

Scrutinizing the Summit

National parliamentary control of the European Council

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Abstract

National parliaments of EU member states (NPs) scrutinize EU decision-making through established parliamentary procedures, for instance by evaluating Commission legislative proposals for directives and regulations. This type of parliamentary activity is often not considered to be very rewarding for members of national parliaments (MPs); EU decision making can be perceived as too technical, too obscure in terms of procedures, and largely invisible to domestic audiences. However, this situation might have changed in the last decade because the heads of state or government of the member states in the European Council have come to play a more prominent role in EU decision making on chefsache such as the Covid-19 recovery fund, climate change, the Eurozone crisis and the migration crisis. Scrutinizing European Council decision making can be potentially rewarding for MPs, especially when the scrutinizing efforts are attracting through plenary debates the attention of the general public. This paper investigates to what extent Italian and Dutch MPs are able to oversee and control European Council decision making on these major issues. The tentative results indicate that Italian MPs who are a party leader, Italian MPs intervening in debates just before or after the European Council summit, Italian MPs from opposition parties, or Dutch MPs from Eurosceptic parties scrutinize the position/decision of their national government more intensely, tending towards political scrutiny instead of only monitoring scrutiny. These findings are key to take into account when we want to understand the extent to which democratic control is exercised over major decisions taken at the EU level on high politics issues.

Introduction

For a long time, the scrutiny of EU decision-making was not considered to be very rewarding for members of national parliaments (MPs). EU decision making was (perceived to be) too technical, too obscure in terms of procedures, and largely invisible to domestic audiences. Hence, this was not an area in which MPs could expect to attract a lot of political/public attention nor influence decisions or policies. To be sure, MPs would still provide ‘routine’ scrutiny and control of EU decision-making – and of national positions – through established parliamentary procedures for instance for evaluating new Commission proposals, or by discussing the position that a national minister would take in a particular Council meeting. But generally speaking, their ability to oversee and control policy making in Brussels is seen as limited. Commission proposals come very early in the process, when there is still much uncertainty about what the actual policies will come to look like. Then there is a long, for MPs rather invisible, phase when these proposals are discussed internally, at working party level. As one Dutch MP states: “The process again becomes visible, once it reached the Agenda of the Ministers. But by then, it is already rather late, as there is not much that can still be changed about the Directive or Regulation. Finally there is the trilogue stage, in which scrutiny is best left to the Members of the European Parliament, rather than NPs” (Authors’ interview, 16-12-2016).

All in all, it is safe to say that national parliamentary careers were not made by scrutinizing EU decision making. However, there are some indications that this situation might have changed. Over the last decade, EU decision making has become far more visible and political. This is the result of a couple of related developments. First, EU issues are high on the national political agendas because the EU and its member states have been dealing with a series

of existential crises and challenges such as the Eurozone crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit, Climate Change and Covid-19.

Second, EU issues are handled by higher level political actors. As a result of the aforementioned crises, the European Council – which refers to the meetings of the Heads of State or Government – has come to play a more prominent role in EU decision making. The term ‘chefsache’ refers to the issues that are of such importance and political sensitivity that the leaders have to engage with them in person. Due to the importance of the issues and the political actors involved, EU decision making is much more visible to domestic audiences. EU Summits are ‘spotlight events’ that receive a lot of press coverage and thus provide MPs with ample opportunities for making their mark.

This also constitutes a problem though. Generally speaking, there are less established routines in European Council decision making. The European Council is ‘event’ rather than rule-driven (Van Middelaar, 2019). Whether and how it will deal with an issue or dossier is generally less predictable. Moreover, the European Council formally does not take decisions or develop policies. It sets the general course, provides guidelines or directions for the other institutions - the European Commission, the Council of Ministers in particular - and it settles contentious points in endgame negotiations. The main instruments at its disposals are *Statements* or *Conclusions* (either by its President or by the entire European Council). But any ‘decision’ by the European Council still needs to be adopted/taken by the Council. Moreover the Commission is not obliged to follow the instructions of the Heads, but can also decide to take a different approach.

Hence, for MPs scrutinizing the European Council is potentially very rewarding, but also rather challenging. This project investigates whether, to what extent and how (well) MPs are able to oversee and control European Council decision making on major issues, so-called *chefsache*. This paper focuses on the extent to which national parliaments have set-up formal

institutions and informal routines to scrutinize the decision-making process of the European Council with respect to four crises; the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, climate change and (the financial implications of) the Covid crisis. We aim to explain possible differences over time, between member states and between crises. More specifically, we look in detail at the central instrument at the disposal of MPs to make their activities visible for the public at large, i.e. to engage in plenary debates with the government. We look not only at the amount of debate before and after European Council meetings, but also at the intensity of the debate, by means of a scrutiny ladder (Smeets and de Ruiter, 2019). Through the analysis of plenary debates, we aim to answer the question to what extent national parliaments have scrutinized the decision-making process of the European Council and how we can explain possible differences between member states.

In the next section, we discuss some of the main developments and challenges for national parliaments in scrutinizing politicized EU negotiations. Subsequently, we show how scholars generally measured the amount of scrutiny of EU affairs, and introduce our approach which focuses on the level of scrutiny. We then present our hypotheses. In the methods section, we describe how we collected and coded the statements by MPs in parliamentary debates on the four crises. In this paper results are included of the debates in the Italian Camera and the Dutch Tweede Kamer. The results section visualizes some of the most important variation in the independent and dependent variables and presents the results of regression models.

