

Accountability in the European Parliament: fact or fairytale?

MEPs oversight of EU agencies using parliamentary questions

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Abstract

In recent years, the European Administrative Space has expanded with the creation of new EU agencies. While the European Parliament expanded her oversight powers to hold EU agencies to account, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not seem to make much use of them, or only focus on a number of agencies. This causes legitimacy problems, especially for EU agencies that attract little attention by MEPs. This article aims to explain which factors influence MEPs decision to ask EU agencies to render account for their actions, based on vote-seeking and policy-seeking questioning activity. It therefore analyses fifteen cases. Based on in-depth interviews with MEPs, support staff and EU experts, the study suggest that *party position* and *personal motivation* are necessary factors, and combined with *media coverage* and *saliency* sufficient factors to ask EPQs. Lobbyists further contribute to oversight of EU agencies through EPQs.

1. Introduction

The European Administrative Space has expanded over the past years. For example, there has been growth in the independent capacities of the European Commission, but also an increase in institutions surrounding the Commission, such as expert committees or networks (Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.298). This expansion can be understood as a process of institutionalization of collective administrative capacity in the EU. Member States loosened their authority over policy and opened their sovereignty for the emergence and establishment of a supranational legal order, which influenced the rise of permanent administrative EU institutions (Hofmann, 2008, p.663; Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.298).

The expansion of independent administrative resources and capacity is also found in European agencies, to which the Commission delegated powers (Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.298; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1350). Most EU agencies are decentralized and contribute to the implementation of Commission policies with administrative, executive, and regulatory capacities (Egeberg and Trondal, 2011, p.869; Levi-Faur, 2011, p.811; Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.299). Next to that 'they also support cooperation between the EU and national governments' (European Union, 2020). Agencies manage programs set up by the Commission and regulate areas such as pharmaceuticals, aviation safety, chemicals, police cooperation and disease control (Busuioc, 2012, p.719; Brandsma et al, 2016, p.627). Although agencies depend upon the Commission for their tasks, operation and resources, some agencies are granted formal decision-making power (Busuioc, 2013, p.2; Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.300).

Considering the importance of agencies' tasks and responsibilities, accountability is needed (Mulgan, 2000). Accountability is a key element to provide legitimacy to public officials' decisions and public institutions (Bovens, 2010, p.954): it is in place to maintain transparency, responsiveness and responsibility of the actions public officials and institutions make (Busuioc, 2012, p.721). Accountability relationships contain two actors, where one actor (the principal) is the superior and calls the other actor (its agent) to account for its actions (Mulgan, 2000; Mashaw, 2006; Bovens, 2007, 2010). The accountability mechanisms for EU agencies are twofold: they can be exercised internally via managerial accountability, and externally via political accountability (Bovens, Curtin, 't Hart, 2010, p.88). Managerial accountability concerns the relations within agencies where officials report to their management board. Political accountability, then, is a high-profile external check on agency behavior (p.89). Political accountability links agencies' activities to democratically elected representatives, which is crucial for the functioning of the democratic chain of delegation (Koop, 2011, p.210; Nesti, 2018, p.468). Because the electorate cannot directly elect public officials for agencies, it relies on the accountability checks of their representatives (Papadopoulos, 2007, p.481; Levi-Faur, 2011, p.814; Brandsma, 2017, p.624; Nesti, 2018, p.468).

Political accountability of agencies is exercised by the European Parliament (EP), via the Commission (Bovens, Curtin, 't Hart, 2010, p.89; Egeberg et al, 2015, p.622; Delputte et al, 2016, p.165; Remáč, 2018, p.16; European Union, 2019). In recent years, the EP expanded her powers to call agencies to account (Koop, 2011; Dionigi & Koop, 2019), in part to compensate for its loss in influence on legislation in times of crises, when agencies gained power that gave them the opportunities to misuse their authority as well (p.777). Therefore, more stringent oversight provisions for accountability were incorporated in the agency design (Koop, 2011, p.228; Busuioc, 2013, p.35).

