP7 and EP8, code opposition on a yearly basis rather than for the legislature as a whole, and cluster standard errors at the MEP level.

In addition, we still find a positive and significant effect of *Opposition* when we use only within-MEP variation by adding MEP fixed effects, as shown in Model 4. Such a set-up identifies the effect of domestic opposition status only by looking at whether the same individual MEPs ask more questions at times when their party is in opposition domestically versus when it is not. Hence, compared to the previous literature, we find strong evidence for an opposition effect as hypothesized by Proksch & Slapin (2011). Future research could use our setup on a dataset covering all PQs to investigate this further.

Table 9. Linear regressions of GI questions.

Linear regression of	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
GI questions	Main variables	Country FEs	PartyGroup FE	MEP FE
Opposition	0.024*** (0.007)	0.024*** (0.007)	0.016* (0.009)	0.030** (0.014)
AGRI	0.140*** (0.043)	0.140*** (0.043)	0.142*** (0.042)	
Country GIs	0.016*** (0.004)			
Nationalist party			0.076** (0.035)	
Ethnic-regional party			0.014 (0.028)	
Party Group FE	No	No	Yes	No
MEP FE	No	No	No	Yes
Country FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-0.048	-0.055	-0.072	-0.001
N	9,102	9,102	9,102	9,102
R squared	0.041	0.052	0.063	0.056
Clusters	1,517 MEPs	1,517 MEPs	1,517 MEPs	1,517 MEPs

Standard errors (clustered at the MEP level) in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Table 10. Negative binomial regression of GI questions.

Neg. binomial of	(1)
GI questions	Count model
Opposition	0.448*** (0.166)
AGRI	1.614*** (0.184)
Nationalist party	0.492 (0.428)
Ethnic-regional party	0.616 (0.447)
Party Group FE	Yes
Country FE	Yes
Year FE	Yes
Constant	-6.463
N	9,102
Pseudo R squared	0.201
Clusters	1,517 MEPs

Standard errors (clustered at the MEP level) in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

8.5 Robustness checks for regional representation

Table 11. Logit regressions of Regional Representation.

Logit of Regional Representation	(1) Country FE	(2) Excl. Italy
Regional lists		2.091** (1.003)
List Openness		-0.038 (0.304)
Nationalist party	1.066* (0.585)	
Ethnic-regional party	1.004 (0.877)	2.374*** (0.529)
Opposition	0.350* (0.201)	0.440 (0.504)
AGRI	1.331*** (0.309)	1.521** (0.614)
Country GLs		0.612 (0.426)
Country FE	Yes	No
Party Group FE	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Constant	-7.631	-8.229
N	3,564	3,526
Pseudo R squared	0.163	0.176
Log pseudolikelihood	-271.6	-161.7
Clusters	8 countries	11 countries

Standard errors clustered at the Country level in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Table 12. Firth logit regression of Regional Representation.

Logit of Regional Representation	(1) Firth logit
Regional lists	1.282*** (0.483)
List Openness	-0.444* (0.229)
Nationalist party	0.950 (0.872)
Ethnic-regional party	1.238** (0.490)
Opposition	0.414 (0.306)
AGRI	1.222*** (0.293)
Country Gls	0.335*** (0.115)
Party Group FE	Yes
Year FE	Yes
Constant	-5.877
N	5,532

Standard errors in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01

Table 13. Zero-inflated negative binomial regression of Regional Representation.

Neg. binomial of (1)	
Regional Representation	Zero-inflated
Regional lists	1.428*** (0.532)
List Openness	-0.312 (0.239)
Nationalist party	1.567* (0.873)
Ethnic-regional party	1.676 (1.054)
Party Group FE	Yes
Year FE	Yes
Constant	-4.040
<i>Zero-inflation logit</i>	
Opposition	-0.860** (0.348)
AGRI	-1.798*** (0.519)
Country Gls	-0.290** (0.120)
Intercept	3.429
N	5,532

Standard errors (clustered at the Country level) in brackets. *p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01