Domestic parliamentary scrutiny in a politicized EU

Successive crises, like the Eurozone and migration crises and the Brexit vote, have led to publically salient and polarized debates about European integration (Statham and Trezn [2015](#), p. 287). It also created vibrant scholarly debates about the politicization of EU decision-making

(De Wilde and Zürn [2012](#); Kriesi and Grande [2016](#)). This debate has moved beyond the original post-functionalist conjecture that domestic contestation has a simple constraining effect on European integration. Scholars now speak of ‘punctuated politicization’, a process that is driven by political agents making use of strategic opportunities to launch a debate about Europe (Grande and Kriesi [2016](#), p. 279). Together with domestic media, national parliaments are considered to be the crucial link between secluded high-level intergovernmental bargaining and domestic audiences (Hutter and Grande [2014](#), p. 1006; Statham and Trez [2015](#), p. 291).

However, there is considerable debate about whether MPs have been able to perform this role as a political agent. Puntcher Riekmann and Wydra ([2013](#), p. 579) for instance note that during the Eurozone crisis parliaments generally only became active at the ratification stage and thus ended up endorsing agreed measures and selling the sacrifices to their constituencies (see also Kriesi and Grande [2016](#), p. 261). This might be the reason why scholarly analyses have focused mostly on the effect that EU-related crises have on national parliaments, rather than the other way around, noticing an overall increase in activity but no real change of practices (Auel and Höing [2015](#), p. 390). Part of the problem seems to be that parliaments stuck to established institutional practices and routines, and therefore had difficulty coping with the (new) intergovernmentalist characteristics of crisis decision-making (Bickerton et al. [2015](#)).

This does not mean that national parliaments have failed entirely to adapt to these developments. MPs employed the primary means that they have at their disposal, which is the ability to engage in debates about EU matters (Maatsch [2014](#), [2016](#)). These debates have become increasingly vibrant, particularly when they concern the transfer of sovereignty and/or when there are budgetary implications (Puntcher Riekmann and Wydra [2013](#), p. 579; Miklin [2014a](#), [b](#), p. 1199). Moreover, scholars noted a backlash from the ‘emergency politics’ of the Eurozone crisis (White [2015](#)), leading to a delayed re-politicization of European

integration (Kriesi and Grande [2016](#), pp. 295–297). National MPs play a crucial role in determining what this politicization process will look like.

Measuring the level of scrutiny: a need for a new approach

In the previous section, we noted that MPs have increased incentives but also face considerable obstacles to control their governments' negotiation behavior. The remainder of this paper focuses on their ability to provide effective scrutiny in practice. Scholars often observe that there is a lack of empirical evidence on the behavior of MPs in parliamentary debates on EU issues, even highly politicized ones such as the Eurozone crisis (Raunio [2009](#), p. 321; Auel et al. [2015](#), pp. 283, 287). Scholars so far have used semi-structured interviewing (e.g., Miklin [2014a, b](#)) or aggregate indicators, often with equal weight, to measure the EU-related scrutiny activity. Examples of the latter are the amount of meetings on EU affairs, the number of resolutions, the duration of the EU-related debates, or references by individual MPs to policies of the EU (e.g., Auel and Höing [2015](#); Rauh [2015](#), p. 124). Others use dichotomous indicators for the involvement of national parliaments in EU affairs, for example the referral of EU law proposals to national parliamentary committees (Finke and Herbel [2015](#)) or when a chamber has provided a reasoned opinion (Gatterman and Heffler [2015](#)). These indicators provide interesting comparative information, but in our view they need to be supported by a fine-grained measure that includes more activities, gives varying weight to these activities, and thereby takes into account what MPs actually say and do in these meetings (Smeets and De Ruiter 2019).

Smeets and De Ruiter (2019) measure the level of parliamentary scrutiny of EU affairs with a slightly amended version of the scrutiny ladder developed by Mastenbroek et al. ([2014](#)). The latter authors use a ladder to analyze the *ex post* involvement of MPs, i.e., in the

implementation phase of EU legislation. Mastebroek et al (2014) proposed a ladder of scrutiny comprising of five goals of scrutiny by MPs: (1) expressing support; (2) gathering information; (3) signaling their position; (4) expressing disagreement; and (5) exerting influence (Mastebroek et al. [2014](#), p. 756). In contrast to Mastebroek et al. ([2014](#)), Smeets and De Ruiter (2019) apply a ladder of scrutiny to the *ex ante* scrutiny of EU level negotiations. Moreover, they have removed the implicit bias in favor of opposition parties present in the original version of the ladder, where expressing disagreement scored higher than expressing support, irrespective of the substantive reasoning behind it. In the amended version of the scrutiny ladder, the steps on the ladder represent the kind of contribution that an MP is willing and able to make to the debate. We distinguish between steps related to *monitoring* scrutiny (i.e., the demand for information on the agent’s action and their context to reduce information asymmetries) and steps related to *political* scrutiny (i.e., political judgement on the appropriateness of the government’s decision and the respective outcome of European negotiations (Auel [2007](#), p. 500). A higher level of scrutiny is generally more demanding both for the MP, who has to prepare the intervention, and for the (prime) minister, who has to offer a response. Table 1 provides an overview of the four levels and related demands.