Although the EP has a role to hold EU agencies to account, it can be questioned that they will do so in practice (Wille, 2010, p.1112; Busuioc, 2013, p.154; Brandsma et al, 2016, p.627; Font & Perez Duran, 2016). First of all, research has shown that the EP has a general lack of interest in discussing agencies' annual reports (Busuioc, 2013, p.118; Brandsma et al, 2016, p.627). Secondly, the EP seems to use its accountability mechanisms for a forward-looking, agenda-setting purpose, instead of examining the Commission's past performance (Zwaan et al, 2016, p.688). Because of this shortage in accountability, however, there is no potential to check if agencies misuse their authority concerning policy (Brandsma et al, 2016, p.632). In sum, the formal power of the EP to hold agencies, via the Commission, to account, may not directly lead to its use in practice (Dionigi & Koop, 2019, p.796). While the EP is unlikely to control EU agencies extensively (Wille, 2010, p.1112; Busuioc, 2013, p.154; Brandsma et al, 2016, p.627), we do see signs of accountability, however, in some cases by parliamentary questions being asked to the Commission about agencies by individual MEPs (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1361).

Font and Perez Durant (2016) find that this is explained by the size of the agency, the salience of the policy an agency deals with, and whether the MEP belongs to a national opposition party. They come to this conclusion based on a statistical analysis of parliamentary questions overseeing EU agencies, asked during the 7th European parliamentary mandate. They point to a number of mechanisms to explain this, such as the fact that only a few EU agencies enjoy most of the annual agency budget, and will therefore receive more attention by MEPs (Font and Perez Durant, 2016, p.1363; European Court of Auditors, 2018, p.11). Also, Font and Perez Durant (2016) suggest that possible mechanisms behind the influence of saliency and national opposition party on questions being asked about agencies, are related to the limited time and information asymmetries for certain MEPs. Whether these two causal mechanisms indeed link these factors to questions being asked, however, requires future qualitative research that can verify how these factors influence MEPs in their oversight regarding agencies. Additionally, such a qualitative approach can also develop other factors that may influence MEPs as well.

This leads us to the aim of this study: trying to explain under what conditions MEPs ask agencies to render account for their actions. In order to achieve the aim of this study, the following

research question will be answered: *Which factors explain MEPs decision to ask European Parliamentary Questions (EPQs) about the functioning of EU agencies?*

To answer this question, this study conducts interviews with (former) MEPs, their support staff and EU experts, covering fifteen cases. Instead of explaining the number and variation of parliamentary questions about agencies by using a statistical analysis, this study will unravel factors and mechanisms that affect motivations of MEPs to exercise accountability in detail. Studying MEPs motivations to ask the Commission to account may shed a new light on the accountability relations between the EP and EU agencies.

Relevance

However, previous research for accountability to be exercised is not complete. First, systematic empirical research into accountability by the EP is lacking (Busuioc, 2013, p.2). So far, most literature has focused on accountability mechanisms and power the EP gained over the years, but not extensively on the actual use in practice (Dionigi & Koop, 2019, p.796). Also, most studies are focused on parliamentary committees or the quantity of parliamentary questions, while Font & Perez Duran (2016) take considerations of MEPs into account in a quantitative design (p.1350). MEPs motivations to ask for account paints a different picture on the explanations for behavior in the EP. Eventually, a qualitative study can expose underlying factors that influence the behavior of MEPs.

Second, despite most studies on political accountability are relevant to political science (Font & Perez Duran, 2016; Dionigi & Koop, 2019), this does not diminish the interest for public administration (Wille, 2010; Busuioc, 2013; Brandsma et al, 2016). By analyzing accountability relations, this study has relevance for societal reasons as well. The European Administrative Space is a complex system where all kinds of EU institutions relate to one another, and it is often unclear who is responsible to whom (Brandsma et al, 2016, p.632). Especially EU agencies are located in a complex hierarchy of accountability relations (p.627). However, studying the accountability relation between the European Parliament and EU agencies might unravel complications in this accountability relation in practice, since it does not occur often. This can set lessons for public officials who work on institutional design for future agencies.

A third argument, from a democratic perspective, is the lack of legitimacy agencies possess, without giving account in the European Parliament. Accountability is a key element for a democratic body that provides legitimacy to public officials and agencies as public institutions (Bovens, 2010, p.954). In order to attain legitimacy as an agency, MEPs have to discuss the issues agencies work on, in public, and agencies have to answer questions via the Commission (Egeberg et al, 2015, p.622). MEPs are mandated to ask the European Commission to account, on behalf of EU citizens (Remáč, 2018,

p.16). If MEPs do not fulfill this function, they do not contribute to the democratic legitimacy of EU agencies. Therefore, it is important how MEPs behave in the European Parliament.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it presents the theoretical background on accountability and the effective mechanism in the European Parliament, regarding EU agencies. After that, factors that affect MEPs motivations to call agencies to account will follow. Second, the method and operationalization of the variables are described. This is followed by the results and analysis of the data. The final section presents the conclusion and discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