Type of scrutiny →	Monitoring scrutiny		Political scrutiny	
Scrutiny level → Demands for MP ↓	Step 1: Expressing support/disagreement	Step 2: Asking questions	Step 3: Taking up alternative position	Step 4: Providing instructions
Knowledge of gov. position on issue	X	X	X	X
Analysis of gov. position and argumentation.		X	X	X
Own information or expertise on issue			X	X
Overview state of play in negotiations				X

Table 1: overview of steps on the scrutiny ladder and related demands for the MP

The lowest step on the scrutiny ladder comes down to expressing support or disagreement by MPs with what the government states as their position in the EU level negotiations. Noting disagreement or support is obviously the least demanding for the MP and for the (prime) minister. Asking questions, by which we mean genuine attempts to acquire information, is step two on the ladder. Formulating informative questions is a bit more demanding for MPs because they need to analyze the government's stated position and argumentation, and identify parts that are unclear or unconvincing. However, MPs do not need to come up with their own counter-argument at this step. They are primarily monitoring, not yet challenging the government's position.

Presenting an alternative position, which means a substantive opinion that is sufficiently distinct from the government's stated position, represents step three on the ladder. This step presumes that the MP has already acquired the necessary information (requested in step two) and is able to use this information to take up such an alternative position. It requires an investment on the side of the MP to acquire the necessary expertise, but it is also more demanding for the (prime) minister, who has to come up with a rebuttal. Such positions tend to remain rather general, reflecting the MPs or party's stance on a certain topic. The fourth step on the ladder is to provide specific instructions to the government. Instructions serve to influence/steer a government's negotiation behavior. They are relatively clear-cut and detailed directions on what a government should actually do at a particular meeting at EU level, on a specific agenda item. To be able to provide instructions MPs need to be informed about the current state of play in Brussels' negotiations, and suggest (feasible) alternative positions.

Explaining variation in the level of scrutiny

To explain the potential variation in the type of interventions MPs make during plenary debates, we propose to look at characteristics of MPs and their political parties that are likely to correlate with the decision to pay attention to EU issues in plenary debates in order to gain votes, influence policies or result in a better reputation as a trustworthy partner to form a coalition government with (Strom 1990). We expect that because of politicization of EU issues at the national level due to the crises, contestation is likely to increase at this level in parliament around EU issues, mirrored by more intense scrutiny of the national government position by MPs from Eurosceptic parties, opposition parties or left-wing parties and especially just before the European Council summit when the impact and visibility is largest. In other words, we expect to observe divisions in the parliamentary arena on the EU *chefsache* along the lines of central political cleavages.

The comparative politics literature on political parties and the EU provides several directions to explore for the first time the extent to which MPs instruct the government before the discussions on major issues in the European Council start, and control afterwards the decisions of the European Council the government was part of. First, MPs from political parties with a strong Eurosceptic stance can be considered the main issue owners in the eyes of voters (Budge and Farlie [1983](#); Rauh [2015](#)), more than political parties who are strongly pro-European (Smeets and De Ruiter 2019). Especially Eurosceptic political parties perceive that they can gain votes by making the EU issue prominent in political debates, distinguish themselves from other parties, and make use of the institutional capacity of a parliament to influence policy (Auel et al. [2015](#)). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: MPs from Eurosceptic political parties are likely to use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder with regard to the EU-related *chefsache* than MPs from non-Eurosceptic political parties.

Second, government parties are more likely than opposition parties to hold back when scrutinizing government activities, because they want their government to stay in office and out of trouble, and be able to show results in the run-up to elections (Auel [2007](#), p. 494). Monitoring scrutiny (step 1 and 2 on our scrutiny ladder) is rather neutral and can be employed both by parties in government and opposition without any political consequences (Auel [2007](#), p. 500). Political scrutiny (step 3 and 4) consists of political judgment on the appropriateness of the government's decision (Auel [2007](#), p. 500), and therefore is expected to be used more by opposition parties. This reasoning is summarized in hypothesis 2:

H2: MPs from opposition parties are likely to use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder with regard to EU-related *chefsache* than MPs from government parties.

Third, scholars have claimed that EU policies are increasingly becoming part of 'normal politics,' reflecting traditional left-right cleavages, thereby providing left and right parties with an incentive to move beyond their consensual views on EU integration (Hooghe and Marks [2009](#), p. 9; Miklin [2014a](#), p. 1200). Although some of the *chefsache* we explore as such cannot be characterized as a typical left or right dossier, the negotiations about the Banking Union, Euro/EMU and the MFF/RFF, climate change coincided with a general backlash against the 'neo- or ordoliberal characteristics' of EU integration, specifically the EMU deepening project. This would lead us to expect that leftist parties have more to gain from providing higher levels of scrutiny. However, this could be balanced out by rightist parties who have an incentive to scrutinize more in the case of migration. This reasoning leads to the third hypothesis we aim to test:

H3: MPs from leftist parties are more likely to use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder with regard to the EU-related *chefsache* than MPs from rightist parties.

Finally, we include a temporal factor that fits with the punctuated pattern of politicization, as suggested in the literature (Grande and Kriesi [2016](#)). We assess the varying salience by looking at the number of workdays between national parliamentary debates and related meetings in Brussels. According to De Wilde ([2011](#)), debates taking place before Council meetings are often used for providing instructions, while debates directly afterwards are used for holding governments accountable. We therefore look at overall proximity, in terms of the number of days between a plenary debate and a relevant European Council meeting. We expect that debates in parliament which are close in time to the EU meetings are likely to have higher levels of scrutiny.

H4: MPs are likely to use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder with regard to EU-related *chefsache* in debates taking place directly before or after a meeting of the European Council or the Council of Ministers than in debates that take place further away in time from such meetings.

A last factor we formulate an hypothesis on is the size of the party. We expect that parties with more seats, have more resources and, hence, capacity to give the government a hard time. We expect that MPs from larger parties will use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder than smaller parties.

H5: MPs from larger parties are likely to use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder with regard to EU-related *chefsache* than MPs from smaller parties.

Methodology

The four levels of scrutiny on the ladder are scored at the level of interventions. An intervention is defined as a unified body of text, usually a paragraph or subsection, that serves to make one particular point on an issue. These points can take the form of explicit statements, questions, positions or instructions to the government. We coded only the statements that were directed at the government representative(s) present, and not the interactions/discussions between MPs. A meeting typically started with a round of prepared statements (on the side of the minister/prime minister: not coded; by MPs: coded), followed by a round of discussions (not coded) and the answers by the (prime) minister (not coded). Since we are interested in the highest level of scrutiny that an MP was willing/able to reach, interventions that contained multiple levels of scrutiny were scored at the highest level. We used the Chapel Hill expert survey dataset to measure Euroscepticism (below 2 on the CHES Euroscepticism scale = Eurosceptic), whether a party is on the left or right of the political spectrum or is in the government or in opposition (Bakker et al. [2012](#)). We included the number of seats of a party as a variable to test hypothesis 5. We included as a control variable whether an MP intervening in a plenary debate was also the leader of the party in the chamber. For the fourth hypothesis, we counted the number of days from the meeting, before and after the meeting. The further away in days, the higher the number. Another control variable included in the Italian case was the media attention 2 days before and 2 days after the Council meeting in two quality newspapers (Corriere della Sera and La Repubblica, Factiva database) as a proxy for the general saliency of the chefsache at the national level. This control variable is not yet coded in the case of the Dutch data. Given the explorative and tentative status of our analyses, we decided to report the results of several regression models, such as ordered logistic regression models, OLS regression models and logistic regression models, with a dichotomous variable measuring monitoring scrutiny (step 1

+ step 2 on the scrutiny ladder) and political scrutiny (step 3 and 4 on the scrutiny ladder) (see also table 1).

We present in this paper the full results of the analysis of the Italian data, and partial results on the Dutch Tweede Kamer. We also plan to analyse German and Austrian debates on the four crises. We selected these cases because of the availability of parliamentary data, the geographical spread, variation in parliamentary strength in the countries selected (Italy: weak; Austria: medium; Germany: strong; The Netherlands: medium, see Winzen 2012), the variation in trust in the EU among the population (low: Italy; medium/high: Austria, Germany, the Netherlands), while all cases are net-contributors. Furthermore, we also selected these countries because they have different positions on the *chefsache*. The Netherlands and Italy disagree on many of the *chefsache*, with Austria more closely related to the Netherlands and Germany more in the middle between those countries on the selected dossiers.

We selected two summits per *chefsache*. We selected key summits that are part of the ‘regular’ agenda. The European Councils main meetings are June and December, followed by March and October. We looked at all plenary debates 1 month before the summit and 1 month after. This is chosen as time period because short before and after the meeting there is momentum to put things on the agenda or to scrutinize decisions of the government *ex post*. After a couple of weeks the momentum surrounding the European Council summit is waning. For collecting the Italian debates we made use of various search engines: <https://www.camera.it/leg18/221>; <http://aic.camera.it/aic/advanced.html>; http://banchedati.camera.it/tiap_18/ctrStartPage.asp. The key words used were ‘consiglio europeo’, ‘capi di stato e di governo’ in all plenary activities 1 month before and 1 month after the Council summit. This ensured that no debate was missed and after a lengthy selection process all relevant debates were selected for coding. The coding was performed by one coder. No reliability test were conducted yet at this stage of the research.

For collecting the Dutch debates, we used the comprehensive search engine of the Dutch Parliament: www.tweedekamer.nl, selecting all plenary debates dedicated to the European Council Summit taking place 1 month before and 1 month after the Summit. The number, length and intensity of these plenary debates varied, depending on the dossier. The Summits that were set to address the migration crisis and the Covid Recovery Fund/MFF attracted a lot of attention, resulting in lengthy debates in the parliament, before and sometimes also after the Summit. The Summits on the ESM, banking union and climate change/Green Deal, attracted less attention and debate. The coding was performed by one coder. No reliability tests were conducted at this stage of the research.