Accountability has generally been conceptualized as a relationship between two actors where one actor is the superior (the forum) and calls the other one to account (the actor) (Mulgan, 2000; Mashaw, 2006; Bovens, 2007, 2010). The accountability definition of Bovens (2007) is increasingly used in the EU literature (Papadopoulos, 2007; Bovens, 2010; Brandsma et al, 2016): *'a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences'* (Bovens, 2007, p.450). This definition of accountability consists of three elements. First, the actor is obliged to provide the forum with information about his or her performances. Second, the forum can question the actor about the adequacy of the provided information or the legitimacy of the performance. Third, the forum can use their right of authority to pass judgement, including the right to sanction as well (p.451).

The European Parliament is most effective in exercising accountability over EU agencies by asking European Parliamentary Questions (EPQs) (Jensen et al, 2013, p.261; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1351; Remáč, 2018, p.5). EPQs for European agencies must be directed to the Commission, which forwards them to agencies and then returns answers to the MEPs (Trondal and Peters, 2013, p.299; Egeberg et al. 2015, p.622). Firstly, EPQs allow individual MEPs to ask for information from the Commission, regarding agencies (Jensen et al, 2013, p.261; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1351). Secondly, these questions are used by MEPs to signal their concern and to alert the Commission about improper agency behavior (p.1351). Thirdly, EPQs can have political consequences, namely further investigation 'through various ad hoc inquiry committees or potentially even the withdrawal of confidence in an individual member of government' (Remáč, 2018, p.28).

Motivations to call to account

It is assumed in this study that motivations to call to account can be understood as rational decisions (Downs, 1957, p.4). Based on Strom (1990) we make a distinction between (1) vote-seeking, (2) office-seeking, and (3) policy-seeking (p.566) behavior of MEPs. The vote-seeker aims 'to maximize their electoral support for the purpose of controlling government' (Strom, 1990, p.566). This Downsian

model assumes that parties or MEPs act in a certain way only to win elections (Downs, 1957, p28). The office-seeking MEP seeks to maximize his or her control over political office: 'they act solely in order to attain the income, prestige, and power which come from being in office' (p.28). The policy-seeker aims to maximize its control on public policy (Strom, 1990, p.567).

Depending on these goals we expect that different factors will affect MEPs motivations to ask questions about agencies. This will be discussed below:

Vote seeker

A vote-seeking MEP behaves in order to maximize its electoral support (Strom, 1990, p.566). To gain attention for the purpose of electoral support, they will profile themselves to be visible (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015). Asking EPQs can be a strategy to gain visibility in parliamentary politics (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1359).

Gattermann and Vasilopoulou (2015) studied media visibility of MEPs and concluded that it is hard to be visible in the media, especially for new MEPs. The media will most likely cover stories of MEPs with seniority and status (p.134). Instead of being visible in the media, *junior MEPs* can use their parliamentary activity for their own share of 'personalization of politics', to show their participation in the EP. Personalization of politics is a trend towards a large focus on individual politicians in political processes (Gattermann, 2018, p.346). Therefore, asking parliamentary questions could be a strategy, especially for junior MEPs, to become visible in the EP.

This mechanism of visibility is strengthened by *media coverage* (Henry and Mark, 2003, p.303; Koop, 2011, p.228; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1353). Media coverage influences the public opinion about the importance of certain issues (McCombs & Zhu, 1995, p.517; Neuman, 1990, p.172), and important issues are likely to attract attention of politicians (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1353). Following that, when an issue already attracts a lot of attention in the media, it can be used by MEPs to profile themselves on this issue (Henry and Mark, 2003, p.303). For example, a news article by Oziel (2018) describes political attention for compliance deficits in the European Chemicals Agency, that have led to parliamentary questions by all kinds of MEPs.

Office seeker

The office-seeker shows behavior in the pursuit of political office and subgovernmental positions, above their electability or policy values (Strom, 1990, p.567). This behavior will not likely lead to holding EU institutions such as agencies to account, since there is no income, prestige, and power to gain from this effort. Also, the office-seeking model relates mostly to the study of parliamentary democracies with government coalitions (p.568). Office-seeking serves participants in coalition governments that gain office from joining a coalition. Since the EU does not know a government

coalition that creates political office, other than the office of MEP, it is unlikely office-seeking is linked to a motivation for MEPs to call agencies to account.