Results

When we look at the descriptive statistics for the Italian debates (see table 2), one directly notes the differences in number of statements per *chefsache*. Some issues are clearly gaining more attention than others in the Italian Chamber, with few statements by MPs on climate change, and considerable more statements on the multi-annual financial framework and the recovery fund. Strikingly, the averages of the number of statements do not run parallel to the averages in scrutiny scores per *chefsache*. Although the topic of climate change attracts less attention by Italian MPs compared to other topics, the average scrutiny score is much higher than for other topics and the median is 3, compared to a median of 1 for the other topics in the Italian case. At the same time, climate change is more a topic for government parties to issue statements on and no party leader issued statements in the Italian Chamber with regard to the position of the Italian government in European Council meetings held on the topic of climate change. A third striking point is that for the Euro/EMU, migration and MFF/RFF topics, the number of statements are higher than for climate change, but much more often Italian MPs voice on these topics simple

agreement or disagreement with the government position. Especially with regard to migration issues MPs from opposition parties voice their disagreement with the position of the government in European Council meetings, introduce their own position, or try to instruct the government to take a certain position in the European Council meetings. Fourth, MPs from left-wing, centrist and right-wing parties pay attention to the government position in the European Council meetings for the issues of the Euro/EMU and migration and MFF/RRF. One of the exceptions is again the topic of climate change. Left-leaning and centrist parties are paying more attention to climate meetings at the European Council level than right-wing parties. The latter parties, together with centrist parties pay more attention to the *chefsache* of MFF/RRF.

Type of <i>chefsache</i>	Number of statements	Average scrutiny score	Median scrutiny score	Average gov/opp MP speaking	Average MP as party leader (no=0; yes=1)	Average left(0)/right(1)	Average left(0)/centre(1)/right(2)	Min scrutiny score	Max scrutiny score
1 = Euro/EMU	61	1,88	1	0,6	0,18	0,51	1,07	1	4
2 = Migration	74	2,12	1	0,77	0,05	0,41	1	1	4
3 = Climate change	17	2,53	3	0,35	0	0,18	0,71	1	4
4 = MFF and RRF	149	1,79	1	0,53	0,06	0,45	1,24	1	4
Total	301	2,08	1	0,59	0,08	0,43	1,12		

Table 2. descriptive statistics, number of statements and average scrutiny score on four different *chefsache* in the Italian Camera.

Some issues are clearly gaining more attention than others in the Dutch Chamber (see table 3), with fewer statements by MPs on climate change, and considerable more statements on migration and the multi-annual financial framework and the recovery fund. Although not all of the Dutch data is included in the dataset yet, we do see that the Dutch data so far show similar trends to the Italian Camera. Just as in the Italian case, the averages of the number of statements do not run parallel to the averages in scrutiny scores per *chefsache* in the Dutch Tweede Kamer. Although the topics of climate change and EMU attract less attention by Dutch MPs compared to other topics, the average scrutiny scores for these topics are higher than for migration and the MFF topics. A difference between the Dutch and Italian data is that the median scrutiny scores are higher for all topics in the Dutch case. A similarity between both Chambers is that climate change is clearly an issue for MPs who are not a party leader. In the Dutch case opposition MPs are more active on EMU, climate change and MFF/RFF, but MPs from government parties are more active on migration. Furthermore, in the case of the Dutch Chamber there are marginal differences between MPs from left-wing, centrist and right-wing parties in attention for the four chefsache.

Type of <i>chefsache</i>	Number of statements	Average scrutiny score	Median scrutiny score	Average gov/op MP speaking	Average MP as party leader (no=0; yes=1)	Average left(0)/right(1)	Average left(0)/centre(1)/right(2)	Min scrutiny score	Max scrutiny score
1 = Euro/EMU	35	2,49	3	0,77	0,89	0,48	0,82	1	4
2 = Migration	112	2,1	2	0,43	0,39	0,37	0,83	1	4

3 = Climate change	27	2,26	2	0,78	0,07	0,41	0,93	1	4
4 = MFF and RRF	82	2,2	2	0,61	0,24	0,49	1,07	1	4
Total	256	2,2	2	0,57	0,38	0,43	0,92	1	4

Table 3. descriptive statistics, number of statements and average scrutiny score on four different *chefsache* in the Dutch Tweede Kamer.

Another interesting angle is to visualize the number of statements by MPs on specific European Council meetings and the average scrutiny score per meeting. For some meetings the number of statements were quite low, so no meaningful graph could be made. Furthermore, due to the incomplete Dutch dataset, we are only able to show meaningful graphs for the Italian Camera. Two general patterns can be derived when the number of statements and average scrutiny score per meeting are compared for the Italian Camera. A first general pattern is that the number of statements on European Council meetings by MPs peaks just before the European Council meeting takes place, with fewer statements by MPs after the European Council meeting on the *chefsache* has taken place. This is the case for the MFF/RFF, Banking Union and migration. In other words, MPs pay attention to the topic before the meeting takes place in the European Council and are less active after the meeting. See figure 1 for an illustration of this trend.