Policy seeker

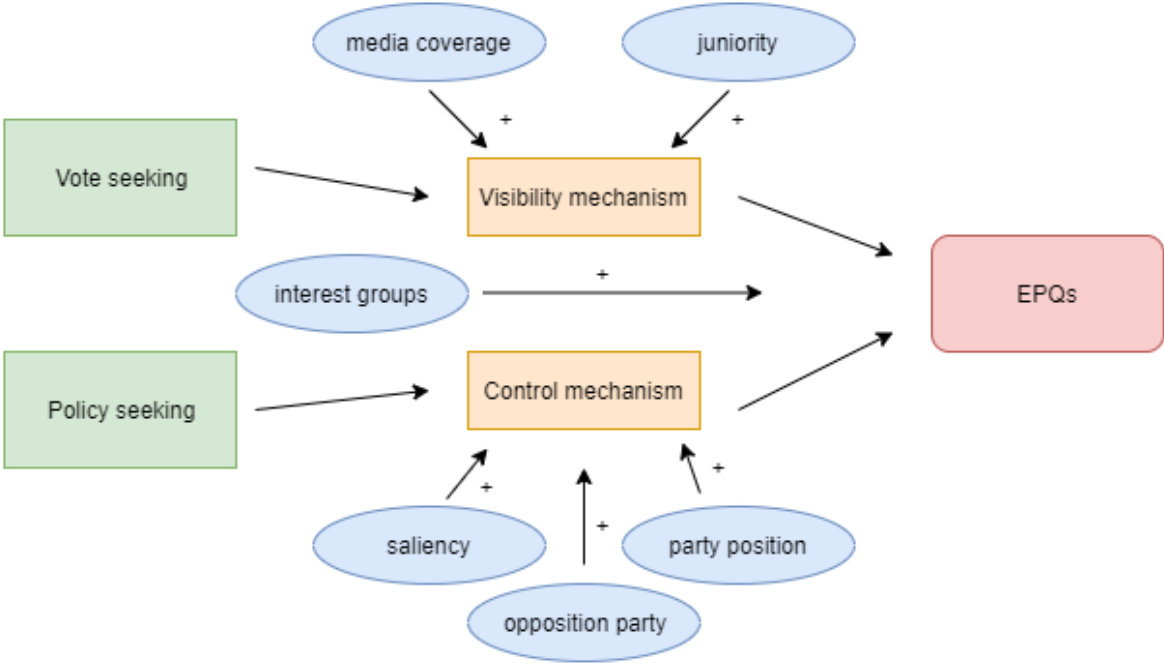
The policy-seeker behaves in a way to control public policy as much as possible (Strom, 1990, p.567). Written parliamentary questions are of use for this control function to voice dissatisfaction and to monitor the Commission (Jensen et al, 2013, p.261; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1351). This mechanism of control is strengthened by factors such as saliency, opposition parties and party position. First, *saliency* is a common explanation for asking parliamentary questions (Egeberg & Trondal, 2011, p.880; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1362). Political saliency is defined as the degree of political attention and public interest devoted to policy issues (Eisner et al, 2000, p.29). Political attention increases, for example, for crisis situations, when the public starts to question how certain events could have happened (Free and Radcliffe, 2004; Grimmelikhuijsen and Snijders, 2016). Following their call for clarification, the saliency of the issue becomes a reason for politicians to exercise control over the activities of the responsible institution (Koop, 2011, p.228; Pollitt et al., 2005). Meaning for EU agencies, that MEPs increasingly use their parliamentary control mechanisms when agencies operate in salient areas (Egeberg & Trondal 2011; Busuioc, 2013, p.135).

Second, it can be expected that MEPs from *national opposition parties* control the Commission more extensively compared to MEPs from national governing parties. First of all, MEPs from national opposition parties have more incentives to call the Commission to account, due to informational asymmetries (Proksch & Slapin, 2010; Jensen et al, 2013). National opposition parties do not have ministers who participate in the Council or a Commissioner (Proksch & Slapin, 2010, p.58). They can only control the Commission via parliamentary mechanisms in the EP (Jensen et al, 2013, p.264). Secondly, MEPs from national opposition parties tend to behave as the 'opposition' in the European Parliament as well, even though the EP does now know a government coalition (p.245). Hence, Font & Perez Duran (2016) concluded that MEPs from national opposition parties ask more questions regarding agencies, than MEPs from national government parties. This suggests that the factor of national party politics 'influences the delegation dimension of legislative-executive relationships at the EU level' (p.1362). This study can elaborate on the idea if national opposition MEPs have stronger incentives to control agencies at the European level.

Third, another factor that influences the control mechanism relates to the importance parties give to certain issues. It can be expected that MEPs will become active scrutinizers when decisions made by the Commission contradict a *party's position* (Perez Duran and Rodriguez Menes, 2017, p.336). For example, as parties on the economic left prioritize an active role in the economy, they will be more interested to control the executive for policies on privatization and tax reduction. Also, if

parties differ in their position on public policy, the party being against the policy will at least call the executive to account (Smeets and de Ruiter, 2018, p.569). By way of contrast, agencies' policy that is completely in line with a party's interest will create no incentive to call the Commission to account.

While MEPs can have different motivations to ask EPQs, they lack information on every policy issue and there is limited time and resources to collect all the information themselves (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1361). Due to these capacity problems, MEPs will also rely on information provided by external sources, in order to know which EPQs to ask regarding EU agencies (Bruycker, 2016, p.608). A factor that is not directly linked to visibility or control, but most likely to affect EPQs, are therefore *interest groups* who lobby for issues that, in their interest, need to be put on the political agenda in order to exert influence on policy decisions (Binderkrantz and Rasmussen, 2015, p.554).



2.1 Causal model with goals, factors, mechanisms, and outcome variable.

3. Methodological framework

Research approach

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of the motivations of MEPs to ask EPQs about EU agencies, using interviews. Interviews are considered most appropriate when explaining decisions (Rathbun, 2008, p.690; McNabb, 2017, p.12). This instrument is increasingly used to identify motivations for certain behavior, which relates to the work of MEPs, who determine to a great extent what they do in the European Parliament themselves (Rathbun, 2008, p.688).

Case selection

Several steps were taken to select EPQs about agency accountability. In the first place, the EP database is used for a document search. The database states the EPQs per parliamentary term. Each selected parliamentary question regarding agencies is a single case, that will be questioned about during the interviews. Second, EPQs were selected that vary on several aspects. A broad spectrum of issues is covered by the EPQs. Additionally, the cases concern EPQs about different agencies, to have a broad understanding of these institutions. Also, EPQs are studied that are asked by MEPs with diverse times in office, and from different party groups, to provide motivations of all political philosophies to call to account.

For practical reasons, there has been an interplay to select EPQs and MEPs. Some of the EPQs studied are asked by the same (Dutch) MEP when this respondent had several EPQs asked. This benefit enlarged the amount of cases while conducting the same number of interviews. Regarding comparability, EPQs are included from the 8th and 9th European parliamentary mandate (since 2014). The European Administrative Space has changed over the past decades, and so the agency design. By selecting these mandates, the cases are closely comparable. Also, EPQs from the most recent mandates are easiest to recall by the respondents.

Data collection and analysis

In order to answer the research question, this study collects data from a document search and semi-structured interviews. First, the EP database is used to select the EPQs. Second, the interviews are semi-structured and in-depth, to understand the underlying factors that influence motivations of MEPs to call the Commission to account (McNabb, 2017, p.12). Furthermore, an interview framework was developed that included mostly open questions that were asked during each interview (*reliability*).

Another argument for semi-structured in-depth interviews is that they follow a certain standard (*internal validity*) but allow for additional in-depth evidence, flexibility and the ability to ask follow-up questions (*causality*) based on the respondent's answer (Rathbun, 2008, p.687). Furthermore, these kinds of interviews provide the ability to introduce other factors when the respondents may deviate from the interview standard. The respondent can introduce new cases and explanatory factors that influenced their motivation to ask EPQs, that will be followed up with.

A total of nine MEP interviews were conducted, covering fifteen cases (EPQs). When possible face-to-face (two respondents), and when necessary by phone (six respondents) or e-mail (one respondent). To avoid the risk of socially desirable answers I guaranteed total anonymity of the respondents and I included MEPs, (policy) staff members and former MEPs, who do not have to worry about the public perception of their work anymore. Additionally, two expert interviews are added with professors in the field of EU governance. One of them is also a former MEP and independent expert at

an agency, and the second expert combines research and consultancy on European institutions. The purpose of these interviews is to discuss the expected causal mechanisms that were not found in this study.