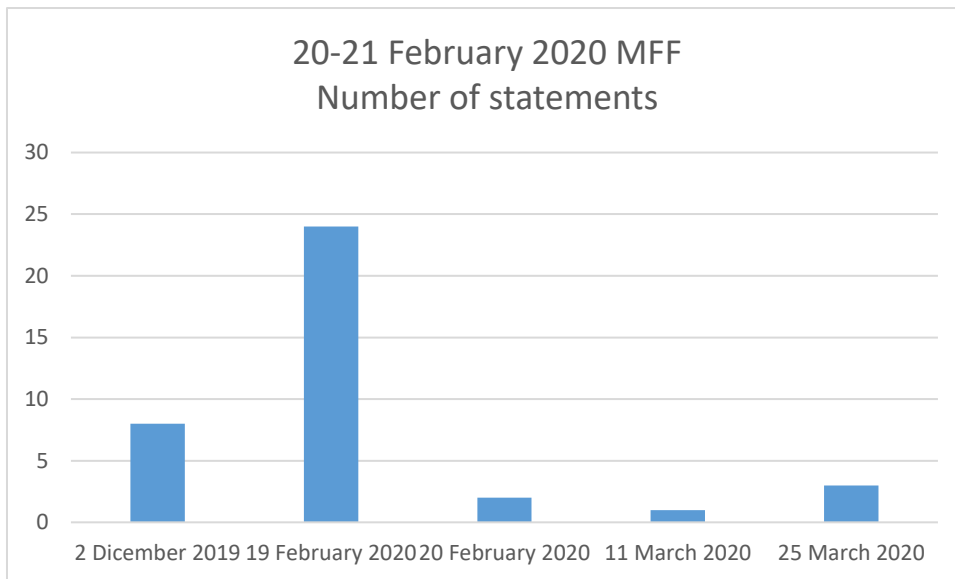


Figure 1. Number of statements in the Italian Chamber on the European Council meeting, 20-21 February 2020 MFF.

Second, some meetings (17-21 July 2020 MFF, 20-21 February 2020 MFF) at the European Council level have similar scrutiny scores throughout the period of 1 month before and 1 month after the European Council meeting, showing that this topic stays on the agenda and is considered important by MPs both before and after the European Council meeting (see figure 2).

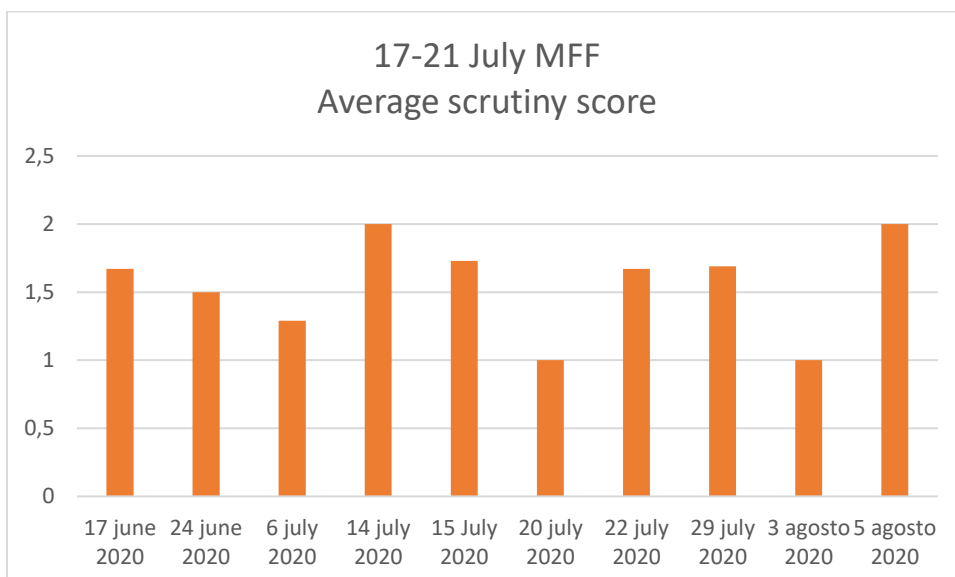


Figure 2. Average scrutiny score in the Italian Chamber on the European Council meeting, 17-21 July 2020 MFF.

However, the other European Council meetings show a similar decreasing trend in scrutiny scores after the European Council meeting has taken place as in the number of statements visualized in figure 1. See figure 3 for an illustration of this latter trend in the average scrutiny score.