Operationalization

EPQs regarding agency accountability, the outcome variable, refers to the European Parliamentary Questions asked by MEPs in the EP, regarding the functioning of agencies (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1351). Via a document search I selected which EPQs were asked regarding agencies. Firstly, EPQs were selected that had the full name or acronym of the agency in the title. Secondly, they must have the purpose to ask the agency or the Commission to account for how the agency fulfils its mandate. Thirdly, respondents were able to introduce other cases at the start of the interview if they meet the previously described criteria and were of importance to them.

Methodological quality of the interview questions was secured by the operationalization of the factors using literature on accountability and motivations, and parliamentary questions (*internal validity*) (Gerring, 2007, p.43). The following factors are operationalized:

Concerning *juniority*, it is assumed that being in your first parliamentary term, these junior MEPs use EPQs for personal visibility (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015, p.134; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1359). Respondents were asked how their juniority influenced their motivation to ask agencies to account. Furthermore, if they are senior MEPs, it was asked if this differs from their current motivations to ask for account. Also, the question was asked if they see junior MEPs around them that use EPQs for personal visibility.

Concerning *media coverage*, respondents were asked to what extent there was an increase in media attention for this agency (Koop, 2011; Font & Perez Duran, 2016), and if this was covered by national media outlets or European (political) media. If so, the question was asked in which way the media attention encouraged them to ask parliamentary questions. This question allowed for checking the assumed mechanism.

Concerning *saliency*, respondents were asked to what extent there was political attention and public interest devoted to policy issues the agency deals with (Eisner et al, 2000, p.29). If so, the question was asked in which way political saliency encouraged them to ask parliamentary questions. This question allowed for checking the assumed mechanism.

Concerning the *national political party practice*, being from a party that is usually in the opposition in the home country, respondents from these parties were asked to what extent this influenced their motivation to control the agency or the Commission (Proksch & Slapin, 2010, p.58; Jensen et al, 2013, p.264). Whereas, respondents from a party that is usually in government in the home country, they were asked if they could control EU agency policy via their Commissioner or via

ministers in the Council. These questions allowed for checking the assumed mechanism. Furthermore, all respondents were asked if there are other (informal) ways to control the Commission.

Concerning *party position*, it is expected that MEPs will ask EPQs when agencies make policy decisions against their party's preferences (Perez Duran and Rodriguez Menes, 2017, p.336). Therefore, respondents were asked in which way their party position on the issue or agency decision influenced their motivation to ask the Commission to account. If so, the question was asked how it encouraged them. This question allowed for checking the assumed mechanism.

Concerning the influence of *interest groups* who lobby for issues they want to be put on the political agenda (Binderkrantz and Rasmussen, 2015, p.554), respondents were asked if interest groups approach MEPs with information on certain issues, also regarding agencies. If so, the question was asked how this influenced their motivation to call the Commission to account. This question allowed for checking the assumed mechanism. Finally, respondents were asked if any of these six factors has the strongest influence, or if other factors have influenced their motivation to ask EPQs.

4. Results

This section provides the results of the analysis. The goal of this chapter is to offer insight in the effect of the visibility mechanism (vote-seeking) with factors as *juniority* and *media coverage* on the one hand, and the effect of the control mechanism (policy-seeking) with factors such as *saliency*, *national opposition party* and *party position* on the other hand. Also, *interest groups* are expected to influence the behavior of MEPs.

To start, the cases cover a broad section of questions regarding agencies. The fifteen EPQs (cases) can be grouped in roughly three categories: policy implementation (8), internal management (4) and resources and finance (3). The EU agencies where EPQs are directed to in this study, vary in policy domain, such as: police cooperation, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and food and aviation safety. All agencies have in common that they enjoy some decision-making power and operate in a specialized branch. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the factors that turned out to play a role in the analyzed EPQs (fifteen cases). An additional factor is listed in Table 4.1 under 'extra' and explained further on in this chapter.

4.1 Results table.

	Juniority	Media coverage	Saliency	National opposition	Party position	Interest groups	Extra
C1	.	X2	X1		X	.	
C2		X	X2		X1		
C3		X2	X1				X
C4		.			X1	.	X2
C5		.			X	X	
C6			.		X	.	
C7		.					X
C8		.			X	X	X
C9			X			X	X
C10		X		.	X		X
C11					X1	.	X2
C12					X	X	
C13	.	X			X	X	
C14		X			X	.	
C15				X	X		X

X1 and X2 indicate a connection between the variables. The ‘.’ shows the factor is present but did not influence the MEP directly.

The qualitative analysis points at *party position* as a necessary factor for MEPs to call agencies to account. It was already expected that MEPs will become active scrutinizers when decisions made by the Commission contradict a party’s position (Perez Duran and Rodriguez Menes, 2017, p.336), and it is present in almost every case in this study. Most of these cases concern questions about policy implementation, where MEPs aim to maximize control on public policy related to their party’s beliefs (policy-seeking). Since *party position* dominates Table 4.1, this factor seems to be a starting point to ask EPQs. The following quote from one of the interviewees illustrates this point: ‘*Yes of course that plays a role. I am more active on agencies that touch on the themes for which I have gone into politics. There are clear interfaces.*’ (Respondent 5).

Furthermore, *juniority* does not seem to play a role for the respondents linked to these cases. This runs against the findings by Gattermann and Vasilopoulou (2015) who studied media visibility of MEPs and concluded that junior MEPs could use EPQs to be more visible in the parliament. It could be that this only applies to salient cases. As oversight is costly, MEPs would benefit more from EPQs regarding agencies that already attract some attention. Although the respondents did not confirm that *juniority* was a factor that influenced their behavior, they do see MEPs around them that use EPQs for personal visibility (Respondent 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9). Also, asking questions as a junior MEP, according to the respondents, is stronger linked to inexperience than to visibility. ‘*When you start here, asking those questions, or official questions during a committee meeting, is the only way to get the info you want.*’ (Respondent 1). One of the experts confirms this as well: senior MEPs know it is more effective to lobby for issues in the preliminary policy stage, instead of asking EPQs. Therefore, *juniority* is in this study stronger connected to control instead of the visibility mechanism.

The *national political party practice*, where opposition parties tend to be more active to control the Commission via EPQs, did not play a role in most of these cases, even though five of the nine MEPs are from a party that has never been in the government in the home country. Font & Perez Duran (2016) expected an increase in EPQs for MEPs with this opposition status, to compensate for informational disadvantages and to exert control in the parliament. Only two respondents from opposition parties see this effect, but link this to their Euro critical character and the fact they were not in a European party group, instead of having less information (Respondent 6 and 9). Firstly, their Euro critical character made them suspicious regarding the EU in general, and therefore active scrutinizers towards the Commission. Secondly, independent members do not have to worry about discipline within a European party group, what makes them more vocal in the parliament. This last dynamic was also confirmed by the experts. Therefore, there seems to be an element for *national opposition parties* to be active scrutinizers in the EP (policy-seeking), but the effect is not that strong, and the underlying mechanism works different than expected.

Subsequently, the factor *media coverage* does influence MEPs in some cases to ask EPQs. This factor is often connected with another factor, however, or *media coverage* was indicated by the respondent but did not influence them directly. *Media coverage* is part of the visibility mechanism, meaning that important issues that are covered by the media are likely to be used by politicians to ask EPQs about (Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1353). The following quote from one of the interviewees describes this process: *'I experience that there is also more journalistic work done, more written about it, and that journalistic production also raises questions. (...) There will be an article about this topic, and that article will be used to ask the Commission: to what extent is Frontex doing its job well?'* (Respondent 1). Furthermore, MEPs ask questions regarding salient issues in the media that play well for their electorate, to show them what they are working on (Respondent 6 and 8). These cases interact with *party position*. One possible explanation for the interaction is that MEPs prefer to show their electorate they work on issues that are important to their party, since it was a reason for their electorate to vote for them (vote-seeking).

Next, *saliency*, defined as the degree of political attention and public interest devoted to policy issues (Eisner et al, 2000, p.29), is part of the control mechanism. It was expected that saliency of issues becomes a reason for politicians to exercise control over EU agencies. Saliency influences MEPs in a few cases, where it interacts with other factors. MEPs seem to control salient agencies only if they match their party's beliefs or their own interests, as is illustrated by the following quote: *'The discussion about EFSA is also about the public debate about pesticides. It is also important that, in my philosophy, we have become far too dependent on pesticides in our agricultural model. And that certainly requires the political agenda.'* (Respondent 5). In the cases where saliency does play a role to

call EU agencies to account, EPQs were used to voice concern or to influence policy implementation, which indicates that *saliency* is a part of policy-seeking.

The last factor from the theoretical model, not yet linked to visibility or control, was the influence of *interest groups*. As expected by Font & Perez Duran (2016), MEPs experience capacity problems to gain information on every policy issue themselves. Therefore, they will rely on the input of lobbyists (p.1361). Respondents indicated that lobbyists know how to find MEPs who work on relevant issues for their interest group and provide them with political interesting information (Respondent 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8). Respondents argue as well that information from lobbyists is a starting point for them, but that they make their own consideration before asking EPQs. That consideration depended on two underlying factors: if it was useful in the media (visibility), or if it was an important topic for them to fight for (control), what indicates policy-seeking (Respondent 3, 5, 8).