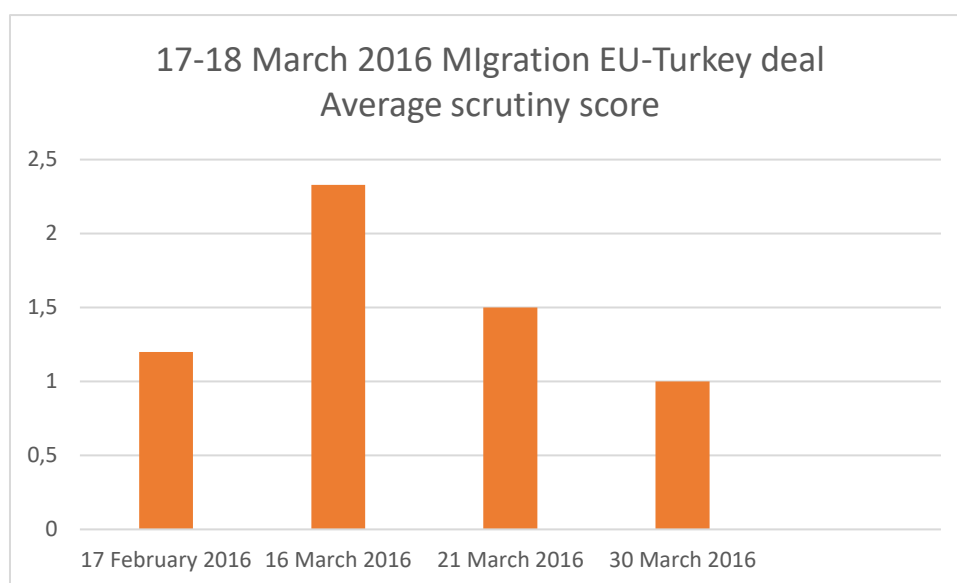


Figure 3. Average scrutiny score in the Italian Chamber on the European Council meeting, 17-18 March 2016, Migration EU Turkey deal

We also analysed the data through the estimation of ordinary least square, ordered logistic and logistic regression models. In the tables 4 and 5 we present some first tentative results for the Dutch Tweede Kamer and the Italian Camera. In the first two models the scrutiny score is used as a dependent variable. In the logistic regression a dichotomous dependent variables was used, with a 0 for the first two steps (monitor scrutiny) and a 1 for step 3 and 4 (political scrutiny) on the scrutiny ladder (see also table 1). Note that the direction of the effect of the dichotomous variables in the ordered logistic regression needs to be interpreted differently from the OLS, with the signs in the opposite direction compared to the other two regression models but a similar interpretation of the coefficients.

	Ordinary Least Square regression	Ordered logistic regression	Logistic regression
Euroscepticism	.156 (.209)	-.269 (.365)	.172 (.380)
Government/opposition	.146 (.172)	-.239 (.302)	.198 (.313)
Left/Right	-.166 (.183)	.297 (.323)	-.274 (.335)
Number of days before/after European Council meeting	-.016* (.009)	-.026 (.016)	-.024 (.017)
Number of seats political party	.001 (.001)	.002 (.002)	.002 (.002)
MP is party leader	.472* (.251)	-.826** (.421)	.749** (.424)
Media attention before/after Council meeting	-.001 (.010)	-.002 (.018)	-.012 (.018)
N	290	290	287

Table 4. Dependent variable: scrutiny score for Italian Camera di Deputati, standard errors between brackets.

	Ordinary Least Square regression	Ordered logistic regression	Logistic regression
Euroscepticism	.275* (.146)	-.379 (.260)	.614** (.302)
Government/opposition	-.051 (.136)	.138 (.325)	-.062 (.283)
Left/Right	-.183 (.138)	.313 (.246)	-.261 (.289)
Number of days before/after European Council meeting	.012 (.023)	.020 (.014)	-.020 (.047)
Number of seats political party	.012 (.008)	.009 (.040)	.021 (.017)
MP is party leader	-.104 (.137)	.230 (.346)	-.020 (.288)
N	253	254	254

Table 5. Dependent variable: scrutiny score for Dutch Tweede Kamer, standard errors between brackets.

A first thing to note in the results in table 4 on the Italian Camera is that when an MP is a party leader and is speaking in a plenary debate on one of the *chefsache*, the intervention is aimed at giving the government a hard time, resulting in more intense scrutiny such as giving instructions or explicating an alternative position. MPs who are not a party leader are more likely to ask questions or voicing opposition or agreement with the government position instead of giving an alternative position or a mandate to the government than MPs who are also a party leader. Out of 287 interventions coded, 25 were from the leader of the party. 15 out of those 25 interventions were from Giorgia Meloni, the party leader of Fratelli d'Italia, an Eurosceptic

radical-right opposition party. She has a relatively high scrutiny score for these 15 interventions of 2,6 on a scale running from step 1 till 4 and a median of 3. The main focus of these interventions by Meloni were the MFF/RFF and migration. She provides instructions to the government indicating a need for a complete blockage with Naval ships between Libia and Italy, closure of the Italian ports, and arresting the NGO representatives bringing refugees on their ships to Italian ports on accusations of human trafficking.

A second point to note in the results of the regression analysis is that the more days are between the meeting of the Italian chamber and the European Council meeting, the lower the scrutiny score for the interventions. MPs give the government a harder time when it is just before the European Council meeting compared to plenary debates on the *chefsache* further away in time from the European Council summit. In sum, when a political party wants to have an impact on the position of the government in the European Council, they send their party leader to the plenary debate to intervene or send MPs to plenary debates on the European Council just before the meeting of the European Council takes place. This is in line with hypothesis 4.

A third interesting finding is that in the Dutch Tweede Kamer, Eurosceptic parties use more often higher steps on the scrutiny ladder than parties who are not Eurosceptic. From the estimation of the regression models (see table 5) it shows that MPs from Eurosceptic parties in the Netherlands aim their intervention at giving the government a hard time, resulting in more intense scrutiny in plenary debates such as giving instructions or explicating an alternative position. MPs who are not member of a Eurosceptic party are more likely to ask questions or voicing opposition or agreement with the government position without providing an alternative position or instructions.