The interviews show that next to the factors discussed above, also *personal motivation* does influence MEPs in these cases. Most of the respondents have a strong focus and personal motivation for their decision to be active in controlling the Commission in the European Parliament. This motivation is often directly linked to the vision of their party's program, what indicates that *personal motivation* is a part of policy-seeking. This is nicely illustrated by respondent 7: *'That is purely my personal interpretation [on party's beliefs]. It is a very long story, but I think that when you go into politics, you don't do it to profile yourself, but to achieve things.'* At last, MEPs make their own decision to ask EPQs or not (Respondent 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9). One of the experts describes this as well: *'Politics is always about knowledge and political choices, that combination.'*

5. Conclusion

This study provides a qualitative analysis of the motivations of MEPs for oversight of EU agencies, through the use of European parliamentary questions (EPQs). To explain the use of EPQs, I turned to two main models of MEP behavior: policy-seeking and vote-seeking. Using these two models and fifteen cases, this study aims to answer the research question: *Which factors explain MEPs decision to ask European Parliamentary Questions (EPQs) about the functioning of EU agencies?*

The analysis shows that both approaches help to explain EPQs and that the different factors must be combined. *Party position* and *personal motivation* seem a starting point and necessary factors to ask EPQs but are not sufficient by themselves. These two factors narrow down which policy fields MEPs focus on. Especially MEPs party's beliefs and their motivation to be active in European politics determine their focus. Together with *saliency* or *media coverage* (which by themselves seem not sufficient to ask EPQs), these factors are sufficient to ask questions. MEPs are likely to have attention for issues that gain attention and play well for their electorate. Such issues have a strong connection

to the position of the party and a MEP's personal motivation, since they went into politics based on these principles. The study further suggests that the influence of *interest groups* is not necessary nor sufficient but contributes to the decision to ask EPQs. Lobbyists from interest groups are valuable to gain relevant information on issues MEPs work on because they have specific expertise and knowledge, but MEPs make their own decision to ask EPQs.

In contrast to the theory, the underlying visibility- and control mechanisms do not appear as expected. To start, *party position* is not only part of policy-seeking but also appears, together with *media coverage*, in vote-seeking. A possible explanation is that MEPs focus on issues that are important to their party because these issues are, for their electorate, a reason to vote for them. Also, the factor *interest group* was not linked to visibility or control but appears to contribute to both vote-seeking and policy-seeking. Interest groups provide MEPs with relevant information based on their policy domain, regardless if they behave in vote-seeking or policy-seeking. Anyhow, this did not influence MEPs decisions directly. Lastly, *juniority* and *national opposition party* did not play an important role in explaining the use of EPQs in this study. An active role for junior MEPs was stronger linked to inexperience than to visibility. National opposition MEPs tend to be more active scrutinizers, but this was explained by their Euro critical character and independent role in the EP.

Altogether this shows the value of qualitative research that allows for in-depth evidence. Based on the interviews we uncovered new factors, were able to shed light on how factors interact and were able to shed light on the underlying mechanisms through which these factors affect EPQs. At the same time, it is problematic to generalize the findings of this unique study to other situations (*external validity*) (Van Thiel, 2015, p.62). This study provides a representation of motivations of Dutch MEPs to call EU agencies to account and has a small sample of cases. Therefore, the findings may not be fully representative for all MEPs. It is advisable that similar studies in the future broaden the number of cases and background of respondents to further test these findings.

Lastly, future research would benefit from a focus on other parliamentary mechanisms as well. This study tried to verify which factors influence MEPs in their oversight behavior regarding EU agencies. EPQs were selected for being an effective tool based on the following characteristics: request information, voice dissatisfaction and political consequences (Jensen et al, 2013, p.261; Font & Perez Duran, 2016, p.1351; Remáč, 2018, p.28). However, all respondents indicated several additional control mechanisms they use to call the Commission or EU agencies directly to account, such as director visits in parliamentary committees, discharge procedures and agency visits. A future research agenda could focus on other parliamentary mechanisms to hold agencies to account. In addition,

research could focus on the effect of these accountability mechanisms on the agency's functioning and assess their contribution to the legitimacy of EU agencies.

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