In the figures 1-3 we saw that especially in the plenary meetings just before and just after the Council meeting, MPs are actively scrutinizing the government on the *chefsache*. If

we only look at the plenary debates in the Italian Camera directly before and directly after the meetings of the European Council take place, we find in the Italian case that the scrutiny is more political compared to plenary meetings more than 2 days away from the Council meeting. The government/opposition variable is almost significant in the OLS and logistic regression models and turns significant in the ordered logistic model, all in the expected direction. This means that MPs from opposition parties use higher steps on the scrutiny ladder than MPs from government parties, turning more to political scrutiny instead of monitoring scrutiny. Furthermore, larger parties are using higher steps on the scrutiny ladder. This could indicate that organizational capacity of political parties might be an important factor in explaining the intensity of scrutiny. Furthermore, when an MP is a party leader, the interventions are more intense than when an MP is not a party leader.

	Ordinary Least Square regression	Ordered logistic regression	Logistic regression
Euroscepticism	.118 (.249)	-.155 (.424)	.206 (.447)
Government/opposition	.349 (.212)	-.633* (.378)	.623 (.392)
Left/Right	-.101 (.210)	.194 (.373)	-.264 (.389)
Number of days before/after European Council meeting	-.170** (.071)	-.353** (.142)	-.235* (.141)
Number of seats political party	.002* (.001)	.004* (.002)	.004* (.002)
MP is party leader	.656** (.300)	-1.218** (.500)	1.001* (.553)
Media attention before/after Council meeting	.000 (.013)	.002 (.022)	-.023 (.023)
N	202	202	202

Table 6. Dependent variable: scrutiny score for Italian Camera di Deputati, in meeting directly before Council meeting or directly after Council meeting, standard errors between brackets.

Another interesting aspect we need to take into account for the Italian case, is that there is large variation between the types of *chefsache* and the scrutiny scores (see table 7). *Chefsache* like

migration and the Eurozone crisis divide parties along government/opposition lines, while the plenary debates on the European Council meetings on the MFF/RFF did not see a clear government/opposition divide. In the case of migration and the Eurozone crisis, MPs from opposition parties used higher steps on the scrutiny ladder than MPs from government parties. We should be careful drawing firm conclusions from the climate change case because of the low number of observations. We clearly need more data from other national parliaments to see whether the differences between *chefsache* hold with a higher number of observations per *chefsache*. The tentative conclusion is that migration and the Eurozone crisis are more politicized, whereas the MFF/RFF is supported by a broad coalition in the Italian chamber, leading to lower scrutiny scores and, hence, more monitoring scrutiny than political scrutiny.

	Ordinary Least Square regression, MFF/RFF	Ordinary Least Square, migration	Ordinary Least square, eurozone crisis	Ordinary Least Square, climate change
Euroscepticism	-.031 (.380)	.496 (.501)	-.003 (.422)	.639 (1.511)
Government/opposition	-.385 (.350)	.974** (.443)	.776* (.434)	1.182 (.877)
Left/Right	.162 (.380)	.064 (.406)	.253 (.313)	-1.926 (1.239)
Number of days before/after European Council meeting	-.003 (.010)	-.038* (.021)	-.031 (.028)	.223 (.161)
Number of seats political party	.001 (.001)	.004* (.002)	.002 (.002)	.004 (.004)
MP is party leader	.653* (.369)	.303 (.725)	.691* (.368)	N/A
Media attention before/after Council meeting	-.052** (.019)	.054 (.075)	.084** (.024)	-.051 (.158)
N	140	70	60	16

Table 7. Dependent variable: scrutiny score for Italian Camera di Deputati for each *chefsache*, standard errors between brackets.

Conclusion

The empirical findings on the Italian Camera and Dutch Tweede Kamer indicate that occasionally MPs use the EU chefsache to give the government a hard time in plenary debates by giving instructions or presenting an elaborate alternative position to the government position in the European Council. The increased contestation on EU chefsache at the national level shows from the plenary debates on these issues, with as a consequence that these EU issues are 'mainstreamed', i.e. plenary debates unfold in a similar way as debates on highly salient domestic issues. We found that occasionally party leaders, MPs from opposition parties and MPs from Eurosceptic parties give the government a hard time, especially just before or just after European Council summits when the visibility and impact are highest. However, these findings are tentative and we need more data and estimate more advanced regression models to assess whether differences exist between countries, over time and between chefsache.

At the same time we find that the EU chefsache are not dealt with by Italian MPs in the same way. It is interesting to note that on the Covid-19 recovery fund, there is no pronounced government vs opposition dynamic present. This might be related to Italy's overarching interest/position on this matter. The country was united in its request for more (financial) support and solidarity from its European partners. The data seem to indicate that MPs were by and large united in their support of the governments' demands.

From a democratic quality perspective it is worrisome that some of the chefsache are not hotly debated at the national level. The chefsache are impacting the survival of the nation states, are crucial for the wealth and welfare of citizens in the EU member states and are, hence, taken serious at the EU level by the Heads of State and Government in the Council. However, some of the chefsache are hardly debated in the national parliament, such as climate change, or MPs from government and opposition parties do not use the chefsache such as the Covid-19 recovery fund to show to the electorate what the differences are between the parties on chefsache. This gives the government in general and the Heads of State or government in

particular, a free hand in the negotiations at the EU level, without political scrutiny by the national parliament and, hence no opportunities used to hold the government to account for its negotiation strategy and the outcome of this strategy.

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